

Subtle Finance

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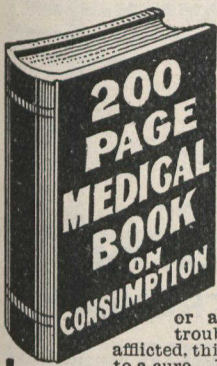
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In answering advertisements mention Canadian Courier

through which the mail steamer would have to pass. More than one nervous passenger had changed his mind at the last minute, and had decided to postpone his voyage to Europe. Others scoffed at the idea of a modern liner being held up on the high seas, and were not backward in expressing it as their opinion that the stories of the outrages were nothing but figments of the imagination, hatched in the brain of some enterprising journalist.

The Captain himself was not by any means easy in his mind. He had the mails on board; in his hold was a valuable cargo; and in his strong room was £250,000 in gold. He was inclined to believe the stories of the pirate; and he thought it was quite likely that an attempt would be made to seize the money. But to the anxious questions of certain nervous passengers he gave a reassuring answer. Ship captains are not in the habit of sharing their anxieties with their passengers.

On the second morning of the voyage the look-out reported to the captain that a small steamer had appeared over the horizon far astern, and that she was gradually overhauling the liner. The captain's face fell as he hurried up on the bridge, and observed the stranger through his glasses. The other steamer was a great distance off, and at first it was difficult to make out very much of her appearance; but as she rapidly approached, the captain's heart sank, for the ship astern fitted exactly the descriptions of the pirate which had been circulated.

The ship's company and passengers had collected on deck, and were watching the approach of the stranger with interest. But soon this feeling of interest gave way to one of alarm. Most of those on board the liner had read the descriptions of the pirate, and had no difficulty in recognising the resemblance between them and the small steamer. Several of the lady passengers broke down and sobbed audibly, while more than one of the men became very pale; and as the captain turned his eyes from the stranger to his own decks he realised that he was likely to have a panic to deal with, in addition to his other troubles. He called his officers together, and gave a few orders quietly. He knew quite well that if the other steamer should turn out to be the pirate, resistance would be useless; but he intended to do all he could to preserve his honour. He had already rung down to the engine-room, giving orders that the very last ounce should be taken out of the engines and boilers; but the *La Patrie* was an old ship, and completely outclassed in the matter of speed by the stranger.

Indeed, the other ship had approached to within signalling distance and was even then sending a message by means of her semaphore, "Heave to."

The captain bit his lip. This peremptory order put all doubts as to the other ship's identity on one side. This was the pirate right enough. But he replied by asking the reason for the order, instead of complying with it at once.

Again came the signal, "Do as I tell you. Heave to."

But still the captain took no notice. His temper was roused; and though he knew that no useful purpose could be served by his delaying to obey, his pride made it very difficult for him to stop the ship.

But the stranger did not mean to be trifled with. No more time was

wasted in signalling. Instead, she fired a gun across the liner's bows, and as the shot splashed into the sea fifty yards ahead, a loud wail arose, and the passengers turned in a body to demand of the captain that he should stop his ship. They were thoroughly frightened, and quite expected the next shot to fall among them, or else to send the ship to the bottom.

The captain reached his hand towards the engine-room telegraph. He realised that to hold out further would mean that his passengers' lives would be placed in extreme peril; but he had not actually given the order to stop the engines, when he was checked by an exclamation from the first officer, who was standing by his side on the bridge.

"My word!" he cried, "we shall get out of it yet."

Something had gone wrong on board the pirate. She had suddenly become enveloped in a cloud of steam, had ceased to move forward, and was lying rocking violently in the trough of the seas. But the captain of the liner did not wait to make enquiries. He thanked his lucky stars, and continued on his course at top speed.

A feeling of relief spread through the ship, though there was still room for anxiety. The trouble in the pirate might be only slight, and at any moment she might start once more after her quarry. Indeed, as all eyes were turned towards her, she was seen to move forward again, but only slowly, and before long she was left a long way behind; so that by lunch-time she was nothing but a small speck upon the horizon; and the passengers went down to the saloon with grateful hearts.

But as the end of the meal was being reached there was a shout on deck, which brought all to their feet. Everyone rushed up the stairway, and there was a general feeling of consternation, as it was seen that the pirate was once more approaching, though not so quickly as before. They were not to be let off after all. The trouble was doubly bad, because of the recently-born hopes; and many gave way to feelings of utter despair.

But as they turned towards the captain they noticed a grim smile on his face. He was not looking at the pirate, but beyond, to where a small black mark appeared on the horizon; a black mark which was rapidly growing larger, and in which he recognised through his glasses a British cruiser. He was smiling at the prospect of seeing the biter bit; for, assuredly, the cruiser would give the pirate short shrift.

It seemed that the pirate had not yet seen the warship, for she continued the chase; but this took longer than before. Evidently the damage had not been entirely repaired. But slowly she crept up; and once more she fired a gun, and once more a shot splashed into the water close to the liner's bow.

A scream of terror arose from the lady passengers. What use would the British warship be to them if she did not arrive until after they had been sent to the bottom? There was a frenzied rush for the life-belts; for, in imagination, the scared passengers could already feel the decks sinking beneath their feet.

But suddenly another gun rang out its challenge, and a shell passed close over the pirate and fell into the sea. The British cruiser was taking a hand in the game. Instantly all was confusion on the decks of the pirate. From the liner men could be seen running hurriedly here and there,

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ESTABLISHED 1879

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