

The Home Mission Journal

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Cruising for the Cross.

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CHAPTER XX.

The United States armored cruiser *American Eagle*. Captain Zeabury, ordered to look after American interests in the South Pacific, and at that particular time en route from Panama to Samoa via the Marquesas Islands, was doggedly churning up the waters one calm day not long after the events narrated in the preceding chapter. The whole ship's company had settled down to the ordinary routine of life on a man-of-war at sea, though never once was vigilance relaxed.

A dapper young ensign, Robert McPherson, walked the bridge as officer of the deck, every now and then sweeping the horizon with his binoculars. Presently in the far distance a sail was seen to shimmer. As the cruiser plowed her way onward, the distant ship was brought into clearer relief. As the man-of-war drew nearer still, the strange vessel seemed to change her course from time to time. "Must have more wind out there than we have here!" muttered the ensign. Suddenly he called:

"Aloft there!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" floated down in response from a jackie on the lookout in the fore-top.

"What do you make out that craft to be?" was the return hail.

"She's a barkantine, sir, what don't appear to know her own mind, sir!" A few moments more and the vessel was brought plainly into view. Soon through the binoculars her crew could be made out scrambling up the rigging, hauling on the braces, running about the decks, and otherwise acting with strange excitement.

"Messenger boy!"

A smart young apprentice tripped up the ladder to the bridge, and stood at attention.

"Report to the Captain and tell him with the compliments of the officer of the deck that a barkantine is in sight on the weather bow, and acting strangely!" said the ensign.

The boy again saluted, and delivered his message to the marine posted as orderly before the door of the Captain's cabin.

Presently a gray-haired officer, who as a cadet had fought with Farragut at Mobile Bay, strode across the quarter-deck and mounted to the bridge. The young ensign, saluting, explained the situation.

"That ship is trying to avoid us, McPherson," exclaimed the captain. And then he added, quietly, "But we'll give her a call!"

"Give her a few more spokes to port!" ordered the ensign, addressing the man at the wheel, and, carrying out the captain's directions.

As soon as it became evident that the man-of-war was bearing down upon the barkantine, the efforts of the crew to make their escape increased and every device known to expert sailors to drive the ship through the water was employed.

"Those fellows are good sailors!" exclaimed Captain Zeabury, with sardonic humor. "They must have been brought up on Luce's Seaman ship!"

When, however, it became perfectly evident to all on board the sailing vessel that the cruiser was determined to pay them a call, all attempts to get away were abandoned, and an effort was made to brazen out the whole affair.

With a superb curve the cruiser swept up toward the barkantine and then swung slowly around just abreast of the sailing craft. By this time the executive officer had joined the captain on the bridge, and the latter taking the mega-

phone hailed the ship.

"What ship is that?"

No response came back over the waters. Evidently the crew of the stranger were looking for some one to act as their spokesman. Finally a man rushed up to the bridge who managed to shout back, in English which had a decided brogue:

"'Is is de Derragent, Cap'n Hurley, from Calcoota to Cheelee!"

"Where is your flag?" demanded the captain.

All hands looked aloft. No flag fluttered from the peak of the stranger.

"Stand by till I send a boat aboard of you!" added the captain through the megaphone. "And if you touch a brace or a hulloard, meanwhile I'll blow you out of the water!"

Turning to the executive officer, Captain Zeabury ordered the port battery cleared away, and two boat crews, manned by sailors and marines, to board the strange craft, whose name had been suspiciously knocked off the stern. Soon the boats from the cruiser were alongside the barkantine, and the navigating lieutenant and Ensign McPherson began asking uncomfortable questions and making mental notes with great rapidity.

The whole crew were a disreputable looking lot of men. One in particular had a dark, ill-favored visage, and the look of a Portuguese. From him the rest of the gang appeared to take orders. A Lascar seemed to be regarded as chief mate, while a British-looking Englishman, even while the usual oaths were on board, did not cease from distributing oaths and blows among his shipmates.

The Portuguese, whom his crew called Captain Antonio, exhibited a dirty set of documents which he claimed were the ship's papers, making voluble explanations as to the absence of a flag—which, he claimed, had been temporarily hauled down for repairs, and concerning the omission of the name on the stern—which had been knocked off by a lot of spit thrown against it by the waves.

"Tell that to the marines!" muttered the lieutenant as he turned on his heel. Then, ordering a dozen of his men to follow him—while the rest of the marines and sailors, under McPherson, covered the motley crew with their rifles—he proceeded to make a thorough search of the ship.

"This is a boat of altogether too fine lines to be engaged in the 'Calcoota and Cheelee trade,'" he exclaimed jokingly to the petty officer following him.

In the captain's cabin nothing was found except some broken remnants of a meal. In the fore-cabin only a few dozing Chinamen were found. "Open the forward hatch!" ordered the lieutenant. That was not so easy to do. All the latches were battened down as securely as if the shipmaster had anticipated a stormy voyage around the Horn.

"This ship has auxiliary engines," remarked the lieutenant. "Before we leave, we'll take a look in the engine-room."

At this the Portuguese scowled horribly, and a vicious look came in his eye. But he could do nothing, for two marines had their rifles leveled on him.

At last the forward hatch was pried up and the exploring party descended. Working their way aft, taking every precaution to guard against surprise in any of the dark passages, the lieutenant and his men finally groped their way to the engine room.

"These have been beautiful engines," exclaimed the lieutenant as a flaming torch lighted up the engine-room, penetrating its corners with a garish light, "but they have been woefully abused!"

In none of the cabins, nor in the sick bay, had a soul been found, nor any distinctly incriminating evidence. Still the lieutenant was not satisfied.

"Let us have a look in the shaft tunnel, he said. In a twinkling the head of the shaft-alley was opened, and the petty officer, torch in hand, crept slowly in. Presently he gave a start. "Hello!" he called. "Anybody there?"

A faint sound was heard, as of heavy breathing. The petty officer crept farther in, and laid his hand on the body of a man—still alive. "Lively here, lads!" he called back. "There's a mystery here which we'll unearth!"

It did not take long for the marines to draw

forth, with that tenderness of touch which brave men know how to show, the unfortunate prisoner in the shaft tunnel. Further exploration showed that more men were still within, all of whom were extricated with some difficulty.

As soon as the first prisoner had been liberated the lieutenant sent word on deck, ordering that a message be sent to the cruiser asking for the surgeon's assistance. With the surgeon, Captain Zeabury, understanding by this time that he had a dangerous lot of men to deal with, sent a dozen more sailors fully armed. When the reinforcements had arrived on board, the whole crew of the barkantine was marched forward and a warning was given that the first man that dared to take a single step aft would be shot down.

Ten men in all were taken from the shaft tunnel, and half a dozen more were found after a further search, secreted in the deepest part of the hold. Under the skillful care of the surgeon the man first extricated from the shaft tunnel was soon revived, and by the time he was carried to the deck of the cruiser, he was able to tell his story to Captain Zeabury.

The barkantine, he said, was the American yacht *Gladiolus*, Captain Henton, on a voyage around the world. The yacht had been left in his care as second officer while anchored off an island on which Captain Henton supposed three unfortunate sailors had been marooned. In reality the island was the home of a pirate band under the lead of a Portuguese, Antonio by name, who had formerly shipped on the *Gladiolus*, and who, with a few others as desperate, had gathered together a motley crew of adventurers in China, and betaken themselves to the island before mentioned. Much to their surprise one day they saw the American yacht approaching, whereupon hiding their old junk up a creek, and placing three men on the beach as a decoy, they had drawn off Captain Henton and a small party into the deep woods. Then, uniting their forces in one desperate venture, they had swept down the creek, overpowered the few men left on board the yacht, and set sail on a piratical cruise in earnest. The second officer and his shipmates had been cruelly used, and two of the men had died as a result of the inhuman treatment they had received.

As Captain Zeabury heard this tale, which bore every evidence of being true, his face grew stern, and bringing his fist down heavily on the cabin table, he declared that he would at once hang the pirates from the yard-arm, if he could do so lawfully, but that in any case he would see that they were handed over to the proper authorities, who would mete out to them the punishment they deserved.

The rest of the much abused crew of the *Gladiolus* were brought aboard the cruiser, where they received the best of medical treatment, and the pirates, heavily ironed, were lodged forward on the berth-deck of the man-of-war.

Ensign McPherson with a picked crew from the *American Eagle* was placed in charge of the *Gladiolus*, while a force from the engineer's department set to work to clean up and overhaul the machinery of the yacht.

The course of both vessels was then laid for the island where Captain Henton and his party were still presumably in exile. As Captain Zeabury was anxious to economize coal, the cruiser steamed slowly, and indeed followed in the wake of the yacht a good part of the time. And so it happened one hazy night, whether by accident or by design, Ensign McPherson was never required to explain, that the yacht dropped the "flagship" quite out of sight, and was not overtaken until the island was reached.

When on the bluff that fateful afternoon Grace Henton came out of her swoon, all her womanly resolution reasserted itself, and bidding Nicker-son lose no time in caring for her, she urged him to look after the captives who had been unceremoniously bundled out of the canoe on the bank of the creek. Running down the slope the first officer was amazed on coming nearer to the edge of the creek to discover that the men who were bound and gagged were none other than Captain Henton and the men of his exploring party!

It was but the work of a moment to wipe a jack-knife out of his pocket and to cut the lashings which bound the men hand and foot, and to release the painful gags from their mouths. Captain Henton, pale and nervous, staggered to