

wary. If he thinks we are worth taking he will not, as he might, stand off and play at long-bowls, because that would result in the probable sinking of the ship and loss of her cargo. On the other hand, he will be very wary of boarding should he anticipate a determined resistance from a large number of armed men; and in that case the best thing we can do, as it seems to me, is to let him believe that we have troops on board, and that any attempt on his part to board will meet with a warm reception. What do you think, gentlemen?"

"The captain was undoubtedly correct in his reasoning, and his opinion was at once acted upon. All of us who held a commission in the army put on our uniforms and appeared in them on the upper deck; while some of the hands forward were rigged in mess jackets, &c., supplied by the officers for the purpose, and were instructed to show themselves at intervals on the fore-castle, multiplying themselves as much as possible; while a soldier-servant of the major's was ordered to do sentry-go with a musket aft. Moreover, our two twenty four pounder carronades were loaded each with a round shot and a large bag of musket bullets; muskets—for we had a few—were served out to the men, with a cutlass apiece; and we who had swords and sporting-guns and pistols made them ready for use.

"But all this preparing of arms and unpacking of uniforms could not be done without the knowledge of the ladies of our party; and the apprehensions of the major's wife were first aroused, and gradually spread in terrified whispers to the whole of the party, until at last it was necessary to take them partly into our confidence and let them know there was danger.

"As night fell we fancied that the swell was somewhat less in bulk, but it might be only fancy; anyhow, the captain would not hear of us all keeping watch all night, which was what we youngsters proposed to do. 'No, gentlemen,' said he. 'Go and turn in, and get what rest you can while you have the chance.'

"I went below and turned in at his bidding, and wearied with excitement and watching I fell asleep, a troubled, unsatisfactory sleep, it is true, but not the less sleep; and from this troubled rest I was aroused by hearing my name whispered and feeling a gentle touch on my arm. I started up, and saw by the dim light of a lantern the figure of our old quartermaster. 'Beg pardon, sir,' said he; 'but the cap'n sent me down to say the brigantine is on the move and he'd like you to know.'

"I jumped up, seized my arms, and hurried on deck. It was about two in the morning; the swell had gone down considerably, though still very great; the stars were all over the sky. The captain silently pointed in the direction of the brigantine. I looked, but at first could see nothing; then she rose upon the swell, and I saw her clearly. She was much nearer!

"But how—how?" I asked. "There is still no wind, and"—
"The captain grasped my arm to make me silent, and whispered: 'Sweeps! Listen!'

"Intently I listened, and for some seconds without result; but, the ship pausing for one moment in her tumbling roll, and allowing a momentary cessation to her creaks and groans, I heard faintly and mystically, as if in a dream, the smothered cheep of the sweeps (long oars) as the unknown vessel strove to work herself forward by this means.

"What can they do?" I whispered.

"Nothing yet while this roll lasts except come closer up and make a nearer inspection of us. When the day dawns we must change our tactics," replied the captain. "Go down again; there is nothing you can do."

"But I was wrought up to too high a pitch to go down again; and the captain and I remained up the rest of the night until daylight dawned discussing the situation, and racking our brains for a method of escape.

"And now the sun sprung up and glorified the tumbling ocean, whose troubled bosom was certainly heaving with far less vehemence than before; and there, not a half mile away from us on our larboard quarter, lay the brigantine, still rolling heavily as we ourselves did, her row of guns, eight on a side, gleaming brightly in the morning sun; her bulwarks thickly lined with heads; and at her gaff, admitting of no doubt any longer as to her character—a coal black-flag! We could see that we were the object of eager examination by her crew; and for their benefit we enacted a little pantomime, which the captain and I had planned the night before. No uniforms were now to be seen upon the deck; but, as we knew their glasses were upon us, intent on discovering our force, those in uniform were instructed to appear occasionally at the hatchways both fore and aft, as if about to come on deck with their arms in their hands, when they would at once be peremptorily ordered below by one of the mates—giving those in the brigantine the idea that we were full of troops.

"As the morning passed, it was evident that the brigantine's people were puzzled, and hardly knew whether to leave us alone or not. All that day and all that night we lay about half a mile apart, courtesying to each other as we rose and fell on the swell, with no incident to cause us fresh apprehensions, save that at night they again got their sweeps out, and actually swept her right round us in order, I suppose, to keep us in a state of panic and anxiety.

"Again the day dawned, again the blaze of sunlight streamed over the waters. What is it that is making such a stir in the swarm on board the brigantine? Why are they getting out their sweeps again in such haste? Are they going at last to attack us? Are they?—But no! their stern is towards us. They are moving in the opposite direction! Is help coming to us? Are they moving off in fear? Our captain rushed up into the maintop with his glass, and even before he had reached that height, the shout of 'A sail!' came from his lips, and his finger pointed over our larboard quarter. Eagerly we strained our eyes in that direction, and far away hull down beneath the horizon, in the very quarter to which the brigantine was steering, we saw the gleam of white which betokened the presence of a large vessel under sail.

"A large merchantman, homeward bound, I should say," the captain shouted from the top. "That villain must have been waiting for her when he fell in with us. Let us hope she will get away from him. She seems to have a breeze at any rate."

"What a relief it was to see that swarm of miscreants moving off by their own exertions! How we followed them with our eyes and glasses an hour after hour their sweeps rose and fell upon the now subsiding surface of the sea! By-and-by, her sails seemed to fill, she heeled slightly to one side; her sweeps were no longer to be seen—she had a breeze."

"Shortly after this, an exclamation from our skipper attracted my attention. 'I thought so,' he said; 'there are two of them!' and as we looked, just clear of the merchantman on the other side we saw a suspicious-looking schooner. The brigantine at once hoisted a signal and fired a gun, as we could see by the white smoke; and then the two evidently converged upon the great merchantman. She, too, saw them, that was evident, for she piled up canvas upon canvas to woo the too sluggish breeze. Now the foe were nearing her, and all disguise was evidently thrown aside, for puff after puff of white smoke darted from their sides, responded to, we were glad to see, by puffs at longer intervals from hers; and faintly on the roaring breeze we caught the sound of the explosions. But closer still and closer crept the foe, and every eye was strained upon the desperate fight, and all minds intent upon that alone, when 'All hands make sail!' shouted the captain; 'here is the breeze right on top of us!' and sure enough there it was coming down crisp and fresh almost before we were ready for it. Quickly our good fellows covered the good ship with a cloud of canvas; and as she felt the gentle power of the young breeze and heeled over to it, and the bubbles began swiftly to course astern, a terrible load fell from our hearts, and we felt that we were saved."

* * * * *

The colonel paused a moment, his eye fixed on vacancy, as if he saw himself once more upon the deck of the *Alfred*.

"And what became of the merchantman?" I asked, when silence had lasted for some moments.

"Don't ask me—don't ask me!" he replied in agitated tones. "Poor souls! murdered—every one of them—and the ship scuttled."

"And was no vengeance enacted for so terrible a crime?"

"Before an hour had passed after our arrival a thirty six gun frigate had sailed on our information to capture or destroy those miserable villains wheresoever they might find them, but vessels such as those may go where no great warship can follow them, and the intricate passages and keys of the West Indies were better known to such outcasts of land and sea than to His Majesty's officers."

"And they escaped?"

"Within a month from the time of our encounter, those vessels were caught in a furious West Indian tornado; were dismantled, and, after tossing about for days at the mercy of the storm, were wrecked on one of the islands, where most of their crew miserably perished in their efforts to swim through the surf. Their leader, however, and one or two more, managed to reach the shore alive, where the natives had come down to render what help they could; but being immediately recognized they were seized and hanged without mercy on the nearest tree. There, madam! that is one of the experiences of a subaltern in the old days, and you will agree with me in thinking it by no means a pleasant one."

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