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The... Crimsons of the High Seas

By PERCIE W. HART

fully in their casings far down below the water line.

"I heard an awfully good story when I was west last summer," began Smithers in his usual luscious fashion. "It seems—er—that there had been a cyclone quite recently. Most astounding things, those cyclones. Er—I was assured by any number of reputable citizens—er— But I'll tell you the story—er—and you can judge for yourselves. You see—"

He regular pacing of the sentry from the mainmast to the level deck showed more than anything else that the huge floating mass of machinery and guns was lying at anchor in a sheltered haven. With one eye and one ear alert for possible disturbance of his present quiet, the marine utilized his other eye and ear for matters of a personal and private nature. Up forward a crowd of Jackies were disporting themselves in acoustical fashion. One couple sat on boxing gloves, and their own agility, combined with the criticisms of surrounding mates, promised skill of no mean order in this form of manly exercise. A little apart from the rest and slightly screened from the full effect of the sun by an iron ventilating shaft two strangely diverse types of humanity lay stretched out upon the deck side by side. One was a big, dark complexioned Irishman, with the grime of coal dust over his eyes and the fibers of his skin; the other, an undersized, ruddy cheeked youth, showed indications of genteel upbringing in every move that he made. To the uninitiated their uniforms appeared to be identical, but there were certain markings and signs which showed their ratings to the nautical mind—the former as a coal passer, the latter as a member of the crew's crew. The Irishman was passing away an idle hour after the fashion of all animals and many men. His companion was reading, apparently with deep interest, from a copy of the "Hill" in the original, for among the very lowest ranks in our navy, and unlike that of any other nation, you may find what you least expect.

An individual rather stout and stout in figure came puffing up the steep ladder leading from the berth deck. Without pausing to watch the glove contest, now in its final and most exciting round, he slowly made his way aft.

"Hello, Billy," commented the intruder genially, completely unashamed by the other's show of dignity. "I want to speak with the captain for a minute or so. I've got a little scheme that—"

At this juncture it chanced that a tall and rather elderly looking officer came out from an adjacent cabin.

"Master Tailor Todds, sir," spoke out the sentry, bringing his piece to the salute. "Something he wants to show you."

"Eh, Todds! To show me?" remarked the captain somewhat wearily, then motioning with his right hand he bade the other follow him.

Carefully holding what appeared to be some sort of article of wearing apparel between his two pudgy fingers, and pointing it in midair as if he feared that even the soft contact of his own finger might result in mutual injury, the visitor obeyed his commanding officer's gesture and trotted along behind him.

Just been most emphatically denounced by his captain. But still—following the blood strain which has given us sewing machines, typewriters and thousands of other similarly useful articles in spite of much more serious obstacles than their simple construction—an official—Obadiah cherished his project as tenderly as ever.

"I really believe that our whole campaign has gone crazy upon the subject of improvement in the latest improved modern methods of naval warfare," remarked Captain Beresford somewhat irritably to his aid, who had just entered the cabin. "The ship's tailor is the latest enthusiast. He has just come to me about having the men supplied with a crazy kind of bullet proof coat that he has patented. Had a model of the thing with him too. Lot of big steel springs like, sewed on thick felt. Something on the idea of old chain armor, only Todds' variety of it looked more like fish scales than anything else. It's true enough, as he says, that the men about the superstructure are well ill-protected, but they need not be so strictly nonprofessional topics with his chief."

Now, the specific order of the navy department had so decreed that the gallant United States battleship Rhode Island should be one of a fleet dispatched to contest the enemy's passage. After many weary days of watchful cruising one of the fast little dispatch boats came scurrying back to the main body of the navy's picket line, with a big bank of smoke to windward. Almost immediately strings of colored flags began going up and down upon the signal halyards of the American vessels, tall black arms wigwagged from the bridges like inspired scarecrows and little steam launches darted hither and thither through the fleet. The rather straggling procession of warships lined up with much greater accuracy of interval and its course seemed so as to lead directly toward the suspicious bank of smoke.

Some little while after another small craft, an unprotected cruiser this time, came back to report the enemy as actually close at hand. The diminutive warship's flag signals were scarcely necessary to establish this fact, however, for one of her two stubby masts was missing and the main portion of her superstructure had been cleared away with all the alacrity of a chance shot at long range was capable.

"The percentage of shattering as against insistent wounds will be very large," argued Hughes in a gleeful tone of voice. "With one or two good shots involving the complete severance of the carotid artery, I can judge from their conversation at the mess table one might almost imagine that the chief surgeon and his assistant regarded the coming action as one especially designed to increase their store of professional knowledge."

"Did you see Hutton when you were aboard the Midget this morning?" "Yes," replied the other, "he passed the latter a reported snare credited to me."

"What are you heading that way for?" began Mortimer. "You're sure not going back to—"

"Yes, we are to try to surprise them in the rear before daylight," answered Hutton. "Now look out. I'm going to throw you something. It's a letter. You need not deliver it unless—unless something happens."

one of his opponent's castles. I presume we may be considered as having won in this first move!"

"How so?" interrogated the commander eagerly.

"The Midget has certainly blown up one of their very biggest battleships, replied the other, taking the glass down from his eyes as he spoke. "But, upon the other hand, their destroyers have undoubtedly made short work of her before she could get away."

"Both men were silent for a time. "Good!" ejaculated the captain at last in a particularly mild mannered and satisfied tone. "Unless I am greatly mistaken the 'make ready' signal is going up on the flagship!"

"Aye, aye, sir," reported the grizzled old quartermaster. "There it is!"

"Clear ship for action!" bellowed the captain.

At these few words, passed on by the boatswain and his mates from deck to deck and from division to division the preliminary overture of their shrill whistles, the men swarmed like working bees all over the huge fighting machine. The Rhode Island, in common with the rest of the fleet, was stripped down to her metal skin, ready to greet the foe. Down in her bowels the whole force of engineers and firemen were hard at it, the smoke belched from the towering stacks in mighty volume, and the roar of steam escaping from the safety valves showed that even the boilers were a sharer in the general excitement of the situation.

"Round general quarters!"

To the call of battle and rattle of drum every single soul on board, from Obadiah Todds, the worker on cloth and buttons, went to the particular station assigned them. Officers and men entered the big turret, manning guns of the secondary battery, clambered up into the fighting tops or joined the powder division below decks. The engineers and firemen had their own special lines of effort to follow out. Not a single idle cog could be found among the hundreds who composed the crew of the big fighting ship. Of what purely commercial or municipal institution could such a thing be said?

"Cast loose and provide!" excitedly cried the commander, for even such things as micrometer scales and cubes of smokeless powder have not been sufficient to destroy the ancient lust of battle when the breath of the enemy is in his throat.

Up in the armor induced conning tower of the Rhode Island sat Lieutenant Beresford, surrounded with speaking tubes, push buttons and various other more or less intricate signaling apparatus. With him was Lieutenant Mortimer. Both men had unlighted cigars tightly clenched between their teeth and the captain had removed his collar and necktie, at the same time carefully buttoning up his uniform coat.

"We ought to fetch in between those two biggest fellows," remarked the younger officer in a peculiarly sweet tone of voice. "The one on the starboard is just about our size, but the other ship looks rather large."

"No," laughed Beresford. "Where is his station?"

"At one of the secondary gun tubes," replied Mortimer.

But the rest of his speech was lost in a roar as if a whole magazine had exploded; the ship reeled and staggered like a sore stricken man, and lay clogging with their ends bitten off, two rollers from side to side, unnoticed, upon the floor of the conning tower.

"A lucky shot indeed! They've spoiled the working of our main battery in great shape!" howled Beresford, with bloodshot eyes and lips foaming in rage. "Let her go, Brownson!" he yelled again.

Scarcely were the words well out of his mouth before the ship again reeled, only this time it was in recoil from her own discharge. The reports from the mighty ten and twelve inch rifles, the concussion of which often burrowed blood vessels in strong men's heads, were roaring and resounding upon every hand. The by no means insignificant secondary batteries served to fill in the gaps, and the crackle and rattle from the small arms were completely indistinguishable. Now were to be seen the full results of scientific warfare.

A huge battleship of the enemy blew up, scattering death and destruction among friend and foe alike within her compass, and one of the American armored cruisers went down beneath the concentrated fire of two black monsters, with her guns still being served and Old Glory floating defiantly at the masthead. The air was poisoned with the dust and fumes from the various chemical explosives, and the soot and smoke from the overtaxed boilers lay like a pall over the scene of carnage.

There was a slight lull after the fleet had so passed through one another and were rounding up, preparatory to repeating the maneuver. Not a single one of the surviving ships had come out of the first attack unscathed. Their superstructures were practically demolished, and great rents and gaping holes were visible everywhere, in unexpected surface and armor plating alike. Moreover, several of them were floating bilk with both engines and guns smashed out of all usefulness, piled knee deep with scarlet horrors, and the few left alive upon them unable to do more than hope for the chance of rescue before they were swallowed up by the remorseless sea.

But there were still left a number of ships upon either side with the masts of their great guns capable even yet of surpassing their previous performance. These ships, reckless and ugly, with human blood pouring from their scuppers and maddened at their helms, were now bearing down upon one another. Among those of them flying American colors was the Rhode Island.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" howled Lieutenant Beresford in wild desperation. "What's the use of fighting expensive battles with cheap stuff? Here we are just at the second waits and not a decent rifle on board. Those cursed cussies in the carriages must have been full of air bubbles. Contract work! Ugh! What do we have dockyards and government machine shops for?"

"They'll save a few dollars and lose all before they finish! Morty, my boy, and his voice softened noticeably, "I'm going to ride that big fellow who knocked our rifles to pieces. He seems to be unmanageable and can hardly get away from us, but his guns are as letter as ever. It's a case of must. One of us will surely have to go to the bottom inside of three minutes. The speaking tubes are knocked sillywise. Steam I must have, and I will try to see that I get it!"

Below deck the young Lieutenant found a startling contrast to the scene of riot and confusion above. The various mechanics were stoically performing their prosaic duties just as if they were on voyage, several others were dodging hither and thither with their long necked cans among the ponderous machinery, while his gold bridges coat thrown to one side, was carefully wiping off a brass mounted reversing lever with a bunch of fresh waste.



Beresford slammed down hard on a lever and shouted a dozen orders.

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"It has been 'loony' on the subject," said the skipper. "It's the safest place on the whole ship."

While this little conversation was proceeding the commander never ceased watching his own deck, the other vessels and the enemy's fleet from the various slots and eyeballs of the conning tower. At frequent intervals he had occasion to manipulate some one or other of his various instruments.

"Ah, ha! They're opening up in regular order," he muttered as a puff of smoke followed by a very fair report came from the headmost of the enemy's ships.

A small black object hurtled across the water, cutting the top of the waves in its progress and sinking in a white track a few feet from the Rhode Island. "Trying to make distance with their six inch rifles," laconically observed the youth fully. "I should call it not much over two miles."

Both fleets were now rushing toward one another as fast as their mighty engines could take them, and the fighting soon became general. The main fighting line of each, composed of the battleships and heavier armored cruisers, moved forward in regular column of attack. Upon meeting they would pass between one another's intervals and exchange volleys from their huge broadside and turret rifles at murderously short range. The lighter craft of either side, such as unprotected cruisers and commerce destroyers, hovered upon the flanks, ready to participate in the easy victories of a rout or to engage in a duel with such of their own class as might offer.

"The big fellow is swinging his fore turret around to train on us," remarked Mortimer quietly.

With a roar like that of a lion when about to jump at his prey, Lieutenant Beresford slammed down hard on a lever and shouted a dozen orders through as many speaking tubes. Almost instantaneously the whole fabric quivered as the ship increased her already high rate of speed and fairly leaped ahead of her comrades.

"Are you ready there, Brownson?" called the captain through the tube that led to the forward main battery.

"Yes, sir," came back the reply. "But the vessel—"

"D—d—d the vessel!" was shouted through the tube. "You don't need any faster at this range. Let them—"



The screen rushed for the ladder.

The screen rushed for the ladder.

"The enemy has blown up the other side of our main battery," said the skipper.

"Eh?" sniffed the surgeon grimly. "And a spent piece of shot has ricocheted from the deck and driven some of the body armor into his vital. If he had only been stripped like the rest it would have been a simple contusion. As it is, the man is practically as dead as a doornail."

Upon the return to port of the victorious American fleet a number of the seamen and marines were made blind drunk by well meaning but rather too enthusiastic civilians. Incidentally this resulted in the dishonorable discharge from the United States service of a red necked shirker named Patsy.

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