

Rudyard Kipling

A Fleet in Being



Редъярд Киплинг

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Kipling Rudyard

A Fleet in Being / Notes of Two Trips With The Channel Squadron

CHAPTER I

*'... the sailor men
That sail upon the seas,
To fight the Wars and keep the Laws,
And live on yellow peas'*

'A Gunroom Ditty-Box.' G. S. BOWLES.

Some thirty of her Majesty's men-of-war were involved in this matter; say a dozen battleships of the most recent, and seventeen or eighteen cruisers; but my concern was limited to one of a new type commanded by an old friend. I had some dim knowledge of the interior of a warship, but none of the new world into which I stepped from a Portsmouth wherry one wonderful summer evening in '97.

With the exception of the Captain, the Chief Engineer, and maybe a few petty officers, nobody was more than twenty-eight years old. They ranged in the ward-room from this resourceful age to twenty-six or seven clear-cut, clean-shaved young faces with all manner of varied experience behind them. When one comes to think, it is only just that a light 20-knot cruiser should be handled, under guidance of an older head, by affable young gentlemen prepared, even sinfully delighted, to take chances not set down in books. She was new, they were new, the Admiral was new, and we were all off to the Manœuvres together – thirty keels next day threading their way in and out between a hundred and twenty moored vessels not so fortunate. We opened the ball, for the benefit of some foreign warships, with a piece of rather pretty steering. A consort was coming up a waterlane, between two lines of shipping, just behind us; and we nipped in immediately ahead of her, precisely as a hansom turning out of Bond Street nips in in front of a City 'bus. Distance on water is deceptive, and when I vowed that at one crisis I could have spat on the wicked ram of our next astern, pointed straight at our naked turning side, the ward-room laughed.

'Oh, that's nothing,' said a gentleman of twenty-two. 'Wait till we have to keep station to-night. It's my middle watch.'

'Close water-tight doors, then,' said a Sub-Lieutenant. 'I say' (this to the passenger) 'if you find a second-class cruiser's ram in the small of your back at midnight don't be alarmed.'

FASCINATING GAME OF GENERAL POST

We were then strung out in a six-mile line, thirty ships, all heading Westwards. As soon as we found room the Flagship began to signal, and there followed a most fascinating game of general post. When I came to know our signalmen on the human side I appreciated it even more. The Admiral wreathed himself with flags, strings of them; the signalman on our high little, narrow little bridge, telescope jammed to his eye, read out the letters of that order; the Quartermaster spun the infantine wheel; the Officer of the Bridge rumbled requests down the speaking-tube to the engine-room, and away we fled to take up station at such and such a distance from our neighbours, ahead and astern, at such and such an angle on the Admiral, his bow or beam. The end of it was a miracle to lay eyes. The long line became four parallel lines of strength and beauty, a mile and a quarter from flank to

flank, and thus we abode till evening. Two hundred yards or so behind us the ram of our next astern planed through the still water; an equal distance in front of us lay the oily water from the screw of our next ahead. So it was ordered, and so we did, as though glued into position. But our Captain took up the parable and bade me observe how slack we were, by reason of recent festivities, compared to what we should be in a few days. 'Now we're all over the shop. The ships haven't worked together, and station-keeping isn't as easy as it looks.' Later on I found this was perfectly true.

A VARYING STRAIN

One thing more than all the rest impresses the passenger on a Queen's ship. She is seldom for three whole hours at the same speed. The liner clear of her dock strikes her pace and holds it to her journey's end, but the man-of-war must always have two or three knots up her sleeve in case the Admiral demands a spurt; she must also be ready to drop three or four knots at the wave of a flag; and on occasion she must lie still and meditate. This means a varying strain on all the mechanism, and constant strain on the people who control it.

I counted seven speeds in one watch, ranging from eight knots to seventeen, which, with eleven, was our point of maximum vibration. At eight knots you heard the vicious little twin-screws jiggling like restive horses; at seventeen they pegged away into the sea like a pair of short-gaited trotting ponies on a hard road. But one felt, even in dreams, that she was being held back. Those who talk of a liner's freedom from breakdown should take a 7,000 horsepower boat and hit her and hold her for a fortnight all across the salt seas.

IN CLUB AND COTERIES

After a while I went to the galley to get light on these and other matters. Once forward of the deck torpedo-tubes you enter another and a fascinating world of seamen-gunners, artificers, cooks, Marines (we had twenty and a sergeant), ship's boys, signalmen, and the general democracy. Here the men smoke at the permitted times, and in clubs and coteries gossip and say what they please of each other and their superiors. Their speech is soft (if everyone spoke aloud you could not hear yourself think on a cruiser), their gestures are few (if a man swung his arms about he would interfere with his neighbour), their steps are noiseless as they pop in and out of the forward flats; they are at all times immensely interesting, and, as a rule, delightfully amusing. Their slang borrows from the engine-room, the working parts of guns, the drill-book, and the last music-hall song. It is delivered in a tight-lipped undertone; the more excruciatingly funny parts without a shade of expression. The first thing that strikes a casual observer is their superb health; next, their quiet adequateness; and thirdly, a grave courtesy. But under the shell of the new Navy beats the heart of the old. All Marryat's immortals are there, better fed, better tended, better educated, but at heart unchanged. I heard Swinburne laying down the law to his juniors by the ash-shoot; Chucks was there, too, inquiring in the politest manner in the world what a friend meant by spreading his limbs about the landscape; and a lineal descendant of Dispart fussed over a 4in. gun that some one had been rude to. They were men of the world, at once curiously simple and curiously wily (this makes the charm of the Naval man of all ranks), coming and going about their businesses like shadows.

NOT FROM THE ADMIRALTY STANDPOINT

They were all keenly interested in the Manœuvres – not from the Admiralty standpoint, but the personal. Many of them had served under one or other of the Admirals, and they enlightened their fellows, as you shall later hear.

Then night fell, and Our Fleet blazed 'like a lot of chemists' shops adrift,' as one truthfully put it – six lights to each ship; bewildering the tramps. There was a cove of refuge, by one of the forward 4-in. guns, within touch of the traffic to the bridge, the break of the foc'sle, the crowded populations below, and the light banter near the galley. My vigil here was cheered by the society of a Marine, who delivered a lecture on the thickness of the skulls of the inhabitants of South America, as tested by his own hands. It ended thus: 'An' so I got ten days in one o' their stinkin' prisons. Fed me on grapes they did, along with one o' their own murderers. Funny people them South Americans. Oh, 'adn't killed any one. We only skirmished through their bloomin' Suburbs lookin' for fun like.'

'Fun! *We've* got all the fun we want!' growled a voice in the shadow. A stoker had risen silently as a seal for a breath of air, and stood, chest to the breeze, scanning the Fleet lights.

'Ullo! Wot's the matter with *your* condenser?' said the Marine. 'You'd better take your mucky 'ands off them hammick-cloths or you'll be spoke to.'

'Our bunkers,' said the figure, addressing his grievance to the sea-line, 'are stuck all about like a lot o' women's pockets. They're stuck about like a lot o' bunion-plasters. That's what our bunkers are.' He slipped back into the darkness. Presently a signalman pattered by to relieve his mate on the bridge.

'You'll be 'ung,' said the Marine, who was a wit, and by the same token something of a prophet.

'Not if you're anywhere in the crowd I won't,' was the retort, always in a cautious, 'don't-wake-him' undertone. 'Wot are you doin' 'ere?'

'Never you mind. You go on up to the 'igh an' lofty bridge an' persecute your vocation. My Gawd! I wouldn't be a signalman, not for ever so.'

When I met my friend next morning 'persecuting his vocation' as sentry over the lifebuoy aft neither he nor I recognised each other; but I owe him some very nice tales.

WHEELING, CIRCLING, AND RETURNING

Next day both Fleets were exercised at steam tactics, which is a noble game; but I was too interested in the life of my own cruiser, unfolding hour by hour, to be intelligently interested in evolutions. All I remember is that we were eternally taking up positions at fifteen knots an hour amid a crowd of other cruisers, all precisely alike, all still as death, each with a wedge of white foam under her nose; wheeling, circling, and returning. The battleships danced stately quadrilles by themselves in another part of the deep. We of the light horse did barn-dances about the windy floors; and precisely as couples in the ball-room fling a word over their shoulders, so we and our friends, whirling past to take up fresh stations, snapped out an unofficial sentence or two by means of our bridge-semaphores. Cruisers are wondrous human. In the afternoon the battleships overtook us, their white upperworks showing like icebergs as they topped the sea-line. Then we sobered our faces, and the engineers had rest, and at a wave of the Admiral's flag off Land's End our Fleet was split in twain. One half would go outside Ireland, toying with the weight of the Atlantic *en route*, to Blacksod Bay, while we turned up the Irish Channel to Lough Swilly. There we would coal, and wait for War. After that it would be blind man's bluff within a three hundred and fifty mile ring of the Atlantic. We of Lough Swilly would try to catch the Blacksod Fleet, which was supposed to have a rendezvous of its own somewhere out at sea, before it could return to the shelter of the Bay.

THE EXPERTS OF THE LOWER DECK

There was, however, one small flaw in the rules, and as soon as they were in possession of the plan of campaign the experts of the lower deck put their horny thumbs on it – thus:

'Look 'ere. Their Admiral 'as to go out from Blacksod to some rendezvous known only to 'isself. Ain't that so?'

'We've 'eard all that.' This from an impertinent, new to War.

'Leavin' a cruiser be'ind 'im —*Blake* most likely, or *Blenheim*— to bring 'im word of the outbreak of 'ostilities. Ain't that so?

'Get *on*. What are you drivin' at?

'You'll see. When that cruiser overtakes 'im 'e 'as to navigate back to Blacksod from 'is precious rendezvous to get 'ome again before we intercepts the beggar.'

'Well?'

'Now I put it to you. What's to prevent 'im rendezvousin' out *slow* in order to be overtook by that cruiser; an' rendezvousin' back quick to Black-sod, before we intercepts 'im? I don't see that 'is steamin' rate is anywhere laid down. You mark my word, 'e'll take precious good care to be overtook by that cruiser of 'is. We won't catch 'im. There's an 'ole in the rules an' 'e'll slip through. *I* know 'im if you don't!'

The voice went on to describe "im,' the Admiral of our enemy – as a wily person, who would make the Admiralty sit up.

And truly, it came out in the end that the other Admiral had done almost exactly what his foc'sle friends expected. He went to his rendezvous slowly, was overtaken by his cruiser about a hundred miles from the rendezvous, turned back again to Blacksod, and having won the game of 'Pussy wants a corner,' played about in front of the Bay till we descended on him. Then he was affable, as he could afford to be, explained the situation, and I presume smiled. There was a 'hole in the rules,' and he sailed all his Fleet through it.

We, of the Northern Squadron, found Lough Swilly in full possession of a Sou'-west gale, and an assortment of dingy colliers lying where they could most annoy the anchoring Fleet. A collier came alongside with donkey-engines that would not lift more than half their proper load; she had no bags, no shovels, and her crazy derrick-boom could not be topped up enough to let the load clear our bulwarks. So we supplied our own bags and shovels, rearranged the boom, put two of our own men on the rickety donkey-engines, and fell to work in that howling wind and wet.

COALING: A PREPARATION FOR WAR

As a preparation for War next day, it seemed a little hard on the crew, who worked like sailors – there is no stronger term. From time to time a red-eyed black demon, with flashing teeth, shot into the ward-room for a bite and a drink, cried out the number of tons aboard, added a few pious words on the collier's appliances, and our bunkers ('Like a lot of bunion-plasters,' the stoker had said), and tore back to where the donkey-engines wheezed, the bags crashed, the shovels rasped and scraped, the boom whined and creaked, and the First Lieutenant, carved in pure jet, said precisely what occurred to him. Before the collier cast off a full-blooded battleship sent over a boat to take some measurements of her hatch. The boat was in charge of a Midshipman aged, perhaps, seventeen, though he looked younger. He came dripping into the ward-room – bloodless, with livid lips, for he had been invalided from the Mediterranean full of Malta fever.

'And what are you in?' said our Captain, who chanced to pass by.

'The *Victorious*, sir, and a smart ship!' He drank his little glass of Marsala, swirled his dank boat-cloak about him, and went out serenely to take his boat home through the dark and the dismal welter.

Now the *Victorious*, she is some fourteen thousand nine hundred tons, and he who gave her her certificate was maybe ten stone two – with a touch of Malta fever on him!

THE WARD-ROOM DISPORTED ITSELF

We cleaned up at last; the First Lieutenant's face relaxed a little, and some one called for the instruments of music. Out came two violins, a mandoline, and bagpipes, and the ward-room

disported itself among tunes of three Nations till War should be declared. In the middle of a scientific experiment as to how the ship's kitten might be affected by bagpipes that hour struck, and even more swiftly than pussy fled under the sofa the trim mess-jackets melted away, the chaff ceased, the hull shivered to the power of the steam-capstan, the slapping of the water on our sides grew, and we glided through the moored Fleet to the mouth of Lough Swilly. Our orders were to follow and support another cruiser who had been already despatched towards Blacksod Bay to observe the enemy – or rather that cruiser who was bearing news of the outbreak of War to the enemy's Fleet.

It was then midnight of the 7th of July – by the rules of the game the main body could not move till noon of the 8th – and the North Atlantic, cold and lumpy, was waiting for us as soon as we had put out our lights. Then I began to understand why a certain type of cruiser is irreverently styled 'a commodious coffee-grinder.' We had the length of a smallish liner, but by no means her dead weight, so where the Red Duster would have driven heavily through the seas the White Ensign danced; and the twin-screws gave us more kick than was pleasant. At half-past five of a peculiarly cheerless dawn we picked up the big cruiser (who had seen nothing), stayed in her company till nearly seven, and ran back to rejoin the Fleet, whom we met coming out of Lough Swilly about 1 p.m. of Thursday, the 8th. And the weather was vile. Once again we headed W.N.W. in company at an average speed of between thirteen and fourteen knots on a straightaway run of three hundred and fifty miles toward the Rockal Bank and the lonely rock that rises out of the sea there. The idea was that our enemy might have made this his rendezvous, in which case we had hope of catching him *en masse*.

Through that penitential day the little cruiser was disgustingly lively, but all we took aboard was spray, whereas the low-bowed battleships slugged their bluff noses into the surge and rose dripping like half-tide rocks. The Flagship might have manœuvred like half a dozen Nelsons, but I lay immediately above the twin-screws and thought of the Quartermaster on the reeling bridge who was not allowed to lie down. Through the cabin-door I could see the decks, dim with spray; hear the bugles calling to quarters; and catch glimpses of the uninterrupted life of the ship – a shining face under a sou'wester; a pair of sea-legs cloaked in oil-skins; a hurrying signalman with a rolling and an anxious eye; a warrant officer concerned for the proper housing of his quick-firers, as they disappeared in squirts of foam; or a Lieutenant serenely reporting men and things 'present' or 'correct.' Behind all, as the cruiser flung herself carelessly abroad, great grey and slate-coloured scoops of tormented sea. About midnight the scouting cruiser – same we had left that morning on the look-out for the *Blake* or the *Blenheim* – rejoined the Fleet; but the fleet might have gone down as one keel so far as one unhappy traveller was concerned.

By noon of July 9 we had covered 325½ miles in twenty-four hours, with never a sight of the enemy to cheer us, and had reached the limit of our ground. Here we turned, and, on a front of twenty-four miles from wing to wing, swept down 250 miles South-eastward to the offing of Blacksod Bay.

'MISSED!'

Mercifully the weather began to improve, and we had the sea more or less behind us. It was when we entered on this second slant, about three minutes after the Fleet swung round, that, as though all men had thought it together, a word went round our forecastle – 'Missed!' After dinner, as they were smoking above the spit-kids, the doctrine was amplified with suitable language by the foc'sle experts, and it was explained to me with a great certainty how the other side had out-manœuvred us 'by means of the 'ole in the rules.' In other words, 'he had been overtook by 'is cruiser,' precisely as the wiser heads had prophesied; and even at that early stage of the game we had been sold.

There was no way of finding out anything for sure. A big scouting cruiser slipped off again a little before dawn of the 10th, and six or seven hours later was reported to be in sight with news of the enemy. At this point there came, as we learned later, what you might call a hitch. Some unhappy signalman, they assert, misplaced a flag of a signal whereby it was caused to be believed that a cruiser

had sighted the enemy where there was no enemy. In that direction, then, the Fleet gave chase, and though the thing was abortive, the run was a beautiful example of what the new Navy can do at a pinch.

WE DISCOVERED OUR MISTAKE

Then, I suppose, we discovered our mistake about the enemy, and hurried all together for Blacksod Bay in the hope of cutting him off. Arrived at the scattered Islands near the mouth, a cruiser was sent inside to see if any one was at home, while the Flagship bade the rest of us 'walk foreinst her while she considered on it.' Meteorologically the weather was now glorious – a blazing sun, and a light swell to which the cruisers rolled lazily, as hounds roll on the grass at a check. Nautically there was a good deal of thunder in the air. Everybody knew something had gone wrong, and when the Flagship announced that she was not at all pleased with the signalling throughout the Fleet it was no more than every one expected.

Now the Flagship had some fifty or sixty signalmen, and a bridge as broad as a houseboat and as clear as a ball-room. Our bridge was perhaps four feet broad; the roar of a stoke-hold ventilating-fan, placed apparently for that purpose, carefully sucked up two-thirds of every shouted order; and between the bridge and the poop the luckless signalman, for want of an overhead passage, had to run an obstacle race along the crowded decks. We owned six signalmen. After watching them for a week I was prepared to swear that each had six arms and eight cinder-proof eyes; but the Flagship thought otherwise. I heard what the signalmen thought later on; but that was by no means for publication.

HIGH-SPEED SCOUTING

Back came the cruiser with news that Blacksod Bay was empty. Meantime three other boats had been sent off to reinforce the racing cruiser whose constant business it was to keep touch with the enemy. That monster did most of our high-speed scouting, and several times at least saw something of the other side. We were not so lucky. With three second-class friends we were ordered to patrol at twelve knots an hour on a six mile beat thirteen miles to the North-east of Eagle Island, to fire a rocket if we saw anything of the enemy that night, and to stay out till we were recalled. When we reached our ground the sea was all empty save for one speck on the horizon that marked the next cruiser, also patrolling. A desolate and a naked shore, broken into barren Islands, turned purplish-grey in the sunset, and two lone lighthouses took up their duty. We tramped up and down through that marvellous transparent dusk, with more than the regularity of the Metropolitan Police. There was no lawful night, but a wine-coloured twilight cut in half by the moon-track on the still water. Unless the enemy poled in punts under the shadow of the shore and the faint mist that lay along it, he could not hope to creep round from the North unobserved. The signalmen blessed their gods – Marine ones – that they were away from the Flagship; the foc'sle and my friend the Marine assured the signalmen that they would be infallibly hanged at the yard-arm when we reached port; and we all talked things over forward as the steady tramp continued.

'I told you so! E's found an 'ole in the rules an' slipped through it,' was the burden of our song. We must have burned more coal than would ever be expedient in War, and we saw imaginary hulls with great zeal till the glorious sunrise, cut off from the battle, peering over the nettings, wet with dew, and just as ignorant of events around us as we shall be when the Real Thing begins.

CHAPTER II

Entered suddenly about noon on Sunday, after the disconcerting fashion of cruisers, one of our side flying the general recall, and telling us to go down to the Flag. But when we reached that place we found neither Flag nor battle ships, but the *Powerful* and the *Terrible*, who took us under their wing – all six of us, second and third-class cruisers. Till that point we had been sizeable ships, but those two huge things dwarfed us to mean little tramps. One never gets used to the bulk and height of these berserk Campanias. Then we all began talking. Who knew anything about anything; and who had dragged who round the walls of what? Our next astern gave us one slateful of information which was rather dizzying. That a cruiser at 7:30 that morning had reported to the Battle Fleet, who had spent the night patrolling outside Blacksod Bay, ‘Enemy to the Westward.’ That the Fleet had given chase; that the Flagship had fired one gun when she came within three miles of the said enemy fifteen miles West of Blacksod Bay. That the enemy had gone in to Blacksod Bay, and, he believed, our own battleships had gone south to Bantry. (I have already explained rudely what the enemy had done.)

That was all we could then arrive at. (The Fleet will learn no more when the Real Thing arrives.) I went forward to hear the text commented on.

SEA-LAWYERS

Said the voice of unshaken experience, ‘We’ve been ’ad. Don’t tell *me*.’

‘We ’aven’t. We’ve intercepted the beggar,’ – a young sea-lawyer began. ‘E was rendezvousin’ back to Blacksod.’

‘What were the rules any’ow?’ a voice cut in.

‘We wasn’t fightin’ rules – we was fightin’ a man. I tell you we’ve been ’ad. Didn’t I say so when we come round on that long slant from Rockall way? ’E’s got round us some’ow.’

‘But look ’ere. The signals make it out we’ve won.’

‘E won’t make it out we’ve won, though. Both sides’ll claim it.’

‘That’s what they always do. When I was in – ’

And one went on to tell of other Manœuvres in which he had apparently taken a leading part, while we jogged Southward behind the *Powerful* as far as the Eastern entrance to Berehaven. But there were no battleships in Bantry Bay. They had gone on to target practice, and presently we cruisers dispersed among the headlands for the same business, with orders to rendezvous a few miles South of the Fastnet, that well-worn mile-post of the Transatlantic liner.

ALMOST INFERNAL MOBILITY

No description will make you realise the almost infernal mobility of a Fleet at sea. I had seen ours called, to all appearance, out of the deep; split in twain at a word, and, at a word, sent skimming beyond the horizon; strung out as vultures string out patiently in the hot sky above a dying beast; flung like a lasso; gathered anew as a riata is coiled at the saddle bow; dealt out card-fashion over fifty miles of green table; picked up, shuffled, and redealt as the game changed. I had seen cruisers flown like hawks, ridden like horses at a close finish, and manœuvred like bicycles; but the wonder of their appearance and disappearance never failed. The *Powerful* spoke, and in ten minutes the cruiser-squadron had vanished; each ship taking her own matches and sulphur to make a hell of her own. And what that hell might be if worked at full power I could, presently, guess as we swung round a headland, and the bugles began. At this point the gunner became a person of importance (in the Navy each hour of the day has its king), and the captains of the guns separated themselves a little

from the common herd. Remember, we were merely a third-class cruiser, capable, perhaps, of slaying destroyers in a heavy sea, but meant for the most part to scout and observe. Our armament consisted of eight four-inch quick-fire wire guns, the newest type – two on the foc'sle, four in the waist, and two on the poop, alternating with as many three-pounder Hotchkiss quick-firers. Three Maxims adorned the low nettings. Their water-jackets were filled up from an innocent tin-pot before the game began. It looked like slaking the thirst of devils.

MAN-SLAYING DEVILTRIES

We found an eligible rock, the tip of a greyish headland, peopled by a few gulls – the surge creaming along its base – and a portion of this we made our target, that we might see the effect of the shots and practise the men at firing on a water-line. Up came the beautiful solid brass cordite cartridges; and the four-inch shells that weigh twenty-five pounds apiece. (The little three-pounders, as you know, have their venomous shell and charge together like small-arm ammunition.) The filled belts of the Maxims were adjusted, and all these man-slaying deviltries waked to life and peered over the side at the unsuspecting gulls. It was 'still' throughout the ship – still as it will be when the Real Thing arrives. From the upper bridge I could hear, above the beat of the engines, the click of the Lieutenants' scabbards (*Why* should men who need every freedom in action be hampered by an utterly useless sword?); the faint clink of a four-inch breech swung open; the crisper snick of the little Hotchkiss's falling-block; and an impatient sewing-machine noise from a Maxim making sure of its lock-action. On his platform over my head the Navigating Officer was giving the ranges to the rock.

'Two thousand seven hundred yards, sir.'

'Two thousand seven hundred yards,' – the order passed from gun to gun – 'ten knots right deflection – starboard battery.' The gun-captains muzzled the rubber-faced shoulder-pieces, and the long lean muzzles behind the shields shifted fractionally.

'Try a sighting shot with that three-pounder!'

The smack of cordite is keener, and catches one more about the heart, than the slower-burning black powder. There was a shrillish gasping wail – exactly like the preliminary whoop of an hysterical woman – as the little shell hurried to the target; and a puff of dirty smoke on the rock-face sent the gulls flying. So far as I could observe there was not even a haze round the lips of the gun. Till I saw the spent case jerked out I did not know which of the clean, precise, and devilish four had spoken.

WHEN THE REAL THING COMES

'Two thousand four hundred,' the voice droned overhead, and the starboard bow four-inch quick-firer opened the ball. Again no smoke; again the song of the shell – not a shriek this time, but a most utterly mournful wail. Again the few seconds suspense (what will they be when the Real Thing comes?) and a white star on the target. The cruiser winced a little, as though some one had pinched her.

Before the next gun had fired, the empty cartridges cylinder of the first was extracted, and by some sleight of hand I could not see the breech had closed behind a full charge. A Martini-Henri could hardly have been reloaded more swiftly.

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