

Goldfrap John Henry

The Dreadnought Boys on Battle Practice



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CHAPTER I.

A RED-HOT STOVE AND DESTINY

"Isn't it a dandy picture – the real thing – just as I've always imagined it. Herc!"

Ned Strong wheeled from the gaudily colored lithograph he had been admiring, and turned to a red-headed youth of about his own age – almost eighteen – who stood beside him in the postoffice and general store at Lambs' Corners, a remote village in the Catskill mountains.

"It's purty as a yearling colt," responded the lad addressed, examining once more, with an important air of criticism, the poster in question. The lithograph had been tacked up only the day before, but by this time half the boys in the neighboring country had examined it.

The poster represented a stalwart, barefooted jackie, in Uncle Sam's natty uniform, standing on the flying-bridge of a battleship and "wig-wagging" the commanding officer's messages. The bright-red signal flag, with its white center, which he wielded, made a vivid splash of color. In the background a graphically depicted sea, flecked with "whitecaps," was pictured. As a whole, the design was one well calculated to catch the attention of all wholesome, adventurous lads, particularly two, who, like our new acquaintances, had never seen any water but the Hudson River. Indeed, as that majestic stream lay twenty miles from their home, they had only set eyes on that at long intervals.

"Look how that ship seems to ride that sea – as if those racing waves didn't bother her a bit," went on Ned, dwelling on the details of the poster, which was issued to every postoffice in the land by the Bureau of Navigation.

"And look at the sailor," urged Herc Taylor, Ned's cousin. Herc had been christened Hercules by his parents, who, like Ned's, had died in his infancy, but Herc he had always been and was likely to remain.

"What's he waving at – sea-cows?"

"See here, Herc Taylor, this is serious. Wouldn't working for Uncle Sam in a uniform like that on a first-class fighting-ship suit you better than doing chores? How would a life on the ocean wave appeal to you, eh?" inquired Ned, with rather a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes.

"First-rate," rejoined Herc. "It makes me think of those sea stories – those you are so fond of reading, Ned, 'Frank on a Gunboat,' and the rest."

"I guess a modern Dreadnought is a whole lot different to the vessels on board which Frank fought," smiled Ned; "but I must admit that that picture has put some queer notions into my head, too."

"For instance, what?" demanded Herc, in whose eyes there was a glimmer which would have said plain as a pike-staff to those who knew him that the red-headed lad had come to some sort of determination.

"For instance, that I'd like to be a sailor for Uncle Sam, and work my way up, like some of those admirals and naval heroes we've read about!" exclaimed Ned, with considerable animation.

"Shake!" cried Herc; "that's what I've been thinking of ever since I saw that picture – "

"Which was ten minutes ago," put in Ned.

"Never mind; you haven't been looking at it any longer, and I can see that you are as hard hit by the idea of joining the navy as I am," briskly interrupted Herc.

"I don't know but what you are right, Herc," rejoined Ned thoughtfully. "I've been thinking that if we go on as we are, we will be doing the same old round of duties on grandpa's farm ten years

from now, just as we are doing to-day. Things don't change much in the country, as you know, while in the navy – "

Ned stopped, but his glowing face and sparkling eyes finished the speech for him.

"While in the navy, bing! bang! – Promotion. – Fire the guns! – Target! – Good shot! – First mate! – Medal! – Introduction to the president. – Up in the fighting-top. – Down in a submarine. – Bottom of the sea. – Top of the mast – whoop!" exploded Herc, in a way that he had when he was excited. It was for all the world like listening to the detonations of an exploding package of firecrackers.

"Well, the poster here *does* say that there are a lot of good chances for promotion," soberly put in Ned, who had been examining the text below the lithograph with some attention, while Herc had been exploding. "I've a good mind to try it, Herc," he concluded suddenly.

"Count me in on that, too," heartily rejoined his cousin, giving a few impromptu steps of what he declared was a sailor's hornpipe; "and when we're both admirals we'll come back here and astonish the natives – including Hank Harkins."

"Who said Hank Harkins?" growled a harsh voice from the rear of the store, for the postoffice was tucked away in one corner of the Lambs' Corners Emporium, in which, it was the boast of its proprietor, you could buy anything from a needle to a gang-plow.

As the words reached the boys' ears, a tall, hulking youth, of about their own age – shouldered his way through the knot of loungers gathered about the stove – for it was December, and cold.

"I'll thank you two to keep my name out of your conversation," growled the newcomer, as he lurched up to the cousins.

"Oh, we'd not use it unless we had to," rejoined Herc, facing round, his red hair seeming to bristle like the hackles on the back of an angry dog. "Since you were mean enough to persuade your father to post his land against us so that we could not take the short cut to the store, we are not likely to want to discuss your points, – good or otherwise – promiscuous."

"See here, Herc Taylor," glowered Hank, who had considerable reputation in the village as a bully, and had sustained his renown as a hard fighter and wrestler in many a tough contest, "I don't know what you mean by promiscuous – "

"No, I didn't think you would," grinned Herc cheerfully.

"But I want to tell you here and now, that if I have any more of your impudence, I'm going to lick you, and lick you good," concluded the bully; his enmity to the two boys, who lived on an adjoining farm to his father's, not at all allayed by Herc's aggressive tone and evident contempt.

"And I want to tell you that we don't want anything to do with you," retorted Herc; "we're mighty particular about our company."

"You young whelp, I'll have to teach you some manners," grated Hank angrily, edging up threateningly toward the red-headed youth, who, for his part, did not budge the fraction of an inch.

"You'll be a teacher who never studied then," retorted Herc hotly, as he turned away to join Ned, who had been regarding the disputants with narrowed eyes, but had said nothing so far. He knew Hank Harkins for a bully, and believed him to be a coward at heart, but he had no wish to get into a fistic argument with him in a public place like Giggins' store and postoffice.

But by this time a number of the loungers about the stove had become attracted by the raised tones of Hank and Herc and crowded around the two; and Hank, nothing loth to having an audience, proceeded to give Herc what he elegantly termed a "tongue-lashing."

"So far as posting our farm went," he sputtered vindictively, "you know why that was done, to keep you two from pot-hunting over it. Killing every rabbit you could and pulling down walls to get them out. Why," exclaimed Hank, turning to the auditors who stood with gaping mouths in various interested postures, "those two fellows made a hole in our south wall that let our whole herd of milch cows through, and – "

He stopped short at a sudden interruption.

"That's a lie." The words came from Ned Strong.

"Yes, you know it is. You pulled down that wall yourself and then to escape getting in trouble with your father you blamed us for it," snapped Herc.

The bully's face twitched. He grew pale with anger and his rage was none the less because he knew Herc's charges to be true.

"Call me a liar, will you?" he gritted out, springing at Ned with considerable agility, considering his hulking frame and general appearance of clumsy strength.

"Take that!"

Smack!

The bully's big hand landed fair on Ned's cheek, bruising it and raising an angry crimson mark.

Unwilling as Ned was to fight in such a place, the insult was too maddening to be allowed to go unnoticed by any one but an arrant coward; and Ned was far from being that.

Before Hank had gathered himself together from the force of his unexpected blow, the quiet Ned was transformed from his usual docile self, into a formidable antagonist. His eyes blazed with anger as he crouched into a boxing posture for a breath, and then lunged full at Hank Harkins, who met the lighter lad's onslaught with a defiant sneer.

So quickly had it all happened that no one had had time to say a word, much less to interfere. Paul Stevens, the owner of the store, was out in the granary at the back helping a farmer get a load of oats onto his wagon.

The loungers, nothing averse to having the monotony of their unceasing discussions of the crops and politics interrupted in such dramatic fashion, fell back to give the battlers room. Not one of them, however, dreamed of but one issue to the battle and that was that Ned Strong was in for a terrible thrashing; but, as the seconds slipped by, and several blows had been exchanged between the two, it began to appear that Ned was not going to prove such an easy prey as had at first seemed manifest.

Hank Harkins himself, who had been surprised at any resistance from Herc's cousin, began to look uneasy as Ned, instead of going down before the perfect hail of blows the bully delivered, skillfully avoided most of the lunges and contented himself with ducking and dodging; only changing his tactics now and then to deliver a blow when he saw a favorable opportunity.

"Good boy, Ned," breathed Herc, as he saw his companion wading into Hank Harkins in such surprising style.

Even the loyal Herc had not hitherto dreamed that beneath Ned's quiet personality had been hidden such ability to take care of himself.

Hank, after the first few minutes, was breathing heavily, and the sweat began to pour off his face. A pampered, only son, he never did much hard work about the farm, whereas Ned's muscles were trained fine as nickel-steel by hay-pitching, wood-sawing and other strenuous tasks. His training stood him in good stead now.

Overmatched by Hank, he undoubtedly was, but his hard frame was the more enduring. Hank's punches, terrific enough at first, began gradually to grow weaker, more particularly as most of them had been wasted on empty space.

Finally Hank, perceiving that he was reaching the end of his rope, clenched his teeth and, with set face and narrowed eyes, made up his mind to end the fight in one supreme effort.

He hurled himself on his lighter antagonist like a thunderbolt, but Ned, with a skillful duck, avoided the full fury of the onslaught, and rising just as the bully launched his blows into thin air, caught his lumbering opponent full under the chin.

Swinging his arms, like a scarecrow in a windstorm, the bully plunged backward under the effective blow.

"Hurray for Ned Strong!" shouted Herc ecstatically, as the bully's big frame reeled staggeringly backward.

The next minute, however, his delight changed to a groan of dismay as Hank, unable to control himself, crashed, full tilt, into the stove. With a deafening clatter, like that of a mad bull careening round a tinware shop, the heater and its long pipe, came toppling in a sooty confusion to the ground. Red-hot coals shot out in every direction.

In the midst of the wreckage sprawled the unlucky bully, his features bedaubed with black. Through this mask his look of puzzled rage at his defeat came so comically that Ned and Herc could not restrain themselves, but, even in the face of the disaster to the store stove, burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter. In the meantime some one hurled a bucket of water on the coals, and the bully was drenched.

The onlookers, their risibilities also tickled by the downfall of the bully, and the noisy demolition of the stove, joined in the merriment and the laden shelves of the store were echoing to a perfect tempest of laughter when suddenly the rear door opened and Paul Stevens entered. A look of dismay appeared on his lean features as his eyes lighted on the wreckage.

With him was another figure whose unexpected appearance caused the boys' faces to assume almost as dismayed a look as the countenance of the storekeeper.

"Grandfather!" gasped Ned, as his eyes encountered the angry glare of the newcomer's pale orbs.

"Yes, – grandfather," snapped the other, whose weather-beaten face was adorned with a tuft of gray hair on the chin, in the style popularly known as "the goatee."

"What have you got to say in explanation of this?"

As he rasped out this query in a harsh, rusty voice like the creaking of a long disused hinge, old Zack Strong pointed to the wreckage. From the midst of it was rising the bully, plentifully besmeared with soot, but doing his best to maintain a look of injured innocence.

CHAPTER II.

"WE'RE GOING TO JOIN THE NAVY."

Old Zack Strong was not one of those men who can distinguish between boyish high spirits and what he would have termed "downright pesky cussedness." In this latter quality, indeed, he believed both his grandsons – Ned, and his dead second son's offspring, Herc, – to be plentifully endowed. Not naturally bad-hearted, however, the old man had assumed the care of the cousins on the death of their parents, but even with his act of adoption there came the thought to his frugal mind: "They'll be a great help 'round the farm."

In his hopes in this direction the old man had not been disappointed. Both boys had entered into the work with painstaking thoroughness; but it must be admitted that to adventurous lads, the monotonous grind of a remote farm in the hills is somewhat dampening. Ever since Ned and Herc had left the district school and become, in a more thorough sense than ever, "helps" to their grandfather, the old man had chafed at their hunting expeditions and proclivities toward baseball and other games. He could not see that pitching hay, milking, and doing chores, was not the full-rounded end of existence for any lads.

So, when, on this bitter December afternoon, he entered the store unexpectedly on his way back from delivering a wagon-load of grist at the water-driven mill at Westerlo, a nearby village, his chagrin may be imagined when he discovered his two young charges occupying the centre of the scene depicted in the last chapter.

In Zack Strong's hard creed there was only one sin worse than playing – or "fooling," as he called it – and that was fighting.

And it was only too evident that in the latter of these heinous offences one at least of the boys had been indulging.

Worse still, in the wrecked stove the old farmer foresaw a demand for damages on the storekeeper's part, and there was only one thing harder to wring from Zack than a smile, and that article was money. If the average farmer is what may be described as "close-fisted," old Zack was "cement-fisted."

With this side-light on their grandfather's character in view, the consternation of the boys may be understood when they met his amazed and indignant gaze resting accusingly on them.

"Mean?" stammered Hank, wiping as best he could some of the soot off his mottled countenance and echoing the old man's last words. "It means that your two boys here have made a brutal and unprovoked attack on me and that –"

"And that my stove is busted to Kingdom Come!" disgustedly sputtered Paul Stevens, whose cadaverous features had been busily scanning the wreckage in the brief interval of time that had elapsed between the entrance of himself and Zack Strong and the seemingly righteously indignant outburst of the bully.

"Never mind your stove now," grated out the hard-featured old farmer, wishing devoutly that the stove could be "never-minded" altogether, "what I want to find out is what these boys here have been up to. What kind of devilry they have been at."

"We haven't been at any devilry, as you please to call it, grandpa," burst out Ned, striving to keep cool, though he was burning inwardly with indignation and humiliation.

"Eh-eh-eh?" grunted the old man incredulously, "that's fine talking, but what's all this I see? How did that young man come to be all mixed up in the stove?"

"Through no wish of his own you may be sure," chuckled the irrepressible Herc. "Say, Hank, you look like a skunk – all black and white, you know –"

"Silence, sir," roared his grandfather, with as near an approach to a stern bass as his wheezy voice would allow. "Who started this?"

Ned remained silent. It was not his wish to tell tales, and he had no desire to act as an informer.

"Why, Hank Harkins here started it," spoke up Si Ingalls, a young farmer who had formed one of the group about the demolished stove, "he slapped Ned in the jaw and Ned – rightly, too – came back at him. Am I correct?" he asked, turning to the others.

"Hank's face looks it," grinned Luke Bates, the village wit, regarding Hank, who was quivering with fury, in an amused way, "never mix it up with a stove, Hank," he went on, "it'll get the best of you every time."

"Is this right?" demanded old Zack, turning to his grandson as soon as the laugh at Hank's expense subsided.

"Oh, yes, that's about the way it happened, I guess," said Ned in a low voice.

"What I want to know is who's going to settle for my stove," wailed Paul Stevens. "Here's a cracked draught-piece, a busted door, two lengths of stove-pipe flattened out like pancakes and soot all over a fine piece of dress goods."

"Name your price," groaned old Zack, wincing as if a twinge of rheumatism had passed through him, "but don't make it too steep," he added, cautiously, "or I won't pay it. How much, now?"

The storekeeper made a rapid mental calculation, in which his fingers and various grimaces played an important part.

"There's the stove door, say seventy-five cents; and the pipe, two lengths, a dollar; and the draught-piece – I'll have to send to New York for another, sixty cents; and the spoiled dress goods – "

"You'll only have to cut the outside edge off them," objected old Zack, his lips twitching nervously as the rising tide of expenses swamped his cautious senses.

"Wall, that'll be a yard, anyhow," announced the storekeeper, "that is twenty-five cents, we'll say. Two dollars thirty-five for the whole shebang."

"Two dollars thirty-five. It's rank robbery," objected the old farmer, almost giving utterance to a groan.

"Of course I may be able to straighten out the stove pipe," admitted Paul Stevens, reluctantly, "and you are an old customer. I'll make it two dollars and ten cents to you."

Reluctantly old Zack drew out a battered wallet and drew from it two one-dollar bills, being careful not to display the rest of its contents. Then, after much fumbling in the recesses of his clothing, he produced a small leather purse from which he drew a ten cent piece. These he tendered with an agonized expression to the storekeeper.

"Canadian," sniffed the storekeeper, regarding the bit of silver.

"It's good," objected old Zack.

"Not to me. Come, I let you off light on the stove and the other damage them boys have done; give me a good dime."

Reluctantly old Zack took back the rejected coin and substituted for it a piece of United States silver.

"There you are," he grumbled, "those pesky boys will bankrupt me yet."

All this time the boys, standing aloof from the crowd of loungers, had regarded the scene with very different expressions. Herc's lips trembled with suppressed laughter as he witnessed the painful operation of separating old Zack from his beloved money, while Ned's face bore a thoughtful look, as if he were revolving some serious project in his mind. Hank Harkins had taken advantage of the temporary diversion from himself as a centre of interest to shuffle off, and was by this time well on his way home, considering, as he went, the best way in which he could explain his soot-smearred face and rapidly swelling eye.

A short time afterwards the boys accompanied their elder to his spring-wagon and, as they had walked down to the store, prepared to accompany him home.

"Look out for squalls," Herc whispered to Ned, as the two lads unhitched the team. His warning was not ill-judged. The vials of old Zack's wrath burst with the fury of a midsummer storm above the boys' heads as soon as the wagon had clattered out of the village and was climbing the steep ascent to Zack Strong's farm.

"Of all the useless, idle scamps that I ever had on the farm, you are the worst," began the querulous old man, "and then, to cap it all, you go to fighting and brawling in public and cost me two dollars and an American dime to settle it. I don't see why Paul Stevens couldn't have taken that Canadian one. They're as good as any others, in some places," he went on, his mind reverting to his other grievance, "but that's the way in this world, nothing but ingratitude everywhere you turn. I've nourished a pair of sar-pints, that's what I've done. You're rattle-brains, both on yer."

He turned a sour enough countenance on the two lads as he spoke.

"Sort of rattlesnakes, eh?" cheerfully remarked the irrepressible Herc. "It's no use being angry, gran'pa," he went on, "we'd finished splitting the last of that tough hickory before we came down to the village and, as there was nothing else to do till chore-time – "

"You spent it in disgracing yourselves, eh?" grimly rejoined old Zack. "I'm tired of it, I tell you," he railed on, "and – "

"And so are we," quietly broke in Ned, whose face still wore the same thoughtful look that had come over it just before they left the store.

"What?" quavered the old man, as if he thought he had not heard aright.

"I mean 'so are we tired of it,'" repeated Ned, slowly, but in a firm voice, "we work for you early and late, grandpa, and nothing ever comes of it but scolding and fault-finding."

"Didn't I pay two dollars ten cents for that busted stove, Ned?" complained old Zack, "and I'll swear the damage wasn't more'n one ninety-eight, and – "

"That's not the question, now," went on Ned, in the same quiet, determined voice, "as it was partly my fault that the stove was overturned I'll pay you back that out of my own pocket."

"What, – you ain't got no money!" exclaimed old Zack incredulously and in somewhat alarmed tones. There was a note in Ned's voice he had never heard there before and he saw his authority melting away like snow in the spring, "and besides, maybe I was a bit hasty, Ned. Come, we'll call it square and you do your work right in future and we'll say no more about it."

"I shall do only a little more work for you, gran'pa," was Ned's amazing reply, which almost caused the old man to drop his lines and fall backward off his seat.

"What's that?" he cried, and his voice fairly squeaked under the stress of his great astonishment.

"I said," calmly repeated Ned, "that I shall not do much more work for you, grandpa, and neither will Herc here, I guess. We are going away."

It was Herc's turn to look astonished. Accustomed as he was to accept Ned's opinion in most things, this latest resolve seemed somewhat drastic even to the impetuous red-headed youth.

"Why, you ain't got no money?" stammered old Zack, not being able to think of anything else to say in his great amazement.

"Oh, yes, I have," quietly rejoined Ned. "I have fifty dollars saved up that I got for skins last winter and Herc has about the same sum. That will carry us a little way, I guess."

"Why, Ned, boy! Land o' Goshen, what have yer set yer mind on doin'?" gasped the farmer.

"We're going to enter the navy," announced Ned, in these same quiet, determined tones; which unmistakably meant to anyone who knew him that his mind was made up beyond the possibility of change.

"What, out on the water?" gasped old Zack, his mind in a whirl at this sudden kicking over the traces of authority.

"I believe they usually sail the vessels of Uncle Sam's navy on the water," chirped the irrepressible Herc, who, his first astonishment over, had quite resolved to follow his cousin's footsteps wherever they might lead.

The sarcasm was lost on old Zack, however. He even forgot to emit his customary minute interval cry of "Geddap!" to his old team which, in consequence, came to a dead standstill in the middle of the road.

"Of course we shall stay and help you till you get a hired man to suit you," went on Ned, with quiet sarcasm.

"Yes – yes," quavered the old man, chirruping to his stationary team, and seemingly dazed by the sudden announcement of the boys' intentions.

"In the navy – out on the water," he muttered as they drove on, "Land o' Goshen! – two dollars! – fights! – busted stoves! – the navy!"

CHAPTER III.

UNCLE SAM GETS TWO RAW RECRUITS

Old Zack's daze was not dispelled the next morning when, having done their work as usual, the boys set off to trudge the six miles into Lambs' Corners.

"Will you be back to dinner?" the old man croaked, in such a quavering voice that even Herc felt sorry for him.

"We'll be back before then, and make up the time we've lost before night," Ned assured him, as the two cousins swung off to take what they both felt was the final step of their resolve.

They had lain awake most of the night in the room they shared, discussing the future, and had decided to abide by the decision they had so hastily arrived at, whatever might happen.

"Things have come to the cross roads of opportunity," was the way Ned put it, "we've got to strike out now and sink or swim."

During the course of their conversation it had occurred to Ned that in reading over the printed matter beneath the picture which had attracted their attention in the post office the day before, he had come across instructions to ask the postmaster for a post card, which was free on application. This card, when mailed to the Navy Department, so the poster said, would bring the applicant additional information regarding the navy, in the form of booklets and pamphlets.

As soon as the boys arrived in the postoffice they perceived that they were the objects of very general scrutiny by the usual group assembled 'round the re-erected stove. They paid no attention to the comments of the knot of spectators, however, but marched straight up to the little pigeon hole, behind which Paul Stevens attended to the weighty matters of the U. S. mail, and demanded two of the post cards the poster mentioned. With a lifting of his eyebrows the postmaster handed them out.

"Seems like everyone in the place is goin' ter enlist, or whatever you call it," he remarked. "Hank Harkins was in here early to-day and got one of them cards. I reckon he's thinking of getting a chore boy's job in the navy, too."

This was news to the boys and not particularly welcome news, either. They had no desire to come into further contact with the lumbering Hank, but inasmuch as they had no control over his movements, they accepted the situation with the best grace they could.

A few days later the literature arrived from Washington and the boys put their heads together over it during their leisure time, examining the prospects held out from every aspect. The result was, as might have been expected, that their resolution became more firmly set than ever and a week after they received the booklets and other information they bade good-bye to old Zack, who had by this time acquired resignation and a hired man, and started for the village whence they were to take the stage to Granville, the railroad town.

As may be imagined, the boys felt little regret on leaving the farm and old Zack, and were not hypocrites enough to pretend to any great affection for their surroundings of so many monotonous years. Old Zack wrung his hands and lamented, to be sure, but as the boys knew that his grief was caused more by the loss of two husky helpers than by any personal regret, they did not pay much attention to his protestations.

As they strode through the old farm gates there did come over them a momentary twinge of feeling at the idea that the portals that they had so often opened and shut as they went about their work, were closing behind them for perhaps the last time. It was only a momentary emotion, however, and was speedily dispelled by a shout of "Hey!" from old Zack, who came running after them from the barn where he had spent the time since, he had said good-by, in scolding the new hired man.

The two lads halted and set down their brand new suit-cases in the dusty track.

"Say!" panted old Zack, clumsily loping up to them, and holding out something in his withered fingers, "here's something you boys may need. Take it, anyhow; I'll give it yer."

In his digits he extended to them the Canadian dime, rejected by the postmaster on the afternoon of the disaster to the stove.

Hardly able to restrain their laughter, the boys accepted the gift with becoming gravity, and once more said farewell to the old man.

"It'll do as a luck-piece, anyhow," laughed Ned, as they trudged on and a turn in the road blotted out from their eyes the old farm-house, its weather-beaten out-buildings and fertile fields. It was to be many a day before they saw it again and many adventures, of which they little dreamed at the moment, were to be experienced by them before they once more encountered it.

In due time the stage reached the Granville ferry and five hours later the railroad brought the two lads down the east bank of the Hudson to New York. They stood dazed and confused outside the Grand Central station looking with amazed eyes on the roar and confusion of traffic that swirled by them. It was mid afternoon and they had yet to report at the recruiting station, of which they had the address in their pockets.

Ned stepped up to a policeman who stood at the crossing directing the flow of traffic by blasts on a whistle.

He extended the piece of paper which bore the address: "U. S. Navy Recruiting Station, No. 394 Bowery," on it.

"Can you please tell us how to get there?" he asked, somewhat tremblingly. It was the first real live policeman he had ever addressed, and the country boy felt somewhat awed.

"I'm a traffic cop. Ask the man on post," snapped the policeman. With a sharp blast on his whistle he started the cross-town traffic, which had halted, to moving again, paying no further attention to the tall sun-burned lad with the shining new suit-case.

Somewhat taken aback at this reception, the lad looked at his companion with a puzzled expression.

"I guess he regulates the traffic," suggested Herc, in response to the silent query, "see that horse's head in a wheel embroidered on his arm? Let's look for a policeman without that and I guess he'll be the right man to inquire from."

Following Herc's suggestion Ned's eyes soon lighted on a stout bluecoat who stood talking to a number of taxi-cab drivers and seemed to have nothing to do with the regulation of traffic; or, in fact, anything else. This time he got a quick answer to his question.

"394 Bowery," repeated the patrolman, "shure any one knows where that is," and he looked at Ned and Herc pityingly as if they were some strange sort of creatures and much to be sympathized with.

"Yes, officer, but we are strangers in the city, and – "

"Sure, any one could tell you were Rubes from the cut of your jibs," grinned the patrolman, while the taxi-cabbies set up a laugh. "Goin' ter enlist in the navy, eh?" he went on, scrutinizing Ned's bit of paper, "well, Heaven help ye. They'll feed ye on skilly, and milk from a tin-cow, and put yer ter bed in a haythanish hammock of nights."

"We are going to become sailors in Uncle Sam's navy," proudly rejoined Ned, "and we think it's a service which any man should be proud to be privileged to join."

His face flushed indignantly, and he felt a flash of anger at the contemptuous tone of the fat policeman.

"Oh well, be aisy," rejoined the bluecoat, "I meant no harm; but my wife's sister's cousin Mary had a son as went for sailor and they brought him home in a coffin, that's all. He was blowed to bits by an explosion of one of the big guns. The police force is good enough for me and by the same token I should think two likely looking lads like you would like to jine the force."

"Our time is limited," broke in the still indignant Ned, "will you please direct us to the address I showed you?"

"Shure I will, me bye," amiably replied the unruffled patrolman, "walk to your left two blocks and take a Third Avenue car down town. When she gets onto the Bowery watch the numbers and you can't miss it."

With a brief word of thanks the boys hastened off in the direction indicated. As they walked away they heard the policeman remark to his friends, the chauffeurs:

"Waal, there goes more food for powder."

"I'm glad we're not staying in New York. I don't believe I should care much for it," said Herc, as the boys walked toward Third Avenue, their ears stunned by the din all about them.

"Nor I," responded Ned. "However, if we pass our tests and are accepted, we shall not have to stop here longer than overnight. That's one comfort."

"That's so," assented Herc. "I used to think there was an ear-splitting racket about the place on hog-killing day, but it was nothing to this."

Thus conversing they boarded a Third Avenue car and rode for half an hour or more.

"Here you are, boys – here's Number 394."

The conductor of the car poked his head in through the doors and gave his bell one jerk, which brought it to a stop.

The boys hastened from the car, and found themselves opposite a not particularly prepossessing looking building, the lower floor of which was occupied by an old book store. But above an open door leading to the upper stories, which had been newly painted and presented a neat appearance, floated a flag that made both their hearts beat quicker. If all went well, they would soon be enlisted under it. Old Glory hung bravely above the dingy portal, amid the hurry and squalidness of the surroundings.

"Well, here's the place, Herc."

But to Ned's surprise, Herc stopped short and was standing irresolutely behind him.

"Um-ah! I guess we'd better walk around the block a couple of times first, Ned," stammered the red-headed youth.

"What's the trouble?" laughed Ned. "You look as awkward as a hired man going courting. You don't mean to say that you are nervous?"

"No," protested Herc, "not nervous, Ned; but – but – Well, the fact is, I'd have liked a little preparation first, as the fellow said when he fell into the well on Luke Bates' place up home."

"You're going to come in with me right now," said Ned grimly, seizing Herc's arm in a grip there was no resisting.

Together the two lads passed through the door and up a flight of stairs. At the head of the flight they found a well-furnished office confronting them. A rather brusque-looking man, with a pair of formidable mustaches, sat at a table facing them.

"Well?" he demanded somewhat truculently.

"Well," the irrepressible Herc was beginning in the same aggressive tone, when Ned checked him.

"We wish to enlist in the navy. Have we come to the right place, sir?" he asked civilly.

"You have, my boys," was the response in heartier tone; "and if you mean business, I think I can promise, from looking you over casually, that you'll pass with flying colors. Fill out these blanks, and I'll see what you're made of. We have so many fakes we have to be careful."

He pushed toward the boys two large sheets of paper. On them were printed numerous questions about themselves, their parents, their previous condition of life, and so forth.

"Gee! this is like passing an examination at school," whispered Herc, as the boys sat down with pen and ink at a corner table and prepared to fill out the blank spaces left for answers.

"Hush!" cautioned Ned.

"Or the papers you fill out when you enter a prize heifer at the county fair," continued the incorrigible red-headed youth.

Despite Herc's frequent remarks, breathed in a cautious undertone, the questions were all answered in due time and the papers handed over to the bristly mustached man, who eyed them approvingly.

"Good!" he snapped. "Neat and satisfactory. Now," he continued, "go into that room and undergo a physical examination."

He indicated a door, which the boys opened with somewhat of a feeling of awe, and found themselves in the presence of a surgeon, who ordered them to disrobe and conducted a thorough examination of them.

"Just as if we were a pair of fat porkers," commented Herc afterward.

"They are magnificent physical specimens," reported the surgeon to the bristly mustached man, who, though the boys did not then know it, was a quartermaster detailed to recruiting duty.

"Good!" snapped the quartermaster once more. "They have already given me the written consent of their guardian, so nothing remains to be done but to administer the oath."

The solemn oath of allegiance to duty and country was then administered to the boys, who stood bolt upright, with round eyes, while the impressive little ceremony was gone through. Even the volatile Herc seemed impressed by the seriousness of what they were undertaking.

"And now we are blue jackets," said Ned, as they concluded and subscribed their names to the oath.

"Not yet," laughed the quartermaster. "You will now have to go to the Naval Training School at Newport as apprentice seamen."

"Only apprentices," sighed Herc. "I thought we were out of that class."

"As apprentice seamen," went on the officer, not noticing the interruption, "you will receive pay during your four months of instruction, and will be furnished uniforms and equipment free, as well as board."

He reached into a drawer.

"Here is your transportation to Newport. The boat leaves to-night at six o'clock," he went on, handing the boys some tickets. "I hope you boys, who look to be the stuff of which real seamen are made, will work hard and succeed."

"Thank you, sir. We will if effort counts for anything," promised Ned.

With light hearts the two boys made their way to the street a few minutes later. As they passed under the flag once more, Ned drew himself up stiffly and saluted.

"Why do you do that?" asked Herc curiously, as he watched his companion's action.

"Because we are now sailors under that flag in the United States navy," replied Ned proudly. "You should do the same, Herc. We're Dreadnought Boys from now on."

"All right. I will salute next time," easily responded Herc. "And now, as we have some few hours before the boat goes, let's saunter round a bit and see the sights."

As the boys, having inquired the way, started toward Broadway, they almost collided with a tall figure that was hastening into the door of the recruiting office.

"Out of my way, can't you?" the newcomer exclaimed querulously, shoving roughly by. "What are you barricading the door of the naval recruiting office for? I'll report you."

"We're here because we are now apprentice seamen in the navy, Hank Harkins," rejoined Ned, who had recognized the bully before the other had realized with whom he had almost collided.

Hank glanced angrily at the two lads, but refrained from speaking. Instead, he hurried up the stairs leading to the recruiting office, paying no attention to his country's flag.

"There goes a fine addition to the navy," sneered Herc, as the boys started off for Broadway.

"Don't say that, Herc. The navy may make a man of him," remarked Ned.

"Then it's got a fine big job on its hands, that's all I've got to say!" was the red-headed lad's rejoinder.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DREADNOUGHT BOYS HAVE AN ADVENTURE

The *Rhode Island*, the largest and fleetest of the big passenger vessels plying Long Island Sound between New York and New England ports, was ploughing her way through a wild, bitter night in the latter part of March, down the narrow, tempestuous passage of water dividing the mainland from the low-lying expanse of Long Island.

Although the snow swirled and the wind screamed through the vessel's funnel stays and lofty wireless aerials as if it would root them out, every window and porthole on her three lofty decks glowed with a cheerful yellow light. The lively strains of an orchestra were occasionally swirled away on the fierce wind, when the door of the main saloon swung open to admit or give egress to a passenger.

The laboring vessel had run into the storm at sundown that evening, and now, as she forged her way through the choppy seas off Point Judith, she was, despite her great size, thrown and tossed about like an empty bottle at the mercy of the seas.

As the vessel gave an unusually heavy plunge, the companion door once more opened, and in the sudden flood of light that illumined the dark decks for a brief interval, the stalwart figures of the two Dreadnought Boys were revealed. Both wore heavy "service" overcoats buttoned up to their chins, and these they secured more tightly about themselves as they faced the storm.

Both lads were heavier, even more bronzed, and keener of eye than when we saw them last. Their four months of vigorous training had, too, given them a manly air of self-reliance.

"Wow!" exclaimed Herc, as the wind hit them full and square and gave pause for a second even to their well-knit frames. "This is a hummer, and no mistake, Ned!"

"Nothing to what we'll get when we go cruising under Uncle Sam's flag," laughed the other. "I tell you, Herc, that this isn't a circumstance to the gales I've heard they get off Cape Hatteras."

"Why, what are you talking about?" rejoined Herc, pulling his cap closer over his head of bright red hair. "This wind is worse than the one that blew the roof off gran'pa's barn last New Year's eve, and that was a hummer, if you like it!"

"Still thinking of the old farm and Lambs' Corners, eh?" laughed his companion, with a hearty chuckle that sounded as if it came from the depth of his full, deep chest and excellent lungs. "Well, now that you're a full-fledged jackie, Herc, it's time to forget the stock and the barnyard, and think of the big guns and the fighting tops."

"Well, anyhow," grunted Herc, as if to change the conversation, "blowing as it is, I'd rather be out here than in that stuffy saloon, for all the lights and the music and the dressed-up ladies."

"Same here," rejoined his companion. "Crickey! that was a lurch, if you like! Hold on, Herc!" he shouted, as the other went sliding off across the slippery deck, under the impetus of the plunge. "We don't want to lose you just yet, you know. And, moreover, this is no skating rink, but a passenger steamer carrying two new-fledged ordinary seamen –"

"Blamed ordinary!" grunted Herc, in parenthesis.

"From the Naval Training School at Newport to New York, to join their ship, the U. S. S. *Manhattan*," went on Ned.

"Dreadnought, isn't she?" sputtered Herc, as a great, hurtling mass of spray was flung aboard by the angry wind.

"That's right. The newest vessel in the navy. We're mighty lucky boys to have got the berths."

"I agree with you," rejoined Herc, brushing his hand across his eyes, where the tang of the salt water still stung him. "I'd be altogether as satisfied as a woodchuck in a corn patch if only that

fellow Hank Harkins hadn't been detailed to the same squadron. He means to give us trouble, Ned. I'm sure of it."

"I'm not afraid of any trouble that a bullying cad like Harkins can make," was Ned's brisk reply. "Anyhow, he is detailed to duty on the *Illinois*; and now, Herc, we've been standing here long enough. We'll take a brisk walk around the decks, to get the cobwebs out of our brains, and then we'll turn in – how's that suit you?"

"Fine," rejoined Herc, as the two young seamen started to circle the swaying decks at a good brisk pace. "I'm as sleepy as Uncle Fred's prize Berkshire after a bran mash."

Immediately on being passed at the New York recruiting office, the lads, as we know, had been ordered to report at the training station at Newport, where they had remained for the prescribed four months, being given in that period a thorough schooling in the detail work of the ordinary seaman in the United States navy. They had also gone through setting-up exercises that had, even in that short period of time, changed their physiques from the somewhat round-shouldered, slouching aspect peculiar to country boys to the smart appearance and trim get-up of Uncle Sam's sailors.

While in the school they had received a salary of seventeen dollars and sixty cents a month, and as uniforms, food and washing were all provided by the government, they had incurred no expenses, and had a good part of their money in their pockets when they left the training-school with their "papers" endorsed "Excellent" in red ink, with a special "good-conduct" mention.

That afternoon they had embarked on the *Rhode Island* for New York, where the vessels of the North Atlantic squadron lay in the North River, awaiting the command to leave for the naval base, at Guantanamo, Cuba, for battle practice.

"Well, Herc," said Ned, after the two lads had circumnavigated the slippery decks a few times, "let's turn in, for, if I'm not mistaken, we have a trying day in front of us to-morrow."

As the boys were unlocking the door of their stateroom, which opened directly onto the deck, the *Rhode Island* gave a plunge that brought her almost on her beam-ends, and sent Herc, who was balancing himself as best he could, while Ned fiddled with the lock, careening full against a tall, gray-mustached man of upright bearing, who was just about to open the door of the stateroom adjoining the boys'.

Herc's heavy frame, with the added impetus given to it by the swerve of the vessel, banged into the other with the force of a projectile, and the two went struggling helplessly toward the scuppers.

Strive desperately as he would, Herc could not regain his balance, and after waving his long, sinewy arms round a couple of times in a vain effort to recover his equilibrium, he collapsed in a heap at the edge of the deck. In his fall he brought down the dignified gentleman, who in the meantime had been striving as hard as Herc to keep upright.

"I – I – I beg your pardon, I'm sure!" sputtered Herc, as he scrambled to his feet and reached out a hand to assist the other to a standing position. "It was quite an accident – as gran'pa said when Betsey, our muley cow, kicked Lem Betts in the eye."

"Thank you, my lad," responded the other, accepting Herc's aid and standing erect once more. "I am sure that, as in the case of your grandfather's cow, the disaster was unintentional."

The boys, for Ned had by this time unlocked the door, and had been taking in the embarrassing incident, regarded the tall stranger with some interest. He was distinctly different from the ordinary citizen. His skin was bronzed and weather-beaten, and, beneath his close-cropped gray mustache, his mouth quivered humorously at poor Herc's obvious embarrassment.

"Why," went on the object of their attention, regarding them in the light which streamed from the open cabin door of the boys' stateroom, "I see that you lads are both recruits to the navy. What ship, may I ask?"

"The new Dreadnought *Manhattan*, sir," said Ned, proudly throwing out his chest, as he always did instinctively when he mentioned the name of the big fighting ship to which they had been assigned.

The gray-mustached man's eyes twinkled more than ever.

"The *Manhattan*, eh?" he repeated reflectively. "Well, in that case we shall probably see more of each other. In any case, I thank you for your assistance" – turning to Herc – "rendered after you had 'boarded' me in such unceremonious fashion."

With a pleasant smile, he turned into his cabin, picking up as he did so a suitcase which had been deposited by him at the stateroom door, just before the unhappy Herc went careening across the deck.

"Say," whispered Herc, in an awed tone, as their new acquaintance vanished into his room, "did you see the letters on the end of the suitcase?"

"No," answered Ned sleepily, "I'm too tired to pay attention to anything but that snug-looking bunk there."

So saying, he closed the door on the storm, and, seating himself on the edge of a lounge at one end of the cabin, began to remove his shoes.

But Herc would not let the subject drop.

"Well, *I* noticed them," he continued in the same awed voice, "and I believe that we've got ourselves in bad right on the start."

"Why, what's the trouble, Herc?" inquired Ned, interested despite himself in his red-headed companion's eager tone.

"Well," said Herc impressively, "it said 'F. A. D., Commander U. S. N.,' on that suitcase, and it looks to me as if we had started our career in the navy by an act 'of gross insubordination,' as they'd have called it at Newport."

"How do you mean?" asked the sleepy Ned, stifling a yawn.

"Why, here am I, Herc Taylor, ordinary seaman, of Lambs' Corners, New York, butting commanders about as if they were ninepins and I was a bowling ball, that's all!" groaned Herc. "And that looks to me like a first-class way to get in bad."

"Herc, you are incorrigible," groaned Ned; "and I agree with you. If this adventure of yours doesn't turn out badly for both of us, I shall be much surprised."

CHAPTER V. TWO LADS WITH THE "RIGHT RING."

It seemed to Herc that he had been asleep but a short time when he awakened with a start and an uneasy feeling that he could not account for.

Gradually, however, as the semi-stupor that followed the opening of his eyes wore off and he became sensible of his surroundings, he was aware that something unusual seemed to be occurring on the ship. Shouts and the trampling of running feet were borne in to him, and his first sleepy impression was that it was morning.

Suddenly, however, he became aware that the shouts formed a certain definite cry.

What was it?

Herc straightened up as well as he could in his bunk and listened.

A thrill of horror shot through him, as, like a flash, he sensed the nature of the shouts that had aroused him.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

The terrifying cry echoed from bow to stern of the ship and Herc now recognized a fact which he had not in first sleepy stupor realized, and that was that their cabin was hazy with smoke, which was becoming momentarily thicker. The heat, also, was growing rapidly insupportable.

With one bound, the boy was on the floor, and shaking Ned by the shoulder.

"Ned, Ned, wake up!" he roared at the top of his voice.

"Aye, aye, sir!" came in a sleepy voice from Ned, who was dreaming that he was still back in the training school and that reveille had blown.

A minute later, however, Herc's shaking aroused him to his senses, and a few rapidly spoken words apprised him of the seriousness of the situation.

"Tumble into your clothes quick!" gasped Herc, as breathing in the smoke-filled room became every moment more difficult.

Ned needed no second telling. In a few seconds, thanks to their training, both boys were in their uniforms, and, grabbing up their suitcases, dashed out onto the decks.

The scene outside was one that might have turned cooler heads than theirs. The storm was still raging, and a white swirl enveloped the laboring ship, but the whiteness of the snow was tinged a fiery red with the reflections of towering flames that were by this time pouring from the engine-room hatch of the *Rhode Island*, and illuminating the night with their devouring splendor. Fire originating in a pile of oily waste against a wooden bulkhead had started the blaze.

Men and women in all stages of dress and undress rushed confusedly about the decks, praying, screaming, blaspheming and fighting.

In the emergency that had so suddenly arisen, the crew and officers of the ship seemed powerless to do anything. Instead of attempting to quiet the panic, they rushed about, apparently as maddened as the rest of the persons on the ship, by the dire peril that confronted them.

"The boats! The boats!" someone suddenly shouted, and a mad rush for the upper decks, on which the boats were swung, followed. Women were flung aside by cowardly men frenzied with terror.

"Here, I can't stand this!" shouted Ned, as, followed by Herc, he plunged toward the foot of the narrow stairway up which the frenzied passengers were fighting their way.

"Women and children first! Women and children first!" the Dreadnought Boy kept shouting, as he elbowed his way to the foot of the steps, closely trailed by Herc.

The roar of the flames was by this time deafening, drowning all other sounds. To add to the confusion, there now came pouring up from the lower regions of the ship a black and sooty crew – the firemen of the vessel. Maddened by fear and brutal by nature, the grimy stokers had little difficulty in

shoving the weaker passengers aside and making their way to the foot of the stairway up which Ned and Herc were helping the women and children and keeping back the cowardly male passengers as best they could. They were not over gentle in doing this latter. It was no time for halfway measures.

Above them, the captain of the ship and two of his officers who had partially collected their wits, were directing the crew to lower the boats. The women and children were being placed in them as rapidly as possible as Ned and Herc passed them up.

"Can you hold them back?" the captain had shouted down to the boys a few minutes before, as he peered down at the struggling mass on the lower deck.

"We'll stick it out as long as we can," Ned had assured him, as he whirled a terrified male passenger about and sent him spinning backward whining pitifully that he "didn't want to die."

Suddenly Herc was confronted by a huge form, brandishing a steel spanner in a knotty fist.

It was one of the panic-stricken firemen.

"Let me by, kid!" bellowed this formidable antagonist.

"You can see for yourself that there are several women to go yet," responded Herc calmly, although he felt anything but easy in his mind as the muscular giant glared at him with terror and vindictiveness mingling in his gaze. "Women first, that's the rule."

"What in blazes do I care about the women?" roared the fireman, behind whom were now ranged several of his companions. "Let me by, or –"

He flourished the spanner with a suggestive motion anything but agreeable to Herc.

The red-headed boy gazed over in the direction in which he had last seen Ned.

There was no hope for help from that quarter, as a glance showed him. Ned was holding back an excited man with long whiskers and of prosperous appearance, who was shouting as if he were a phonograph:

"A thousand dollars for a seat in the boats! A thousand – two thousand dollars for a seat in the boats!"

Suddenly, so suddenly that Herc had not time to guard against it, the stokers made a concerted rush for him.

"Ned! Ned!" shouted the boy, as he felt himself borne down by overwhelming numbers and trampled underfoot.

Ned heard the cry, and in two leaps was in the midst of the scuffle, dealing and receiving blows right and left.

"Do you call yourselves men?" he shouted indignantly, as the stokers fought their way forward in a grim phalanx which there was no resisting.

"It's deuce take the hindmost, and every man for himself now!" shouted a voice in the crowd, and the cowardly mob elbowed forward through the few women that still remained on the stairway and its approaches.

Ned and Herc, who had by this time struggled to his feet, fought desperately to stem the tide. So effective were their blows that for a time they actually succeeded in checking the advance.

"Oh, for a gun!" breathed Ned.

"A cannon!" amended Herc.

Above them they heard a cheer, signifying that the first boat had struck the water.

"Stick it out, Herc!" panted Ned, as he struggled with a grimy giant, who, thanks to his ignorance of wrestling and tackles, was easily hurled backward by his lighter opponent. But the fight was too uneven to be of long duration.

Step by step, fighting every inch of the way, the two boys were borne backward by the opposing mob. Ned's foot caught in the lower step of the stairway and he was toppled over backward.

A mighty onrush of the fugitives immediately followed, and Herc shared Ned's fate.

The thought that they had failed flashed bitterly through each Dreadnought Boy's mind as they were trampled and crushed by hurrying feet of the terrified firemen, whose van was followed by

the badly scared male passengers. The screams of the women who were being ruthlessly thrust aside tingled maddeningly in the boys' ears as they strove to regain their feet.

Suddenly, above all the noise of the fugitives and the crackling of the flames as they ate through the bulkheads about the engine-room hatchway, the boys heard a sharp command.

It rang out as incisively as the report of a rifle, in a voice that seemed used to implicit obedience: "I'll shoot the next man up that stairway!"

The rush came to halt for a brief second, and in that time the boys scrambled to their feet.

They soon perceived the cause of the interruption.

Not far from them, garbed in his shirt and trousers, just as he had rushed from his cabin on awaking, stood the man who had occupied the neighboring cabin to theirs.

The flames illumined the grim compression of his lips beneath his gray mustache. His eyes were narrowed to a determined angle.

In his hand he held a blue-steel navy revolver on which the glare of the conflagration played glisteningly.

"Come on, boys!" roared the stoker who had threatened Herc with the spanner. "It's just a bluff!"

At his words, the spell that had fallen on the frightened crowd for a second seemed to be broken, and the rush recommenced. The boys, with horrified eyes, saw the giant stoker snatch up a woman with a child in her arms and hurl her brutally back into the crowd, where she disappeared, lost in the vortex of struggling humanity.

"Crack!"

There was a spit of vicious blue flame from the revolver, followed by a yell of pain from the giant stoker.

The boys saw the spanner fall from his upraised hand and tumble with a clatter at his feet. His wrist, shot through by the gray-mustached man's unerring aim, hung limp at his side.

Like frightened sheep suddenly checked in a stampede, the white-faced crowd came to a halt and faced about at the new peril.

"That's to show you *I mean business!*" grated out the marksman, in a voice as cold as chilled steel. "Now let the women go first, and then the men may follow."

Under that menacing weapon, of whose efficiency they had just received so convincing a proof, the men sullenly stood aside and passed up the half-dozen women or so who had not had an opportunity to take advantage of the boys' plucky stand.

From the bridge above, the captain of the *Rhode Island* hailed them.

"Six boats are away! Let the rest come!"

"Steady, steady!" came the sharp, commanding voice of the man with the pistol once more, as the score of men left began to scramble up the stairway. "One at a time! Take it easy!"

Under his authoritative voice the rush changed like magic to an orderly retreat, and in a few minutes a seventh boat was loaded with frightened passengers and lowered onto the heaving sea.

"Well, I guess we can go now, Herc," remarked Ned, turning to his companion.

"Yes, it's getting as warm here as it is in the smoke house at home in July," agreed Herc, as he carefully picked up his suitcase, which was somewhat battered by the recent knocking about it had gone through. After Ned had likewise recovered his piece of baggage, the two boys began the ascent of the stairway. For the moment they had quite forgotten the presence of the gray-mustached man, of whom, as we know, Herc stood in some awe on account of the inscription he had espied on the former's suitcase.

Now, however, the stranger was at the boys' sides. They saluted instinctively.

"I was a witness of your plucky conduct," he exclaimed warmly, "and I am glad to see that I was not to be disappointed in the estimate I had formed of both your characters. I shall keep a sharp lookout over your future careers as seamen in the navy."

It was a moment when ordinary barriers seemed to be let down, and Herc, in a hesitating tone, asked, as they gained the boat deck:

"Are you in the navy, too, sir, may we ask?"

"You may, my boy," was the hearty response. "I am Captain Dunham of the *Manhattan*."

"You're all right, sir," sputtered Herc, in his enthusiasm entirely forgetting the respect due to an officer.

The next minute, with cheeks even more crimson than the flames and his exertions had painted them, the farmer boy plunged forward into the confusion of the boat deck, much embarrassed at his impulsive breach of discipline.

CHAPTER VI. A COWARD'S BLOW

Thanks to the boys' defense of the stairway, and the cool-headed commander's prompt action in quelling the onrush of the stokers, the boys found that there was plenty of room in the two boats that still remained to be lowered. Haste, however, was a matter of necessity, as the flames by this time had devoured the bulkheads and were sweeping forward, driven by the high wind.

The captain of the *Rhode Island* had recovered his wits, and the loading of the boats went on rapidly. In its company were enrolled the cowardly stokers, at whom the boys could not gaze without a feeling of disgust.

"Are not you boys going in that boat?" said a voice at their elbow, as the davits were swung out and the remainder of the crew prepared to lower it.

"No, sir; as navy men," said Ned, proudly dwelling on the "men," "we prefer to wait till the last boat to leave the ship."

"That's right," agreed the commander approvingly.

He hastened off and assumed the control of the few manoeuvres to be carried out before the *Rhode Island* was ready to be abandoned. The captain of the *Rhode Island* had recognized Captain Dunham, and was anxiously trying to aid him; but the naval commander treated the other with some contempt, doubtless inspired by the latter's abject failure to quell the panic in its inception or handle it when it broke.

The boys now had time to gaze about them.

The glare of the burning ship lit up the surrounding water with a weird radiance, in which they could see the loaded boats, already lowered, tossing helplessly, the crowds on each being so great that the sailors could not use their oars.

"Say, Ned, suppose the boiler busts!" suddenly exclaimed the cheerful Herc, as the last boat was swung out.

"No use thinking of such possibilities," rejoined Ned decisively.

"Well, I can't help it," protested Herc indignantly. "I remember when that thresher blew up to grandpa's. I guess this would be something like that, eh, Ned?"

"Only more so," was the dry reply.

Suddenly the notification that all was ready for the lowering of the last boat rang out.

As this one was to be the final lifeboat to leave the ship, it was put overside before any one boarded it. The officers of the *Rhode Island*, the six members of the crew remaining, the boys and Commander Dunham getting into it by sliding down the falls.

At last they were all on board, and the order was given to shove off. No time was lost in doing this, as the *Rhode Island* was by this time a mass of flames in her forepart, and it seemed impossible that she could float much longer.

"Do you anticipate being picked up shortly, captain?" asked the boys' friend of the commander of the *Rhode Island*.

"Why, I don't expect that we'll have to drift about very long," was the reply. "You see, the Sound is well traveled, and some ship must have seen the flare of the fire."

It was bitterly cold in the storm-swept waters of the Sound, but the boys checked any tendency they might have felt to complain by thinking of the plight of the women and children in the other boats.

It is doubtful as the newspapers at the time pointed out, that there would have been no fatalities attendant on the wreck of the *Rhode Island*, if but a little less than half an hour after they had cast

adrift from the ill-fated steamer, the *Kentucky*, of the Joy Line, had not hove in sight. By this time the *Rhode Island* had burned to the water's edge, and sank with a noisy roar.

The *Kentucky* bore down with all speed on the drifting boatloads of half-frozen men and women, and within an hour every one of the passengers had been picked up and given warm food and drink and attention.

As the *Kentucky*, having performed her rescue work, pursued her way to New York, the boys mingled with the excited crowd of the saved that thronged her lighted saloon.

While they walked about, overhearing interesting scraps of conversation relating to the rescues of several of the passengers, they were startled by a sudden cry in a woman's voice:

"There he is! There he is, the coward!"

There was a rush to the part of the saloon from whence the cry had proceeded. Every one was naturally anxious to ascertain what could have caused it. The boys were among the curious persons who joined the throng.

They saw a slight, pale-faced woman pointing indignantly to a tall youth who was slinking away through the crowd, trying evidently to conceal himself from the woman's scorn.

"What is the matter, madam?" somebody asked the excited woman.

"Why, I was in the first rush for the stairway," explained the woman, "before those brave young men there – " It was the boys' turn to try to slink away. "Before those brave young men there kept back the cowardly fellows who were trying to trample past us. That man yonder, who has just slunk away, dealt me this blow in the face," she pointed to a livid weal on her cheek, "and knocked me down."

A roar of indignation went up as she related the craven conduct of the youth the boys had observed slink off. Some of the more excitable passengers shouted that they wanted to organize a party to find him and deal him out summary punishment. Cooler counsel prevailed, however, and the rest of the night was passed in as comfortable a manner as was possible on the overcrowded ship.

When the *Kentucky* arrived at her dock on the East River, below the Brooklyn Bridge, she was met by big crowds, among whom were many reporters, the wireless stations along the Sound having been notified by the *Kentucky* of the disaster that had overtaken the *Rhode Island*.

The boys, laughingly turning aside the assiduous young men of the press, were making their way ashore, when Herc suddenly caught hold of Ned's arm.

"Look there!" he exclaimed.

Ned looked, and saw Hank Harkins standing in the midst of a throng of reporters, to whom he was evidently giving a "big story."

"I took the woman in my arms," the boys heard him say, as they paused, "and made my way to the upper deck with her."

"You saved her?" asked a young reporter, holding a long pencil poised above a very large new notebook.

"Yes, I saved her, and then – " Hank was continuing, when his jaw suddenly dropped, and he shook as if he was about to have a fit.

Then, without another word to the amazed reporters, he shouldered his way through their ranks and dashed off down the gangplank in the direction of the land.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Herc. "I'll remember Hank's look when he met our eyes as long as I live. He looked like a dying duck in a thunderstorm!"

"I guess we headed off his thrilling narrative, all right," commented Ned, echoing Herc's merriment.

"And for a good reason, too," went on Herc. "I recognized Hank as he slunk away from that woman last night. He was the coward who struck her and disgraced his uniform."

"I'm glad his overcoat covered it," rejoined Ned.

At this juncture one of the reporters, who had noticed that both the lads wore Uncle Sam's uniforms, hurried up to them.

"Can you tell us what was the matter with that fellow?" he demanded. "He was just in the middle of giving us a good story, when he suddenly hurried off as if he had been shot. Is he a reliable chap, do you know?"

"Well, I wouldn't believe *all* he told you," grinned Herc, as the Dreadnought Boys hurried ashore, to cross New York and join their ship.

CHAPTER VII.

"WE ARE PART OF THE FLEET."

After some little difficulty the boys ascertained that the *Manhattan* lay up the North River, off the foot of Seventy-second Street and Riverside Drive. They could go to Seventy-second Street in a subway express, they were informed, and then walk across to the boat landing, where they would be almost sure to find a launch from the big Dreadnought waiting to take off the shore-leave men.

"Say!" gasped Herc, as the two, having descended into the "tube" and seated themselves in the lighted car, were whirled northward through pitch darkness toward their destination, "how far does this hole in the ground go?"

"Almost as far as Yonkers, I guess," replied Ned; "or so I've heard. Don't you like it?"

"Not much," rejoined Herc; "it's like trying to talk in a boiler factory."

The two boys had their suitcases tightly clutched between their knees, but nevertheless, when they reached the Grand Central station, the inrush of passengers, tumbling and pushing like mad to get seats, swept the lads' possessions before them as if the two pieces of baggage had been chaff in a high wind.

"Hey! come back with those gripsacks!" yelled Herc indignantly, seizing the arm of a puny-looking lad who was stumbling forward over the red-headed lad's particular possession. "Haven't you any manners?"

The town-bred lad turned a sharp, ferret-eyed face on the young sailor.

"Say, greenie, where do you come from, Painted Post or far Cohoes 'where the wind flower blows'? Just keep an eye on your own junk, or else hire an express wagon."

The indignant Herc stooped to rescue his suitcase, and by the time he raised a red and angry face, the sharp-faced lad had gone.

"Good thing he did get out of the way, or I'd have fetched him a clip on the ear!" grumbled Herc, as he resumed his seat by Ned, who had by this time retrieved his property also.

"No use losing your temper," counseled Ned; "just keep cool. Hullo, there is an old lady and a younger one standing up over there. The old one looks feeble. I'm going to give them these seats. Come on and get up."

"All right," muttered Herc, "but I don't see any one else doing so. See, all the men are seated and the women all seem to be standing up. What's the use of being different to the others? We'll only get stared at."

"All the more reason that we should be polite. The first duty of a sailor is to be kind and courteous to those weaker than himself," rejoined Ned in an undertone, as the boys rose to their feet.

With a courteous bow, Ned approached the ladies and motioned behind him to where he supposed two seats were vacant.

"Will you avail yourself of our places, madam?" he said, addressing the older lady and removing his navy cap.

Herc, with an awkward grin, also uncovered his red thatch and made a sweeping motion behind him with his big hand.

"Thank you very much, sir," rejoined the elderly lady, "my daughter and myself would be very glad to accept your kindness, but others seem already to have availed themselves of it."

"What's that?" cried Ned, wheeling, with a red face, and clapping his eyes on the seats they had just vacated.

Sure enough, as the elderly lady had said, they were occupied.

Two stout, red-faced men, with well-rounded stomachs and fingers covered with diamonds, lolled at their ease in the just vacated seats, reading their papers. They had slipped into the places while the boys were requesting the two ladies to take them.

"Well, what do you know about that?" sputtered Herc indignantly. "They just sneaked into those seats like skunks into a wood pile."

"They'll come out of them a lot more easily," breathed Ned grimly, as he took in the situation.

Bending forward, he addressed the interlopers courteously enough, while those around who had witnessed the scene looked on curiously. It is not often that a subway passenger has the courage to resent any slight, however marked. From the compression of Ned's lips and the determined flash in his eyes, however, it was evident that he had no intention of allowing the two beefy newspaper readers to enjoy their stolen seats undisturbed.

"I beg your pardon," said Ned. "Perhaps you are not aware that my friend and I vacated those seats to allow these ladies to be seated."

One of the red-faced ones, slightly older, it seemed, than the other, looked up with a bovine stare in his heavily rimmed eyes.

He stared at the Dreadnought Boys much as if they had been some strange visitors from another planet.

"I guess you don't know much about Noo Yawk," he said in a sneering tone, "or you'd have known that in the Subway it's 'first come, first served.'"

"Is that so?" inquired Ned, keeping down his anger, while Herc was dancing about in the narrow space he could find in the aisle of the crowded car. The red-headed lad was biting his nails and scratching his head in a manner that boded a storm as surely as black clouds portend thunder.

"That being the case," Ned went on in a cool voice, "it's about time that the Subway learned a few manners. We gave those seats up for those two ladies, and not for you. Are you going to vacate them?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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