

Yates Stirling



*A United States
Midshipman
Afloat*

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CHAPTER I

ENEMY OR FRIEND

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THE Navy-Yard at Brooklyn buzzed with its daily turmoil of labor. It was a bright June morning, and the high chimneys of the numerous shops and foundries belched forth flame and smoke. Thousands of begrimed workmen toiled incessantly, hammering, bending and riveting masses of metal, fashioning them into shape to be carried by the steam cranes to be blended into the hulls of waiting battle-ships.

Through this scene of activity two boys walked briskly. Their clothing was new and in the latest style. It clung to their well set up figures, betraying the hand of the military tailor. Each carried a bright leather suitcase to the top of which a cased sword was strapped.

Emerging from the tangle of buildings, the youths glanced about, and an exclamation of pleasure escaped them as a view of their nation's sea power met their eyes: ten huge battle-ships resplendent in their glassy white and contrasting buff paint lay tied up, filling every foot of the dock frontage.

"Which is ours, Phil?" asked one of the youths, stopping and setting his case down with a sigh of relief.

Philip Perry, as he slowly shifted his bag to his other hand, glanced down the long line of stately defenders.

"There she is, Syd," he finally replied, pointing his free hand in the direction of one moored at the foot of the street.

“The one with three smoke-stacks and eight turrets. What a beauty she is!”

Philip Perry and Sydney Monroe were the names stenciled in bold type on the new traveling bags, and underneath the names in smaller capitals were the letters: U. S. N.

Any one familiar with the navy could have told by a glance that they were midshipmen, just graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis and in the distribution of their class to the many ships of the navy, these two had received orders and were on their way to report for duty on board one of the powerful battle-ships lying directly before them.

The four years' course of study at Annapolis had filled their minds with a store of wisdom, and the rigorous outdoor drills had given to their bodies suppleness and strength. They were a sample of the finished output of the Naval National Academy.

The picturesque life on the ocean would give them ample opportunity to benefit themselves and put to good use their stored-up knowledge. They were on the threshold of a new era, in which their character and professional worth would be valued by the success achieved.

As they walked in silence toward their future home, their minds dwelt on the vast intricacies of this creation of steel, but these thoughts were quickly forgotten as they stepped over the side of the U. S. S. “Connecticut” and reported their arrival to the officer of the deck.

They were wrapped in wonder at the work of getting a battle-ship ready for sea. Ammunition and stores were being taken on board from huge cargo barges with lightning

rapidity by hundreds of strong bronzed sailormen. All was activity. The dockyard had completed its work on the steel hull and all hands seemed eager to breathe once more the pure air of the sea.

Five minutes later they were grasping the welcoming hands of their future messmates—those midshipmen who had been graduated from Annapolis one short year ago, yet had mastered the mystery of many things which to the newcomers were as an unopened book.

“The captain will see you both as soon as you are ready, sir,” the marine orderly reported to Phil.

Donning their bright new uniforms, which had been the sole contents of their valises, and buckling on their swords, they were ushered into the captain’s spacious quarters.

They found him brusque and businesslike. A hand to each in turn, with a firm manly pressure:

“Glad to have you with us;” then to the attentive orderly:

“Show these gentlemen to the executive officer,” and the ordeal was over.

Phil and Sydney had no time for conversation during the next twenty minutes, while they found themselves hurried through the rounds of official formality and then sent to their quarters to unpack and be ready for immediate duty.

“They gave me no choice of a roommate, did they, Syd?” said Phil, ten minutes later, as he dived into his trunk and commenced to toss his belongings on to his bunk to have them more handy to stow into the numerous small receptacles located about the narrow room which he and Sydney had been ordered to occupy.

“No, they didn’t,” answered Sydney, with a grin, “but we have stood each other for four years; I guess we can do it for two more.”

The last of their belongings was scarcely stowed when a servant announced that the midday meal was ready in the mess room.

They entered and were greeted by more of their former schoolmates. Phil found his seat next to Marshall, an old friend of Annapolis days, who was anxious to give him all the tips possible on what he could expect in his daily life on a battle-ship. Phil listened intently while he breathlessly recited all the gems of wisdom that came into his head:

“You are in Lazar’s division. It’s a crackerjack, too; you’ve got your work cut out for you. He’s a hustler. He isn’t much liked by the middies because he ‘horses’ us so much, but the captain swears by him. Beaty—you remember old ‘Pike’?—he had your job, but I guess Lazar was too many for him. We sent him to the hospital with nerves a week ago. Some of the fellows saw him yesterday, doing the gentleman act there, looking as pink and fresh as a girl. Hope you will manage all right.”

Phil tried to look cheerful, but Marshall’s quick eye detected something wrong.

“Do you know Lazar? of course you were at the Academy with him, but——”

He stopped and glanced hurriedly into Phil’s face, then dropped his voice:

“Why, it was you that fought him. How unfortunate!” Then musingly, “He is not the man to forget.”

“I can’t believe that he would allow a boy’s quarrel—remember, that was nearly four years ago—to influence his feelings for me now,” answered Phil, gaining but scant comfort from his own words.

He remembered how bitter Lazar had been in his relations to him the few months before the older man graduated and left him in peace. He was but a plebe then. Well, the future would tell.

As soon as the short meal was over Phil went to his room and changed his uniform, donning the oldest he owned, but the bright lace and lustrous braid was in great contrast to the uniforms of those officers and midshipmen who had received their baptism of salt spray, in the year at sea on board the battle-ship, cruising and drilling until their ship was considered to be in efficient condition to join the fleet and compete in all the drills and games that go to make up the very full itinerary of the sailor’s life afloat.

Sydney came in full of enthusiasm, having seen his divisional officer and obtained an idea of what he had to do.

“I have a fine job,” he cried, as he threw his coat on his bunk and started to get out his older clothes. “Four seven-inch guns, all my own; Lieutenant Brand says if I don’t make all hits at target practice, he won’t give me a two-five——”

Then, stopping and catching sight of his chum’s face in the mirror back of the washstand:

“Whatever is wrong, Phil?” he exclaimed anxiously. “You look as glum as an oyster.”

Phil hesitated. Should he confide in his roommate of Annapolis days? Or should he fight it out alone? He felt it was a situation needing every ounce of his manhood and

tact. What harm could be done by asking Syd's friendly advice?

"I have great misgivings, Syd," he commenced cautiously. "I was prepared for almost anything, but Lazar for my divisional officer had never occurred to me. Do you blame me for looking and feeling glum?"

Sydney's joyous face became serious in an instant.

"That's certainly hard luck. Why couldn't I have been assigned to his division instead of you?" exclaimed he, generously. "I never liked him, but he doesn't know me from an old shoe, and he has a good reason to know you." Then, reminiscently, "I can remember his face after your fight with him as plainly as if it were yesterday; the referee called it a draw, but every one knew that you had the better of the fight. He was in the hospital for a week until his face healed up, while you were in ranks at the next formation, with no more marks than I give myself daily shaving."

"Do you believe he has forgotten, or at least forgiven?" asked Phil.

"You or I would have long ago," replied Sydney thoughtfully, "but Lazar always seemed so vindictive to me; maybe his Latin blood makes him so. Jules Lazar is not an appropriate name for a forgiving nature; it sounds very belligerent to me."

"You certainly are comforting," smiled Phil, as he started to leave the room to report to his divisional officer and find out for himself what the outward signs of friendship or enmity might tell.

With many misgivings he went up the companion ladder leading to the quarter-deck. As his foot touched the clean

white deck, he raised his hand to his cap in salute to the flag.

Standing near the great twelve-inch turret, managing the labor of filling the spacious storerooms and magazines, was Lazar, the spy-glass in his gloved hand identifying him as the officer of the deck, in charge of the progress of work on the big fighter.

Phil stepped smartly up to him and saluted.

Lazar turned slowly toward him. His brow contracted imperceptibly as he returned the salute of the midshipman.

“Mr. Perry reports to you, sir, as junior officer of the fourth division,” Phil said in the official tone he had been taught to use at Annapolis. His eyes unwaveringly sought the restless energetic face of his divisional officer.

Would Lazar give him his hand? Phil was ready to believe that his boyish quarrel and fight were forgiven. He waited what seemed a long time while officer and midshipman each looked straight into the eyes of the other. Neither wavered, and each seemed to wish to sweep aside the other’s mask and read the thoughts behind the cold impassive exterior.

“Aye, aye, Mr. Perry,” finally replied Lazar. “Get a correct list of the division, and a copy of our station bills. You will find them posted in the division bulletin-board.” Then glancing at the bright clean uniform of the youth before him, “You had better put on your oldest clothes, then come up here, and I shall give you something to occupy you. You stand watch with me, you know?”

Phil held his hand at his side ready to offer it at the first intimation that it would be accepted by the older man, but

Lazar did not show by voice or sign that he wished for anything more than purely official relations with the midshipman.

“I am ready now for duty, sir,” answered Phil in a voice that, strive as he could to hide it, betrayed a tone of disappointment, tinged with indignation. Glancing down at his converted Annapolis uniform, “I have no older ones,” he confessed. “I might as well break this in, sir.”

“Very good; you will take charge of the work on the forecastle.” Glancing about and motioning a smart-looking petty officer to advance, “O’Neil, here, is in our division.” Then addressing the attentive coxswain, “You are excused from other work and will lend Mr. Perry a hand. He is our new midshipman, and is about to direct the work on the forecastle.” Then again turning to Phil and dropping his voice: “That’s a splendid man, he knows the name of every man on board. You will find him a willing subordinate.”

Phil saluted stiffly in Annapolis fashion, while O’Neil jerked his hand toward his cap and in a businesslike voice announced his readiness by a hearty, “Aye, aye, sir.”

O’Neil led the way through the battery deck, the men engaged in work there standing aside in respectful attention to allow the new arrival to pass.

Phil’s mind wavered between the decision that Lazar would give him a fair showing, and the contrary one that he would make his life as unpleasant as possible; and from the accounts he had heard of Beaty, the midshipman in the hospital with “too much Lazar,” as one of the midshipmen had diagnosed his complaint, he knew his new divisional officer, by voice and action, could make the life of one he

disliked so unhappy that a cot in the hospital might be preferable.

He found his work on the forecastle just what he needed to keep his mind off his troubles, and in the language of O'Neil: "he made good," as he encouraged, directed and helped the men handle the bulky packages.

"That's a fine young gentleman," O'Neil confided to a brother petty officer, as he watched Phil put his shoulder against a twelve-inch shell and guide it clear of an iron hatch top. "Do you see the way the boys are working? As if they were to get shore leave at the end of this job. It's a pity to see him spoil them bright new clothes, but when I tried to help him he told me he wanted exercise."

Phil had found his thoughts very unpleasant companions as he had watched the work progress, and now doing the manual labor of a leading man, he had forgotten, for the time at least, the sombre reflections that had, like spectres, come into his mind.

Would this man attempt to ruin him? And could he do so if he so wished?

He considered going to the captain and asking to be assigned to another division, stating his reasons, but he saw immediately how childish it would seem to that busy officer. A boys' quarrel, long ago forgotten, he would call it.

Phil wished it were so.

CHAPTER II

UNDER ARREST

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PHIL awakened the next morning at an early hour. Hurriedly dressing, he went on deck.

His sleep had refreshed him and his mind was less ready to dwell on the dark side of his life on board ship. He believed when he and Lazar had become better acquainted the old grudge would be overshadowed in the intimacy of the life on the ocean.

With muster-roll and station bills neatly copied in his note-books, he was impatient for the bugle to sound the call to "quarters," when he would meet his division for the first time.

He watched with interest the scene about him. Petty officers and men were busily engaged putting the finishing touches to the clean deck and bright brass work of the vessel. Others were using a clothes-brush carefully on their neatly fitting blue uniforms or giving a parting rub to their broad shoes. The gunners' mates guarded their huge guns jealously, occasionally rubbing an imaginary spot of rust or dirt.

While the bugle call was being sounded on each of the many decks, he was an interested spectator of the magic effect of the clear notes. Confusion seemed to melt away into the most perfect order as men took their places in ranks abreast the guns they served.

Lazar stood facing his division,—fifty well set up, youthful men. Back of him were the turret guns for which his division

formed the crews. Across the deck the marine guard was paraded, the military bearing of the soldier-sailors contrasting with the easy pose of the picturesque sailormen about them.

The executive officer was at his station across the deck from Lazar.

Such is the formation for quarters on board a war-ship of the navy. Each divisional officer musters his men, inspecting carefully, in order that the standard of neatness may be maintained. He then reports the result to the executive officer, receives his orders for drill and returns to his station.

Upon the completion of muster the captain will be informed of the number of absentees and then this report is signaled to the flag-ship.

Upon such a scene Phil gazed for the first time as an officer and thrilled to the impressive ceremony. He stood at "attention" on the right of the division.

Lazar, muster-book in hand, glanced along the double line of men until his eyes rested on his midshipman. The precision in the attitude of his junior caught his eye. His glance wavered and the slightest of sneers appeared on his face. For the fraction of a second he seemed to hesitate, then words that brought the blush of shame and anger to the face of the unsuspecting boy struck harshly upon his ears:

"Mr. Perry, I gave you the credit for knowing that at quarters all officers must wear sword and gloves. Go below, sir, and get yourself in proper uniform."

Phil stood motionless. He was stunned for the moment, not so much by the words as by the scorn in his voice.

Almost overcome with confusion and embarrassment, he turned away and hastily descended the ladder to the deck below.

Once more in his room he found his sword and gloves where he had placed them but ten minutes before the call to quarters. Then had come a call to the executive officer, and once on deck all save the scene about him was driven from his mind. His own thoughtlessness alone could be blamed, but the sneer in Lazar's voice rankled.

When he again reached the deck, the men had broken ranks and the sharp pipe of the whistles of the boatswain and his mates filled the air, followed in sonorous tones and in perfect chorus:

“All hands unmoor ship.”

The stout hemp lines and chains securing the battle-ship to the dock were cast off, and like writhing serpents, hauled aboard by the lusty crew. The two great propellers churned the muddy water and the war-ship glided out into the crowded waters of the East River.

Two handy tugs attached themselves to this unwieldy mass of steel and slowly swung her armored bow toward the Brooklyn Bridge, spanning the river like a huge rainbow of metal.

“Let go!” shouted the captain of the war-ship to his tiny helpmates; then to the attentive executive officer by his side—

“Slow speed ahead!”

Quietly, the powerful engines started in motion the sixteen thousand tons of fighting material.

“Half speed ahead,” ordered the captain.

The Brooklyn Bridge swept by overhead. The docks and shipping melted into a confusion of masts and smoke-stacks.

Through the harbor the battle-ship glided like a great giant, then turned and headed through the Narrows for the open sea.

The ship was soon well out on the Atlantic, the haze of the city melted astern. The low lying coast of Long Island was dimly in sight on the port hand.

The two friends spent the remainder of the day in getting their bearings in their new home, and when eight o'clock came were quite willing to seek their bunks.

It was midnight when Phil found himself by Lazar's side on the high bridge of the battle-ship, as junior officer of the watch.

The wind, which had been light at the start, had increased steadily in violence until now the vessel was plunging heavily into the teeth of a moderate gale. Her powerful engines crowded her steel shod prow with terrific force into the rising seas, flinging tons of spray on to her high forecastle.

Lazar stood with his face close to the canvass weather cloth, for the protection of those on the bridge against the force of the blast, and peered through the inky blackness.

The responsibility for the ship rested upon his shoulders for the next four hours.

Turning toward the younger man, he motioned him nearer.

"Mr. Perry, your duties are to muster the watch on deck," he shouted in Phil's ear, in order to be heard in the roar of

the wind; "examine both life-boats; see that everything movable about decks is secure. We are going to have a bad night," he added, glancing at the angry sea. "Your duty is to go in the life-boat if she is called away; but I shall not lower a boat to-night."

Phil glanced in amazement at the officer of the deck. He could but see the outline of his face in the gloom of his southwester.

"Did I understand you, sir, to say you would not lower a life-boat to-night?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, sir, you did," snapped Lazar, "in this sea to do so would mean sending seven men to death."

Phil made his way aft, to where the watch had gathered to keep dry against the heavy seas of spray that periodically were flung over the deck.

O'Neil held the lantern while Phil called off the men's names. Then he and O'Neil climbed out and examined the life-boats, one on each side, swung securely from their davits, overhanging the angry water. Then Phil went on the quarter-deck and questioned the marine sentry at the patent life-buoy. Every one seemed to be well instructed. All was secure.

"Keep your men from the side," he cautioned the boatswain's mate of the watch; "we don't want any one overboard in a sea like this."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the sailor, "there ain't any danger now; maybe when they hoists ashes some of them lubberly firemen may get too near the side. But I'll warn 'um, sir."

Returning to his station on the bridge, he sought the friendly shelter of the weather cloth against the increasing

fierceness of the wind and stinging spray. The sound of flapping canvas and the sea breaking its fury on the steel bow were the only sounds above the roar of the wind.

Phil counted not the time. All was too new and absorbing. His thoughts had turned to many things when his breathing stopped and his heart sank as a terrifying cry from aft came faintly but clearly to his ears.

“Man overboard.”

He was rooted to the spot. In helpless consternation he looked to his officer for instructions. A human being was adrift in this angry sea, or maybe had been already killed by a swiftly moving propeller blade.

As in a dream he saw Lazar grasp the handles of the telegraphs to the engine room and signal “full speed astern.”

There could be but one interpretation. Lazar would lower a life-boat after all.

Phil ran down the bridge ladder and swung himself nimbly out on the life-boat gallery.

There he found the lee life-boat ready for lowering; six sailors sat quietly at the thwarts, while those of the watch had led out the boat-falls. O’Neil, the coxswain, with his hand on the strong-back, stood ready to leap into the boat. That they were doing more than their duty did not occur to these stout American hearts. A fellow-being was in danger of drowning—that was enough reason for them.

“Shall I lower, sir?” the coxswain shouted to Phil as the latter swung himself over the rail of the superstructure and stood by his side; “he can’t live long in this sea.”

Phil surveyed hastily the strongly built boat, then his gaze traveled down to the angry sea beneath him.

The engines were backing. He saw the heavy surge of the sea astern as the propellers threw a powerful race current forward. Why did not the order come? After the ship had started astern the boat could not be lowered. Far away on the lee quarter the chemical flame of the patent life-buoy showed a dim light against a background of troubled waters.

Under the spell of one of those impulses that seem to take possession so absolutely of the mind in times of emergency, Phil cried:

“Lower away,” and he and O’Neil swung themselves on board the life-boat as she dropped evenly and quickly toward the black sea beneath her.

Phil seized the handle of the steering oar in both hands, motioning O’Neil away. The boat shivered as she struck the lumpy sea.

“Sit here, O’Neil, and hang on to my legs,” shouted Phil at the top of his lungs, through the roaring of the gale, as the boat shot ahead on her life-line, while with the steering oar he swung her stern in toward the white wall of the battle-ship towering above them.

The life-line sheered the boat clear of the menacing ship.

“Let go,” shouted the youth.

“Give way! Bend to it, men,” he cautioned, turning the life-boat’s prow toward the flicker of light appearing periodically on the crest of a wave and quickly disappearing down into its deep trough.

Straight-backed and supple the six oarsmen sent the long, narrow boat over the seas that seemed ready to engulf

her.

“Never mind me,” shouted Phil to O’Neil, bracing his legs firmly against the stern boards. “Stand by forward there, we shall be at the life-buoy in a moment.”

O’Neil glanced with grave concern at the midshipman.

“Aye, aye, sir. Keep your weather eye open, sir,” he cautioned. “If you go overboard with them rubber boots on, you’ll go to the bottom like a shot.”

Protesting at the boy’s recklessness, he crawled forward and stood ready to grasp the man if he were clinging to the life-buoy or yet swimming on the surface of the angry water.

“Can you see the buoy, sir?” shouted O’Neil. “It’s broad off the starboard bow.”

“I see it,” shouted back Phil, as he threw the stern to port and bore down on the two flames still burning brightly amid the tempest.

“Stand by to ‘peak your oars.’ Peak!” he shouted to the crew as the boat with a rush was brought around and headed up to the buoy.

“He’s there, boys,” cried O’Neil, joyously, as he leaned far out and grasped a limp, bedraggled figure clinging to the life-buoy. The men dropped the handles of their oars between their feet, raising the blades clear of the passing waves.

“In you come, my hearty,” cried the coxswain, as his arms encircled the half-drowned man, and he lifted him from the hungry sea to safety in the life-boat.

Searchlights were now playing from the battle-ship. One beam of light held steadily on the struggling boat, while the

others swept fretfully about as if they sought to pierce the dark water.

As the midshipman struggled manfully at the steering oar, holding the bow of the boat up against the impact of the powerful seas, Lazar's words seemed to ring in his ears like a knell.

Fear clutched at his heart that he might by his disobedience send these brave men to a watery grave.

As long as the oarsmen could give the boat headway, he felt confident all would go well, but some of the men were exhausted, and the sea was ever increasing.

"Steady, men! Give way together. This is for your lives," he shouted, as a white wall of water reared itself close aboard out of the blackness to windward.

The boat seemed to fairly crawl over the angry bosom of foam.

"Stand by to peak your oars," he shouted hoarsely. "Peak!" as the monster wave curled over, ready to engulf them, and struck the bow of the life-boat. She shivered to her keel and half filled with water, then lay dead on the surface of the sea.

Wave after wave swept over the half-submerged boat, almost drowning the exhausted crew. Phil attempted frantically to head the boat up to the battering seas.

Casting a despairing look at his men, whose efforts were becoming ever weaker, he read on their faces a look of hope. Throwing a swift glance over his shoulder, he saw the misty form of the "Connecticut" loom up out of the darkness, scarce a boat's length away. He heard the whir of her backing propellers; the dull boom of the sea spending its

fury against her sides; the rapidly given orders, and the scurry of shod feet on her decks.

A line whistled overhead and fell in the midst of the exhausted crew.

“Take a turn with that line,” Phil shouted.

O’Neil grasped the line and secured it to the bow-thwart of the boat.

Phil braced himself against the jar of the tautening line.

The boat rose and fell on the angry sea, in momentary danger of splitting herself asunder on the sides of the battle-ship. The waves, but half broken by the armored bow, swept over the struggling men.

He felt himself grasped and held strongly by hands from above, and then slowly hauled upward. He saw the whole boat lifted on a giant sea and then swept wildly against the ship’s steel side. A crash of splintered wood. Then all was darkness.

Phil opened his eyes in his own room, with Sydney and Marshall bending over him and a doctor binding up a cut over his temple. Two or three times he attempted to speak, to find out the worst. He knew that the life of every man sacrificed was caused by his impulse. He had given the order to lower the boat directly contrary to the stated instructions of the officer of the deck.

He had not the courage to ask of the fate of his men. He had seen the boat go to pieces with his own eyes, surely some of the crew had been drowned.

He could not stand the suspense a moment longer. He must know all. It would be better than this uncertainty.

“Syd, tell me what happened?” he whispered hoarsely.

“All were saved,” Sydney answered. “We abandoned the boat, of course. You were struck by a splinter as you were being hauled on board. You are the biggest man on this ship to-night, Phil.”

The joyful news made the overwrought boy tremble. He turned his face away to hide his emotion.

Greatly strengthened by the happy tidings, he put on dry clothes and, despite Sydney’s offer to stand the remainder of his watch, made his way to the bridge to report his return to Lazar. It seemed an age since he had responded to that terrifying cry, but the clock told him it had been but scarce a half hour ago.

What would Lazar say? Would not success wipe away the guilt of disobedience? What was the loss of a boat compared to the loss of a human life?

With a cheerful ring in his voice he reported his return to duty.

“I was struck by a piece of the boat, sir,” he offered in excuse for his tardiness. The ship had been on her course for nearly ten minutes.

Lazar turned on him fiercely. His even white teeth gleamed under his black moustache.

“You can thank Providence, Mr. Perry, that you are alive this moment.” His voice rose in anger. “A midshipman who cannot obey orders is a menace to the safety of those under him. That you were not all drowned was due to me, sir. I saved you by putting the ship between your boat and the seas, and hauling you aboard like so much cargo.” Then in a voice cold and passionless: “I have received the captain’s

authority, Mr. Perry, to place you under arrest for wilfully disobeying my order. You will go to your room, sir.”

Phil turned away without a word.

CHAPTER III

THE TRACK MEET

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“BRACE up and don’t pull such a long face, Phil,” Sydney was saying in their room after breakfast the next morning.

“You are the boast of the ship, and the captain will not be severe with you. You disobeyed orders, of course, but so did Admiral Nelson at the battle of the Nile, and yet he was promoted for his action because he ‘made good’——”

“Yes, but I didn’t ‘make good.’ Lazar ‘made good’ for me and he took pains to tell me so last night. I would rather have drowned than listen to his scornful denunciation of my conduct,” answered Phil sadly.

“You are entirely too sensitive,” answered Sydney in a disgusted voice. “If I had been in your place last night I’d have been proud of myself, and Lazar’s scorn would be as water on a duck’s back. Every one is for you, even Mr. Penfield, the executive officer. I hear he said at the wardroom mess-table that he was of the opinion that you should be publicly commended by the secretary of the navy.”

Phil blushed with pleasure at his friend’s impetuous words.

“Did he, though?” he said, brightly; then his face clouded as his eyes fell on his empty sword rack.

“The humiliation of the arrest is what hurts,” he added. “When the captain sent for my sword I felt like a veritable traitor.”

“There you are, sentiment again,” cried Sydney. “The sword is merely a matter of form. You will have it again in a jiffy. I’m coming back as soon as we anchor,” he added, buckling on his sword and hurriedly leaving the room as the bugle call sounded, and the boatswain’s mates’ hoarse voices were heard calling:

“Bring ship to an anchor!”

Throwing himself into his chair, Phil turned over in his mind the various incidents that had led to his arrest. How could he answer Lazar’s accusations? His only manly course was to acknowledge his guilt and hope for the captain’s clemency. Down in his heart he knew he would do the same again. It was cruel to stand by and see a man perish without raising a hand. Yet Lazar’s judgment had been sound. For the benefit of many it were better to allow one to drown.

Alone in his room he followed the movements of the ship by the noises about him. As the vibrations of the propellers lessened, he knew that the vessel was near the anchored fleet and had slowed her engines. Shortly, he heard the rattle of chain as the anchor was dropped overboard.

“Sir, the captain wishes to see Mr. Perry in the cabin,” announced the orderly five minutes later.

Entering the cabin, Phil removed his cap and stood with military exactness before his commanding officer.

“Take a seat, Mr. Perry,” said the captain, not unkindly.

A few moments elapsed, then Lazar entered, and at a motion from the captain occupied a chair next to Phil.

Phil’s heart beat fast. The solemnity of the occasion awed him. His hopes were ready to sink within him as he waited for the captain’s decision.

“Gentlemen,” the captain began, weighing his words, “Mr. Perry, in deliberately disobeying the order of his senior officer, helped to save an unfortunate man from certain death;” the captain hesitated and shifted his gaze to Lazar. “If it had not been for the masterful manner in which the officer of the deck, Mr. Lazar, handled the ship, placing her between the helpless boat and the force of the seas, eight more men would have been sacrificed.” Then turning to Phil and addressing him directly: “It was Mr. Lazar’s high sense of duty that compelled him to report your disobedience. What have you to say, sir?”

Phil was silent. The captain thrummed on the table, as if impatient for an answer. Lazar fidgeted uneasily in his chair, no doubt wondering what defense the boy would advance.

“I have nothing to say, sir,” began Phil in a low voice. “I committed a grave error, sir. I have steered life-boats before, but the sea was greater than I realized.” He stopped and glanced up in embarrassment at the captain. “I am afraid, sir, I would do the same again, sir.”

“Well spoken, lad,” cried the captain delightedly. He had prepared himself for an excuse, so this straightforward acknowledgment was extremely gratifying to the blunt sailor.

“Bless you, boy, you gave me a few new white hairs as I watched your boat. I never thought to see any of that crew again, but all’s well that ends well, eh, Lazar?” he asked, turning suddenly on the ensign.

“I feel I have done my duty, sir; the verdict rests with you,” answered he, in a strained voice, in which Phil thought he read disappointment.