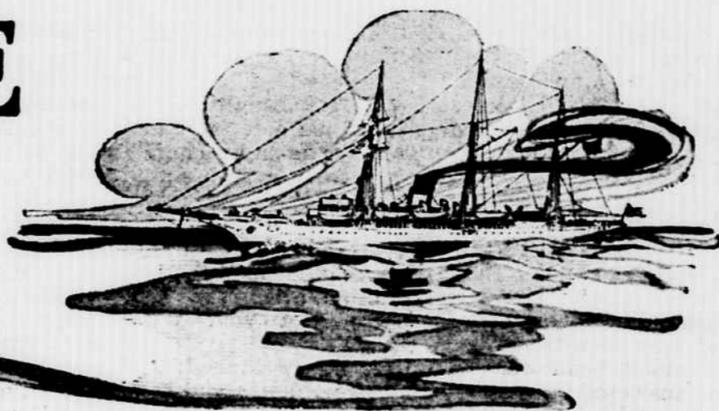


THE SPITFIRE

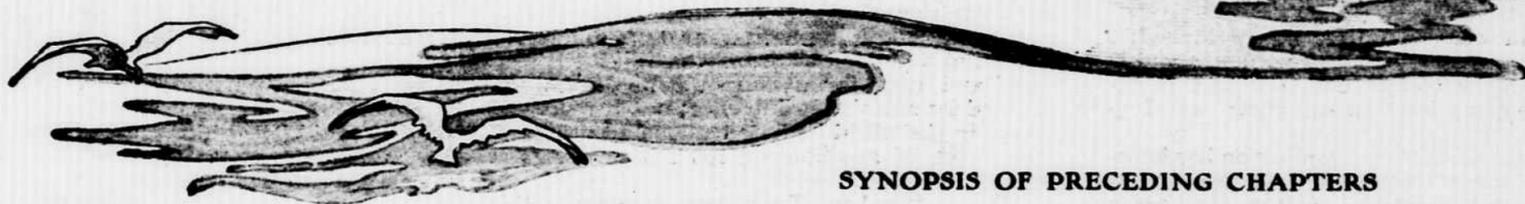
By EDWARD PEPLE

Drawings by J. V. McFall



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Looking Forward



SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

THE big black yacht tore along after the white one, until it came within easy hailing distance; then a fleshy man in a suit of blue and white pajamas called cautiously across the waters: "Spitfire ahoy! Is that you, Larris?"

The astonished Captain recognized the owner's hail, and returned an equally guarded answer, while his sigh of personal satisfaction was comparable to that of escaping steam.

"All right," came the voice again. "Half speed and straight ahead! I'm coming aboard!"

The two yachts were eased down without undue commotion, while the Horsehair edged up gently and pushed a light bridge to the break in the Spitfire's rail. Girard stepped on it, with his clothes on his arm; but turned to give a final order to the borrowed Captain.

"Thanks, Harley. Just work along behind us in shouting distance, if you please. I may need you."

He crossed the bridge, and was met by Beasley, who had just turned out to relieve his superior officer at the wheel.

"And who are you?" demanded the scant clad owner sharply.

"I'm Beasley, sir," returned the afflicted mate, using his lower jaw with difficulty.

"You're a liar!" said Girard with simplicity and warmth. "I never saw you before since I was born!"

The mate hastened to explain that his facial strangeness was due to an accident.

Girard snorted and went to Captain Joe in the pilot house. "Send for Torkins!" he ordered, while he began to array himself a bit more conventionally in trousers.

The Captain stared at him in open mouthed wonder. "Torkins, sir?" he asked blankly.

"Torkins?"

"Yes, Torkins!" snapped the old man, balancing himself on one leg and thrusting the other into his trousers viciously. "Not the angel Gabriel, but just plain Torkins! What the— Ah! Isn't the skunk on board?"

"No, sir," answered Captain Joe. "he isn't. What's more, I haven't seen him, sir."

Girard eyed the Captain suspiciously, readjusted his disturbed convictions, and nodded slowly.

"Good!" he said. "I mean good for Torkins' skin. Now, let's get down to business."

While Beasley took the wheel the two retired to the Captain's cabin, where they held a consultation for an hour, going over all such details as Captain Joe could furnish.

"All right, Larris," said Girard as he rose at last. "Just set a double watch on deck, and arm them. If anyone of the three rascals tries to sneak over the side, put a hole in him! I mean it! Good night."

"Good night."

MARCUS GIRARD, an irascible and erratic American millionaire, peremptorily ordered his daughter Valda to take Aunt Mary Howard, his half-sister, and Polly Thurman, a relative of Aunt Mary's, on his yacht Spitfire to Calais, France, leaving him in London free to transact his business without being bothered by the women.

James Ormond, a stranger, showed the yacht's master, Captain Joseph Larris, written instructions, signed by Girard's name, for him (Ormond) to take full charge of the Spitfire and sail for New York. These instructions were confirmed later by telegrams sent to Valda and Captain Joe in Girard's private cipher.

When out of Calais, the yacht picked up a man calling himself Bruce Morson, who had been thrown off a tug, Valda peremptorily assuming command when Ormond refused to stop. Ormond convinced Valda that Morson was a customs house officer and had come aboard to catch her father in an attempt to smuggle jewelry into New York; and so, when Morson told her the story of his experiences, which Ormond had branded a fake, she was more than ever convinced that he was a deceiver, and ordered him to report to Captain Joe to work his passage.

After Valda had taken Morson to task several times, the latter told her he would willingly jump overboard if it would please her. She at once dared him to—and he did. Of course he was fished out again. Then Valda told him what she thought of him.

Beasley, mate of the Spitfire, set Morson to holystoning the decks, and then goaded him beyond endurance by pushing him sprawling with his foot. Valda witnessed the insult, and gave Morson permission to resent it anyway he pleased. Then ensued a wonderful prize fight, with Morson the winner.

Girard, as soon as he traced the movements of the Spitfire by the conspirators' telegrams, rushed to New York and engaged a fast yacht to head off his own vessel.

his chin on his cravat. When she had finished he protested feebly:

"But, my dear child, I never smuggled anything in my whole life,—that is, except the two times you mention,—and—and, good God, Val! I had forgotten all about the pesky things! You were trying to keep your wicked old dad out of the penitentiary, were you? Well, I'll be—"

He paused to laugh. "Suppose you put on your snaffle, my dear, and we'll get down to a trot. Now then! What the blazes do you make of it, anyway?"

Valda shook her head. Also, her explanation of the tangled events was a trifle unsatisfactory; for it is always difficult to tell a clean breasted, lucid story and at the same time suppress important facts—

but the young woman had her reasons. She told of the coming of Ormond and his secretary without reserve, and was greatly relieved on learning of the part that Torkins had played in the beginning of things. This left a clear case against two of the miscreants; still there was a third miscreant to be accounted for, and it was concerning him that the most salient facts were being artfully suppressed.

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"Aha!" cried Girard. "Now we seem to be getting at it!"