



Texas Navy Association

Historical Article



RUNNING A FRENCH BLOCKADE

Or

THE WAY THEY FOOLED THE PRINCE DE JOINVILLE.

DURING the latter part of 1838, by reason of troubles existing between the two governments, a large squadron of French ships-of-war was stationed along the Mexican coast, for the purpose of enforcing the blockade declared by France. As consequence of this measure, provisions, and such articles as had hitherto been imported into the Mexican sea-ports, became very scarce, and the high prices which were demanded offered strong inducement' to our enterprising, money-loving countrymen to out-wit the keen eyed Frenchmen, and in defiance of their blockade to supply the interdicted ports.

One of these adventurous exploits came immediately under my own observation, and anticipating the reader's permission, I reel off the yarn for his edification. It occurred while I was cruising in the sloop of war Boston, under the gallant Captain BABBIT, who was one of the officers of the old Philadelphia, when she was captured by the Algerines.

Apropos of my revered old commander: there comes up always, when I recall him, his standing toast; the only one he ever gave after his release from imprisonment.: "The downfall of the barbarous Moors". On all occasions, when he was called upon for a sentiment, this was given. We were once dining with the celebrated ESPKLETA, Governor-General of Cuba, who did not understand a word of English. He gave as usual, "The downfall of the barbarous Moors," which, creating unusual merriment among all who understood him, caused the governor to require its translation. To judge from the governor's appearance, it must have touched him nearly, for his complexion clearly betrayed his Arabic descent. But I am yawning off my course.

After a cruise of four or five months in the Gulf, we hauled up for Tampico, to look once more on terra-firma, and to fill oar water-tanks. On coming to anchor in the roadstead, we found the French corvette Creole,

commanded by the Prince de Joinville, and a brig of the same nation, moored in front of the river. The bar of Tampico is too shallow to admit vessels of heavy draught, which are obliged to anchor in the open roads outside, and on the approach of a gale are forced to get under weigh and give the shore a wide berth. The blockading craft were anchored barely out of the reach of the guns mounted on Castle San Marco, in a situation to intercept any vessel attempting to enter the harbour. After we came to and furled sails, the usual salutes were exchanged, visits of etiquette paid and the launch hoisted out, preparatory to watering ship.

Having nothing with which to occupy myself, and not intending to visit the town before the next day, I took my sketch-book and pencil, and ascended to the main-top, designing to sketch the entrance of the river. I stowed myself away on a spare studding-sail, and commenced the outline of the beautiful landscape; but I was interrupted by old Marline, the captain of the top, with:

“Them Johnny Crapeaus have got an eye out to windward, lieutenant. That there ‘Grey-owl,’ as they call her, is talking bunting (i. e. signalling) to the brig; and there go her hands aloft to loose her canvas, sir.”

I cast my eyes towards the brig, and at once perceived that she was heaving up her anchor. A second look to seaward explained the cause of this manoeuvre. On the extreme verge of the windward horizon a small white speck appeared, seeming but a floating cloudlet resting between the light blue of the clear sky and the deep azure of the ocean.

The brig was soon under weigh, and piling the canvas on her tall spars, she hauled on a taut bowline in the direction of the strange sail. Sending Marline below for my spy-glass, I was now enabled with its aid to make the stranger out. She appeared to be of brigantine size, and by the way she rose in the horizon, I judged her to be a fast-sailing clipper. There was a light sky-sail breeze ruffling gently over the waters from seaward, but not blowing hard enough to make the anchored vessels teed head to wind against ebb tide; therefore we lay bows in towards the harbour.

The brigantine rapidly neared the French brig, and while my eye was fixed on her rakish rip, and the beautiful cut of her square sails, her colours rose to the gaff. I at once distinguished the flag of “the lone star republic.” The Frenchman had got within hail of the stranger, and apparently satisfied

with his appearance, had squared away, and under a cloud of snow-white canvas the two vessels came in side by side. How beautiful is a ship, decked in her snowy robes and flaunting streamers, bonding gracefully over the gently undulating bosom of the ocean, as she parts the blue waves and throws the foam in silvery sheets in her walk! The outline of her tapering spars, her dark thread-like rigging, and broad sails thrown out in bold relief against the sky; the variety of colours, each softened down into the other, are, in my mind, “beautiful exceedingly.”

The two vessels neared the anchorage; suddenly the French brig clewed up her fore and main-sails, the Texan banner fluttered from her fore-mast-head, and her guns opened a salute to the brigantine. As the brigantine swept smoothly on, an involuntary buzz of admiration rose from our crew, as they gazed on her sylph-like beauty. She was evidently Baltimore-built, her spars very taunt and rakish, her hull long and low in the water, with bows that seemed to pass through the waves without a ripple. Apparently she had but a small crew, some ten or fifteen seamen only being actively occupied in working her, and a few red-coated marines leaning with professional stiffness against the masts and bulwarks. Three or four officers also appeared at their usual stations; and as we knew the difficulties of shipping men in that non-payment service, we were not surprised to see her so poorly manned. A long brass thirty-two pounder, working on a pivot amidships, and masked

port-holes along her sides, were symptoms of a sharp set of teeth, which gave her the cut of a dangerous customer. As soon as the Frenchman fired the last gun of his salute, he clewed up everything and came to in the berth he had left. The brigantine kept on close under our lee, without shortening sail; as she passed, answering our hail, as the “Texan brig of war Brazos, commander Charles E. Hawkins.” She had also hoisted the French flag forward, and we were expecting to see her come to, and answer the salute of the Frenchman, when suddenly altering her course, she luffed short across the bows of the Creole, and headed in for the fort, intending apparently to cross the bar. While we were wondering at her temerity in thus venturing under the guns of an enemy’s fort, the Texan flag was hauled down, the star-spangled banner floated in its place, and at the foremast bead the Mexican flag was hoisted above the French.

This was more than the Frenchmen could bear. To be thus tricked out of a salute, their blockade broken under their very noses, and their half-worshipped tri-colour hoisted beneath the Mexican flag, was too gallingly insulting for their fiery natures. The brigantine had hauled up BO as to bring their masts in a range, and as they swung to the tide not a gun could be brought to bear from their decks upon her, while she stretched boldly across the bar. The confusion of Babel most have been great if it exceeded that which uprose from the angry Frenchmen. First one and then the other

slipped their cables and made sail so as to bring their broadsides to bear on the daring stranger; but they were too late, and in their hurry got foul of each other, only throwing a few harmless shot over and around the brigantine, which soon rounded the high bluffs of Punta Tanupeco, leaving them to get clear of each other and seek their old anchorage again.

The excitement of the scene had thrown all idea of sketching out of my head; and having an old acquaintance on board the Creole, I determined to pay him a visit, having a midday-like desire to witness the workings of the bitter pill they had swallowed. After getting on board and exchanging the usual salutations and inquiries, we adjourned to the mess-room, where a bottle of claret was introduced, as well as the subject of “running the blockade!” To do justice to my French friend, I must give the conversation to my readers as it occurred verbatim et literatim.

“My ver goot fren, you see zat dam rascality Yankee-doodale fellow laff ze grande prince, ze grande nation, ze whole blockade, all in ze ver face?”

“Yes, Sprraic, I saw it all; but why did you let him pass?”

“Let him pass, by gar!—LET him pass, you say, eh! Vy, sacre-mil-tonnere! he say he one—fontre!—vat you call him? —zat leetle republique, vat fight all Mexique?”
“Texas.”

“Ah, yes, Texas—Texas man-o’-war he say himself. Oh, by gar, ze grande prince he mad ver moosh! Mil tonnere! how he swear Anglice, ven he see ze coortain of glory, la belle tri-colour, hang up all same like one deesh-clout under the dirty flag de Mexique! He say he watch for zat dam Yankee-doodale canaille bugare all eternitee, till he catch him. He no nevare come out zees port ‘gain, vizout ve catch him!”

This I found out to be the actual determination of the blockading squadron; not to move from the port till they succeeded in capturing the American.

I returned on board, and the next morning started for the city, feeling a strong desire to see and make the acquaintance of one so much after my own heart as the man who had planned and executed this bold manoeuvre. Tampico is situated on a river of the same name, several miles from its month. With its narrow unpaved streets, strong prison-like houses closely planted together, it stands as a fair specimen of the old style of Spanish cities. It lied on a green plain which gently slopes up from the river side, and every knoll in the vicinity is fortified and garrisoned. We entered the river at the moment that the sun arose, dispelling the fog-mantle that enveloped the banks of the clear stream. The row was delightfully pleasant, as we pursued our way up the winding stream, the fresh morning air bearing us the grateful perfume of fruit and flowers on its cooling wings. After rowing about an hour, we turned

around a point, and before us lay the town. Anchored in the stream, lay our friend the Baltimorean, surrounded by boats filled with bartering natives. As we pulled alongside of her, I beheld beneath the shady rim of an enormous Panama hat a face weather-bronzed, yet ruddy with a good-humored expression that seemed familiar to me. AS I drew near, a smile of recognition settled upon it, that at once illumined the dimness of memory. It was my old school-mate and friend Will Allen.

“Thundering tritons! Will, is that you?” was my exclamation as I sprang over the low bulwarks and landed in the friendly embrace of his brawny arms.

“Well, Allen, you are the last fellow that I expected to meet in these cruising grounds,” said I, as soon as I could regain my breath, and the power of utterance which he had squeezed out of me.

“I suppose you are astonished to see me on salt-water, Ned, but I knew you were aboard the old Boston, and of course expected to cross your hawse somewhere in these latitudes. I owe you an apology for not paying my respects to you last night, but I had no time to stop. By the way, speaking of that, what did the Frenchmen say at my not answering their salute?”

“Why, they are going to catch and keelhaul you if you try to come out; so, you bad better stay in port till they break up and clear out.”

“Well, now, don’t I wish they may do it, all but the catching part! Why, confound the soup-drinking lubbers, I hav’n’t shown them half what my little ‘ Nella,’ can do yet. I’ll bet my eyes to a bucket of tar that I go out as I came in, with my colours flying, looking them right in the teeth.”

“ You had better be careful, Will; they are on the look-out for you : but where is your long-tom that you had mounted on a pivot yesterday ?” said I, looking in vain for the gun.

“ There it lies on the forecastle, alongside the heel of the bowsprit; it’s only a pine log, shaped like a gun and painted yellow. I thought American naval officers had better eyes than to take a log of wood for a bona-fide barker.”

“You made a good imitation, Will; but where are your marines ?”

“ Oh!—the sogers ? I threw them overboard on the bar, for the benefit of the Frenchmen!”

“ Threw them overboard! Why, what do you mean ?”

“Why, I mean just what I say ; that I threw a dozen bundles of straw dressed up in red, yellow, and white flannel, overboard on the bar yesterday, for the special benefit of the Johnnies.”

“I understand you now. Will; your guns,

soldiers, and all, were quakers?”

“Precisely so, Ned. The Nella was stowed too full of dry goods, flour, and the like, to have any room for arms; and I trust more to her speed than my own valour. I have got my cargo in safe, and have sold it for a juvenile fortune; enough to enable me to get spliced to my old sweetheart, pretty Kate V -----, and settle down in Gotham for life. And as I have finished here, I am going out as soon as St. Antonio will send me a breeze; so look out for the homeward-bound the first norther that blows; as sure as it comes, I’ll run by the Frenchmen in spite of their threats.”

After spending a happy day and evening with my friend, in overhauling joint recollections of old times, I returned on board ship.

During several ensuing days we were employed in procuring wood and water, preparatory to continuing our cruise, and were nearly ready for sea, when the visits of the skipper to his barometer became frequent; and the most knowing of our forecastle oracles shrugged their shoulders coldly as they turned their eyes towards the mountain tops in the interior. The clerk of the weather was evidently brewing mischief. One of the most certain omens of an approaching gale on that coast is a singularly clear atmosphere. Distant hills, seen at no other time, show their blue peaks plainly; thus forewarning the mariner to be ready to cut and run. We, as well as our French

neighbours, commenced preparing for it by sending down our light spars, housing top-gallant masts, close-reefing topsails and courses, and re-furling them snugly to the yards, intending if possible to “ lay it out” at anchor.

Night came on, and as the sun gradually descended behind a gathering bank of black clouds in the west, the wind increased, beginning to pipe the sailor’s warning in its loudest key. The ground-swell rose very high, causing us to labour heavily, and to pitch bows-under into it. The distant thunder began to echo the hoarse moaning gale, and lightning played fitfully through the flying clouds. “This is the very night for such a dare-devil as Will Allen,” said I, as I hurried on deck, enveloped in the folds of my storm-jacket, with my sou-wester lashed on my head. The thought had barely passed through my mind, when the look-out on the night-heads sang out “Sail ho!”

“Where away is she!” said I, straining my eye-sight in the gloom.

“Right ahead, sir. I believe it’s that clipper that tricked the Johnnies the other day, trying to come out over the bar.”

“Great God, she’ll be lost!” said I, as I caught a glimpse of her struggling through the heavy range of breakers that ran mountains high entirely across the bar one moment hidden in their tumultuous boiling* the next, seeming to leap high above their

snowy crests. Oh! it was beautiful; grandly, sublimely, terrifically beautiful! As the lightning flash illuminated the scene, the eye in one hurried glance would cover the high, rolling breakers, tinged with the prismatic hues of the rainbow, that seemed to leap madly up from the quicksand bar; the gallant and beautiful vessel rushing swiftly through the flashing waters, her spars bowing to the full strength of the storm-king's breath, her sails white as the cloud-spot whence the lightning bursts forth; her crew hurriedly flying from one post to another, as their varied duties required, in the dread time of danger.

Again the the lightning-cloud closes, and the imagination is left to picture the scene from the wild uproar of warring elements. Once more the ragged rays of lurid light flash forth; the vessel has passed the bar in safety; here she comes, right down in our midst! The gale had increased to a height that rendered our anchorage unsafe, and all together, French and American, were obliged to slip and scud.

The ire of the Frenchmen was aroused. It was galling to their pride to see a little Yankee clipper pass into a blockaded ports in fair weather, under their very port-holes, but doubly galling to see the audacious craft again laugh at them, and defy their power in the teeth of a hurricane. As the Nella came on, the French ships beat to quarters, determined, as one of their officers afterwards told roe, to sink her. We were now all in a huddle, driving out to sea before the gale. As the treacherous lightning betrayed the position of the gallant Allen, the French opened a rapid fire upon him, but they were too nervous to do any harm; their shot flew wide, the quick flash of light hardly enabling them to take an aim, which the succeeding darkness would set entirely at fault. On, on we sped before the whistling blast, amid the roar of the hurricane, the loud-booming cannon, the lightning's glare, and the red flashing of the guns; but the Nella had the heels of us. Soon even the far-reaching storm-light failed to discover her situation; she had run the blockade, in and out, in perfect safety.

CRUISINGS, AFLOAT AND ASHORE:
FROM THE PRIVATE LOG OF NED
BUNTLINE [PSEUD.] SKETCHES OF
LAND AND SEA, HUMOROUS AND
PATHETIC, TRAGICAL AND COMICAL

Author Ned Buntline

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