



Illustrated by

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WAR had not actually been declared. Indeed, there were a few who still professed to believe that the differences might even now be arranged without the shedding of blood.

There is no need to enter into the rights and wrongs of the quarrel. It had begun in an alleged act of disrespect on the part of the people of Vandolia towards the Prince (hereditary) of Pegrin. This Prince Leopold, it will be remembered, had been the accepted *fiancé* of the pretty daughter of King Guy of Vandolia, who, for her own part, had other views and intentions with regard to the disposal of her fair hand, the people of her native country siding strongly with her in the matter and against the King her father and the Prince of Pegrin, the suitor accepted by him. Thus it was that when the Prince visited the Vandolian Court, on invitation, of course, he had the misfortune to be hooted at in the streets and to be called many offensive names, and even, it is said, to be made the target for a discharge of eggs of indifferent quality.

This unhappy incident led to diplomatic representations, and though apologies were offered, these did not appear to be tendered with all the humility and sincerity considered requisite by the outraged Pegrimese.

Misunderstandings followed. Bitter correspondence occupied the wires for a few days. Then Pegrin complicated matters by suddenly

demanding the settlement of a certain old-standing claim for compensation in a fishery dispute, and presented an ultimatum.

At the same time came news which greatly disquieted the brave Vandolians, who saw in this latest telegram from St. Louis, the Pegrimese capital, indication of coming disaster and, it might be, ruin.

As all the world is well aware, both Vandolia and Pegrin are South Pacific States of little importance to anyone but their own rulers and populations. Geographically their respective positions are, indeed, to be found upon a good map, if it be a fairly large one; but neither in territorial area nor in available revenue is either State so considerable as to be a matter of much interest to the rest of the world.

The surprising news telegraphed most unexpectedly from St. Louis to Vando had nothing less than this, that Pegrin had purchased a first class battleship, in good condition, from the United States, who, having settled matters with Spain, with some assistance from this very vessel, the *Acteon*, were now selling off their old stock.

"Why, good Heavens!" exclaimed the Prime Minister at Vando, when this terrible telegram was read out to him, "where did they get the money from? They have no credit in New York, no more than we have!"

"The rascals must have negotiated a loan somewhere!" said the pale, scared clerk who had brought in the message. "I thought there must be something in the air, their conduct has of late been so very aggressive."

"I'm afraid you are right," said the Minister. "We could have held them with our fleet, but for this, and they knew it; now——"

Venuzzia did not finish his speech; natural emotions choked his utterance.

Vandolia's fleet could certainly, as he declared, have accounted for that of Pegrim as it had existed up to this day; for as against the obsolete cruiser and two dangerous gunboats possessed by Pegrim there lay in Vandolia's principal harbour a fine old battleship, the *Monopole* (much out of date, of course, and in ill repair, but fairly seaworthy and with two enormous turrets, each provided with a stupendous gun); and besides the *Monopole* there were two torpedo boats, one of which had lost its torpedo tube and could therefore only be of use for the purpose of terrifying the enemy; while over and above these splendid vessels there were two which the Minister of Marine was accustomed to designate "third class cruisers." But, unfortunately, of these one was without engines, and the other was used as a hospital and prison, and was no more ready for a sudden naval campaign than its sister ship.

Naturally, all things considered, this sudden and unexpected purchase by the rival State of a battleship of proved efficiency appeared to Venuzzia, Prime Minister of Vandolia, like the first stroke of impending doom.

The war, if it came—as it surely must—to war, would be fought upon the high seas. Neither State possessed an army, if we except a militia regiment or so, employed more for the purpose of police duty than anything else. Soldiers would be useless in a Vando-Pegrimese war, for this reason, that between the frontiers of Vandolia and Pegrim there lies a third and very much larger State, but for which geographical and providential fact

the two smaller States would long since have annihilated one another like the famous cats of Kilkenny. The rulers of this third State, Campania, had, moreover, made it a matter of full knowledge to both parties concerned, that if either should request Campania to allow its troops to march through her territory in order to fly at the throat of the other, Campania would see them—well, in diplomatic language, Campania would "withhold her consent."

So, then, the war, if to war it should come between them, must be fought upon the high seas, and thus it was that Vandolia found herself suddenly confronted by a problem. On the one hand was the ultimatum of Pegrim, requiring satisfac-



"His Majesty dining quietly with his family."

tion for the fishery dispute; on the other hand lay war; and war, with the *Actæon* ready to sail out of harbour, fully armed and manned, would be practically over as soon as begun.

"We cannot possibly recede from our position!" said poor Venuzzia; "the honour of the nation demands that we should refuse to pay this million of dollars."

"We haven't the money, or anything like it," added the Minister of Finance.

"The ultimatum expires the day after to-morrow, at 7 p.m.," said Venuzzia. "I see

no way out of the difficulty ; it is an *impasse* ; we must inform his Majesty and learn his views upon the matter."

So to the King's palace the Cabinet repaired, and there they found his Majesty dining quietly with his family, which consisted of the Queen and his charming daughter, Princess Angela ; there was also a guest present, a German princeling, Otto von Elberhauser, a gay and gallant young man, but not at present in great favour with the King, because it was for this very suitor's sake that Angela, his daughter, had elevated her nose at the Prince of Pegrim, thus indirectly causing the political deadlock of the present moment.

The communication which Venuzzia had to make to the royal party naturally threw the family circle into a state of gloom bordering upon despair.

"We are lost !" said the Queen, weeping into her lace handkerchief.

"Yes—we are ruined—undone !" echoed his Majesty. "Oh, Angela. . . ."

To the surprise of all present Prince Otto von Elberhauser here suddenly interposed.

"Not a bit of it, your Majesty," he exclaimed quite bracingly ; "you are very far from ruined. War is not yet declared ; there are still forty-seven hours before us ; in that period much may be done !"

Prince Otto actually laughed, a circumstance which filled all present (excepting Princess Angela) with horror. It seemed a shocking thing that this person—practically the first cause of all the trouble at present confronting the State—should behave in a light and unseemly, nay, frivolous manner in the face of imminent disaster to those who were his hosts and upon whom he had himself brought this trouble.

"Does your Highness not discern," said the King gravely, but with perfect courtesy, "that these Pegrimese are minded to ruin us ? It is, as Venuzzia declares, an *impasse*. Our exchequer is not overflowing ; we cannot pay their fishery claim if we would. Therefore they will declare war upon us in, as you rightly calculate, about forty-seven hours. Forty-seven hours may, in certain circumstances, be regarded as a considerable period of time ; for us it is as useless as a single half hour, for we can accomplish no more towards safeguarding our country in two days than we could accomplish in two minutes. We can neither build nor procure a battleship in forty-seven hours."

"With your Majesty's pardon," smiled Otto, "that is the very point upon which I

venture to differ from your Majesty. I see no reason why we should not procure a battleship within the time stated."

King, Queen, and Cabinet gaped upon one another in bewildered silence. Was this man perpetrating a heartless and most ill-timed jest ? What could he mean ? Was he mad, or a fool ?

"His Highness jests !" murmured Venuzzia. "Battleships are not to be picked up on the high seas for the asking, neither is there any harbour within a day's sail, or two days' sail, where such a vessel could at this moment be purchased by us ; and if there were, there is first the treasure to be found, and—"

"His Excellence will pardon me," said Otto, "but he is wrong in his premises. I know of a battleship, as fine and magnificent a vessel as he would desire to see, and this battleship may be procured without money and within the specified period, for she rides at anchor at this moment well within a twenty-four hours' sail, waiting, if I may say so, for us to lay claim to her."

Venuzzia glanced at his peers and at the King. Then his eyes returned to the face of Otto and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not follow his Highness !" he murmured.

"Then I will explain," laughed Otto. "The name of the harbour I refer to is St. Louis, and the vessel is the *Acteon*."

Had a bomb fallen in the midst of the party (to use a hackneyed expression) it could not have produced more amazement than Otto's words.

"How ?—when ?—I do not comprehend," muttered the old King. And Venuzzia sat with open mouth and wide eyes staring at Prince Otto and at his colleagues, but saying nothing.

"It is perfectly simple," said the German. "Here is an ultimatum ; good. At 7 p.m. the day after to-morrow, this ultimatum, if still disregarded by us, becomes, *ipso facto*, a declaration of war ; good again. At 7.15 of that evening Vandolia shall make the first move in the newly declared war, and that move will be the capture of the *Acteon* by a boat's crew of armed men, of whom I trust to be allowed to be one."

"But——" began Venuzzia, and remained silent, his mouth still open, but no sound coming therefrom.

"But," echoed one or two others of the King's bewildered advisers, "a boat's crew to seize a battleship ? It is madness—it is impossible !"

"By no means," said Otto cordially. "Believe me that I speak upon particular knowledge. See, I have received a letter."

The Prince produced an envelope as he spoke, from which he drew a letter, which he laid upon the table.

"It is a letter from a friend in St. Louis," he explained. "My friend is the principal banker in the Pegrin capital. He bids me warn my kind hosts in Vandolia. 'They should be advised,' he writes, 'to accede to the terms of his Pegrinese Highness. As the friend of the Court, you would deal well by the King to counsel him to this effect, for the purchase of the *Acteon* is, in fact, a supreme act of policy which has laid the Vandolian power at our feet. Better to pay or promise the million dollars than to see every maritime city that his Majesty possesses laid in ruins. In confidence, I may tell you that within four hours of the declaration of war—that is, at eleven o'clock of the night of Wednesday—the *Acteon* will sail out upon her mission of devastation. Her triumph over the weakness of Vandolian resistance is certain. The Pegrinese intend to celebrate their victory beforehand, so sure are they, and justly, of their success. There is to be a great national banquet on the evening of Wednesday, when the officers and crew of the *Acteon* are to be the chief guests, and when they will be toasted as though already the conquering heroes which, since nothing can prevent it, they will prove within a short space of time. Oxen will be roasted whole; wine is to flow freely for all—etc., etc. From this you will realise how great, and withal how legitimate, is the confidence of the Pegrinese people in the strength of their cause, or—if you prefer it—of the armaments of the *Acteon*. Therefore, I say, as the friend of the Court of Vandolia, counsel them, if you can, to timely submission.'" Prince Otto folded his letter and pocketed it. "That is the particular information," he ended. "The question is, dare you act upon it? Of course, with a crew of some six or seven hundred men, the vessel is not likely to be left absolutely empty. There must be left on board a few at least. Steam will have to be got up by these while the others feast ashore, for at eleven the *Acteon* is due to sail."

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The banquet on the following Wednesday evening was a grand success. It was a warm autumn evening, though somewhat dark, but those who were assembled at the *fête* in the

public park could plainly distinguish the lines of the magnificent battleship lying nearly a mile out in the bay, for she was decorated gaudily with Chinese lanterns, and stood out—an edifice of twinkling light—against the blackness of the sky and water.

The great ship had been toasted a thousand times by individual banqueters and by groups of excited admirers. If a vessel can feel proud and flattered, she must surely have spent a royal evening, for every throat hailed her as defender and hero, as the country's darling and pride, as the saviour of the honour of the nation, and so on. Each banqueter awaited the supreme moment of national joy and triumph, when, at ten o'clock, the nation would salute the embodiment of its power—the pledge of imminent victory—with the discharge of a great many guns and rockets, which demonstration would just precede the embarkation of the crew, and be the signal for the break-up of the happy national gathering.

Officers and crew were preparing to depart. They pledged, in the last glasses of wine, their relatives, their lovers. It was time to begin their farewells, for in five minutes up would go the rockets and bang would go the guns, and then—away to battle and to glory! The partings would not be for long. In a couple of days Vandolia should be smoking in ashes, and within a week the *Acteon* would be back in harbour, her mission of destruction accomplished.

And now the psychical moment had arrived.

With a sudden startling swish and a great whirr up went the first rocket—the signal for the grand national salute.

Bang went the guns from the two small forts, one on each side of the harbour, answering one another. It was a very fine effect, and with the discharge of rockets well kept up in the foreground made altogether a notable demonstration, though undoubtedly a noisy one for sensitive ears. While this grand national salute was still in progress, the searchlight was suddenly switched on by the *Acteon*, and, sweeping up and down the sea-front, added enormously to the general effect of light and brilliance, as well as to the enthusiasm of the people, who yelled their delight at full lung power.

"That searchlight is a good idea," said the young Prince of Pegrin (the rejected swain of Princess Angela), who sat at table with Petrucchi, captain of the *Acteon*, on his left.

Petrucchi said nothing; he bowed. The

thing was a surprise to him; he did not quite understand why it had been done, for no orders had been left as to the searchlight. He agreed with the Prince, however, that the idea was a good one, and felt somewhat

newspapers had made it their business to educate the people on this point.

"That must have been the nine-inch!" exclaimed the Prince. "What a terrific discharge! And did you observe the disturbance of the air above us? Why, it might have been a shell flying overhead!"

Captain Petrucchi had risen in his place.

"What the dickens——" he exclaimed, forgetting in his agitation that he was in the presence of royalty—"what the dickens is young Martinsen about?"

He did not say that a shell had



"The searchlight was suddenly switched on."

grateful towards the young officer left in charge of the ship for having thought of it.

Suddenly, during a lull in the din of salutation from fort and sea-front, the very loud discharge of a big gun from on board the *Acteon* startled for an instant the assembled crowd, but was quickly greeted with a tremendous cheer.

"Aha! she is replying to our salutes!" cried the delighted inhabitants. "Good old *Acteon*—what a gun, eh? Only think of poor Vandolia peppered by our little nine-inch with the full charge in her—eh?—what?"

All Pegrin was thoroughly acquainted with the armament of the *Acteon*; the

actually flown over the heads of the feasters, but he knew it.

Bang went the salutes once more, and crash!—there followed a second discharge from the *Acteon*. This time a very remark-

able thing happened. The Admiralty building, looking out upon the grand sea-front of St. Louis, was a fine, ornate structure, quite new. A gigantic figure of Neptune ornamented the centre of the huge Doric porch. The *Actæon's* searchlight had illuminated this portion of the building with a blaze of radiance, as though calling attention to the fact that this day Pegrin, as mistress of the ocean—in so far, that is, as concerned her own share of it and that of Vandolia—claimed, henceforward, once and for ever, the special protection of the sea-god.

This delicate poetical allusion had been observed and appreciated by the people, whom it greatly delighted.

But at the second discharge of the *Actæon's* big gun it

was seen, to the horror of all, that where, a moment before, great Neptune had surmounted the Doric porch, which was his footstool, there was now neither statue nor porch, but instead a heap of ruined masonry from which arose clouds of dust and smoke.



“ ‘Arrest him!’ shrieked the Prince.”

“ ‘Good Heavens!’” cried one and all, “ ‘there has been a terrible accident! The *Actæon's* gun was loaded, unknown to the gunners, with shell cartridge!’”

The captain, Petrucchi, was in despair; he stood staring at the ruin, tearing his hair, weeping, and groaning.

“ ‘He has gone mad! Martinsen has gone mad!’” he cried; and forthwith,

without greeting to prince or peer, he dashed away towards the jetty, shouting aloud for his officers to follow him. "Lieutenant Martinsen," he shouted, "whom I left in charge of the ship, has gone mad, and is bombarding the town!"

As to the bombardment, there was not much doubt of that, though, fortunately, no shells were directed among the teeming masses of the population, the feasters, and the spectators. Had Martinsen sent a shell or two among the crowd, that would have been disaster indeed! The two forts, however, were blown to pieces very quickly, and there was a sudden end to the saluting.

Then the people realised that something had gone seriously wrong on board the *Actæon*, and though she had now ceased firing, they stood no longer in crowds, but dispersed hither and thither, and discussed the situation in small groups, shivering and wondering, and watching the captain's cutter as it neared the great vessel which had suddenly behaved itself in so unseemly and surprising a fashion.

They saw the small boat reach the battleship, and watched the officers go aboard. Presently the cutter returned to the harbour, and there stepped ashore a stranger, who asked to be taken to the Prince of Pegrim.

The Prince was himself close to the landing-stage and was soon in conversation with the stranger, who, to his amazement, promptly bade the city surrender to *force majeure*, on pain of being blown to matchwood by the guns of his Majesty's ship *Actæon*.

"By our own ship?" exclaimed the Prince. "What do you mean, sir?—Are you the mad Lieutenant Martinsen?"

"Pardon, Highness," said the other; "I am not Martinsen; neither is the *Actæon* any longer an item in your navy-list; she is already our prize of war; in the name of his Vandolian Majesty we captured the ship at 7.15 this evening, shortly after the declaration of war."

"Arrest him!" shrieked the Prince. But the stranger quickly flashed a lantern over his head, once, twice, and thrice. Instantly a gun from the big ship roared out in response to the signal. There was a cloud of dust and stones, and another bit of the Admiralty lay in ruins.

"*Donner und Blitzen-wetter!*" cried the Prince, who always preferred to swear in German. "We are lost!"

"Yes," said Otto, "you are lost, Highness; you had better give the necessary orders and come aboard at once with the members of your Cabinet."

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The fishery dispute was settled presently, but not in the manner expected by his Pegrimese Majesty. On the contrary, the Vandolian treasury was the richer for the arrangement by the comfortable sum of two million dollars, and his own the poorer by exactly that sum. The marriage of Princess Angela was settled also, and settled in perfect accord with the ideas of Prince Otto and of the charming Princess herself.

As for that fine ship, the *Actæon*, she floats at this moment in the pretty Vandolian harbour of Aqua-Pura, the pride and the delight of the nation that possesses her, and in her the mastery of the high seas—those, at least, which wash the shores of their own native country and of Pegrim, their natural enemy.

