

The Privateer Story

by William J. Hopkins

Once upon a time there was a wide river that ran into the ocean, and beside it was a little city. And in that city was a wharf where great ships came from far countries. And a narrow road led down a very steep hill to that wharf, and anybody that wanted to go to the wharf had to go down the steep hill on the narrow road, for there wasn't any other way. And because ships had come there for a great many years and all the sailors and all the captains and all the men who had business with the ships had to go on that narrow road, the flagstones that made the sidewalk were much worn. That was a great many years ago.

That wharf was Captain Jonathan's and Captain Jacob's and they owned the ships that sailed from it; and, after their ships had been sailing from that wharf in the little city for a good many years, they changed their office to Boston. After that, their ships sailed from a wharf in Boston.

Once, in the year 1807, the brig *Industry* sailed from Boston for far countries with Captain Sol as her captain. There was, at that time, a great war between France and Spain, on one side, and England and some other countries, on the other side; but the English ships had to do almost all the fighting, for their side, that was done on the ocean. And there were a good many English and French and Spanish privateers sailing about, seeing how much harm they could do to the ships that belonged to the other side.

A privateer was a vessel that was fitted out by private persons, just as if Captain Jonathan and Captain Jacob had made up their minds that the *Industry* should be a privateer, if the United States was at war. And they would fit her out with guns and swords and cutlasses, and they would get a crew for her, and they would ask the government if she could be a privateer. And the government would probably have said that she could, and they would have sent Captain Jonathan and Captain Jacob some papers, called "letters of marque and reprisal," which said that the *Industry* was a United States privateer and that she could take ships as prizes and sell them. Governments do not do that, now, and a privateer is no better than a pirate; but they all did it a hundred years ago.

Captain Sol had thought about it a great deal, for privateers weren't very particular what ships they captured; and he wondered whether he ought to carry a whole lot of guns. He always had some guns on the ship, but not enough to make a fight with, if the other vessel had a whole lot, as privateers always did. But, finally, he decided that he had better not, or he might be taken for a pirate. For his country wasn't at war and, of course, he hadn't any papers. Pirates that are captured are usually short lived. So he had sailed away without any guns worth mentioning.

The *Industry* sailed along over the ocean for about two weeks and nothing much happened, and she wasn't so very far from the coast of Spain; perhaps she was three or four hundred miles away.

For, on that voyage, she was bound to Leghorn, first, and then she was going to Java and Manila. And, in the middle of the forenoon of that day, the lookout in the crosstrees of the *Industry* reported a sail heading directly for them.

Captain Sol was worried about it and asked the sailor about the rig of the vessel. And the sailor said that he couldn't tell what her rig was because he couldn't see any more than her upper sails, and not

much of them; but she seemed to be a brig, and he thought she was fast, by the way she was rising. He thought he should be able to see her hull in less than half an hour.

Captain Sol said a bad word and took his glass and went up to the crosstrees himself. But he couldn't see enough, there, so he went on, up the mast. And he rested the glass against the rigging and looked. It took him a long time to see anything, the rigging jumped around so; but at last he managed to see. And he came down quickly and spoke to the man at the wheel, who looked at him as if he expected some orders.

"Keep her as she goes," he said. "It won't do any good to try to run away from that vessel. She can sail three feet to our two. And, whoever she is, she has no business with us, anyway."

But Captain Sol knew that it would make very little difference whether she had any right to stop them or not. If her captain wanted to he would. And the mates knew that, and the sailors knew it. So Captain Sol ordered one of the sailors to hoist the United States flag, and he kept on.

The brig kept rising fast and, in a short time, they could see her hull from the deck of the *Industry*. They saw that she was a Spanish privateer; and she hoisted the Spanish flag and kept on. And, pretty soon, she was nearly abreast of the *Industry*; and she turned a little, and there was a little puff of smoke from her side, and the sound of the report came over the water a second or two later.

That was a signal for the *Industry* to stop. But the *Industry* seemed to have grown deaf, and she didn't stop, and no sailor made a move to touch a rope. And the Spanish brig seemed to be a little angry, and she turned again and there was a bigger puff of smoke from her side and a cannon ball came skipping across the water, ahead of the *Industry*. That was a hint that she had better stop, if she knew what was good for her. But Captain Sol only had another United States flag hoisted, and it was a bigger flag than the first one.

When the Spanish brig saw that the *Industry* wasn't going to stop, she seemed to get very angry. There was another puff of smoke from her side, and a solid shot tore through one of the sails of the *Industry*, leaving a ragged hole.

"Well," said Captain Sol, "she's begun to talk. I guess we may as well heave to."

So he had the sailors fix the sails so that the ship wouldn't go ahead. But the sailors worked slowly, and the mates didn't hurry them, either.

And, in a few minutes, a boat put off from the Spanish brig, and the boat was filled with men. They had a pretty long way to row because Captain Sol hadn't stopped when he was asked to. But, after a while, they were at the side. The officer in the Spanish boat was very much excited and talked very fast. He wanted Captain Sol to put a gangway or a ladder over the side, so that he could get on board easily.

But Captain Sol winked at the mate and made believe that he didn't understand.

"No compreeny," he said, leaning over the side. For he thought that they could come aboard any way they were able. He had had the ship stopped for them.

"Donkey!" said the officer, in Spanish. And he scrambled up, followed by ten of his men. The

other men stayed in the boat.

And Captain Sol was very polite, but he couldn't talk Spanish and he made believe he couldn't understand what was said. Really, he knew enough Spanish to be able to understand what the officer said, but he couldn't speak Spanish. After a while, the officer tried French, but Captain Sol made believe that he couldn't understand that, either, and he said, in English, that he was very sorry that he didn't have any Frenchmen in the crew. So the officer gave up trying to make Captain Sol understand.

And he made the crew of the *Industry* go in the boat, but he left Captain Sol and the mates, and ten men for a prize crew. And he told Captain Sol that he was to take the ship to Cadiz. He kept saying that name over and over.

Captain Sol knew that it would be of no use to resist, and he didn't. And the crew bade him good bye, and the boat was rowed away. Then his new Spanish crew fixed the sails so that the ship would go ahead. He thought they were pretty clumsy about it, but he didn't say anything. And the *Industry* sailed away towards Cadiz, and the Spanish brig turned to the north.

They sailed all the rest of that day towards the coast of Spain, which was on their way to Leghorn, anyway. Captain Sol kept his eyes open, for he hadn't given up hoping for a chance to get the ship back again; but the chance didn't seem very good, with only the two mates and himself against the ten Spaniards. And, that night, there must have been something the matter with the watch that the Spaniards kept, for, when there was light enough to see, in the morning, there was a big English warship close to them. She was big enough to swallow the *Industry* whole and never to know the difference. Captain Sol laughed right out loud when the Spaniards first saw her; he had known about her nearly half the night.

The Spaniards never once thought of fighting, but surrendered right off. It would have been very foolish for them to fight, for they were only ten men, in a ship that wasn't fitted for fighting; and the English ship was a big ship fitted up on purpose to fight, and she had a crew of three or four hundred men.

So a boat soon put off from the English ship, with sailors in it, and came to the side of the *Industry*. And Captain Sol was hurrying to put a ladder over, so that the English officer could come up without any trouble. But the officer didn't wait for any ladder; he and his men swarmed up the side like flies. And Captain Sol met the officer, and he laughed and said that he was glad to see him. And the officer smiled and wondered why that was, and he shook hands with Captain Sol; and then Captain Sol and the officer went into the cabin together. And Captain Sol told the officer about the Spanish privateer.

When the officer had heard the story he said it was hard luck, but, as the vessel was a Spanish prize, he should have to take her. He thought that the Admiralty court would fix that matter all right. And Captain Sol sighed and said that he hoped so, but he didn't know much about Admiralty courts. He had understood that American owners were apt to get the worst of it. And then Captain Sol and the officer had a glass of wine together, and it was so good that they each had another glass; and then they went on deck.

The officer bundled the Spaniards into the boat and left ten Englishmen to take their places, apologizing to Captain Sol for leaving him so short-handed. The *Industry* generally had a crew of twenty-five or thirty men. Then the officer got into the boat and rowed away. Captain Sol was to take

the *Industry* to Gibraltar, which was right on the way to Leghorn, too. And it was pretty near, so that he ought to get there the next day.

Then Captain Sol had an idea. He served out a little rum, first, and he told the crew that if nothing happened he would take the ship straight to Gibraltar. But the Spaniards were pretty thick between where they were and Gibraltar, so he thought he would ask them a question. If they should be taken by the Spaniards again, and the crew should be left on board, would they agree to sign as his crew, for a voyage to Leghorn and other ports?

When the English sailors heard that, some of them began to grin; and they talked together for a little while, and then they said that they would agree to do as Captain Sol had said. And Captain Sol was pleased, and he served out another helping of rum all around. The sailors called it grog.

Sure enough, they were captured again, the next morning, before they had got within sight of Gibraltar; and the Spanish ship put on board the *Industry* a prize crew of nine men. But she left the English crew on board, for she had already taken several other prizes; and she had put other prize crews on board of those prizes, and she had their crews as prisoners. And her captain was afraid to have more prisoners because he would have nearly as many prisoners as he had men left in his crew. Then the Spanish ship told Captain Sol to steer for Algiers, and she sailed away about her business.

Captain Sol did as he was told and steered for Algiers. But, in the night of that day, the two mates went, while the Spanish crew weren't looking, and they set free the Englishmen and gave them a paper to sign. That paper made them Captain Sol's sailors. And then they gave each man pistols and a cutlass, and the first mate took half of the Englishmen and went to the fore-castle, where four men of the Spanish crew were sleeping; and the second mate took the other five Englishmen, and he went on deck, where the other five men of the Spanish crew were on watch, but he hid his Englishmen. And Captain Sol was walking back and forth on the quarter deck, and suddenly he began to whistle softly. And all the Englishmen sprang out, and they had that Spanish crew captured before they knew what had happened. But they didn't have to hurt anybody, they captured them so quickly.

Then Captain Sol changed the course of the *Industry* so that she was heading for Leghorn, and he got to Leghorn in due time; but he had some trouble in getting rid of his Spanish prisoners.

And nobody ever knew whether Captain Sol meant to be captured by the Spaniards, that last time, or not.

And that's all.

Source:

Hopkins, William J. "The Privateer Story." *The Sandman: His Sea Stories*. Chicago: Cadmua Books E.M. Hale and Company, 1908. 270 – 290. Electronic.