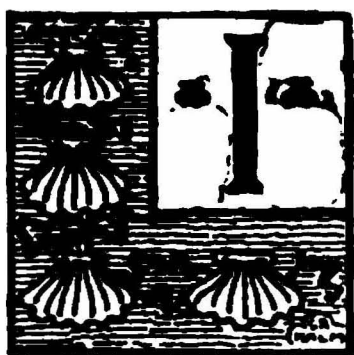


THE FLYING SQUADRON*

A Story of the Black Republic

BY E. & H. HERON



IT'S an awkward business, take it how you will," Allansford was saying. "I've no belief in black republics; on the other hand, if the States do annex, they'll annex another big factor to that unmentionable trouble, the nigger question." I had formulated a simple and decisive policy to be pursued by the United States anent Cuba, and Allansford had subsequently pointed out with all the delicacy of intimate friendship that cocksureness was the result of an unblessed ignorance.

"But you surely will own that things could not have been allowed to go as they have been doing in Cuba?" I replied.

"I'm free to own that. It sounds fair enough to hear a Spaniard say the States have no call to shove a hand into his particular fish-tub. But it's not the States as the States that are acting; it's the States in the character of the nearest civilized power doing police-work, the police-work you hear so much about in Europe with regard to Turkish affairs. Given the Cuban is six of one and the Spaniard half-a-dozen of the other, still it isn't in nature to stand by and watch crowds of women and children die of dirt, disease and famine because two sets of mottled scoundrels choose to carry on a lingering guerilla warfare. The neutrals suffer, but, on the whole, the other johnnies enjoy themselves."

"The States must get something for their trouble," I said. "No nation ever did anything without a 'quid pro quo'—nor ever will."

"There will be no difficulty about that; American police are accustomed to collect their own wages," returned Allansford.

*From the "Cornhill Magazine."

"I very much hope the States will see their way to annexation, however, because there is only one other way out of that coil, and I've no special desire to see the foundation of another republic on the ground-plan of Cuba's eastern neighbor."

Allansford's piazza is the best place in Yellowtown, for there it is always—for Yellowtown—cool. In England the hour would have been the hour of afternoon tea. In Yellowtown we had just arisen from a late siesta. Allansford was sitting on the threshold of the piazza, half on and half off the dark polished floor of the big darkened room. Outside the cliff fell six hundred feet to the waters of the Pacific, which inshore were pale and blue, but away beyond the thundering bar they heaved westwards in spreading patches of violet.

Allansford was amusing himself with a grotesque catapult, which may have been a weapon used by the aboriginal inhabitants of those parts; at any rate, it looked pre-historic. With this he fired at the turkey-buzzards perched on the many-colored roofs of the corrugated-iron sheds in which the niggers lived on the beach below. A nigger came out barefooted into the burning sand to see what was disturbing the scavengers, and catching sight of Allansford grinned and retired to his own galvanized oven again. It was Allansford's custom to tell the tally of the huts in which the yellow fever raged, evening by evening, just when the thick shoulder of the tropic night-cloud began to show itself above the horizon, and we smoked forlornly to be rid of mosquitoes, and argued to exhaustion for want of anything on earth to do.

"Now, I'll tell you what's the matter with Cuba," went on Allansford; "it's her position. She's not a beggar at the door, like Crete; she's more like a voice crying somewhere out in the night, and nobody's made it their business until now to get up and see what's the matter."

"We," I said largely, identifying myself for the moment with Europe, "would have given her guaranteed autonomy long ago."

Allansford laughed rather scornfully, I thought.

"Very likely, and made the usual bad job of it. Cuba has no Porfirio Diaz, not even a Juarez, or she would be free to-day. As it is, without a capable leader, Cuba would soon sink far below the level of the worst of the Central American republics."

"Below! Why below?"

“Because as soon as the war stopped the negro population would get the upper hand, and they’d start a sister republic to Hayti, with Haytian laws and a shiny black president. The whites in Cuba don’t see that yet, nor that their one chance of salvation lies by way of annexation—preferably to Mexico.”

The night drew on with a cooler breeze, and I rocked myself lazily, while the crickets, first one, then two, and then a dozen, set up their drowsy whirr.

“Those Haytians, now,” I said in the dusk, “they’re a bumptious crowd, I’ve heard.”

“Why, yes; once a nigger finds his head loose, he develops a burlesque ambition. Hayti once constituted itself into an empire, but it fell to pieces from natural causes. The Republic has an immense public debt, more or less repudiated; the currency is chiefly paper, and the greater part of that is forged. The history of Haytian politics would make incredible reading. Now it is not very generally known, but it’s a fact, that once upon a time the Haytian Republic saw fit to initiate a war against Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Norway and every other power, with the exception of England and the United States of America!

“There were no formalities observed, such as sending ultimatums or making declarations of war, and no shot was fired; consequently there were no reprisals. Indeed, it is doubtful whether Russia, Germany, France and the others ever knew of the peril which menaced them; they certainly did not do so until that peril had become a matter of merely historical interest. Norway, in the person of the Spaniard who happened to be acting as Norwegian consul at the time, may have had an inkling of it, because of the hostile intentions openly avowed during a whole afternoon against a Norwegian timber-ship that had come up from the Mexican Gulf. Also the war was to be a purely naval war, and was undertaken in much the same spirit that urges a young bull to battle by way of testing his new-gotten horns; the horns in the case of Hayti being represented by their recently acquired warship, the *Foudroyant*, then lying at anchor in the harbor of Port au Prince.

“The beginning of the trouble may be attributed to certain action taken by the British Government in Jamaica. They did several things which Hayti disapproved and disliked. So the Haytians said ‘Stop!’ but in her customary casual way England took no manner of notice, and went on as before. This

drove the republic to the consideration of definite measures. It immediately determined to become a naval power and cope with England on her own element. The prime mover in the matter was General Deloncle, a large negro in cotton-print trousers and a clerical hat. He was a general in the Republican army, and brimful of ambition. Also he was a logician and a Positivist.

“‘England,’ he said to the President, ‘she great big power—owns one hundred ships and one thousand jacktar. She make us do what she want until we own one-hunder-anone ships and one-thousan-anone jacktar! Then——’

“In this he merely stated the Haytian theory that the smaller number should always on principle run away. So it was that the republic set about becoming a first-class naval power with the ultimate idea of twisting England’s tail.

“Judged by the standard of some of the surrounding States, the prospect before them opened out into an encouraging and variegated vista of triumph. Venezuela at that time possessed, so they say, but three gunboats; one was without a boiler, another had no propeller, and the third not infrequently did duty—for a consideration—as lighter to British shipping.

“If the Haytians really meant business, there seemed no reason why they should not become the sea power of the Caribbean and cover themselves with glory of the most superior kind.

“Such was the notion which prompted them to purchase their first warship. A new tax was at once levied, and they raised a handsome sum, four-fifths of which went, as usual, to the State officials, and the remaining fifth was used to buy the nucleus of a navy. The Foudroyant, in the days before the President’s wife rechristened her, had been a tramp in the Gulf trade, taking the Progreso, Vera Cruz and Tampico route. She was a wooden ship, single screw, of about 1,500 tons gross register, and a speed—on paper—of ten knots, and she had originally been the Susan Wroxham, out of Cardiff. The Haytian Government bought her through her Vera Cruz agents, painted her white with a pink and pea-green strake and a Neapolitan-ice funnel—they are color-lovers in the Black Republic—clapped a cross-spar upon her mizzen-mast, and after a little gold-work about her prow launched her as a first-class cruiser of the Republic of Hayti. She carried a crew of eighty, and the only white men aboard were the four engineers.

“The step to be taken next could not be hastily decided upon; meanwhile the *Foudroyant* was utilized for saluting purposes. She was commanded, like everything else in Hayti, by a general. She took part in one review and knocked several yards of wharf into the harbor by loading up her big gun with ball in mistake for blank cartridge, and, in fact, taken altogether, was a source of real pride and self-gratulation to the Government.

“You must understand that Hayti is, above all things, military. She is the military republic, by far the most unconditionally military republic in the world. All the State departments are presided over by full generals. If you go ashore at Port au Prince and walk up the main street, a heavy percentage of the people you meet will be generals. So it was in the nature of things that the navy should be commanded by a general. And it happened to be the same man, Deloncle, who had inaugurated the spirited policy in connection with England.

“For some months he rested on his laurels, and tasted to the full the delightful distinction which his novel status conferred upon him. But by degrees the fickle public tired of their toy. There were changes in the Ministry, and the brand-newness of the popular sentiment about the warship was wearing off, so that Deloncle found himself sinking back into his old position of one general among many, instead of the sole and much-admired general of the navy; in fact, the army began to regain its old ascendancy over the imagination of the people, the reason probably being that there was a sameness about the tactics of the *Foudroyant*; she never did anything but steam round the harbor and fire salutes, while the army held reviews into which a certain amount of novelty could be thrown in the way of manœuvres and uniforms—especially uniforms.

“It struck Deloncle that the departure of the *Foudroyant* on a cruise in neighboring waters might revive the fading enthusiasm, the start to be celebrated by playing of bands and firing of cannon, and his return made into a sort of triumphal entry, when his grateful country could do no less than give a banquet in his honor, backed by public illuminations.

“He carried this through with success, and it produced an excellent effect for the time being. The warship made a number of comfortable little trips all within sight of land—quite a prolonged cruise can be made in those crowded seas without losing the land. But on one occasion they adventurously al-

tered their usual procedure and steamed clear. They steamed on and on, taking up tedious horizons, for some three days, till they did not know where they were, and the navigating colonel began to be vaguely suspicious that they had sailed out into some new and limitless ocean. At length, to every one's relief, a cloud of land appeared in the offing, which presently evolved itself into a little sun-scorched town, sitting on a cushion of green inside the sand-rim. They put in alongside the wharf and asked what day of the month it was, and after some further diplomatic questioning they discovered the name of the country they had arrived at. It was a comfort to find it to be Jamaica.

"In the course of a week, their confidence being restored, they paid a pilot to take them home again. After that they were regarded as local Nansens, and fêted accordingly. Next, however, some ill-advised person pointed out that fruit-boats ply almost daily between Hayti and Jamaica; but then a fruit-boat isn't a warship, and the irrelevancy of the criticism was obvious.

"Yet the effect of even this daring venture wore away, while the supremacy of the seas remained still a dream, and England went on making herself as obnoxious as ever. To add to this, Deloncle heard some very disquieting rumors. General Brutus Squadro, who happened to be his own specific rival, had gone one better in the bid for popularity. He had undertaken to add to the defenses of the island, and owing, as he put it, 'to the criminal indifference—or it might be incapacity—of the Ministry of Marine,' his chief design was to lay submarine mines in the harbor of Port au Prince, and so secure the capital from the dangers of foreign invasion.

"Deloncle saw at once that this was a bad business, for he knew that if ever he chanced to get into General Squadro's way, nothing could be more simple than the accidental discharge of a submarine mine, and there would be an end of Deloncle and his battleship. At first he could hit upon no way of counteracting Squadro's plot. Day by day Brutus grew in favor with the populace, who loved him for the plans he was making, fac-similes of which he caused to be published in colors, so that the people might know what he was doing and appreciate his patriotic labors.

"One evening Deloncle met Squadro in the harbor extension works.

“ ‘I give you a good evening, General,’ said Deloncle.

“ ‘I give you a most good evening, General,’ returned Squadro with even more dignity. ‘When the mines are finished, we shall sleep safe at Port au Prince.’

“ ‘But there is no war,’ said Deloncle sarcastically.

“ ‘There may be next week or next month,’ explained Squadro.

“They looked each other up and down, and Deloncle, who was six feet two, felt the courage swell in his heart. Squadro had given him just the hint he needed.

“That night he sent off an invitation to the President, asking him to dine on board the navy on the following evening. After the dinner was over, he took the President away into the after-cabin, and put in an urgent demand for active service.

“ ‘We hab navy,’ he said indignantly, ‘and she stay-at-’ome! What de use of stay-at-’ome navy?’

“The Haytians talk French of a sort, you know, and run their words into one another as negro races seem apt to do whatever tongue they adopt. I’m giving you a free translation.

“The President admitted that it was unfitting for a go-ahead state like theirs, which possessed so good a navy, to keep it chained up.

“ ‘England—she dam proud! We teach her a lesson!’ went on Deloncle. But the President shied at the idea of fighting England, and reminded Deloncle of the Bulldog.

“Some time previously an English man-of-war had visited Hayti about an indemnity, and left a considerable impression behind.

“ ‘Oah, yes; I remember de British Bulldog and de jacktars wid de hairy breasts. Oah, yes, I remember, and de debbil of a captain! De little man who get eberyting he want! But we will not yet attack de mercantile of England or de States.’

“Upon this the President asked what General Deloncle wished him to do.

“ ‘We will make war on all de oder nations, sah!’ Deloncle answered without any hesitation.

“He knew exactly what he wanted. It was a comprehensive scheme, and the possible fame touched the vanity of the President and made him warm to the idea, though some lingering doubt, induced by the recollection of the Bulldog, that war is a game at which more than one can play, still troubled him. But Deloncle was prepared to overwhelm all objections.

“ ‘Dis ship is de Flying-Squadron of de Republic of Hayti! You gib me sealed orders,’ he answered confidently. ‘It is always sealed orders in de navies. I fulfill dem, and afterwards I return!’

“The President being yet inclined to demur, Deloncle went into details.

“ ‘You write, “Destroy dis,” or “Sink dat,” and it is done! We are ready to fight anyt’ing in dis fine big steamer! Dis is de way. We sight de enemy, we fire across her bows—she lay to, haul down her flag, and I go aboard! Den we bring back prizes, and we will add dem to our navy list. Come-on-deck, sah!’

“The President was then given a further insight into Deloncle’s designs; but he had not much to gain personally by the affair, and his office to lose if it turned out badly, therefore he suggested that he should take the opinion of the Ministry before decided action.

“ ‘Oah, but most assuredly it is a t’ing for the sum-total of the Ministers to consult upon,’ agreed the other, who had no notion of hiding his light under a bushel. ‘But dat can be done ver’-soon. And den de world will hear of de Flying-Squadron of General Deloncle!’

“For many days Deloncle paraded the streets of Port au Prince, carrying the air of a man overloaded with an important mission. The Haytians, like all other niggers, are as full of curiosity as monkeys, and his movements were watched with immense interest. And when the proposal was laid before the Ministry in all its splendor, with the catchwords of ‘Flying-Squadron’ and ‘sealed-orders’ to inflame the national vain-gloriousness with the illusion of dabbling in affairs usually considered to be within the prerogative of the great powers only, it was unanimously conceded that the general of the navy had earned his keep. The President’s speech was set forth in placards on the following day. His views on the reasons for armament were natural, because he was an undiluted savage. A savage raises a fighting power for the purpose of making war, a civilized people in order to maintain peace. He alluded to the example of big, fat, commercial England, which he compared to a hive of bees, making the honey, which is gold. Her warships, her cruisers and her gunboats were hornets sent forth to prevent other people’s honey-making. The present expedition and the little war he advocated against Russia,

Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Norway and other second-rate nations was, so to speak, the thin end of the wedge. Hayti would increase and prosper, and by and by there would be a colored England in the Caribbean! As he ended, the black men around him, drunk with dreams of plunder and unlimited wealth, applauded to the echo.

"In the meanwhile Deloncle sat in his cabin on board the *Foudroyant* and awaited the coming of the sealed orders, playing European card games to pass the time with the major of the watch.

"When the orders actually came it was necessary to send for the chief engineer, because he could read. He was a thinnish hard-set man, hailing from Westward Ho, and he had no respect at all for his employers. When he came aft the 'sealed orders' were no longer sealed, but lying open on the table under the awning on the after-deck. The chief picked them up and began to read with wonder breaking out upon his face. Presently he said:

" 'So it's to be war—sanguinary war all round, and we're to do the fighting.'

"Deloncle signified that he was exactly right.

" 'But this document should not have been opened until we were out of sight of land,' said the chief. 'That's said expressly.'

" 'Yes; but de enemy has already come,' explained Deloncle, indicating a small steamer lying in the roads.

"She was flying the Norwegian flag and her pilot flag, but orders had been issued that no pilot was to go out to her, and her skipper was afraid to bring her in himself, not being regular on that route.

" 'She is there!' said Deloncle. 'We will make our first battle in de sight ob all!'

"The chief asked if they were to start next morning, hoping, perhaps, that saner counsels might by that time prevail. But Deloncle had the war-fever badly.

" 'We must be out ob de harbor before morning,' he replied. 'De orders, dey say, "Sail-at-once." You will remember dat dis is de Flying-Squadron ob Hayti! We must be ready to bombard de enemy at dawn!'

"By the time the fourth engineer had his harbor watch set the chief returned to the alley-way cabin with the extraordinary news.

“‘Are we going round the world and back like the Libertad of the Mexicans?’ inquired the second engineer, grinning.

“‘Bigger thing than that, my son,’ said the chief—manners were easy on the Foudroyant. ‘This condemned old tramp is the Flying Squadron of Hayti, and we’re going to offer battle to most of the navies of the world! That’s our lay. The sealed orders say, “Sinkez-vous! Arretez-vous everything you sight-o.” It’s rank suicide, that’s what it is.’

“But the engine-room staff refused to be dispirited, and rejoiced as one man at the chance of the fun, more especially as they very well knew the Foudroyant was not fit to fight a Dutch bumboat! The second engineer offered some suggestion of this kind.

“‘You’re right,’ said the chief, ‘right as you can be. We’ve two obsolete nine-pounders and that big German blunderbuss on deck. A rowboat with a governess and a child in it could take us, yet here we are prancing out to destruction to please a charcoal-skinned six-foot idiot! It makes me sick!’

“‘What are we likely to fall in with?’ answered the second gleefully. ‘West India Pacific boat coming back through the Yucatan Channel?’

“‘Barred! She’d sail under the Union Jack. Oh, no, we’ve fixed our prize. She’s that Norwegian timber-tramp that’s been signaling for a pilot the whole afternoon.’

“By eleven o’clock the Foudroyant’s engine-bell rang, and the single screw began to revolve slowly. The Flying Squadron had started on her mission of blood.

“Deloncle, standing on the bridge, felt himself an embryo Nelson. The waterways of the world lay before him, and the German-made gun aboard twinkled black and wet without its tarpaulin under the heavy dews, ready for action and loaded with everything available. A mile away the starboard light of the Norwegian glimmered green through the darkness. Silence lay on the black sea. Deloncle would have preferred daylight and acclamation, but he dwelt on the sensation the battle would cause in the morning among the onlookers ashore, and the welcome that would be given to him when he towed his shattered prize into the harbor, and was comforted.

“In the pride of his heart he had determined upon making the ship’s officers fetch the Foudroyant out of port without the aid usually lent by the local pilots. For this cause the Flying Squadron performed many strange antics underneath the stars,

but the providence of the drunkard and the fool befriended her, for after an hour or so she screamed into the outer night with no worse damage than knocking her bowsprit into splinters.

“Naturally she showed no lights. Deloncle understood that under similar circumstances line-of-battle ships never did show lights. War had already broken out at Hayti, for the Foudroyant was going to soil the dawn with gunpowder. Deloncle proposed to lie with banked fires near his prey, and commence hostilities with the first light.

“Now about a fortnight or so before this a Liverpool shipping firm had sent out a cargo-boat, called the Panama, to do commerce among the islands. Shortly after midnight, the second mate on the bridge of the Panama had picked up the Port au Prince lights, and the lookout had chanted the usual, ‘All’s well,’ after the quartermaster had struck eight bells. Of course, the Panama hadn’t the ghost of a notion that the Flying Squadron of Hayti was out on the war-trail, any more than the crowd on board the Foudroyant gave a thought to any incoming steamers they might get foul of owing to their strategical abandonment of lights. Under any circumstances, I understood, the Foudroyant always showed a fine disregard for the rule of the road. If she met a ship, she simply steered straight ahead till the other vessel got out of her way. This course was not altogether prompted by pride, but partly by necessity, for the Haytians are not good at nautical manœuvres.

“In the thick blackness of the night the warship slid through the water, but as she turned to make her westing the stem of the big cargo-boat caught her abaft the mainmast. The Foudroyant leaped, shuddered and ceased to move. Deloncle on the bridge saw the big gun break loose under the shock and charge back with a rattle followed by the crash of woodwork.

“Then a harsh voice roared in a choke of rage from the Panama asking who they were.

“The chief, knowing what had happened, got on deck as soon as he could. He found Deloncle calling on the Panama to surrender.

“On seeing the chief, he clasped him in his arms.

“‘Oah, it is glorious! It is magnificent. We ’ave rammed her!’ he yelled in ecstasy.

“The chief shook himself clear.

“‘Somebody’s rammed us, you hooting bradawl! Get out the boats, or we’ll see more glory than we bargained for in two

shakes! The collision's wrecked my engines; the sea's coming in like a sluice!

"Then he addressed himself to the mate on the Panama, who rudely intimated that he, the chief, must be drunk, or he'd have his lights showing, till the chief asked him to keep his blackguarding till later, as the Foudroyant was settling down by the stern. Then a gruff order was given to lower away and save as many as possible.

"The Liverpool lifeboats had a busy ten minutes of it. Luckily the night was calm, and a fair proportion of the Foudroyant's crew were hauled aboard, when they heard a sound like a gulp in some monstrous throat. It was the Flying Squadron of Hayti taking her final flutter to the sea bottom.

"The next dawn, that was to have heralded in the era of conquest and world-wide dominion, broke over a peaceful sea and a group of wet and saddened negroes—the survivors of the wreck. It broke also upon a large black man in cotton-print trousers, but lacking the clerical hat, who was trying with the help of the chief engineer, to make the position clear to the impatient skipper of the Panama.

"'So you were the Haytian Flying Squadron, were you?' he said at last. 'Well, I'm sorry I tumbled on to you and spoilt the fun. But I'll have to dock the Panama if I can get her as far as Jamaica, and I expect my people will send you in the bill, Commodore. Shall I put you ashore?'

"Deloncle accepted the offer, and hastened to tell his own version of the incident to the Government, who decided to seize the Panama as soon as she was warped into port; but the skipper was wide awake and steamed away from Port au Prince without entering the harbor, though before the year was over the Liverpool owners made a heavy demand upon the Republic."

"How did the tale come to you? Did it happen while you were at Hayti?" I asked of Allansford.

"Long before that. It was the chief engineer who told the story to me. I found him a berth later on one of the Atlas boats. But as for the collision, you may call it chance or bad luck, but the fact remains that no known power will ever persuade the Haytians that the Panama was not acting under orders from the Cabinet of St. James, who, hearing of the ambitions entertained by the Republic, sent out the Liverpool boat to commit a dastardly outrage!"