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# JOHN SURRATT'S CAPTURE.

## The Last Surviving Officer of the Swatara Tells the Interesting Story.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SUN—*Sir:* About a fortnight ago news of the death of John H. Surratt was published in the daily press with a brief and imperfect account of his capture in Alexandria, Egypt, in December, 1866, and subsequent trials in Washington in 1867-68.

As the last surviving commissioned officer of the Swatara, the ship used in the pursuit and capture of Surratt, I send a somewhat detailed statement of the facts, which may prove interesting to some of your readers. It should, at least, set at rest the many fantastic accounts of the historical event published from time to time.

Surratt, as is well known, was an intimate of John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, and immediately after the death of the President he made his way to Montreal, Canada, and subsequently to Rome, where he enlisted in the army of Pope Pius IX. The Pope at that time had temporal power and maintained a little army of his own.

The United States Government offered a reward of $25,000 for the capture of Surratt. An acquaintance, one Henry B. Ste. Marie, followed him to Rome and he himself enlisted in the Zouaves. Having located Surratt, he waited on our Minister in Rome, the Hon. Rufus King, and informed him of the fact. Mr. King told Ste. Marie to return to his company, keep the matter to himself and later on he would communicate with him, and at once informed Mr. Seward, our Secretary of State, that Surratt had been located and asked for instructions. Mr. Seward instructed Mr. King to ask Cardinal Antonelli, the Papal Secretary of State, if the United States made a demand for Surratt would the Papal Government give him up. The answer was "Yes, send for him."

Mr. King's next step was to communicate with Admiral Goldsborough, commanding the European squadron.

The Swatara at the time was at Marseilles and Commander William N. Jeffers, a brilliant and distinguished officer, received orders to proceed immediately with his ship to Civita Vecchia, the seaport of Rome, and then proceed personally to Rome, receive Surratt as a prisoner, take him on board and report to the Admiral.

I was an officer on the Swatara and accompanied Commander Jeffers to Rome, where it was learned that Surratt, who had been stationed with his company at a little distance from Rome, had been put under arrest and on his way as a prisoner to the city managed to elude his guards and escape into Italian territory, getting to Naples and as a third class passenger had gone aboard an Italian steamer bound for Alexandria by way of Malta.

The Swatara followed, stopping at Malta. The Italian ship had been there and gone. The Swatara left at once, arriving at Alexandria a few days after the Italian had made port.

Unfortunately for Surratt, Naples had had a visitation of cholera and was considered a foul port by the authorities of Alexandria, and all the third class passengers were marched to the quarantine station and placed under guard for a week's observation.

Commander Jeffers waited on our Minister Resident, the Hon. Charles Hale, and the same question: "If the United States Government made a demand for Surratt would the Khedive surrender him?" was propounded to the Khedivial Government. Back came the prompt reply, "Yes, send for him."

An officer and a file of marines were sent to the corral. Surratt, a tall, straight, self-contained young man, was marched, a prisoner, on board, handcuffed between two marines. The ship was not a large one and there was a quandary just where to put him. He was a state prisoner and had to be treated with consideration.

Commander Jeffers finally concluded to relinquish his bathroom, which was outside of his cabin with a door opening on the spar deck, and it was fitted up as a stateroom and the prisoner made as comfortable as could be; his meals were served to him from the wardroom table.

The ships were not kept together in those days, but were scattered about in European waters. Then came a hunt to find Admiral Goldsborough. The Swatara chased him around the Mediterranean looking for the flagship, and finally located the Colorado in Villefranche. A few days afterward the Swatara started homeward under orders to proceed to Washington and report to the Secretary of the Navy.

The winter of 1866-67 was cold and stormy, and the Swatara, soon after leaving Villefranche, struck a hard gale and the ship was most uncomfortable as she pounded through the heavy head seas of the Mediterranean.

Passing through the Straits and reaching the open sea the fires were allowed to die out and the ship proceeded across the Atlantic under her own sail. The Navy Department just at that time was very economical and coal could not be used when ships were in the open sea. The Swatara sailed across the Atlantic in that stormy January and February, forty-five days from Villefranche to the Capes of Virginia.

Surratt's personal condition when brought aboard ship was frightful, but plenty of hot water and good soap with fresh new (sailor) clothes from the ship's stores soon made him quite comfortable in that respect. He was a wretched sailor, however, and suffered greatly from seasickness on the long voyage. No doubt he was glad when the ship reached Washington and he found himself once more on terra firma, even if it was behind the bars of the Old Capitol Prison.

During the time he was on board the Swatara an armed sentry was at his door and no one but the commander, the executive officer, the surgeon and the officer of the deck ever spoke to him; their conversation was limited to inquiries for his health and comfort.

He was never tried by a military commission. In the summer of 1867 his first trial was in the Criminal Court in Washington, before Judge Fisher; I was a witness at this trial simply to identify him as the man taken on board the Swatara at Alexandria, Egypt, in December, 1866. The jury disagreed at this trial after many hours of consideration, and two other juries at two subsequent trials also disagreed, when the indictment was quashed and Surratt was set at liberty.

Whether Ste. Marie ever received any reward I never knew.

GEORGE DE FOREST BARTON,
Late Paymaster, United States Navy.
NEW YORK, May 19.