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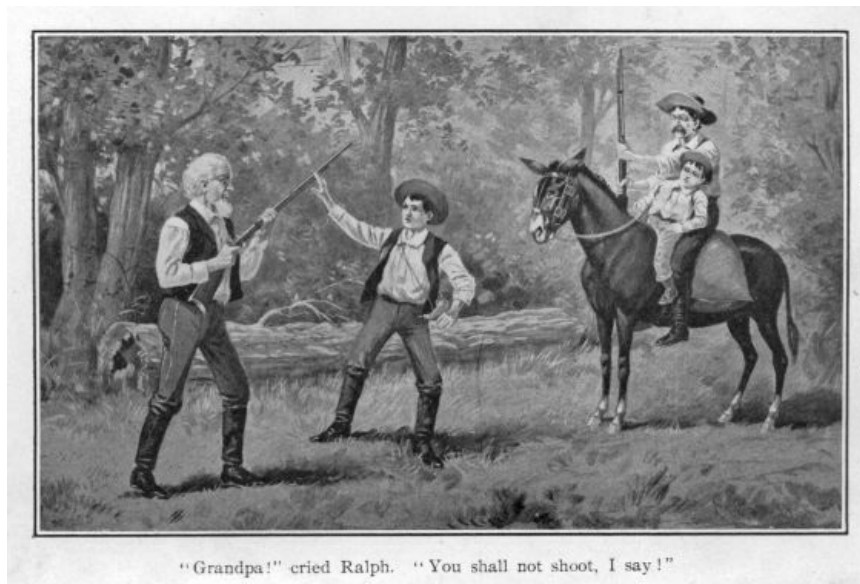
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[Frontispiece: "Grandpa!" cried Ralph. "You shall not shoot, I say!"]

RALPH GRANGER'S FORTUNES

BY

WILLIAM PERRY BROWN

**ILLUSTRATED
BY
W. H. FRY**

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"Grandpa!" cried Ralph. "You shall not shoot, I say!"
Frontispiece

"Mr. Duff," said Gary in his most grating tones, "who gave you the authority to interfere with my designs regarding this insolent youngster?"

Ralph's Winchester cracked and the raised arm fell shattered and useless.

"Quick, Ralph, pull me through by the arms."

Ralph Granger's Fortunes.

CHAPTER I.

Ending the Feud.

"Must I do it, grandpa?"

"Of course you must! I'm afraid you ain't a true Granger, Ralph, or you wouldn't ask no such question."

"But why should I do it, grandpa?"

"Listen at the boy."

The sharp-eyed, grizzled old man rose from his seat before the fire, and took down an ancient looking, muzzle loading rifle from over the cabin door.

"I'll tell you why."

He patted the gun, now lying across his knees.

"This here was your father's gun. He carried it for many years. I had it when the feud betwixt the Grangers and the Vaughns first began. He had it with him when he was shot down at the Laurel Branch by John Vaughn, just six years ago today."

"Today is my birthday," commented Ralph, a sturdy-limbed, ruddy-faced lad.

"And you are fifteen. Think of that; 'most a man. I said I'd wait till you was fifteen, and as it happens, his son's a goin' to mill today."

"What of that?"

"You just wait and you'll see. All you've got to do is to obey orders."

The old man got up, took down a leather shot pouch, and proceeded to load the rifle carefully. After which he slung the pouch and a powder horn round Ralph's neck, then went out and looked at the sun.

He returned, placed the rifle in the lad's hands, and bade him follow. Taking their hats they went out of the house.

Steep mountain ridges cut off any extended view. An old field or two lay about them, partially in the narrow creek bottom and partially climbing the last rugged slopes.

There was a foot log across the little brawling brook, beyond which the public road wound deviously down the glen towards the far distant lowlands.

Ralph eyed the unusually stern expression of his grandfather's face dubiously as they trudged along the road.

Bras Granger was all of sixty-five years old, dried and toughened by toil, exposure, and vindictive broodings, until he resembled a cross-grained bit of time-hardened oak. His gait, though shambling, was rapid for one of his age.

"You said you'd tell me why," suggested Ralph, as they wound their way along the crooked road.

"Didn't I say that the son of the man as killed your father was comin' by the Laurel Branch this mornin'? Haven't the Vaughns and the Grangers been at outs for more than twenty year? What more d'ye want?"

The boy frowned, but it was in perplexity rather than wrath.

They came at last to a wooded hollow, through which another creek ran, thickly shaded by thick overhanging shrubbery. The old man led the way to a half decayed log of immense size, that lay behind a thick fringe of bushes, at an angle just beyond where the road crossed the creek.

It was a deadly spot for an ambushade.

"Lay down behind that log," said old Granger. "Now, can you draw a good bead on him when he comes in sight?"

Young Granger squinted along the rifle barrel, now resting across the log. Though apparently concealed himself, he had a fair view of the road for sixty yards in both directions. Where it entered the brook it was barely thirty feet away.

"Take him right forninst the left shoulder, 'bout the time his mule crosses the creek; then your poor father'll rest easy in his grave."

"Why ain't you killed him afore?" demanded Ralph.

"My hand hasn't been steady these nine year; not since them Vaughns burned our house down the night your grandmother died. It was cold and snowin', and bein' out in it was more'n she could stand."

"I remember," said the boy gloomily. "But that was a long time ago. I can't stay mad nine year."

"I'm madder now than I was then!" almost shouted the infuriated mountaineer. "After they got your pap, I 'lowed I'd wait 'twel you was fifteen. Then you'd be big enough to know how sweet revenge is. Heap sweeter than sugar, ain't it?"

"Hark?" interjected Ralph, without replying. "Some one is comin' up the road."

A trample of hoofs became audible, and presently a man mounted on a mule, with a sack of corn under him, was to be seen approaching the ambushade.

Seated before him was a child of perhaps four or five, who laughed and prattled to the man's evident delight. Old Granger's eyes shown with a ferocious joy.

"That's him!" he exclaimed in tremulously eager tones. "He's got his brat along. I wish ye could get 'em both, then there'd be an end of the miserable brood for one while. Wait, boy—wait 'twel he gets to the creek afore ye shoot. Think of your poor pap, when ye draw bead."

But Ralph's face did not betoken any kindred enthusiasm. He was tired to death of hearing about the everlasting feud between the families.

If the Vaughns had fought the Grangers, it was equally certain that the Grangers had been no whit behind in sanguinary reprisals. He remembered seeing this same Jase Vaughn, now riding unsuspectingly toward the loaded rifle, at a corn shucking once. Ralph then thought him a very jolly, amusing fellow.

"Now lad—now lad!" whispered the old man. "Get down and take your sight. I've seen ye shoot the heads offn squirrels. Just imagine that feller's head is a squirrel's. As for the child—"

"Grandpa, I will not shoot. It would be murder. I'll meet him fair and square, though, and if he's sorry for what his father done, I'll let it pass. He couldn't help it anyhow, if he wanted to, I reckon."

To the old man's intense disgust, Ralph leaped lightly over the log and advanced into the road, rifle in hand. His grandfather followed him, raving in his futile rage.

"Hello!" exclaimed Jase Vaughn, thrusting his hand behind him quickly. "Here's old Granger and his son's kid. I wish you was at home, Clelly."

This last to his boy who, not at all alarmed, was smiling at Ralph in a very friendly manner.

When the lad saw Jase throw back his hand, he dropped his rifle into the hollow of his left arm and brought the trigger to a half cock, advancing at the same time squarely into the middle of the road.

"Grandpa tells me that you are the son of the man who shot my father, here, just six years ago," began the boy. "I knew it myself, but I didn't 'low you was to blame, 'less you uphilt him in it."

"Suppose I do; what then?" Jase eyed the two Grangers steadily, though not in anger as far as Ralph could see.

"Then we'll settle it right here," said the latter firmly. "I could have shot you from the bushes, as your father did mine, but I wouldn't."

"The more fool you!" hissed the vindictive old man. "I ought to have kept the gun myself."

"Suppose I don't uphold the deed?" added Vaughn, still totally undisturbed.

"Then you can go, for all of me. I'm sick of the feud."

"Shake my boy!" Jase held out a large brown paw. "So am I. If I could 'a' had my way your pap never would a been killed."

Ralph hesitated an instant, when suddenly little Clelly reached forth his small, chubby fingers, and the boy surrendered. He suffered Vaughn to shake his hand, then frankly took the child's and pressed it warmly.

"I like 'oo," cried the little fellow, whereat Jase gave a great horse laugh of undisguised satisfaction.

"These young uns has got more sense than all of us older fools," exclaimed the gratified father. "Ain't that so, old man?" he added, looking at the elder Granger.

But the face of Ralph's grandfather became convulsed with a sudden fury. He rushed upon Ralph with a celerity unlocked for in one so old, and wrenched the rifle from the boy's hands.

Then he turned upon Jase Vaughn who had witnessed this action in astonishment.

"Now," shouted old Granger, "reckon I'll get even for the loss of my son. Here's at ye!"

"Grandpa!" cried Ralph, springing between the old man and his intended victim. "You shall not shoot, I say!"

"Out of my way, you renegade," retorted the other leveling his gun.

As the cap snapped, Ralph struck up the barrel, and was rewarded by a furious imprecation from the aged but relentless relative.

CHAPTER II

Ralph and His Grandfather.

Meanwhile Jase Vaughn sat on his mule looking quietly on, as if he were entirely unconcerned in the result of the struggle between Ralph and his grandfather.

Old Granger, finding himself baffled, flung down the rifle upon the ground and strode off up the road, muttering wildly to himself like one demented.

"Hold on, grandpa!" shouted Ralph, picking up the gun. "I'll be with you in a minute."

But the old man heeded not, and soon disappeared round a bend of the road in the direction of his home.

"He's too old to change," said Jase. "But I really don't see any reason why you and me should keep up this foolishness. If my father shot yourn, thar was a cousin of your father's fought a duel with my dad 'way down in Georgy. Both on 'em were hurt so bad they never walked again."

"We heard of it," returned Ralph, "and I couldn't help thinking at the time what fools our families were to keep up a feud started, I reckon, by our great grandfathers."

"Right, you are, young feller. Hit all come of doggin' hogs outn a sweet tater patch; so I've heard."

"Then there was a row, I reckon."

"Yes. One word brought on another, till at last some one got hurt, then the shootin' begun. I never did take much to the business myself, but somehow I didn't have the energy to set the thing straight. I'm powerful glad ye done what ye have done today, and I passes you my word that Jase Vaughn has done with the feud as well as you."

This time it was Ralph's turn to offer his hand. After another hearty shake little Clell threw himself upon the lad's neck with childish abandon.

"I like 'oo!" he cried again.

"Well, I swow!" exclaimed Jase. "He's takin' a plum likin' to you. But we must be gettin' on. If ever I can do anything for you, don't 'low my bein' a Vaughn keep you from lettin' me know."

Then Jase clucked to his mule and rode away, with little Clell craning his neck to catch a last glimpse of Ralph, who, shouldering his rifle, began to retrace his steps towards home.

As he proceeded his face grew grave. How would his incensed relative receive him?

Since the grandmother's and his father's death Ralph and the old man had lived principally by themselves. The boy's own mother had died when he was a baby. Now and then some woman would be hired to do some house-work, usually the wife or daughter of some tenant to whom Bras Granger rented a portion of his land. But they seldom remained long, and Ralph had, perforce, to take their place from time to time.

He grew as expert at cooking and other simple household duties as he was at shooting, trapping, and similar mountain accomplishments. Thus the two had lived on together, with little outside society, relying mainly on themselves for diversion as well as support.

The maintenance of the feud was the old man's greatest wish. It was as meat and drink to his soul.

When Ralph showed the indifference he often felt on that subject, his grandfather always flew into a rage.

"To think that my only living descendant should go back on the family, is too much to bear," he said. "There's only nephews and cousins 'sides you, Ralph. They are scattered here and yonder; they ain't a carin' much about the family honor. Hit all depends on you, boy. I wonder your pap's ghost ain't a haantin' you for bein' so careless."

Then Ralph would vaguely promise to do better, and the subject would be dropped, only to crop up again whenever the old man felt more savagely inclined than usual. Today, however, was the first time that the two had come to an open and violent rupture.

When the boy came in sight of the cabin he beheld his grandparent seated in the doorway absorbed, apparently in deep reflection.

Ralph crossed the foot log, opened the gate and walked up to the door.

"I am sorry I displeased you today," he began, "but I just couldn't do what you wanted me to do—"

"Shet your mouth!" interrupted Granger harshly. "You are a disgrace to your kin. I never would a believed it if my eyes hadn't a seen and my ears a heard. You are no longer a grandson of mine. D'ye hear?"

Ralph's perplexed and distressed look seemed to again infuriate the old man.

"Pack up your traps and get outn here!" he raged, brandishing his walking stick. "My house is no longer a home for such as you."

"Wh—where shall I go?" asked Ralph, still dazed over this astounding outcome of the Vaughn incident.

"Mebbe you'd better go over to Jase Vaughn's," sneered old Granger. "His father killed yourn, but you don't care for such a little thing as that."

"Grandpa," cried Ralph, stung to indignation at last, "it is cruel of you to treat me so, simply because I wouldn't commit murder. Yes—murder. I say it would have been murder! I'm no coward; and it is cowardly to shoot down a man and him not knowing."

"You reprobate!" gasped the obdurate old mountaineer. "I've a notion to thrash you—right here."

He again shook his cane and glared his hatred of Ralph's conduct. But the boy only said:

"I'd rather you beat me than do what I always would be miserable over. Let's drop it, grandpa."

He passed into the cabin and observed a small pile of clothing on the floor.

"There's your duds, boy," said Bras Granger grimly. "Pick 'em up and pull your freight outn here."

Ralph surveyed the old man curiously; but as he noted the latter's stern, unyielding aspect he said no more until he had rolled up a clean shirt and a pair of socks. A tear or two fell as he tied the bundle in a large handkerchief.

"Am I to take the gun?" asked he, gulping down his emotion as best he could.

"No!" almost shouted the old man. "What business you got with a gun? Come now; are you ready?"

Ralph nodded; his heart was too full to speak.

The old man stood aside and pointed to the door. Ralph held out his hand.

"Good by," he managed to falter forth. "May God forgive you for turnin' me out this day."

He passed through the yard, feeling for the gate, for his eyes were dim with moisture. Crossing the foot log, he walked on until he came to a rise of ground just where the road made a sudden turn.

Then he wheeled, dashed the tears away, and took a last look at the place where he was born and had always lived.

Shut in by wild and rugged mountains, far from the world's great life, humble and homely, it was still the only place on earth where the orphaned lad had felt that he had any natural right to be. And now, even this slender thread had been rudely severed by his nearest living relative.

"Good-by, old home," said he audibly, as he waved his hand in a farewell gesture. "I hate to leave you when it comes to the pinch, but if I live I'll make my way somewhere's else. There's other places beside these mountains where a boy can get on, I know."

He resumed his way, forcing back the tears, and soon found his emotions subside.

A conviction that he had acted right throughout the altercation with old Bras, helped him to bear more cheerfully the hard fact that he was not only homeless but almost moneyless. This last misfortune did not press on him heavily, as in that secluded region people were universally hospitable. Ralph had never paid for a meal or a night's lodging in his life.

As he happened to take an easterly course he kept it merely because it would lead him to the lowlands and the towns as quickly as any other route.

He had at once resolved to leave his native mountains. Inexperienced as he was, he instinctively felt that there were better things in store for an energetic lad in other parts of the country than he would be apt to find anywhere near his home.

He struck a lively pace and had walked nearly a mile, with his bundle under his arm, when he met Jase Vaughn returning from the mill.

"Hello, youngster!" quoth that worthy man as cordially as if Ralph and himself had been warm friends all along. "Where you carryin' yourself to? Old man got in good humor yet?"

"He has turned me out, lock, stock, and barrel," replied the boy, swallowing his pride in this humiliating confession.

"W-h-a-a-t?" ejaculated Jase thoroughly amazed, while Clell smiled at Ralph in a most amiable manner.

"Grandpa was so provoked because I declined to obey him," said Ralph, "that he told me to pack up and get out."

"For good and all?"

"Yes, for good. At least I sh'an't go back any more—unless—he was to send for me."

"Bully for you! I wouldn't either. Give you the shake 'cause you wouldn't let him put a bullet hole through me! Well, I swow!"

Jase stared at Ralph in mingled admiration and compassion.

"The dadburned old fool!" he continued. "'Scuse me, Ralph, no reflections on your fambly, but

hit kind o' teches my feelin's to see you fired in this shape, long o' your actin' the gentleman with me. Where be you goin'?"

"Somewhere's down below; I don't know exactly where."

"Got any money?"

"A little. I'm going to hunt work; then I'll soon make more. I sha'n't stay in the mountains."

Jase drew forth a greasy leather wallet and extracted a five dollar bill, which he eyed reflectively as if forcing himself to make up his mind, then suddenly handed it to Ralph, who thanked him but shook his head.

"Dang it! Let me loan it to you then. Didn't you as good as save my life? Look, Clell wants you to take it, don't you, Clell?"

The little fellow laughed, seized the bill from his father's hand, and tossed it towards Ralph, saying:

"Take it; take it. I like 'oo, Walph."

Ralph felt another rising in his throat as he stooped to pick up the note; but he could not bring himself to the point of accepting so great a favor from one of the Vaughns.

"I—I really don't need it," said he. "Hold on! Jase! Do hold up a minute."

"Can't, old feller," called back Jase, who had suddenly spurred his mule into a trot when he saw the note in Ralph's hand. "Pay me when you get back, if you'd rather."

"But I say! I can't keep this money——"

"Good by," came floating back on the breeze. "I don't know nothin' 'bout no money. Take good care of yourself."

Then Jase, boy, and mule, whipped round a crook of the road and were seen no more.

Ralph's first impulse was to throw the bill away. But sober second thoughts prevailed, and somewhat reluctantly he placed it with the rest of his slender stock of cash.

"Jase means well," thought he, resuming his tramp. "I don't know that either of us are to blame 'cause our families have been at outs for so long. When I get to making something I'll send it back."

All that day Ralph trudged manfully on. At times grief would be uppermost in his heart when he thought of the way in which his grandfather had treated him.

Once, as he passed a cabin where a boy of about his own age stood washing his hands on the porch, and he caught a glimpse of a cheerful interior, with dinner smoking on the table, he felt very homesick. He wished he was back, preparing his grandpa's noontday meal.

As he did not feel hungry he did not stop anywhere until about sunset, when he walked up to a double penned house that looked roomy and hospitable. Several dogs ran out barking.

"Here, you Boss! Git out'n thar, Louder! Pick up a stick and frail the nation outn 'em, boy."

A tall, shock headed, awkward man had come onto the porch and was making these remarks with great vigor but entire good nature. The dogs subsided, and Ralph ran lightly up the steps.

"Come in. Take a chair by the fire. What mought your name be these hard times?"

"I'm Ralph Granger, from over about Hiawasse Gap."

"Son of old Bras?"

Ralph assented, when the shock headed man called to his wife, who was sifting meal for the supper:

"Tildy this must be one of your kin folks." Then, turning to Ralph, "My wife was a Granger; one of the Gregory branch. Well, tell us all about yourself. Don't mind the children, they always are in the way, anyhow."

Ralph, finding that he was among friends, related briefly the events of the day and wound up by again expressing his detestation of the feud. Mr. Dopples, for that was the shock headed man's name, nodded approval.

"We mountain folks live too much outn the world," said he. "What you goin' to do?"

"Anything honest, to make a living. I'm not going to stay in these parts though."

"If you've any notion of goin' down about Columbia, I can direct you to a friend of mine as lives there. Comes up here every summer to fish and hunt. Got lots of coin, and is always wantin' me to go down there and take a regular town spree with him. Oh he's a sight!"

"What is his name? I don't suppose he would care anything about me. He never heard of me, anyhow."

"Name is Captain Shard; he keeps a big livery stable. You just tell him you're a friend of mine, and I'll bet my steers agin a coon skin you're at home straight."

Soon after supper Ralph was shown to his bed in a shed room at the rear of the house. In the mountains the people go to bed and rise early from habit.

Before eight o'clock a sound of heavy breathing could be heard from every room. Under the floor the very dogs were steeped in dreams of coon and 'possum hunting.

Suddenly Ralph awoke, feeling a pressure on his chest. The room was not so dark but that he could detect a shadowy figure at the bedside.

A prickly chill ran through his veins, but before he could speak, a voice whispered:

"Give me your hand," and as the boy dazely obeyed, the pressure on his chest was removed as another hand was lifted from there, that firmly grasped his own.

"I can feel your pulse jump; you're skeered, Ralph."

"Wh—who are—you?" faltered Ralph, unable to make out as yet whether it was a "haant" or a living person that had awakened him thus.

"Don't know me?" There was a titter of nearly noiseless laughter. "Felt me pressin' your chist, didn't you?"

"Yes. At first I thought I must be stiflin', but——"

"If you want to wake a person 'thout speakin', you press on their chist. Hit always fetches 'em. Don't you know me yet?"

Ralph murmured a low negative.

"Well, then, I'll tell you I'm——"

A sound of feet striking the floor heavily was heard from one of the other rooms, and was followed by the voice of Mr. Dopples, calling out:

"Tildy! Oh, Tildy! Where be ye, Tildy?"

CHAPTER III.

Ralph Continues His Journey.

The form at Ralph's bedside grasped his hand again in a warning pressure.

"Keep quiet," it said. "I'm your Aunt Tildy. I have something to say to you by and by."

The figure vanished, and presently the lad heard his aunt say:

"What are you fussin' about, Mr. Dopples? Can't a body stir 'thout you havin' a fit?"

"I only wanted to know where ye were," was the shock headed man's reply. "What are ye progin' round this time o' night for?"

"Cause I want to. Now shet up and go to sleep."

While Ralph was wondering what on earth his aunt, whom he had never seen before, could want to say to him at such an hour, the talking in the other room died away, and was succeeded soon by a resonant snoring, that denoted Mr. Dopples' prompt obedience to his wife's last command.

Shortly thereafter she swept softly into the boy's room, wrapped in a shawl and seated herself at his side.

"Are you awake?" she said in a whisper.

Ralph said, "Yes;" and propped himself in a listening attitude.

"You think strange, I reckon, at my comin' to you in this way," she began. "You've never seen and hardly ever heard of us before. But when I learned the way your grandpap have treated you, I felt sorry, and I want to help you what little I can."

"I'm mightily obliged, aunt," replied Ralph, still puzzled how to connect this friendly wish with the object of such a visit as she was making tonight.

"Hit was a brother of mine as fought that fight with John Vaughn. I used to believe in the feud, but I don't now. It's a wicked thing to seek people's lives. Both sides have suffered enough, Ralph, and I say let there be peace."

"Amen," muttered the lad heartily.

"But what I wanted to let you know was about this Captain Shard, as Dopples wants you to go and see. My man never quarrels with nobody—bless his old soul! Therefore, he never 'spicious that any of his friends would want to, either. There's where he is wrong."

"Yes; but I don't see how that can apply to Captain Shard, whom I never heard of before."

"I know you don't, but I do. Captain Shard's mother was a Vaughn. Now, do you see?"

"Good gracious! But it seems to me as if that don't amount to much. Why should this man want to hurt me?"

"Hold on. This man Shard's mother was sister to the Vaughn who killed your father, and whom my brother had fought on account of it. Don't you see? When Shard learns who you are, his Vaughn blood is more than apt to prompt him to do you some harm."

"They don't shoot people in the town the way we do in the mountains, aunt. I've read that the law is too strong for that."

"There's other ways of hurtin' a poor boy 'sides takin' a gun to him. If he chose, he might harm you in other ways. I've heard it said that folks with plenty of money can do 'most anything in the city."

"Well, aunt, I'm much obliged to you for letting me know. If I strike Columbia, and meet up with Captain Shard, I shall certainly remember what you say."

"Good night, then. Don't tell Dopples what I've said. He's a thinkin' the world of Shard. I like him, too; but then he don't know I'm a Granger, I reckon."

After Mrs. Dopples retired, Ralph soon fell asleep. When he wakened again daylight was at hand, and Mr. Dopples was kindling a fire.

Breakfast came early, then Ralph bade his kindly friends farewell, and resumed his journey as the sun was peeping over the easterly summits of the Blue Ridge.

"Don't forget to see Shard," called the shock headed man, as the boy reached the public road. "He'll help you out."

"I may see Shard," thought Ralph; "but I'll be careful how he sees me. I'm going to get out of the range of this feud if I have to travel clear to the seacoast."

As he had a lunch along—given him by Mrs. Dopples—he did not stop anywhere for dinner, but trudged resolutely on at a three mile an hour gait.

His young limbs, hardened by constant mountain climbing, did not tire readily, while his experience of traveling enabled him to keep the general course he wished to go, notwithstanding the branch trails and the many windings caused by the ruggedness of the country.

The latter portion of the afternoon was occupied in climbing a long mountain range that overtopped most of the others in sight. The sun was nearly setting as he reached the summit; then he uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

Behind him was a confused jumble of peaks and ridges as far as the eye could reach. It was the region he had left—his own native wilds.

Before him stretched an undulating panorama of plain, valley, and gentle hills. There were patches of woodland, great plantations with here and there variegated spots that Ralph supposed to be villages.

It was his first view of the level country beyond the Blue Ridge, and he surveyed it with intense interest.

"They say it stretches that way clear to the seacoast," he said to himself as he began to descend the mountain. "I don't see how they can see any distance with no big ridges to look off

from."

This idea—otherwise laughable—was perfectly natural to a lad who had never seen anything but wild and rugged mountains in his life.

He quickened his pace, wishing to get down into the region of farms and houses before darkness should come. A rising cloud in the southeast also occasioned him some concern.

"Looks mighty like there might be rain in that cloud," he thought. "I've got matches, but I'd hate to have to spend a wet night out in these woods."

The gun went down and the black south-easterly haze came up, with semi-tropical celerity. Ralph was still in the lonely region of forest and crag, when a whirl of wind struck him in the face and a few drops spattered on the leaves of the chestnuts around.

The brief southern twilight was blotted out almost at once by the overspreading clouds, and young Granger became conscious that he had somehow missed the trail.

"That is odd," he muttered. "It was just here a minute ago."

Something like a yellow gleam caught his eye, and he plunged along in its course in a reckless manner, for he was nervous with anxiety.

Being in a strange region, with a storm on the point of breaking, was not pleasant even to older nerves, when added to the natural terrors of a night in the woods, without any other company than one's brooding thoughts.

"Hello! What's this?" he exclaimed as he almost ran against an obstruction that looked not unlike a steep house roof.

The odor of tar and resin pervaded the air. Ralph groped his way around it, feeling here and there with his hands.

"It's a tar kiln, sure as preaching!" ejaculated he, at length. "There ought to be some kind of a shack about, looks like."

He was still searching, when the wind, which had been increasing, brought with it a sudden downpour of rain. Ralph was about to rush for a tree to shelter himself, when a flash of lightning lighted up the kiln and surrounding objects with a pale, brief glare.

"Ha—there she is!" exclaimed Ralph, discovering the object of his search. "I almost knew the man as put up this kiln must have had a shelter of some kind."

He made his way to a low, brush covered frame near by, arriving there just in time. The darkness was intense, except when cloven by the lightning, while the fall of rain was drenching and furious.

The shack leaked some, but it was an immense improvement over a tree for shelter.

"Let's see where we are, anyhow," said Ralph, producing some matches, one of which he struck. "Hello! There are some pine knots. Here's luck at last."

In a few minutes he had a small fire blazing brightly, and felt more like contemplating his surroundings with cheerful equanimity.

But as the rain increased, the leaks grew in number, threatening to put out the fire, and converting the earth floor into a mushy mud puddle.

"I can't do any sleeping here," thought he. "Might just as well make up my mind for a night of it round this fire."

By dint of careful watching he kept his fire from going entirely out, and managed to keep himself dry by picking out the spots where the leaks were fewest in which to stand.

But it was a dreary, lonesome time. The wind whistled dolefully through the pines, and the rain splashed unmercifully upon the bark and boughs of the shack.

After each flash of lightning, sharp peals of thunder added their harsh echoes, until Ralph's ears ached, used as he was to mountain storms. The rain began to slacken in an hour, while the wind gradually dwindled to a light breeze.

Still there was no chance to lie down, and the boy was growing sleepy.

He had drooped his head between his knees as he sat on a pine block, and was dropping into a doze when he heard something stirring at the back of the shanty. He looked around in a drowsy way, but seeing nothing, he again fell into an uneasy slumber.

How long his nap lasted he did not know, but all at once he nodded violently and awoke. The fire was low. Then a muffled rattling noise at his feet sent the blood in a furious leap to his

pulses.

He threw on a rich knot, and as it blazed up his eye fell on an object that caused him to spring up as if he had been stung.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed, and as the rattle sounded once more, he made a long leap for the doorway. "That was a narrow escape. S'pose I hadn't a woke up?"

Then he shuddered, but recovering, hunted up a cudgel and cautiously returned within the hut.

There, within a few inches of where the lad's feet had rested as he slept, was a large rattlesnake still in its coil and giving forth its ominous rattle. A dexterous blow or two finished the reptile, but the odor given forth by the creature in its anger filled the hut.

"Pah!" ejaculated Ralph. "I must get out of here. The place would sicken a dog."

He returned to the open air, now freshened by the vanished rain, and round to his delight, that a moon several days old was visible in the west. The clouds had disappeared, and there seemed every prospect of a clear and quiet night.

"It is light enough to see to travel if I can only find the road again," he reflected. "Anything is better than staying here."

Taking the direction in which it seemed to him that the trail ought to be, he sought eagerly for the narrow strip of white that would indicate the wished for goal. Presently he heard a distant sound.

"It may be the deer a whistling," thought he, listening intently. "But, no; that ain't made by no deer. I believe—it's—somebody a coming along."

Some distance to his left Ralph could now detect a connected sound as if a tune were being whistled. In his eager desire for human companionship, he cast prudence completely aside and ran forward shouting:

"Hold on! I'm coming. Hold on till I get there!"

CHAPTER IV.

The Moonshiners and the Railroad.

The whistling stopped suddenly. Ralph kept on, however, in the direction where he had last heard the sounds, and presently distinguished two dim forms standing in an open space amid the trees, through which ran the white thread that indicated the lost trail.

"I say," began the lad, "are you fellows going down the mountain? If you are, I'd like to go with you. Fact is, I believe I'm lost."

"Halt, there, young feller!" was the reply, given in sharp, stern tones. "One step further and you'll find half an ounce of lead under your skin, mebbe."

Ralph obeyed, somewhat puzzled and decidedly alarmed. The men—there were two of them—drew something over their faces, then ordered the boy to advance.

He did so, and on drawing near saw that they now wore masks, and had long sacks swung over their shoulders, with a load of some kind in either end. When he saw the masks and the bags Ralph understood at once what their business was.

"Who are you?" demanded one of the men, and the lad could see that he held a pistol in one hand. "No lyin', now!"

"My name is Granger, and I'm from over on Hiawassee River way. Want to get down into the low country. Got lost; stayed in a shack while it rained, and—here I am."

"Be you a son of old Bras Granger?"

"No; grandson."

The two whispered together a moment, then one of them said:

"I reckon you're all right, boy. 'Taint wuth while to ast our names, 'cause d'ye see—we wouldn't tell."

"You'd be fools if you did," returned Ralph, his self confidence now fully restored. "I ain't a wanting to know who you are. I know already what you are."

"How's that?" came sharply back, and an ominous click was heard, which, however, did not seem to alarm Ralph.

"Moonshiners," said the boy briefly. "Haven't I been raised among 'em? I've got kin folks as stills regular, I'm sorry to say."

"Sorry! Ain't it a good trade?"

"Not when it lands you inside of some dirty jail. Besides, I don't like the stuff, anyhow."

"No use to offer you a dram then?"

"Not a bit. But I say, if you'll let me go on with you till we get down where there's some houses, I'll think more of that than if you gave me a barrel of whisky."

"We're on our way back. We're goin' up the mountain. But you foller this trail for about a mile, then take the first right hand turn. Follow that 'twel you come to an old field. T'other side of that you'll find the mud pike as runs to Hendersonville. After that you'll find houses thick enough. But where are you bound for after you get down there?"

"Oh, anywhere most. I'm after work."

Ralph concluded that he had better not be more explicit with strangers.

The moonshiners soon grew quite friendly and seemed a little hurt over Ralph's persistence in declining a drink.

"I'm going out among strangers," he said, "and I've got to keep my head. The best way to do that is to let the stuff entirely alone. Well, so long, men. I'm mighty glad I met up with you."

He struck out down the trail whistling merrily. Now that he was on the right road again, and with a clear night before him, he felt far more cheerful than before.

He found the old field without difficulty, and not far beyond he struck the Hendersonville pike as the moonshiner had intimated.

Here the country was more open. Large fields, interspersed with patches of woodland, were on either hand. Now and then he would pass a cabin, his approach being heralded by the barking of dogs.

Once or twice large buildings came into view. These were the residences of the more wealthy class of planters. Even in the dim starlight, Ralph saw that they were larger than the log dwellings he was accustomed to.

Finally the moon went down. He would have stopped at some house and asked for shelter, but the hour was so late that he shrank from disturbing strangers. The night was not uncomfortably cool and he was getting further on.

Roosters began to crow. A few clouds glided athwart some of the brightest stars and he found difficulty in traveling.

Just beyond some buildings he stumbled over something hard and immovable. As he picked himself up, his hand came in contact with cold steel.

Peering closely he saw two long lines running parallel as far as he could distinguish on either hand. He found that they were of iron or steel and rested on wooden supporters, half buried in the earth.

"Dinged if this ain't queer!" he thought. "Let me see. I wonder if this ain't one of them railroads I've heard folks tell about. They say it'll carry you as far in one hour as a man'll walk all day."

Pondering over this, to him, puzzling celerity of motion, he groped his way along the track to where it broadened out into a switch.

"Reckon this one must run somewhere else," thought Ralph, when he suddenly detected a large dark object ahead. "What's that, I wonder. Guess I'll look into that. Seeing I'm getting into a strange country it won't do to be too careless."

Going slowly forward, he walked completely round the unknown affair, which he ascertained was on wheels that rested on the iron tracks.

"This must be one of their wagons they ride so fast in," said the boy to himself. "Hello! The door is open."

It was an ordinary box car on a siding, the sliding door of which was partially open. As Ralph

strove to peer within, he detected the sound of measured breathing.

"Some one is in there," he decided, and drew back cautiously.

The darkness had increased greatly and there seemed to be signs of another rain coming up. No other place of shelter was in the immediate neighborhood that he could discern.

He thrust his head into the car and felt with his hands. Nothing could he see, nor did he feel aught but the flooring of the car. While he debated as to what he should do, the rain began again.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed, "I don't like to go into another man's ranch like this, but blamed if I am going to get wet, with a shelter within two feet of me."

He clambered inside and sat with his back against the wall, intending to get out again after the shower should pass.

But the shower did not pass on. Instead it settled into a steady drizzle. When the rain began to beat inside he drew the door nearly shut.

The measured breathing came from one end of the car. There seemed to be but one occupant besides Ralph.

As the time passed, the lad grew drowsy. Inured though he was to an active life, the walking he had done had fatigued him greatly. Now, as he sat resting, waiting for the rain to cease, a natural drowsiness asserted itself with a potency that would not be denied.

As he nodded he awakened himself several times by a violent jerk of the head, but at last slumber prevailed entirely, and Ralph was sleeping as soundly as the other unknown occupant of the car.

The unusual events of the last two days had kept his fancies at an abnormal stretch. It was natural, therefore, for him to begin dreaming.

It seemed as if he were going back instead of leaving his home. Every one he met looked at him compassionately. Finally he saw Jase Vaughn, and remembered that he owed Jase five dollars. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out—a rattlesnake.

Even this did not waken him, though he thought he was back at the shack by the tar kiln. The ground seemed to be covered with snakes. He ran ever so far, then all at once he was with Jase just as if he had been with him all the time.

"I haven't got no money," he said sorrowfully.

"Never mind," replied Vaughn. "You run home. Poor fellow; I'm sorry for you."

Much perplexed, he kept on until he stood before his grandfather's cabin. He thought his Aunt Dopples was there, with her eyes red with weeping.

"Go in; go in," she urged, pushing him through the doorway. "He's been waiting for you till he's about give out."

Ralph dreamed that the first thing he saw was his grandfather propped up in bed, with a ghastly pallor on his face. When he beheld his truant grandson, the scowl upon his brow deepened, and he shook a warning finger.

"Wretched boy!" hissed the old man, while Ralph cowered like one in the presence of a ghost, "you are no Granger. There never was a Granger that acted the coward. You are a Vaughn—a Vaughn—a Vaughn!"

The old man's tone towards the last rose into such a wild, weird shriek, that Ralph's blood ran cold. He attempted to speak with a tongue so tied by fear that words would not come.

Under the agony of effort he screamed aloud, then suddenly awoke.

"Here! Here! Wake up, I say!"

These words, uttered shrilly in his ear, staggered his senses as he opened his eyes and looked up.

CHAPTER V.

Ralph's First Railroad Ride.

A slender, thin faced, alert looking man was stooping over the boy, and shaking him vigorously. Day had dawned.

"Wake up, young fellow!" continued the stranger, as Ralph gazed at him in a dazed sort of way. "How came you in here?"

"I—I got in out of the rain," said Ralph, staggering to his feet, only to be thrown down again by the jolting of the car, which was in rapid motion.

The sliding door was now open. Ralph glancing out, saw the landscape slipping by at a furious rate of speed.

The sight so astonished him, that he sank back again. To his unaccustomed senses it was as if the earth were turning upside down.

"What's the matter with you? Drunk?"

"No!" almost shouted the boy, suddenly indignant. "I never took a drink in my life. Neither was I ever on such a—a wagon as this before. Lordy! How fast we're going!"

The man roared with laughter.

"Well, you are a curiosity. Where did you come from? Out of the woods?"

"I'm from the mountains. Never was out of them before. Isn't there no danger in going so fast? My! How my head swims when I look out!"

"Not a bit of danger, unless in case of a collision, or when something gives way. But come! Give me an account of yourself. When I find an uninvited stranger aboard my private car, I ought to know something about him, I reckon."

While Ralph gave a brief account of himself and his affairs—omitting the feud, however—his eyes rested first on one strange object, then another.

There was a large pile of canvas at one end of the car, neatly folded. Several tent poles lay along the floor. A large and a small camera, resting on tripods, especially puzzled the boy. There were also several chests and a trunk or two.

At the other end of the car there was a cot bedstead with mattress and bedding, a chair or two, a small table, an oil cooking stove, together with other household paraphernalia.

The whole outfit was simple, yet complete, and did not take up much room.

"Well," said the man, as Ralph concluded his statement, "you seem to be an honest and a plucky lad, though an almighty green one, I guess. Never been anywhere, you say?"

"I've hunted for miles in the mountains, and I've been to a store or two, and to meeting, and to the 'lections. Yes, and I've been to school three months a year ever since I was so high," Ralph indicated the height with his hand. "But grandpa would never let me go off any very great distance from home."

"So you finally took matters into your own hands and gave him leg bail. Well, that ain't bad. But you mustn't go about breaking into people's houses and cars as you did last night. It isn't safe."

"I was lost, and it began to rain. I didn't mean no harm. I can pay my way."

He drew forth some money, under a dim idea that he had heard some one say once, that below the mountains, folks made people pay for about everything they got.

"Keep your cash, my boy," said the man evidently having a better idea of Ralph than at first. "Hold to all you've got. People are not as free with their grub and beds down here as they are up in your country. By the way, what's your name?"

"Ralph Granger. What might be yours?"

"Mine? Oh, my name is Quigg—Lemuel Quigg. I am a traveling photographer."

"What is that?"

"Did I ever see such ignorance! Ralph, you are a curiosity. I take pictures for a living. Usually I go by wagon. But I am bound for the seacoast, so I hired this car to take me right through."

"There was a fellow up in our parts once as took pictures for two bits apiece."

"Like these?" Mr. Quigg threw open one lid of a trunk, disclosing a velvet lined show case filled with photographs of different sizes.

They would now be considered antiquated affairs, but to Ralph the life-like attitudes and

looks of the sitters seemed wonderful.

"Gracious, no!" he exclaimed. "That fellow only took little tintypes, as we folks call them. These beat anything I ever saw."

"Well, suppose we get breakfast," said Quigg, turning to his oil stove. "We'll be in Hendersonville in an hour. Can you cook?"

Ralph staggered to the stove, and took a puzzled look.

"I've cooked on a fireplace all my life, more or less. But I don't think much of that thing."

"Don't, eh? Well, well! You'll do for a dime museum, you will. Go and sit down, and watch me."

Ralph took a seat near the door, and divided his time between Mr. Quigg's culinary operations and the swiftly moving panorama outside.

The dizzy, yet smooth, motion of the car, the—to him—miraculous speed, the whirl and shimmer of the landscape—all this fascinated him after his first nervousness wore off.

The artist, however, recalled him from this sort of day dreaming, by saying:

"Ever make biscuit?"

"We eat corn pones mostly at home."

"Well, you can fry some bacon and eggs, I guess."

He gave the boy a small frying pan, showed him where to place it, then lighted his lamp.

"That beats pine knots, don't it?" he asked, while Ralph noted with a new wonder the ease and rapidity with which Mr. Quigg managed everything.

While the meat and eggs were frying, the artist made coffee, thrust some potatoes into the oven beside the biscuit, then completed his morning toilet over a tin basin and a hand mirror.

"Better take a wash and a brush," said he to Ralph. "I'll dish up the breakfast."

So, while Mr. Quigg set the table, the lad washed his face, brushed his hair, and despite his homely looking jeans and rough brogans, presented a very slightly appearance as he sat down opposite the little photographer.

At least so the latter thought, and remained in apparent deep reflection while eating.

Ralph saw the white granulated sugar for the first time, and, mistaking it for salt, was about to sprinkle some on his egg.

"That's a queer way to eat sugar," said Quigg, happening to notice the move.

"Goes pretty good that way, though," returned Ralph, determined to martyr his palate rather than own up to any further ignorance.

He was already beginning to divine the primitive nature of his native manner of life, but the consciousness of this fact only strengthened his desire to familiarize himself with these strange usages.

Quigg laughed, then resumed his reverie.

After the meal was over, Ralph washed the dishes, while the artist made up his bed and otherwise tidied up the car.

Two window sash of unusual size attracted the lad's attention.

"Those are my skylights," said Quigg. "You might polish them up a bit after we leave Hendersonville. That is, if you are going on further."

Ralph had no definite idea as to where he wanted to go, except that he thought of Captain Shard. Regardless of Mrs. Dopples' warning, he now said that he had a notion of going on to Columbia.

"All right," responded Quigg, who liked Ralph's appearance the more he saw of him. "Go on with me. You can help me for your keep until something better offers. I shall stay in Columbia a week, then strike for the coast. What say?"

Ralph assented gladly, and thought himself lucky in being afforded so easy a chance to get forward. Presently he was rubbing away upon the skylights, while Mr. Quigg produced a cornet from somewhere among his belongings, and played sundry doleful airs with indifferent skill, until the train arrived at Hendersonville.

"What do you call that brass horn?" asked Ralph.

"A brass horn! Come! That's good." Quigg laughed loudly. "That is a cornet, and a good one, too! But here we are."

Hendersonville, though but a moderate sized town, seemed to the mountain boy to contain all the world's wonders. Both car doors were thrown wide open, and as they had to remain on a siding until an express went by, Ralph indulged his curiosity fully.

The two and three story buildings, nicely painted and standing so close together, the teams, the stores, the shouting negroes and hurrying whites, were all a startling novelty to him.

"Looks like everybody is a rushin' as if he'd forgot something," he thought. "What a sight of niggers! Good Lord! What's that?"

This last he uttered aloud as the express whizzed by them at a moderate rate of speed.

"That's the train we were waiting for. Now we'll get on, I guess. You see, our train is a freight, and we have to make way for pretty much everything."

Presently their car began to move. As they passed the depot an engine close by blew a whistle, at which the boy started.

The hissing, steaming locomotive was to him the most wonderful thing of all. Truly, the mountain people lived as in another world.

"I am glad I left home," said he to himself. "Grandpa would never have let me know anything. Down here there is a chance to do something and be somebody."

Soon they were again whirling through a semi-level country on their way to the South Carolina line. The corn and cotton fields increased in size, the plantation houses grew larger and began to have stately lawns and groves of woodland about them. The log houses seemed to be mostly inhabited by negroes. Ralph finished his skylights, then assisted Mr. Quigg in getting dinner. The afternoon wore slowly away; then they ate a cold supper, washed down by some warm coffee. The train moved haltingly, having to wait at sidings for other trains that had the right of way. Night came, and Ralph took a blanket and lay down for a nap, having not yet "caught up with his sleep," as he said to the artist.

Mr. Quigg lighted a lamp and sat down over a novel. Ralph slumbered on with his bundle for a pillow.

Once, when he wakened for a moment, he saw as in a dream, the strange inside of the car with the photographer quietly reading; then he dropped off again.

The next thing he was conscious of was being pulled into a sitting position, and hearing a voice in his ear calling:

"Hello there! Wake up! Chickens are crowing for day!"

CHAPTER VI.

Ralph in Columbia.

"All right, grandpa," said Ralph, mechanically sitting up, though his ideas were still mixed with his dreams.

"I am not your respected grandparent," said Mr. Quigg from the stove, where he was lighting the fire, "but I'll dare say he would call you just as early."

The lad laughed at himself as he sprang up and, after washing and brushing, hastened to help Mr. Quigg with his morning tasks.

He happened to glance out and noticed that their car was on a siding and that numerous other tracks contained many coaches and freight cars of different kinds. A small engine was puffing up and down among them, while on every side beyond were tall buildings and vacant lots.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Where you said you wanted to go—Columbia."

"Looks like a dirty place," commented Ralph, having had the raw edge of his curiosity sufficiently dulled at Hendersonville to make him a little critical already.

"Wait till we get out where you can see something. It's a fine town. I made a hundred dollars in a week here once."

This sounded like a fortune to Ralph.

"You see, one of the home artists was sick and the other one on a whiz down at Charleston, and the Legislature was in session. So I just took pictures and raked in the shekels. Here comes my dray. Shove all the dishes into that chest, Ralph. We've lots to do today."

A truck driven by a negro and drawn by two mules, hitched up tandem fashion, now backed up to the open door of the car.

"Hello Sam!" called out, Mr. Quigg. "Got my telegram, did you?"

"Yaas, suh. Marse Thompson, he read um."

"Now, give us a hand, Ralph," continued the artist. "We'll put the tent on first."

The lad, having bestowed the dishes, lent willing aid in loading the dray, while Mr. Quigg superintended operations.

"I guess you will have to go along with Sam," said he to Ralph. "He'll want some help at unloading. Then you must stay there and watch the things until we come with the next load."

So it was that Ralph found himself presently perched high up on the dray and rattling through the streets, while Sam sat in front, guiding his team by a single rein, and a deal of vociferation.

They came finally to a vacant corner lot where they began to unload.

"Do you know of a man here called Captain Shard?" asked the boy, at length remembering the individual he desired to find.

"Reckon I does. Bless grashus! Ain't I a wukin' fer dat same man de bigger heft er de time?"

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Fust rate; fust rate. Dat is if he don't hab nuttin' begainst yo'. When he do, den—look out."

This rather supported the tenor of Mrs. Dopples' cautions, and Ralph paused a moment before he asked:

"Where can I find him?"

"Yo' membah dat big liv'ry stable on de Main Street as we come erlong?"

"Where there were so many wagons and carriages around?"

"Yaas, suh. Dat's him. De cap'n he own um all. Disher team 'longs ter de cap'n too. Dey some says—Hi yo! If he ain' a comin' right now! Oh, cap'n! Say yo' wanter see him, suh?"

Ralph would have declined such a sudden meeting, but before he could think of any excuse, a portly, fine looking man, with flowing chin beard and dark, piercing eyes, stopped as he was sauntering by.

"What is it, Sam?" he demanded, at the same time scanning Ralph casually.

"Dish yer white boy, he astin' where 'bout he kin find yo', suh. I up an' tol' him, when—bless de land!—yere yo' is."

Sam gathered up his reins, cracked his whip, and tore away down the street without another word.

Ralph, from the divided nature of his thoughts, could think of nothing to say until the captain spoke again.

"Well, what is it you want of me—a—what is your name?"

"Ralph Granger," blurted forth the boy, then was sorry he had committed himself.

Captain Shard glanced sharply at Ralph's coarsely clad figure, and noticed the home made texture of his clothes.

"Granger—Granger," he muttered as if to himself. "From the mountains, ain't you?" he added quickly.

Ralph was so unaccustomed to lying that he said "Yes," notwithstanding the prickings occasioned by what Aunt Dopples had said.

"Who sent you to me?"

"A man by the name of Dopples, who married one of my kin folks."

"Tildy Dopples a relative of yours?" The captain appeared surprised.

Ralph, feeling that he was in for it, boldly told who and what he was, omitting any allusion to the feud, however. As he continued, the captain, who had been pondering as he listened, suddenly scowled.

"Was your father's name Ralph, too?" asked he, and when the boy nodded affirmatively, added: "And was his father's name Bras Granger?"

"Yes," replied Ralph. "I lived with him after—after——" he hesitated, conscious of speaking too frankly.

"After a Vaughn killed him!" interposed the captain with emphasis, then added: "Did you know my mother was a Vaughn, boy? And that a brother of hers was killed in a duel by a cousin of your father's?"

"So—I have—heard," faltered Ralph, feeling that he was by no means beyond the reach of that wretched feud yet.

"Finally, did you know that this brother of my mother was the man who shot your father?"

"I—never knew until Aunt Dopples told me. I call her aunt."

"Yet, knowing this, they sent you to me. I like Dopples; would do nearly anything for him I could. His wife was always rather distant. If she is a Granger that accounts for it."

"She told me you might not like me if you knew who I was, but I—I am so sick of that useless old feud, that I thought you might not remember it against me. Down here it seems as if you have too much else to think of to be always wanting to shoot somebody."

"Right you are, my boy." Captain Shard now shook Ralph's hand cordially, though his eye held a rather sinister gleam. "What is the use of forever brooding over old scores? Come round and see me. Perhaps I can put you in the way of earning a living."

The captain patted Ralph on the shoulder, started off, but called back: "If my uncle and your great uncle made fools of themselves by carving each other up, that is no reason you and I should keep up the folly. We are not in the mountains now—thank goodness!"

Though much relieved at Shard's apparently amicable way of taking things, Ralph was not altogether comfortable.

"It was a close pull," he thought. "Suppose he had got mad when he pumped out of me who I was? If Mr. Quigg goes on to the coast, I'll stick by him. I'm going to get away from that old feud, if I have to go to Jericho."

As he arrived at this vague geographical decision, he beheld Sam approaching with a second load. While they were unloading, Mr. Quigg came up on foot. He soon paid the darky off, then took a survey of their surroundings.

"This is not a bad stand for a day or two," said he to Ralph. "We'll put up the tent first; then, while I fix up things inside, you can go about and stick up some posters. I'll put a few ads. in the newspapers and, there you are—see?"

Ralph did not see except dimly, yet he assented readily and began to feel quite an interest in his new occupation already.

The tent was soon stretched and the large skylight adjusted. Some of the idlers who are always present at any outdoor proceedings in town, lent a hand now and then, being rewarded with a few nickels by the artist.

"Now, Ralph," said Mr. Quigg, after the trunks and other movables had been taken inside, "do you know what a poster is?"

Without waiting for a reply, he lifted from a chest a pile of gaily colored placards describing in florid style and with gorgeous illustrations, the unrivaled perfections of Lemuel Quigg as an artist, the cheapness of his prices, &c., &c.

"What do you think of these?" asked Quigg holding up one of the largest. "Won't they take the town?"

"It says you are one of the best artists in the world," said Ralph, scanning the poster gravely. "Are you?"

"Why of course I am!" Here Mr. Quigg stared at Ralph a moment, then smiled and winked

knowingly. "You have to say those things, or people will not think anything of you—see?"

"Whether it is so or not?"

"To be sure. You must blow your own horn, my boy, if you want to get on. Humbug 'em right and left, if you look to see the scads come in fast."

"I wouldn't lie just to make a little money," said Ralph so earnestly that the artist broke into a laugh.

"You're in training for an angel, you are. Look out you don't starve though, before your wings sprout. But—let's get to work."

The artist selected a number of posters which he hung over a short stick, to each end of which was attached a leather strap. This he slung around Ralph's shoulder, after the manner of a professional bill sticker.

Then placing in his hand a bucket of paste, which he had prepared that morning in the car, together with a brush, he inquired:

"Think you can find your way round town without getting lost?"

Ralph was not certain, but said he would try.

"If you get lost, just inquire your way to Main and Third Streets. That's here. Now come on, and I will show you how to stick bills. Don't take long to learn this trade."

Ralph followed Mr. Quigg to a vacant wall near by, where he took a large poster, held it flat against the wall with one hand, gave a dexterous swipe or two with the brush, reversed it, then with a few more flourishes drew back and surveyed his work triumphantly.

"Try a small one over yonder," he said to the boy.

Ralph obeyed instructions in an awkward, though passable manner, whereat the artist looked his approval.

"You'll do, I guess. Be careful about the corners. If a corner doubles on you, you're in trouble. I'll fasten up, and run round to the newspapers with a few ads. then finish fixing up. Look sharp; don't get lost, and be back as soon as you can."

Ralph took his way down Main Street, feeling, as he expressed it, a good deal like a duck out of water.

Presently he stopped at a high board fence and stuck a couple of bills without much trouble. Quigg had not instructed him where and where not to place the posters, and he was pasting a large one against the front of a closed warehouse, when some one at a near by corner called out:

"Hey, there! Yo' white boy, there! What are yo' up to?"

CHAPTER VII.

An Enraged Photographer.

Ralph continued his work, thinking some one else was referred to, when he was seized by the shoulder and jerked rudely around.

His mountain blood was aflame in an instant, and seeing only that his assailant was a negro boy but little larger than himself, he let drive with his fist and sent the other staggering against the wall.

"Gret king!" exclaimed the darky, rubbing his ear, which had received the blow, "What yo' do dat for, anyhow?"

"To teach folks to mind their own business," replied Ralph, turning to his half stuck poster again.

"P'lice have you, when yo' stick dat up dar. Disher's private proputtty."

"Can't I stick these wherever I want to?" asked Ralph, in surprise.

"Cou'se not. Better tear dat one down."

Ralph hesitated, then deeming that in his ignorance of city life, he had better be prudent, he removed the offending poster, then turned to the negro, who still stood angrily looking on.

"I'm sorry I hit you," said Ralph. "You see, you took hold of me pretty rough and I—ain't used to it exactly."

At this apology the colored lad grinned, then explained in his own terse way that only certain places were set aside for bill sticking. even these were rented out to regular bill posters who paid the city for the privilege of using them.

Ralph listened in astonishment.

"Then I ain't really got a right to stick my bills anywhere, have I?"

The darkey was not certain, but inclined to the belief that such was the case, unless Ralph had arranged matters with those who rented these privileges.

"Well, I'm much obliged for telling me," returned Ralph, picking up his bucket of paste.

"You are a good fellow, and I say again I'm sorry I hit you."

He walked slowly away, hardly knowing what to do. Soon a feeling of indignation took possession of him as he considered the peril to which Quigg had exposed him.

"He's used to towns and he must know it all. However, I'll ask this man in blue. I reckon he must be one of them police that darky spoke about."

The big officer halted as Ralph began to question him concerning the rights of bill stickers generally and his own in particular.

"Have ye any license?" demanded the policeman gruffly. "How many bills have you put up?"

"I don't know what you mean by a license," said Ralph, whose only idea regarding licenses was that they were something "to get married with."

"Ye don't! Who's your boss?"

Ralph explained as best he could Mr. Quigg's occupation and whereabouts, and also intimated that he had posted probably half a dozen bills.

"Come with me, then," said the officer. "We'll look into this."

He took Ralph by the arm and marched him back to the corner of Third and Main Streets, followed by an increasing retinue of street Arabs, both white and black.

When Mr. Quigg saw the officer he shook his fist at Ralph.

"Couldn't you keep yourself out of trouble?" he demanded.

"Why didn't you tell me that the walls were not free?" retorted Ralph. "I was told I had no right to post bills anywhere, and this man says I ought to have a license."

The artist assumed an air of injured innocence.

"Didn't I tell you to go straight to the city hall and procure my license?"

"No; you didn't," said the boy, angered at this barefaced attempt to place him in a false position.

"You told me to go out and paste up these bills, and you didn't say a word about license or anything else."

"That's what I get for picking up a lad I know nothing about," remarked Quigg, turning to the officer, with a shrug and uplifted eyebrows. "He crept into my car night before last when I was asleep, and being sorry for him I gave him some work. And now he gets me into this scrape."

"That's betwixt you and him," replied the officer indifferently. "I'm here to look out for the city. If you are going to take pictures, get out your license at wanst. And you'd better be after seeing Bud McShane the regular bill sticker, about the rint of what space ye want, or he'll be in your hair, the nixt."

With this the policeman walked leisurely away, swinging his club.

Quigg surveyed Ralph with disgust.

"Put down that bucket and brush," said he, "and unsling those posters. You're too precious green for my business, by half."

"Green I may be," returned the boy, disburdening himself at once, "but I am no liar, and I

can't say as I want to work for a liar either."

"You impudent rascal!" cried Quigg, thoroughly enraged, "I'll teach you to call names!"

Quigg was small for a man, and Ralph large for a boy of his age. When the former advanced threateningly, the mountain lad stood firm and eyed his employer steadily.

"You can talk as you please, Mr. Quigg; but—keep your hands off."

The little artist stormed and threatened, but came no nearer.

"If you had been sharp," said he "you would have posted those bills in a hurry and dodged the police. I could have taken pictures for a few days, then boarded the train before the authorities got onto the scheme."

"That wouldn't be honest, would it?"

"Honest! Get out of here. What you've eaten is good pay for the little you've done. As it is, I shall have a fine bill to settle with the city on account of your folly."

"You did not care whether I got into trouble or not, so you saved a little by swindling the city. That's about what it amounts to, as far as I can make out."

"Get out, I say. Tramp! Scat with you!"

Mr. Quigg fairly danced with futile anger, while Ralph, seeing the uselessness of further words, walked rapidly off.

The small crowd disappointed in beholding a fight, slowly dispersed. The last Ralph saw of his former "boss," the latter was trying to secure another assistant from the idle boys looking on.

"Well," thought the mountain lad, as he walked aimlessly up one of the principal streets, "I am no worse off than I was before I met that fellow. I'm further on my way, wherever I fetch up at, and I haven't had to spend any money yet."

The sights and sounds of city life so interested him for the next hour or two, that he partially forgot the exigencies of his situation in contemplating the strange scenes by which he was surrounded.

The street cars, the drays, the carriages, and the other intermingling vehicles puzzled his senses and deafened his ears.

"What a racket they keep up," thought he. "It's a wonder they don't run into each other! And the women! I never saw such dressin' before, nor so many pretty girls. Our mountain folks on meeting day ain't nowhere. The houses are so high I don't see how they ever climb to the top. I'd just as soon crawl up old Peaky Top back of our cabin on Hiawassee."

Down at the railroad station he narrowly escaped being run over by a swiftly moving engine. Its shrill whistle and the objurgations of the fireman as it passed, startled him not a little.

For some time he watched the movements of trains and the shifting of cars, and finally found his way into the general waiting room for passengers. A red shirted bootblack accosted him in a bantering tone.

"Hey, country! Have your mud splashers shined? Only a nickel."

"I'll shine your nose with my fist, if you don't let me alone," said Ralph, with so fierce a scowl that the boy edged away.

The mountain lad, though but half comprehending the bootblack's meaning, was aware that he was being made game of. He paused before a full length mirror in the toilet room, and for the first time in his life obtained a good view of his entire person.

"I declare! That looking glass is a sight. I'm a sight, too. I don't wonder folks call me country."

He was sharp enough to realize the difference in appearance, between himself in his home made outfit and the generally smart youth of the city. Yet he could hardly define wherein the contrast consisted.

"I know I ain't no fool," was his reflection, "yet I know I must look like one to these sassy town fellows."

The sight of an Italian fruit and cake stand reminded him that he was hungry, so he invested a nickel in a frugal supply of gingerbread, which he munched as he stood on the curb.

"Take banana. T'ree fo' five centa," urged the black eyed girl, with large ear rings, who had supplied his wants.

Ralph eyed the pendulous fruit dubiously. He had never seen anything like it before.

"Looks some like skinned sweet taters," he said to himself. "Are they good?" he queried aloud.

"Verra goot; go nice wiz shinger braad."

"All right. Give me three," and he parted with another five cents, then bit into the fruit without more ado.

The girl tried in vain to smother her laughter.

"Zat nota ze way. You peel um—so." She accompanied her words by stripping the skin from one. "Now; be ready fo' eat."

Ralph turned away with his relish for new delicacies embittered by another reminder of his worldly deficiencies.

"I never know'd before how ignorant we mountain folks are. Even that foreign girl as can hardly talk at all, laughed at my way of doing." He dropped the bananas into the paper bag holding the gingerbread, and frowned heavily. Then he set his lips firmly together. "I will not let 'em down me this way. I'll learn their ways or die a trying."

After enunciating this resolve, he felt better. Presently he sat down on a door step at the entrance to an alley and ate his lunch with a better appetite.

"These—what was it she called 'em?—these bernanas ain't so bad after all," he said to himself. "Taste a little like apples, seems like."

While he sat there some bells began ringing furiously and a steam fire engine rushed by. The smoke, flame, roar and speed, stirred his blood, while the singular, not to say splendid, appearance of the outfit, with its bright brass work and powerful horses, was at once fascinating and terrible.

Having finished his lunch he followed the crowd that was surging along the street and presently came in sight of the burning building, which was a large cotton warehouse. He soon was in the midst of a pushing, noisy mass of people, with eyes only for the fire, the rolling smoke, and the puffing engines.

Suddenly he felt a touch upon his person, which, though light as thistle down, almost thrilled him with an indefinite sense of alarm. Reaching quickly downward he grasped a wrist that was not his own.

CHAPTER VIII.

Captain Shard's Proposal.

The arm Ralph seized was violently jerked and twisted, but the mountain boy was strong for his age, and held on tight.

Turning at the same instant he found himself facing the same negro boy, who had probably saved him from arrest that morning by warning him regarding the bill posting.

"What did you want in my pocket?" demanded Ralph, feeling with his free hand to assure himself that his money was safe.

"Hush!" half whispered the darky. "I didn't see hit was yo'. Deed I didn't, suh."

Ralph regarded the negro steadily, as it dawned upon his crude conceptions that the other was a thief. Then he thought of the service the fellow had unwittingly done him, and at once released his grip.

"Go," said he contemptuously. "Don't let me see you round here any more."

The negro disappeared in the crowd, one of whom said to the mountain boy:

"Why didn't you hand him over to yonder policeman?"

"Well—because I sort of felt sorry for the fool," was the explanation Ralph would vouchsafe as he, too, turned away and extricated himself from the throng.

After that he wandered about the city, finding something to excite his wonder or admiration at every turn, until the lowness of the western sun admonished him that he had better begin to look out for supper and bed.

First he stepped into an area way, and placed his money in an inside pocket.

"Best to be on the safe side," thought he, as he returned to the street. "Looks like in these towns they'd steal a man's britches if they could pull 'em off without his knowing it. Hullo! That must be the captain's livery stable."

Directly across the street was a large wooden building, on the front of which, in enormous letters, were these words:

SHARD'S LIVERY STABLE.

While Ralph was debating whether he should again make himself known, the captain drove forth from the stable in a buggy. His quick eye lighted upon Ralph at once.

"Come here," he called, beckoning also with his finger. "I see you are still about," he added as Ralph crossed over.

"Yes, but I ain't posting bills any more."

"Then your job didn't last long?"

Ralph frankly related the cause and manner of his discharge by Mr. Quigg, whereat the captain laughed heartily.

"Well," said he, "I don't think you missed much, if that is the sort of a man he is. I'm city auditor, and I will see that Quigg, or whatever his name is, don't cheat the city. What are you going to do?"

Shard bent his eyes sharply on Ralph, and once more the boy felt uncomfortable. He replied, however, that he would find something before long.

"You stay with my foreman tonight," the captain said briskly. "Emmons!" to some one inside. "This lad will eat and sleep with you. I want you to take good care of him."

Emmons, without appearing, grunted a distant assent. Ralph ventured a protest.

"I can find a lodging, captain," he began.

"Hut tut! You're too green yet to be left alone all night in this town. Not a word. You stay with Emmons. In the morning I will let you know of a plan I am considering. It may be good for you."

Captain Shard gathered up his reins, nodded carelessly, and went off down the street in a small cloud of dust.

Ralph went into the stable, not seeing clearly how to refuse, though hardly at ease in his mind. As he stood in the doorway, looking along a double line of vehicles of all sorts backed against the wall, a hoarse voice bade him come into the office.

"Rather a small hole, but large enough for two," remarked Emmons from a high stool as Ralph entered a box of a place, about eight by ten, with a desk, a chair, stool, and a few lap robes in a corner as the furnishings thereof.

Emmons was a squat, thick set personage, with most of his face hidden behind a tremendous beard. He cast a careless glance at the boy, then shutting a ledger said:

"Let's go to supper."

He seized an old palmetto hat, and leaving the stables, dived down a side street, and into a cheap restaurant near by.

Ralph followed. They seated themselves at one of a row of pine tables, covered with oilcloth, and well sprinkled with crumbs and flies.

"Better take beef stew," remarked Emmons, seizing some bread and eating ravenously. "Get more if you're hungry."

Two beef stews were therefore ordered, and brought with a great clatter of table ware. Emmons fell to as if he had not broken his fast that day.

Ralph did not like the chicory coffee, though he did justice to the stew. The crowd of rapid eaters, the noisy rush and yells of the waiters, the steam fly fans, and the hard faced cashier, all excited his curiosity.

Two checks were thrown down. Emmons pounced upon both, though Ralph did not understand what they meant, until he saw the stable man lay them, accompanied by two dimes, upon the desk at the door.

"Why did you not let me pay mine?" he asked.

"All right. Boss's orders."

The evening passed quietly, the foreman talking but little, though he entertained Ralph for a time by playing on a French harp, or mouth organ.

When bedtime came he ushered the boy into a sort of cubby hole behind the office that was barely large enough to afford space for undressing beside the bed. In five minutes Emmons was snoring lustily, though Ralph lay long awake, thinking over the various phases of his situation and prospects.

He was routed out early in the morning to help the foreman feed the horses and mules in the stables underneath, and kept busy for an hour, after which they took breakfast at the restaurant where they had procured their supper.

About nine o'clock Captain Shard arrived in his buggy from his home in the suburbs.

"Come in here, Ralph," said he, as Emmons took the horse. "I want to have a talk with you."

He led the way into the office, closed the door, and fixed his eyes intently on Ralph, who followed. Then he frowned, appeared to ponder for a moment, and finally cleared his brow as he looked up again.

"How would you like to follow the sea for a living?" he at length demanded.

"Follow the sea?" repeated Ralph as if he hardly comprehended. "Do you mean how would I like to be a sailor?"

"Something of the kind. You would begin as cabin boy, probably. If you are smart and willing you would soon climb up higher. By the time you are eighteen, you should be an A 1 seaman, earning at least twenty dollars a month and your keep."

Among the few books the boy had somehow got hold of in the mountains, one of the most treasured was a copy of Marryat's "Midshipman Easy." He felt a thrill now, as he pictured himself in a position to emulate, in a measure, some of the adventures therein so graphically depicted. The distant ocean held up to his anticipation the stirring pleasures of a life on the wave, while veiling from his boyish ignorance its overmastering hardships.

The captain saw his face light up, and proceeded to explain further.

"I have a cousin who runs a schooner in the West Indies trade. He is now at the Marshall House, Savannah. His vessel is somewhere near there. Now I can get you a good berth with him, I know. I have done him a few favors, and he is not ungrateful.

"Emmons, here, is going to start today with a gang of mules for Augusta. You can help him on that far, and in payment he will buy you a ticket to Savannah. I will give you a letter to my cousin, and also write him by mail that you are on the way. Now, what do you think of that?"

"Sounds mighty nice—almost too nice," thought Ralph, who was shrewd enough to wonder why Shard—whom he had been warned against—should put himself out to serve a Granger.

"Perhaps he is sick of the feud, like me. I'm sure I would do him a favor, if he is half a Vaughn. By granny! I believe I will take him up. Aunt Dopples don't know everything."

"Think over it well," added the captain, noticing the boy's reflective manner. "A sailor's life is by no means easy, yet a bright, active lad can rise. Many a captain began before the mast."

Shard was smiling seductively, though his gaze seemed hard and penetrating. He hung over the lad not unlike some bird of prey, waiting for a favorable chance to pounce.

"All right," said Ralph at last. "I will go and feel thankful for the chance, if you will answer me one question. Why should you be so—so willing to do a favor to me. In the mountains folks would think you were crazy."

"Ha! That miserable old feud again. My boy, I have outgrown it; have been too much in the world. I see in you a bright lad, who only needs to be started in order to make his own way. Why should I not start you as well as any one else, especially when it costs me nothing but the stroke of a pen? Besides your going to Augusta saves me the expense of hiring an extra hand."

All this seemed so reasonable that Ralph's weakening scruples entirely vanished. He assented without further parley to Captain Shard's offer, and was straightway placed under the supervision of the foreman, who was in a rear stable yard haltering a small drove of mules together in squads.

Ralph lent active assistance, and in half an hour they were ready to start. One mule in each bunch was saddled. Extra clothing was rolled in blankets, and strapped behind the saddles.

Emmons disappeared in the direction of the office. When he returned the captain came with him, bearing in his hand a letter.

"Here is your introduction to Captain Gary, the gentleman whom you will find at the Marshall House in Savannah. Suppose you read it to see that all is square and above board."

"Oh, it's all right, I reckon," replied Ralph carelessly.

"Yes, it is all right, but I would rather you looked for yourself before leaving. Should anything go wrong—which I do not anticipate at all—I wish to feel exonerated in your mind, my boy."

The captain's teeth gleamed almost fiercely as he smiled in a friendly manner, though his eyes never relented in their hard, unfeeling stare.

Ralph drew forth the note from the envelope and read:—

MY DEAR COUSIN:

This will make you acquainted with a youth in whose welfare I already feel a deep interest. He has made up his mind to learn to be a sailor, and I shall take it very kindly if you will take charge of him, and see what he can do. Give him as easy a berth as you can, and let me know from time to time what progress he is making. His name is Ralph Granger, and he is as plucky as he looks.

Your cousin and friend,
THEODORE SHARD.

To CAPTAIN MARK GARY,
Marshall House, Savannah.

This seemed flattering enough. As Ralph expressed his thanks, he repressed a fleeting idea that the tone of the letter was most too much that way.

Shard shook him by the hand, and was about to retire when he appeared to recollect something.

"Need any money, for clothes, and so on?"

"I have enough to do me," said Ralph. "You have done enough already, and I——"

"Never mind that. Emmons will settle board bills, and get your ticket in Augusta. Good by. Let me hear a good account of you when Gary writes."

With a final nod and smile that was almost fatherly, the captain disappeared.

Emmons had already mounted. Ralph quickly did likewise, and the two, with their four footed charges, rode out of the yard through a gate that was closed behind them by a negro hostler.

At first the five mules Ralph was leading, besides the one he rode, did not travel well together. His arm was wrenched almost unbearably in the effort to keep them up to the pace Emmons was setting.

The latter, looking back, called out:

"Make your halter fast to your saddle bow. Then lay the whip on."

The boy did so, and they were presently clattering down the street at a pace that made a stray policeman wave his club warningly. Soon they were in the suburbs, and thence the open country came into view, where truck farms and fruit orchards gave way to green fields of cotton and corn.

The negroes seemed to be everywhere. At a bridge a couple of black fishermen bobbed up from behind an abutment, scaring the rear squad of mules.

The five lead ones pressed heavily upon the one Ralph was riding.

"Look out!" cried one of the darkies. "Yo'se gwine over de bank! Watch out, I say!"

CHAPTER IX.

Ralph Arrives at Savannah.

The warning was too late to be effectual. It might not have done any good, anyhow, as under the pressure of five frightened mules, the one Ralph bestrode was pushed to the very verge of the high embankment leading up to the bridge.

The boy saw the inevitable catastrophe that was coming. He released his feet from the stirrups, unwound the halter from the saddle bow and threw himself on the back of the next mule just as the one he had been riding toppled over the embankment, down which it rolled clumsily to the bottom.

Ralph spurred the other on vigorously towards the bridge, while the two negroes, who were responsible for the disaster, seized the rope that held the animals and between the three further mischief was averted.

But it was a very close shave. Had the whole bunch gone, Ralph's life might have been sacrificed, to say nothing of damage to the mules.

Emmons now came cantering back with his charges just as the fallen mule regained its feet with the saddle between its legs.

"What d'ye mean?" he scolded. "Hain't you learned to ride yet?"

Ralph, rather provoked and much out of breath, was silent, but the darkies gave loud and voluble explanations, tending mostly to exculpate themselves. Then they brought up the fallen mule, fixed the saddle and looked as if they would not have objected to a small reward.

"Hurry, Ralph!" exclaimed Emmons, tossing them a dime. "We got no time to lose. Glad there's no bones broken, but you must look sharp."

Ralph remounted and they were soon on the way again. For the next two or three days they passed through a mostly level country, where great cotton plantations, with stretches of swamp between, alternated with broad pine barrens.

In these last the wind sighed mournfully, and the soil looked so poor that the mountain boy felt that there was a section worse off than his own steep and gravelly native land.

They arrived in Augusta by way of a ferry across the dirty, narrow river that flows near the city. The mules were duly delivered to the proper parties and the two at last felt at leisure to do as they pleased.

Emmons took Ralph to a soda fountain.

"What will you have?" he asked.

"I don't know; whatever you like," said the boy, once more at sea as to what he might expect.

When the effervescent liquid foamed and fizzed, Ralph stared in amazement.

"Must I drink it?" he faltered, noticing the ease with which Emmons swallowed his.

"Of course, you must. Did you think it was to wash with?"

Ralph afterward averred that it tasted better than it sounded, but again pondered over the—to him—increasing mysteries of civilization. They had a late dinner, then made their way to the railroad depot, where Emmons bought and gave to Ralph his ticket for Savannah by the train which was to leave in an hour.

"I'll be goin' back to see about the money for them mules," said Emmons at length. "Well, good by. Swing tight to your cash, and write to us when ye get to Savanny."

As the foreman took his big beard out of sight somebody out where the cars were shouted:

"All aboard! All aboard!"

Ralph saw people rushing out and jumping on the train that was on the point of starting. He suddenly was seized by an idea that he was about to be left. So he ran out with the crowd and was about to climb into a drawing room coach, when a trim colored man dressed in blue, who was standing at the steps, stopped him.

"Let's see your ticket please."

Ralph drew it forth and was about to hurry on in, when the porter handed it back.

"Dis ain't your train, boy," said he with a somewhat contemptuous accent. "Dis yere's a parlor coach fo' Atlanty."

"Wh—where is my train then?" asked Ralph, not knowing what to do next.

"Ain't made up yet," called the porter as the cars moved away, leaving the lad looking about him rather foolishly.

"Made a jack of myself again," said he, as he remembered that the agent had told Emmons when they bought their tickets, that the Savannah train would not leave for an hour.

He returned to the waiting room and sat there very quietly until the time was nearly up, then went out and found the proper car without further difficulty.

That long night's ride was interesting though tiresome. Ralph tried to count the telegraph poles without understanding much about their uses.

The low, level country, the tall trunks of the pines, the ever present negroes, the sparks from the engine, and the occasional interruptions from the conductor, kept him from sleep until long after midnight.

Finally, however, he coiled himself up on the seat and knew nothing more until some one shook him by the shoulder.

"Is yo' gwine ter stay in yere all day?" asked a voice.

Ralph sat up and rubbed his eyes. The sun was shining and the car empty, with the exception of himself and a negro brakeman, who had awakened him from an unusually sound slumber.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"We'se in Savanny. Been yere nigh 'bout an hour. I seed yo' was tired, an' I 'lowed I'd let yer sleep. But I'se got ter sweep out now."

When Ralph emerged from the depot he found himself on a sandy unpaved street, with many half shabby frame houses about and a number of tall pines in the distance.

He followed a line of trucks and drays towards the business part of the city, and presently dropped into a cheap eating house for breakfast.

After that he began to inquire for the Marshall House, which he found to be a large, red brick hostelry, with a broad second story veranda in front. The sidewalk beneath was sprinkled with chairs partially occupied by men reading their morning papers or smoking.

A few glanced curiously at the roughly dressed boy, who made his way into a large hall and office combined, where trunks and grips were stacked up by the score, and trim porters and waiters were gliding to and fro.

He instantly felt himself out of place amid those well dressed people, and smart servants. It was his first experience with a first class city hotel.

So low did his courage ebb at first that he very nearly made up his mind to retreat without attempting to see Captain Gary. In his unwashed, uncombed condition, the contrast between himself and those around was embarrassing enough even to his crude conception.

He stood gazing about in a half helpless manner, not knowing to whom to apply for information.

"Where can I find Captain Gary?" he asked at length of a porter who happened to be lounging near.

The negro inspected Ralph from head to foot, then demanded: "Do he stop yere?"

"Yes. I have a letter for him."

"Oh! Dat all is it?" The porter had found it hard to reconcile Ralph's appearance with any other connection with a guest of the hotel than a menial one. "Yo' go right up to de office over dar and gin it to the clerk. He see Cap'n Gary gits um."

"But—but I have to see the captain myself," urged Ralph.

"What yo' reckon a gen'leman like he wanter sech a boy as you? Huh?"

Ralph felt that his clothes were against him, but he did not propose to be bullied by a servant and a negro at that.

"Look here," said he. "I want to see Captain Gary and I'm going to see him, too. I've got business with him—d'ye understand?"

"Well den," replied the porter insolently, "s'posen yo' find where he is yo'self."

Ralph, without another word, marched straight to the clerk's desk.

CHAPTER X.

The Captain Talks With Ralph.

Ralph's previous diffidence disappeared under the flush of anger aroused by the porter's words.

"Mister," said he addressing the stylish looking clerk, who at first barely glanced at the lad, "I was sent here from Columbia to see a man who stops here called Captain Gary. That nigger over there, when I asked him where the man was, told me to hunt him up myself. I never was in your tavern before. How can I find him, I'd like to know?"

Before Ralph had concluded, the clerk was inspecting his person curiously. Ralph again thought of his clothes.

"I don't look very stylish," said he, "and I know it; but I've got business with Captain Gary all the same."

"Front!" called the clerk, without addressing Ralph.

A smart mulatto boy, uniformed in blue and red, sprang from a bench where several others similarly clad were seated.

"Show this—this person to forty nine," directed the clerk, then turned to another inquirer as if he had already forgotten Ralph's existence.

"There's one thing certain," thought the lad, as he followed the call boy down a long hall, up one flight of stairs and into a richly carpeted corridor, "we mountain folks can beat these city dudes on manners, if we can't in anything else."

The boy knocked at a door and a voice almost feminine in musical softness bade them "Come in."

"Some one to see yo', suh," said the messenger, pushing Ralph inside and closing the door.

The mountain youth found himself alone with a slender, exceedingly handsome man, so slight of figure and fair in complexion as to fully bear out in his appearance the womanly resemblance suggested by his voice.

He was dressed in a walking suit of a subdued gray tint, with patent leather gaiters, and his hands were white, while his fingers sparkled with one or two jeweled rings. His linen was spotless and in his lemon colored neck tie shone a large diamond.

He was reclining in an easy chair, smoking a cigarette, and as he languidly surveyed Ralph, the boy felt that here was a sea captain different from those he had read of or imagined.

"Well, my lad, what is it you want of me?" inquired the man.

"My name is Ralph Granger. I have a letter for you from Captain Shard. He said you would understand."

Gary took the missive which Ralph now produced, opened it, and glanced through it carelessly, then extended his hand.

"Glad to see you," said he softly. "So you want to try the sea, eh? Well, any one coming from my cousin Shard is always sure of a welcome from me."

Here he smiled very sweetly and waved his beringed fingers. "Stand more in the light, please. I want to take a good look at you, Ralph."

As he inspected the boy from under his half closed lashes, his eyes shone curiously.

"Now, Ralph," continued he with lazy cordiality, as if he had known the youth for weeks instead of minutes, "what do you know about a sailor's life?"

"I don't know anything, except—except,"—Ralph hesitated.

"Well?" suggested the captain inquiringly, and with an enchanting smile.

"I've read a book or two about sea life and ships, and all that. Outside of that I ain't posted."

"I see. Did you bring any kit along?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Outfit, clothes, baggage, you know."

"I've got a bundle of clothes down at the car shed."

"Ah—yes." The captain reflected a moment.

"My boatswain is to be here at eleven sharp. I guess you had better go aboard with him."

"Go where, sir?"

"Down to the ship. We call it going aboard, you see," and once more Captain Gary smiled with almost infantile amiability. "Been to breakfast? Yes? Well, then, suppose you take a stroll about and see the town. Don't get lost, and be sure and be back by eleven. My room is forty nine; can you recollect that?"

Ralph thought he could, and was about to withdraw when the captain pulled out a silver dollar.

"You may need a little spending money," said he. "Only I hope you won't buy tobacco. Lads of your age, you know, are best without it, and as for cards——"

Ralph hastened to assure him that he not only did not smoke or gamble, but that he had some money of his own.

"Take this, however. We will call it a slight advance on your wages."

The captain insisted so genially that Ralph could not refuse.

"Looks like I've dropped into a soft snap at last," thought he, as he found his way to the street. "I wonder if many ship captains are like him? Them as I have read of were mostly great, big, strapping, swearing sort of fellows, ready to knock a body down when things don't go to suit 'em. Well, I'm glad I've got such an easy going boss to learn a sailor's trade under. I wonder where we will sail to first? I hope it will be a good long voyage where I can see and learn a heap."

After Ralph's departure Captain Gary sank back into his chair and smoked his cigarette out. Then he produced another letter, addressed in the same hand as the one given him by Ralph, and spread them out together on his knees.

"So," said he, half aloud, while certain hard lines appeared on his face that changed its entire expression to one of callous severity, "my good cousin wants me to put this lad through. What is there about the boy that he dislikes? Well, Theodore has done me more than one good turn. What is a lad more or less?"

He stared at the wall before him, disclosing in his now widely open eyes a brightness as of steel, for the feminine softness had vanished utterly. "Tom Bludson will make him wish he had never been born as quickly as even Shard could desire. To make sure, we might leave him behind when we reach the Gold Coast. However, all this can be decided later."

The captain lighted another cigarette, rang for a mint julep, then addressed himself to some writing, the materials for which were scattered about on a table by the window. He wrote several letters, made out some orders and accounts, smoking the while and sipping his julep through a long rye straw from time to time.

At last, promptly on the stroke of eleven, appeared a tall, brawny, mahogany faced seaman, clad in blue flannels of a nautical cut. This personage pulled off a round, flat, visorless cap, and made a half military salute upon entering in obedience to the captain's summons.

"That you, Ralph?" said the latter softly but without looking up. "That's right. Always be prompt, and you will be—a—hello!" raising his eyes. "What the dev—oh! It's you, is it, Tom?"

"Me it are, sir," replied the tall sailor, again ducking his head. "I was to report at 'leven—shore time."

"I thought it was that cursed boy," returned the captain in a sharp, quick tone, totally unlike the soothing drawl he had used in addressing Ralph. "Where can he be, I wonder?"

The boatswain, comprehending that the captain was making inquiry rather of himself than his auditor, remained discreetly silent, merely availing himself of a chance to throw a tremendous quid of "navy" into the fireplace.

"I want you to take him on board, Tom," added Gary, turning round. "You must see him stowed before I go down."

"Where will I find him, sir?"

"The deuce only knows. I told him to take a run round, but to show up at eleven. He is a thorough backwoods rooster and he may have got lost. Suppose you take a turn round the square and look him up. Don't be gone long. I have stores yet to go down by tug."

"Aye, aye, sir," quoth Bludson, and promptly vanished.

The captain had hardly buried himself in his accounts again, before the boatswain reappeared, holding Ralph by the collar. The lad had resisted at first, but found himself helpless in the grasp of the gigantic seaman and now ceased his struggles, though his face was red with vexation.

"Be this the chap?" asked Tom.

"Yes; you may turn him loose, however."

The captain's teeth shone very white, so broad was the smile with which he strove to conceal the scowl that had at first mantled his brow at sight of Ralph.

"My boy," continued he, "you will not feel hurt when I tell you that punctuality is one of the first requisites of success in the calling you have chosen."

"I lost my way for a little while," began Ralph, but the captain signified that the tardiness was pardoned already.

"You see we sail tonight on the flood," he added, "and we have yet much to do. This is our boatswain or bos'n—as we call them—Mr. Bludson. He will accompany you to the ship. Perhaps you will not mind assisting him a little in seeing to some stores that are yet to go down. Tom, you must be careful of young Granger. We already take a great interest in his welfare."

Tom looked puzzled at first, but when the captain smiled once more he seemed relieved. Evidently he understood that smile.

Ralph thought he did too, and he again felt that he was lucky in having so kind hearted a captain.

After that Gary and Bludson conferred together over matters concerning the ship, while Ralph twirled his cap and placed his bundle beside him on the carpet. Some fifteen minutes might have thus passed, then the boatswain straightened up, thrust some papers the captain had given him into his hip pocket, and turned to the door.

"Now, youngster," said he, "we'll get sail."

"Stay with Bludson, Ralph," called the captain, waving his hand gracefully; "he will see you through in fine shape."

"Aye, aye. I warrant I see him through," echoed the boatswain hoarsely as the two went out.

In Ralph's opinion the captain was much more agreeable and "well mannered" than his subordinate. In the hall below they encountered a heavy set, bushy bearded man in navy blue, at sight of whom Bludson touched his cap. The man looked so sharply at Ralph that the boy inquired:

"Who is that, Mr. Bludson?"

"That's our first mate, and a rare un he is, too."

"A rare one. What do you mean by that?"

"Oh! You'll find out soon enough. Best not ask too many questions. Howsoever, I'll give ye one bit of advice, as is worth a heap to landsmen aboard ship, and it shan't cost 'e a cent. That is keep your eyes peeled and your tongue betwixt your teeth. That's the way to larn and keep a whole skin."

All this was rather enigmatical, but Ralph understood that he was not to ask any questions.

After that Mr. Bludson maintained a dignified silence as he plunged, with Ralph at his side, into the regions of the wholesale trade. They called at several grocery and provision stores, and also at a ship chandler's. The boatswain had sundry talks with sundry clerks and some drays were loaded.

Finally the two emerged upon the river front where lay, among other craft, a steam tug with a gang plank ashore. Tom pulled off his coat and gave it to Ralph, saying:

"Climb aboard with this, then come back and bear a hand."

The lad ran down the plank and deposited the boatswain's jacket and his bundle in the helmsman's closet, then made his way back and took hold of the incoming freight with a will.

In half an hour the stores were on board, and the tug, casting loose, began to steam swiftly down the river.

It being Ralph's first experience afloat, the swift, gliding motion and the noisy engine interested him greatly. The novelty was, in its way, as exciting as his first car ride.

"What is it makes things go?" he asked of Bludson, who was sprawled upon a coil of cable, smoking a short black pipe.

"The ingine and the propeller, ye lubber," replied the latter. "Did 'e think it was wings?"

"But what is a propeller?"

"Ah! The ign'erance of land folks! It do beat all. The propeller—why the propeller is a propeller, of course. What else did 'e think it were."

"I know, but——"

"Now look here, youngster. Watching is one thing and always wanting to know is another. Stow your gaff, as I said afore, and use your peepers."

After this rebuff Ralph asked no more questions of his superior, but he faithfully obeyed the injunction as to "keeping a bright lookout."

CHAPTER XI.

Aboard the Curlew.

They steamed along between low marshy banks for an hour or two, then the river began to widen into an irregularly shaped bay. Sundry low lying islands, covered with strange semi-tropic vegetation, rose up seaward, and by and by a sound as of muffled thunder could be heard.

As they passed old Fort Pulaski, Ralph ventured to question the pilot on the roof. This grizzled boatman was gruff, but obliging.

"It's the roar of the breakers, you hear," said he. "That is an old fort. Good for a siege once—no good now. And yonder—do you see that low lying, black schooner under the lee of Tybee light?"

"Where?" inquired Ralph, leaning out of the little pilot house window.

The pilot pointed, but it was quite a minute before the boy could distinguish the vessel. When he did, all his unaccustomed eye could make out, was a narrow dark line surmounted by a dim tracery of spars that were barely relieved by the white beach behind.

Still further beyond rose the towering white lighthouse.

"I believe I do see it," he said at length.

"Well, that's the Curlew. She's a daisy on the wind, or for that matter sailing free either. There ain't a sweeter looking fore-an-after on this coast."

"Is that Captain Gary's ship?" asked Ralph, for he had not heard the name of the vessel mentioned before.

"Well, you are an ignoramus. Don't know the name of the craft you're shipping on."

The old pilot looked disgusted. "Where'd you get your trainin'?"

When Ralph explained that this was his first sight of salt water, and that he had seen the captain for the first time that morning, the pilot shook his grizzled head doubtfully.

"Captain Gary is a deep one, that's what he is. He was mighty milk and watery, wasn't he? I thought so. Know where you're bound for?"

Ralph had not the least idea, but felt no uneasiness, as the captain was so kind; had treated him almost like a son.

"Did eh! Well, now see here. It's none of my business, but I believe in a fair shake." The pilot glanced round and noticing the boatswain sauntering toward them, he bent forward and concluded in an undertone: "When you get aboard and out to sea, you keep your eyes open and watch out for squalls. D'ye hear. Watch out for squalls."

The boy heard but did not understand. The pilot's manner, however, impressed him as unusual. He felt vaguely uncomfortable, as the old man, after a knowing wink or two, fixed his eyes upon the course he was steering, and thereafter ignored Ralph's presence entirely.

Bludson cast a searching glance at them both, then ordered Ralph to go below and bring up his coat. The lad obeyed and when he returned, the tug had forged past an island headland, disclosing to them a fine view of the open ocean.

Ralph uttered an exclamation of wonder, and for five minutes or more he leaned against the guard rail, feasting his eyes on the heaving expanse of blue, foam dotted water near the inlet, where the rollers were breaking upon the bar.

"It's the greatest sight I ever saw," he said turning to Bludson, who merely grunted. "How blue it looks! I suppose those changing lines of white are the breakers. Well, well! This beats the mountains. I wish I was out there right now."

"You'd be wishing yourself ashore soon," returned Tom apathetically. "Wait till 'e gets seasick."

"What is that? Does the sea make you sick?"

"I should say it do. But there's a mighty fine cure for all that. Aye, 'tis a bracin', healthful cure."

"Tell me, Mr. Bludson. You know I might get seasick, too."

"Ye be bound to. Then cap'n 'e'll say lay forrid there and trice up that fo'topmast stays'l brace; and there you is first 'e know fifty feet above the fo' s'l boom, a takin' a good look of an hour or so at old Neptune. Well, if that don't fetch 'e all right, cap'n 'e'll say 'Reeve a slip knot under his arms' which, no sooner done than overboard you goes for a dip or two. That always brings 'em round."

"Looks like a queer way to cure a sick man," commented Ralph, who but half comprehended the boatswain's lingo.

"It beats the doctor though all the same," said Tom with rather a heartless grin. "But look round. What do 'e think of the Curlew now? Ain't she a beauty?"

The tug had got near enough to enable the proportions of the vessel to be seen quite distinctly.

Even to Ralph she was a graceful and pleasing sight. The long, low, black hull exhibited curves as perfect as the flowing sweep of a rainbow. The tall mast, the tapering tracery of spars, the snowy canvas and the general trim and orderly air maintained, were all attractive to the eye.

In a brief time, the tug was lying alongside and the stores transferred to the schooner's hold in short order. A dozen or more catlike sailors assisted the crew of the tug, and Ralph made himself useful.

When the tug sheered off, the boy leaning over the side of the schooner, beheld the pilot shake his head in a doubtful way as he answered Ralph's farewell wave of the hand.

"So I must look out for squalls, must I?" he reflected. "I wonder what the man meant. Never mind. I am young, stout, and I'm not afraid. So I guess I won't worry. So nice a man as Captain Gary won't see a boy put upon, I know."

A heavy hand came down on his shoulder.

"Come now! We don't want no idlin' or staring over the side on this craft. Come along and stow your kit and sling your hammock. Then we'll eat a bite—you and me."

Thus roused, he followed Tom Bludson into the forecabin, where a low but roomy apartment was lighted both by a swinging lamp and the daylight streaming through the narrow companionway. There was a double row of bunks on either hand and overhead were hooks to swing hammocks in the space between.

Bludson unslung a hammock from the wall and tossed it to Ralph. There was a blanket inside.

"Wrap your clothes in that blanket and give the hammock a turn or two—so." The boatswain accompanied his words by showing Ralph how a hammock is folded and slung to the hooks overhead when not in use.

"Now," he added, "it's stowed for the day. When bedtime comes you must unslung and hang it as the rest do. You see there's not enough bunks for the crew, so some has to use hammocks."

After that Tom led the way to the cook's galley, a mere closet of a place just abaft the foremast. In entering one went down two or three steps. Here they found Neb (short for Nebraska), the cook, a short, fat jolly looking negro, who with his stove and cooking utensils so completely filled up the place that Ralph was puzzled to see how the man ever managed to cook at all. Every bit of space was utilized, however. There were drawers and lockers under shelves and tables, while overhead were swinging racks for dishes and provisions.

"Hi, Marse Tom, who be dat yo' got dar? One er dese yere shore kids?"

"Yes, he's a shore kid, Neb. Him and me haven't had any dinner. Can't you shake us up a bit of something. Salt horse and skilly will do, if nothin' else is handy."

Neb was acquiescent and the boatswain and his charge were soon discussing a hearty meal with molasses, vinegar and water for a beverage instead of coffee.

After that Bludson took Ralph aft and introduced him to the second mate, Mr. Duff, a slim, active, pleasant looking young man of four and twenty, who was superintending the coiling of a spare cable in a cuddy hole beneath the wheel.

"New boy, eh," said he, giving Ralph a brief but keen inspection. "I thought the captain swore that he wanted no more boys, after Bunty gave him the slip."

Bunty, Ralph afterward learned, had run away at a foreign port with a small sum of money not his own.

"Cap'n's changed his mind then, sir," returned Tom, "He said as 'e wanted p'tickler care taken of this kid, and he was to wait in the cabin till 'e gets his sea legs on so to speak."

"What' your name?" To Ralph, then turning to the men: "Easy there. Lay her even, can't you."

Ralph replied and Bludson added:

"Blest if the kid's ever seen the ocean before. He don't know a brace from a marlin spike."

"I can learn, I reckon," said Ralph so heartily that Mr. Duff took a second look at the boy, then smiled to himself.

"Run down to the cabin and fetch me up the doctor," said the mate. "Yon's the way."

He pointed towards the companionway.

Ralph, somewhat puzzled, started down, but fancied he heard a sound of smothered laughter as he passed from sight.

"They're making fun of me," thought he. "I don't believe there is any doctor here."

The two men having finished with the cable went forward, just as Ralph reappeared bearing a box of patent pills he had found below.

"That's the nearest thing to a doctor I could find," said he.

The mate roared with laughter, while Long Tom grinned broadly, and the sailors snickered.

"I guess you'll do, my lad," exclaimed Mr. Duff in high good humor. "Come with me and I will show you what the doctor is. Bludson, have that peak block on the foresail gaff slung a little higher. I think she will hoist easier."

"Aye, aye, sir," returned the boatswain, while Ralph, following the mate, again descended to the cabin.

The cabin was roomy, well carpeted, and contained a stationary table through the center of which ran the mainmast of the schooner. At the stern were two staterooms; one for the captain and the other for the two mates. Lockers and drawers were scattered about, and a mirror with a picture or two was attached to the walls.

On a cushioned seat at one side lay a large white cat.

"That's Doctor," said the mate. "He's a great pet, and while you are aft you must see that he wants for nothing."

The mate showed Ralph a small closet where were sundry brooms, brushes and other implements for cleaning up.

"As you are to be cabin boy, for a while at least," said Mr. Duff, "you might as well begin by tidying up the cabin a bit. We want to have things shipshape by the time the captain comes aboard."

For an hour or so Ralph busied himself accordingly, until a commotion on deck led him to look out at one of the stateroom windows.

CHAPTER XII.

The Curlew Puts to Sea.

These windows were mere bullseye affairs, swinging on pivots.

Pushing one open, Ralph saw a four oared boat pulling rapidly for the schooner. Presently he heard the rattle of oars under the vessel's side, and an order or two issued by the second mate.

He hastened up the companionway just in time to see Mr. Duff saluting Captain Gary and Mr. Rucker as they came over the side, passing between several seamen drawn up on either side of the gangway. The first mate cast an eye aloft and to seaward, while the captain walked so quickly down the companionway that he nearly overturned Ralph.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Gary, flinging the lad roughly aside. "Have you no manners?"

He disappeared in the cabin whither Ralph followed dumbfounded at this unlooked for exhibition of temper on the part of his hitherto placid superior.

The captain was flinging down some papers on the table. Looking up he recognized Ralph for the first time.

"That you, Ralph?" he said, banishing a scowl in a smile that had no mirth in it. "Was it you outside?"

"Yes, sir."

"I did not know it was you. But we learn to look sharp and be spry on shipboard. Did Bludson treat you well? Ah—that's good. Had a pleasant time? I always want my men to enjoy themselves. I see you have tidied up things here. You must keep this cabin clean, and also these staterooms. You will also wait on the cabin table and take your meals here."

The captain started for his own room, but looking back, said:

"Go forward, Neb will show you about making ready for supper."

From then on until flood tide, several hours later, both men and officers were busy in stowing away and making things generally snug.

After his duties at the table were over, Ralph had little to do but to watch what was going on around, which he did eagerly, striving to master, as well as he could, the mystery and duties of the strange life upon which he was entering.

As the hour grew late, only the watch on deck, together with the officer in charge, remained above; that is except Ralph, who found everything interesting. The first mate was in his berth, and the captain writing in the cabin. Mr. Duff was walking to and fro near the wheel, while in the forecabin the major part of the crew were in their bunks.

It might have been near midnight. Ralph, having seated himself on the step between the quarter and the main decks, had at last fallen into a doze, with his head against the bulwarks.

Captain Gary came up, cast a look about and then consulted his watch.

"We might as well make sail, Mr. Duff," said he in a low tone. "Call all hands."

Then he returned to the cabin. A moment later Bludson's shrill whistle aroused Ralph with a start.

The deck became alive with moving figures in answer to the boatswain's hoarse summons.

"Hoist away with a will, men. Yo—heave—ho! Up she goes."

To such and similar cries, Ralph saw the great main sail unfold its vast expanse in obedience to the measured hauling of a line of men, who uttered a monotonous half shout as they bent to the work. Another gang soon had the foresail going upward, after which the capstan was manned.

To Ralph these proceedings were thrillingly attractive. It was his first bewildering taste of the duties of a sailor's life.

As the men pushed with a will at the capstan bars, and the ship drew toward her anchor, some one struck up a song that ran somewhat as follows:

"A bucklin' wind and a swashin' tide,
Yo ho, ho, boys, yo ho, ho!
If I had Nancy by my side,
With a yo ho, ho, ho, boys, yo ho, ho!"

While there did not seem to be much sense attached to the words, the manner in which they were roared forth, and the push altogether with which they drove the bars at the end of each line, made a vivid impression on the mountain lad's imagination.

He felt glad that he had elected to be a sailor, even though he began as an humble cabin boy. There was an element of dash and danger connected with the life that appealed to the natural daring of his disposition.

"I shall certainly see enough of the world," thought he, "and I shall leave that miserable feud far, far behind."

With the anchor a-trip, the men waited for the final signal. As a light westerly puff swelled the mainsail, which was drawn flat, Mr. Duff uttered a low "Now then," that was repeated loudly by the boatswain, who acted also as a sort of sailing master.

"Yo ho, ho! Heave 'er up, hearties!"

The capstan was again manned, and as the schooner fell off before the wind, Ralph, leaning over the forward bulwarks, saw the great anchor hang dripping under the bow. Later on it would be stowed on deck.

And now the three jibs were hoisted one after another, then the topsails, and finally, as the breeze was light, a triangular staysail was run well up to the weather side between the masts.

Under the influence of the wind and tide the Curlew spun along at an eight knot gait, trailing a glistening wake behind and with a briny hissing along the side as the smooth hull cut the rippling water.

Presently the north point of the inlet was abreast, and Ralph began to notice a slow rocking motion which, as the vessel rose upon the swells, made him feel as if the deck were sinking beneath his feet. At first it was a pleasant sensation, and he leaned over the side, enjoying the starlit view, the moist, balmy air and the gentle motion.

Tybee was now well astern. On either hand the shore line was receding while in front came a low, irregular roaring.

Ralph walked back to where Mr. Duff was standing at the binnacle, conning the ship. There was no pilot aboard, as for some reason, Captain Gary did not wish the time of his departure publicly known.

"What is that noise we hear ahead Mr. Duff?" asked the lad, whereat the sailor at the wheel snickered, while the mate allowed himself to smile.

"That's the surf on the bar," said he. "What did you suppose it might be?"

"I 'lowed it might be thunder, only I didn't see any clouds."

At this Mr. Duff laughed outright, and the sailors nudged each other as if highly tickled. Ralph looked from one to another, and his pulse beat fast.

"If I had you folks up in our mountains," said he, "mebbe I could show you a thing or two that would puzzle you. I know I'm green, but I'm not too green to learn."

"You'll do," replied the mate shortly, as the boy turned away.

A little later as he was standing by the after hatch, a hand was laid on his arm.

"Ralph," said the second mate, for it was he, "let me give you a bit of advice. No matter what is said or done to you, take it and go along. Hard words mend no bones. I'm giving you straight goods, my lad. You seem to have the right kind of stuff in you, and all you need is to be kept in line."

"Mr. Bludson said something of the sort, I think. All right, sir. I'll keep my mind on that, and I'm obliged to you."

But after the mate had returned to the binnacle Ralph was conscious of a fall in his spirits. Ocean life might be glorious after a while, but at present he was apparently under everybody; he knew less than anybody, and—suddenly he threw his hand to his head.

The roar of the breakers was close at hand now, and as the Curlew began to roll and pitch in quite a pronounced manner, the boy would have been alarmed but for the overmastering wretchedness of his feelings. His whole internal system seemed to be turning upside down.

"It must be!" he groaned, staggering to the side. "I—I'm—sea—sick. Oh—oh—oh—Lordy!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A Taste of Ship's Discipline.

For an hour or more passing events were as naught to Ralph. Too ill to sling his hammock, he finally crawled under one of the small boats on the main deck, and at last fell asleep.

The next thing he was conscious of was a terrible chill, a sensation of drowning, and gasping for breath. As he woke he heard a gruff voice say:

"If that don't fetch him nothin' won't."

As Ralph opened his eyes, several seamen were standing about, laughing, one of whom held a half emptied bucket of water.

The boy's head ached and he was thoroughly drenched and miserable.

"Up you get!" said Long Tom, pausing in his walk to and fro in the waist of the schooner, "Time you were gettin' breakfast on the cabin table. Cap'n always raises thunder when breakfast is late."

Ralph, on rising to his feet, nearly pitched down again, being brought up with a round turn in the lee scuppers.

"Easy now, and get 'e sea legs on," suggested Bludson, who was balancing himself dexterously in his walk.

The wind had stiffened, and a crisp plain of dancing white caps met Ralph's gaze as he steadied himself by the bulwarks. The Curlew, under a single reefed fore and mainsail and a single jib, was gracefully rising and falling to the rhythmic motion of long and ponderous waves.

The unaccustomed roll bewildered the lad from the mountains, the singing of the wind through the shrouds buzzed strangely in his ears. He made a dive for the cook's galley, where Neb was dishing up the cabin meal.

"Mind yo' steps, now," the negro cautioned him, as Ralph, with a waiter full of dishes, started for the companionway.

The boy, though wet and shivering, determined to do his duty, come what might. By the assistance of Long Tom, who seized him by the collar and propelled him roughly but safely across the deck, he managed to reach the cabin.

He got the table arranged somehow, placing the dishes in the rough weather racks provided, then after washing his face, he made his way back to the galley and started with another waiter full of eatables.

This time something had drawn Long Tom away. Ralph did very well until he came to the open space between one of the boats and the mainmast. A rope really should have been stretched amid deck for his aid, but as others did not need it, no one thought or cared for the cabin boy.

Just as Ralph made a dive for the mast and the afterhatch beyond, the captain emerged from the companionway. The boy reached the mast in safety. Encouraged by this, he loosened his hold and started boldly for the head of the stairs.

Unfortunately the stern of the Curlew sank suddenly under the influence of a receding wave of unusual proportions. Ralph and his waiter of dishes were thrown violently forward against Captain Gary, who stood like a rock, while the boy pitched one way and his dishes went another.

All who saw the catastrophe looked on with suspended breath.

The captain glared at Ralph as the lad picked himself up, then pointed to the wreck of his breakfast.

"Clean up that rubbish," he growled, a grimness as of death settling over his face.

Two sailors sprang forward with bucket and mop. The captain turned to Ralph, who could now trace little resemblance in his superior's face and mien to the bland, almost fatherly man who had welcomed him at the Marshall House.

"My lad," said Gary, and his voice grated harshly on the ear, "I don't think the deck agrees with you. Suppose you try the fo'mast head for an hour. Come! Up you go!"

In his bewilderment Ralph attempted to mount the mainmast ratlines in a lumbering way.

"Start him up, Long Tom," roared the captain. "The fool don't even know where the fo'mast is."

Bludson again seized Ralph by the collar, propelled him the length of the deck and gave him a long boost up the forward ratlines.

Faint from sickness, shivering in his wet clothes, dizzy with the peril of his position, yet with a rising passion in his heart, the boy began to ascend. With a shifting foundation under his feet, a stiff wind flattening him against the shrouds, and a deathly swaying to and fro that increased as he went higher, he managed to reach the foretop. Crawling through the lubber hole he rested and held on.

"Up with you!" shouted the captain, but Ralph gave no heed.

He was weak, faint and dizzy. The heaving plain below made his head swim [Transcriber's note: swim?]. The schooner's deck looked fearfully small.

Casting his eye upward, he saw a narrowing ladder of rope shooting to a mere dot of a resting place twenty feet above him. It did not look as if a monkey could have held on there.

"Why in the — don't you go on!" roared Gary, who was now pale with contained fury.

"I think the lad is sick, sir," said Duff, who happened to be near. "See—by heavens!—he has fainted."

"The kid is shamming," growled the first mate, whose watch it now was. "A dose of the paddle would bring him to, I'll warrant."

"I think you are right, Rucker," said Gary without paying any heed to the second mate. "Lay for'ard there two of you and lash him to the topmast shrouds. He shall have his hour up there, dead or alive, then we'll settle his shamming."

Two sailors, seizing some loose line, ran up the foremast to where Ralph had sunk back in a swoon, overcome by the combined effects of illness and the terrors of his position.

Lifting him to his feet, they bound him to the topmast ratlines so that his feet rested on the little platform. As they came down one said to the other:

"He ain't shamming. The lad is sick enough for a doctor, that's what 'e is, mate."

"Shet up," quoth his companion. "Let the captain hear you and he'll put you on bread and water for three days, if no worse comes. Every tub stands on its own bottom in this craft."

Meanwhile Neb had served breakfast in the cabin. Gary and Rucker went down, Duff taking the first mate's place.

This was the second mate's first voyage with Captain Gary, and he furtively sympathized with Ralph, but such is the force of discipline on shipboard that he dared not show his feelings openly.

"It's a burning shame," thought he, "to punish a land lubber of a boy the first day he ever spent at sea. Sugar wouldn't melt in Gary's mouth when I went to him for a job, but now the tune is changed. And to cap all, nobody seems to know where we're bound, unless it may be Rucker. The crew know nothing, except that we're provisioned for a long voyage, with a lot of stuff locked up in the hold as no one has seen yet."

He glanced up at the helpless boy, then shook his head.

"Hut tut! Are you sick of this cruise already, Jacob Duff? This will never do. You're in for it, so make the most of your luck, even if it turns out you do have a fiend for a skipper."

When Gary and his first officer returned, Duff went below. But as he ate, his thoughts reverted so persistently to Ralph's predicament that he grew impatient with himself. After finishing his meal he lay down in his berth and tried to sleep. Some time had elapsed when he was aroused by a sound of furious objurgation on deck.

He rose, took his cap and crept up the companionway. Captain Gary was standing by the weather rail of the quarter deck, where with clenched hands and violent gestures, he was pouring forth a flood of profane vituperation such as Duff had seldom heard equaled.

Before him was Ralph, still so weak as to require the support which Long Tom was roughly giving him, yet gazing on his infuriated commander with a steady unflinching scorn.

"Tell me you won't, eh?" stormed the captain, his feminine air and aspect completely lost in a mien of scowling ferocity. "By the living—but what's the use of swearing! Down with him to the sweat box, and if that don't tame him we'll try the paddle afterward."

"Captain Gary," interrupted Ralph undauntedly, "if I had known you yesterday as I know you now, I'd have seen you dead before I'd a been here today. I'm weak, I know; you may tie and

starve me, but if you ever have me beaten—make it a good job."

Gary seemed momentarily paralyzed at such independence, then out of sheer amazement hissed forth sneeringly:

"Will your impudence tell me why?"

"Because I'll kill you!" exclaimed Ralph, with such concentrated energy of tone and accent, that Duff trembled inwardly for the boy's safety. "I know I'm in your power now, but I'd do it ten years from now if I had to wait so long. I never knew a mountain man to take a beating yet, without he got even—never!"

Such unheard of insolence appeared to deprive Gary of words wherewith to do the situation justice.

"You know what I want!" he roared at Bludson, as he left the deck. "See that it is done!"

The boatswain at once collared Ralph and took him forward, where both disappeared in the forecastle.

While this scene was being enacted, Rucker leaned against the stern rail idly picking his teeth, as his dull, hard eye glanced alternately from the vessel's course to the parties most concerned.

"What in heaven's name is it all about?" asked Duff, when the two men were alone but for the man at the wheel, who appeared to give no heed. "What has the boy done?"

"He's too independent," replied the first mate. "He can't do nothing; he couldn't even climb the fo'mast or walk the deck in a breeze. Such green uns has no business bein' independent aboard ship. If I was captain I'd a had him triced up to the mast and the paddle a going afore now."

"The lad never saw a ship till yesterday. Isn't it a little rough to expect him to find his sea legs in half an hour? He was seasick to boot."

"Sea—thunder! You never sailed with Captain Gary afore, did you?" Rucker regarded his junior with a peculiar smile. "I thought not. Well—I have. I'll give you a pointer. He'd rather send this ship to the bottom any time than stand any nonsense. That's him; and I'm sort o' built that way myself."

Duff made no response, and soon returned to his stateroom, where he remained until his own watch was called. He was a good sailor and a nervy sort of a man, but there was something so peculiarly devilish in the contrast presented by Gary's slight, feminine person and his abnormal exhibition of rage that the second mate began to doubt whether he had done wisely in shipping with an unknown captain on an unknown voyage for the sake of mere high wages.

He finally fell asleep until wakened by the sound of two bells being struck, followed by the hoarse cry of:

"Starb'd watch on deck, ahoy!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Bad Weather.

When the second mate reached the deck the wind had freshened still more. In the southwest a low lying bank of slate colored cloud was slowly diffusing itself over that quarter of the heavens.

Under its lower edge, was a coppery hued, wind streaked border, that glistened in a dull way.

"The barometer is falling," remarked Rucker as he prepared to go below. "We're going to have a nasty spell, I guess. You might take a double reef in that jib if it gets worse. If there's any shortnin' of sail beyond that, call the captain."

In his walk to and fro the second mate's thoughts reverted to Ralph occasionally and he took pains later on, to ask Neb if the boy had had anything to eat.

"Nuttin' but braid an' water, suh. Capn's orders."

"It's a shame," thought Duff. "The lad's sick, so I don't reckon he's hungry; but he ought to have something more strengthening than that. I wonder what kind of a hole this sweat box is?"

But as the weather grew worse, Mr. Duff's attention was necessarily given entirely to the management of the vessel when on watch, and during his hours off, he usually slept away his fatigue.

The storm that gradually rose lasted, with varying fury, for three days. The Curlew proved herself a staunch and buoyant craft, easily controlled and as stiff under sail as a two-decker.

It was well for all hands that this was so, for the cyclone was a dangerous one, being a stray tempest from that center breeding place of storms, the West Indies. On the second day the two strong men who were required to steer had to be lashed to the wheel. Great combers occasionally swept the decks from bow to stern. After one of these the little schooner would rise, staggering not unlike a drunken man, the brine pouring in torrents from the scuppers, and the very hull quivering from the shock of the impact of those tons of water.

The hatches were battened down and after the first day Captain Gary never left the deck. He had food and drink brought to him, as he swung to the weather shrouds, where he at times lashed himself, to avoid being washed overboard.

He was the coolest man on the ship, never losing either presence of mind or a certain lightness of spirits, totally unlike the apparently ungovernable fury that possessed him when crossed by any one under his authority. His slight figure and gloved white hands seemed endowed with muscles of steel; he was, to all appearance, impervious to fatigue or fear.

"He's a sailor, right," exclaimed Duff one day to Rucker, after Gary had brought the schooner unscathed through a mountainous wave that had threatened to overwhelm everything. "I will say this for him, he knows how to handle a ship."

"I should say!" declared the first mate. "There ain't his equal nowhere. I've sailed with him and I know."

When the weather moderated and the schooner, after being tidied up, was plunging along with a double reefed fore and single reefed mainsail, and every one was breathing freely, Duff again thought of Ralph.

"Poor fellow," said he to himself, "it's been tougher on him than any of us. He must have thought we were going to Davy Jones any time these three days."

Not long after this he saw Long Tom bearing away a covered tin dish from the galley, and hastened to join the boatswain.

"Is that the kid's grub?" he demanded, taking off the lid and surveying the contents. "Tis, eh? Well, see here, Bludson, I call it a crying shame. Bread and water still! Heave ahead. I am going to see what kind of a place this sweat box is."

The boatswain would have remonstrated, but Duff ordered him on peremptorily. He led the way therefore to a trap door in the floor of the men's quarters in the fore-castle.

Passing through this with a lighted lantern they pushed forward into the very bow of the vessel, where a small space—three-cornered—was walled in. Inside was a form crouched in a corner.

The whole area was a mere closet, not only pitch dark within, but several feet below water level and with but a couple of inches of planking between a prisoner and the swashing, gurgling billows outside.

"Ralph," called Duff, "are you all right, my lad?"

"Here, boy," said Tom, setting down the tin vessel, "wake up and eat a bite. Mayhap cap'n will let you out before long. He's in a good humor today."

But Ralph did not move. Duff raised him in his arms.

The boy was insensible, either from fright, exhaustion, or the lack of suitable food. The mate's anger rose within him like a torrent.

"This is simply brutal!—it is infamous. Lead the way out of here, bos'n; or—stay! Go to Captain Gary and say that Mr. Duff wants him to come here right away."

"It's as much as my life's worth, sir."

"Go on I tell you!" Duff was white to the lips, "D'ye want to see murder done? This lad's life is at stake, I say."

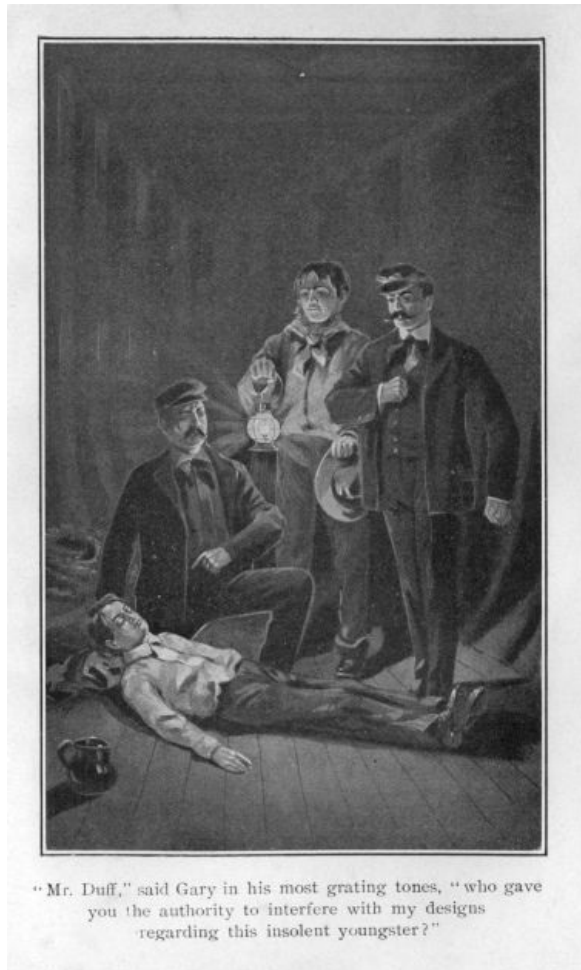
While Tom went off grumbling, the second mate bathed Ralph's face with water from a jug he found, and chafed his hands.

"Poor fellow! If I lose my job and am put here with him, I will speak out. The boy hasn't had a decent thing to eat since he came aboard."

Presently the flicker of Tom's lantern was seen again. The captain was behind him, and in no good humor over the message he had received.

The dash and swirl of water outside was incessant and deafening.

"Mr. Duff," said Gary in his most grating tones, "who gave you the authority to interfere with my designs regarding this insolent youngster?"



[Illustration: "Mr. Duff," said Gary in his most grating tones, "who gave you the authority to interfere with my designs regarding this insolent youngster?"]

Duff's first reply was to bring Ralph's pale, inanimate face under the light.

"Captain Gary," said he, "I profess to be a man—not a brute. I recognize your authority, but when I see murder about to be done—it's time to say something."

The captain looked around as if to find a weapon wherewith to strike his subordinate down, while in his eye shone a dull spark. He did not look at Ralph, but controlled himself by a mighty effort.

"Of course," he was able to say at last, "if the kid is in any danger, that alters the state of the case. But I dare say he is shamming."

"Shamming! Look at his eyes; feel of his pulse."

The captain declined these offices. He bit his nether lip instead and regarded Duff in a peculiar way, as the latter continued his efforts to resuscitate the boy.

"We have no ship's doctor on board as you know," said Gary. "However, take him to a bunk in the men's quarters and tell the cook to make him some broth. He'll come round; then we will see how he behaves. Do you understand, Mr. Duff?"

"Aye, aye, sir. Give the boy a chance and I think he will come out all right."

Here Ralph showed signs of animation. He twisted himself as if in pain, then muttered:

"If he beats me I—I—shall—kill him! Shan't I—grandpa? You drove—me—away—cause I wouldn't—cause I—wouldn't——" He became unintelligible for a moment, but finally burst forth with feeble energy again. "Let him starve me—shut me up—but—let him keep his hands off—hands off."

The dull spark in Captain Gary's eyes seemed to enlarge and twinkle as the boy uttered these words in a semi-drowsy, spasmodic way. Presently the partially rolled up eyes opened in a natural manner and blinked feebly at the light.

At this juncture a loud cry was heard from aloft of:

"S-a-i-l h-o!"

The captain turned away as if the interruption were a welcome one to him.

"Stow that lad and see to him," he repeated, then added sternly: "Be assured of one thing, Mr. Duff, I will not forget your part in this affair."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the second mate, as the captain walked off.

CHAPTER XV.

Boarded by a Cruiser.

Ralph was borne up into the men's quarters and placed in one of the most comfortable bunks.

Pretty soon down came Neb with a steaming dish of stewed chicken, and a good supply of broth. This, with a ship's biscuit and a cup of coffee, were fed slowly to the lad by one of the sailors, until he was strong enough to help himself.

"That's cabin grub, lad," remarked the sailor. "Second mate ordered it himself."

Ralph, with the horror of those three days of darkness, and pitching, and churning seas still upon him, thanked his stars that he seemed to have one friend on board.

Meanwhile, on deck all hands were watching the approach of a large steamship that was bearing down upon the Curlew to windward. The schooner was sailing with the wind abeam.

Presently the captain, who was examining the stranger through a glass, ordered the helmsman to "ease away a bit."

The Curlew fell off more before the wind, when it was seen that the steamer slightly changed her course so as to meet the altered movements of the schooner.

Gary and Rucker now put their heads together, then the first mate, summoning the boatswain, disappeared below.

"Hold her up a little, Mr. Duff," said the captain to the second officer, who was once more at his post. "She is a man of war, I think, and though I have no love for their prying ways, we must not seem to want to avoid her, now that she evidently intends to speak us."

So the schooner's head was put to windward, and the two vessels rapidly drew near each other.

It could soon be seen that the stranger was an armored cruiser, of great power and speed.

"Run up the Stars and Stripes," said Gary. "Let him see what we are. Perhaps he'll be satisfied and pass on."

This was done, but evoked no response from the cruiser, now less than a mile away. Suddenly the warship swung gracefully around, showing along her dull gray side a row of guns, while over bow and stern loomed two immense cannon of a caliber sufficient to sink the Curlew at a single discharge.

Several little flags followed one another up to the cruiser's mastheads.

"Get out the code, Mr. Duff," ordered the captain. "He's signaling. What in the mischief can he want?"

Duff plunged into the cabin, reappearing a moment later with the signal book. Opening this, he compared the flags as seen through the glass with similar ones in the book, and their meanings.

"Well?" said the captain impatiently.

"He orders us to heave to under his quarter. Says he is going to send a boat aboard."

"The deuce he is! Well, I suppose we might as well do as he says. Strikes me as a pretty high handed proceeding though, in time of peace. Look! There go his colors at last. British, by thunder!"

As the cross of St. George unfolded to the breeze, Captain Gary, looking somewhat anxious, bade Duff obey the cruiser's order; then hastened below in the wake of his first mate and boatswain.

By the time the Curlew had rounded to, a boat was leaving the warship's side as she lay broadside, hardly a quarter of a mile off. Though the sea was still rough, six pair of oars brought the boat spinning over the waves.

Two officers were in the stern sheets, one of whom—a young third lieutenant—was soon on the deck of the schooner.

At this juncture Captain Gary reappeared, followed by Rucker. Long Tom had already gone forward.

"What schooner is this?" demanded the officer, after the first salutations had passed.

"I should like to know first what right you have to ask that question," replied Gary in his most suave manner. "These are times of peace, when every one is privileged to attend to his own affairs, I believe."

"Yes, when his affairs are not injurious to others. There is surely no harm in asking a vessel's name."

"Is it customary to stop them on the high seas, and send a boat aboard to find out?"

"Well, yes—under certain circumstances." The lieutenant smiled. "Especially so when we are under orders to that effect. To be plain, sir, we suspect you of being engaged in an unlawful enterprise."

As may be supposed, Duff was paying the closest attention, for he and most others on board had shipped, not knowing the object of the voyage, but tempted by the high wages.

"You do, eh." It was Gary's turn to smile now. "You men o' war's men often make mistakes as well as other people. This is the Curlew, four days out of Savannah, in ballast, and bound for Bermuda."

"You are clear out of your course, if that is the case."

"The storm did that for us. We had a three days' siege of it."

"Well, let me see your papers and take a look through the hold. It can do no harm."

"None in the least," replied the captain.

He then ordered the main hatch opened as he escorted the officer down to the cabin in order to inspect the ship's papers.

Rucker followed. Duff, impelled by curiosity, watched the opening of the hatch, which had remained closely sealed ever since he had been aboard.

An apparently empty hold was all that rewarded his eye, except for the usual stores and provisions necessary for a long voyage.

"If Bermuda is really our port, we've got grub enough, and to spare," thought he as he returned to the quarter-deck.

Meanwhile the lieutenant, after a thorough inspection of the hold, returned to the open air. He still seemed unsatisfied, and cast curious glances here and there over the vessel's trim proportions. Finally he gave it up.

"Your papers seem to be all right," he said, "and you certainly have no cargo, though you are provisioned for a voyage round the world, I should say."

"Barrels of meal," said the captain. "My owner had a lot on hand, and thought it might fetch a better price in the Bermudas than at home. We can trade it for potatoes."

"Well, I wish you success," added the officer, pausing at the ladder, and touching his cap to Gary and the mates. "Pardon whatever inconvenience we may have occasioned."

He went down the side, the boat pulled back to the cruiser, and the latter steamed away westward.

The Curlew, holding east, soon helped to place her dangerous neighbor hull down, when Captain Gary gave the order for all hands to be summoned aft. The crew came tumbling back into the waist, a swarthy, brawny, reckless looking set of men. Two of them brought Ralph up and set

him down on a coil of rope.

The warm meal, the sight of human faces, the sounds of life and light, had already renewed his strength and spirits. He was no longer so ill, and the bright sunlight and the heaving waves sent a sort of thrill through him. The sea was not all terrible after all.

"Now, men," began the captain, when all had assumed a decorous silence, "what do you think that war ship supposed we were?"

There was no reply to this, though the men looked at each other, then turned to their commander, as if expecting an answer. The captain broke into a harsh laugh.

"Why," he continued, "they thought this ship was the famous slaver, the Wanderer. I guess you've all heard of the Wanderer."

Yes, they had. Duff noticed that Rucker and Long Tom were the only two who seemed to be indifferent to this announcement.

One or two of the sailors winked at each other as if the news that was to come would not be very much of a surprise, after all.

"We are so far advanced on our way," continued the captain, "that I have concluded to let you know who and what we are and where we are bound. In case we are liable to another overhauling you can better assist in throwing the intermeddlers off the true scent.

"We fooled them this time, but that was because the boarding officer was a green one. If an old hand at the business comes aboard it may be necessary to chuck him over the side and run for it. Therefore it is right you should know things, in order the more intelligently to obey orders.

"This schooner is the Wanderer, men. You have shipped on the Wanderer, bound for the coast of Guinea after negroes for the Cuba market. How does that suit you?"

"If there are any grumblers, speak up. You've got high wages, light work, good grub, and a chance—if you stand by the ship—to share in the profits at the end of the voyage. Now, what d'ye say?"

There was some muttering and laying of heads together on the part of the crew, then one old salt pulled off his cap, ducked his head, and after carefully transferring a quid of tobacco from his mouth to his pocket, said:

"If so be the rest don't care, I don't. If so be some on us had knowed afore we shipped what kind of cargo we was after, we might have thought twice afore we signed. Niggers is niggers. Some say they is humans, some say they ain't. But this here shippin' 'em like two legged cattle be mighty resky nowadays. Less'n we make a heap."

"Oh, you shut up!" interrupted the captain, laughing. "All the scruples any of you have is concerning the money there is in the cruise. Am I right?"

"Well, a man's obleeged to look out for number one, cap'n," responded the fellow, falling back and restoring his quid to his left jaw.

Ralph seemed about to speak, but as Gary's cold, hard eye fell on the lad, prudence bade him hold his peace. Besides he did not more than half comprehend the nature of the captain's explanation.

The face of the second mate was a picture of disgust and irresolution. He said nothing, however, until the captain went below. Then he followed.

"Captain Gary," said he, when the two were alone in the cabin, "you should have had my right hand sooner than have got me off on such a cruise had I known its object before I signed with you."

"I know you," replied Gary somewhat scornfully. "You have just about conscience enough not to violate your word when the sacrifice would be too great. Of course you don't approve. I never asked for your approval; wouldn't give a cent for it if I had it. But you signed—for high wages—to go wherever I choose to sail. Is not that so?"

"In one sense, yes. But a slaver now is little better than a pirate. You should have been more open."

"And you less greedy for money. I say you are in for it. There is no chance to secure another mate, and I intend to see that you do your duty."

CHAPTER XVI.

Nearing the Gold Coast.

The two men regarded each other steadily for a moment, then the mate heaved a sigh.

"I don't care for your threats," said he. "It's that same conscience of mine which you think so little of that troubles me. As long as I am your second mate I shall do my duty. But I give you fair warning: when we get to port, if there is another ship where a man can get a job I shall leave you."

"You'll leave without your pay, then," retorted the captain.

Duff, without replying, left the cabin. He had explained his sentiments, and that was all he could do at present. In his succeeding round of ship inspection he was halted in the forecabin by Ralph, who had lain down again.

"Oh, Mr. Duff, won't you please explain to me what the captain meant when he said we were bound after negroes for the Cuban market."

"It's plain as your nose, my lad. We are going to the west coast of Africa—somewhere about the Congo, I guess. There we take on a load of Gold Coast darkies, fetch 'em over to Cuba, run 'em in after night, then get away—if we can. If we get captured we'll all get a term in Morro Castle or some other Spanish hole, and lose everything we've got. Oh, it's a nasty business the —"

Here Mr. Duff broke off, remembering that he was saying too much before a cabin boy. But Ralph detained him by the sleeve.

"I thought the negroes were all freed."

"At home they are. But in Cuba and Brazil they are not, although the prospect is that they will be set at liberty before long. The best sentiment of the world is against slavery, you know.'

"And what we're up to is worse than all the rest, isn't it?"

"Yes; it is a vile business. But look here, my lad. Whether you like the job or not, you've shipped, and that means everything on shipboard. Make the best of it while you're with us; when you're away it's another thing."

"If you think so badly of it," persisted Ralph, "why did you ship, Mr. Duff?"

"Because, like most of the others, I went it blind for the sake of high wages. I had an idea we were on a smuggling trip. I suppose you were too green to know anything."

"I left everything to Captain Gary. But I say, Mr. Duff, I think with you that it is a low, mean business."

"H-s-s-h!" The mate made a warning gesture and turned away, just as Mr. Rucker thrust his bushy beard down the fore hatch, preceded by his burly legs and body.

The first officer looked sharply at Ralph as the boy lay in his hammock, which he had at last slung.

"You'll report for duty in the cabin tomorrow, my lad," said he. "Captain's orders. There won't be much shirking on this ship, whether or no."

After the storm, the wind and weather remained fair for many days, during which the Wanderer (as she was now called) glided into the tropics, and justified her fame on the score of speed.

One day a cry of "Land ho!" was raised. Half an hour later the irregular heights of the Cape Verde Islands began to be visible from the deck. But the schooner bore away to the southeast and no close view was obtained.

It was a lonely voyage. Scarcely any vessels were passed, and the captain avoided these in so far as he could. It was his policy to follow a route as little traveled as possible.

The glaring sun, bright skies, and even trade winds of these regions were like a new world to Ralph. At night the extreme brilliancy of the stars, framed in new and strange constellations, and the vivid play of phosphorescent waves, kept him on deck with Mr. Duff at times for hours.

These two, though so widely separated by rank, were congenial in a furtive way. Perhaps the mutual knowledge that both so heartily disapproved of the object of the voyage, was a subtle link between them.

Though awkward enough at first, Ralph persevered so faithfully in acquiring a knowledge of his new duties, that he slowly won the approval of every one on board, unless it might have been

the captain. Gary preserved a sphinx-like attitude, never sparing the boy, never praising him, nor manifesting by any sign an atom of that feminine graciousness of manner that had on shore first won the lad over.

But Ralph's growing proficiency in a seaman's tasks was such, that on Rucker's advice, he was put before the mast altogether, after one of the sailors had broken several ribs by falling from aloft during a squall. The injured man, as soon as he was able, took Ralph's place in the cabin.

As they approached the African coast, alternate fogs and calms delayed their progress somewhat. The fogs were a protection from prying vessels, but the calms proved to be an unmitigated nuisance.

The ocean would be like shining glass beneath a vertical shower of the sun's rays that, at times, rendered the deck almost unendurable. Awnings were stretched and for hours and even days the Wanderer would lie almost motionless, except for the impalpable swell from which the bosom of the sea is never entirely free.

One dull, damp morning, when the decks were slippery with moisture and a curtain of mist veiled everything beyond a hundred yards, Ralph, who was in the foretop on the lookout, fancied that he detected a sound somewhat different from the usual noises surrounding a vessel even in a calm.

They were nearing the land, as the captain's last reckoning showed, yet soundings taken not half an hour previous, had discovered no bottom at a depth of several hundred feet. Ralph called to a sailor below to ask the second mate to come forward.

"Well, what now, Granger?" demanded Duff from the main deck.

Ralph had hardly explained, before the mate sprang up the rigging to the lad's side. The trained ear of the officer instantly divined what might be the matter.

"Down with you, Ralph," said he, hurrying to the deck himself. "Pipe up all hands and shorten sail!" he shouted to the boatswain, then emerging from the forecabin. "Lively now!"

The schooner was under full canvas, with the purpose of making the most of what little air might be stirring. A moment before, the most profound repose was reigning, but with the shrill call that instantly rang out, all was changed to a scene of the most intense activity.

Men came tumbling up to join the watch on deck in lowering two of the jibs, and reefing a third, while the great fore and aft sails were reduced to less than half their size in a twinkling.

Orders came sharp and fast, three seamen in each top were hastily lowering and lashing the topsails, when the sound heard by Ralph, and which had rapidly increased to a sputtering roar, was split as it were by a crash of thunder. The fog melted away like a dissolving dream, showing beyond the burst of sunlight, a coppery cloud that swept the ocean to windward, driving before it a line of hissing foam.

By this time captain and first mate were up. The Wanderer lay without headway, though bobbing slowly as a slight whiff of air stirred the flattened mainsail.

"Meet her! Meet her, Mr. Duff!" shouted Gary, instantly realizing the coming peril.

The men were tumbling from the tops, Ralph among the last, for though ordered down by the considerate mate, he returned with the others when the topsails were to be stowed.

Duff and two old hands were at the wheel; others were lashing loose articles, when with a scream and a screech, the squall was upon them.

At that season and on that coast, these sudden commotions are especially treacherous and full of peril. Coming, as it were from nowhere, either on the heels of fog or calm, their advent is doubly dreaded by the unwary mariner. When the blast struck the schooner, over she heeled, and in a trice the lee scuppers were seething with brine. Each man clung to something for life, as the deck sloped like a house roof.

"Ease her! Ease her!" roared the captain from the main weather bobstays. "For your lives, men! Shove her nose up in the wind."

The scud, as it struck the port bow, flew like shot across the deck. So acute was the shriek of the wind, even shouted orders could hardly be heard.

The Wanderer, trembling like a living thing, slowly—at first almost imperceptibly—rose from the blows hammering at her sides like thunder. There was a long moment of intense, even agonizing suspense, then she began to forge ahead, buffeted, battered, heeling dizzily still to leeward, yet—saved, for the time being at least.

"That was a close call, captain," remarked Duff as the two stood together five minutes later, clinging to the weather shrouds.

"I should say so. Who first heard the thing coming?"

"Young Granger, I believe. There's good stuff in that lad, I make bold to say."

These words shouted into Gary's ear, for the squall was still at its height, caused a deep scowl to settle on the captain's brow. He turned away without a word.

"Gary doesn't like that boy for some reason," was the mate's inward comment. "I wonder why?"

After twenty minutes of wind so furious that the sea was fairly flattened, the squall ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun, before the great ocean billows had time to rise. But in that short interval a jib had been blown into ribbons and the foresail torn loose from its treble reefing points. A great rent was made by its violent flappings before it could be again secured. In the struggle one man was knocked insensible, so severe were the surgings of the boom, as the heavy canvas jarred the whole ship with its cannon-like reports.

One result was a fair after breeze and a clear sky. The schooner bowled along at a nine knot gait, while the men worked cheerily to repair the slight injuries occasioned by the squall.

That day the trailing smoke of a steamer was indistinctly seen in the southern horizon. The helm was instantly put about and the Wanderer hauled up on a northeast course, which was maintained all day.

The captain and first mate took careful reckonings more than once, verifying each other's castings of their latitude and longitude. It became generally understood that land was close at hand and an air of expectancy became general on board.

The succeeding night was cloudless in the earlier part. Later on a mist slowly inclosed them as they neared the coast.

Ralph sat up late, for he was vaguely excited at the prospect of beholding what was to him a new world. But he gave out at last and turned in, intending, however, to be on deck at the first notice of land. Youth sleeps sound, and his next conscious sensation was that of being rudely shaken.

"On deck with you, boy," said the sailor who had roused him. "Going to snooze all day?"

He leaped from his hammock, and ran up the companionway. Then an exclamation of astonishment burst from his lips.

CHAPTER XVII.

Up the River.

The Wanderer lay in a small, land locked harbor, densely surrounded by a strange and wonderful growth of forest, that completely concealed the shore behind.

Near by, though hidden beyond a neck of land, one could hear the roar of breakers. At the opposite extremity, the harbor was elongated, as if some stream were entering beneath a giant growth of overhanging foliage.

The little bay was no more than a quarter of a mile across, nor was there any sign of human presence other than that presented by the schooner and her crew. She was anchored mid-stream, and Ralph could perceive a sluggish, muddy current making towards an inlet that was partially concealed by several small islets, densely covered by mangroves.

"Granger, I want you," said the second mate from the quarter deck. "Take three hands and make ready the ship's yawl alongside."

In obedience to this, Ralph, with the requisite aid, soon had the large boat that rested amidships, swinging by a painter to the schooner's side. Mr. Duff then directed two pair of oars, a keg of water and some cooked provisions and bedding to be placed aboard.

"I want you, Ralph, and you, Ben, to go along."

The Ben to whom the mate alluded was a broadfaced Englishman, who had been the spokesman on the occasion when Gary had made known to the crew the object and destination of his voyage. He had expressed himself once or twice since then unfavorably, to his mates, and had been rebuked by Long Tom in consequence.

Duff disappeared below, but soon returned with three Winchester rifles and the same number of cutlasses. He handed one of each to the other two, saying to Ralph:

"I guess you can shoot, can't you? I hear you mountaineers are hard to beat with a long rifle."

"I can shoot a squirrel's head off with grandfather's old gun four times out of five. But this here short, double barreled thing don't look good for much."

Duff laughed, then briefly explained the purpose of the magazine and showed him how to work the mechanism. Ralph, though still dubious, said nothing, and resolved to test for himself the wonderful qualities of the modern breech loader, which the average mountaineer distrusts in proportion to his ignorance.

The boy noticed that the most of the crew, together with the captain and first mate, were absent. Only Bludson, with three or four sailors, were left on board, after Duff and his boatmen were pulling towards the mouth of the river above.

"Now, lads," said Long Tom, "look alive. We've got to get the hold ready against cap'n gets back with the first batch. We're rid of the squeamish ones, I reckon. 'Fore they come in with their meat we'll be loaded; that is, s'posin' they show up in time."

The boatswain grinned in a knowing, mirthless way, that his assistants seemed to understand, for they responded in kind. The main hatch was then opened and an iron grating substituted.

Between the main hold and the cabin was a strong bulkhead with a double door, strongly barred and padlocked. This was thrown open and a four pound howitzer mounted in the gangway in such a manner that when the upper half of the door was thrown open, the gun could rake the hold from end to end.

Water butts were set up where water could be handed inside by the bucket. From store rooms on either side of the gangway, long chains with short fetters attached at intervals were brought out and stretched across the hold about seven feet apart and about a foot from the floor. Ankle cuffs that closed with spring locks were attached to these fetters.

In these storerooms were placed the barrels of provisions that had deceived the lieutenant. Then Bludson and his assistants passed the next few hours in throwing overboard the ballast that had been stowed at Tybee Island in far away America.

Meanwhile Duff and his companions entered the river, which seemed to be a small stream flowing deviously through a low, half swampy region, where insects swarmed and many kinds of strange animals and bird life were to be seen.

Ralph, to try his Winchester, shot at a blue heron on the wing and made the feathers fly.

"Try it again," urged Duff sharply. "Quick now."

A second shot brought down the bird, and Ralph's opinion of breech loaders was raised at once.

For several hours they pulled up stream, the mate taking his turn at the oars with the others. The trees rose to a gigantic height, while the interlacing undergrowth was at some places impenetrable.

About eleven they halted, mooring the boat to a fallen tree half imbedded in the water. Deep shadows from the overhanging foliage screened them from the now scorching sunlight. After a lunch on dried beef and biscuit, the mate suggested a siesta for an hour or two until it should be cool enough to proceed. Ralph volunteered to keep watch, though there did not seem to be much necessity for vigilance. The whole vast forest and all life within its folds appeared to be steeped in tropical midday repose.

"Well," said the mate, as he and Ben bestowed themselves in the bottom of the boat on some blankets, "if you get too sleepy call Ben. We'll have to cover our heads on account of these wretched gnats and mosquitos."

While the two slumbered, Ralph amused himself at first by examining the mechanism of his Winchester. Tiring of this he fell into a reverie so deep that he hardly realized that he was dozing until roused to wakefulness by a slight pressure upon his hat, which was pulled forward over his eyes.

His first impulse was to start up, but a long, skeleton leg with tiny claws at the end—horribly hairy in a miniature way—slowly protruded over the front brim of his headgear, sending a curdling chill through his veins as he wondered what kind of a creature its owner might be.

Thoughts of the strange, poisonous insects of abnormal size, which he had read of as being common in certain warm countries, coursed through his mind. If he stirred, the thing might claw or bite, and the merest scratch was said, in some kinds of these venomous species, to be fatal.

He dared not move, but lay there in a sort of physical coma, though with every nerve strung to the point of agonized apprehension.

After feeling first with one claw, then another, the creature began to descend. The first touch upon his face was indescribably loathsome to Ralph, and as its round, egg-like body came in view, he closed his eyes and held his breath.

Down to his breast the thing crawled, while the skin of his face prickled sharply under an imaginary pain. Then he opened his eyes and beheld a gigantic spider slowly making its way down his clothing.

With a body quite as large as the egg of a hen, and legs in proportion, it moved slowly, in a groping manner, as if uncertain of its whereabouts. Ralph fancied he could see its dull, cruel eyes. He lay as if dead, until the thing had left his person, then recovered his breath and courage by a vigorous inhalation.

But upon his first move the creature ran along the bottom of the boat with extraordinary rapidity, and thence along Ben's blanket and body, pausing only as it reached the sailor's now uncovered head.

There it seemed to look back at Ralph, who did not dare attempt to kill it, lest it should attack Ben. To his horror the sailor stirred and opened his eyes drowsily.

"Ben," whispered Ralph, "for goodness sake don't move, as you value your life. Do as I tell you. It—it may bite you, if you stir."

Ben felt the creature as the boy had done. He lay shivering.

Slowly the great insect turned and made its way from the sailor's neck to the flooring, then up the side of the boat. Ralph, seizing a rope's end, struck a furious blow, but missed. With lightning-like speed the spider ran up the side of the boat, sprang upon the water where it floated like a feather, and pushed towards shore.

But Ben had seized an oar and now came down with a splash that sent a shower of spray about and momentarily blinded them both.

"There! Look yonder, Ben!" cried Ralph. "Confound the luck!"

The spider was swiftly crawling up the bank, where it quickly disappeared beneath a tussock.

"That beats all the creatures I ever seen," said Ben. "He must be the great grandfather of all the spiders hereabout."

Mr. Duff, also awakened by the noise, now suggested that it was time they were going on. While proceeding up stream Ralph related his own and Ben's experience with the spider, whereat the mate laughed heartily.

"I am familiar with the species," said he. "True, they do look scary enough, but, strange to say, they are perfectly harmless. Instead of teeth, their mouth is supplied with a kind of suction apparatus by which they suck the blood from smaller insects. But they cannot bite, nor is their touch poisonous. There are other, smaller kinds of spiders about here, however, whose bite is fatal."

"We were jist as bad scared as if it had been a rattlesnake," returned Ben. "I could feel me bloomin' hair turnin' gray when the thing was cocked upon me shoulder."

Towards night they came to a dozen or more small huts made of palm leaves and elephant grass, from which issued a number of nearly naked blacks, who made the air hideous with shouts of welcome.

Here was where they were to trade for fresh meat and vegetables—the object of their river trip.

One tall savage, with a pair of bullock's horns as a head dress, and with his hair reeking with grease, coiled round the same, appeared to be the head man of the village.

He wore a long red flannel shirt as an additional badge of dignity. The rest, men as well as women, wore little else but cloths about the loins.

They were a jolly, sociable set though, and gave our party a hut to themselves, after supplying them with a bountiful supper of "mealies," bull beef, and a kind of bread made from ground maize and the grated buds of the cabbage palm.

After that Mr. Duff and the chief began a laborious trade for meat and vegetables that lasted for an hour or more, and was carried on principally by signs and gestures. Some red blankets, beads, and cheap hand mirrors constituted the offers on the part of the mate.

In this way several bushels of potatoes and a lot of green corn were secured and placed by

the natives in the yawl. Meanwhile another party, taking torches, proceeded to a corral near by, and slaughtered a fat ox, with great dexterity. This, in its turn, was placed in the boat, after which all hands prepared to turn in.

"One of us must sleep in the yawl," remarked Duff, "and I guess it ought to be the lightest sleeper."

Ben volunteered, saying that he would waken, as he expressed it, "at the bat of a cat's eye."

Leaving Ben in the boat with a blanket and Winchester, the other two retired to the hut prepared for their reception, and lay down, as they thought, for the night. Duff was soon asleep, but Ralph remained wakeful.

To add to his restlessness he soon found his blankets alive with fleas, from which these native huts are hardly ever free. After fighting and scratching for an hour or more, he got up and returned to the open air for relief.

The scene was both weird and dismal. The small clearing, densely walled in by the forest where the trees sprang nearly two hundred feet in the air, seemed to be stifling under the compression, though the feeling was but the resulting languor of a tropic night without a breeze. Sundry strange and melancholy calls issued in varying cadences from the wilderness, and an occasional splash from the river denoted the passage of some huge marine animal. Crocodiles were bellowing sullenly up stream, and from the closed huts issued the sounds of heavy slumber.

He was thinking it strange that no one should remain on guard amid a life so savage and isolated as that of these simple people, when he was aroused by a touch on his arm, as he sat musing on a log before the embers of their fire.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Brush in the Wilderness.

Ralph leaped to his feet and presented his ready rifle. But it was only Ben. The sailor's rugged face wore a look of alarm.

"I'm glad ye're up," was his first remark. "I don't like the look of things, though what's stirrin' is more nor I can make out."

"What have yon seen—or heard, for that matter? One can't see much under this wall of woods all about."

"Divil a bit! So I pricked up me ears for list'nin. The crocydiles kep' up such a hullabaloo I could hardly hear meself think, but somehow I caught on to the sound of paddles a goin'. Hist now! Can't 'e hear that?"

They were at one edge of the village, which was not defended by a kraal, or stockade, as is often the custom where enemies are feared. The dense forest undergrowth was not over thirty yards away.

They could now hear certain stealthy sounds, as of some one or something moving within the timber.

"I will wake Mr. Duff," whispered Ralph. "You go back to the boat, Ben. They may see us by the fire."

The sailor returned to his post. The lad soon had the mate awake, listening to his explanation of their uneasiness.

"I will rouse the chief," replied Duff. "You had better rejoin Ben and wait for me there. If some enemy is really prowling around, our first duty, after alarming these people, is to defend our boat."

"Hadn't I better remain with you?" suggested Ralph, with the idea that the greatest danger was in lingering on shore.

"You had better obey orders, lad," returned the mate, not unkindly, however.

Ralph accordingly gathered the bedding in a bundle and stole down to the boat, the bow of which was drawn upon the gravelly bank. Hardly had he reached it when a series of hideous yells issued from the forest on every side, and a rush of unknown forms could be dimly seen making for the huddle of huts near the river.

Other figures of men, women, and children, naked and all but defenseless, emerged from their egg-shaped shelters, some fighting as best they could, others flying, and all apparently surrounded by a band of vociferous demons.

"Ben," called Ralph, "keep the boat with your gun. I must go and see what has become of Mr. Duff."

He sprang ashore, but had hardly climbed the bank when the mate appeared rifle in hand, cool and collected.

"They are surprised by some predatory party of savages," said Duff. "I don't think there are much if any firearms on either side, however. I think we had better help our dusky friends, don't you, boys? They've treated us white enough."

This was assented to, and the three crawled through the tall grass to the verge of the village, where more of a massacre than a battle was now going on.

The villagers were taken at a sad disadvantage, and were surrounded evidently by superior numbers. The red-shirted chief was on the point of being clubbed by one tall savage, while desperately engaged with another. Ralph, seeing this, leveled his gun with a swiftness that came of long practice amid the wilds of his native Hiawassee.

"Well done!" exclaimed the mate, as, after a sharp report, the negro with a club dropped his weapon and hopped away with a ball in his shoulder. "Now, let us spread out ten paces or so apart and advance. Pump the balls into 'em, boys, but don't hit our black friends."

"How can we tell which is which when they're all alike as two ha'pence?" growled Ben, but he received no answer, as both Mr. Duff and Ralph were intent on the duty before them.

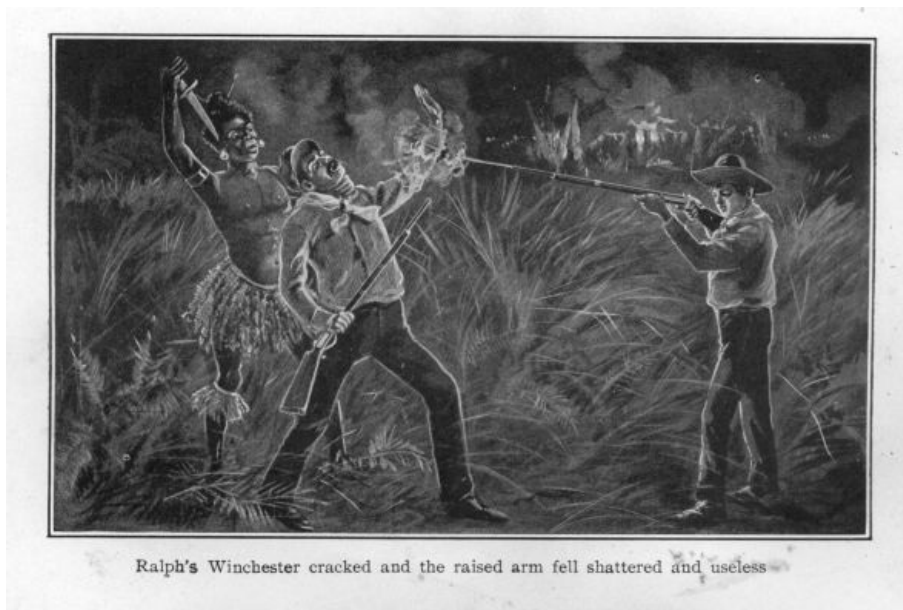
The crack of the Winchesters soon diverted attention from the villagers to an extent that enabled them to recover somewhat from their panic. The rapid hail of balls that hardly ever missed their aim disconcerted the enemy.

The three whites, acting under Duff's orders, kept back in the tall elephant grass at the edge of the huts; but also within close and deadly range. Some of the blacks had thrown wood on the fires, and the light was now sufficient to enable the raiders to be distinguished clearly by their dress and adornments.

"Don't shoot to kill, if you can help it, lads," called Duff. "Maim 'em and lame 'em if you can. It isn't our quarrel you know, only as we——"

Here further utterance was choked off, as a powerful negro, who had made a detour, leaped upon the unwary mate from behind as he was delivering his merciful order. The knife was uplifted as the mate felt the grip of the man upon his collar, but the blow was not struck.

Ralph's Winchester cracked and the raised arm fell shattered and useless, while the knife dropped from the relaxing fingers.



[Illustration: Ralph's Winchester cracked and the raised arm fell shattered and useless.]

The attacked villagers, inspired by the assistance they were receiving, fought with renewed energy.

In those days repeating breech loaders were much less commonly used than in more recent years. The savages became terror stricken at guns which seemed to be always loaded.

A final and despairing yell gave the signal for retreat, and in a moment or two more, none of the enemy were to be seen, except the dead and wounded left behind.

Our three adventurers were then overwhelmed by the rude but expressive manifestations of thanks on the part of the villagers. The wounded were soon despatched, and it became evident to Duff, who partially understood their practices, that a cannibal feast would be next in order.

The very idea sickened Ralph, though Ben announced that he had no objections to see one "black nigger eat up another."

"Well, we have, if you haven't," said Duff, "so, as it is pretty near day and we're loaded, I think we had better be getting back to the ship, Captain's in a hurry to leave the coast anyhow."

But when the natives heard of this determination, they one and all tried to persuade the whites to remain at least until day. The red-shirted chief pleaded almost with tears, in the very few words of English at his command.

"You—me—brothers!" He pointed from Duff to himself. "You—stay. All—stay. Eat War-i-ka-ri much; eat—heap!"

But when he found that all persuasion was useless, he bade his people fill the yawl with vegetables and such meat as was on hand. He would have butchered another ox, but as the boat would now hold no more, Duff with difficulty made him stop.

As the whites were pushing off he came running down to the landing, bearing on his shoulder a human leg severed from the body at the hip.

"Take!" he shouted, but Ralph made haste to shove the boat off. "Take!"

Seeing that they would not return, he heaved the toothsome delicacy at the lad, who, instead of catching it, knocked it into the river, whereat the chief became highly excited, and evidently somewhat wroth. The last they saw of him, he and others were trying to recover it by the aid of a pole.

"Isn't it horrible?" said Ralph, feeling nauseated at the idea and the sight. "They seem friendly enough, yet—they eat one another. Pah!"

Duff, at the tiller, laughed. Ben shook his head as he took a fresh quid.

"Many of these coast tribes are cannibals I've heard," commented the mate. "In times of famine they eat the old folks and the girl babies. Queer world, isn't it?"

By the time the firelight had disappeared, and only the stars afforded a relief to the darkness, the wall of forest on either hand grew vague and indistinct.

Having the current with them, their progress was more rapid than their ascent of the stream, and by the time daylight appeared they were well on their way towards the mouth of the river.

Once, as they were rounding a bend, and were nearer the shore than usual, a deep, harsh, though distant roar met their ears. Ralph and Ben wondered what it was, but the mate replied by one significant word:

"Lions."

"I would like to see one," said Ralph. "But I thought lions were found mostly in Central and Southern Africa. At least so I've read."

"Right you are. But now and then they frequent the Gold Coast. I have heard them in Natal, and down about the diamond regions. Once you hear a wild lion roar, you never forget the sound."

As the sun mounted above the forest, the odorous mists that infest those regions were drawn upward, giving out as the air grew warm a sickening and malarious influence. Vast and gloomy cypress, bay, swamp palm, ironwood, and other tropical woods reared their columnar trunks, from out a dark and noisome undergrowth, to an immense height. In those leafy depths no sun ever shone, and the absence of bird life was noticeably depressing.

"I hardly wonder the captain wants to get away as soon as possible," remarked Duff, as they at last neared the narrow point where the river entered the little harbor. "A week in this place and half of us would be down with coast fever."

An exclamation from Ralph, who was in the bow, came next, as the yawl passed the last leafy point, and the surface of the anchorage became visible.

"What now?" demanded Duff.

CHAPTER XIX.

Left Behind.

No reply was necessary, for in another instant both the mate and the sailor comprehended the cause of Ralph's surprise and alarm.

The Wanderer was nowhere to be seen.

The entire surface of the small, landlocked bay was as deserted and seemingly untouched by man's presence, as if human eyes had never beheld its solitude. A glimpse of the inlet and the breakers far out on the bar beyond was visible between two islets.

They could hear the monotonous thunder of the surf and discern a glassy ocean farther out, for the morning was calm, promising also to be intensely hot.

The surprise of each was so supreme that for an instant nothing was said. Finally the mate, with an expression of deep perplexity on his countenance, said:

"I cannot understand it at all. Let us row to the landing. Perhaps we may gain some clue to the mystery."

So they pulled across to the part of the harbor where the schooner had been anchored when Duff, heading the boat for the shore, plunged them into the leafy recesses that overhung the water. Having once penetrated this outer curtain, Ralph saw they were close to a rude landing made of logs sunk endways into the oozy bottom, and floored with large canes similar to bamboo.

A sort of corduroy road led into the swamp, and disappeared amid the trees. Upon a post near by was an old marlin spike with something white fluttering beneath. This attracted the mate's eye.

"Here we are," said he, detaching the bit of paper. "Perhaps this will give us a little light."

And he read as follows:

"3 bells sekund dog watch. gOt to git out. Uncle Sam on the Lookoute. cap ses yu must shift fer yure selves."

"That looks as if a fo'c'stle fist had written it," remarked Duff ruminatively. "I have felt for some time that Gary wouldn't object to being rid of a few of us."

"E's a bloomin' fool," quoth Ben, evidently feeling that this exigency had removed all restraint of speech as regarded the captain. "Wot will 'e do short handed with a hundred or more black devils aboard in case trouble comes? Barrin' I were out o' here though, I wouldn't care if I never touched a halyard of the Wanderer again."

"You see," said Duff, "we three were known to disapprove of the whole business. He needed me to get over here, for I know the coast. But he can get along without me going back."

"What does that mean about Uncle Sam," asked Ralph.

"That is to make us think some Yankee cruiser is in the neighborhood, and that they left for safety's sake. I half believe that is a blind. But come. We must be stirring, and see if they are really gone, and also if we can cross the bar in a calm, loaded as we are. I know we can't, should a breeze spring up."

Presently they were aboard again, pulling for the inlet. As they passed between a number of mangrove islets Ralph, looking down, could see an occasional shark or sawfish leisurely prodding about ten or fifteen feet below the surface.

But as they neared the bar the water grew clouded, though a dark dorsal appendage thrusting itself here and there above the wave indicated the terrible result that would probably follow should the boat capsize.

When they rounded the last intervening point and the open ocean was disclosed, the first object that met their eyes was the Wanderer with all sails set, about two miles in the offing. She lay motionless, for the calm was complete.

"Well," remarked Duff, "we're all right if we pass the bar. There would be no trouble about that with a lighter load. We can try it as we are, for our supplies will be needed; but if necessary—over they go."

They were already nearing the first line of breakers, when the mate detected a second sail to the left and much nearer the shore.

This stranger was a full rigged ship hardly a mile away and to the southward, while the Wanderer was almost due west from the inlet.

"She's a sailing corvette, or I'm much mistaken," said the mate, "but—mind yourselves, men! Pull with a will."

The first line of breakers was passed without trouble. The second was rougher, and the men strained at the oars to give the yawl as much headway as possible.

The last wave came "quartering" and threw a hatful of water into Ralph's face, whereat Mr. Duff laughed cheerily.

"One ducking!" he cried. "But now comes the tug of war. Jump her, boys! Jump her, I say!"

The third and last line was longer, larger, and in every way more formidable, owing to the sudden deepening of the water. Both Ben and Ralph were rather exhausted from their previous exertions, and Duff yelled himself hoarse in his repeated entreaties to:

"Give way! G-g-give wa-a-a-y I tell you! Don't you see—we're gone? Keep her nose up! K-e-e-p it u-u-u-p-p! Sharks and sawfish, men! are you going to let her broach? Now then! All together, a-n-d—over she—good heavens!"

A barrel or two of brine hurled over the starboard quarter choked off the mate's adjurations. But it was the last of the angry combers and the next minute the three were wiping the salt water from their faces while the yawl was riding easily on the glassy swell just beyond the bar.

"Now head her for the schooner, boys," said Duff, bailing with one hand as he steered with the other. "If we hadn't had the ebb with us, we'd have had to lighten her. Now—give me your oar, Ralph. You steer. We've no time to lose, for if a breeze starts before we reach the side, I fear they're not so fond of our company but what they might give us the slip yet."

"Couldn't we ship on that other vessel?" asked Ralph, by no means reluctant to change his berth to a ship less liable to the law's penalties.

"We probably could," replied Duff dryly. "We probably might also have to spend several months in jail somewhere as slavers, or for aiding and abetting in the traffic. I think we'd better overhaul the schooner and wait for better times."

The sun was now high in the heavens, and the growing heat already almost unbearable. They stripped to their shirt and trousers while the sweat rolled in streams from the faces of the oarsmen.

While nearing the Wanderer rapidly they noticed a faint, dark line approaching up from the southeast along the line of the coast.

"A wind, by thunder!" exclaimed Duff, renewing his efforts at the oar. "Look! the corvette already feels it. Give way, Ben? Gary is none too good to leave us yet if the wind reaches him before we do."

Ralph, now rested, sprang forward.

"Take the tiller, Ben," said he. "I'm good for a sharp pull."

But the old sailor, whose muscles were like whipcord, shook his head and fairly made the yawl spring beneath his redoubled strokes.

For the next three or four minutes Duff kept his eye upon the advancing line, behind which a sea of steely ripples danced in the sunlight.

The cruiser, slowly heeling to leeward, veered her bow round to her course, and Duff could see the dash of water about her cutwater as she forged ahead. Still the Wanderer lay motionless, like a beautiful picture, every sail that would draw set to catch the first whiff of the breeze that was bringing the corvette slowly within range.

Less than three miles separated the vessels, while the yawl, scarcely four hundred yards from the schooner, was lessening the distance rapidly. But the breeze traveled faster.

Ralph could see Gary in the rigging watching the cruiser through a glass. No attention seemed to be paid to the boat.

Three hundred yards—then two hundred—one hundred; and as the distance lessened their spirits rose. They were, however, half a cable length away, when a sullen boom was heard, and a solid shot came skipping along the surface of the sea to the left of the schooner.

"That is an order to 'stay where you are'," remarked Duff. "Ah! here comes our wind," he

added, as a cool, refreshing whiff fanned their brows. "Any other time and I would welcome it; but—come down on her, Ben!"

Ralph, fancying that he saw the Wanderer's sails beginning to fill, sprang forward, seized an extra oar and pulled with all his might. The tired muscles were strained in a final effort, and the moist veins bulged about their temples.

"Boat ahoy!" came from the schooner. "Look alive or we'll leave you."

"Leave——" the rest of Duff's exclamation was lost as he threw his whole effort into a last spurt.

The shadow of the lofty sails was towering over the yawl when the Wanderer began to glide ahead. Another gun from the cruiser, and the ball drove between boat and schooner, missing the first by but a few yards.

"Boat there! Make ready for a rope!"

A sailor sprang upon the taffrail and the next instant a slim line uncoiled itself over the water. Duff, springing up, caught the end on his oar blade, and by a dexterous twist brought it within reach.

As he rose from making it fast, the yawl was spinning through the water in the schooner's wake, as the latter, heeling to the wind, responded like a thing of life to the wishes of those on board.

Hand over hand the mate drew the heavily laden boat under the Wanderer's lee, made fast the davits as they were lowered, and a moment or two later the three tired boatmen found themselves safely on deck.

When the ample supply of meat and vegetables was hoisted over the bulwarks, the few who had time to look were loud in their expressions of approval. Captain Gary hardly vouchsafed them more than a glance. To Duff, however, he briefly said:

"We had warning in the night that the Adams" (a sailing vessel in the old United States navy) "was making up the coast, and we had to pull out. We're short of water. Your grub comes in handy, though."

"I suppose then we might have been left, had we been a little later, or the wind had sprung up sooner."

The captain shrugged his shoulders, then glowered at Ralph, who was relating his adventures to several men about the cook's galley.

"When John Bull or Uncle Sam are as close as that fellow yonder, a slaver has to look out for himself. Now, Mr. Duff, you are a gunner, I understand. I want you to make ready our stern chaser. If they keep on firing we must try to cripple their sailing powers if we can. It's lucky she didn't happen to be a steamer."

But Duff, already somewhat piqued by Gary's apparent indifference as to whether the yawl was picked up or not, drew himself up stiffly.

"When I shipped with you, Captain Gary," he replied, "there was nothing said about my serving as a gunner. I must respectfully decline to fire on an American ship. I am too much of an American myself."

Without waiting for the burst of anger which he knew would follow this mutinous(?) delivery, the second mate wheeled and made his way to the galley, where he ordered Neb to serve him breakfast in the cabin.

Gary gave vent to a subdued oath or two, then bottled his wrath for a more auspicious occasion.

Meanwhile the Wanderer, when once fully under way, began to evince her remarkable sailing qualities, especially in light winds. She steadily drew away from the cruiser, whose people, having obtained the range, were sending shot after shot, with a view of crippling the schooner's sailing powers.

One round shot tore a great hole through the mainsail, as it went shrieking by. Gary himself, aided by Rucker, got ready one of the two guns wherewith the Wanderer was equipped and soon returned their fire, though no effect was manifest.

The cruiser must have been informed of the character of the slaver, or she would not have attempted to cripple her so persistently. Duff, after eating, returned to the quarter-deck, where he watched with folded arms the rather unskillful efforts to handle the long twelve pounder pointed sternwards from the Wanderer's waist. At each discharge a chorus of cries from the hold reminded him of their living cargo, deepening still more his disgust at the nature of the venture into which he had been inveigled.

The breeze began to freshen and whip somewhat to the southwest. Duff went forward to where Gary and Rucker were trying to sight the loaded gun.

"Shall I have the sheets trimmed, Captain Gary," he asked.

Gary surveyed the mate from head to foot with cool insolence. Then he stamped his foot.

"You shall either go before the mast as a common sailor, or you can remain a prisoner in your stateroom during my pleasure. If I gave you your deserts, I'd have you clapped in irons."

"As a sailor you would probably put me in irons for again refusing to fire, should you order me to; so I will go to the cabin. Take notice, however, Captain Gary, I protest against your treatment. To fire on an American man-of-war under these circumstances is piracy, and I submit that no captain has a right to issue such orders to true American seamen."

Gary's fury was such that he laid hold of one of the cutlasses in the rack at the foot of the mainmast, but the screech of a shot and the crash of a splintered topsail boom, diverted his attention.

Duff, laying aside his own weapon, descended to the cabin.

"Up with you!" shouted the captain. "Lay out along the fo's'l gaff there. Lively now!"

CHAPTER XX.

Ralph Stumbles on a Discovery.

Three nimble sailors were soon stretched along the slanting gaff of the great foresail, a perilous and quivering berth, with nothing for the hands to grasp but the shivering leech and shivered boom of the topsail. The crippled boom was soon lashed with pieces of spun yarn, and the damage thus temporarily repaired.

Ralph, after a comfortable meal in the galley for himself and Ben, was attracted to the grating over the main hatch by the strange noises that issued thence. Shading his eyes from the light, he peered below, and through the semi-darkness saw a sight that made him heartsick and disgusted. More than ever he wished that he had never gone on this luckless cruise.

The main hold was a place, perhaps sixty feet long by less than twenty-five wide. Into this "black hole," where the upright space between decks was less than seven feet, were crowded one hundred and seventy naked creatures, like hogs in a stock car.

They could not lie down unless a portion stood up to make room, neither could all remain seated except by drawing up their limbs in cramping and painful postures. The odors already arising from this pit of torture were such that the lad had to turn his face away for fresh air.

"It's awful!" he gasped to himself. "It's simply awful. I never had very much liking for niggers—as niggers, but such as this is enough to bring God's punishment on every one of us that have helped to bring it about. Jeemineddy! I wouldn't care much if that ship did overhaul us. Want water, do you?"

This last remark was brought out by Ralph's noticing several of the negroes make signs to him as of drinking from their hands. Ralph walked straight to Captain Gary and saluted.

"May I give those people below some water, sir?" he asked. "They seem to want some."

"No!" shouted Gary, not sorry to vent his spleen on so inviting an object as Ralph. "We'll all be wanting water if that fellow there drives us from the coast without another chance to fill the butts. Get forward there and don't let me hear from you till you're spoken to. D'y'e understand?"

Ralph retreated, and Gary, after another unsuccessful trial at the cruiser's masts, gave orders to cease firing.

The wind was now a stiff breeze, and the Adams was holding her own. With the rising of the sea it was probable that the larger vessel would gain on the smaller one.

The cruiser also stopped firing, as the increased rolling of the ship rendered a long range shot too ineffective.

For an hour or more the relative positions of the two vessels remained comparatively unchanged. If there was any advantage it was on the side of the cruiser, though the Wanderer behaved beautifully.

But the wind steadily rose, and by the time eight bells was struck, and Neb announced dinner, the Adams was perceptibly gaining.

"Send that boy aft," ordered Gary, and when Ralph appeared the captain said sneeringly: "You seem to think so much of those black brutes below, I guess you can help deal out their rations. Go to Long Tom."

That worthy was buckling a brace of revolvers about his person, and had in his hand a sharp rawhide. Two sailors bore a great basket of corn bread and ship's hard bread. To Ralph was given a smaller one, containing meat minutely divided into about two ounce slices.

"Ere we go," remarked the boatswain, heading for the lower gangway door.

At this place an armed sentinel stood day and night. As the four entered, a howl arose not unlike that of caged wild beasts. But it was more for water than for food.

"Eat first; drink afterwards," said Bludson, striking lightly right and left to restrain their eagerness. "That's the law aboard here. Mind, Ralph; one bit of meat apiece—no more."

One sailor bore a lantern, for the only light afforded outside of that was from the grated hatch above. Amid the half obscurity Ralph saw a jumble of swart, brutish faces and wildly gleaming eyes, and heard a babel of guttural sounds suggestive of a savage Bedlam where violence was restrained only by fear.

Up and down the rows of naked forms they passed, dealing to each one a ration of bread and meat, scanty and coarse enough, yet sufficient to sustain life. Then half a pint of water was served out to each.

Here the struggle to keep order was fiercest. The strong would attempt to deprive the weak of their share, and Bludson's whip was kept constantly going.

Once a brawny negro made a strong effort to seize the bucket, regardless of the cowhide, when Long Tom felled him at a blow with his pistol butt, then cocking the weapon, glanced sternly around at the circle of angry faces by which they were surrounded.

The negroes would have torn them in pieces had they dared, for the want of water was already rendering them desperate in that fetid hole.

Ralph returned to the deck pale, nauseated, and sick at heart. The captain noticed this and it angered him, as did nearly everything which the boy now did.

"Hark ye!" he growled. "D'ye think you'd like to spend all your time down there?"

"I would rather be dead," said Ralph half angrily, for his whole being rebelled against the atrocity of which he was being made, perforce, one of the perpetrators.

"Would, eh?" The captain eyed him with leering malevolence. "You'll mind your eye then while you're on this craft, and you'll obey orders, without a word, or—down you go among those demons for punishment. Go to my room and bring up my small glass—the double one. Stay—while you're there make up the berth and tidy things up a bit. Lively now!"

Ralph went below burning with a sense of futile rage. It was useless to rebel, however, for on a ship a boy is the most helpless of creatures.

As he moodily arranged things in the captain's stateroom, wondering for the hundredth time why Gary should appear to wish to persecute him after having been so courteous at Savannah, Ralph's eye fell on an open letter lying on the floor before the half open door of a small iron safe. Evidently Gary, in his haste or excitement over the approach of the warship, had left the safe in this condition. The letter had probably fallen there unnoticed.

Ralph picked it up, intending to lay it on the table, when a certain familiarity in the handwriting struck him as peculiar and he started to read the contents.

"My dear Cousin:—" it began; but after getting thus far the boy threw the sheet down upon the table.

"Why should I be reading the captain's letters?" thought he, and a flush of shame crept momentarily to his forehead. "And yet—it doesn't seem to be the one I gave him."

He remembered that Shard had mentioned an intention to write Gary by mail.

As Ralph hesitated, a desire strengthened within him to read further, despite the monitions of conscience. A vague idea that the strange and contradictory behavior of Gary might be explained was perhaps at the bottom of the lad's mental persistence.

He hesitated until his fingers burned, then made a sudden grasp at the letter.

CHAPTER XXI.

At Close Quarters.

Without giving himself time to think, Ralph now read as follows:

My Dear Cousin:

If he does not get lost on his way you will be apt to see an awkward country boy in Savannah in a day or two, who is quite anxious to go to sea. I have recommended him to apply to you, and you will do me a great favor, not only to take him, but to see that he never comes back. Mind you—no violence. I know your devilish temper. But you can either wear him out with hard work, or leave him in Africa, or get rid of him in some way which may gratify the hatred which I and mine have felt for his whole generation for years, and yet avoid difficulty with the law. We have enough to contend with as it is, in our Cuban venture.

Frankly now, if you wish any more cash advances from me, you must see to this lad, and contrive to make something out of this cargo of live stock. Shipping wild niggers is growing riskier every year, especially as Cuba and Brazil (our only markets left) threaten to free their slaves.

Look sharp, dodge all warships, and attend to that brat of a boy. I have soft soaped him by giving him a letter to you which you will interpret by this.

Your Cousin,
Theodore Shard.

Ralph's first hot impulse was to go up and make known to Gary that he now saw through the eccentricities of the latter's behavior, and that Shard's treachery was also known. A second thought convinced him that such a course in the captain's present mood, would most likely, only precipitate some act of violence of which he would be the victim.

Ralph now saw why he had been sent up the river on a perilous errand, and why he and his companions were so readily deserted on the first inkling that a sloop of war was near.

Gary's unchanging severity and dislike were explained, and as the boy contrasted his present treatment with the honeyed manner which had so deceived him in Savannah, he felt that he was justified in using any means to counteract such methods.

As he flung the letter down, a slight noise made him turn. Duff was standing at the door.

Ralph, feeling that here was his best friend aboard, resolved to acquaint the mate with all that had occurred relating to Shard's and Gary's conspiracy against himself. This he did as briefly as possible, clinching his remarks by holding out the letter.

"I won't read it, though it's right enough you should, seeing it concerns your safety," replied Duff. "I'm in disgrace, too, so it might be a good plan for us to stick together—for self preservation, I mean. We don't want to hurt any one, unless they try to hurt us. We're scarce in water, and that cruiser ain't going to let us back to the coast again. You can bank your life on that.

"Captain is in his worst mood, and he ain't likely to get better. He'll begin on the crew next. They say he is a perfect fiend for punishment once he gets mad all through. These poor niggers will keep him half crazy as their want of water grows, and the hot calms strike us in the doldrums. It's my frank opinion, lad, that we'll be having a little floating place of torment of our own here before many days have passed."

The captain's voice hurled down the companionway, interrupted them harshly.

"He wants his glass," said Ralph, seizing the instrument in question. "I must go."

"Well," concluded Duff as he returned to his own stateroom, "lay low and look out for squalls. That's all we can do at present."

When Ralph returned to the deck the wind was stiffening to a gale, and half a dozen men were putting a single reef into the mainsail, while several more were laying out along the bowsprit doing the same office for one of the jibs.

The outermost one, called the flyaway, was being furled, though the sailor stretched out upon the stay beneath the bowsprit was drenched by each downward plunge of the schooner's bow. The Adams still carried a heavy press of canvas, though black specks of men could be seen on the yards shortening the loftier sails. The larger vessel rode the rising seas more easily, and had already come within close range.

Gary seized the glass and leveled it at the cruiser, then at the southwestern horizon, where a dull gray film of vapor was settled upon the sea.

He handed the glass to Rucker and swore impatiently.

"If we have half an hour more of this wind we're gone up," he growled. "Our only chance is a fog."

A puff of smoke belched from the port bow of the warship.

"They understand what that fog might do for us as well as we do," remarked Rucker, as a shell exploded some distance to leeward. "They'll get the range in a few minutes, and when one of those twelve pound bombs explodes in our tops——"

"They see that solid shot won't do," interrupted Gary fiercely. "It is quick work they are after."

Down in the hold the labored pitching of the schooner was adding seasickness to the sufferings of the poor wretches there. Doleful cries resounded, among which one at all conversant with their language would have heard calls for water predominate.

At night, when darkness reigned, the misery of such a scene would be augmented.

Several shells were fired by the cruiser, each one coming nearer to the mark, until at last an explosion just forward of the foretopmast shattered a double throat block, and down came the foresail, the leech trailing in the sea as it fell.

Another piece of the shell tore off a sailor's arm, and still another disabled one of the boats.

Orders from the captain came thick and fast; men flew hither and thither to repair the damage; while the wounded man lay writhing and neglected for some time. The Adams all at once slowly yawed, being within easy range, as the Wanderer lay helpless with her nose in the wind's eye.

"Look out!" shouted Rucker. "She's making ready to give us a broadside."

"Lively there, men!" roared Gary, nearly frantic. "Do you want to spend a year or so in a Yankee jail?"

A redoubled roar from the cruiser followed, and a small tempest of iron hurtled around them.

One shot passed through the after hold, terrifying anew the negroes, who yelled fearfully. A rent or two in the sails was all the damage beside, that was inflicted.

Ralph, who was assisting to reeve a new block at the foretop, saw that the fog was almost at hand. But before it came a change of wind; preceding which, as the southeaster died, there were a few moments of calm.

The lull reached the Wanderer first, and the cruiser, swinging to her course, forged so far ahead that, before the schooner could again hoist her foresail, the Adams rounded to, less than half a mile away and presented a frowning row of shotted guns to the slaver's stern. It was a fair raking position.

Rucker threw down his speaking trumpet in despair, though Gary's eyes were fixed keenly upon the advancing fog. A signal for the slaver to lie to was followed by a peremptory shot athwart the schooner's bow.

At the same time a boat was lowered away, filled with armed men, and started towards the Wanderer.

"Heave to, men!" ordered the captain. "But be ready to hoist the fo's'l when I give the word. Down with your helm—down, man!" This to the man at the wheel. "We mustn't give those fellows any cause to suspect us—now."

While the boat approached, it was at times lost in the hollows of the seas, but always rose again nearer than before. Meanwhile the Wanderer lay to, with her mainsail flattened and her topsails aback.

Apparently she was merely awaiting the arrival of the cruiser's boat to surrender herself. Many on board thought so now, and, in certain quarters, bitter were the grumblings over their "hard luck." All this time Gary, standing at the compass, alternately watched the cruiser and the approach of the fog, while the schooner, deprived of headway, rolled in seeming helplessness in the trough of the sea.

"Lad," said Ben to Ralph as the two slid down the ratlines when their task aloft was done, "I almost wish we were back among those bloody niggers ashore. 'Twould be better than standin' trial for bein' caught on a blackguard of a slaver—bad luck to her."

"We must make the best of it," began Ralph, when Gary's voice interrupted him.

"Hoist away there, men!" cried the captain, brandishing his arms furiously. "Up with that fo's'l! Up with it, I say! Ease away on those tops'ls. Lively now! Haul away on that jib. Flatten 'em, boys!"

The men worked like demons, for on the instant they apprehended the daring nature of Gary's maneuver. Rucker, seizing the trumpet, echoed the captain's orders in stentorian tones.

It was not until the schooner fell off broadside that these actions were noticeable to those on the warship. But she could not now fire without endangering her own boat, which was scarcely fifty yards from the slaver.

So nicely had Gary calculated, that the breeze bearing the fog struck the Wanderer's sails just as she was trimmed to fall off. The cruiser, stricken by the brief calm which had previously palsied the schooner's movements, lay helpless in a double sense, being unable to either move or fire.

"Make ready to go about," said the captain to the first mate, who bellowed the order through his trumpet.

They were nearly abreast of the cruiser's boat, which, seeing at once what was up, fired an ineffectual volley of small arms as the Wanderer gracefully swept by, hardly a pistol shot off.

"About ship!" said Gary quietly.

"Hard a lee!" sang out the mate, and as the schooner rushed up into the wind, Gary, walking to the stern, kissed his hand satirically to the officers in the boat.

"I've a notion to sink you," he muttered. "One solid shot would do the business; but perhaps 'twill be best for us to get away, doing as little damage as possible. It might be safer in case of subsequent trouble with the authorities."

Close hauled upon her other tack, the schooner was heading diagonally towards the fog which was just at hand, like a dense, advancing wall.

As they drew away from the boat the cruiser began to fire one gun after another. Each discharge sent apprehensive thrills through the slaver's crew. Finally a whole broadside of the warship's upper battery came shrieking over the water.

CHAPTER XXII.

Trouble of Another Kind.

"That was a close call," exclaimed Rucker, as a shot cut away one of the jib stays, carrying down the flying jib.

Even as he spoke the film of the fog enveloped them, and though the sloop of war continued to fire, her shots did no further damage, for the Wanderer almost immediately lost sight of her pursuer.

Gary then had the course altered to disconcert the aim of the corvette, which soon after ceased firing.

The breeze that bore the fog with it, was a light one, and as the mist was liable to rise at any time the captain made the most of his opportunity by carrying all the sail he could spread. He dared not return to the coast, bad as he needed water; for the alarm once given, other cruisers would be on the watch there. So he determined to make for the Cape Verdes, and risk the chance of being able to water in those islands. Should no prying war ships happen along he anticipated little difficulty.

The day wore away slowly. It was about an hour by sun in the afternoon before the fog began to lift. A sailor was at each mast head watching for the Adams, as the course of the corvette was entirely unknown.

"Sail ho!" sang out one of these lookouts as the mist, rolling eastward, began to show a clear horizon towards the north.

In a minute both captain and mate were aloft. There was the Adams about four miles away, and somewhat astern to the lee quarter. Almost at the same time the Wanderer was observed from the cruiser, as the latter began to pile up her canvas with a rapidity that evinced a sudden

cause therefor. As the mate returned to the deck Gary called:

"Ease away, Mr. Rucker. We've got just the wind that suits us, and I think we have the advantage this time."

With the light breeze that continued, and with the sheets free, the Wanderer was at her best. By the time the sun went down it could be seen that the war ship was losing ground.

When night closed in she was fully five miles astern. With a heavier wind the advantage would have been on her side, but as it was, when morning dawned the Adams was not in sight.

After that came several days of light, baffling winds, alternating with calms. The sun, as they drew nearer the equator, became more and more unbearable.

In the close hold the heat and stench were frightful. The constant cries for water rendered the crew nervous and the captain irritable. He now punished the men severely for the slightest infraction of duty.

"If we don't reach the Verdes," said Duff to Ralph one day, as the lad was sweeping the cabin, "there will be an outbreak of some kind. Come to the gangway and listen."

The second mate, who still remained below—his place being taken by Bludson after a fashion—now led Ralph to the grated door where stood the loaded howitzer. The sentry was not there; another sign of the crew's demoralization. He had slipped into one of the store rooms, now left unlocked, to tap a water butt unseen, for all hands were on short water rations.

When Duff and the boy halted, they could hear a sort of rasping sound from underneath like the boring or cutting of wood.

"What is that?" asked Ralph.

"Mischief," said the mate sententiously. "Those wretches in the hold are up to some trickery. These stupid sentries are too dull or careless to investigate. They are crazy for water in there, and it is my opinion they have got hold of something and are trying to cut a way out—God knows where!—perhaps through the bottom of the vessel."

"Suppose you tell the captain."

"He is that obstinate he'd simply curse me, and probably give no heed. But some one else might speak with better effect."

"Do you think I had better?"

Ralph spoke doubtfully, realizing that he also was no favorite with Gary.

"You might bring it about in some way. I certainly owe Captain Gary no favors, yet I should hate to stand by and see those fiends cut their way out, and say nothing. They would murder every soul on board."

Later on, Ralph found a chance to tell the captain what Duff had told him. Gary's scowl deepened.

"Duff told you this, did he?" demanded the skipper suspiciously. "Out with the truth."

Ralph acknowledged that the second mate was his informant.

"Stuff! Haven't we a sentry there constantly?"

"But the sentry isn't always at his post, so Mr. Duff says. He was away today when we heard the noises."

"And you heard them, too! The mate tattling to the cabin boy, and both peaching on the poor sentry, who is, I dare say, more trusty than either one of you two. Go forward, and stay there until you are bidden back. Rank mutiny, by thunder!"

Gary stamped his foot, more with the air of one demented than that of a sane and sober commander. Indeed the situation was sufficiently grave without this new complication.

Several of the negroes had already died, and more were down helpless beneath the feet of their thirst-tortured but more able-bodied fellow sufferers. The howls and lamentations that continually ascended through the grating were trying to the nerves, aside from considerations of profit and loss. The combined effect on Gary was to render him more unreasonable and tyrannical than ever.

Oh, for more wind! They were hardly up into the trades yet, and at that season, even the trades were uncertain.

But it was certain that unless enough favorable wind did come, and come soon, they would hardly reach the Cape Verdes in time. Already crew, negroes and all, were down to one pint of

water to the man every twenty-four hours. In that hot and stifling weather their tortures grew almost unbearable.

One night Rucker, happening to want a night glass, left the deck for a moment to go below for it, and passing close to the sleepy sentry, he heard the same sounds which had aroused Duff's suspicions. After Ralph's rebuff the second mate had made no further attempt to have the thing investigated.

"What's that?" said he sharply to the sailor, who sat leaning against the bulkhead, but the man made no answer.

Rucker shook him sharply, and at the same time scented the odor of liquor about the fellow.

"Wake up. What have you been drinking? What noise is that?"

But receiving only unintelligible replies, and having to return immediately to his watch on deck, he reported the circumstances to the captain, who broke into a storm of invective. Rucker discreetly withdrew.

Shortly thereafter Duff heard from his stateroom an uproar in the gangway. Looking out, he saw the captain standing over the prostrate form of the sentry, whom he had knocked down with the man's own gun. One of the storeroom doors was open.

"I see now!" foamed Gary, nearly beside himself. "You fellows on watch have been tapping this rum barrel night and day, I reckon, and mischief going on right under your feet. But I'll even you up. Where is the bo's'n?"

Receiving no answer to this last shouted demand, Gary sprang up the stairway, leaving the insensible sentry stretched upon the floor.

Duff, still watching from his stateroom through the open cabin door, saw a gaunt, dusky face thrust itself from the storeroom and peer wildly round. Other faces joined it, and in an instant a dozen naked black forms were crowding the gangway.

They saw Duff. Several made for him, brandishing short chains from their fetters, which they had managed somehow to loosen and sever. Others beat the sentry's brains out, and overthrew the howitzer.

The noise thus made, and Duff's loud calls to alarm the ship, caused Rucker and one or two seamen to run hastily down the companionway. Being unarmed they were forced into the cabin or back up the gangway, by a horde of frantic savages, who were being continually reinforced from the hold by way of the two holes, which they had somehow cut through the bulkhead into the storeroom, where among other things, was the barrel of rum.

The drinking must have been going on secretly for a day or two. In fact others of the crew were now discovered to be tipsy, and that the officers had not found it out before was doubtless owing to the growing laxness of discipline, despite the captain's severity.

Gary, accompanied by Bludson and others, now appeared, armed with pistols and cutlasses; but the door leading into the hold was already broken down. Scores of half crazy negroes swarmed into the gangway, bearing back the whites by sheer weight of numbers, notwithstanding the weapons of the crew. Revolver and cutlass played an active part, but the slaves seemed absolutely indifferent to life.

When one was shot down, half a dozen took his place. Even the few women fought like tigresses. The truth was they were crazed for want of water.

In the cabin, Rucker and one seaman had been literally torn limb from limb. The remaining man escaped into the captain's room.

Duff, who was without weapons, clambered through the stern window of his room, and gained the deck by way of the vessel's stern post and a rope thrown him by Ralph, who had been summoned to the wheel when the alarm was given. The lad was chafing at his inactivity.

"There's hardly any breeze," said Duff. "Lash the wheel, my lad, and bear a hand. If those niggers gain the deck we're gone up sure."

It was but the task of a moment to obey, seize a cutlass from the rack and follow the mate to the companion-way, where Gary and what was left of the men with him were being forced up the steps.

The captain was covered with blood from a scalp wound, but he was equal to several ordinary men. Skillfully parrying the blows directed at his life, he had laid more than one burly savage low.

But the number and fury of the yelling crowd were irresistible. Seizing the weapons of their dead and wounded assailants, they fought with the blind energy of desperation.

"Batten down the main hatch," called Gary, seeing Duff and Ralph. "Bludson is gone, but we can hold them until you return."

The order was swiftly executed. Then the second mate and Ralph, assisted by one sailor, brought forward the heavy storm covering of the after companion-way and placed it in readiness. A charge down was then made and the negroes driven back a little.

"Now, men," cried Gary, springing up to the deck, at the rear of his men, "down with it! Jump on it, and batten her—batten her!"

With both hatches thus secured, they were in undisputed possession of the deck, though the whole interior of the ship, except the forecabin, was at the mercy of the negroes. The triumphant howls of the latter were deafening.

Suddenly a shriek was heard. The savages had entered the captain's stateroom and fallen upon the sailor who had taken refuge there.

On deck Gary counted his help. He found that besides Bludson and Rucker five sailors were missing. His available force, including himself, Duff and Ralph, amounted only to ten.

Two of these were desperately wounded, one having his throat actually torn by the teeth of the cannibals below.

The arms were mostly on deck, but the ammunition, provisions, and most of their scanty supply of water was below.

They were in a terrible situation. What deed of desperation the negroes might do it was impossible to tell. There were matches; they might fire the ship. There was the rum; they might still gain the upper hand of all, when nerved and further crazed by liquor.

Two lanterns shed a melancholy light fore and aft. The wind had died away and the heavens were sprinkled with stars.

Gary placed two men fully armed, at each hatch, then called the rest to the quarter-deck for a consultation. He was calm, cool, yet heartless and vindictive as ever.

Without caring for the men already sacrificed, he seemed only anxious to save his vessel and as many of his mutinous victims as he might now be able to carry into port. For Duff and Ralph he, even now, scarcely veiled his dislike as he sat upon the hatch, binding his wounded head with a handkerchief.

But before much was said, a sailor ran back crying:

"This way! This way! The fiends are after us again."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Adrift.

Seizing their weapons, the wearied men ran forward to the forecabin, where the negroes had nearly cut another hole through the bulkhead separating the crew's quarters from the hold.

One of the main hatch guards was holding them at bay, and had managed to seize the implement with which they had gained their liberty, from the savage who happened to be using it last. It was part of an old hand saw, that had, by some neglect, been left unnoticed on the floor of the hold.

Several shots drove back the blacks, then the hole, which was a small one, was nailed up and another guard stationed.

Gary's next move was to order the two sound boats lowered and attached by ropes to the side. He was impressed by this last effort of the blacks that the worst might happen, and that they had better be prepared. Once the horde of savages gained the decks, the vessel would afford no refuge to their hated oppressors.

The night was somewhat advanced. In the horizon a few darker spaces denoted the presence of clouds, though all above was clear.

The Wanderer's sails hung limp, unless now and then a feeble expansion caused by some desultory puff be excepted. Gary divided the remainder of the men into two watches, one of whom he caused to lie down on deck for a little rest, with their arms at their sides.

Below, amid the darkness, a single light shone from the cabin. Some one of the blacks, evidently acquainted with the use of matches (through traders or missionaries, doubtless), had found a way of lighting the cabin lamp. Pandemonium reigned there. Inflamed by rum, furious efforts were made from time to time to burst through the hatches.

Along towards morning, however, a certain degree of quiet began to prevail. Perhaps the negroes were growing weary.

A light breeze had arisen that sent the schooner ahead. Gary had determined to make for the nearest port, provided they could hold out to reach it. He saw no chance to do aught to subdue and confine the blacks with his reduced force. If they saved the vessel and their own lives, they would do more than some of them expected.

One of the boats was chafing against the weather side of the ship. Gary directed Ralph to drop both boats astern and fasten one behind the other.

The boy obeyed, climbing down into the first boat in order to attach the second to its stern. He made, as he thought, a half hitch of the painter, then, drawing the second boat close to the first, he stepped into it, and began bailing out the water that had filtered in through the seams shrunken by exposure to the sun on the schooner's deck.

As he worked away, thoughts of his mountain home intruded strangely, perhaps incongruously, upon his mind. Looking eastward a narrow rim of moon was protruding over the ocean's rim.

Something reminded him of the way it used to rise above "Old Peaky Top," just back of the cabin on Hiawasee. He straightened himself to obtain a better view. A sharp report rang out behind him from the vessel, and he felt a numbness under his shoulder.

"Reckon they must be trying to get out again," he muttered, glancing at the ship's stern.

He was then sensible of a dizziness and a roaring in his ears. A black savage face was glaring upon him from the window of the captain's stateroom, from whence protruded the barrel of a rifle. After that his sight grew dim; something wet trickled down on one of his hands, and outward things became a blank. His last sensation was a comfortable kind of sleepiness.

When Ralph came to himself he was lying in the bottom of the boat with his head jammed uncomfortably under one of the thwarts. As he scrambled up, his first thought was of what the captain would say to his falling asleep in that way. But instead of rising, he stumbled and fell. Then he realized that it was morning and that he was unaccountably weak. Pulling himself up again with more care, he stared around for an instant, then sank back against the thwart.

The Wanderer was nowhere to be seen. After another moment he pulled himself up on the seat, in order to assure himself that he was not dreaming. What his eyes had told him was a fact.

He was alone in that little boat, with not a sail or other sign of man's presence anywhere within view. The surprise held him mute and breathless at first, then he began to wonder how he came to be left in such a plight.

His left arm felt stiff and sore. Looking down, he saw the blood had dried on his left hand, while under that shoulder something smarted with every movement.

It came to him then. The report, the numbness, the fleeting glimpse of that savage face, and the gun barrel, were now accounted for.

"While I was mooning away about grandfather and home, that fellow shot me. Lucky he didn't strike closer. But how did I get loose?"

Examination showed him the painter trailing idly in the water alongside. He must have made that half hitch carelessly. During his swoon it had worked loose.

His friends on board had doubtless had their attention too much taken up by the blacks, to give heed to him. The whiffs of air had slowly swept the schooner out of sight and he had lain senseless until daylight.

"I am surely in a bad fix," he reflected. "Wounded—in an open boat—without an oar, or a bite to eat or drink."

He had read enough of the perils of the sea to comprehend the terrible possibilities of his situation, and at first his blood chilled and his courage sank. Resolute as he was by nature, there was a deadly difference between the loneliness of his present condition and the solitude of his native mountains.

In the woods he was at home; he knew where to go to find people there—but here! In his weakened condition tears started to his eyes. But he soon dashed them away, and, rising, set about dressing his wound.

He removed his jacket and shirt, and bathed the wound with ocean water, as he knew that

salt was good to allay possible inflammation. The bullet had grazed his side just under the shoulder, making a painful though not a dangerous injury.

"Lucky it didn't lodge," he thought, as he tore up his handkerchief and bound up the place by passing the bandage over his opposite shoulder.

A good deal of blood had flowed both down his arm and side. This accounted for his present weakness.

After resuming his clothes, he sat down to consider the situation.

There was a light breeze from the northeast, with a straggling fleece of clouds, expanding like a fan towards the zenith. Ralph knew that the appearance indicated more wind, but he determined not to borrow trouble from the future.

A slow, majestic heaving of the ocean, on which the yawl gently rose and fell was counter crossed by the shorter ripples stirred up by the light wind then blowing. The dead swell evinced the neighborhood of some previous gale.

"I might as well search the lockers," he said to himself. "There might be something eatable in them."

There was nothing to eat aboard; but in the locker at the stern he discovered a small keg filled with water, overlooked probably when the boat was unloaded, for it was the same craft in which the trip up the African river had been made.

"That's a good find," he ejaculated. "Crickey! what is this?"

He drew forth from under the bow a strip of canvas and an old rusty hatchet. The possession of these articles raised his spirits for a time, so that he set to work to rig up a sort of jury mast and sail. There were three thwarts. From one of these he managed to split two pieces some six feet long without impairing its strength as a brace to stiffen the boat. He lashed the three together with a few bits of spun yarn from his pocket, making a mast nearly ten feet long.

Next he split from the other thwarts a piece or two for a boom, then he turned his attention to the sail.

Part of the canvas he tore into strips, and by the help of these he manufactured a sort of lug sail of sufficient size to keep the boat steady in a seaway, and in running with a fair wind to make two or three miles an hour.

To step and wedge the mast with the aid of the hatchet and more splinters from the thwarts, did not take long. The only thing that bothered him was the main sheet, or—to explain—the rope which should hold the sail taut and trim.

His eye happened to rest on the knot of the painter where it was fastened to a ring bolt at the bow. He drew the wet line aboard, untied the knot and soon had his main sheet fastened to the boom.

There was a cleat near the tiller and Ralph, hauling in, brought the yawl a little up in the wind and soon had the craft under headway.

"By jolly!" he exclaimed, "but this isn't so very bad, after all. If I only knew where to head now, I might strike the Cape Verdes. I suppose I might hit Africa if I went east long enough; that is, supposing I didn't capsize or founder, or starve, or something. Heigho! How weak I feel. Believe I'll take breakfast."

So he took up the keg and drank heartily, for his wound had made him slightly feverish.

"I must touch it lighter than this," he said as he put down the keg. "Lord only knows when or where I will get it filled again."

As the sun came up, a flaming red ball, the wind slowly increased.

Ralph, though by no means experienced in boat sailing, had learned how to steer. The sail was too small and weakly fastened to render it liable to endanger the safety of the craft and for a time the interest aroused by the novelty of sailing by himself kept his spirits up.

But in an hour or so he felt weary. The sea had slowly risen so that an occasional dash of water flew over the bow whenever he headed in the least to windward.

"What is the use of tiring myself out?" he thought at last. "It don't make any difference where I go, or whether I go at all."

So he unstepped his mast, stowed it in the boat's bottom, and lay down on the sail. The sun dazzled him and he drew his hat over his eyes.

Probably his wound and weakness made him drowsy, for he fell asleep. When he again awoke

the sun was nearly overhead. The hot glare was stifling. His very clothing seemed to burn his flesh. He staggered to his feet and looked around the horizon wearily.

Suddenly his eyes brightened and his whole figure became animated and eager.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Ralph's Sufferings.

Low down in the northwestern horizon was a faint speck of white. Everywhere else the blue of the sky and ocean was unrelieved. The "mares' tails" of clouds had disappeared and the sea was a gently heaving plain of glass.

"A sail!" exclaimed the boy. "It must be a sail."

He hurriedly set up his mast again and hastened back to the tiller. But there was no wind; the canvas hung limp, while the sun was broiling the paint on the little forward deck.

"I don't suppose they can see me," thought he dejectedly. "It must be only their topsails that I see, and so small a boat as this would be invisible. Perhaps if they had a glass at the mast head, they might find me. Oh, if I only had a wind!"

Reflection, however, convinced him that a breeze would be as apt to carry the strange vessel off as to bring it nearer, so he was fain to sit still and idly watch the tiny dot of white, which meant so much, yet might do so little.

The isolation of his position pressed upon him harder than ever. He felt, for a time, that if that elusive bit of white should disappear he would certainly break down. The heat and glare in the air added to his misery, and he took another drink from the keg, despite his previous abstemious resolve.

"I just can't help drinking," he said to himself in justification of his act. "I reckon it's the wound makes me burn so."

For a long while matters remained much the same, except that his hunger increased and his general state of discomfort grew to a point that rendered his exposure to the sun's rays unbearable. He would have taken his sail and made some sort of awning but for the faint hope that it might be seen.

He crawled under the bow, where the deck sheltered the upper half of his person, and found some relief. From time to time he crept out and, standing on the thwarts, watched the unchanging speck of white, with longings which at times were almost akin to despair.

Towards the middle of the afternoon, after a longer stay beneath the deck than usual, he heard a slight thump against the side of the boat. Scrambling up, he saw that a light breeze had arisen, sending little ripples over the sea.

The wind was fair towards the distant sail, and Ralph again stepped his mast and trimmed his sheet, while his heart beat fast. If he could only get near enough to the stranger to be recognized!

But his progress was slow and many times the distant spot would disappear momentarily, sending painful thrills through his veins. Then, when it was visible once more, the sense of relief was almost as hard to bear, so greatly were his nerves wrought up.

After a time it seemed to him that the sail was growing larger. At first he doubted, then became assured of that fact.

He rose and shouted in sheer exultation. For a time the white spot increased in size until he felt that he would certainly be seen a moment or two later. But that longed-for moment did not come.

At last he perceived that the stranger was sailing at right angles to his own course, which would naturally expose to his view a larger expanse of sail. Would he be able to forge far enough ahead to be recognized?

The period of suspense was almost an agony; nor was the after conviction that the ship was slowly but surely leaving him, as she passed on her course, much more painful by comparison. But as long as she was in sight Ralph sailed on.

He could not voluntarily give up even the last glimpse of what appeared to be the only link

connecting him with his fellow creatures. But as the dot of white was finally lost to view, he sank to the boat's bottom in despair, letting the sail flap listlessly and the tiller swing unguided.

"It is no use," he faltered, as his eyes momentarily filled under a sinking feeling of utter loneliness. "I might as well give up."

But pain is at times a great reviver. As hope dwindled, the irritation of his wound and the gnawing of his stomach forced their discomfort upon his attention. He drank again, and later on, again, with a persistent disregard of future consequences which only the overwhelming disconsolation of his situation could have inspired.

The wind stiffened and at last he was obliged to take down his sail, out of sheer lack of energy to continue his battle with fate. He lay down under the bow for a long time.

The pitching of the yawl increased. Finally a larger sea than usual sent nearly a barrel of water over the deck, that streamed down upon his legs. Fear roused him to action once more.

He began bailing frantically with his hat, and soon had the boat dry again. As he remained aft, no more seas were shipped, though the wind was increasing, and by certain signs he felt that rougher weather might be imminent. Clouds were rising, and though he did not like their appearance, it was some relief when they shaded him from the now declining heat of the sun.

As night approached, the wild waste of waters looked terribly stern and forbidding. Occasionally a distant breaking of some white capped wave would send his heart into his mouth, only to sink again despairingly.

Just at sunset the great luminary peered gloriously forth. Torturing as was its power at midday, now it seemed to Ralph as if a friend were bidding him farewell. When the last of its golden surface had vanished, he felt as if that friend had departed, never to return, at least to him.

For hours he sat after that, while a gloom as of death settled over the ocean, broken only by the splash of waves and the constant creaking of the yawl as it rolled and pitched in the trough of the sea.

Once a shower of rain, accompanied by a slight flurry of wind, set him to trembling, as he remembered the fury of the squalls in those latitudes. He felt that his frail shallop would never live through one.

Though in the tropics, he became chilly as the night advanced, while the pain of hunger was but partially eased by the drafts of water of which he still partook from time to time. He finally lay down in the stern and wrapped himself in the sail.

The pitching and rolling soon sent him to sleep, in a merciful relief to the gnawing sense of misery that now never left his mind while awake.

A ship's yawl, being both broad and deep, is one of the safest of small boats in a seaway. Therefore Ralph passed the hours in temporary security while unconscious. Unless a gale should rise, there was little danger of his craft's swamping, nor, except from hunger, was his physical situation any worse than during the day.

The most appalling thing connected with such a position was the feelings which it must necessarily arouse, and until day Ralph was exempted from these.

When he rubbed his eyes at dawn he lay there dreading to rise. The loneliness of the sea renewed its terrors at once, and he feared to look upon a scene of which he was the sole living element.

"I'm getting to be a regular baby," he said aloud. "I wonder what grandfather would say could he see me now. I am at least away from that old feud, if I never was before."

This allusion led him into a reverie upon the strangeness of the fate that had led him half across the world in order to free himself from a senseless quarrel, and to be pursued by it to an extent that had left him free from its influence only when he was facing death in his present forlorn condition.

He had been sent to Shard, whom he should have avoided as a relative of the Vaughn faction. Shard had sent him to Gary, while Gary, five thousand miles away, was wreaking upon the boy all the hatred inspired by the haters of his family far back in the Southern mountains.

At last he raised his head and peered out upon the watery waste. As his gaze swept from one side to the other an exclamation of amazement dropped from his lips and he sprang to his feet.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile away was the Wanderer, with her sails all spread and flapping idly from side to side as she rolled gently upon the dead swell of the sea. The wind had died away and the slaver lay between the yawl and the eastern dawn, a dim yet recognizable bulk. Her dark, graceful proportions were not to be mistaken.

"This beats the nation!" was Ralph's next ejaculation. "This is what one might call pure luck. Now if I only had a pair of oars."

Not having any, he tried his sail, but found the attempt useless, and he was compelled to sit there thrilling with impatience to be aboard once more. Finally, as he was about to rise and shout, he noticed something white being waved from one of the stern windows.

While he was puzzling his brain over the meaning of this, a line of black heads appeared above the bulwarks, and sundry black, naked forms ran up the rigging. At the same time a chorus of barbaric yells rang out, that chilled the boy's blood, even at that distance.

"I wonder if the blacks have got possession of the ship at last," and with the thought his heart sank as he realized the certain death to all in case such a thing had taken place. "If this be so, they have undoubtedly killed every white aboard."

Ralph's situation now became doubly trying. To venture to board the schooner might prove his destruction. To remain in the yawl was to court a lingering and terrible death.

Already the pangs of hunger were almost unendurable. He drank from the keg, then measured the contents with a splinter. It was half empty. Twenty-four more hours of this and then—

"Come what will," he resolved, "I shall try to board the vessel. One may as well die one way as another."

After some reflection he took apart his mast and used the six foot strips as oars, finding that he made a little progress, though the task was fatiguing and the movement exasperatingly slow.

Meanwhile the noise on the Wanderer grew hideous. The idle, untrimmed manner in which the sails swung, was a fearful indication that the untrained negroes were masters. When within two hundred yards he took a careful survey. The whole deck and the lower rigging were alive with blacks shouting, gesticulating, acting more like lunatics than sane beings.

Something at the stern window again attracted his notice. It was a handkerchief being waved. He answered the signal by waving his hat. Then to Ralph's surprise and delight a white face was cautiously protruded.

"I'll help that man off or die for it," was his next thought as he bent once more to the task of rowing.

Had not the ocean been calm he would have made no headway. As it was, when he drew up some thirty yards from the schooner's stern, he was for the moment completely exhausted.

Turning round, he recognized with joy the pale blood-stained face at the window.

"In heaven's name!" cried the boy. "What has happened? Are any more of you alive?"

CHAPTER XXV.

The Second Mate's Story.

The face at the window was that of Jacob Duff, the second mate. He shook his head in a melancholy way and beckoned with his hand.

"Come a little closer. The blacks are drunk and have exhausted their ammunition. The magazine is in the lower hold, double locked and they haven't found it yet."

Ralph slowly pulled under the stern where he would be protected from missiles. Over his head was a screaming crowd of savages who, however, confined themselves to unintelligible threats.

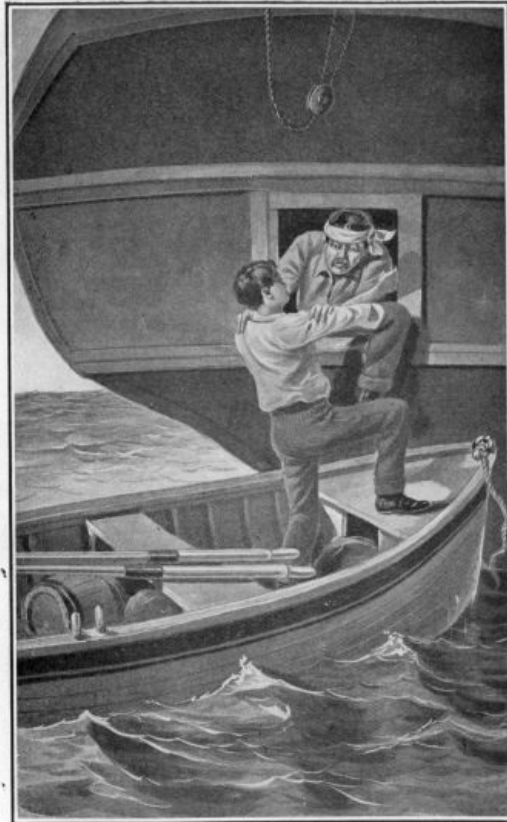
The other boat was gone. Duff, leaning out, motioned with his hand.

"There is no time for explanations now," said he. "Let us get away from here while those demons are too drunk to know how to hinder us. Heavens, but what a time we've had!"

While speaking he handed out a pair of oars, a bag of ship's biscuit, and a breaker of water.

Meantime the negroes evidently discovered that the boy was communicating with some one on board. The cries and uproar redoubled. The noise of a crowd surging down the companionway and into the main cabin could be heard. Then came a tremendous crash against the door of the stateroom.

"Hurry up!" exclaimed Duff coolly, handing out the things all in a heap and scrambling to get through the small aperture himself. "I braced the door, but they are battering it down. Quick, Ralph, pull me through by the arms."



"Quick, Ralph, pull me through by the arms."

[Illustration: "Quick, Ralph, pull me through by the arms."]

The boy was none too swift. Tugging with might and main, he dragged the mate through and both fell heavily to the bottom of the yawl, nearly capsizing the craft, just as the stateroom door gave way.

A stream of frantic blacks swarmed into the little apartment, one of whom, thrusting his hideous face out at the window, was unceremoniously pushed through by his comrades. He fell across the gunwale of the boat and was shoved overboard by Duff, while Ralph, seizing an oar, placed an end against the schooner's stern-post and threw all his waning strength upon it, sending the yawl out from under the shelter of the ship.

When the negroes saw two whites instead of one they appeared beside themselves with rage. A few missiles were thrown; among other articles a Winchester, which the boy strove in vain to reach as it rebounded from the boat's bow into the sea. Duff was struck with a marlin-spike, but he still clung to the oar he was trying to use. Another black plunged through the window into the water, while several threw themselves from the deck and began swimming towards the boat.

Ralph noticed that Duff could not stand. He took both oars, and, notwithstanding his weak condition, soon placed the boat beyond the reach of pursuit.

The blacks, realizing this, turned and were swimming back to the schooner, when one of them rose half his length from the water, sending forth a piercing cry of agony. Then he was suddenly jerked beneath the waves, as if by some powerful though unseen agency.

"What did that?" exclaimed Ralph, horror stricken.

"Sharks," returned Duff sententiously, pointing to several dark pointed fins that now appeared, all making for the schooner. "The rascals are never far away from a ship in these latitudes."

"This is horrible!" exclaimed the lad, pulling on one oar to turn the boat round.

"What are you doing?" demanded Duff.

"I am going to try and save some of those niggers. I know they are bad; but we made them so. I can't stand it, I tell you, to see them eaten up in that way. Look!"

There came another shriek, and a second trail of blood rose to the surface of the sea as

another victim was dragged beneath.

"I know," replied Duff. "But—self preservation first. Lock there, will you!"

Regardless of their screaming comrades who were trying to reach the ship, the blacks on board were striving to turn the big Long Tom amidships so as to bring it to bear upon the yawl.

"That cannon is loaded—with slugs and scrap iron. Captain had it done in order to sweep the decks, if necessary. But they gave us no chance and the load is in it yet. Give me an oar. Pull now—for your life! Lucky it is they don't know much about sighting a gun."

Suiting his action to his words the mate literally forced the lad to obey. Other cries sounded, and Ralph caught a glimpse of two or three scrambling on board again by the aid of a rope that happened to hang over the side.

His strength was nearly gone, and only an intense resolution kept him to his task at the oar. Duff, behind Ralph, also pulled away, though the strain caused him to groan now and then.

"Are you hurt?" asked the boy as they drew rapidly away from the now dreaded ship.

"Leg broke. Shot below the knee. Hist! They are going to try it now."

A large negro was hastening from the cook's galley with a flaming brand. The instant of suspense that followed was awful. A bright flash followed, and as the accompanying roar met their ears a harsh spattering and hissing beyond relieved their anxiety immensely.

Not a thing touched the boat or its occupants.

"Overshot—by thunder!" cried Duff with an exulting whoop, that ended in a groan of pain. "We are all right now; the beggars can never reload. They don't know how, and be hanged to 'em!"

After that, while resting, Ralph briefly related his own adventures, though touching lightly upon his suffering for food and the pain of his wound.

"You've had a time of it, sure," replied Duff. "Yet it was lucky for you and me both that you parted company with us as you did. Ah! 'twas a very trying day yesterday and a fearful time last night. Eat a bite, lad. I can't till I've tried to do something for my leg."

So Ralph fell to on the bag of biscuit and the keg of water, while Duff bathed and bound up his leg as best he could. The bone had been fractured just above the ankle by a bullet.

Fortunately it was an easy though painful matter to straighten the limb, as nothing had been unjointed. A spare shirt and some of the canvas sufficed to keep the bone in place after a fashion. As Duff said grimly:

"It will do until we're picked up; and if we ain't picked up, it will do anyhow."

Ralph, after eating, dressed his own wound, and the two made themselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. The mate's account of what happened after Ralph's drifting away was in substance as follows.

Things remained tolerably quiet for several hours after the defeat of the attempt on the part of the blacks to gain the deck by way of the forecabin. It was concluded that the negroes were sleeping off the effect of the rum they must have taken. As most of the water was below, they probably quenched their thirst without stint.

Meanwhile, on deck things looked more blue than ever. The whites were without provisions, nearly everything in that line being in the store rooms below. A large breaker of water was on tap in the waist, which, with some ship's biscuits, formed their only diet that morning.

No sail was sighted all that day. Ralph's absence was detected only when it was found that one of the boats was gone. Gary swore some at the loss of the last, but seemed relieved rather than otherwise over the fate of the boy.

"He's gone and a good riddance," said he. "We're short of help, but we can stand the loss of the cub better than that of the boat."

During the day the blacks below threw overboard the bodies of the slain, having no fire wherewith to indulge their cannibalistic tastes. One of the wounded seamen died and was consigned to the deep by his desperate comrades.

The hours wore on until the strain of anxiety lest the blacks should fire the ship, or renew their assaults, grew unendurable. Some proposed a desperate charge down the gangway with cutlasses and loaded rifles. Could they once force the blacks into the main hold, the howitzer might again be trained on them. One fatal discharge, said these bolder ones, would cow the negroes into submission.

But Gary, who was no coward, would not allow any such rashness. What could seven men do against a hundred? The negroes now had a few weapons; they had all the ammunition but what was in the magazines of the Winchesters.

"We must wait, keep cool, and watch for a sail," said the captain. "In rescue and in keeping these beggars below decks lies our hope."

"What will we do when our grub gives out?" asked some one.

"Die like men when the time comes, I hope," replied Gary, with grim determination.

He was as game as he was heartless and cruel. But later on one of the men found a demijohn of liquor in the cook's pantry. Neb, thoroughly cowed by his uncivilized brethren below, had deserted his post and was in hiding somewhere. The liquor was secretly hidden away, and the men began drinking.

By the time Gary found out what was up, every one but himself and Duff was recklessly intoxicated. He made a search for the stuff, but was recalled by another effort of the blacks to force open one of the hatches.

The attempt was foiled, but night had fallen before Gary found where the liquor was hidden. He promptly broke the demijohn, and was knocked down thereupon by one of the drunken sailors. This led to a general melee on the quarter deck, where the row began.

The forecastle was entirely deserted by the men, who were maddened by the destruction of their liquor. Duff used his efforts to part them, but growing uneasy over the unguarded state of the ship, he started to go forward.

He had hardly reached the main deck when he saw a black form leaping out of the forecastle. The blacks, taking advantage of the fight overhead, and the absence of a guard, had battered down the bulkhead between the main hold and the sailors' sleeping quarters with the very howitzer which had been mounted below for their subjection.

Duff raised the alarm, but it was too late. Scores of negroes poured upon the decks, now dimly lighted by ship's lanterns, and fell upon their oppressors with a fury intensified by rum and a sense of cruelties that had been inflicted upon them when bound and helpless.

They had armed themselves with knives, pieces of furniture converted into clubs—anything that could be had. Those who had Winchesters opened a wild though almost useless fire on the whites, then clubbed their guns.

One ball did indeed strike the second mate, and another put out the two lanterns, leaving the after part of the ship in darkness. But the terrible conflict was over soon.

The last Duff saw of Gary he was backed against the main mast defending himself. One arm hung useless, as he faced a circle of savage, merciless faces. Then one of the negroes felled the captain from behind, and a shower of blows was rained upon his prostrate figure.

Duff, who had done his part during the fighting, managed to make his way to the quarter deck by striking down a negro or two who opposed him. It was then that he was shot.

Realizing that all was over, and determined to sell his life as dearly as possible, he limped to the stern, and awaited his fate. As if by an inspiration, he thought of his stateroom which, as far as he knew, might have remained locked after he had abandoned it upon the first breaking forth of the blacks.

For the moment he was unobserved in the darkness that now reigned aft. The negroes had just brought forth Neb's body, and were manifesting their disapproval of his association with the whites by beating and kicking the inanimate clay.

Duff, despite the pain of his fractured limb, lowered himself by a rope to the still open window, and managed to pull himself through into his stateroom, and drag his body to his berth. Here the agony of his wound overcame him, and he fell into a deep swoon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Hard Times.

When the second mate revived there were sounds of high rejoicing overhead. He saw that the fastenings of his door had not been disturbed.

After dressing his wound as best he could, he set about securing the best possible means of prolonging and perhaps saving his life. If the drink-crazed blacks could be kept out of his stateroom, it might be that he would not be molested until some passing vessel, noting the unseaman-like appearance and maneuvers of the Wanderer would come to his rescue.

The blacks evidently did not know of his whereabouts, but considered that all of their whilom masters had been put to death. But the chance for ultimate safety was slight, he felt.

When the schooner might be fired or dismantled in a gale, through ignorance, he knew not, but he realized that the negroes were liable to commit almost any blunder. Again, the passing ships might not stop.

He also must have something to eat and drink, his wound rendering him especially thirsty.

Limping to the door he listened long and intently. As far as he could tell, the entire crowd of blacks were on deck, carousing over their victory and enjoying the fresh air of which they so long had been deprived.

He unlocked and peered through the door. Then he quickly slipped into the cabin and reconnoitered. All seemed to be quiet.

Without wasting time he went into the store rooms, secured a bag of biscuit and filled a breaker with water from one of the butts. Carrying these into his room he returned and took a pair of spare oars wherewith to brace his door.

The confusion and waste wrought by the blacks were extreme. Bread, meat, and vegetables lay upon the floor. Boxes and barrels were broken open and their contents recklessly thrown about. The rum barrel had been conveyed to the deck.

Overhead Duff could hear barbaric dancing, whooping and singing. A noise at the head of the companion-way caused him to retreat hastily to his own room, where he softly locked the door and used both oars as braces. For the present he was probably safe, as his presence had not yet been discovered.

All that day the negroes gave themselves over to eating and drinking. The sails swung idly in the passing breezes, and as the weather was not boisterous the schooner fared very well.

Duff slept, thought, and nursed his wound. At times he would look from his little window for a sail, and when night came he curled down in his bunk so snugly, that it seemed at times as if things were going on as usual before the mutiny. When he looked out in the morning at daylight the first object he saw was the yawl.

At first he thought it might be the second boat which had been loosened somehow during the fierce battle on deck. But when Ralph rose and looked around, the mate recognized the lad and waved his handkerchief.

He was not a little astonished at the boy's re-appearance, having heard the shot which wounded Ralph, and having given both lad and yawl up for lost.

"Well now," remarked Ralph, on the conclusion of the story, "what are we to do?"

"When the sun gets well up, we will take an observation and make a reckoning. Then we'll lay our course for the nearest land. Perhaps we may be picked up—perhaps we won't be. Whatever happens we will make the grub and water go as far as possible, keep a stiff lip, and trust to Providence."

While speaking Duff drew forth from the bundle of bedding he had thrown out, a leather bag. From this he produced a compass and a sextant.

"Now, lad," said he, "let us enlarge this here sail a bit, and get ready to do some traveling when the breeze comes."

For an hour or two both man and boy worked until they had the yawl in as good trim as possible. Then the mate took an observation by the sun, cast a reckoning, and informed Ralph that as far as his knowledge of geography would serve, they were some two hundred miles from the Cape Verdes.

"We have a fair wind, Ralph, so square away west by nor'west, and leave this bloody slaver to her fate. I'm sorry for those niggers, for bad as they treated us, we got 'em in the fix they're in. If we speak a vessel we can go back."

"Mebbe they won't want to," suggested Ralph.

"Salvage," returned Duff briefly. "There's money in it, you see. Men will do about anything for money enough."

For the next two days they kept their course and took turn about in sailing. As the last glimpse of the slaver faded into nothingness, both felt relieved. They nursed their wounds and

endured their sufferings and privations as best they could.

The third day sundry signs betokening a storm lent an anxious expression to Duff's face, that soon transferred itself to Ralph's.

The wind stiffened gradually into half a gale and night closed in, around an ominous and threatening horizon. Though worn and wearied, the mate never gave up the tiller all during that black and perilous siege of darkness.

Ralph bailed and held the main sheet. When the squalls came he slackened up or drew in around the cleat as became necessary.

The scene was intensely depressing, hopeless, terrible. Hardly a word was spoken save in reference to the management of the boat.

Morning found them greatly exhausted and barely able to keep their small craft from broaching to. Had this happened they would have foundered undoubtedly.

The clouds seemed to press the ocean, confining the view to less than half a mile in any direction. The sea was a tumbling mass of gray, seething billows, that tossed the yawl at pleasure hither and thither, the rag of sail barely sufficing to keep her head to windward.

Ralph had endured the terrors of the night without a murmur. But he had been aboard the yawl now about five days on a diet of bread and water. Nature was giving way under the strain.

As he gazed around on the angry scene, where no sign of relenting on the part of the storm was evident, he turned to Duff and fixed on him a hopeless look.

"I don't think I can stand it much longer, sir," he said.

The mate's plight was almost as bad; indeed his wound was worse than Ralph's. But he was tougher; he had been shipwrecked twice previously.

"Lad," he replied, somewhat sternly, "never give up as long as you can bat an eye. That's my doctrine."

And he looked it; so did Ralph a moment later, nor did the boy complain again.

All that weary day they fought a losing battle against wind and wave, and when night once more closed in without any sign of clearing weather, the hearts of both were at the lowest ebb of hope. Had the gale increased they must inevitably have been swamped.

Along about two bells in the first night watch the mate, who had never uttered one word of complaint, groaned aloud.

"Give—me—water," he faltered. "I—I——" And he sank forward against Ralph, and from there to the boat's bottom, where he lay apparently insensible from exhaustion and pain.

The boy seized the tiller, or the yawl, broaching, would have shipped a fatal sea. There was nothing to do but to hold to his post; so after throwing a blanket over Duff he turned his attention to the boat, keeping the shred of sail taut, and the bow as much to windward as possible.

Later on he nodded, but found on awaking that the wind was decreasing. This cheered him into renewed activity for a time, then he fell asleep again, and so continued, with brief interludes of wakefulness, until he felt himself sinking from the seat he had held so long. Once he fancied he caught a gleam of stars; and it seemed that a stillness was pervading the air as the whistle of the wind died into melancholy murmurings. After that he remembered nothing more until a voice penetrated his brain like a trump of doom.

He started up, but fell back weakly. The mate was steering and half lying on the bottom of the boat, while shading his eyes with one hand as he stared over the gunwale.

"Rouse up a bit, lad!" cried Duff, his tones quivering with excitement and weakness. "It's a sail—a sail!"

Ralph struggled to his knees and beheld a large ship bearing down upon them scarcely half a mile away. The sun was up, and the sky bright and fair, with a ragged patch of cloud here and there.

"Hurray!" he cried weakly, then his head swam, and he fell back motionless.

Duff held grimly to his post, even after consciousness had departed. The rescuing party found him with head drooped upon his arm, while his nerveless fingers still rested on the tiller.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Uncle Gideon.

The day was well spent when Ralph again came to his senses. He raised his head and looked about in a half stupefied wondering way.

The lad was in a small, but well lighted stateroom, plainly yet comfortably furnished. A grave looking, middle aged man was feeling his pulse, while a sailor, neatly dressed in a blue jacket and white duck trousers, stood behind with a towel over his arm and a bowl of broth in his hand.

The other was in a navy blue uniform. The gold lace on his cap and the shoulder straps betokened one in authority. Outside, the sun was shining brightly, while a sound of measured tramping and an occasional order in commanding tones, indicated something of military precision in the surroundings.

"Where am I?" asked Ralph, noticing that his hands were rather white and wasted.

"You are on the United States sloop of war, the Adams, homeward bound," replied the officer. "You were picked up six days ago, and have been ill ever since. I am the ship's surgeon."

"Is—is——"

"Yes, Mr. Duff is well," said Dr. Barker, anticipating the boy's inquiry; "that is except his leg, which is progressing finely. You must not talk much—yet. We ran upon the Wanderer after picking you up. Duff related his own adventures and yours, and gave us his reckoning, taken just after you and he left her. We found her after a two days' search, partially dismasted, and the blacks thoroughly cowed by the gale. We sent her to St. Paul De Loando, where she will be appraised and sold.

"It is likely that your share and Mr. Duff's of the prize money will be considerable, as but for you two we would not have made the capture. As you were deceived when shipping on her as to the object of her trip, you can not be held responsible for the crime committed by her captain and owner in violating the law against slave trading. The negroes of course will be set free."

The door here opened and Duff entered on crutches, followed by a tall, sandy whiskered officer, who went up to Ralph at once.

"Well, nephew," said he in a cordial, hearty tone, "how are you? Well enough to stand a stiff surprise?"

Ralph wondered weakly, but his perplexity ended in a smile. It seemed as if every one was very cordial and that his lines were falling in pleasant places at last.

He greeted Duff eagerly and looked at the two naval men inquiringly, remembering the surgeon's warning as to talking.

"This is Chief Quartermaster Gideon Granger, Ralph," said Duff. "Now do you know who he is?"

"Gideon Granger was my father's half brother," replied the lad at once. "He left home before I was born. Grandfather thought he went to Texas, but as he never heard from him, we all supposed he was dead. So—you are—Uncle Gid."

"Yes, my lad," said Granger. "You see your grandfather and I didn't get on together somehow, so one day I tripped anchor and made sail, as I thought, for the West; but the sight of salt water was too much for me. I drifted into a sailor's life, got into the navy, was promoted during the war, and—here I am.

"Meeting up with you, however, is about the strangest streak of luck I have happened with yet. But I am none the less glad to fall in with one of my own kin. You're as welcome to me, lad, as I reckon we were to you and Duff, the morning we sighted you off the Cape Verdes. When he told me who you were I was all broke up. You were pretty well done for."

"I guess I must have given you some trouble since then," returned Ralph, reaching for his uncle's hand. "We did have rather a tough time in that old boat."

"You did that. As soon as you were hoisted aboard, Dr. Barker pronounced you down with coast fever. That trip up the river Duff tells me about, probably planted the seeds, and exposure did the rest—eh, Doc."

The surgeon nodded, then the chief quartermaster added: "But we will be at Norfolk in a week, then I'll apply for shore leave and you and I will go down and see the old man."

"He won't want to see me," remarked Ralph, who then briefly related the circumstances under which he had been driven from home, his encounter with Shard, and the latter's mode of

placing him at Gary's mercy.

The old warrant officer laughed over the silly feud, while sympathizing with the boy over its sad results.

"You shall take me home," he concluded. "Father will forgive us both and we'll liven the old gent up a bit. Perhaps we can get him down where he can taste a whiff of salt air, especially if I make a man-'o-war's man out of his grandson."

The doctor now interposed, and said that Ralph had talked, and been talked to, enough that day. So the boy was left to another refreshing sleep, after enjoying his bowl of chicken broth.

Two days later he was out on deck, where the neatness, precision, and martial splendor of everything he saw, quite captivated his young imagination. When they entered the harbor at Fortress Monroe and salutes were fired, yards manned, and flags dipped by the Adams and the friendly foreign war ships anchored there, Ralph felt more than ever that his vocation was that of a sailor.

True to his word, Uncle Gideon soon started with his nephew for the old mountain home that he had not seen for more than thirty years. When Ralph stood aside, and the stern old man gazed upon his first born, the meeting and recognition were touching in the extreme.

Ralph was forgiven for outliving the feud, and the final result was that son and grandson carried the lonely old man with them back to Norfolk, where he was made comfortable in the "Old People's Home," his own means, supplemented by Gideon's savings, paying all expenses.

One day the quartermaster came into their boarding-house, and on entering Ralph's room slapped the lad heartily on the back.

"I've fixed it, nephew," said he jovially. "My ship sails in three days, and I was afraid I might not pull you through in time. But our captain gave us a lift. You know he stands in with some of the big bugs in the navy department at Washington.

"What!" exclaimed Ralph enthusiastically, his eyes glowing, "am I really to get a berth on the training ship as a naval apprentice?"

"Better than that. When I made known that your share of the Wanderer prize money, and what I could spare would pay your way, captain wrote to his friend at Washington, and the upshot of it all is you're to go to Annapolis. Think of that! One year to prepare for your examination—four years as a cadet—then an ensign. Ah, lad! If I'd had your chance at your age I might have been at least a lieutenant. During the war there was more than one such rose to be commodore. But bear in mind: I can renew my youth in watching you. So bear a hand, lad, and do your best. You may live to walk your own quarter-deck yet."

"If I do," replied Ralph, seizing his uncle's hard and weather beaten hand, "it will all be owing to you."

The old veteran grinned, then seemed to remember something.

"Put on your hat, lad," said he. "We will lay a course for the old man over at the Home. You must ask him if fighting for Uncle Sam on sea isn't better than bushwhacking your neighbors in the mountains."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RALPH GRANGER'S FORTUNES ***

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