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Title: The Voyage of the Aurora

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Release date: January 27, 2009 [eBook #27906]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VOYAGE OF THE AURORA ***

Harry Collingwood

"The Voyage of the Aurora"

Chapter One.

Introduces Lucy Walford.

Those who have ever had occasion to reside for any length of time in Gosport are sure to be more or less acquainted with the little village of Alverstoke; because it lies near at hand, and the road leading thereto forms one of the most pleasant walks in the neighbourhood.

But it may be that there are those, into whose hands this book will fall, who have never so much as heard the name of the place. For their benefit, then, it may be worth while to state that Alverstoke is pleasantly situated at a distance of about one mile from the above-mentioned town of Gosport, and within half a mile of the waters of the Solent.

It is a very unimportant little place at the present day: it was even more so in the year 17—, the year in which this veracious history opens. It was unimportant, that is to say, in a *general* sense; the public knew very little about it, and cared still less; but in a *particular* sense, and to the officers of His Majesty's Customs, it was a very important place indeed, inasmuch as the inhabitants, animated by a spirit of enterprise and a love of adventure not to be satisfied by such very ordinary and humdrum pursuits as those of fishing and market-gardening, had, almost to a man—to say nothing of the women and children—added thereto the illegal but lucrative and exciting occupation of smuggling; to the great loss and damage of the king's revenues.

The village consisted, at that time, of a single short, narrow street with a bend in the middle of it. Nearly one half of the north side of this street was occupied by the churchyard and church; the remaining portion, as well as the opposite side of the way, being composed of small low, two-story cottages with thatched roofs (and most of them having little projecting dormer-windows), a couple of public-houses, and a small grocery establishment.

This constituted the village proper; but a little aloof from it—being in it but not of it, as it were—there were in all perhaps half a dozen residences of a somewhat more pretentious kind. There was the rectory, for instance, on the opposite side of the road, eastward of the church, built in the very centre of its extensive garden, and snugly surrounded on all sides by high stone walls. Then there was Stoke House, near the rectory, standing well back from the road, embowered in trees, and with a carriage-drive running straight up through its beautiful rose-garden to the front door. Nearer the beach, and on the opposite side of the valley, was "Verbena Cottage," the abode of Lieutenant Bobus, in command of the coast-guard; and still nearer the beach, some ten or a dozen yards back from the road, enclosed within a neat paling, sheltered by lofty trees, with a lovely flower-garden in front and an extensive fruit and kitchen-garden in the rear, stood "Sea View," a small but well-built house, in which resided the relict and daughter of the late "Cap'n" Walford.

The late "Cap'n" Walford had been a wonderfully popular man in his day; and his memory was greatly esteemed and revered by the villagers. Manifesting, at an early age, a love of enterprise and excitement quite extraordinary even in an Alverstoke man, he had seized the first opportunity which offered to become the owner of a very fine fast-sailing lugger, in which, during his thirty years of devotion to maritime pursuits, he, by a rare combination of prudence and audacity, gradually acquired the reputation of being a most successful smuggler—and the snug little fortune of some ten thousand pounds. The latter and more desirable portion of his acquirements he carefully invested, as it dribbled in bit by bit, in house-property in the neighbourhood; so that, when this estimable man's career was cut short at the comparatively early age of sixty years, by an unlucky cannon-shot fired from a revenue cutter, his disconsolate relict found herself the possessor of a comfortable income amounting to some five hundred pounds per annum, together with "Sea View" and—last, but by no means least—a daughter, fourteen years of age. This melancholy event occurred four years before the date at which this history opens; Lucy Walford was therefore about eighteen years old when the first of that train of events happened which it is herein proposed to record.

Mrs Walford was wont to assert, just about this time, that Lucy was the very living picture of what she herself used to be when a girl. If this was indeed true, it was at once an evidence of that remarkable good taste which the late "cap'n" was said to have possessed, and of the extraordinary changes effected by the hand of Time, for no one could ever have suspected such a resemblance without Mrs Walford's assurance. The old lady was a sad and subdued personage, thin and angular of figure and face, with prominent cheek-bones, eye-brows, and chin, dark eyes, deeply sunk in their sockets, a broad forehead, ploughed with innumerable wrinkles, a long sharp aquiline nose, a large thin-lipped mouth, and a querulous temper.

Lucy, on the other hand, was of medium height, slight, graceful figure, abounding in delicate curves, with small hands and feet, an exquisite complexion, a face, the sweet piquant loveliness of which set all the youth of Alverstoke—and Gosport too, for that matter—by the ears, a wealth of long silky golden hair, which persisted in twisting itself into a most distracting conglomeration of wavy curls, and a temper which nothing—not even her mother's querulousness—could ruffle.

That Lucy should be fairly beset by suitors was only natural. There was not a single bold young smuggler of marriageable age in all the country round about who did not cherish in a greater or lesser degree the fond hope of one day making her his own, albeit most of them were—it is only just to say—dimly cognisant of the fact that she was much too good for the best of them. It was probably in consequence of this feeling that only one or two—the boldest of the bold of this dashing fraternity—had, so far, mustered up the courage to approach the young lady with a distinct proposal of marriage; and these, it is hardly necessary to say, had been firmly, but as pleasantly as possible, sent to the right-about. This class of lovers gave Lucy no trouble whatever; bold as they might be in the pursuit of their lawless avocation, they were diffident to the verge of absurdity in the presence of beauty, if associated with dignity and refinement; they were painfully conscious of their uncouth bearing and manners; and Lucy had little difficulty in keeping them at a proper distance.

But if these admirers gave her no trouble, there were others—notably two—who did; quite enough, in fact, to fully compensate for the ease with which she was able to manage all the rest. One of these was a certain Lieutenant Walford, a cousin of Lucy's; the other being Captain George Leicester, of the merchant schooner *Industry*.

Edward Walford was the only son of a half-brother of the late Captain Walford. He was an orphan, twenty-three years of age, and held a commission in his Majesty's—foot, then quartered in Gosport. He was fairly well educated, tall, passably good-looking, of engaging manners, but—those who knew him best said—treacherous, unscrupulous, and a gamester.

George Leicester, on the other hand, whilst perhaps quite as handsome as his rival, was simply a frank, honest, sturdy seaman, carrying his heart upon his sleeve; thoroughly master of his profession, but diffident and doubtful of himself in all other matters.

The trouble with these two was, that Walford could not be made to see that his presence was distasteful to Lucy; whilst Leicester was provokingly blind to the fact that the fair girl loved him with all her pure, simple little heart. She had not given her love to him unsought, it must be understood—far from it; George Leicester had been one of the earliest, as he was one of her most constant and devoted, admirers; he was unremitting in his attentions to her whenever he was in port; but the simple fellow was so doubtful as to his prospects of success that he had never given Lucy the chance, which she would so gladly have welcomed, to say "Yes" to the momentous question which was ever hovering upon his lips, but had never yet been able to get beyond them.

It was on a certain brilliant June afternoon that Lucy, as was her frequent custom, took a book in her hand and strolled down to the beach, where, making a little nest for herself in the shingle, she sat down to read or think, as the whim might take her.

The ardent rays of the sun, streaming down out of a cloudless sky, gleamed and flashed and sparkled upon the waters of the Solent, which, ruffled by a gentle westerly breeze, shone like a sheet of liquid gold. On the further side of the strait, the Isle of Wight appeared its green and wooded slopes in fair perspective; its northern shore, from Nettlestone Point to Egypt, bounding the view. On Lucy's right lay the entrance to Southampton Water, with the further shore, about Stone Point and the mouth of the Beaulieu River, indistinctly seen through the quivering golden haze; whilst on the left, across the water, Southsea Castle stood boldly forward upon its low projecting point, a watchful sentinel over the magnificent anchorage of Spithead. Inland from the castle lay the little straggling town of Southsea; and beyond it again, still higher up the estuary, appeared the spires and roofs of Portsmouth, its harbour crowded with a perfect forest of masts. Some half a dozen men-o'-war lay at anchor at Spithead; and the waters of the Solent were dotted with the sails of craft of all sizes, from the stately frigate to the humble but enterprising bumboat.

As Lucy sat there on the beach, basking in the sun, and far too idle to read, her listless gaze became fastened upon a trim, smart-looking little schooner which, under all the canvas she could possibly spread, was creeping slowly up from the westward before the light summer breeze. The glance of indifference with which the fair girl at first regarded the little craft, gradually changed to one of the greatest interest. Lucy, it must be remembered, was a sailor's daughter; nearly all her neighbours were interested almost solely in seafaring matters; the daily conversation of those by whom she was surrounded abounded in nautical technicalities; she had even made a trip upon one occasion in her father's lugger (the only occasion, by the bye, on which the hold of the said lugger was absolutely guiltless of contraband freight); and lastly, were not the walls of her home adorned with portraits of craft of various rigs passing Flushing or the Needles? All of which circumstances had combined to give Lucy a very fair knowledge of nautical matters and "a sailor's eye." She had not only learned the distinguishing characteristics of different rigs, but had also acquired the subtle power of recognising the individuality of different craft of the same rig whenever there happened to be anything to excite her interest in such craft. So now she first recognised the fact that the approaching vessel was a schooner, and, a little later on, when the schooner had drawn somewhat nearer, she became conscious that the schooner was well known to her. Drawing a small telescope from her pocket, she focussed it and pointed it at the vessel. Yes; there could be no doubt about it, it was the *Industry*; every little detail of canvas and rigging proclaimed the schooner's identity; and then, as though in order that there should be no possible room for doubt, and as though George Leicester had seen and recognised the charming girlish figure standing there on the beach (as possibly he had through his powerful marine glass), a white fluttering object gleamed out over the rail and, soaring aloft, streamed from the main-truck, a burgee with the name *Industry* worked upon it in red letters. At the sight of this Lucy rapidly closed her little telescope and returned it to her pocket with a bright flush and a conscious, happy little laugh.

"Dear George," she murmured; "how glad I am that he is back all safe; and how fervently I hope that he did not see me watching the schooner. I wonder whether he will walk over this evening."

She then, uncomfortably conscious of the possibility that "dear George" might at that very moment have her accurately focussed in the field of his glass, sauntered along the beach with as much of an air of total abstraction as she could conveniently assume on the spur of the moment, and finally, after watching the schooner pass safely into Portsmouth Harbour and there come to an anchor, returned home.

She found her mother suffering from a more than ordinarily severe attack of "the miserables," as that lady was wont to term her low spirits. It was one of Mrs Walford's peculiarities to be depressed in spirits in exact proportion to the brightness and exhilarating character of the weather—but Lucy was completely proof against it all just now; the sight she had so lately looked upon had sent a soft, dainty flush into her cheeks, a light into her eyes, and a song to her lips, which

her mother's "miserables" were wholly powerless to drive away, and she went about the house filling it with the melody of her low, sweet voice.

Tea was over; Mrs Walford was made comfortable in her wide arm-chair, with a huge volume of sermons in her lap; and Lucy was trying to settle down with composure to the execution of some trifle in the way of needle-work, when the sharp click of the gate-latch was heard; there was a crunching of feet upon the gravel walk, the front door was unceremoniously opened, and Lieutenant Edward Walford walked in.

"How *do*, aunt? Lucy, fair coz, I hope I see you in a state of perfect salubrity?" was his nonchalant greeting.

Mrs Walford replied that "she was as well as could be expected,"—she did not say under what adverse circumstances—and Lucy requested him not to make himself ridiculous. It was too bad, she decided; here she had been looking forward to a delightful visit from George Leicester, probably a whole evening spent in his society, and now this pestilent cousin of hers must needs take it into his perverse head to walk over from Gosport—to be found later on by "dear George" making fierce love to her, the unfortunate Lucy;—which would be quite sufficient, she felt sure, to choke the said George off for at least another voyage. But that should never be, she was quite resolved; she could not prevent her cousin coming to the house, since her mother not only tolerated, but rather encouraged his visits; but she could, and she *would*, prevent his making love to her.

With this determination she sat down, and, resorting to the best means she could think of for keeping her cousin at arm's length, produced her writing-materials and proceeded to discharge a few of her epistolary debts.

Being thus unmistakably shown that his presence was unwelcome to the younger lady, he turned his attention to the elder one, talking to her about the war—the then all-important and most interesting topic of the moment—and giving her such scraps of news as had come to hand during the day, but it was perfectly evident from the uneasy glances he shot at his cousin and the nervous way in which he tugged at his long auburn moustache, that his occupation was not to his liking. At last, abandoning all further effort to accomplish the almost impossible task of amusing the old lady, he stepped to Lucy's side, and said in a low whisper—

"Will you come into the garden with me for a few minutes, Lucy? I have something of the utmost importance to say to you, something which will brook no delay, for my regiment is ordered off to the West Indies, and I may not have another opportunity to see you."

Lucy knew as well as possible what the "something" was which her cousin so anxiously desired to say to her; she was convinced that it was nothing less than a proposal of marriage; and her first impulse was to excuse herself. But that, she decided, would hardly be kind on the eve of his departure for foreign service; moreover, it might leave him in possession of a feeling that there was some hope for him, or possibly, after the many love-speeches he had made her, he might feel himself in some sort bound not to marry any one else until he had had a distinct refusal from her, and that must certainly be avoided; so she decided that she would grant him the desired interview, give him his dismissal as speedily and withal as kindly as possible, and get him out of the house without delay—it was still early in the evening, and who knew but that she might succeed in getting rid of her unwelcome suitor before the welcome one put in an appearance?

So, laying aside her pen, she motioned him to follow her into the large garden at the back of the house, where they would be perfectly secure from observation, and herself led the way.

She conducted her cousin to a little summer-house at the lower end of the garden, and, motioning him to a seat said

"Now, Cousin Edward, what is this important communication which you have to make? Be as brief as possible, if you please, for I really cannot spare you much time."

"I will," he said. Then, pausing for a moment, and making an unsuccessful attempt to gain possession of her hand, he remarked—

"I think you must have already guessed what it is that I have to say to you, Lucy. You cannot be ignorant of the feeling with which I regard you; you must have discovered long ago that I love you, Lucy, deeply, passionately, tenderly, as a man loves only once in his lifetime. We have not known each other *very* long, it is true," he continued after a slight pause, during which he had vainly looked into her downcast face for some sign of encouragement, "but the time has been long enough for me to learn that all my hopes of future happiness depend on you; and I think it has also been long enough to enable you to judge whether you can entrust your happiness to me or not. I know I am by no means what I ought to be,"—here he made another pause, hoping for some word or sign of disclaimer, which, however, never came—"but I hope you will not judge me too harshly. I am an orphan, remember. Robbed at an early age of a mother's tender care and gentle training, I have been left pretty much to the mercy of strangers, who allowed me to grow up to manhood without an effort to check the development of those evil propensities which we all alike inherit from our first parents; and then, too, I have had the misfortune to be thrown—against my will, I honestly assure you—into evil companionship. But, in spite of all these disadvantages, I flatter myself that I am by no means a bad sort of fellow; and if you will only take me in hand, Lucy, I feel sure you could make a reformed character of me. And then, too, consider the society into which I could introduce you. Wearing his Majesty's uniform, as I do, I could—"

"Pray say no more, Edward, I beg," interrupted Lucy. "I am grieved to be obliged to disappoint you—though I do not think the disappointment will be very great—but what you ask is quite impossible. In the first place I must frankly say that I do not love you; and in the second I must with equal frankness say that, though I might love ever so much, I would *never* marry a man who needed that I should 'take him in hand' to make a reformed character of him. You are my cousin, and, as such, I shall always regard you with friendly interest; but I shall never be able to entertain for you any warmer feeling."

Walford, pale to the lips with surprise and chagrin, looked incredulously in the face of the fair girl by whose side he was seated. He was completely staggered. The idea of his being indifferent to his cousin had never for a single instant occurred to him. He had won for himself the reputation of being quite a "lady-killer;" and now this little country-bred girl had the impertinence to tell him coolly that she did not love him; nay, more—to hint pretty strongly that she regarded him with feelings not very far removed from contempt, because, forsooth, he had lived a somewhat fast life. Why, many of the girls he had met had positively *admired* him for his rakishness—he did not pause to consider what manner of girls these were, though, by the bye. It was monstrous, it was positively insulting. Then, in addition to the severe wound to his *amour-propre*, there was the disappointment of his hopes of pecuniary aggrandisement; Lucy's fortune, modest though it was, would have been of the utmost service to him. It was true, he knew, that she would not have a penny of her own

until her mother died, but that, he was firmly convinced, would not be a very long-postponed event; the “old fool”—as he called Mrs Walford in his heart—would doubtless be in her grave long enough before he returned from foreign service—and, at all events, he was willing to risk that. But then Lucy had said she would not have him. Surely she could not mean it; she was only saying it to try him, or—stay—was it possible that she loved that sailor-fellow Leicester? He would find out.

“Are you *quite sure*, Lucy, that you will never be able to love me?” he asked, infusing a very successful affectation of passionate entreaty into the tones of his voice. “Perhaps I have spoken too quickly; I have taken you by surprise, I have allowed my impatience to outrun my judgment; perhaps if I had waited a little longer—”

“It would have been just the same; I could never have loved you,” interrupted Lucy. “And now let us return to the house; this interview has lasted quite long enough. I am sincerely sorry if you are disappointed, Edward, but I could never give you any other answer, so please say no more about it.”

“One word more,” exclaimed Walford. “Tell me—I have a right to know—do you love any one else?”

“I really do not see that you *have* a right to know anything about my private affairs,” answered Lucy with some hauteur, “but in order that you may fully understand the hopelessness of your own case, I will confess that—that there *is*—some one else.”

“Ah!” ejaculated Walford between his set teeth, “I suspected as much. And I can form a pretty shrewd guess as to who it is, too. It is that sneaking rascal Leicester, is it not?”

“How dare you, sir, speak to me of my friends in that manner!” exclaimed Lucy, rising to her feet and stamping upon the ground in the excess of her indignation. “Go, sir, and never come near me again; I will never speak another word to you!”

“You won’t, eh?” was the sneering retort. “All right. I *will* go; and I’ll not come near you again. But I’ll make you bitterly repent of your treatment of me yet, or my name is not Edward Walford.”

And rising to his feet, he walked rapidly up the garden, through the house, and straight out at the front door, without so much as pausing to bid his aunt good-bye.

Chapter Two.

Captain Leicester hears Bad News.

In the meantime, the *Industry* having come to an anchor in Portsmouth Harbour, Captain Leicester, waiting only to see the sails properly furled, jumped into the boat and hurried away to his owner’s residence.

Here he was detained for more than an hour, the individual he was desirous of seeing happening to be absent, “but expected back immediately,” according to the statement of the solitary clerk who occupied the little front room which did duty as an office.

The owner of the *Industry* having at length turned up, her captain was instructed to haul alongside the wharf forthwith, in readiness to begin discharging her cargo the first thing next morning. So George Leicester, greatly to his disappointment, had to return on board once more; and it was not until the clocks were striking seven that, the schooner having been duly hauled alongside the wharf and securely moored thereto, her commander felt himself at liberty to leave her and set out upon a pilgrimage to Alverstoke. But for the delay thus occasioned, the events herein recorded would probably never have occurred, those of them at least which chiefly concern Captain Leicester.

Let us take a good look at our hero as he stands for a moment in the golden evening light on the planks of the wooden structure which, supported by ricketty, worm-eaten piles, does duty as a wharf. Like a thorough seaman as he is, he is taking a last glance at the schooner before he leaves her, to see that everything is thoroughly “ship-shape and Bristol-fashion” on board her. She is a small and somewhat insignificant craft; but as George has sailed in her for the last four years of his life—two years as mate and two more as master—he has become attached to her, looking at her faults with a lenient eye, and striving to conceal them as much as possible from others. As he stands, with his hands lightly crossed behind him, his legs a trifle apart, and his eye wandering critically over the *Industry’s* hull and rigging, we see him to be a man of about five feet eight inches in height, with a well-knit figure, regular features, dark hair and eyes, the former surmounted by a jaunty crimson worsted cap with a silk tassel on its drooping end, and tied into a queue behind with a bow of very broad black silk ribbon, short black whiskers on each side of his face, with a clean-shaven upper lip and chin. He is clad in a wide-skirted coat of fine blue cloth, trimmed with large gilt buttons, and worn open to show the kerseymere waistcoat beneath, the long flaps of which are confined by a broad belt. He wears a white silk kerchief round his throat, lace ruffles at his wrists (in honour of his projected visit to his lady-love), and his nether man is encased in knee-breeches, white stockings, and shoes with large silver buckles. There is a frank, pleasant look in the keen dark eyes, and an expression of firmness about the closed lips which makes most people feel, when they look at him, that they would much rather have him for a friend than for an enemy. Altogether, as far as *physique* is concerned, he certainly has the advantage of Lieutenant Walford. As to the comparative moral qualities of the two men, the reader will have abundant opportunity to judge for him—or her—self.

Unfortunately, however, for his own and Lucy Walford’s peace of mind, George Leicester is not only unaware of this superiority on his own part, but he strongly suspects it to be all on the other side. He has made Walford’s acquaintance, having met him, perhaps, some half a dozen times in all, at “Sea View,” and, despite his simplicity, he has had no difficulty in recognising in the lieutenant a would-be rival. And this is just where his own modesty and self-depreciation have played him a scurvy trick. He has noted Walford’s easy, nonchalant bearing, and his two or three flashy accomplishments; he has noticed, too, that the lieutenant is not altogether devoid of good looks, and has jumped—all too hastily, as we are aware—at the conclusion that, where a woman is concerned, a plain, straightforward, honest sailor can have no chance against a dashing soldier like the lieutenant. At the same time, he has by no means given up the chase, nor ever will, so he tells himself, as long as Lucy is free. Over and over again has he been upon the point of speaking out and learning his fate, and over and over again has he hesitated and closed his lips, deeming the occasion unpropitious, or fearing to learn that which will make the remainder of his life a blank to him.

But now he has resolved to delay no longer. He has been screwing up his courage to the sticking-place during the

whole of the passage from Waterford to Gosport, and when he stepped from the rail of the *Industry* on to the wharf, he was on his way to Alverstoke to learn his fate.

Satisfied at last that everything was right on board the schooner, Leicester turned away and directed his steps up High Street, and thence out on to the Stoke Road. Alverstoke church-clock struck eight just as he came in sight of it; and the next moment he saw, far ahead of him, a man dart round the corner and come swinging along the road towards him at a tremendous pace. Distant as the man was, Captain Leicester had no difficulty in recognising in him his dreaded rival, Lieutenant Walford. He guessed at once that the lieutenant had been visiting at "Sea View;" but what struck him as strange was that Walford's appearance and bearing was that of a man in a towering passion. Almost immediately afterwards, however, he decided that he must have been mistaken in supposing this, for as Walford looked up and recognised him he stopped dead in the road for a moment, and then hurried towards the skipper with outstretched hand and a beaming face.

"My *dear* Leicester, how are you?" Walford exclaimed with effusion, as he grasped the seaman's hand and wrung it heartily. "How glad I am to see you. When did you arrive?"

"This afternoon only," was the answer. "Have you been to 'Sea View' lately? There is nothing wrong there, I hope?"

"Wrong, my dear fellow! No. Why do you ask?"

"Well, when you rounded the corner just now you were walking at such a terrific pace, and looked so much as though you were greatly upset about something, that I feared there had been an accident at 'Sea View,' and that—"

"That I was hurrying off for the nearest doctor, eh? Well, you may set your mind at rest, my dear boy; nothing *is* the matter. I have just left Mrs Walford's, and both she and Lucy are in excellent health, I am glad to say. It is deuced kind of you, though, to take such a warm interest in them, and I thank you for it with all my heart. You are a prime favourite there, I can tell you, my lad; I have been frightfully jealous of you for a long time, but now I shall never be so any more. Lucy—darling girl that she is—has had pity upon me at last, and has condescended to set all my fears at rest; so you may congratulate me if you like."

"Upon her having—accepted you as—as—her future husband?" gasped Leicester, white to the very lips.

"Exactly; I *knew* you would be glad to hear it, being an old friend of hers," was the reply. "But mum's the word for the present. Our regiment is ordered away to the West Indies at once, so Lucy wishes the engagement to be kept secret until I can return home to claim her. Well, I must be off; you are going to 'Sea View,' I suppose? Don't mention our conversation there, please; I should not like Lucy to know that I have already been prating of the engagement; if she feels inclined to tell you of it herself, of course that is another thing."

"All right, I'll not say a word about it, you may rest assured," answered Leicester, as he suffered his hand to be clasped in farewell; "in fact, I don't suppose I shall have an opportunity to mention it to them; I am not going to call there to-night, and I may not have time to call there at all, as I shall be very busy during the next few days. I—I am—thinking of giving up the *Industry* and going—somewhere—abroad, myself."

"Are you?" ejaculated Walford with great heartiness. "Well done; I am glad to hear you say so. A fellow with your pluck and sinews was never intended to potter about in a trumpery little coaster. Well, good-bye."

The two men separated; Walford to chuckle and exult over the complete success of his suddenly planned ruse, and Leicester, with all hope and brightness gone out of his face, to saunter despondently along the road and back to Gosport, by way of Haslar Common, avoiding "Sea View" altogether.

So Lucy was lost to him! Well, after all, it was no more than he had dreaded all along; he had been a fool, and worse than a fool, to suppose that he, a plain, unpolished seaman, could possibly have a chance of success when pitted against a fellow like Walford—curse him! No—no, not that, he did not mean that; why should he curse the man to whom Lucy had given her young, fresh love? Still it was very hard to bear—very hard; he hoped the fellow would treat her well; if not, let him look to himself. But why should not Walford treat her well? Who could do otherwise? Who was there in the whole wide world who could find it in his heart to be anything but kind and loving and tender to her? And yet—Psha! Who was he—George Leicester—that he should judge another man? True, he had heard some very queer stories about this same Lieutenant Walford, but doubtless they were all fabrications; Lucy was not the girl to love a man of whom such things could possibly be true. And as to his (Leicester's) own feelings of distrust and dislike, why they were after all only the natural outcome of his jealousy, and were certainly not to be relied upon as indicating faultiness of character in his successful rival. Still, argue as he would, he had his doubts, and he could not dispel them, and—well, it was a hard blow, coming so suddenly, too; it was difficult to bear it patiently even *now*, and he had a shrewd suspicion that it would be still more difficult to bear by-and-by, when he fully realised the extent of his loss.

But it was no use fretting over it; the question was, "What was now to be done?" He could not possibly live on the old humdrum life any longer. He must have excitement and activity, plenty of both, to keep his mind occupied, and to prevent his fretting over his disappointment. "Yes, that was a happy inspiration which had led him to tell Walford he intended giving up the *Industry*; that must be his first act. And after that? Well, after that he would look about him, and if he could pick up a tidy little vessel cheap; he would invest his savings in the purchase of her, sail in his own employ, and try to stifle all vain regrets by plunging into a more adventurous mode of existence."

So ran George Leicester's thoughts as he made his way back to the *Industry*.

Meanwhile, Lucy, having given one lover his *congé* waited with loving impatience but in vain, for the appearance of the other.

On the following day, the master of the *Industry* waited upon his owner, a Mr Winter, and requested his discharge. Mr Winter was both surprised and chagrined at the news that he was to lose so well-trying and faithful a servant as George; but, finding our hero inflexible in his resolution, he could, of course, do nothing but accede to his request, which he did at last with a very good grace.

"And now," said Mr Winter, when the accounts had all been gone through and squared up, "since you are quite determined to go your own wilful way, I suppose I must do what I can to help you. You will go to London, of course, to look out for this ship that you propose to purchase; and I will give you a letter to a Mr Roberts, a ship-broker and a friend of mine, who has an office in Great Saint Helen's. He is pretty sure to have or to know of something which will suit you;

he is a thoroughly straightforward, honourable man, will do his best to suit you, and will charge you nothing; the seller is the man who will have to pay him his commission."

George duly thanked Mr Winter for his kindness, received the letter, and on the following morning crossed over to Portsmouth, and booked himself to London on the "Highflyer" coach.

The next day found our hero at an early hour in Leadenhall Street, seeking for the whereabouts of Great Saint Helen's. A clerk, going in that direction on his way to business, pointed out the place, and, turning into the narrow court, George soon found the office of which he was in search.

Mr Roberts was busy perusing a large pile of papers when his visitor was shown in, and he begged to be excused for a moment whilst he completed his task. This was soon done, whereupon Mr Roberts rang two distinct strokes upon a small hand-bell, and a clerk entered in response.

"Here, Wilson," said the ship-broker, handing over the pile of papers, "take these. You will find from the notes I have jotted down upon this sheet of paper what to do with them. Now, sir," turning to George, "what can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

George briefly explained his business, and handed over Mr Winter's letter of introduction, which Mr Roberts rapidly glanced through. Then the little bell was struck once, and another and much more substantial-looking clerk made his appearance.

"Bring me List A, if you please," said Mr Roberts.

"List A," a large leather-bound volume, was brought in and laid upon the table before the ship-broker, who at once opened it, and began to run his fingers slowly down an index. Then he rapidly turned up an entry in the book itself, and read out—

"'Challenger—brig; 450 tons; softwood built, iron-fastened, sheathed with zinc; nine years old; well found in sails, ground-tackle, and all necessary stores, ready for sea. Price 1800 pounds.' How will that do? She is really a very decent vessel of her kind, and exceedingly cheap at the price."

"We might take a look at her," remarked George, "but her description does not sound very inviting."

Another reference to the index, another turning up of an entry, and—

"Well, what do you think of this? 'Lucy—brigantine; 520 tons; oak-built, coppered, and copper-fastened throughout; has only been to sea twice; excellent sea-boat, very fast and weatherly; fully found in every respect, and quite ready for sea. Price 2500 pounds.'"

"That sounds very much better," answered Leicester, who, to tell the truth, was almost as much taken with the name as anything else; "but I don't particularly admire the rig."

"Umph!" ejaculated Mr Roberts, pursing up his lips and referring to the index once more. "Um, um, *Maid of the Mist—Lizzie—Highland Lass—Enterprise*—ah! yes; perhaps this will do. '*Enterprise*—brig; seven years old, oak-built, iron-fastened, 350 tons register, will carry 600 tons dead-weight; well found. Price 2200 pounds. Requires a few trifling repairs amounting to possibly 500 pounds.' How does that strike you?"

"Not very favourably," was the reply.

"Well, let's try again," remarked the ship-broker. "I *know* I can suit you."

Another reference to the index, then a sudden sharp closing of the book, with the muttered ejaculation, "The very thing! What a donkey I am not to have thought of her before."

Then a single stroke on the bell, followed by the reappearance of the substantial-looking clerk.

"Bring me in the inventory of the *Aurora*, if you please; that paper that was left here by Mr Sutton yesterday."

The document was brought in, and Mr Roberts at once handed it over to his client with the remark—

"There, my dear sir, just run your eye over that; if the *Aurora* won't suit you, *nothing* will. She is a capital little ship; I know her well. Her owner, poor fellow—who is captain of her also—had the misfortune to lose his wife last voyage—washed overboard somehow in a gale of wind—and it has so upset him that he has resolved to cut the sea altogether and everything connected with it. He is even willing to sell at a great sacrifice, so as to get rid of the ship as soon as possible. Great bargain, captain; most extraordinary bargain; never get another such a chance."

"That looks much more promising," said George, returning the paper. "Where is she, and when can I see her?"

"London Docks—see her in an hour—I'll take you down on board at once," was the reply.

And merely stopping to change his coat, and give some instructions to his clerks, Mr Roberts invited George to follow him; and, getting into the street, they hailed the first hackney-coach which passed, and in a few minutes were jolting along on their way to the London Docks.

Dismissing the coach at the dock gates, Mr Roberts inquired of the gate-keeper where the *Aurora* was to be found.

"Inside ship, fourth berth, north side," answered the man, pointing out the direction they were to take.

They soon found the vessel, and George, standing on the edge of the dock wall, saw before him a pretty little barque of some four hundred and odd tons, copper-bottomed, with a flush deck fore and aft, a fine set of spars, and such a shapely hull as set his eyes glistening. He walked away from her and knelt down so as to take a good look at her "run;" then went ahead of her to see what her bows were like; and finally, very much prepossessed in her favour already, went

on board, accompanied by Mr Roberts.

Here they were received by the ship-keeper, who at once led the way into the cabin. This proved to be an exceedingly snug and comfortable apartment, not very large, yet roomy enough, and very tastefully fitted up. Aft this they found the captain's cabin, a room some twelve feet long, and the entire width of the ship, well lighted—there being both a skylight and stern-ports—and fitted up in a style which gave unmistakable evidence of the refined taste of the former captain's poor drowned wife. From the cabin they proceeded to the fore-castle, and from thence into the hold, George all the time peering about everywhere for signs of weakness or bad workmanship, without finding any. Having at length satisfied himself as to the soundness of the hull, he went aloft and gave to the spars and rigging a careful examination. Here, too, everything was perfectly satisfactory; and when he at length stepped down out of the rigging on to the deck, he nodded approvingly to Mr Roberts and said—

“All right; I'll take her.”

“Glad to hear you say so, captain,” was the cheery reply; “she is a capital little craft, and I'm sure you'll like her. Now—as it is nearly two o'clock—what say you, will you come and take dinner with me?”

Leicester acquiescing, they made the best of their way to the eating-house which Mr Roberts patronised, and, while discussing the meal, made arrangements for the completion of the purchase.

The meal ended, George wended his way back toward the dock, and, turning into Nightingale Lane, established himself in tolerably comfortable quarters in a boarding-house kept by a widow, whose husband had been what she called a “sea-captain.”

On the following day Captain Leicester paid over the full amount of the purchase-money, receiving in return the ship's register properly endorsed; and that same evening he found himself the undisputed owner of the *Aurora*.

His next task was to secure a freight. This he had no difficulty in doing—in fact he had his choice of some half a dozen—and by noon he had accepted a charter for the conveyance of a general cargo to Kingston, Jamaica; to commence loading at once. Having completed the business, he hurried away to the shipping-office, and was fortunate enough to secure the services of a very promising-looking mate, who undertook to establish himself on board forthwith, so as to be on the spot in readiness to receive the cargo as it came down to the ship.

George now found himself comparatively at leisure, and he had at one time serious thoughts of running down to Gosport, were it only for a day, just to see Lucy once more, and bid her good-bye. Well would it have been for both of them had he done so. But on reconsidering the matter, he arrived at the conclusion that no good could possibly come of any such proceeding, whilst the sight of Lucy would only too certainly increase the pangs of regret he already so keenly felt at his failure to win her; so he eventually decided to remain where he was, and occupy himself in watching the stowage of the cargo.

Chapter Three.

A Capture and a Recapture.

A fortnight from the day on which Captain Leicester signed the charter-party saw the last package passed into the *Aurora's* hold, and on the following day she sailed for Plymouth, there to join a fleet of merchant-ships which were to cross the Atlantic under convoy.

Thanks principally to the exertions of his chief mate, Mr Bowen, George was fortunate enough to pick up a very good crew, comprising a second mate—who acted also as boatswain—a carpenter, a steward, a black cook, two able-seamen, four ordinary ditto, and two well-grown lads, who had already been a voyage or two in a coaster. This constituted a complement of fourteen men, all told; just sufficient to handle the barque comfortably.

They sailed from the Thames with the wind at about west, and had a capital run as far as the South Foreland, the *Aurora* showing herself to be such a smart vessel under her canvas that her commander was delighted with her.

At this point, however, the wind, which still held from the westward, was dead against them, and it became a question whether they should anchor in the Downs to await a favourable change, or continue on and endeavour to beat a passage as far as Plymouth. Prudence dictated the adoption of the former course; it being well known that the Channel was just then swarming with French privateers—powerful luggers for the most part—the captains of which had an unpleasant habit of slipping out of harbour as the evening came on, and stretching across toward the English coast, on the lookout for our merchantmen, very often picking up a valuable prize and getting back into port the next morning. The weather, too, happened just then to be highly favourable for the operations of these gentry, the sky being overcast with frequent showers, and no moon.

On the other hand, however, time was of the utmost importance; George had only five days left him in which to reach Plymouth, if he was to avail himself of the protection of convoy; so, after discussing the question with Mr Bowen, and carefully weighing it in his own mind, he finally decided to keep the ship moving, and to trust to fortune and a good lookout.

The *Aurora* accordingly proceeded, stretching over as far as mid-channel, when she went about; and on drawing in with the land again Leicester had the satisfaction of seeing that she would handsomely weather Beachy Head, which she did, tacking close in under the land about breakfast-time on the day following her departure from London. At 2 p.m., being at the time rather nearer to the French than to the English coast, George tacked again, in order to close the English shore toward nightfall.

At 9 p.m., being abreast of Littlehampton, and about eight miles off the shore, the *Aurora* went about once more, and stood over towards France, close-hauled on the starboard tack.

The weather had cleared somewhat, the sun breaking through the clouds as the afternoon wore on, and flooding the whole western sky with splendour as he sank to rest. One by one, as the golden glory of the west faded into sober grey, the stars shone out, peeping shyly down upon the world from the softly dappled sky, and there was every prospect of its

being a fine night in the Channel. George accordingly gave instructions for the ship to continue on the same tack until midnight, when she was to be hove about once more. Then, cautioning the second mate—who was in charge of the deck—to maintain a strict lookout and to call him in the event of a change of weather or the appearance of a suspicious-looking sail in their neighbourhood, he went below to snatch an hour or two of sleep, having had none so far from the moment of the vessel's sailing.

Flinging off his clothes, he threw himself into his swinging cot, and instantly sank into a sound and dreamless slumber; to be awakened again with a start, and almost instantly, as it seemed to him, by the flapping of the ship's canvas in the wind.

Starting up into a sitting posture, he heard the voice of the chief mate on deck giving the necessary orders for tacking ship.

"Hillo!" he thought, "what is the meaning of this? Nothing wrong, I hope. No, that cannot be, or they would surely have called me. Perhaps it is a change of wind; I hope it is. Well, being awake, I may as well slip on deck and satisfy myself as to the meaning of it."

He accordingly sprang out of his cot, and began to dress himself; the sounds on deck having meanwhile ceased, save for the monotonous tread overhead of the officer of the watch, and the occasional clank of the wheel-chains. The ship was heeling over to starboard, showing that she was on the port tack, and the rushing sound of the water along her sides seemed to indicate that she was moving pretty rapidly through it.

As he opened his state-room door to pass into the main cabin, a heavy step was heard descending the companion-ladder, and the next moment the second mate appeared at its foot, in the act of turning into his own state-room.

"Well, Mr Cross," said the skipper, "what is the news from the deck? You have tacked ship, it seems; is there a change of wind?"

"No, sir," answered Cross; "the wind still holds steady at about west, though it seems a little inclined to back half a point or so to the south'ard, and it's clouded over again and gone very dark. We tacked at midnight, sir, according to your orders."

"Midnight!" ejaculated George; "you surely do not mean to say it is midnight already, Cross?"

"About a quarter after it, sir," answered the second mate with a smile. "You've slept sound, sir, I expect; and time has travelled fast with you."

"I must have slept sound indeed," answered the skipper; "to me it seemed that I had hardly fallen asleep when I was awakened by the flapping of the canvas. Well, I'll not keep you from your bunk; I shall go on deck and take a look round before I turn in again. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," was the reply; and the second mate opened the door of his berth and passed in, whilst George sprang lightly up the companion-ladder and stepped out on deck.

It was indeed, as the second mate had said, very dark; so much so that the skipper, having just left the cabin, where a lamp was dimly burning, was unable to see anything for a moment or two. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he caught first a glimpse of the man at the wheel, his form faintly illuminated by the binnacle light, then the figure of the mate, just turning near the taffrail to walk forward, and finally the dark, shadowy pile of canvas towering away aloft until it melted into the general obscurity.

"It has gone very dark again, Mr Bowen," remarked the skipper, as the mate, becoming aware of George's presence on deck, joined him.

"It *is* dark, sir," answered the mate, "almost too dark to be poking about here in the Channel without lights."

"It is rather risky, I admit," returned George; "still, I do not think it is so dangerous as showing our lights; that would simply be hanging out an invitation to those prowling French privateers to pounce down on us. How is her head?"—to the man at the wheel, George and the mate having by this time strolled aft together.

"No'th, half west, sir," was the reply.

"Come, that is not so bad," remarked George. "We shall fetch Plymouth yet in good time to join the convoy if all be —"

"A sail broad on the weather bow!" broke in the lookout forward, with startling abruptness.

Both George and the mate instantly directed their gaze in the direction indicated by the lookout; and presently a shapeless something like a blacker patch against the black background of the darkness loomed into view, about one point before the beam, showing by this rapid change in the respective positions of the two ships how near was the stranger.

"Why!" exclaimed Leicester, "he is coming right down for us; he will be into us. Port, port hard; up with your helm smartly, my lad," to the man at the wheel. "Ship ahoy! Port your helm; can you not see us?"

"Ay, ay; oh, yesh," was the response from the other vessel; and as it came floating down upon the wind the stranger took a broad sheer to port, showing herself to be a large lugger, and shot very neatly alongside the *Aurora*, the grappling-irons being cleverly hove into the barque's fore and main-rigging, as the two vessels touched.

At the same moment some five-and-twenty Frenchmen, armed with cutlass and pistol, scrambled alertly in over the *Aurora's* bulwarks, the leader singling out George, notwithstanding the darkness, and exclaiming, as he promptly presented a pistol at his head—

"Vat cheep dis is, eh?"

"The *Aurora*, of London," was the answer, "Très bien! My cheep, the *Belle Marie*, est un corsaire Français, un—vat you call—privateere, et vous êtes mes prisonniers. It is ze fortune of war, messieurs; my turn to-night—yours to-morrow, perhaps—ha, ha! Now, my dear sares, as there not moosh time is, permettez moi," and he flung open the companion-doors, motioning significantly to George and the mate to go below.

Poor George glanced swiftly round the deck, only to see that it was in complete possession of the Frenchmen, one of whom was already at the wheel. So, turning to Mr Bowen, and murmuring, "There is no help for it, I suppose," he signed to the mate to lead the way, and then followed, dejectedly, the doors being smartly slammed-to after them, and the next moment they heard the sound of some heavy body being dragged up to and banged against the companion entrance, thus precluding the possibility of their stealing on deck again, and effecting a counter surprise.

The whole thing had been done so rapidly that it was not until he found the ship being once more hove about, with her head pointing toward the French coast, that Captain Leicester fully realised his situation. In less than ten minutes his ship had been taken from him, and himself confined in his own cabin, a prisoner. Had he not been on deck at the time of the occurrence, he would certainly have considered it an avoidable misfortune, to be accounted for only by the most gross carelessness; but as it was, he was fully able to understand that it was entirely due to the extreme darkness of the night, and the circumstance of the lugger and the barque stumbling over each other, as it were. But that made matters no better for him; he had lost his ship—his all—and now there loomed before him the immediate prospect of a dreary confinement—for many years perhaps—in a French prison. The thought goaded him almost to madness, and he sprang impatiently to his feet, and began to pace moodily to and fro over the narrow limits of the cabin floor.

Meanwhile the second mate—who had started out of his berth at the first shock of contact between the two vessels, and had made a rush for the deck, only to be confronted and driven back by a Frenchman with a drawn cutlass—was seated on the lockers alongside Mr Bowen, listening to that individual's gloomy recital of the details of the capture.

The low murmur of the two men's voices annoyed George in his then irritable frame of mind, and, to avoid it, he retired into his own state-room. The night being close and sultry, all the stern-ports were open, and as he entered the cabin the sound of a hail from to leeward came floating in through the ports. It was answered from the deck, and, kneeling upon the sofa-locker and thrusting his body well out of the port, the skipper became aware that the lugger was parting company, and that the hail he had heard was the voice of the French captain shouting his parting instructions to the officer he had left in charge of the prize. Looking away to leeward, in the direction from which the sounds had come, he was just able to distinguish the dark outline of the lugger, as she bore up and pursued her *way once more to the eastward*. After this a considerable amount of excited jabbering took place on deck, the word "Cherbourg" being so often repeated that George had no doubt it was to that port that the barque was to be taken; but in about half an hour all this died away, and perfect silence reigned on board once more.

From the moment that the lugger parted company a confused idea as to the possibility of retaking the barque had been gradually attaining definite shape in George's mind. It was rather a desperate attempt to make, it is true, with himself and the two mates shut up there in the cabin aft, while the crew were doubtless confined in the fore-castle, and with no possibility of effecting a junction with them. Still, if Bowen and Cross were willing to run the risk of assisting him, it might be worth while to try it.

Thinking thus, he drew his head inside the stern-port, and made his way back into the main cabin, where he found the two mates, with their arms crossed upon their chests, and their heads bowed upon their breasts, asleep.

Giving them a gentle shake apiece, to arouse them, he sat down beside them and asked them bluntly if they felt disposed to run a little risk in an attempt to retake the barque, and so avoid a French prison.

"You may reckon on me for one, sir, if you've hit upon anything likely in the shape of a plan," heartily answered the chief mate; "and Cross here, I know, won't hold back either, unless I'm greatly mistaken in him."

"Never fear," said Cross; "if you give the word, sir, and the ship is to be retook, we'll have her. But how do you propose to do it?—it'll have to be a surprise, I s'pose?"

"Listen," said George. "What I propose is this. The stern-ports are all open; and I believe that, by assisting each other, we may manage to creep out through them on to the main-brace boom-iron, and thence make our way along the ship's side, *outside* the bulwarks, forward, when, by watching our opportunity, we may possibly manage to overpower the guard on the fore-castle, throw off the hatch, and release our own lads, and then we must just make a fight for it. We may perhaps—we three—manage to take along with us a cutlass and a brace of pistols each; but the men must do the best they can with hand-spikes, belaying-pins, and, in short, anything they can lay their hands upon."

"A very promising plan indeed, sir," answered the chief mate. "The next question is, when are we to set about it?"

"The sooner the better," answered George; "so go at once, please, for your pistols; load them carefully; take a cutlass each from the rack; and then we will proceed to business."

In a very *few* minutes the trio were ready. Going softly into George's state-room, they paused for a minute or two to listen for any sounds which might furnish them with a clue to the condition of affairs on deck; but nothing was to be heard, save the occasional clank of the wheel-chains, and the low humming of a song by the helmsman.

"It is all curiously quiet on deck," whispered George to his two companions; "I can't quite make it out; it undoubtedly means one of two things, however—either they are keeping a very strict and careful watch, or none at all; we shall soon see which. Now, Cross, stand by to give me a hoist, if I seem to require it; I will go first, and as soon as I am fairly out of the way, Mr Bowen can follow."

Kicking off his boots and stockings, the skipper thereupon, without further ado, mounted the lockers, and passing his body cautiously out of the weathermost stern-port, held on by the edge of the port with one hand, whilst he reached out and felt for the brace-iron with the other. This he soon found, and grasping it firmly with his right hand, began to work himself cautiously towards it. The task he had set himself proved, however, to be much more difficult than he had expected; the rake of the ship's stern so greatly interfering with his freedom of motion that at first he feared he would be obliged to abandon the attempt altogether, as he foresaw that, the moment he released his hold upon the edge of the port, he must infallibly swing off backwards, and, unless he could manage to retain his grasp of the iron, drop overboard. So he slipped in through the port again, to explain this difficulty to the mates, and to caution them to be careful when it came to their turn, and then resumed his attempt.

Once more securing a firm grasp upon the brace-iron, he watched the roll of the ship, and, seizing the first favourable opportunity, boldly swung himself off into the air, where he hung suspended by one arm, with his feet almost touching the water. In another moment he had both hands upon the iron, and, giving himself a vigorous upward swing, he was soon able to throw his feet over the tautly-strained main-brace. To scramble up and place himself astride the brace-block was now an easy task, and, settling himself firmly there, he prepared to assist the chief mate, when he should make his appearance.

He had not long to wait. Hardly was he comfortably established in his comparatively safe position, when a hand appeared from behind the quarter-piece in search of the iron. George promptly seized and guided it to the object of its search, then firmly grasped the wrist with one hand, keeping the other ready to render further assistance.

"Look out, sir, I'm coming," he heard the chief mate mutter, and then, with a tremendous swing, Mr Bowen's body came into view. Quick as thought George leaned over and caught the disengaged hand, placed it too upon the iron, and then, rising to his feet and exerting his strength to the utmost, he proceeded to drag his chief mate up alongside himself.

"Now," he whispered, as soon as he had got him there, "I shall begin to work my way forward at once, so as to be out of your way; but you had better stay and lend Cross a hand. I shall wait for you both in the fore-chains."

So saying, he stepped off the brace-iron, planting his feet firmly on the broad beading which ran along the top edge of the sheer-strake, and leaning his body against the bulwarks, whilst he grasped the outer edge of the rail to steady himself, he speedily and easily reached the mizzen-chains.

Here, availing himself of the partial shelter and cover afforded by the lanyards and dead-eyes of the rigging, he cautiously raised his head above the level of the bulwarks, to survey the state of the deck inboard. The first object which met his view was the figure of the helmsman, rendered visible by the light of the binnacle-lamps as they beamed dimly out upon him and feebly lighted up his figure. He was leaning negligently against the wheel, with one arm thrown carelessly over it, and his eyes were vacantly fixed upon the cloudy heavens above him, with his thoughts evidently far away. Not another soul was visible, either forward or aft; but George thought he could make out the indistinct outline of something resembling a human figure seated on the bench to windward of the cabin companion. He continued so long his earnest gaze upon this object that he was quite startled to find his first and second mates beside him; and he came at last to the conclusion that, if it were indeed a human figure at all, it must be that of the prize-master—sound asleep.

Turning his glances from this object forward, he saw that the galley-door to windward was shut, whilst on the lee-side it was open, the reflection of a light inside shining pretty strongly upon the lee bulwarks and showing the shadows of men evidently in the act of eating and drinking.

"Do you see that?" whispered George to his two companions. "Nothing could possibly be more favourable to our plans. We will work our way forward as far as the main-rigging, when, I think, we may venture to slip over the bulwarks, and in on deck. Then we must creep very cautiously forward, find out the whereabouts of the watchman, or lookout, or whatever he is, and overpower him, if possible, without raising an alarm. That done, we will set free our own lads, and I have no fear whatever as to the result."

The three adventurers then moved noiselessly forward until they came to the main-rigging, when they slipped in on deck, and, crouching low in the deep shadow of the weather bulwarks, crept along until they were within a dozen feet of the fore-scuttle. Here they paused, and began to peer anxiously about for the man they expected to find on watch on the fore-castle.

"There he is, just forward of the cat-head," whispered the second mate; and hastily snatching a heavy iron belaying-pin from the rail, he stole, crouching and noiseless as a cat, upon his unconscious enemy. Six seconds later a dull heavy blow was heard, followed by a faint groan, the dark object near the cat-head vanished, and Cross, returning to the skipper's side, whispered—

"He's all right; knocked the senses clean out of him, and then laid him quietly out on deck. I reckon he won't come to hisself again for the next half-hour. Now, what's the next move, cap'n?"

"The next thing," answered George, "is to open the fore-scuttle, and quietly get our own lads on deck. I am surprised that they have not attempted to steal up of their own accord before this."

On going to the fore-castle hatch, however, they soon discovered the reason why the men were content to remain so quietly below, a large mooring hawser having been coiled down on the top of the hatch, thus effectually preventing the imprisoned men from raising it.

"We shall never be able to move this without giving the alarm," said George. "We must contrive somehow to shut those fellows up in the galley, and keep them there."

"That is easily done," whispered the chief mate. "'Cookey' has a lot of firewood stowed away in the eyes of the long-boat; we must get hold of a piece, cut half a dozen wedges from it, and one of us must then slide-to the door on the lee-side, and wedge it tight with three of the wedges, whilst another of us at the same time wedges up the door to windward."

He then glided away to the long-boat, and soon returned with a small piece of wood in his hand.

"Here we are," he whispered; "now we'll soon have them boxed up so tight that they won't get out until we open the doors for 'em."

Whilst speaking he had produced his knife from his pocket, and, notwithstanding the intense darkness, soon hacked out the half-dozen wedges, which, though very roughly shaped, were still good enough for the purpose.

"Now, sir," said he in a low tone to George, "you take these three, let Cross go with you and slide-to the lee-door with a slam, and then you slip in the wedges and jam them tight home, while I will do the same to wind'ard, as soon as I hear Cross close the lee-door."

George took the wedges, and, accompanied by Cross crept noiselessly up to the galley-door to leeward, Mr Bowen meanwhile making his way to the corresponding door on the weather side. There was a loud slam, a moment of silence,

then a tremendous outcry, accompanied by the sound of heavy battering from inside the galley, and the three adventurers met again at the fore-castle hatch.

“Now, then,” cried George, “we haven’t a moment to lose, so let us capsize the hawser bodily. Are you ready? Then, one—two—three, Heave!”

By exerting their whole strength to the utmost the heavy hawser was rolled off the hatch, and the hatch itself raised, just as two figures came rushing forward from the quarter-deck with loud and angry outcries.

“Tumble up, my lads!” shouted George down the scuttle; “tumble up smartly, and help us to retake the ship.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” was the eager answer from below, and then the skipper, drawing his cutlass and pistol, turned to meet the prize-master and the helmsman, who had both hurried forward to learn the meaning of the disturbance in the galley.

“Surrender, or you are a dead man!” exclaimed George, thrusting the muzzle of his pistol into the face of the as yet only half-awake prize-master.

“Oui, oui, m’sieu; oh, yais, I surrendaire,” exclaimed the poor fellow, as he felt the firm pressure of the cold pistol-barrel against his forehead; and hastily unbuckling his cutlass, he thrust it into George’s hand.

The chief mate, in the meantime, had incontinently felled the other man to the deck with a single blow from his fist, and had then left Cross to secure him with a rope’s end. The barque’s crew had meanwhile made their way on deck, and were now clustered about their officers, anxious to know what they were to do, whilst the *Aurora*, left to herself, had shot up into the wind’s eye, and was now lying stationary, with all her square canvas aback, and the rest of her sails fluttering loudly in the wind.

“One hand to the wheel, and jam it hard up,” commanded George; “the rest of you to your stations. Mr Bowen and Mr Cross, you will mount guard over the galley-doors, if you please, until we have got the ship round. Raise tacks and sheets, round with the main-yard, and flatten in forward. Well, there, with the main-braces. Now swing your fore-yard, board the fore and main-tacks, and haul over the head-sheets. Right your helm, my lad; give her a spoke or two, if *you find* she wants it, as she gathers way, and then keep her ‘full and by.’ Now, lads, never mind about coiling up just now; you can do that after we have attended to the prisoners; come forward and open the weather galley-door, and as the Frenchmen pass out, seize them and lash their hands and heels together.”

These orders were promptly executed, the discomfited Frenchmen being permitted to pass out of the galley only one at a time. Cross’s burly form, drawn cutlass and conspicuously displayed pistol, supported by the appearance of the barque’s crew in his immediate background, proving an effectual deterrent to any attempt on the part of the privateersmen to make a rush for freedom, and in something like a couple of hours from the time of her capture, the *Aurora*, was once more in the undisputed possession of her rightful owner.

Chapter Four.

The Departure of the Convoy.

About daybreak the wind veered round and blew a fine, fresh, steady breeze from the northward, enabling the barque to lay her course with flowing sheets; and sunset found her safely anchored in Plymouth Sound, one of a fleet of nearly two hundred merchantmen, which had assembled there for the purpose of being convoyed across the Atlantic.

The convoy was to sail on the following day but one; the men-o’-war which constituted their escort were already in the Sound, along with several other ships of the royal navy; and as the cable smoked out through the *Aurora*’s hawse-pipe that evening, when she dropped her anchor, George fondly hoped his troubles were at an end.

But he was mistaken.

As soon as the canvas was furled, Captain Leicester manned a boat, and, proceeding on board the admiral’s ship reported the circumstance of the capture and recapture of his vessel, requesting at the same time to be relieved as soon as possible of the custody of his prisoners. This was speedily arranged. By the admiral’s orders an armed boat’s crew was at once despatched to the *Aurora*, the prisoners were released from their bonds, passed into the man-o’-war’s boat, and in little more than an hour from their arrival in the Sound safely lodged on board a prison-hulk.

So far, so good. But George had yet to learn that there was one inconvenient result generally attendant upon a request to a man-o’-war for assistance. The boat, after conveying the Frenchmen to the prison-hulk, duly returned to the admiral’s ship; but, instead of the crew at once passing out of her, they were ordered to remain where they were, the lieutenant in charge alone going on deck and holding a short conference with the captain, after which he re-entered the boat, and she proceeded once more alongside the *Aurora*.

George saw her coming, and wondered what could possibly be her errand. He was not left long in doubt.

“I am very sorry to trouble you,” remarked the lieutenant, as he encountered George at the gangway, whither the latter had repaired to meet him, “but I must ask you to kindly muster your men.”

George knew only too well then what this visit boded, but he was quite helpless; so, putting the best face he could upon the matter, he answered as cheerfully as he could, and directed that all hands should be summoned on deck.

“I hope, however,” he remarked to the officer, “that you will not deprive me of any of my crew. I have shipped only just sufficient men to handle her, and I assure you that even with the fine weather we have had in our trip down Channel I have found that we have not a hand too many for the efficient management of the ship.”

“Ah, yes,” answered the lieutenant with a laugh; “all you merchant-skippers tell the same story; but we shall see—we shall see. They must be exceptionally good men, however, or you would never have succeeded in recovering possession of your ship. Ah! here they are, and a fine smart crew they look, too. Upon my word I must congratulate you, Mr—a—um—a, upon your good luck in securing so many fine fellows; why, they look capable of taking care of a ship twice your size.

I really *must* relieve you of one or two of them; it would be nothing short of treason to his most gracious Majesty to allow you to keep them all, when the navy is in such urgent want of men."

The crew were by this time assembled on deck, and a very disconcerted and disgusted-looking set of men they were; they had submitted to weeks of voluntary imprisonment in crimps' houses for the sole purpose of escaping impressment into the navy, and now, when their voyage had actually begun, here was a man-o'-war's boat alongside, to force them into the service they regarded with so great an abhorrence. No wonder that they looked and felt disgusted.

The men were drawn up in line along the deck, in single file, and the lieutenant sauntered leisurely along the line, critically examining each man as he came to him, but without, as George had anticipated, ordering any of them into the boat alongside. At length he reached the last individual in the line, one of the lads, and Leicester was beginning to breathe freely once more, hoping that he was, after all, not to be robbed of any of his crew, when the officer returned to the head of the line, and, touching the second mate lightly on the chest with his finger, said—

"You were evidently born to become a man-o'-war's man, my fine fellow; get your traps together and pass them and yourself into the boat alongside as soon as you have received your wages."

"Excuse me," said George, "I really must ask you not to take that man; he is my second mate."

"Your second mate!" exclaimed the officer with well-feigned astonishment. "You surely do not mean to say you carry a second mate on board such a cock-boat as this?"

"Certainly I do," retorted George somewhat tartly; "why not, pray?"

"Simply, my good man, because such an individual is wholly unnecessary. You can take charge of one watch, yourself, you know, and your mate will of course command the other, so that you can have no possible use for a second mate. Why, a smart, active young fellow like you ought to be ashamed of such an act of laziness as the carrying of a second mate. Pay the man his wages, if you please, and let him pass into the boat."

"I owe him no wages," answered George; "on the contrary, he—and every other man of the crew, for that matter—has drawn a month's advance, and owes me three weeks' service yet before we shall be square. Who is to reimburse me for that loss?"

"I am sorry to say I am quite unable to answer that question," was the reply; "but, giving it—mind you, strictly as my private opinion—I am afraid you will have to suffer the loss. For my part I have never been able to understand why you masters of merchantmen *will* persist in so risky a policy as the payment of a month's wages in advance, when you can never tell what may occur to prevent the men from working out their time. But this is not business; I must bear a hand and finish my work, or I shall get severely rapped over the knuckles."

Then, turning once more to the men, he ordered the carpenter to get his things ready, and go into the boat.

"No," said George, by this time thoroughly exasperated, "*that* I will *not* permit. This man is the ship's carpenter, and I forbid you, sir, to impress him at your peril."

"You *forbid*, eh?" said the lieutenant, turning angrily upon George. "Take care what you are saying, my fine fellow, or I may perhaps find ways and means of impressing *you* before you sail."

Then, suddenly realising that he had allowed his temper to outrun his discretion, he added in a conciliatory tone—

"Well, since you say that this man is the carpenter, I will spare him; but you should have explained that fact to me at first; and as to impressing *you*, why, I daresay you know the old joke about impressing a ship-master, and will understand I was only jesting; you are a capital fellow, and have behaved very well over this business, so I will let you off as easily as I can. But of course I must do my duty and take another man or two from you; if I did not, some of the other ships would be sending on board you and leaving you really short-handed."

With that he picked out with unerring eye the two able-seamen, and then, turning to George with a great show of generous forbearance, announced that he would leave him all the rest, though he could hardly reconcile it to his conscience to *go away* with only three men out of so strong and smart a crew as that belonging to the *Aurora*.

Cross was by this time with his chest on deck; the other two impressed men soon followed, and the disconsolate trio passed down the ship's side in moody silence, unmoved alike by the commiserating looks of their late shipmates or the jocular and more than half-ironical congratulations of the man-o'-war's men in the boat upon their entry into so promising a service as that of the British navy.

On the departure of the boat, George held a short consultation with Mr Bowen, the result of which was a very wise determination to "grin and bear it," rather than risk fresh annoyance by an effort—which he very strongly suspected would be utterly useless—to obtain redress and the restitution of his men. This determination come to, the carpenter was summoned aft, and installed into the duties and the berth of the unfortunate Cross; George thus finding his crew reduced to three men, the officers included, and one lad in each watch, the cook and steward of course being "idlers," and their services in the working of the ship only to be demanded on occasions of exceptional urgency.

On the day but one following that of the impressment of the *Aurora's* men, a gun was fired at sunrise by the commodore, blue-peter was hoisted at the fore-royal-mastheads, and the fore-topsails were loosed on board the ships of the convoying squadron, and the still morning air immediately began to resound with the songs of seamen and the clanking of windlass-pawls, as the fleet of merchantmen constituting the convoy began to get under weigh. There was a considerable amount of emulation displayed among the merchant-skippers—those of them, at least, whose ships or crews had any pretensions to smartness, and in half an hour a good many of the craft were under weigh and standing out to sea with a light air of wind from the eastward. The old *Tremendous*, 74, led the van, closely followed by the *Torpid*, 50; while the frigates *Andromeda* and *Vixen*, each of 32 guns, assisted by the *Dasher*, *Grampus*, *Throstle*, and *Mallard*, 10-gun-brigs, cruised round and round the laggards, making signals, firing guns, and generally creating a great deal of fuss, noise, and excitement. The leading portion of the fleet was hove-to, hull-down, at sea, before the last craft in the convoy had succeeded in getting her anchor and making a start; but by noon the whole of the fleet was fairly in the Channel, when the *Tremendous* made the signal to fill, and away they all went, bowling along to the southward and westward, the dull sailers under every rag they could spread to the wind—now settled into a fine steady royal-breeze from east-south-

east, while the smarter craft were compelled to show only such a spread of canvas as would enable the dullards to keep pace with them. The *Tremendous* and *Torpid*, under double-reefed topsails, led the way about two miles apart; the frigates were posted, one to windward and one to leeward of the merchant-fleet, and the brigs brought up the rear, it being their duty to whip-in the stragglers, urge on the slow-coaches, and keep a sharp lookout for prowling privateers.

The English coast was still faintly visible, like a light grey cloud, on the horizon astern, when a strange sail was sighted on the port beam, steering west, a course which brought her gradually nearer to the convoy. She was brig-rigged, and she continued to approach until she had reached a point some six miles from the fleet; when she suddenly hauled her wind, and, without showing any colours, stood away to the southward and eastward, close-hauled, under a heavy press of canvas. There had been a considerable amount of signalling going on between the various men-o'-war from the moment of her first appearance, and now there was still more; but it soon ceased; the last string of flags displayed by the *Tremendous* was acknowledged by the *Andromeda*, the weathermost frigate, and the excitement appeared to be at an end.

"I'm afraid that means trouble for some of us, unless the men-o'-war keep a good sharp lookout," observed Mr Bowen to George, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the rapidly receding brig, as the two men walked the deck together, criticising the appearance and sailing powers of the various craft in company.

"Ah, indeed?" remarked George. "I see you have come to the same conclusion as myself with regard to the stranger, which is that she is a French privateer."

"Just that, sir, and nothing else," was the reply. "She is French all over; no need for her to show her colours; her rig speaks her nationality plain enough for a blind man to read it. She's been on the watch for this fleet for the last week or more, you may depend on it, and now she has gone back to report the news to her consorts that the West India convoy has sailed. Mark my words, sir; we shall all have to keep a good sharp lookout, or a few of us will be snapped up yet, in spite of the men-o'-war, before we sight the next land."

"Well," said George, "we must take care that the *Aurora* is not one of the few, that is all. Luckily, we are not exactly the dullest sailer in the fleet; and we must manage to keep well in the body of it. It is the outsiders that will run the greatest risk."

For the next three or four days an unusual amount of vigilance was observable on board the men-o'-war, especially the frigates and gun-brigs, all of which kept well in the offing during the day, evidently on the lookout for prowling picaroons, and closing in again upon the convoy at night; but nothing was seen to keep alive suspicion; no ships of any description were encountered, save a couple of English frigates, each of which replied to the private signal and exchanged numbers with the *Tremendous*; and on the evening of the tenth day out the lofty, precipitous cliffs of the Azores were sighted and passed.

Another week sped away without the occurrence of any incident worthy of record; the wind continued fair and steady; and the convoy, though its rate of travelling was rather slow, made very good progress.

On the afternoon of the eighteenth day out from Plymouth, the fleet being at the time in latitude 32 degrees North, longitude 44 degrees 30 minutes West, or about half-way to Jamaica, the wind fell light; the sky, which had hitherto been clear, became overcast, heavy masses of dark, thunderous cloud slowly gathering in the south-western quarter and gradually spreading athwart the sky until the whole of the visible heavens were obscured. The barometer dropped slightly, indicating, in conjunction with the aspect of the sky, a probable change of wind and a consequent interruption to their hitherto highly satisfactory progress.

As evening fell, flashes of sheet-lightning were occasionally to be seen along the southern horizon; and Captain Leicester, anticipating a thunder-storm and a probable heavy downfall of rain, made preparations for the refilling of his water-casks.

But, though the atmosphere appeared to be heavily charged with electricity, the thunder held off, and when night closed down upon the convoy, the moon being then in her third quarter and rising late, it became as dark as a wolf's mouth.

Lights were of course displayed on board each ship; and the convoy having become somewhat scattered in consequence of the failure of the breeze, the effect was very singular and striking.

This being George's first voyage across the Atlantic, he was naturally a little anxious; and on the night in question he resolved to remain on deck until the weather should have assumed some more decided aspect. There was fortunately still a gentle breeze from about east-south-east fanning the convoy along at a speed of some two knots in the hour, just giving the ships steerage-way; and they were consequently able to keep out of each other's way, and thus avoid collision, always a great element of danger when a large number of craft happen to be sailing in company.

About two bells in the middle watch, George being seated at the time near the companion, smoking a meditative pipe, and thinking somewhat ruefully about Lucy Walford, the carpenter, who was in charge of the deck, approached him and said—

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, sir, here's a large craft without any lights creeping up on our larboard quarter."

"Indeed," said George, rousing himself and stepping aft to the taffrail with the carpenter; "whereabouts is she?"

The carpenter looked intently astern for a moment, then stretched out his arm, saying—

"There, sir—ah! now you can see her, she is just about to shut out the first of those four lights that you can see all close together. There! now she has shut it out."

"I see her!" said George. "Whatever does the fellow mean by being without lights on such a pitch-dark night as this; it would serve him right to report him to the commodore in the morning. He has a smart vessel under his feet, though; see how she is overhauling us. Why, it must surely be one of the gun-brigs, judging from her spread of canvas and her lofty spars. But what can she be doing here, in the very middle of the fleet, and without lights, too?"

The stranger was by this time little more than a couple of cables' lengths from the *Aurora*, drawing up to her fast, and

apparently intending to pass her very closely. George glanced anxiously at his stern light, thinking it might possibly have gone out, but no, it was burning brightly and must be distinctly visible to those on board the other craft.

Gradually the dark, mysterious fabric drew closer and still closer up on the port quarter of the *Aurora*, not the faintest glimmer of light being visible from stem to stern, and not a sound of any kind to be heard on board her.

George began to feel a trifle nervous as he watched the silent, stealthy approach of the stranger; and fetching his speaking-trumpet from the beackets in the companion-way, where it always hung in company with the telescope, he stepped aft to the taffrail and hailed—

“Ship ahoy!”

“Hillo!” was the response, in a tone of voice pitched so low that, though it was distinctly audible to those on board the *Aurora*, it would not penetrate the sluggish atmosphere to any great distance.

“What ship is that?” inquired George.

“His Britannic Majesty’s brig—” (name unintelligible). “What ship is that?”

“The *Aurora*, of London. Why are you out of your station, and without lights, sir? Is there anything wrong?”

“Yes,” was the reply, “but don’t hail any more; there are enemies at hand. I will sheer alongside you presently, and tell you what to do.”

“Enemies at hand, eh!” muttered George. “What can it mean, I wonder? And if there *are* enemies, by which, I suppose, they mean Frenchmen, in our neighbourhood, those man-o’-war fellows must have eyes like owls to be able to see them in the dark. Just step down into the cabin, if you please, Mr Ritson, and give the mate a call; I don’t half like this.”

In little more than a minute Mr Bowen was on deck and listening to George’s statement of what had already passed, and of his uneasiness. George had just finished speaking, when there was a sound as of a falling handspike, or something of the kind, on board the stranger, followed by a loud ejaculation of—

“*Sacr-r-r-r-ré nom de—*”

The remainder of the exclamation was promptly suppressed, but it was enough; George’s suspicions were now fully aroused, and he whispered to the two men standing by him—

“She is French, beyond a doubt; they intended to surprise us, and very nearly they did it, too. But we will not be caught quite so easily this time. Ritson, go forward, rouse the men, and tell them to creep aft under the shelter of the bulwarks; let not one of them show so much as a hair of his head above the rail; and tell them to look lively. And you, Mr Bowen, be good enough to go below and bring up a cutlass apiece for all hands.”

Chapter Five.

“Choppee for Changee—A Black Dog for a Blue Monkey.”

By the time that the *Aurora’s* crew were on deck, crouching behind the bulwarks aft on the port side, armed, and instructed by George as to what he required of them, the strange sail was within a dozen fathoms of the *Aurora’s* port quarter.

She could now be seen with tolerable distinctness, the outline of the hull and of the lofty canvas showing black as ebony against the dark background of sea and sky; and any doubts which Captain Leicester might have still entertained concerning her, were completely set at rest as he glanced at the cut of her canvas. It was French all over.

Foot by foot the brig—for such she was—crept up to the *Aurora*, until her bows were in a line with the barque’s stern and not more than twenty feet distant. George stood by the main-rigging, watching her, cutlass in hand, calm and determined, his plans already formed for action in the event of his suspicions proving correct.

In the ordinary course of things the two craft were now quite near enough to each other for any communication, however confidential in its nature, to be made without the possibility of its being overheard; but, though George could see that a figure stood on the brig’s rail by the main-rigging, not a word was uttered.

Keeping his gaze steadfastly fixed upon the brig, Captain Leicester saw that her helm had suddenly been ported, for she was sheering strongly in toward his own vessel.

“Brig ahoy!” he hailed. “What is it you have to say to me? Do not come too close, sir, or you will be into us.”

“Never fear,” answered in perfect English the dark figure on board the brig, “we will not carry away so much as a rope-yarn belonging to you. But I must be on board you before I can venture to give you your instructions.”

“Oh! very well,” said George. “If you intend boarding us, you had better do so by way of our fore-rigging, or you may get a nasty fall; we are very much littered up here abaft with spars and so on.”

“Ah, thank you very much; I will take your advice,” was the reply.

George saw the man motion with his arm, and the brig’s course was altered sufficiently to put her alongside with her gangway even with the *Aurora’s* fore-mast. Another second or two, and the ships gently jarred together, the brig’s quarter dropping alongside the barque at the same moment.

“*Enfans, allons-nous-en!*” exclaimed the voice of the stranger forward, followed by the sound of a leap on to the

barque's deck, and a scramble among the spars which littered it there.

"Now is your time, lads; jump for your lives!" exclaimed George in a low, excited tone; and, setting his men the example, he forthwith sprang from his own ship's bulwarks to those of the brig; and dashing at the helmsman, cut him down with his cutlass before the fellow could recover sufficiently from his astonishment to utter a cry. Then, without a moment's pause, he seized the wheel and exerting all his strength, sent it with a single twirl spinning hard over to starboard, where he lashed it.

The shock of collision, slight as it was, caused the two vessels to recoil from each other, and they were barely alongside when they separated again; George's manipulation of the brig's wheel, and a similar manipulation of the *Aurora's* helm at the last moment before the touching of the two vessels, greatly expediting the separation. By the time, therefore, that George had looked about him, and satisfied himself that the whole of his crew were safely with him on the brig's deck, the two vessels were a dozen feet apart and increasing their distance every second; their bows diverging from each other at almost a right angle.

The Frenchmen, on boarding the *Aurora*, divided into two parties, one of which rushed forward to secure the crew, while the other made a similar rush aft, for the purpose of overpowering the officers and helmsman. In their astonishment and perplexity at finding the decks deserted, they paused for a moment irresolutely, then hurriedly searched the cabin and forecabin, only to find that the ship was utterly deserted. Then, for the first time, a glimmering of the truth presented itself to the mind of the French leader, and his suspicions were instantly confirmed; for Captain Leicester, having at that moment rallied his crew, led them forward, and, finding that, as he had expected, the Frenchmen had boarded the *Aurora* with all their available strength, leaving only some five-and-twenty men on board the brig to handle her, he, after a short, sharp tussle, drove these men below and secured complete possession of the brig.

The party on board the *Aurora* distinctly heard the sounds of the conflict, and waited in breathless expectancy for its termination. They had not long to wait; in little over a couple of minutes Captain Leicester's voice was heard giving the order to shift the helm—the brig having in the meantime gone round until she was head to wind with her canvas flat aback—and to trim over the head-sheets. Then a chorus of curses, both loud and deep, from the deck of the *Aurora*, proclaimed the chagrin of the Frenchmen on board her at the—to them—extraordinary and unforeseen result of the adventure.

But their captain was a man of indomitable pluck, energy, and readiness of resource, and by no means given to a tame and immediate acceptance of defeat. He realised the situation in a moment, and, determining to make the best of a bad bargain, promptly ordered sail to be crowded upon the *Aurora*, in the hope of effecting his escape. The night being dark, however, and his men new to the ship, the work went on but slowly; and by the time that the topgallantsails were sheeted home, his own brig was once more alongside, with two red lights hoisted to her gaff-end (the alarm-signal), her ports open, guns run out, and the men standing by them ready to open fire.

As she drew up abreast the *Aurora*, George hailed—

"Barque ahoy! Let fly your sheets and halliards at once, and surrender, or I will fire into you!"

"All right," was the reply from the French captain; "you have won the game, monsieur, so I will not attempt to rob you of the credit of victory. You managed the affair exceedingly well, *mon ami*, and have taught me a lesson I shall remember for the rest of my life. You may come on board and take possession as soon as you like."

He then gave the necessary orders in French to his crew; the halliards and sheets were let fly on board the *Aurora*, George reducing sail at the same time in the brig, and the two vessels, losing way, began gradually to drop into the rear portion of the convoy.

Captain Leicester did not, however, accept the French captain's invitation to go on board and take possession once more of his own ship; that proceeding would have been just a trifle too risky. He had the game in his own hands, and intended to keep it there; so he quietly waited until one of the men-o'-war should come alongside, as he knew would soon be the case, in response to his signal.

In a short time another brig was seen approaching under a perfect cloud of sail, an unmistakably English gun-brig this time, however. Sweeping up on the port quarter of George's prize, an officer sprang into the main-rigging, and hailed—

"Brig ahoy! What brig is that?"

"The *Jeune Virginie*, French privateer," answered George. "She managed, somehow, to slip in among the fleet unobserved in the darkness, and threw a heavy boarding-party in on the deck of my vessel—the *Aurora* I suspected her designs just in time, however, and as her crew boarded me, I boarded her, and succeeded in taking possession; the two ships separating immediately and thus preventing the return of the French to their own craft."

"Ah, I see," remarked the officer. "You effected an exchange of ships—'choppee for changee—a black dog for a blue monkey,' eh? And now you want us to get your own ship back for you?"

"Not exactly," answered George with a laugh; "I have already forced her to surrender; that is the craft—the barque immediately under my lee. But I shall feel obliged if you will take charge of the prisoners, and lend me sufficient men to navigate my prize into port."

"Um; well, I really do not quite know about that. I will man your prize for you to-night; but you must see the commodore about the matter in the morning; if he will authorise me to lend you a prize-crew, of course I shall be very happy. By the way, where did the Frenchman come from?"

"When I saw the craft first, she was about a couple of cables' lengths directly astern of us," answered Leicester.

"She was, eh!" remarked the officer. "Well, there will be a pretty row to-morrow about her being allowed to slip in undetected. I will send a boat on board your own ship at once, to remove the prisoners; and, that done, I will tell off a crew to man your prize for you."

This was accordingly done, and an hour after the arrival of the *Throstle* upon the scene, George and his crew were once more comfortably established on board their own ship.

On the following morning the affair was officially reported to the commodore, who put himself into a tremendous passion about it, declaring that such an occurrence reflected indelible disgrace upon the whole British navy, and that he would bring to court-martial every one of the officers belonging to the convoying ships;—which, however, seeing that at bottom he was a fine, good-hearted old fellow, he never did. And after abusing everybody else, he sent for George, complimented him upon his gallantry publicly on the quarterdeck of the *Tremendous*, offered to obtain a commission for him (an offer which our hero was foolish enough to decline), and gave his hearty consent to the proposed borrowing of a prize-crew.

But the affair did not by any means end here; for on the following night, which was almost as dark as the preceding one, three ships belonging to the merchant-fleet under convoy gave an unusual and altogether extraordinary amount of trouble to the captains of the gun-brigs by their persistent straggling; and, suspicion being at length aroused, they were all found to be in the hands of French prize-crews, having been surprised and captured by the *Jeune Virginie* immediately prior to her unsuccessful attempt upon the *Aurora*. Had they been only a little less anxious to effect their escape, they might, as the event proved, have accomplished it without the slightest difficulty.

About 2 p.m. on the day following the recapture of these three vessels, the weather being at the time stark calm, with an overcast sky, the signal to “shorten sail and prepare for bad weather,” was exhibited on board the commodore’s ship—the old *Tremendous*. It was very difficult to make out the signal, the flags hanging from the masthead in such close, motionless folds that it was almost impossible to identify them; so, after a long and anxious scrutiny of them through his telescope, George, thinking he must surely have misinterpreted the message, dived below to take a look at his barometer. A single glance at it was sufficient to show him that he was not mistaken, the mercury having fallen a full inch in little more than two hours.

When he returned to the deck again, which he did immediately, the various ships were lying with their heads all round the compass, the merchantmen showing no signs that they understood the signal; but on board the men-o’-war the crews were seen to be very busy reefing topsails; the topgallant and royal-masts and yards being already sent down on deck.

Captain Leicester lost no time in following their example, as far as he was able. To send down on deck any of his top-hammer, with his limited crew, was of course quite out of the question, but he called all hands, and, hurrying them aloft, set them to work, first to furl all the light upper canvas, and then to close-reef both topsails. This done, he ordered them to furl the main and fore courses, which were already clewed up.

Part of the crew were already on the main-yard, and the remainder, having completed the reefing of the fore-topsail, had descended from aloft forward and were on their way up the main-rigging to assist in the stowing of the main-sail, when a heavy black, threatening-looking cloud-bank, which lay stretched along the western horizon, was seen to suddenly burst open, revealing a broad copper-tinted rent, which widened with alarming rapidity.

George’s quick eye detected the change in an instant, and knowing what it meant, and that there was no time to lose, hailed the crew with a loud shout of—

“Now then, my lads, look alive aloft there, and toss up that main-sail smartly. If you are quick about it, you may yet get the gaskets round it before the gale strikes us; if you are not, we shall lose the sail, and very probably some of you, too.”

The men answered with a cheery “Ay, ay, sir,” and set to work with a will, Leicester and the chief mate springing aft to the wheel at the same moment.

In the meantime the broad yellow rent in the clouds to the westward had spread very considerably, the vapour overhead had gathered way, and was scudding rapidly across the sky in an easterly direction, and already, upon the western horizon, a long, rapidly advancing line of white foaming water gave unmistakable indications of the close proximity of the hurricane. The old *Tremendous* now did what she could to hurry up the laggards, by firing rapid signal-guns; and the crews of the several ships, waking up at last, were seen swarming aloft, when it was too late, to shorten sail.

The *Aurora* was lying with her head pointed to the southward, with her starboard broadside presented square to the wind, when the gale first struck her. Her skipper, anxious to save his canvas, if possible, kept his men aloft as long as he dared, urging and encouraging them with his voice to exert themselves to their utmost; but when he saw the old *Tremendous* bow under the first stroke of the blast as though she meant to “turn the turtle” altogether, he thought it was high time to look to the safety of his crew.

“Make fast, and come down at once, lads,” he shouted; “down with you, for your lives; the canvas must take care of itself now.”

Startled by the anxious sharpness of the hail, the men hurriedly knotted the gaskets, just as they were, and scuttled in off the yard like so many frightened squirrels.

They were all in the main-rigging when the hurricane burst upon the ship. With a terrific, unearthly streaming roar it rushed upon her, and the barque, as if conscious of her utter inability to withstand its tremendous strength, instantly went over on her beam-ends, with her lower yard-arms dipping into the water. The men in the lee-rigging were almost completely sheltered by the hull of the ship, and they had therefore but little difficulty in holding on. But they were obliged to remain where they were, the lower portion of the shrouds being buried some eight feet deep in water, thus precluding the possibility of the men descending to the deck; whilst to go aloft again and endeavour to descend to windward, was as much as their lives were worth. They had a practical illustration of this in the fact that two of the men in the weather shrouds were actually torn from their hold, and dashed with such violence against the main-top that one man had his arm, and the other, three of his ribs broken.

Captain Leicester, on seeing the near approach of the hurricane, had, after hailing his men to come down from aloft, lashed the wheel hard-a-starboard, and then, accompanied by Mr Bowen, he hurried away to the foot of the main-mast, where they cast off the starboard fore-braces and hauled in upon the larboard until they had braced the topsail as sharp up as it was possible for two men to get it. The result of this manoeuvre was that, when the gale struck the *Aurora*, her main-topsail, which was a-shiver, was blown clean out of the bolt-ropes in an instant, as also was the foresail and the partially-stowed main-sail; whilst the fore-topsail was strongly filled at once, and being luckily a new sail, and standing the strain upon it bravely, it quickly began to drag the ship through the water. As soon as she gathered way, her bows began to pay off, and presently she recovered her upright position with a jerk which snapped both her topgallant-masts

close off by the caps.

The wheel was now righted, and away the *Aurora* went, scudding dead before it, under her close-reefed fore-topsail only. The crew now made the best of their way down on deck, the head-yards were squared, and an effort was made to clear away the wreck, two of the men volunteering for, and succeeding in, the dangerous task of going aloft to cut away the fore and main-topgallant rigging.

George now had time to look about him a little, and observe the state of affairs prevailing outside his own ship. On all sides were to be seen ships—men-o'-war as well as merchantmen—scudding, like his own, before the irresistible fury of the gale. Nearly every ship had suffered damage of some sort, either to sails, spars, or rigging; and out of them all, very few had come better out of the first buffet than the *Aurora*. Here was to be seen a craft with topgallant-masts and jib-boom gone, and her canvas hanging from her yards in long tattered streamers; there another with nothing standing above her lower mastheads; here a barque with her main-yard carried away; there a stately ship with her mizzenmast and all attached still towing astern, and the crew busy cutting away at the rigging which held the shattered spar; here another fine ship, totally dismasted; and there, now far astern, more than one dark object lying low in the water, and but imperfectly seen through the flying spindrift, which George Leicester knew only too well were the hulls of ships which had capsized, and whose crews would be left to perish miserably, since no human power could possibly save them in an hour like that.

It soon became evident to the crew of the *Aurora*, that though they had so far escaped with comparatively slight damage, they could certainly not regard their ship as by any means free from peril so long as they remained in the company of the rest of the fleet. So many ships scudding together almost helplessly before the fury of the gale could not but prove a very great source of danger to each other, now that it was no longer possible to regulate their rate of sailing; and George soon found himself confronted with a new anxiety, that of being in danger of a collision. The sea was rising with extraordinary rapidity, and the various craft soon began to steer wildly, sheering so rankly, first to one side and then to the other, that many of them threatened to broach-to altogether.

The *Aurora* was a very smart little vessel under her canvas, as she now proved by keeping pace with two large ships, one of which lay on her port-bow, and the other on her starboard beam. So even was the rate of sailing of the three that neither of them, anxious as each was to accomplish the feat, could draw away from the others; and the strength of the gale was such that it was equally impossible for them either to make or to reduce sail. There they remained, therefore, maintaining exactly the same relative position to each other, now sheering uncontrollably inwards, so that each man held his breath and braced himself for the shock which seemed inevitable, and which, under such circumstances, must result in the total destruction of both ships; and, anon, surging as wildly off in opposite directions.

To add still further to Captain Leicester's embarrassments, the trio of ships were rapidly overhauling a fourth, which was wallowing along dead ahead of the *Aurora*. She was a large craft, apparently of about eight hundred tons measurement; her three topmasts were carried away close off by the caps; the wreckage was all lying inboard, cumbering up her decks; her courses and staysails were blown to ribbons; and she was steering so badly that it was difficult to say *where* she was going, except that her general direction was to leeward. George saw that, should he overtake this vessel before getting clear of the two which already hampered him so seriously, a catastrophe was inevitable, and he speedily made up his mind that the *Aurora's* speed *must* be sufficiently reduced to allow of her dropping astern and into the wake of one or the other of his present consorts. The only means by which, under the circumstances, this could be accomplished was by sacrificing the fore-topsail; and he accordingly called for a volunteer to assist him in the task. Mr Bowen and the carpenter both proffered their services, and, selecting the latter, and requesting the chief mate to take charge of the deck and superintend the conning of the ship, George went forward, followed by the carpenter, and led the way aloft. Now that they were scudding before it, the strength of the wind was no longer felt to its full extent; it was still powerful enough, however, to make the journey aloft full of peril, and the two adventurers were compelled to make frequent pauses on their way, in order to avoid being blown out of the rigging. At length, however, they reached the yard, and, producing their knives, began to work their way outwards from the mast, one toward each yard-arm, cutting the seizings as they came to them. Their task was soon accomplished; for when half the seizings were cut, the wind saved them all further trouble by carrying away the remainder; the sail gave one terrific flap—which sprung the fore-yard—and then, tearing out of its bolt-ropes, went soaring away ahead of them, like a flake of cloud.

Thus relieved, the *Aurora's* speed sensibly diminished and by the time that George was once more down on deck, they were able, by watching their opportunity, to sheer in under the stern of the ship which had before lain upon their port-bow, and thus place the *Aurora* comparatively out of harm's way.

They were only just in time. The ship ahead was overtaken, and, in sheering into her new position, the *Aurora* was compelled to shave close past the stranger's stern. Glancing up at her as they shot past, with a feeling of deep gratitude at their escape, George saw a little crowd of passengers huddled together upon her poop, like frightened sheep. They were all looking at the *Aurora*, evidently fully aware of the danger from which they had so narrowly escaped; and among them George suddenly recognised a face which he had more than half hoped he would never see again—the face of his successful rival, as he believed him to be, Lieutenant Walford.

George waved his hand in recognition, the salutation was half reluctantly returned, and then the two craft separated; but not before George had had time to read the name painted on her stern—the *Princess Royal*, of London.

Chapter Six.

The Mutiny on board the "Princess Royal."

It now becomes necessary that we should for a short time forsake the *Aurora*, and follow the fortunes of the *Princess Royal*.

At the moment of our making the acquaintance of this vessel a very unsatisfactory state of affairs happened to prevail on board her. She was, as we have already seen, a large ship, as ships went at that time, being of 870 tons register, and capable of carrying close upon 1200 tons dead-weight. She had saloon accommodation for forty passengers, and carried an armament of twelve 9-pounders upon her main-deck, the intention of her owners being that she should fight her own way, if necessary, to and fro across the ocean, and so be independent of convoy.

But on her present voyage this plan had to be abandoned, the activity of the press-gangs, and the consequent scarcity of seamen being such that she cleared out of the port of London with only thirty men in her fore-castle; a crew

wholly inadequate to successfully defend a ship of her size in the extremely likely event of her encountering an adversary. She was therefore compelled, like many others, to avail herself of the protection of convoy.

Upon her arrival at Plymouth, she, like the *Aurora*, received a visit from a man-o'-war's boat, which carried off four of her best men, reducing her number of seamen to twenty-six. It will thus be seen that, when she finally sailed out of English waters, she was very short-handed.

Now, as Jack is to this day, so he ever has been—an inveterate grumbler; he *will* find *something* to growl about. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that, with such good cause, there should be constant dissatisfaction in the *Princess Royal's* fore-castle.

But though Jack *is*, and always has been, such a grumbler, and though probably nothing on earth will ever cure him of this habit—for habit only it is—yet, even where there is good and sufficient cause for discontent, a little judicious management, forbearance, and sympathy will prevent the mischief from going any further.

Unfortunately, however, for the *Princess Royal* and all connected with her, the measures adopted by those in authority on board her for the suppression of this quickly-discovered spirit of discontent were the extreme opposite of judicious. The master—as is sometimes the case with masters of very fine ships—was haughty and overbearing, possessed of a highly-exaggerated opinion of his own importance, turning a deaf ear to all the complaints of his crew, and treating them with an impatience and superciliousness of manner which made him heartily detested. The chief mate, an arrant sycophant, taking his cue from his superior officer imitated him to the utmost extent of his ability, with a like result; while the second mate was a blustering bully, whose great pride and boast it was that he could always make one man do the work of two. Hence, from the very commencement of the voyage, the quarterdeck and the fore-castle, instead of pulling together and making an united effort to overcome the difficulties of their position, rapidly grew to regard each other with mutual feelings of enmity and distrust.

Matters had consequently, as might be expected, been steadily growing from bad to worse, from the first moment of sailing; and on the day before the gale a very unpleasant incident had occurred on board.

It arose in this way. On the second mate's watch being called, one of the men remained in his hammock, sending word by one of his shipmates to the officer of the watch that he was ill and unfit for duty. The second mate, instead of reporting the circumstance to the master, and having it inquired into, as was the proper course, jumped at once to the conclusion that the man was merely feigning sickness, in order to avoid the performance of his proper share of work; and, taking the matter into his own hands, he proceeded to the fore-castle, armed with a "colt," and, dragging the unhappy seaman out of his hammock, drove him on deck, abusing him roundly the while in no measured terms, and setting him to work to grease the main-mast, from the truck downward.

The poor fellow, who was really ill, procured a pot of grease and started up the rigging, but, finding himself wholly unequal to the task of going aloft, descended again, and proceeding aft to the poop went up to the captain, who happened to be standing conversing with some of the passengers, and requested to be released from duty, repeating his plea of illness. The second mate had, however, in the meantime mentioned the matter to the captain, putting his own construction upon it; the request was therefore harshly and hastily refused, the refusal being accompanied by the assertion that the pleader was a mean, skulking, mutinous rascal, not worth his salt.

Lieutenant Walford happened to be one of the passengers standing near at the moment, and, as the dissatisfied seaman turned away, Walford turned to the captain and said—

"We in the army have a very short and simple method of dealing with fellows like that—we flog them; and, I assure you, it proves a never-failing cure."

The sick man heard this remark, so did the man at the wheel, and from that moment Walford was a marked man.

The captain turned round sharply.

"Do you?" said he. "Then by Jove I'll see if it will prove equally efficacious here. Mr Thomson, have that man seized up to a grating, and give him two dozen; I'll be bound he'll be well enough to go aloft after that; if he isn't, he shall have another couple of dozen."

Thomson, the second mate, at once sprang upon the man, and, seizing him by the collar, ordered the boatswain to call all hands.

This was done. The men were drawn up in the waist of the ship on the lee-side, the sick seaman was seized up at the lee gangway, and in the presence of all on board (except the ladies, who retired to the saloon in indignation and disgust) the unhappy man received his two dozen.

But here a further widening of the breach between the officers and the crew of the ship took place. The individual appointed to administer the flogging was the boatswain's mate, a great brawny Cornishman, named Talbot. This individual, when all was ready, bared his muscular right arm to the shoulder, and, grasping the cat firmly, measured his distance accurately with his eye; then stood waiting the command to begin. The captain, the mates, Walford, and one or two more of the on-lookers smiled their satisfaction as they witnessed these elaborate preparations for the infliction of a severe flogging; and the captain, willing to prolong the man's suffering as much as possible, allowed a long pause to ensue before giving the word.

At length he nodded to Talbot, who at once took a step back, and, giving the tails of the cat a mighty flourish in the air, brought them down upon the man's naked shoulders so gently that an audible laugh broke spontaneously from the entire crew at the ludicrous sight. The captain turned livid with fury.

"You!" he gasped; "what do you mean by that, you lubber? Lay it on, sir; lay it on hot and heavy, or by Jove I'll have *you* seized up, and will give you five dozen myself."

"Ay, ay, sir," was the imperturbable reply; and the second stroke was administered with even more threatening preliminaries than the first, but with, if possible, even less effect.

"Put that fellow in irons at once!" shouted the captain, "and let him have no food except bread and water until

further orders. You hear, steward? If he has anything more, I will make you responsible for it. I will teach him—and everybody else—that when I give an order, I will have it obeyed. Now, Rogers,” to the boatswain, “take the cat, and give that skulking rascal at the grating the two dozen he so richly deserves.”

The boatswain stepped forward, and, without removing his jacket or making any other preparation, sullenly took the cat in his hand. The chief mate meanwhile went off for a pair of handcuffs, and, returning, slipped them on the wrists of the rebellious boatswain’s mate.

The second mate, who was still looking on, noticing the behaviour of the boatswain, and the ill-concealed triumph of the crew at Talbot’s conduct, now turned to the captain and said—

“Let *me* play bo’sun’s mate for once sir; I’ll be bound I’ll give the sneaking lubber his proper ’lowance; he’ll never get it from any of his shipmates, I can see.”

“Very well, do so,” said the captain; “let him have it hot and strong; it will show those mutinous scoundrels that we have it in our power to punish them yet.”

The second mate waited for no more, but, whipping off his coat and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, snatched the cat out of Rogers’ hand, and began at once to administer the punishment.

His first stroke drew blood and forced a shriek of anguish from the quivering lips of his victim, a sound which extorted a laugh of fiendish glee from the captain. A second, third, fourth, and fifth lash followed in slow, deliberate succession, stripping off shreds of skin, and lacerating the back of the sufferer until it presented a sickening sight. At the sixth stroke the shrieks ceased, and the man’s head dropped upon his breast.

At this sight the second mate seemed somewhat startled, and looked up inquiringly at the captain.

“Go on,” said the latter, with an encouraging nod of the head; “go on and finish the dose; he’s only shamming. Put a little more strength into your blows, man; I’ll be bound you can fetch another howl or two out of him yet, if you feel inclined.”

Thus incited, the second mate actually proceeded with and completed his fiendish task, at the end of which the perspiration poured in a stream down his face, so great had been his exertions.

But not another cry could he wring from his victim, in spite of all his efforts—the poor fellow was insensible, and in that condition was cast off from the grating, and taken below to his hammock. There was no doctor on board, so the unfortunate seaman was left to the clumsy though well-meant ministrations of his shipmates, who did the best they could for him, the captain refusing to supply salve, lint, or in fact anything else with which to dress his wounds.

At dinner that evening the captain was urged by some of the passengers to represent to the commodore of the convoying squadron the insubordinate condition of the crew, and to request his assistance. This, however, he positively refused to do, roundly asserting his ability to command his own ship; but, as a matter of fact, the only reason for his reluctance to take this step arose out of the conviction that an inquiry would certainly follow as to the causes of the insubordination, from which inquiry, as he was very well aware, he and his officers could hope for nothing but a complete revelation of their own culpability.

At the moment that this course was being urged upon the captain in the saloon, the incident of the flogging, and, indeed, the whole question of their treatment by their officers, was being discussed on the fore-castle by the men; and, singular to relate, although Talbot was believed by his officers to be at that instant in irons below, if either of them had walked forward just then, they would have found him snugly seated on deck, free, on the fore-side of the windlass, taking an active part in the discussion. By the time that eight bells had struck, they had fully made up their minds as to their course of action, and the assembly quietly dispersed.

The next day was that on which the gale burst upon the fleet.

On the signal being made by the *Tremendous* to “Shorten sail and prepare for bad weather,” the *Princess Royal* was one of the first to manifest signs of obedience. She was at the time under every stitch of canvas she could spread, not because she was a sluggish sailer, for she was the reverse of that, but because, there being a flat calm, it mattered not how much or how little canvas was set, it could make no possible difference in the movements or position of the vessel; and the captain, seeing here a fine opportunity to impose upon his crew—“by way of punishment,” as he put it to himself and his officers—a great deal of unnecessary work, ordered all sail, even to the studding-sails, to be set, for the purpose, as he averred, of giving them an airing.

The first thing to be done in the way of shortening sail, therefore, was to take in the studding-sails, which the crew, not being then aware of the danger which threatened the ship, proceeded to do in a very leisurely and deliberate fashion. Their next task was to haul down the smaller staysails, then to clew up and furl royals and topgallantsails. They were all aloft, in the act of stowing these sails, when the hurricane burst upon them. They fortunately saw its approach in time to save themselves, and, leaving the canvas drooping loose from the yards, hurriedly descended to the deck by way of the backstays, and were scarcely there when, with the first furious rush of the wind, the three topmasts went, one after the other in quick succession, the wreckage falling on deck and lumbering it fore and aft.

The crew regarded the mishap with stolid satisfaction. The delay which it would occasion in the prosecution of the voyage was nothing to them; the ship was stripped of everything above her lower mastheads, leaving so much the less canvas for her crew to handle, and that was all they cared about at the moment. A little later on in the day they saw that if the gale lasted—of which there was every prospect—the loss of her spars would result in her separation from the remainder of the fleet, and as they remarked upon this to each other, the men smiled grimly, and exchanged certain short pithy remarks which, had they been heard by the occupants of the saloon, would have produced a feeling of grave uneasiness.

The crew were, of course, at once set to work to clear away the wreck, and this they forthwith proceeded to do, for their own sakes, however, rather than out of respect to the captain’s orders, the heavy spars dashing about the deck with the roll of the ship in a manner which made it positively dangerous to be there at all.

By nightfall the rest of the fleet had passed out of sight to the eastward, scattered like chaff before the angry breath

of the hurricane, and the *Princess Royal* was left to fight out her battle alone. By dint of almost superhuman exertions, the shattered spars had been secured, the main-sail cut away from the yard, and such other dispositions made as would allow of her being kept dead before the wind, and out of the trough of the sea during the coming night; and when the captain took his seat at the head of the saloon-table at dinner that evening, he was full of boastful exultation over the prompt obedience of his crew, frequently congratulating his passengers upon their being on board a ship in charge of such capable officers as himself and his mates. Of course he did not actually say this in so many words, but the burden of his remarks amounted to it, and nothing less.

The second mate had the middle watch on that eventful night, and just after he had struck four bells, and the wheel had been relieved, he was inexpressibly scandalised by hearing above the howling of the gale loud sounds of singing and jocularities on the fore-castle.

Such sounds were of so very unusual a character on board the *Princess Royal* that, coupled with the circumstance of their being uttered in the middle watch of all times in the world, he was at first so astonished as to be quite unable to believe his own ears. Very soon, however, they were repeated, one of the men actually breaking into a rollicking song, the burden of which was an invocation to "Let us all be jolly, boys," under every conceivable combination of circumstances.

"Jolly! The scoundrels! How dare they so much as think of such a thing at a time when they were living under the ban of their officers' severe displeasure? And the ship a perfect wreck aloft, too!" It was simply monstrous; the second mate's righteous anger blazed up into full fury at once, and, advancing to the break of the poop, he roared out in stentorian tones—

"Silence, there, for'ard! What do you mean, you unmannerly swabs, by disturbing the ship fore and aft with your infernal howling at this time of night?"

Either the "unmannerly swabs" had not heard him, or they were so utterly lost to all sense of the respect due to their officer as to pay no attention to his polite adjuration, for the song was continued, with some attempt at a chorus.

The second mate was not in the habit of speaking twice to those under him, and he did not attempt to do so now. Drawing his knotted "colt" out of his pocket, he descended the poop-ladder, and hurried forward as fast as the heavy rolling of the ship would permit, determined to teach the "howling thieves" a lesson they would not readily forget.

Meanwhile, though he was blissfully ignorant of the fact, sharp eyes had been watching his motions for some time; and his foot was scarcely on the top step of the poop-ladder when Jim Martin, the owner of a pair of the aforesaid sharp eyes, exclaimed—

"Hurrah, my bullies! Keep it up; here he comes. The shark has bolted the bait without so much as smelling at it."

The group of men clustered on the fore-castle made a slight restless movement, as men sometimes will when they are conscious of the approach of a great crisis in their lives, and the voice of the singer quavered the merest trifle. Another moment, and the second mate was among them, his eyes flashing with anger and his colt uplifted to strike.

"What the deuce?"

Before he could utter another word, his legs were cut from under him by the sweeping blow of a handspike, and he fell with a crash to the deck, the back of his head striking so violently on the planking as to momentarily stun him. In an instant a belaying-pin was thrust between his teeth and secured there with a lashing of spun-yarn; and then, before he had sufficiently recovered to realise his position, he was turned over on his face, his arms drawn behind him, and his wrists and ankles firmly lashed together.

"Very neatly managed," remarked Talbot approvingly, as his gaze rested on the prostrate figure on the deck. "Now, mates, what's the next move? Come, Ned," to the boatswain, "you're to be our new skipper, you know; give us your orders, cap'n, and we'll be 'yours obejently.'"

"Well, then, if you're all agreed upon that, shipmates, my first order is for one of you—you Tom—to go aft into the saloon and knock at the 'old man's' door (Note 1), and ask him to come on deck at once, as Mr Thomson have met with a haccident. Two more of you'll wait for him outside the door, and when he steps out 'pon deck sarve him the same as you've sarved our respected friend here. Then do the same with Mr Nicholls (the chief mate)."

These orders were so skilfully executed, that in a quarter of an hour the mutineers had the captain and his two *aides* prisoners—bound and helpless in their hands, without the slightest alarm having been given to the other occupants of the saloon. The larboard watch was then called; and from their first eager questions when aroused it became evident that the seizure of the ship was a carefully planned affair, of which all in the fore-castle were fully cognisant.

The seamen having paraded on deck, and been, with the aid of a lantern, carefully inspected by the boatswain to ascertain that there were no recreant spirits among them now that the crisis had arrived, each man—excepting a half-dozen left in charge of the deck—was provided with a short length of well-stretched ratline, carrying which, they proceeded in a body to the saloon, and, entering the state-rooms, surprised in their sleep and secured without difficulty the whole of the male passengers, pinioned them firmly, and then, after depriving them of such weapons as they happened to possess, locked them up in their own cabins. The ladies were only disturbed so far as was necessary to make them acquainted with the fact that the ship had changed hands, and that, if they had only the good sense to acquiesce in the arrangement, they would be perfectly unmolested. The cook and stewards were also called, and, having been left in ignorance of the proposed mutiny lest they should inadvertently let the secret slip, addressed in somewhat similar terms; whereupon they at once declared their readiness to throw in their lot with the mutineers, and were forthwith sworn in.

Note 1. The master of a merchant-ship is frequently spoken of by his crew as "the old man," whether his years happen to be few or many.

Lieutenant Walford finds himself in an exceedingly unpleasant Position.

On the morning following the seizure of the *Princess Royal* by her misguided crew, the day broke tardily, revealing to the mutineers a wild, threatening sky, a high and increasing sea, the curling foam-crests of which raced after the ship menacingly, and an unbroken horizon all round. Not a solitary sail of any description was visible; they were alone, at the mercy of the towering mountain-surges, and of the gale which howled deafeningly past them. The sight which on that morning presented itself from the poop of the crippled ship was one to make the stoutest heart quail, to impress the onlooker with an overpowering sense of his own insignificance compared with Him who holds the ocean in the hollow of His hand, and of the blasphemous arrogance of those who would presume to take upon themselves one of the functions of the Almighty, and, in the blindness of their anger, attempt to mete out to their fellow-men that justice which it is His alone to repay.

Yet no such idea presented itself to the mutineers; or, if it did, each man was careful to conceal it from all the rest. They had been systematically down-trodden and ill-treated from the commencement of the voyage; their lives had been made a burden to them; and now—having at last been provoked into the throwing off of their yoke of insupportable bondage—they thirsted for revenge upon the authors of their miseries.

As might be expected, the whole internal economy of the ship was upset from the moment that she fell into the hands of the mutineers. Their first act, on the morning in question, was to transfer the male passengers from the cabin to the fore-castle, and to remove their own belongings aft into the state-rooms thus rendered vacant. The ladies, of whom, fortunately, there were only half a dozen on board, were permitted for the present to retain possession of their state-rooms, being given to understand, however, that it was only upon the express condition that they were to make no attempt whatever to meddle with the arrangements of the mutineers, nor to communicate in any way with the male passengers confined in the fore-castle.

These arrangements completed, Rogers ordered the steward to prepare and serve to the mutineers in the saloon the best breakfast that the resources of the ship would allow; the passengers in the fore-castle to be served with such a meal as ordinarily fell to the lot of the seamen; while the deposed captain and the two mates were to be left entirely without food of any kind. These orders were carried out to the letter; the unfortunate ladies being compelled to take their seats as usual at the breakfast table, and share the meal of the mutineers.

This being over, the table was cleared; spirits and tobacco were called for, and Rogers, from his seat at the head of the saloon-table, gave orders that the captain and the two mates should be brought aft, and put upon their trial before a court of the whole crew.

"There's one more as I votes we try at the same time, and that's the sodger-officer as got poor Dicky Rudd his flogging," observed one of the men.

"Very well," assented Rogers, "bring him along, too, mates; I intended to take him by hisself, but it don't matter; bring the whole four of 'em."

In a few minutes Captain Arnold, Nicholls the chief mate, and Thomson the second mate, with Lieutenant Walford, were ushered into the saloon, handcuffed, and guarded by eight armed mutineers.

"The prisoners is before the court," announced Talbot, in a loud voice, anxious to make the proceedings partake as much of the character of a ceremonial as possible.

The four men were then ordered to range themselves in line at the foot of the table, an order which, after a little hesitation, they sullenly obeyed.

Meanwhile, the mutineers, having been served with tobacco and brandy, had lighted their pipes and provided themselves, each man, with a stiff rummer of grog. A cursory observer would possibly have thought the scene grotesque; but the four men ranged at the foot of the table speedily detected in the countenances of their self-constituted judges, an expression of stern determination which caused their hearts to sink and their cheeks to blanch with sudden fear.

A low-toned consultation now ensued between Rogers and those nearest him, in which Talbot was summoned to take part. At its conclusion the latter withdrew a little apart, and Rogers, turning to the captain, said—

"Robert Arnold, yours is the first case. Who is the prosecutor?"

"I am," answered Talbot, "on behalf of the whole crew."

"Very good," acquiesced Rogers. "Benjamin Talbot, state y'ur case."

Upon this, Talbot stepped up to the cabin-table and said—

"On behalf of the whole crew of this here ship—the *Princess Royal*—I charges Robert Arnold, late skipper of the same, with havin' treated all hands before the mast in a most onjustifiable manner. As you're fully aweer, shipmates, we was short-handed when we left London; and at Plymouth the men-o'-war robbed us of four of our best hands, makin' us more short-handed still. Very well. Now what's the dooty of a skipper to his crew under such sarcumstances as this here? Why, I say his dooty is to make things as easy as possible for 'em. Instead o' which this here Robert Arnold, the prisoner as we're tryin', he goes and expects us to do as much work, and to do it as smartly, as if the ship was fully manned. And because we couldn't do it—as it stands to reason we couldn't—he goes and makes *extra* work for us by way of punishment; he robs us of our a'ternoon watch below; he stops our grog; he tyrannises over us in every imaginable way; he treats us like dogs and not like men, abusin' and bullyin' us, and goin' out of his way to hurt our feelin's; he refuses to listen to our just complaints; he encourages the first and second mates to sarve out to us the same sort of treatment as he gives us hisself, instead of takin' our part and treatin' us with justice; and he does all this not once in a way only, but from the very commencement of the v'yage. And, lastly, he orders a sick man to be flogged; laughs at the poor chap's sufferin's; and refuses to sarve out the necessaries to dress his wounds a'terwards. That, shipmates, is the charge I brings against Robert Arnold."

"You hears the charge agin the prisoner, shipmates all?" observed Rogers, glancing round the table. "Ben Talbot brings this here charge in the name of all hands; so, if there's any of yer as disagrees with what he've said, just stand up like men and say so."

A profound silence followed, no man making the slightest sign or token of dissent. "Very well," resumed Rogers; "nobody don't seem to have anything to say agin the charge. Now, you that *agrees* with Talbot, and thinks as he've stated the case fairly, hold up y'ur hands."

Every hand was at once and unhesitatingly raised at arm's length.

"Unanermous," pronounced Rogers. "Now, Robert Arnold, you've heard what's been charged agin yer, and you've seen that all hands of us agrees that the charge is just. What have yer got to say in y'ur defence?"

"Nothing," answered the captain; "except that I utterly disclaim your right to sit in judgment upon me or to criticise my actions in any manner whatsoever. Your conduct is in the last degree illegal and unjustifiable. You are a pack of mutinous scoundrels; and I warn you that a terrible punishment will surely overtake you if you persist in your defiance of my authority. If, however, you will return to your duty and deliver up to us, your duly appointed officers, the ringleaders in this disgraceful mutiny, I will undertake to overlook this most serious offence, so far as the rest of you are concerned."

"You hear what the prisoner says, shipmates," observed Rogers calmly. "Do you consider as he've made good his defence? Is it your opinion as he've justified hisself? Them as thinks he have, hold up their hands. Them as thinks he haven't, stand up."

The self-constituted judges with one accord rose to their feet.

"That'll do; you may sit down agin," remarked Rogers. "The prisoner is found *guilty*. The next question to be settled is the matter of punishment. Now, there's a many ways of punishing a man, some on 'em more severe than others. The most severest as I knows is *death*; death by hangin' from the yard-arm. Them as thinks the prisoner Arnold deservin' of this punishment, hold up their hands."

Two or three hands were hesitatingly raised, and, after a slight pause, lowered again.

"Do I understand as *everybody* thinks hangin' too severe?" inquired Rogers, glancing slowly round the table. "I do,"—as no hands were shown. "Well then, let's try something else. Perhaps, shipmates, some of yer's got a hidee as you'd like to put afore the court? If so, let's hear what it is."

"I thinks as it would be no more nor he deserves if we was to treat him for the rest of the v'yage as he've treated us from the beginnin' of it. He'd know then what it's like, and if he lives long enough to get the command of another ship, maybe he'll then know better how to treat his crew," observed one of the men.

"Not at all a bad idee," commented Rogers. "You've heard what Phil says; what d'ye think on't?"

"I thinks it's a capical notion," remarked one.

"I'm agreeable," intimated another.

"Ay; let's see how he likes that sort of thing hisself," remarked a third.

And so on; all hands intimating their concurrence in the suggestion.

"Wery good," remarked Rogers, when all had spoken. Then, turning to the captain, he said—

"Robert Arnold, the sentence of this here court is that you'm to be turned for'ard and converted into a 'hordinary seaman,' to do a hordinary seaman's dooties, and to receive just exactly the same treatment as you've sarved out to the hands since this here ship sailed from Hold England, namely, more kicks than ha'pence. And the Lord have mercy on yer miserable carcasse!"

He paused for a moment on concluding this—in his opinion—impressive address, and then ordered that Arnold should be removed to the forecabin, and the chief mate brought forward.

This was done, and as Nicholls, the chief mate, stepped forward in answer to his name, his ashy pale face, his trepidation of manner, and his imperfect articulation all showed him to be labouring under a very agony of fear.

The charge against him was also preferred by Talbot in pretty much the same language as was used by that individual in his charge against the captain; the accusation in the present case, however, being to the effect that Nicholls, occupying as he did the influential post of chief mate, had, instead of using his influence with the captain to make matters as agreeable as possible for the men, countenanced, aided, abetted, and encouraged his superior in the adoption of a harsh and tyrannical course of conduct. Upon this charge he was found guilty; and his sentence was similar to that of the captain's, with the addition that he was to receive at the gangway twenty-five lashes, well laid on.

Thomson, the second mate, was now called forward; and the yell of fiendish delight which greeted him as the bully staggered up to the cabin-table, fairly caused his teeth to chatter with affright.

The charge against him was made by Talbot, who plunged eagerly into his task with a manifest gusto which had been well suppressed in the previous cases. The indictment was very similar to that preferred against Nicholls; but, in addition to all that the latter had been charged with, Talbot rapidly enumerated a long list of wanton cruelties and petty tyrannies which had sprung spontaneously and unprompted as it were from the second mate's own evil nature. At the conclusion of Talbot's address the men, without waiting for Rogers to formally charge them, sprang eagerly to their feet and clamorously declared the prisoner guilty.

The question of punishment was then referred to by Rogers; and the moment that he ceased to speak, the shout of "Death! Death! Hanging from the yard-arm," rang through the cabin. "And let him have five dozen at the gangway before he's strung up, just by way of payin' off Dicky Rudd's debt with interest," added a voice. The suggestion was carried by acclamation; and the miserable man was informed that the sentence against him would be carried into effect at the conclusion of the trial of the fourth prisoner, Lieutenant Walford, who was now commanded to stand forward.

Walford stepped up to the cabin-table with an assumption of firmness which was completely belied by the ghastly

pallor of his countenance and the convulsive twitching of his white lips. Grasping the table with both hands, he said in a voice which he in vain attempted to render steady—

“Before you proceed any further in this matter I wish to remind you that I am merely a *passenger* on board this ship, and that I have nothing whatever to do with any quarrel which may exist between you and your officers. I have heard the charges which you have preferred against them, and I am wholly at a loss to understand in what way you associate me with them; you can scarcely suppose, I imagine, that the passengers would regard themselves as called upon to interfere in the management or discipline of the ship; for my own part, I have always considered you quite able to manage your own affairs, and quite capable of putting a stop to any injustice to which you might be subjected; you never appealed to me for help, and you therefore ought not to be surprised if I have held aloof.”

He paused here for a moment and glanced anxiously round the table to note the effect of his address, and seeing, by the stern expression on the faces of the men seated at the table, that he had wholly failed to make a favourable impression, he hastily proceeded to add—

“Furthermore, let me remind you that I am an officer and a gentleman, the wearer of his Most Gracious Majesty’s uniform, and in virtue of that fact I may claim—I *do* claim—to be in some sort his Majesty’s representative, on board this ship. Any violence or indignity offered to me, therefore, is tantamount to offering the same to the king himself; and, as you are all fully aware, to offer indignity or violence to the king’s person is high treason, a crime punishable with death. I hope, therefore, that you will pause and consider well the consequences of any hasty action which your present temporary assumption of power might betray you into, and that, before it is too late, and before you have too deeply inculcated yourselves, you will see the advisability of restoring to me my freedom.”

If he expected this appeal to be of any benefit to him he was sorely disappointed, for the gloomy, repellent expression on the faces of his judges, was only deepened by his ill-advised address.

A moment or two of complete silence followed the utterance of his closing words; and then Rogers, looking him straight in the face, said—

“Well, pris’ner, have yer quite finished?”

“Surely I have said sufficient to demonstrate to you the impolicy, as well as the injustice, of making me suffer for the faults of others?” exclaimed Walford.

“Glad you think so,” replied Rogers, with a sardonic grin. “Howsoever,” he continued, “you may keep y’ur mind easy about one thing; we ain’t goin’ to make yer ‘suffer for the faults of others,’ as you calls it; you’ll only be made to suffer for faults of y’ur own; and bad enough you’ll find that, I reckon. Now, Ben, what’s the charge agin this one?”

“I charges him,” answered Talbot, “with havin’ wilfully spoke the words what got poor Dicky Rudd two dozen lashes at the gangway, when the poor feller was ‘most too sick to stand upright. If he hadn’t spoke as likely as not the skipper had never ha’ thought of it, and, so far as that goes, I believes that all hands of us is agreed that he wouldn’t. Therefore I charges this here pris’ner with bein’ the man what acshully got poor Dicky his floggin’.”

“You hears, pris’ner, what the crew has against yer; what have yer got to say to it?” interrogated Rogers.

Walford had evidently either forgotten all about his ill-advised suggestion, or had believed the crew to be ignorant of it: he seemed to have thought that the utmost extent of the mutineers’ complaint against him would be that he had not interfered in their behalf. When therefore he heard the charge against him, and realised the fact that he was wholly in their power, and utterly at their mercy, his courage—which at the best of times was only of a very flimsy and unreliable character—utterly gave way; he involuntarily turned his eyes for a moment upon the miserable second mate; recalled the fact that the wretched man had been doomed to a speedy and degrading death by the same individuals who were now sitting in judgment upon him; and a shameful panic took possession of him. An uncontrollable shivering fit seized his frame, he was obliged to clench his teeth together, to prevent them from chattering audibly; he glanced wildly round him as if seeking for some means of escape; and, after two or three ineffectual efforts to speak, he managed to gasp out brokenly through his clenched teeth and quivering lips—

“I—I—I give you—my—my sacred word of honour, gen-gentlemen, that I was o-only in—jest. I nev-never believed for a—a moment that Cap-t-tain Arnold would t-take my remark seriously, or I as-sure you I would n-n-ever have uttered it. And besides, I re-really believed that your—friend R-R-udd was—was only sh-h—er—ah—I beg your pardon gentlemen, I sc-scarcely know what I am saying, but—oh, gentlemen I don’t be hard upon me—have mercy upon me, for God’s sake! Spare my life, and you may do with me what you will.”

He ceased, from sheer physical inability to utter another word, and, sinking upon his knees, stretched forth his quaking hands in a mute appeal for mercy.

This disgraceful exhibition of cowardice was *almost* successful in winning for Walford an ignominious release. The mutineers were so unutterably disgusted that, for a moment, their impulse was to kick him out of the cabin like a craven hound and henceforward ignore his existence. But this impulse lasted only for a moment; they recalled to mind the insolent arrogance with which this same cowering creature had treated them when he deemed himself secure from retaliation; and they determined that, while his miserable life was not worth the taking, he should still receive so salutary a lesson as should effectually deter him from any repetition of the offence for the remainder of his life.

“Well, shipmates,” exclaimed Rogers, breaking the painful silence which had followed Walford’s shameful appeal, “what d’ye think? Is the pris’ner guilty or not guilty?”

“*Guilty!*” was the unanimous declaration of the assembly.

“Guilty? In course he is. And what’s the punishment to be? Death?”

“Oh, no! Not death—not death, gentlemen. For the love of God, spare my life; I am not fit to die; I am not indeed. You see how young a man I am; why, I have never yet thought about dying. Mercy! mercy!” shrieked the miserable wretch as he grovelled on his knees before them, and sought to clasp the knees of the man nearest him—an attempt which was repulsed with an oath, a look of unutterable loathing, a kick, and a brutal blow on the mouth.

"Come, lads, speak up," urged Rogers, wholly unmoved by the interruption, "say what the punishment's to be, and let's have done with it. I'm sick of this here, I am."

"Well," said Talbot, stepping forward, "I wotes that the prisoner be first made to go and axe poor Dicky's pardon. If he can't get it, why, let's string him up at the yard-arm to balance t'other one. But if Dicky likes to forgi'e him, well, we'll spare his life and redooce his punishment to two dozen at the gangway—same as he got for Rudd—and make him do Rudd's dooty 'til the poor chap's better; arter which the prisoner can be set to do all the dirty work o' the ship. How's that, shipmates?"

"Ay, ay, Ben; that'll do, bo', that'll do fust-rate. And he may thank his lucky stars at bein' let off so precious easy," was Rogers' reply; in which the remainder of the men laughingly acquiesced.

"Then you'd better step this way at once, young feller," remarked Talbot to the miserable Walford, "and see what you can do with poor Dicky. If he won't forgive yer, mind, it's all up with yer."

So saying he opened the door of the state-room in which Rudd was lying, thrust his victim into the apartment, and closed the door upon him.

The state-room into which Walford was thus unceremoniously ushered was divided from the saloon by a bulkhead with a door in it, the upper panel of which was fitted with sloping slats like those of the Venetian window-blinds of the present day; it was perfectly easy, therefore, for an occupant of the state-room to hear all that passed in the saloon, and *vice versa*. As a matter of fact, Rudd, who was lying in his berth, broad awake, *had* heard every word uttered during the course of the trial, and shrewdly suspecting that his shipmates were more anxious to thoroughly frighten than to actually hurt their fourth prisoner, and having, moreover, a trifling personal grudge against the man who had secured for him his flogging, he determined to have a little amusement at Walford's expense before according to him the pardon which he knew his shipmates expected of him. When, therefore, Walford staggered up to the side of the berth, and began eagerly and incoherently to stammer forth the most abject apologies and the wildest prayers for forgiveness, Rudd simply growled forth an oath and impatiently flung himself over in the berth with his back to the petitioner. This had the intended effect of causing Walford's apologies and prayers to be reiterated with increased eagerness and incoherence, to the hearty amusement of the men in the saloon.

At length Talbot opened the state-room door, and, thrusting in his head, said roughly—

"Here, come out of that, mister; you've worried poor Dicky quite long enough. If he won't forgive yer, why, he *won't*, and that settles it. You've had a fair chance to see what you could do with him, and you've failed; we decided to give yer a quarter of an hour, and the time's up; so out you comes; d'ye hear?"

The next moment Walford was seized by the collar, and was being dragged roughly enough out of the state-room, when Rudd, pretending to relent, called out—

"There, take him away, Ben; but don't be too hard on him; I forgives him just this once, and I hopes he won't never do it again."

Walford, upon hearing these words, which seemed to him a reprieve from the very jaws of death, broke away from Talbot's grasp, and, rushing back to the side of the berth, seized Rudd's hand, kissed it wildly, and burst into an uncontrollable passion of tears, in the midst of which he was hustled unceremoniously out on deck.

Chapter Eight.

A Double Tragedy.

A moment or two in the open air sufficed to settle in some measure Walford's disordered faculties and to restore to him his reason, of which he had been pretty nearly bereft by the terror of the preceding half-hour.

He found himself in the midst of the—by this time—more than half-intoxicated seamen, none of whom appeared to be paying much attention to him, for they were all talking loudly together, discussing and arranging the details of the punishment of those whom they chose to regard as the two chief offenders.

The men were all greatly excited by the potations in which they had freely indulged during the mockery of a trial in the saloon, and their differences of opinion on some points were so strong that at one moment the proceedings seemed more than likely to be diversified by a pitched battle. Rogers, however, whose head seemed capable of resisting the effects of almost any amount of liquor, interposed between the belligerents, and by a determined exercise of his newly-acquired authority, and by most frightful threats of the chastisement which he personally would inflict on the first man who ventured to disobey him, succeeded at length in restoring some semblance of order. This achieved, he ordered a grating to be rigged in the larboard gangway, and that, when this was done, the chief mate should be seized thereto.

His orders were speedily carried out; and when the man Nicholls, stripped to the waist, was firmly lashed to the grating in readiness to receive his punishment, Rogers ordered that the second mate should be brought to him.

The miserable Thomson was thereupon led before him, and a more wretched spectacle than this man presented it would be difficult to find. His old blustering, bullying, overbearing manner had completely deserted him; the fear of death was upon him; and he shivered like a man in an ague-fit.

"You Thomson," said Rogers, addressing him in a calm matter-of-fact tone of voice, as if what he was about to say had reference only to some trifling everyday affair, "you was present at the trial of that man Nicholls as stands seized up to yonder grating, and you knows the punishment as it was decided for to give him. It was five and twenty lashes, well laid on; you hears that, *well laid on*. Wery good. Now, this here same man Nicholls, it seems to me, is in a sort o' way to blame for getting *you* into your trouble. If he'd been a proper sort of man, understandin' that he owed a dooty to the *crew* as well as to the owners of the ship, instead of encouraging you in your goin's-on agin us, he'd have took you o' one side, and he'd ha' said to you, 'Look here, Thomson, my good feller, you mustn't be too hard upon them poor sailor-men for'ard; you knows as they don't muster a full-handed crew, and so it don't stand to reason as they can do so much as if they *was* full-handed; they're a decent enough willin' lot of men, and we mustn't axe too much from 'em. Just keep that

in mind, and make things as easy as you can for 'em.' If he'd been a proper sort of man, I say, he'd have said some'at of that sort to you, now wouldn't he? And you'd have listened to him, and then you wouldn't have been in this here precious scrape as you're in now, would you?"

"You're right, Rogers; I should not," eagerly exclaimed Thomson, his eyes lighting up with a gleam of fresh hope, as he thought he detected in the boatswain's speech some signs of relenting. "If Mr Nicholls had only put the matter to me as you have just now put it, I should never have given a single man of you the slightest reason for complaint against me. But he never did anything of the kind; on the contrary, both he and Captain Arnold encouraged me to believe you an idle, worthless lot of scamps, and to treat you as such. And that is the plain, simple truth, I swear it."

"Wery good," commented Rogers. "Then, you see, Thomson, you and us thinks alike, namely, that Nicholls in a kind of a sort of a way led you into this here miserable scrape. That bein' the case, we thinks it'll be only fair if *you* gives him the twenty-five lashes—*well laid on*—that the court have condemned him to receive."

Thomson looked eagerly into the face of the boatswain, hoping that in this proposal he saw a commutation of his death-sentence. Rogers returned the gaze with a look of grim satisfaction, which the second mate mistook for a half-drunken leer of benevolence; and, anxious above all things to propitiate this man, who undoubtedly held the power of life and death in his hands, he excitedly exclaimed—

"I'll do it! Give me the cat, and you shall have *no* cause to complain of the way in which I will execute your sentence."

"All right; that's a bargain," agreed Rogers. Then, turning to the rest of the mutineers, he ordered them to fetch all hands on deck to witness punishment, "All hands exceptin' the ladies, I mean; they'd be shocked at the sight, pretty dears, and we must take care as they don't see nor hear nothin' as'd shock 'em, sweet, delicate creeturs," he added with a contemptuous laugh, which was echoed by his comrades as they staggered forward to drag the male passengers on deck.

In a few minutes these were all mustered, Walford contriving, seemingly without attracting attention, to mingle with them and take up an unobtrusive position, from which he intended, if possible, to quietly effect a retreat at the first convenient opportunity.

When all was at length ready, the scene which presented itself was a sufficiently curious one.

The chief object of the picture was, of course, the figure of the unhappy chief mate, who, naked to the waist, stood firmly lashed to the grating, with arms and legs wide spread in the orthodox attitude of a man about to be flogged. Opposite him, and some four or five feet distant, stood Thomson, his coat and vest laid aside, his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows, and the cat in his hand, with the knotted tails prone upon the deck. Around these two figures, in a compact ring, stood the gentlemen passengers and the captain of the ship, a group of unwilling spectators of the outrage about to be inflicted; whilst outside them again, and completely hemming them in beyond all possibility of escape, crowded the half-drunken mutineers, armed to the teeth, and bandying brutal and obscene jests back and forth. Then there was the huge bulk of the disabled ship, surging madly forward like a hunted creature dizzy and reeling with terror, her spacious decks knee-deep in the water which was incessantly pouring in over her bulwarks as she rolled gunwale-under; and for a background the mountainous seas careering swiftly past, with their lofty crests towering high and menacingly all round the ship, and the leaden-hued, stormy sky.

The deep and painful silence which prevailed was broken by Rogers' harsh voice remarking—

"Now, Thomson, you knows your dooty, which is to give the pris'ner on the gratin' five and twenty lashes, *well laid on*. So go ahead, my man, and let's see if you can't make him yell a bit louder than you did poor Dicky Rudd."

Thomson glanced at the speaker and nodded. The hope which he entertained of an eventual escape from death had thrown him into a state of terrible excitement, bordering almost upon madness; his ghastly pallor had vanished, and was now superseded by a deep purplish tinge, resulting from the violent rush of blood to the head; the veins upon his forehead stood out like cords, his eyes glowed like those of a wild animal, and his jaws were flecked with foam streaked with blood, which trickled from a wound in his lower lip, where in his terrible excitement he had unconsciously bitten it through.

This frenzied creature nodded his comprehension of Rogers' command, and, gathering himself up like an animal about to make a spring, he drew the tails of the cat slowly through his closed left hand, measured his distance carefully, and, making a quick bound forward, brought the nine knotted lashes down upon the mate's naked shoulders with a demoniac strength which seemed to literally bury them in the quivering flesh. The mate responded to this with a sharp yell, which was greeted by the mutineers with mocking laughter, Rogers remarking to Thomson that, "That was pretty well; but, you know, you can do a deal better'n that." The second stroke—but why go further with the description of the sickening scene? Let it suffice to say that when the inanimate body of the mate was cast loose from the grating, it bore the appearance of having been mangled by the teeth and claws of some savage beast rather than by a human being.

"So far, so good," observed Rogers. "That ends act the first. Now, Thomson, it's your turn, you know. Strip, my boy, without makin' any bones about it; and let's see if you can take y'ur punishment any better'n your superior hossifer."

The man spoke in a rallying tone of such geniality that Thomson grew more sanguine than ever as to the remission of the more serious part of his sentence, and, with a ghastly grin in response to Rogers' patronising smile, he began to slowly strip. He even, after drawing his shirt over his head, summoned the courage to walk up to the grating, and, leaning his body upon it, to spontaneously stretch out his arms and legs to the proper position.

When the wretched man was securely "spread-eagled" on the grating, Talbot and another man were ordered to step forward and administer the flogging, which they did, relieving each other at the completion of every dozen lashes, until the entire fifty had been inflicted. The punishment was terribly severe; but the intense excitement under which the second mate laboured enabled him to retain his consciousness throughout, and even to stand without assistance on being cast loose. A stiff "reviver" of grog was administered to him by Rogers' order, and he was then told to dress himself.

The critical moment was now at hand when the miserable Thomson's state of torturing suspense was to cease, when he would know for certain whether these men were actually relentless, or whether, having already wreaked an ample vengeance upon him, they would be content to ignore the remainder of his sentence; which, after all, he was more than half-inclined to believe was nothing but a cruel hoax, arranged beforehand for the purpose of giving him a good fright.

Hopeful as he was, however, upon this score, he could not help feeling terribly anxious; and it was with the utmost difficulty that he controlled his quaking nerves sufficiently to replace his clothing without assistance. During the time that he was thus engaged, the circle which hemmed him in was maintained unbroken; the mutineers watching his motions with strong interest, and indulging freely in jocular comments and jeering encouragement as he winced and shrank at the chafe of his clothing on his lacerated back and shoulders.

At length he stood once more before them, fully clothed, his eyes glowing like carbuncles, his visage blanched, and his whole frame quivering with pain and the tensivity of excitement and suspense.

"Wery good, Thomson; wery good indeed," remarked Rogers approvingly; "you've showed a great deal more pluck than any of us have ever give you credit for—so far. If you only behaves as well for the next ten minutes, we shall feel quite a respect' for y'ur mem'ry. Now, shipmates, and pris'ners all, for'ard we goes, to carry out the second part of the sentence."

At the word, two of the mutineers stepped forward, and, placing themselves one on each side of the second mate, linked their arms in his and led him forward, halting him just beneath the fore-yard; the remainder of the crowd following in a body and forming in a circle round him as before. Then, at Rogers' command, one of the mutineers separated himself from the main body, and in the course of a minute or two was seen leisurely ascending the fore-rigging with a tail-block in one hand and the end of a coil of light line in the other.

Thomson glanced upward at this man, and like a lightning-stroke the conviction flashed upon him that his doom *was* indeed sealed—that the death-sentence passed upon him was no grim and ghastly piece of jocularly, no hoax practised upon him to test his courage, but that it was spoken in cruel and bitter earnest. For a second or two his heart stood still, his head swam, his sight failed him, and a feeling of horrible nausea oppressed him. He realised at last that he was about to die; that, standing there on that reeling deck as he did in the full strength and prime of lusty manhood, with all his energies mental and physical at their best, the sands of his life had so nearly run out that the few last grains were even now falling in the hour-glass of his fate. Then, in a single instant, the whole of his past life rose up before him, with every thought, word, and deed clearly and sharply reproduced. And, as it did so, the present world and all its concerns, its petty aspirations, ambitions, hopes, and strivings, dwindled away into the most contemptible insignificance; his mental vision cleared; he saw how full had been his life of great and noble possibilities—as are the lives of all of us, would we but allow ourselves to see that it is so—and he saw, too, how completely he had missed his mark; how very far his own evil passions had led him astray from the narrow and seldom-trodden path which, faithfully followed, leads to that highest possible attainment of humanity—True Goodness.

Ah! how bitterly he repented him then of all his lost, or rather his cast-away, opportunities. From his earliest youth he had chosen to follow evil rather than good; he had turned persistently away from the right; and now there was neither time nor opportunity left him for reparation. The utter blankness and uselessness of his life stood revealed to him as one long, unbroken, unanswerable accusation; and, in his mad despair, he suddenly dashed aside the two men who held him in their custody, sprang with a single bound to the rail, and, placing his hands upon the top of the topgallant-bulwark, vaulted clear over it before a single hand could be outstretched to restrain him, and with a yell which evermore rang in the ears of those who heard it, threw up his hands and vanished for ever into the dark and terrible depths of his ocean-grave.

The little crowd of spectators stood for a few moments silent and almost stupefied at this sudden and tragic disappearance of the second mate from their midst. The occurrence was so totally unexpected that it in a measure sobered the mutineers, who regarded each other with some such expression as that of a group of school-boys terrified at the sudden occurrence of some disaster, the result of their own mischievous acts, and each anxious to shift the blame and responsibility from his own shoulders to those of the others.

The first to recover his self-possession was Rogers, who exclaimed with an obviously forced laugh—

"Well, curse me if that ain't a good un! What, in the name of all that's foolish, made the man do that? He might ha' *known* as we was only goin' to frighten him a bit. You'll bear me out, shipmates, that we was all agreed to go no further than the frightenin' of him a bit, and meant to let him off arter we'd made fast the rope, and let him stand with it round his neck a minute or two. Now, ain't them there the facts o' the case?"

"Ay, ay, Ned; you're right, bo'; that's just exactly how't was," was the reply.

"Nevertheless," answered Captain Arnold sternly, "you are as much murderers, every one of you, as if you had hanged the man—as you seemed about to do—or had taken him up and flung him over the side with your own hands. You *drove* him to his death; his blood is upon your hands; and you will individually be called upon to answer for your accursed deed, if not in this world, certainly in the next."

The men cowered like whipped hounds before the captain's denunciation, which they knew in their inmost souls to be just; for an instant they stood appalled before the awful conviction that they were indeed *murderers*, none the less guilty because their crime was unintentional; and, but for the swift intervention of Rogers, they would there and then, in their horror and remorse, have yielded up possession of the ship, and returned to their duty. But the boatswain, taking in at a glance the critical state of affairs, and fully realising his own perilous position as the ring-leader in the mutiny, rallied his men by exclaiming—

"There now, belay all that, you Arnold; we wants none of *your* preachin', and, what's more, we won't have it. And, shipmates, don't you take no notice of what he says; we never *meant* to take the second mate's life; we'd ha' stopped him from drownin' hisself if we could; and so it's just all gammon to talk about our bein' his—his—murderers. Now march the pris'ners down into the fo'c's'le again; clap the bilboes on 'em; shut down the scuttle upon 'em; and then come aft into the cabin, all hands, and we'll 'freshen the nip.'"

This proposal to "freshen the nip"—or take another glass or two of grog—was eagerly welcomed by the mutineers, who felt that they *must* have something to dispel those qualms of conscience which so greatly disturbed them; and in another quarter of an hour they were all—with the exception of two men at the wheel and one on the poop, who was supposed to be acting as lookout—once more assembled round the saloon-table, busily endeavouring to drown their sense of guilt in a flood of liquor.

The ladies—who had long before effected a retreat to their own state-rooms, where they had locked themselves in—were for some time allowed to remain unmolested; but when the libations in which the mutineers liberally indulged had at last achieved their desired effect, and the spirits of the men began to rise, one of the most reckless of them proposed

that the ladies should be invited to grace the revel with their presence. The proposal was received with acclamation, and the unhappy women were forthwith ordered into the saloon. The poor terrified creatures at first made no response, hoping that if no notice were taken of them the intoxicated mutineers would forget all about them, and leave them in peace. But this hope was of short duration, for the mutineers, drinking deep and rapidly, soon grew excited, and, finding their repeated demands of no avail, staggered to their feet, and, breaking open the state-room doors, dragged forth their victims, compelling them to seat themselves at the same table and partake with them of the liquor with which it was bountifully supplied. The scene which followed is simply too shameful for detailed description. The men, inflamed by drink and rendered reckless by a feeling which none of them could entirely shake off—that they had already offended past all forgiveness—speedily grew more and more outrageous in their behaviour, until the orgie became one of such unbridled licence that one of the ladies—the young and lovely wife of one of the passengers imprisoned in the fore-castle—in her desperation drew a pistol from the belt of the man nearest her, and, quickly cocking it, placed the muzzle to her breast, pulled the trigger, and sank upon the saloon floor a corpse, shot through the heart.

This second fatality, more sudden if possible than the first, brought the unholy revel to an abrupt conclusion; the mutineers, thoroughly horrified at the occurrence, notwithstanding their drunken condition, staggering to their feet with one accord, and making the best of their way out on deck, where they sought to sober themselves by plunging their heads into buckets of water.

Having to some extent succeeded in this endeavour, they next bethought themselves of the desirability of putting the ship to rights. It was still blowing very heavily, and the sea was higher than ever—dangerously so indeed, as the ship had more than once narrowly escaped being pooped—but the sky looked a trifle less wild than before, and the glass was rising. Rogers therefore determined, as a first step, to get up a new foresail, bend, and set it. The sail-room was accordingly opened, and then, in pursuance of their resolution to do as little work as possible themselves, the prisoners in the fore-castle were brought up on deck, and ordered, first to rouse out the sail, and then to go aloft and bend it. This the unfortunate passengers, aided and directed by the captain, at length accomplished, though it was at the imminent risk of their lives, the violent motion of the ship momentarily threatening to send them—unaccustomed as they were to such work—whirling off the yard into the sea. The sail being bent, it was loosed and set, close-reefed; after which the disabled ship not only steered more easily, but also became more steady; all further danger, too, of being pooped was at an end.

The spare spars were next cast adrift, and preparations made for getting new topmasts on end as soon as the weather should moderate sufficiently; and thus passed that eventful day.

Walford was soon found to be so exceedingly timid when aloft, that he was not only of no use there, he was absolutely a clog and hindrance to the efforts of the others; he was accordingly relegated to the ignominious post of cook's mate, in which an abundance of the dirtiest work was carefully provided for him.

On the second day after his assumption of his new duties, this unfortunate individual, while engaged in the task of getting up coals from the fore-peak, was unlucky enough to capsize the lamp which he was using, and so set the ship on fire. Instead of giving the alarm instantly, as he ought to have done, he rushed on deck with the intention of getting some buckets of water, and endeavouring to extinguish the fire unaided. No sooner, however, did he make his appearance than he was hustled peremptorily off by the cook upon another errand; and when he returned, a quarter of an hour later, the fore-castle was all ablaze, and the smoke just beginning to curl up through the scuttle.

Then indeed he shouted "Fire!" with all his might, and at the terrible cry all hands rushed forward, to find the alarm only too true.

In the first mad hurry and confusion, no one seemed to think of inquiring how the fire had originated; and Walford was beginning to congratulate himself that, whatever happened, his complicity would not be suspected, when Talbot, happening to run up against him, stopped abruptly, and exclaimed—

"Ha! you lubber, I saw *you* creeping up and down the fore-castle ladder just now, as gingerly as a cat walking upon hot bricks—you ought to know something about this job—and by Jove you do, too; I can see it by the blink of your eyes—so out with it, you long-shore lantern-jawed son of a baked monkey."

To this elegant adjuration Walford began to stammer out an exculpatory explanation, which, however, was abruptly nipped in the bud by the boatswain's mate exclaiming—

"There, belay all that and coil up the slack of your jawing-tackle; there's no time to talk now; tail on there and try to make yourself useful. But look out, my lad if this fire gets the upper hand of us; curse me, if we don't leave you to roast in it."

A vigorous attack upon the fire was speedily organised, Rogers and Talbot each taking command of a separate party, which they were careful so to arrange that there should be no possibility of their prisoners concerting together in a successful attempt to retake the ship. So far, however, as the passengers were concerned, they appeared to be far too anxious to subdue the flames to have time for any other thought or consideration.

All through the ensuing night this curiously-constituted party laboured in their efforts to get the upper hand of the fire; but it had been allowed to obtain too firm a hold upon the ship before the alarm was given; much of the cargo was of a highly combustible nature, and though, by the zeal and energy with which all hands worked, they succeeded to some extent in retarding the progress of the flames, when day at length broke, it became apparent to all that the ship was doomed.

When at last they were compelled, from sheer exhaustion, to desist for a time from their long-continued and fatiguing efforts, the fact—which had hitherto escaped their notice—became apparent that, happily, the gale had blown itself out; the wind had already dropped considerably, and the sea, though it was still very high, no longer broke in its former dangerous and menacing fashion.

Upon seeing this, Rogers at once came to the determination not to waste any further labour in the useless endeavour to save the ship, but to devote all his energies to the getting of the boats safely into the water. The mutineers were by this time perfectly sober once more, and having shaken off with their intoxication the recklessness which it had engendered, they felt keenly anxious to escape the responsibility of any further waste of human life.

But, as usual in such cases, their own escape, not only from the danger of being burnt with the ship, but also from the punishment due to their misdeeds, was of paramount importance with them. Before commencing, therefore, upon the difficult task of launching the boats, Rogers informed his unfortunate prisoners that he was willing to give them a

couple of boats, with all necessary provisions and water, if they would individually take a solemn oath never to reveal any of the circumstances connected with the mutiny, nor to say or do anything which would place the mutineers within the power of the law. If they would do this, they might have the boats; if not, he informed them that they would be left on board the burning ship, and that the mutineers would take such measures as would effectually preclude any possibility of escape. Under the circumstances the prisoners had no alternative but to comply, which they did, and the launching of the boats was then vigorously proceeded with.

This task, after an immense amount of difficulty, and two or three exceedingly narrow escapes from the accident of having the boats stove or swamped, was at length satisfactorily accomplished; after which no time was lost in provisioning and manning them.

As soon as the boats were ready to receive them, the ladies were summoned from the saloon to take their places therein. The poor creatures could hardly be persuaded, in their terror and distraction, to leave even such inefficient protection as the saloon afforded them, so great was their horror and repugnance at the idea of being brought once more, even though it might be for ever so short a time, into the presence and propinquity of the mutineers. And when at length they emerged from the saloon, and, standing upon the wet and slippery deck, glanced first aloft at the splintered spars, the tattered remains of the sails, and the ends and bights of rope streaming in the wind, then at the great tongues of flame and clouds of smoke which enwrapped the forepart of the ship, and, lastly, over the side at the boats tossing like egg-shells upon the mountainous seas which swept hissing past, their courage entirely failed them; and it was not until Rogers, growing impatient at the delay, strode up to them and gave them the choice of going instantly and without further ado over the side and into the boats, or of being left behind altogether, that they could be persuaded to essay the dangerous adventure.

At length, however, by the exercise of great care and circumspection on the part of all concerned, the trans-shipment of the ladies was safely effected, and then the gentlemen were ordered to go. The husband of the unhappy lady who had been so cruelly driven to suicide had been for some time eagerly looking about for his wife, and, not seeing her, he at last made inquiry of the other ladies as to her whereabouts. His grief, when the dreadful news of her death was gradually broken to him with all that gentleness of which a woman's tender, loving heart alone is capable, was something pitiful to witness; he rushed into the saloon, and entering the state-room in which the poor lady's inanimate body had been reverently deposited by her companions in misfortune, flung himself upon his knees by the side of the berth, and uttered alternately the wildest prayers that heaven would pardon her act of desperation, and the bitterest curses upon the heads of those who had driven her to it. It was with the utmost difficulty that he was at last persuaded by Captain Arnold to bid an eternal farewell to the beloved remains, and to join the rest of the party in the boats allotted to them.

On hearing the order given for the gentlemen to pass down into the boats, Walford mingled with the group and pressed quietly forward to the gangway, having a vivid remembrance of Talbot's terrible threat, and not caring to remind him of it by a too obtrusive exhibition of his anxiety to escape. But in consequence of the still heavy run of the sea, several of the mutineers—both Rogers and Talbot being among them—were assisting at the transfer; and when Walford's turn came to pass down over the side, he was summarily ordered back by the boatswain's mate, who gruffly exclaimed, as his eye fell upon the quaking lieutenant—

“Here, you! stand back, will yer? Your turn ain't come yet.”

Walford at once fell back, in a state of most painful trepidation, but still hopeful that he would be allowed to go with the rest. When all the passengers but himself, however, had passed down the side, the order was given for them to cast off, which they at once did, ignorant or forgetful of the fact that one of their number still remained behind. Walford was about to rush to the gangway, and hail the fast receding boat, when the ever-watchful Talbot caught him by the collar, and flung him from him with an “Ah! would yer,” and a kick which sent the unfortunate officer sprawling upon the deck.

It was now the turn of the mutineers to take to the boats, and it was not long before they stood in the gangway, each with the bag containing his few belongings in his hand, waiting to be passed in turn down over the side. Rogers rapidly ran his eye over them, satisfied himself that everybody was present, and then began to call out their names in the order in which they were to leave the ship. When one boat had received its complement and shoved off, Walford once more pressed forward, half wild with anxiety now, and begged in piteous terms that he might not be left on board, as now seemed to be the actual determination of the mutineers. Upon this Talbot lost all patience with him, and, seizing him once more by the collar, thrust him before him into the saloon, exclaiming as he did so—

“Now look here, you meddling young jackanapes, there's been enough blood spilt on board this ship already—chiefly in consequence of your havin' shoved in your oar where it weren't wanted, and advisin' the skipper to flog a sick man—and I don't want to have to shed any more, you understand? Wery well, then; you stay in here until that there clock have marked off a good half-hour; arter that you may come out and do the best you can for yourself; there's plenty o' spars knockin' about the decks here, which you can lash together, and make a tip-top raft out of 'em, upon which you can go for a cruise on your own account; but if you shows your ugly head outside this here cabin before the half-hour's out, damn me if I won't lash your neck and heels together, and heave you into the middle of the fire there for'ard. Comprenny?”

So saying, he coolly shifted the key from the inside to the outside of the saloon-door, slammed the latter, turned the key, and then the wretched Walford heard the heavy tramp of his footsteps upon the deck rapidly growing fainter and more faint as he walked away.

Chapter Nine.

Driven to Madness.

As the key turned in the lock, Walford sank down in a state of semi-stupefaction upon one of the saloon sofas, listening like one in a dream to the distant sound of the men's voices and the occasional tramp of feet, as the mutineers passed, one by one, down the ship's side into the boats. A few minutes more and these sounds ceased. He lifted up his head, listening eagerly; but he could hear nothing, save the dismal creaking of the bulkheads, the moaning of the wind, the monotonous *swish, swish* of the water washing across the deck outside with the roll of the ship, and the dull hum and crackling of the flames as they slowly ate their destructive way further and further into the heart of the doomed craft.

“Were they actually gone?” he asked himself. “Was it possible that he was left alone, absolutely *alone* on that burning wreck, thousands of miles from the nearest land, drifting he knew not whither at the mercy of wind and wave,

with no hope of rescue and with the certainty that in a day or two at most the fabric which bore him would be so completely enveloped in the flames kindled by his own clumsiness that it would no longer be tenable, and the only alternative open to him would be that of perishing in the fire or flinging himself into the sea, there to battle despairingly for an extra hour or two of life?" He could not believe it, he *would* not believe it possible that men could be found so inhuman as to leave a fellow-mortal in so desperate a strait; they were only trying him, as they had tried that poor fellow Thomson; and if he would but have patience to wait until the stipulated half-hour had passed, he would find them still there, waiting to receive him into the boat. He laughed aloud, as he thought what a fool he had been to allow himself to be terrified even for a moment, but the laugh was so utterly the reverse of mirthful, so harsh and ghastly, that he stopped abruptly, startled by the hideous strangeness of the sounds. Then he rose and crept on tip-toe towards the saloon-door, and, on reaching it, crouched down and applied first his eye and then his ear to the key-hole. The key had been removed from the lock and the shield had fallen down over the opening outside, so that he was unable to see anything; neither could he detect any sounds indicative of the presence of others on board. Once or twice indeed he *thought* he caught the sound of whispered voices just outside the door, but he could not be sure about the matter; and in an agony of uncertainty he crept back to the sofa to watch the lagging minute-hand of the clock, and wait for the expiration of the half-hour.

Oh! what a weary time was that for the lonely watcher, as he sat there with his hands tightly locked together, his frame quivering with anxiety and apprehension, and his eyes fixed upon that inexorable minute-hand, which would not hasten its movement, though his life might be dependent on it. What if the men should grow weary of waiting? A thousand horrible fancies crowded in upon him, until in his distraction he groaned aloud. The suspense became unendurable; and in his anguish he started up to burst open the saloon-door and learn the worst at once, but (remembering Talbot's threat, and more than half-believing him to be capable of carrying it into execution) turned back again and fell to pacing rapidly to and fro the whole length of the saloon instead.

At last! at last! the half-hour of penance was over, and he was free once more. He dashed at the locked saloon-door, and, frantically hammering upon it with his clenched fists until his knuckles streamed with blood, shouted eagerly—

"Talbot! Talbot! the half-hour is up; so open the door, please, and let me out, there's a good fellow."

Then he applied his ear to the key-hole, listening eagerly for the first sound of approaching footsteps.

Five seconds—ten seconds—twenty—thirty—a minute; why did they not come? Was it possible that they had not heard him? He applied his mouth to the joint between the door and its jamb, and again shouted, "Talbot! *Talbot! Talbot!*" until his voice cracked with the strain he put upon it. Still no answer, no sound save the wail of the wind, the wash of the water, and the creaking of the ship's timbers. "Good God! were they really gone? *Was* he, after all, actually left there to die alone?" He seized the handle of the door and tugged at it, fiercely, desperately, with the strength of a madman; but the stout lock stood firm, defying his utmost efforts. Then he suddenly remembered that the captain's cabin was situated on the other side of the ship, with one door opening into the saloon and the other out on deck. With a single bound and a wild cry he crossed the saloon, and laying his hand upon the handle of the door of the captain's cabin, turned it; the door swung open. Another bound and he was at the outer door; was it locked? No; a twist of the handle, and he stepped out on deck, with the water surging and splashing over his feet. But what cared he then for such a trifle; he was not even conscious of it. Swiftly his gaze swept round the decks: they were empty. In an instant he was at the gangway and peering over the side. No boats there; nothing but the empty tackles of the quarter-boats alternately swinging in the air and trailing in the water with the roll of the ship. "*Where* were the boats? Ha! towing astern, of course, it would simply mean destruction to them if they attempted to remain alongside in so heavy a sea." In frantic haste he scrambled up the poop-ladder and rushed aft.

The boats were gone!

"Then it was an absolute fact that he was left there alone and powerless, doomed to watch with a horrible fascination the steady relentless approach of the Grim Enemy in his most terrible form, and to suffer the while in imaginative anticipation all the agonies of a thousand fiery deaths. Oh, God! it was too much. Mercy! mercy!" And with a demoniac yell he stood clutching and tugging at his hair with both hands, his teeth clenched, his eyes fixed and almost bursting from their sockets, foam bubbling from his lips—a *raving madman!*

This terrible state of distraction endured for nearly an hour, and then a species of numbness seized upon his faculties, his anxiety vanished, and he found his thoughts straying away and fixing themselves upon the veriest trivialities, conjuring up again before his mental vision acts and words which had never recurred to him since the day on which they had been done or said, mischievous practical jokes played off upon some unlucky school-fellow, mess-room jests and tattle, and a thousand other absurdities, at which he laughed aloud. Then disconnected words and phrases rushed helter-skelter through his seething brain, having no meaning, yet causing him the keenest annoyance, because he believed he had heard them before, and was anxious to connect them with the circumstances of their utterance. There was one in particular which especially tormented him. "Go for a cruise on your own account; go for a cruise on your own account," his brain reiterated with merciless pertinacity. What did it mean? Where had he heard those words before, and who had uttered them? He felt absolutely certain that at some time or other he had heard that phrase spoken, and that it had some intimate connection with himself, that it somehow concerned him vitally. "There was something else, too, said at the same time—something about—about—what was it? Something about—ah! yes—spars and a raft—'spars—raft—go for a cruise on your own account.' What could it mean?" Finally a gleam of reason returned to his clouded mind, and he realised dimly that it was of the utmost importance that he should construct a raft and "go for a cruise on his own account."

Having at last grasped this idea, he rose from the seat upon which he had flung himself, and upon which he seemed to himself to have been sitting as long as ever he could remember, and proceeded to carry it out. Sauntering leisurely off the poop, he descended to the waist of the ship, repeating eagerly over and over again the words "spars—raft," lest he should forget them. There were several spare spars of various sizes, ranging from topmasts down to studding-sail booms, lashed to the deck on each side of the main-hatchway, and these he deliberately set to work to cast adrift. With considerable difficulty he at length succeeded in accomplishing this task, the result being that the spars were set rolling athwart the deck with the roll of the ship. Nothing daunted by this, however, he dashed recklessly in among them, and escaping, heaven knows how, from the incessant danger of fractured limbs, managed to drag out, one after the other, and launch overboard several of the lighter spars. Having commenced the work, he now toiled persistently on, allowing himself neither pause nor rest until he had disposed of every spar which his unaided strength would allow him to move. Then, panting, breathless, and reeking with perspiration, he walked to the side and peered over. The spars were nowhere to be seen; in his madness it had never occurred to him to secure them with ropes, and they had consequently drifted astern, and were of course tossing, some of them miles away, in the wake of the ship.

Somehow the loss of the spars caused him no distress; indeed, as a matter of fact, he had again forgotten all about

the raft, and had continued to labour on, merely because it had not occurred to him to stop. Now that he had stopped, however, he began to be conscious not only of fatigue, but also of hunger, for he had tasted no food for nearly twenty-four hours, and had been working hard all through the night; so he made his way by instinct into the saloon and thence to the steward's pantry, where he found an abundance of food, which he attacked ravenously. He then, after satisfying his hunger, bent his steps in the direction of his own state-room, and, entering, flung himself upon the bed, and soon sank into an uneasy and restless sleep.

Meanwhile the wind had been steadily dropping, the sea going down at the same time, and when, just before sunset, the glorious orb burst through and dispersed the curtain of storm-tattered clouds which had for so long a time overspread the sky, his golden rays fell upon the *Princess Royal*, now no longer rolling gunwale-under, but swinging with a slow stately motion over the long swell, and still drifting lazily to the eastward; her bows heading now this way, now that; her fore-mast burned through and towing over the side; and the flames in complete possession of her as far aft as the main-mast.

Walford's sleep, if such it could be called, lasted all through the night and until just before the dawn. Then the overpowering heat and smoke, the loud crackling roar of the flames, and the fierce ruddy light streaming into the saloon and through the open state-room door aroused him. Sitting up in his berth, he looked around him in a bewildered way, passing his hand impatiently over his brow repeatedly, as if striving to recall distinctly the remembrance of something vaguely haunting his memory, but ever eluding his mental grasp. Glancing vacantly around him, the red glare of the flames fascinated his gaze, and he turned to watch the leaping, flickering flashes of light as they came and went with the sway and roll of the ship.

"Red," he began to mutter, "red as blood. Blood? Who said that I had been the cause of bloodshed? Who dares to say that it is my hand which has splashed those walls—that floor—with such hideous stains? Ha! see how they leap and dance, rise and fall; the place is full of them. Horrible! horrible! Are they there to taunt me, to reproach me, to accuse me? I say I did *not* do it; I am not to blame. How could I know that—that—what was it? Let me think. 'His blood is upon your hands.' Whose hands? Not mine, I swear; I could not do it; I have not the nerve, the courage for it. 'His blood is upon your hands.' Who said that? It was not said to *me*. But stay—*was* I to blame—*was* it my fault? Ugh! what a terrible thing it was to see him standing there with the rope round his neck, to know that they were going to take away his life for a fault which perhaps he would never have committed but for *me*, and to feel that I had not the courage to intercede in his behalf; to stand there quaking with fear whilst *he* was driven to his death. No, no; I did not drive him to it; it was they; and I had no control over them—but—but—ah! I never tried to save him. Yes, yes, I am coming. Is that you, Thomson? Are you calling *me*?"

He sprang out of his berth, and, making his way through the captain's cabin, passed out on deck. The first faint rays of the approaching dawn were lighting up the eastern horizon; but he saw them not; they were effectually hidden from his sight by the dazzling brightness of the flames and the dense clouds of smoke which went rolling heavily to leeward before the now scanty wind. The fire had made steady progress during the night, the hull forward being burned down nearly to the waters' edge; while aft, the flames had extended to the after hatchway, and the main-mast, burnt through at its heel, had gone by the board and fallen forward into the fiercest of the fire, where it was rapidly consuming. Luckily for the wretched Walford, the ship was once more dead before the wind, and the flames were fanned forward; had her head been in the opposite direction, his retreat would have been effectually cut off. As it was, the heat was so intense that he instinctively avoided it by springing up the poop-ladder and making his way as far aft as possible.

Arrived at the extreme end of the poop, he stood gazing intently down into the black water, and presently he began muttering again.

"Yes," he said, pointing down into the hollow of the swell as it came creeping up after the ship, "that is the spot where he went down; I saw him; I was standing near the bulwarks, and when he sprang my eyes followed him; I heard his dying cry; and I saw his last agonised upward look of despair as he went down with a plunge into the hollow between the waves, and the waters closed over his head for ever. For ever? Yes, surely—and yet—what is that white gleaming object there now, glaring up at me from beneath the water? It is—it *is* the face of the dead man. Ha! see he is beckoning to me. Then it *was* his voice I heard calling to me. Listen—what was that? Did you call, Thomson? He will not answer; he is tired of calling; but the white ghastly face is still there, and—see—there too is the beckoning hand. It is my summons, and I must obey."

At that moment the weird plaintive scream of a sea-bird came floating down out of the grey shadows of the dawn, and Walford, starting violently, stood for a moment in an attitude of rapt attention. The cry was repeated; he glared wildly round him for an instant, and then, screaming hoarsely "I come—I come!" sprang over the guard-rails and into the sea.

Chapter Ten.

A Strange Rencontre.

We left the *Aurora*, as the reader will remember, at the moment when, by the merest hair's breadth, she was enabled to avoid what must have been a terribly disastrous collision with the ill-fated *Princess Royal* on the day when the hurricane burst with such destructive effect upon the outward-bound fleet.

Deprived of her fore-topsail, the little barque was soon left astern by her two unwelcome neighbours, and—the fleet rapidly dispersing, now that it was no longer possible to regulate the speed of the several craft which composed it—by nightfall her crew found themselves, comparatively speaking, alone, there being only some twenty sail in sight from the deck.

That night was a most anxious one for Captain Leicester, the gale being heavier and the sea considerably higher than he had ever before witnessed; the *Aurora*, however, proved to be a capital little sea-boat, riding over the great liquid hills light and dry as a gull; and when at length the morning broke, revealing only two sail in sight, George felt so easy in his mind that he did not hesitate to go below and seek in his comfortable berth an hour or two of that rest which he so greatly needed.

The first stroke of the hurricane had been, as is generally the case, the worst; for about half an hour it had blown with frightful and disastrous fury, as has already been described, after which it lulled somewhat, and then had again steadily increased. Accordingly, when Captain Leicester went on deck at noon, he found the gale still gathering strength, the sea

higher than ever, and the sky looking more threatening than he remembered to have ever before seen it.

The ship was scudding under bare poles, and behaving capitally, too; but George saw that if the sea rose much higher there would be great danger of being "pooped;" so he—like the people on board the unfortunate *Princess Royal*—roused out a new foresail and, with very great difficulty, got it bent and set, reefed. This sail dragged the little barque along at a tremendous pace; and from that time there was no further danger of her being "pooped" or overrun by the sea.

On the third day the gale broke; and by sundown the weather had so far moderated as to permit of the *Aurora* being brought to the wind and hove-to, a manoeuvre which George was most anxious to accomplish, since the ship had, for over seventy-two hours, been running to the eastward, or directly away from her port, at the rate of some ten knots an hour, giving her over seven hundred miles of extra distance to make up. The *Aurora* remained hove-to during the whole of that night; but at eight bells next morning she made sail under single-reefed topsails and courses; stretching away to the northward and westward on the port tack. She continued on this tack all day; and went about at the end of the second dog-watch, George's object being to work his way back to the spot, as nearly as possible, where the fleet had separated, and there wait two or three days if need be, in the hope of falling in with the bulk of them again.

Captain Leicester had of course taken full advantage of the return of fine weather to repair damages; the crew had been busy during the whole day getting two new topgallant-masts aloft and rigging them, bending new sails in place of those split or blown away, and so on; the *Aurora* was consequently, when night fell, all at aunto once more; and a stranger looking at her, would, except for the *new* look of some of the spars and canvas, never have suspected that she had had her wings clipped.

At nightfall she was standing to the southward and westward on the port tack, under every stitch of canvas that would draw; the wind was falling fast; the sea had long since ceased to break; there was now only an occasional white fleecy comb to be seen on the crests of the waves; and the ship was gliding gently along, with a slow, steady, rhythmical rising-and-falling motion over the long heavy swell, at the rate of some five knots in the hour. The skipper was in excellent spirits at having escaped so well and so cheaply from the fury of the hurricane; and he remained on deck until midnight, chatting with Mr Bowen, the chief mate.

The relief-watch had just been called, and George was waiting to accompany the mate below when his attention was suddenly attracted by a curious appearance in the sky to windward. It was still cloudy; and, low down on the horizon and about two points on the weather bow, he noticed that the clouds were lighter and brighter in tint than anywhere else.

"Look, Bowen," he exclaimed, "do you see that peculiar-looking cloud away there on the horizon, just over our cat-head? What is the meaning of it?"

The mate looked in the direction indicated; and his more mature experience at once suggested an explanation.

"Looks to me," he said, "as if there was something afire over there. Here, you Tom," to a lad belonging to the relief-watch, who had just come on deck, "slip up as far as the fore-topmast cross-trees, and see if you can see anything out of the common away there on the weather bow."

"Ay, ay, sir," answered the lad; and in another moment he was dancing nimbly up the fore-rigging; his form just dimly discernible in the dark shadow of the sails.

Presently he hailed from the cross-trees, "I can't see nothing, sir; but the sky away over there looks uncommon bright, and it seems to flicker now and then, as if there was a big fire burning under it."

"That'll do; you can come down again," answered the chief mate. Then, turning to George, he said—

"Depend upon it, sir, there's a ship afire away over there. Well, we're steering a course as'll take us pretty close to her, if so be as there *is* one; and I suppose, sir, you'll feel like giving of her a overhaul, won't you?"

"Most certainly," answered George earnestly. "We will at least ascertain whether there are any human beings on board her. Mr Ritson,"—to the carpenter, who since Cross's impressment had acted in the capacity of second mate—"steer your present course, please, as long as the wind will allow you; crack on all you can; and, as soon as the burning ship—or whatever it is—is fairly in sight, give me a call."

He then descended to his cabin, and in another five minutes had fallen into a state of blissful oblivion.

At eight bells (or four o'clock a.m.) Ritson knocked at George's state-room door, after calling the chief mate, and said

"We can see the flames and smoke from the deck, sir, though the ship herself is still hull-down. I've been up in the fore-top, howsoever, with the glass, and make her out to be a large ship—close upon a thousand tons, I should say—but I can't see any people on board of her, nor I can't make out no sign of boats. She's all ablaze from for'ard right aft as far as the main-mast, which toppled over and fell for'ard while I was lookin' at her. I fancy the people must ha' left her, sir."

"All right, Ritson," answered George, "I'll be on deck in a minute or two."

Within the stipulated time Captain Leicester made his appearance on deck, and proceeded at once to the fore-top, where, with the aid of his glass, he made a careful inspection of the burning ship.

"Well, Mr Bowen," he said, when he had completed his examination, and was once more down on deck, "it is as Ritson says: there is no sign of any human being on board her; I have looked long and carefully at her, and am quite sure I should have seen the people moving about, had there been any. We will stand on as we are going, however, and cross her stern; we shall then perhaps get a chance to make out her name. Somehow, she has a familiar look with her, as though I had seen her before; I wonder if she was in the fleet?"

"Like enough, sir," answered Bowen; "we're right in the track of 'em; and maybe this is one of the slow-coaches as we run away from."

"Possibly," answered George abstractedly; and then the two fell to pacing slowly fore and aft, from the main-mast to

the taffrail, in that persevering way which is so characteristic of seamen.

The *Aurora* was now sliding gently along at a speed of about four knots, with every sail set that would draw; and gradually she crept up closer and closer to the burning ship, which, meanwhile, was slowly drifting to leeward.

The watch on deck were clustered together in a body, forward, watching the unusual sight; the ship being now about a point on the lee bow and about half a mile distant. Suddenly there was a loud shout from them, followed by the cry—

“There’s somebody still aboard the burning ship sir!”

George and the mate, who at the moment were walking towards the taffrail, with their backs towards the burning ship, turned quickly at the cry, and the former, hastily seizing the telescope which lay ready to hand on the skylight, swiftly brought it to bear. There, sure enough, standing right aft on the raised poop, could be distinctly seen a solitary figure, apparently that of a man. He seemed to be gazing intently into the water astern, pointing and gesticulating, and was evidently wholly unaware of the approach of the *Aurora*.

“Yes,” said George, “truly enough there *is* a man on board; and he does not seem to have seen us yet; perhaps the glare of the flames has dazzled his eyes. Just step down into the cabin, Mr Bowen, if you please, and bring up a couple of muskets; we will fire them, one after the other, and the reports will call his attention to the fact of our presence.”

The mate turned away to do George’s bidding, and he had hardly disappeared down the companion-ladder when the skipper, who had the telescope once more at his eye, saw the figure start—look behind him, as though he had heard some alarming sound—and then spring, in apparent terror, into the sea.

“He’s jumped overboard, sir!” reported the men forward, who were now eagerly watching the actions of the stranger.

“Ay, ay,” answered Leicester, “I see he has. One of you call the watch below; the rest of you lay aft here and clear away the starboard gig, cast off her lashings, and get her ready for rousing off the gallows and into the water.”

The gig which had been hanging at the davits ever since the *Aurora* cleared out of the docks at London, had been destroyed when the ship was thrown on her beam-ends in the hurricane; and the men had been so busy on apparently more important duties that they had had no opportunity of getting another boat ready for service; hence there was now a considerable amount of delay in the launching of the boat which George intended to despatch in search of the swimmer.

Mr Bowen soon returned to the deck with the muskets, and handing one to George and retaining the other himself, they fired them one after the other in rapid succession, hoping by this means to attract the unfortunate man’s attention and show him that help was near.

George then sprang into the mizzen-rigging and looked anxiously out over the glittering surface of the sea, in the effort to catch a glimpse of the man, should he happen to be still above water. It was not, however, until the *Aurora* was fairly crossing the wake of the burning ship—which by this time had drifted a considerable distance to leeward—that he was successful. Then, indeed, he did for an instant detect a small dark object on the crest of a sea, standing out in bold relief against the bright ruddy reflection of the flames in the water beyond it. Almost at the instant that he caught sight of it, he lost it again as it disappeared in the hollow of the swell, then once more it rose into view, clearly and unmistakably the head of a man.

“All right, I see him,” he exclaimed. “Now then, Mr Bowen, is the boat ready? I am going to that poor fellow’s assistance, so back the main-topsail, if you please, and send the boat after us as quickly as you can.”

As the last words left George’s mouth his hands rose above his head, his body curved itself over towards the water, and in an instant he shot downward out of the rigging swiftly as a sea-bird making its swoop, and entered the water without a splash.

On coming to the surface, Captain Leicester struck vigorously out at once in the direction of the burning ship, knowing that the man he sought was exactly in line with her, but that he would probably not see him until he was close upon him. He swam steadily on, not hurrying himself, but husbanding his strength as much as possible, and in about ten minutes he caught sight of the object of which he was in search. But the manner in which that object presented itself to his view was so startling that George’s first impulse was to turn round and swim back towards the *Aurora* with all speed, an impulse which, however, was only felt to be instantly overcome. The man was suddenly revealed, within some six feet or so of George’s grasp, as the latter rose upon the crest of a sea; but, instead of swimming as George expected he would be, the unfortunate creature was lying on his back, his ghastly white face upturned to the sky, and his eyes fixed and staring, with that terrible indescribable expression in them which tells at once and unmistakably the dreadful tale of *madness*.

Very naturally, our hero felt a little doubtful as to the expediency of placing himself within the grasp of a madman; he therefore, before closing with him, exclaimed in a loud, cheery voice—

“Hillo, there! are you tired? If so, just say the word, and I’ll drop alongside and lend you a hand.”

For all the visible effect this speech had on the stranger he might as well have been stone-deaf, for he vouchsafed not the slightest notice.

George shouted again, with a like result, and then—still feeling very doubtful as to the best mode of proceeding—he struck out, and swam quietly round the ghastly floating figure. A stroke or two sufficed to place him in such a position as enabled him at last to get a clear and distinct view of the stranger’s features, fully illumined by the glare of the flames, and instant recognition followed.

“Walford!” he exclaimed. Then, without another moment’s hesitation, he dashed up and, throwing himself upon his back, seized his rival by the hair and drew him into such a position as permitted of his taking Walford’s head upon his shoulder and supporting it high enough above the surface to prevent the sea washing over it and so suffocating him.

Walford offered no resistance, and gave not the faintest sign of being aware of George’s presence; and there the two lay, quietly floating on the bosom of the long heaving swell, until the boat came to their assistance and conveyed them both on board the *Aurora*.

On reaching the ship, George had his rival promptly stripped, rubbed vigorously down, and comfortably bestowed in his own berth, well and warmly wrapped up in blankets, with Tom Price—one of the fore-castle hands, and a very smart, intelligent young fellow—to watch over him. After which, the skipper gave a little attention to his own comfort, and finally went on deck once more, it being by that time too late to think of turning in again.

By the time that George regained the deck, the *Aurora* had crept to a distance of about four miles from the *Princess Royal*. The unfortunate craft was by that time blazing fiercely fore and aft, the fire having at last reached her store-room, in which there was a considerable quantity of highly inflammable material; and half an hour afterwards her powder-magazine (almost every ship of any size in those days was provided with a magazine) exploded; and the charred fragments of half-consumed timber, which were widely scattered over the now sleepily heaving surface of the sea, alone remained as relics of the once noble and stately ship, the destruction of which had been the last link in a chain of disastrous occurrences resulting primarily from the overbearing, tyrannical, and imprudent behaviour of her officers.

With the appearance of the sun above the horizon the clouds gradually disappeared, the wind dropped, the surface of the ocean became like heaving oil; and the *Aurora*, losing steerage-way, rolled almost gunwale-to, with her canvas flapping loudly and monotonously against her masts.

About two bells (or nine o'clock) one of the hands, upon being sent aloft to "grease down," reported a sail in the southern quarter, and on the usual inquiry being put to him, as to what he made her out to be, he replied that she was a small topsail-schooner.

"A small topsail-schooner!" muttered George. "I wonder what she can be; I cannot remember having seen any such craft in the fleet. Ritson,"—to the carpenter who had charge of the deck,— "do you remember having seen a topsail-schooner among the fleet?"

"No, sir; can't say as I do," answered Ritson. "Don't believe there *was* any such craft, sir; the smallest, as I remembers was that purty little brig painted all white down to her water-line; perhaps you recollects her, sir?"

"Yes," said Leicester, "I recollect the craft perfectly well; and, as far as my memory serves me, she *was*, as you say, the smallest craft in company."

The conversation here dropped for a time, George resuming the somewhat dejected saunter fore and aft from the main-mast to the taffrail, and the half-unconscious whistling for a wind, in which he had before been indulging. His pursuit of this monotonous and uninteresting occupation was interrupted by the steward, who requested him to step down into the cabin, "to take a look at the man as was picked up this morning; as he seems to be took a bit worse, sir."

George at once went below, and found Walford sitting up in the berth, muttering to himself disconnectedly and occasionally addressing with great earnestness the watchful Tom, whose horror-stricken face plainly revealed that his patient's random observations had been of a somewhat startling character. On entering the state-room, Leicester at once addressed Walford, asking him whether he felt better; and the unfortunate man glanced for a moment in George's face with an air of semi-recognition; but this immediately passed away, and the incoherent mutterings went on again as before.

"That's just how he've been goin' on for the last half-'our," explained Tom; "talkin' about 'murder' and 'hangin',' and being left to burn in the ship; it's enough to give one the 'orrors to listen to him."

George sat down by the side of the cot and listened patiently for nearly an hour to Walford's rambling talk; and, although he was unable to make out from it a clearly-connected story, he heard enough to give him a shrewd idea of the truth, and to convince him that a terrible tragedy of some kind had occurred on board the ill-fated *Princess Royal*. The patient at length grew calm once more, and, lying back upon his pillow, seemed inclined to sleep, upon which George quietly rose and went on deck again to see how matters were proceeding there.

As he meditatively made his way up the companion-ladder, he could not help thinking of the singularity of this last meeting between him and his rival, and comparing it with the one which had occurred on that lovely June evening, on the road to Stoke. As the two men stood there on the white dusty road, with the rays of the declining sun darting down upon them through the foliage of the overhanging trees, and as Walford told the story of his just concluded engagement to Lucy, how little, thought George, could either of them suspect that, when they next came into such close contact, it would be literally on the bosom of the broad Atlantic, up-borne by nothing save its restless waters. Poor Leicester was greatly disturbed by this singular and unconscious claim upon his hospitality which had so recently arisen. He was as generous-hearted a man as the sun ever shone upon, ever ready to give liberally and ungrudgingly to any one who seemed to be in need; but somehow he wished that in the present instance it had fallen to the lot of some one else than himself to play the part of rescuer and benefactor, or that the rescued individual had been any one rather than Walford. The fact was that he wanted to forget, if possible, the keen and bitter pain of his disappointment: and now the presence of his unhappy guest had brought it all back to him and would keep it in poignant remembrance as long as they two should remain together. Then, he bethought himself how selfish a feeling he had been allowing himself to indulge; how utterly he had forgotten that the matter was one with which Lucy's happiness must be inseparably connected; and that fate—or Providence, rather, as he reverently corrected himself—had in a very great measure confided that happiness to his keeping, by delivering into his care the man upon whom she had bestowed the priceless treasure of her heart's best love. And as he thought this, he solemnly vowed that he would honestly strive to prove worthy of the trust; that he would be to Lucy's lover a brother—*ay, more* than a brother; that he would nurse and tend him, restore to him his reason if God willed it, and, in any case, watch over and protect him—at the cost of his own life even, if need were—until he could restore him to the arms of the woman who was impatiently awaiting at home his safe return.

"His well-being has been confided to me as a sacred trust," he murmured in conclusion, "and, please God, I will prove myself worthy of it."

With this resolution he dismissed the subject temporarily from his thoughts, and turned his attention once more to the affairs of the ship.

Glancing aloft, and then all round the horizon, he observed that it had fallen a flat calm, and that moreover there was no immediate prospect of a breeze. The sky was a clear deep blue in the zenith, merging by imperceptible gradations into a delicate warm grey at the horizon. The water was absolutely without a ripple, there was not so much as the faintest suggestion of a "cat's-paw" on all its glassy surface; and save for the long sluggish sweep and heave of the swell which, as it undulated past the ship, caught and reflected the varying tints of the sky, it would have been difficult to detect the presence of water at all at a distance of more than a few yards from the ship. The *Aurora* was still rolling

sluggishly on the sleepy swell; her dazzling white canvas flapping and the slings and trusses of the yards creaking with the roll; the men, rendered languid by the heat, were making such show as they were able of being busy on various odd jobs about the decks or aloft; and the man at the wheel had lashed it and was leaning upon it more than half-asleep. Ritson, apparently for want of something better to do, was seated on the main-topmast cross-trees, with the ship's telescope in his hand, scrutinising the motions of the distant schooner, whose tiny "royal" was now visible from the deck, gleaming white as snow on the extreme verge of the horizon.

Noting all these things at a glance, George turned to saunter aft, thinking that on such a perfectly calm day, and with such still water, he might, by leaning well out over the taffrail, get a glimpse of the ship's bottom and see whether it had fouled at all, or whether the copper showed any signs of wrinkling. Arrived at the taffrail, he leaned well out over it, and peered down into the water. The first thing which attracted his notice was the deep, pure, beautiful ultramarine tint of the water, as he gazed far down into its unfathomable depths; the next was, the presence of a long greyish-brown object under the ship's counter, which had escaped his notice at first in consequence of its being in the deepest shadow of the hull. A moment sufficed to satisfy him that it was a huge shark; and as the creature caught sight of him, and with a barely perceptible movement of its fins, backed out a foot or two from under the ship, as if in preparation to make a dart at him in case he should fall into the water, George shuddered at the thought of what might have been his or Walford's fate, had the monster been in the neighbourhood of the ship a few hours earlier.

Sliding his body gently inboard again, Leicester turned to the dozing helmsman, and exclaimed—

"Here, you Ned; rouse up, man. There's a big shark under the counter, so get out the shark-hook, ask the cook for a piece of good fat pork, and muster the watch aft in readiness to haul him inboard, in case we can coax him into swallowing the bait."

Chapter Eleven.

A Suspicious Sail.

The man hurried away joyously to do George's bidding, hailing his comrades aloft to "knock off work and come shark-fishing, all you sea-dogs aloft there," as soon as he had placed a sufficiently respectful distance between himself and his skipper. There is no sport or pastime in which sailors will engage more eagerly than in the attempt to capture a shark; they regard the creature as their worst and most relentless enemy, and never willingly let slip an opportunity to catch and destroy one, frequently venting their hatred upon the unfortunate fish, when caught, in the utmost refinement of cruelty. Accordingly, no sooner was Ned's hail heard than, dropping incontinently whatever work they happened to be engaged on, the whole watch, Ritson included, hurried down on deck and aft to the taffrail, to take a share in the sport. Ritson, by virtue of his superior rank, assumed the lead at once, and as a matter of course. Taking the hook with its swivel and chain attached, and a piece of fat pork, some three or four pounds in weight, from the now lively and wide-awake Ned, he called out for "a bit of stoutish line," busying himself meanwhile in burying the hook cunningly in the bait, in order that the shark might not see it—for it is a well-established fact that these monsters, unless very hungry, are acute enough to refuse a bait if the hook is not well hidden. The line, in the shape of the gaff-topsail halliard-fall, hastily unrove for the occasion, was soon forthcoming, and the hook, being at last baited to the second mate's satisfaction, bent on to the chain.

"Now stand clear," commanded Ritson, as he prepared to pitch the bait overboard, "stand clear all of yer; and when I gives the word to 'haul in,' walk away for'ard with the line and bring his head out of water."

A long steady pendulum-like swing or two of the bait followed, and then away it went out over the stern and into the water with a splash. Leicester who was leaning over the taffrail and watching the proceedings with the greatest interest, saw the great fish turn like a flash and rush to the spot where the bait had fallen, turning himself over on his side as he did so.

"Hurrah! He bites; he's got it," shouted one of the men eagerly. But he spoke rather too soon; Jack Shark was not to be caught quite so easily. Instead of opening his great jaws and swallowing the bait, hook and all, at a gulp, as was expected, he stopped dead in his rush, and began to poke the bait about suspiciously with the point of his shovel-shaped nose; and finally, with a contemptuous whisk of his tail, left it, and resumed his former position under the ship's quarter.

Great was the disappointment of the younger hands at this failure.

"He ain't hungry," explained one.

"Ain't he?" contemptuously retorted another. "Just you drop overboard and try him, bo'; why he'd take you—sou'wester, water-boots, and all—down that main-hatchway of his'n without winking, and then come back and axe for more. No, no; 'taint that, mates; he's *waiting* for somebody, most likely for the poor chap as the skipper picked up this mornin'!"

"Come, stow all that rubbish!" exclaimed the second mate; "how do you expect we're going to catch the brute if you all stand there palavering like so many fish-wives? It's enough to frighten him away altogether. Clap a stopper on your jaw-tackles now, all of you; and give me a chance to play him a bit."

The speaker thereupon, by sundry dexterous movements of the wrist, imparted a gentle wriggling motion to the line, which in its turn conveyed a corresponding motion to the bait, the latter being slowly drawn through the water at the same time. This was too much for the shark's equanimity; and he made another dash at the bait, still refusing to swallow it however. The second mate then tried the virtue of a few quick jerks upon the bait, as though drawing it away from the creature, which had the effect of causing him to turn once more on his side, and make a snap at it, actually taking it into his mouth. Still he would neither swallow it nor close his jaws upon it, but unresistingly suffered it to be jerked out of his mouth again.

"We'll have him yet, boys," Ritson exclaimed. "Pay out the line to its bare end."

This was done, the shark keeping close to the bait, turning it over and over with his nose, but persistently refusing to take it.

"Now walk away steadily for'ard with your line, and stand by for a surge," was the next command.

Away went the men, dragging the line after them, and towing the bait through the water. The shark followed it closely up; and at last, just as the pork was being dragged out of the water altogether, he made a determined jump at it, swallowing it and the hook together; and the next moment the men were brought-up "all standing" by the tremendous strain on the line as the hook buried its barbed point in the creature's body, while the water was lashed into foam and splashed clear in over the barque's taffrail in the fish's frantic efforts to free itself.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Ritson. "Now you have him, lads. Hold on every inch of line, or he'll break away from you yet. Bear a hand here, one of you. Take the spanker-sheet and throw a running-bowline round the line, so's we can get it down over his fins. That's your sort, Ned; don't let him get it into his jaws. Cleverly done; haul taut. Now we have him safe. Lead the sheet for'ard, let all hands tail on to it, and we'll run him up out of the water and in on deck."

The bowline in the end of the sheet having been successfully passed over the fish's shoulders and under his fins, the rope was laid along the deck, and the watch, leaving one by one the line to which the hook was attached, got hold of the sheet, and then with a joyous shout of "Stamp and go, boys; walk away with him," they dragged the monster, still struggling furiously, up out of the water and in on deck over the taffrail.

For a moment the huge fish lay perfectly still, then he began to plunge about and lash right and left with his tail in a manner which caused the whole ship to resound with the terrific blows; rousing the watch below, and causing them to "tumble up" *en masse* to ascertain the nature of the disturbance.

"Ware tail," exclaimed the second mate warningly. "If any of you chaps catches a smack with it across your shins it'll snap 'em like pipe-stems. Where's the cook's axe?"

The question was promptly answered by the appearance of cookie himself, his sable visage beaming and his eyeballs rolling with delight as he danced nimbly about the deck, dodging the strokes of that terrible tail, with his gleaming axe upraised in readiness to deal a blow at the first opportunity. At length there was a momentary pause in the tremendous struggles, a pause of which Snowball (all black cooks who go to sea seem to be dubbed "Snowball") promptly availed himself. A quick flash of his axe-blade in the sun, a dull crunching thud, and the back-bone was severed at the junction of the tail with the body; a lightning-like stroke of his long keen knife followed, and the severed tail was flung quivering aside as a long thin jet of blood spouted out from the body, broadly staining the snow-white deck-planks.

But the shark had plenty of fight left in him still, as one of the men speedily discovered when, on thrusting a handspike into the great jaws, the strong, stout wooden bar was promptly bitten in two.

"Here, lay hold, two or three of you, and capsize him," ordered Ritson; "we must make an end of the beast, or some of yer'll get hurted yet, I can see. Now then," as three of the men seized the shark by his enormous fins, "one, two, three, and over with him!"

With a cry of "Yo, heave he!" and a hearty drag the great fish was turned over on his back; and then Snowball, stepping forward once more, placed himself astride the creature and, with a quick, powerful stroke of his knife, slit open its belly, and so put an end to its sufferings. But so tenacious of life was it that even after the removal of the vital organs the heart was seen to be still expanding and contracting, which it continued to do for fully five minutes after being taken out of the fish. The head was next cut off and the back-bone removed for preservation as "curios," after which the mutilated carcass was thrown overboard and the decks washed down.

Ritson did not wait for the completion of this operation, but, leaving its superintendence to Mr Bowen (who, like the rest of the watch below, had come on deck to see what was the cause of the unusual tumult), retired once more with the telescope to his former post in the main-topmast cross-trees, and resumed his scrutiny of the strange schooner.

George noticed this, and vaguely wondering what had so greatly excited his second mate's curiosity, glanced in the direction to which the telescope was pointing, to find to his surprise that the upper half of the stranger's topsail was visible from the deck.

"Why, Ritson," he hailed, "the schooner must have a little air of wind, surely; she is nearing us perceptibly."

Ritson, entirely contrary to nautical etiquette, made no reply to the skipper's hail, but remained with his eye immovably glued to the tube for a full minute longer, when he gently closed the instrument and descended slowly to the deck.

Arrived there, he walked up to Captain Leicester, and first glancing cautiously round to make sure that no one was within ear-shot, murmured in a low voice—

"She's heading as straight for us as she can steer, sir, *with six sweeps out—three of a side*. That means, sir, that her skipper wants so badly to get alongside of us, that he's noways particular about the trouble he takes to bring him here."

George gave a low involuntary whistle of astonishment.

"That is queer news indeed," he remarked after a contemplative pause. "And you think then, Ritson, that the craft is a—"

"A rover, sir; neither more nor less," answered the second mate. "She ain't French, I'm certain; she ain't got the look of it; besides, the Johnnies wouldn't ventur so far as this in a craft of that size—why she ain't more than about a hundred and twenty tons at the very outside. No; she's a rover, that's what *she* is; a craft with a low beamy hull painted all black, tremendous long spars, and canvas with just no end of a h'ist to it."

"Give me the glass," said George; "I'll go as far as the cross-trees and take a look at her myself."

The second mate handed over the telescope, and the skipper, proceeding aloft, soon saw quite enough to satisfy him that Ritson's conjectures as to the character and intentions of the schooner were only too likely to prove correct.

Descending once more to the deck, he held a hurried consultation with his two officers, the result of which was a determination to fight to the last gasp, if the crew were only willing to stand by them. It would be necessary to ascertain their feeling upon the subject before anything could be done; so, it being then within a quarter of an hour of noon, George and the chief mate went below for their quadrants, took the sun's meridian altitude, and, on the bell being struck

to denote the hour of noon and the termination of the morning watch, Captain Leicester gave the word for all hands to muster aft.

"My lads," said George, when the men were all standing before him in obedience to his summons, "I have called you here in order that I may communicate to you a very disagreeable piece of intelligence. Briefly, it is this. The strange schooner yonder is a very suspicious-looking craft; Mr Ritson and I, who have both carefully examined her through the glass, are quite of the same opinion about her, namely, that she is a *pirate*. She has all the look of one; and her conduct tends greatly to confirm us in our suspicions, for she has rigged out half a dozen sweeps and is sweeping as straight down for us as she can come. Now, lads, I want to know what you propose to do in the event of our suspicions proving correct. Will you allow her to come alongside and throw her bloodthirsty crew in on our deck to cut our throats as if we were so many sheep! Or will you fight for your lives, and take your chance of being able to beat her off?"

There was a few minutes of anxious consultation among the men; and then Ned stepped forward as spokesman of the party, and asked—

"What would you advise us to do, sir? What do you think of doin' yourself, sir, if we may make so bold as to axe?"

"Mr Bowen, Mr Ritson, and I have resolved to fight as long as we can raise a hand in self-defence," answered George; "and my advice to you is to do the same. Alone, we three men cannot hope to do much; but with your aid I certainly should not despair of beating off yonder schooner, even though she be full of men. And if the worst comes to the worst and we find that we *must* die, it will be far better to do so with swords in our hands, than to be slaughtered in cold blood."

"Yes, yes; that's true; none o' that for me, thank'ee," and sundry other exclamations of concurrence followed the conclusion of the skipper's speech; then came another very brief consultation; and finally Ned once more stepped forward and said—

"We've agreed, sir, as you're in the rights of it about the fightin'; and we're quite ready to stand by yer—all hands of us—and do our best."

"Very well," said George. "Then we will lose no time in making ready for our defence. Mr Bowen, we will have up that brass long nine-pounder which is down below; I provided it for just such an emergency as this."

"Ay, ay, sir," answered the mate, in a cheery tone of voice which spoke volumes as to his confidence in their ability to beat off the pirate, if such the schooner should prove to be. Then, turning to the men, he continued—

"Now then, some of you, whip the tarpaulin off this after hatchway, and lift off the hatches. Mr Ritson, will you be good enough to rouse out a couple of fourfold tackles and get them made fast aloft? We shall require a chain strop also. That's right, lads; off with those hatches; we'll soon have the old barkie in fighting trim."

Inspired by the mate's cheery manner, the men worked with hearty good-will; and in less than an hour they had the long nine-pounder on deck, mounted on its carriage, its tackles hooked on, the gun loaded, cutlasses and pistols distributed, boarding-pikes cast loose, and everything ready for a stubborn resistance.

These preliminaries arranged, George and the chief mate made their way aloft as far as the main-top to watch the approach of the suspected schooner, which had by this time crept up to within about nine miles of the *Aurora*. She was still heading straight for the barque; and the telescope enabled them to see that her six sweeps were being vigorously plied; their long steady swing and the perfect time which was maintained in the working of them conclusively showing that they were being handled by a strong gang of men.

"Why, she must be full of men, or those long, heavy sweeps could never be kept going for so great a length of time," remarked George to the mate. "We shall have to devote all our attention to those sweeps in the first instance, I can see. If we are only fortunate enough to knock away two or three of them, it will at least *delay* their approach; and if a breeze would only spring up, smart as that schooner looks, I should not despair of being able to show her a clean pair of heels."

"Ay," answered Bowen, "and we're going to have a breeze by-and-by; just the way we wants it, too. I can make out the upper edge of a cloud-bank rising now above the horizon to the east'ard there; and if we can only keep yonder cut-throat crew at arm's length until we get the wind, and if it'll only come down upon us pretty fresh when it *does* come, I think, as you say, sir, we may give them handsomely the slip."

With the view of getting a still clearer idea as to the possible advent of the desired breeze, Mr Bowen forthwith undertook a journey as far as the main-royal yard, upon which he comfortably established himself, with one arm round the royal-pole, whilst he carefully studied the aspect of the weather, and as carefully scrutinised the horizon to see whether there were any other craft in their immediate neighbourhood. No other sail excepting the schooner, however, was in sight in any direction; and having at length formed a tolerably clear opinion with regard to the weather, he descended again to the main-top, and remarked to George—

"That schooner must be coming up at the rate of about three knots, by the look of her."

"Yes; about that," answered George.

"And she's about eight miles off now, I should say," continued Bowen.

"Yes; about eight miles," returned George, with his eye still peering through the telescope.

"Then," remarked the mate, "it will take her a matter of some two hours and forty minutes, or thereabouts, to get alongside. And by that time, unless I am greatly mistaken, the first of the breeze will have reached us. I hope we shall get it *before* then; because in light winds I don't doubt but what that craft could sail round and round us; but only let it come strong enough to oblige us to stow our royals, and I'll bet my old hat that we can walk away from her. I'm afraid we sha'n't scrape clear without finding out the weight of the shot she can pitch at us; but if our lads are only steady when the powder-burning begins, I sha'n't feel noways very greatly concerned."

With which summing up of the case Mr Bowen dropped into a sitting posture alongside his commander, and, letting his legs dangle down over the outer edge of the top, filled his pipe, and proceeded to regale himself with what he chose

to term "two whiffs and a half."

Chapter Twelve.

A Marine Duel—and its Result.

The two occupants of the main-top maintained their position therein, keeping a watchful eye upon the movements of the schooner, until that craft had approached to within about three miles of the *Aurora*, when they descended to the deck; Captain Leicester remarking to the mate, as the latter swung himself down off the rail—

"I think, Mr Bowen, we may as well run up our ensign; perhaps the schooner will return the compliment and oblige us with a sight of the colour of her bunting."

"Ay, ay, sir," answered the mate; and he walked aft, got out the ensign, bent it on to the halliards, and ran it up to the mizzen peak, where it hung in drooping folds, swaying listlessly with the sleepy roll of the ship.

For some time there was no response on the part of the schooner, which held steadily on her way straight for the barque, her six long sweeps plying as vigorously as ever, and churning up the glassy water into a long line of miniature whirlpools, which gradually diminished until they finally subsided on each side of her gleaming wake.

"The breeze, the breeze; here it comes at last, thank God!" ejaculated Bowen, who had been for some time anxiously regarding the rising bank of greyish cloud to the eastward. As he spoke, a faint, barely perceptible breath of cool air fanned the faces of the anxious watchers on the deck of the *Aurora*, and was gone again; a "cat's-paw" or two momentarily ruffled the surface of the water here and there, only to leave it as glassy as before; then came another puff, which lasted just long enough to trail out the ensign for an instant and to rustle the royals; and then away on the extreme verge of the eastern horizon, the gleaming water assumed a light blue tint, which gradually spread, creeping slowly down towards the two vessels, the blue on the horizon insensibly darkening all the while, and conveying the thrice welcome intelligence that the breeze was slowly but steadily freshening.

"Yes," said George, "here it comes, sure enough; and in a few hours we shall have plenty of it, by the look of the sky. Stand by the braces, lads; let go, and haul the yards round, and be lively about it; we cannot spare the time to be taken aback just now; that's right, men; well there with the fore-braces; well with the main; brail in the mizzen and stow it; haul down the mizzen-topmast staysail. Now she feels the breeze. Hard up with your helm, my man, and let her wear short round. Let go your lee main-braces and round in to windward—gently now; not too quick; that's well; catch a turn with your after-braces and then square the fore-yard; well with the fore-braces; belay all and coil up. Ah! I expected that."

The latter exclamation was evoked by the boom of a gun from the schooner; and, turning his eyes in her direction, George saw the white smoke floating lazily away from her to leeward, and then a white jet of water started up as the shot came flying towards the barque, then another—another—and another, and finally a scurrying splash as the iron messenger swept along the surface of the water and sank, falling short by about a hundred yards. At the same moment the heavy sweeps were laid in; the schooner's sails were trimmed as if by magic to the coy breeze; her head paid off; and as she swept gracefully round upon a course which would enable her to intercept the *Aurora*, a tiny ball went soaring aloft to her main-topmast-head and, breaking abroad as it reached the truck, a square *black* flag fluttered threateningly out, a fit emblem of the character of those who sailed beneath it.

"Not quite close enough, Mr Rover," remarked Bowen, cheerfully, as the shot sank into the placid depths of the ocean, now gently ruffled by the increasing breeze. "Shall we return the compliment, sir?"

"Not just yet," answered George; "she is still a long way off; and we cannot afford to waste a single ounce of powder or shot. But it is time that we should have everything ready to carry on the fight in earnest, so I must ask *you*, Mr Bowen—as the most reliable man I have on board—to go below and see to the passing up of the powder; it will never do to run the risk of having an explosion in the powder-magazine."

"Very well, sir; I'd have greatly preferred to have been on deck, to take my fair share in the fighting; but I'm ready to do my duty wherever you may choose to order me," said the chief mate, as he walked away aft with a rather rueful face, on his way below to the magazine.

The schooner, finding that she was not yet within range, remained silent for the next five minutes; and then George, who was keenly watching her, saw another flash, another puff of white fleecy smoke, and once more the ball came bounding over the water, straight for the barque.

"It will reach us this time," thought the skipper; and he was right, the shot striking the water about forty feet from the side of the *Aurora* and then bounding harmlessly over her, except for a hole which it punched in the main try-sail in its passage.

"Now, lads," said George, "it's our turn. Mr Ritson, run out the gun, if you please, and show us what you can do in the way of shooting."

"Ay, ay, sir," answered Ritson gleefully, "the water's smooth, the ship's steady, and altogether it's a capital day for this kind of work. Man the tackles, there; run out; muzzle to the right, a trifle; not too much; so, well there; elevate the muzzle a *leetle* more; there, that'll do; I'll try that. Now then, Snowball, let's have that 'loggerhead.' Ned, just freshen that priming a bit. Now stand clear, lads, and you, Tom, touch her off when I give the word."

Then, stooping down, he glanced along the sights for an instant or two, and finally gave the word "Fire!"

At the word Tom promptly applied the loggerhead; there was a ringing report; and as the smoke cleared off the shot was seen to strike the water close alongside the schooner, and the next instant a white scar in her bulwarks attested Ritson's skill as a marksman and showed that the shot had taken effect. A hearty cheer from the *Aurora's* crew manifested their elation at this lucky hit; and George, who was watching the schooner through his telescope, quietly remarked—

"Thank you, Ritson; that was capitally aimed; you must have done some execution among the crew of that craft, too,

for there is a great deal of confusion among them on deck, I see. Ah! there they fire again."

Once more the shot came flying straight for the barque; and once more it whistled harmlessly over her, just touching the main-mast as it passed, but inflicting no injury on the spar.

"Capital practice on both sides," remarked the skipper coolly; "six inches further to the right, gentlemen, and you would have plumped that shot right into our main-mast. Now try again, Ritson, and aim for his spars; the sooner we can cripple him the better will be our chances of getting clear of him without loss to ourselves."

Again the *Aurora's* long nine rang out its sharp report; but for some reason, probably from over-eagerness on the part of the second mate, the shot flew wide, passing some twenty yards astern of the schooner.

"Bad luck to it!" exclaimed the discomfited Ritson impatiently. "Run in the gun, lads; and be smart with it; that's your sort; sponge it well out; that'll do; now in with the cartridge; three strokes with the rammer; now home with the shot; run out the gun again; bear a hand with the priming-iron, you Ned; muzzle to the left—a little more yet; well with that. Now Tom, stand by—Fire!"

Both vessels fired at precisely the same moment; the schooner's shot passing in through the *Aurora's* bulwarks close to the gun, and making the splinters fly in all directions, one of the latter grazing Captain Leicester's cheek, and drawing blood; but, very fortunately, beyond this no further damage was done.

On the other hand, the *Aurora's* shot, much better aimed this time, cut the weather whisker-stay on board the schooner, and compelled her to at once keep dead away before the wind in order to prevent the loss of her jib-boom.

"Well shot!" exclaimed George enthusiastically. "Fore and main-braces, lads; port your helm, my man,"—to the helmsman—"and let her come up 'full and by;' round in upon the port-braces, fore and aft; board the fore and main-tacks; aft with the sheets, cheerily, my lads; if we are smart we may get out of gun-shot before they can repair that damage. Well there of all. Now to your gun again, lads, and let's treat them to another dose of the same sort."

The men sprang about the decks like wild-cats, and, in their elation and excitement, did the work of at least three men each; the yards were braced up almost as soon as the ship could luff to the wind; the tacks were seized and boarded with irresistible strength and energy, the sheets flattened in; and in considerably less than five minutes the *Aurora* was rushing along on a bowline with her lee covering-board nearly awash, and a clear, glassy surge spouting up on each side of her cutwater, and foaming away from her sharp bows with a hissing roar which was sweetest music just then to the ears of her delighted crew.

"Now the old barkie travels," exclaimed the exultant Ritson. "Unhook the gun-tackles, you sea-dogs, and rush the gun aft; we'll try a shot out through the stern-ports this time."

At this moment the boom of another gun from the schooner was heard; and next moment the shot came flying through the *Aurora's* rigging, cutting the main-brace pennant, and passing through the head of the foresail. The lee main-yard-arm at once flew forward, throwing the main-sail aback, and of course seriously interfering with the barque's flight.

"Up with your helm and keep her away until the main-sail fills again," commanded George; "haul inboard the brace, and one hand get a marlinespike and jump aloft to make the splice. Be smart, lads; there's no great harm done."

Ritson was, in the meantime, busy aft with the gun; and presently he fired again, pitching the shot fairly on the schooner's fore-castle, where some of her crew were busy with the cut stay.

On board the *Aurora* the main-brace was very soon spliced; after which Captain Leicester had the mizzen, gaff-topsail, and, in short, every stitch of canvas that would draw, set to the freshening breeze; then, inquiry having elicited the fact that tea—or supper, as the men termed it—was ready, he ordered the crew to knock off and take the meal whilst they had the opportunity.

George and the two mates had their meal served on deck, the top of the skylight doing duty for a table; and they were about half-way through with it when the pirate schooner was seen to once more haul her wind in pursuit. This, however, gave them no immediate apprehension, as she was far out of gun-shot; the breeze was still steadily freshening, and the *Aurora* was plunging along at a racing pace over the short sea which had already been raised, with the wind humming merrily through her rigging, and a great foaming surge hissing and buzzing under her lee bow and streaming out in a long trail of bubbling froth behind her.

"We're going to have a fresh breeze to-night, I think, sir," remarked the chief mate, as he helped himself to another slab of salt junk, "and, if it'll only come fresh enough to oblige us to stow our royals, I think that, on an easy bowline—our best point of sailing—we shall be able to fairly run away from that chap."

"Yes," said George, "I believe we shall. And if we can only get weather which will give us the advantage over her in the matter of speed, I shall feel very much inclined to turn the tables on her, and give her a good wholesome lesson. It struck me that our gun threw its shot considerably further than hers did."

"I'm *sure* it did," emphatically corroborated Ritson; "and it'd be doin' a real service to give the piccarooning rascals a thorough good drubbing."

It appeared, however, as though the fortuitous combination of circumstances hinted at by Captain Leicester was not to be; for before long it became evident that the schooner, notwithstanding the freshening breeze and the increasing sea, was slowly but steadily gaining on the barque. But "a stern chase is a long chase," and the schooner, while repairing damages, had not only been left astern, but had also been compelled to run a considerable distance to leeward. So that, when the sun set, and the short brilliant tropical twilight faded out of the sky, she was still some six miles distant, broad on the *Aurora's* lee quarter.

With the setting of the sun there came a still further freshening of the breeze, laying the barque down upon her side until her lee covering-board was buried, and the water, spouting up through the scuppers, was washing the deck on the lee-side almost up to the coamings of the main-hatchway. The wind was making weird, wild music as it swept through the taut-strained rigging; and the topgallant and royal-masts were whipping and bending like fishing-rods with every pitch and 'scend of the ship, while the straining canvas, towering away aloft toward the dusky heavens, stood as firm and

steady as though moulded in iron. The watch below were in their hammocks, enjoying the repose which they had earned by a day of unusual exertion; and the watch on deck were also, by George's express command, snatching such a weazel-like sleep as could be obtained consistently with the holding of themselves ready for a prompt call in case of emergency.

The night wore slowly on; the young moon, which had been hanging like a silver crescent low in the western sky, sank beneath the horizon; and the spangled heavens became almost wholly obscured by the broadening masses of dusky vapour which swept rapidly athwart them. There was light enough, however, to render the schooner easily distinguishable with the aid of the night-glass; and George, after attentively watching her for more than half an hour, came to the conclusion that the *Aurora* was at length holding her own.

"We will clew up and furl the royals, if you please Mr Ritson," said he to the officer of the watch; "I am getting uneasy about those sticks; and it would be most unfortunate to lose them just now. I believe we shall do just as well without the royals as with them in this fresh breeze. How is she steering? Pretty easily?" to the man at the wheel.

"No, sir," was the reply; "she's 'gripin'' awful; it takes a half-turn of the wheel to keep her out of the wind."

"Then we'll take in the gaff-topsail and mizzen-topmast staysail as well," said George. "All that weather-helm must make at least half a knot difference in her sailing."

Sail was accordingly shortened, the result proving the justice of Captain Leicester's surmise, for there was no perceptible diminution in the speed of the barque; on the contrary, in another half-hour both the skipper and his second mate were convinced that the *Aurora* was gradually creeping away from her pursuer.

The spread of canvas was then further reduced by the hauling down of the main-topgallant-staysail, and the furling of the fore-topgallant-sail; and finally the flying-jib and main-topgallant-sail were stowed, after which the two craft appeared to maintain, as nearly as possible, an equal speed all through the remainder of the night.

The next morning dawned with a coppery-red tint in the eastern sky, and a streaky look in the clouds, which was a presage of a windy day. The schooner was about six miles distant, bearing three points on the barque's lee quarter. Her royal, topgallant-sail, and flying-jib were stowed; but by the way in which she was lying over to the breeze, and the dense showers of spray which were incessantly flying in over her weather bow, it was evident that she was still carrying all the canvas she could stagger under.

"Now," said George to the first mate, when the latter came on deck to take charge at eight bells, "I think we have that fellow in our power, and can do pretty nearly what we like with him. In this breeze and with this sea we can outsail him; and with all that water pouring in upon his fore-castle it will be difficult for him to work his long-gun to advantage, which I believe, unlike ourselves, he has fixed there on a pivot; so I propose to let him creep up within gun-shot astern of us, and fight him there, where all the advantage will be on our side."

Accordingly, as soon as the crew had taken their breakfast, Captain Leicester ordered the jib and fore-topmast staysail-sheets to be hauled over to windward in order that the barque's speed might be reduced without shortening sail and so exciting any suspicion in the minds of the pirates of a desire on the part of the *Aurora* to renew the action.

This manoeuvre had the desired effect; and shortly before noon the schooner once more opened fire, the shot flying past the *Aurora*, and at some distance to leeward of her. This was doubtless in consequence of the violent motion of the schooner, which, being a much smaller vessel than the barque, was much more lively in the sea-way. This gave the *Aurora* another advantage over the schooner, as was at once apparent when Ritson recommenced his gun-practice; his first shot passing through the schooner's topsail in close proximity to the mast.

The firing soon became pretty animated on both sides, the *Aurora* having, however, a decided advantage over her antagonist both in rapidity and precision of fire. Thus, while at the end of half an hour only one of the schooner's shot had touched the barque, and that without doing any material damage, her own sails and rigging were pretty well cut up, several shot-holes being visible in her canvas, whilst a number of ends and bights of ropes were seen streaming to leeward in the wind.

At length a lucky shot from the *Aurora* struck the schooner's fore-mast just below the eyes of the rigging, wounding the spar so badly that it almost immediately afterwards went, carrying away the main-topmast with it, and in an instant the whole of the pirate's top-hamper was towing to leeward, causing tremendous confusion on board, and placing the craft almost completely at the mercy of her antagonist.

A hearty cheer burst from the lips of the *Aurora's* crew at the sight of this disaster on board their adversary, a disaster of which George was determined to take the fullest advantage.

"Now, lads," he exclaimed, "she is at our mercy, and we will inflict on her a lesson she is not likely to speedily forget. Clew up the courses, then let go the topsail-halliards, and double-reef the fore and main-topsails, and, as you come down, stow the courses."

The men sprang aloft with alacrity to execute these duties; and, on their return to the deck, sail was further shortened, until the barque was under double-reefed topsails and fore-topmast staysail only; when she wore round and stood directly for the disabled pirate schooner, the long-gun being run forward and pointed out of the foremost port on the lee-side, and the firing resumed.

In a very short time she was close to the schooner, round and round which George proceeded deliberately to sail, maintaining a steady fire upon her meanwhile.

The pirate schooner, however, though disabled, was by no means rendered harmless, as Captain Leicester soon discovered to his cost; for, as he was sailing past her to windward, at a distance of about fifty yards, to his very great surprise, her crew suddenly threw open three ports in her weather bulwarks, and the next moment three six-pounder shots came whistling through the *Aurora's* rigging, cutting a rope or two, but happily missing the spars and all gear connected with the canvas which was set. At the same moment Ritson fired his nine-pounder, and struck the schooner (which was listing over to leeward with the weight of her wreckage) exactly between wind and water.

Now that the two vessels were so close together, it became apparent that Captain Leicester had been perfectly correct in his estimate as to the strength of the schooner's crew; for whilst a strong gang could be seen hard at work

clearing away the wreckage of the spars, a sufficient number of men were still available to work the broadside guns to windward, which they did with great animation as long as it was possible for one of them to be pointed at the *Aurora*.

This was not for long, however, for the barque, holding on her way, wore round as soon as she was out of musket-shot, and, passing across the schooner's stern, swept up again to leeward, Ritson all the while keeping up an animated fire from the long-nine, and evidently doing tremendous execution among the thickly-clustering men on the schooner's deck, who, whilst the barque was to leeward, were unable, in consequence of the wreckage, to return more than a very ineffectual fire.

At length, after an hour of this work, the black flag, which had fallen with the main-topmast, was exhibited above the bulwarks of the schooner for a moment, lashed to a boat's oar, and was then dropped again, in token of surrender.

"That means that they've struck, sir, you may depend on't," exclaimed Ritson, walking aft as if for further instructions.

"Yes, I have no doubt it does," replied Captain Leicester; "but if they expect that the fact of their striking will be of any benefit to them, they are woefully mistaken. We are altogether too short-handed to attempt to take possession of her as a prize; and as to leaving her alone, in order that she may repair damages and have the opportunity of renewing her depredations, it is not to be thought of. She is not entitled to any of the privileges of an ordinary enemy, nor shall I extend any such to her. She is simply *a pirate*, one of those pests of the high seas which it is the duty of any honest man to destroy, if he have the opportunity. And that," he concluded grimly, "is what I intend to do. Keep up your fire, sir, and aim so as to strike her between wind and water if possible. I'll sink her before I've done with her."

Ritson accordingly returned forward, and, communicating the captain's determination to the crew, they resumed work at the gun, with the stern set faces of men who recognised that they had a very terrible and disagreeable duty to perform, from the responsibility of which they dared not shrink.

As soon as the schooner's crew discovered that their surrender had not been accepted, they reopened fire as well as they could from their own guns, and a man was seen to jump into the main-rigging and run aloft with something rolled up under his arm, which proved in another minute to be the black flag. Ascending as high as the lower masthead, he coolly climbed up on the cross-trees, and, standing there, deftly and rapidly lashed it to the masthead, after which he deliberately descended the rigging again, defiantly shaking his fist at the *Aurora* as he did so.

About ten minutes after the occurrence of this incident there followed another of an infinitely more thrilling and startling character. The *Aurora* had worn round, and was once more passing the schooner; and Ritson was in the act of glancing along the sights of the gun, preparatory to giving the order to fire, when, without the slightest warning or premonition of the dreadful tragedy about to take place, a dazzling flash of light was seen on board the schooner, her spars, her deck, and all that was upon it went soaring in fragments high into the air, her sides were rent open, and in a tremendous cloud of smoke, and with a deafening report, the devoted craft disappeared.

The barque's whole frame jarred, her canvas flapped violently, and she careened perceptibly under the terrific concussion; a dead silence seemed suddenly to have fallen upon the scene of strife, and then came the *splash, splash* of the falling fragments into the water around, accompanied by the heavy thud of others descending upon the barque's deck; the water seethed and leaped madly for a few seconds on the spot where the schooner had a minute before been floating, then subsided once more into the long, steady, regular run and heave of the sea, and all was over.

Whether the explosion was the result of accident, or the deliberate act of her desperate and reckless commander, it was of course impossible to ascertain; very probably it was the latter; but, whatever the cause of it, the pirate schooner was no more; a few rent and blackened timbers, with here and there the mangled remains of what had a few minutes before been a human being, floating on the surface of the heaving waters, was all that remained of her and her crew. George Leicester's grim deed of retribution was complete.

Chapter Thirteen.

Surprised.

"A Terrible ending to a sin-stained career," murmured the skipper of the *Aurora* with white set lips, when the first shock of surprise and consternation had passed away sufficiently to allow him to speak. "Up with your helm, my man," he continued to the seaman at the wheel; "up with your helm, and keep her away upon a west and by south course; we'll get away from this accursed spot as soon as possible. Man the braces, fore and aft, if you please, Mr Ritson, square the yards, secure the long-gun, and then let all hands make sail."

Then, going to the companion, he passed the word below for Mr Bowen to close the magazine and come on deck.

Five minutes later the chief mate emerged from the companion, and, walking up to George, observed—

"Well, sir, you've managed to make a pretty effectual end of the buccaneer, I see."

"Yes," answered George gravely. "The schooner struck; but we are much too short-handed to take and retain possession of such a craft as that, so, as I did not feel justified in leaving them at liberty to resume their nefarious business, I continued to fire into the schooner, intending to sink her; and I am of opinion that her captain, recognising the fact that escape was hopeless, blew her up with his own hand, hoping to involve us in the destruction also. It was a terrible thing, Mr Bowen, to cause the loss of so many lives, but I am convinced that I only did my duty. And now, as there seems to be no immediate prospect of our falling in with the fleet again, I propose to take full advantage of this fine fair wind, and proceed upon my voyage; so please pack on the ship everything that will draw; then let the men clear up the decks, and knock off work; they have had two very fatiguing days, and have fought well; let them get all the rest they possibly can between this and to-morrow morning."

When the sun set that evening, the *Aurora* was flying to the southward and westward (as if instinct with life and thrilling with horror at her terrible achievement) before the freshening gale at the rate of fully twelve knots per hour, with studding-sails set on both sides, aloft and aloft; while her crew, assembled on the fore-castle, discussed in low tones the incidents of the fight, and her skipper, with hands clasped behind him, bent head, and furrowed brow, held solemn self-communion upon the same subject.

George Leicester now found himself at liberty to attend to his guest, and he spent almost the whole of his leisure time by the side of Walford's cot. For the first week after the arrival of the latter on board the *Aurora* very little change or improvement could be detected in him; his mental faculties seemed to be almost paralysed; and he would lie in his cot for hours at a time, with wide-opened eyes, staring into vacancy, the blank, expressionless look upon his face betraying the utter inactivity of his mind. Then there would occur a short period, during which it seemed that memory was struggling to re-assert itself; he would glance vacantly round the cosy sleeping-cabin in which he found himself, a look of mild surprise would overspread his features, and he would pass his hand over his brow with the action of one who is trying to remember something; then would recur another vacant period.

During all this time he never expressed a wish or uttered a single coherent word; only occasionally, when the memory was struggling to regain its seat, he would mutter a few incoherent words, that of "murder" being sometimes repeated, in low tones of suppressed horror, half-a-dozen times together. His appetite appeared to be good, since he ate and drank freely whatever was offered him; but if the food was withheld, as it sometimes was, by way of experiment, at Captain Leicester's order, he never asked for it, or evinced any surprise or uneasiness at its non-appearance.

About the tenth day, however, after the one on which he had been picked up, George thought he detected signs of improvement. The periods of thinking were more frequent and more prolonged, and once during that day, when the skipper entered the cabin, Walford noticed the opening of the door, and, turning his eyes in that direction, regarded George for some moments with a steadfast inquiring look; but the recognition, if such there was, was momentary only, the hand was pressed meditatively to the forehead the next instant, and then the blank look returned.

The next day witnessed a recurrence of the same symptoms, added to which there seemed to be a vague sort of semi-recognition of George's voice; for, whenever the latter spoke, Walford would look up with an anxious questioning glance, as though he had an idea that he had heard the voice before.

Finally, on that same evening, when George and Mr Bowen were in the saloon together, chatting over the tea-table, the after-cabin door being open, so as to insure a current of air through the apartment, Walford, who had been asleep, suddenly started up in his cot with the exclamation—

"Surely that is Leicester's voice?"

George heard the ejaculation, and, springing to his feet, stepped eagerly into the sleeping-cabin, saying—

"Of course it is, my dear fellow. How do you feel now? Better?"

"Better?" repeated Walford. "I haven't been ill, have I? Where am I? How did I come here? And where did *you* come from?"

"What a string of questions!" said George with a laugh. "But don't worry yourself by trying to guess the answers to any of them just now, you have been ill; but, thank God, you are getting better again. When you are well enough to listen, I will tell you all I know; until then you must be satisfied with the assurance that you are as safe as a man can be in a tight little ship, with fine weather and plenty of sea-room."

"Safe!" ejaculated Walford. "Ah! but *am* I safe? I have a horrible feeling of dread upon me—a sensation of some frightful danger hovering over me—a feeling that unless I can do something, I know not what, a hideous disaster will happen."

He shuddered violently as these words left his lips; then, turning suddenly to George, he grasped him convulsively by the arm, and exclaimed in agitated tones—

"Oh, Leicester! tell me what is it that threatens? What have I to guard against? If you know what it is—"

"There," said George soothingly, "do not worry about it any more. I did not intend to say a word about it for some time to come; but, since I find that you remember something about it, I will tell you this much. You *have* been in very great danger indeed, but all that is long past; you are now on board my ship, more than a thousand miles away from the danger which threatened you, and as safe as a man can be in mid-ocean."

"Thanks, thanks! I believe you," muttered Walford with a sigh of ineffable relief, as he sank back upon his pillow. "So I am in your ship, eh? That's strange; I can't imagine—but, there, I shall not worry myself any more about the matter; you'll look after me, I know; you're a thorough good fellow, Leicester, and I'm almost sorry now that I—that I—um! what *was* it, now? Well, I dare say I shall remember it further on. I say, old fellow, what time is it? Nearly dinner-time, I should think, for I feel most confoundedly hungry."

"It *is* nearly dinner-time," answered George, delighted to find so great an improvement in the man he had vowed to protect and restore. "If you can hold out for another half-hour, I think I may promise you a decent meal by that time. Will that do?"

"Yes, oh, yes, I dare say I can manage to survive until then," murmured Walford.

Whereupon the skipper hurried away and took counsel with the steward; the result of which was that in little more than the stipulated half-hour Walford was served with the best meal which the *Aurora's* resources could furnish.

From that time he grew steadily better, and in another day or two he was able to leave his cot and to indulge in a bath, a clean shave, and an hour or so on deck, half-sitting, half-reclining in a hammock which the skipper had ordered to be slung for him from the spanker-boom. He suffered from extreme bodily weakness, doubtless the result of his frenzied exertions on board the ill-fated *Princess Royal*; but that was, of course, an evil which rest and nourishing food would speedily remedy. But he did not recover the use of his reasoning faculties for some time after the period now referred to, and then the recovery was only partial.

As for Captain Leicester, he was in high spirits; the breeze lasted fresh for four full days after his encounter with the pirate schooner, so fresh indeed that once or twice he was obliged to furl his royals, in order to save the sticks; and the barque, no longer compelled to moderate her pace to that of the slowest sailer in a large fleet, maintained a steady speed of twelve knots during the whole of that time, thus fully making up, in the skipper's opinion, for the time and ground lost during the gale, and encouraging him to look forward hopefully to the accomplishment of a quick passage.

But such a state of things was too good to last. On the fifth day the wind fell light, and on the sixth it failed them altogether, leaving the *Aurora* helpless in the "doldrums," she being at that time about a thousand miles from Cape Haytien, and six hundred from the island of Saint Thomas. This was particularly vexatious, because Captain Leicester considered that, had the breeze continued fresh and favourable for only twenty-four hours longer, it would in all probability have run him fairly into the North-East trades, and he would then have been able to calculate the duration of the remainder of the voyage with almost mathematical exactness, and, what was still more to the purpose, would have been sure of a breeze, and that a fair one, for the remainder of the way.

However, there was no help for it, they had to take the wind and weather as it came, and the crew had a busy time of it "box-hauling" the yards, now this way, now that; trimming the sails to every passing breath of the capricious air, and, after all their trouble, accomplishing only some half-a-dozen miles during the whole day.

On the next day it was the same, excepting that the proceedings were varied by a tremendously heavy thunder-storm, followed by, instead of the wind which Captain Leicester so earnestly hoped for, a perfect deluge of rain, which lasted for rather more than an hour. It was a regular tropical downpour; the water descended, not in separate detached drops, but in *sheets*, which splashed down on the decks as if from a cataract. Advantage was taken of this copious downfall of pure fresh water to refill all the water-casks; after which the scuppers were plugged, wash-deck tubs filled, and all hands, stripping to the skin, indulged in the unwonted luxury of a thorough ablution in the warm soft water, finishing up by rousing out all their "wash clothes," and treating them to the same beneficial process.

The storm cleared away as rapidly as it had worked up, leaving the sky absolutely cloudless, and the water thrashed down by the rain until it was smooth as a polished mirror. The heat was intense, and the men, notwithstanding their refreshing bath, went about their work languidly, perspiring at every pore. It was a positive relief to them to see the sun at last go down behind the gleaming horizon, and a greater relief still when, an hour later, a faint breeze from the eastward came creeping over the water, and, barely filling the *Aurora's* light upper sails, gave her just sufficient way through the water to allow of her head being kept in the right direction.

At eight o'clock that evening Mr Bowen retired to his cabin, it being then his watch below, and at nine the skipper followed his example. The ship was then stealing along through the water at a speed of about two knots, the royals, topgallantsails, and more lofty staysails just "asleep," the topsails alternately filling out and flapping again to the masts with the barely perceptible swing of the ship over the low, long, sleepy heave of the swell, and the courses drooping heavily and uselessly from the yards. The sky was "as clear as a bell," to use a favourite metaphor of Ritson's, not a trace of cloud being visible in any part of the vast sapphire vault which stretched overhead, spangled here and there with a few stars of the first magnitude, and with the moon, nearly at the full, hanging in the midst like a disc of burnished silver, her pure soft light flooding the sea with its dazzling radiance, and causing the sails to stand out like sheets of ivory against the deep dark blue of the sky. There seemed to be no immediate prospect of any change in the weather, but George was thankful that the ship was really at last moving once more—though ever so slowly—in the right direction; and, fervently hoping that the breeze would last long enough to run him into the "trades," he went below with an easy mind, after giving Ritson the usual stereotyped order to call him should any untoward event occur.

After the overpowering heat of the day the comparative coolness of the night was unspeakably refreshing, and with all the doors, the skylight, and the stern-windows open, and a thorough circulation of fresh air through the cabins, their several occupants were soon wrapped in a sound and dreamless slumber.

It was even more pleasant on deck than it was below, for the hull of the ship had, during the long scorching day, absorbed a considerable amount of heat, which it gave off again during the night, causing the cabins and fore-castle to be unpleasantly warm even after all possible means had been adopted for their thorough ventilation, whilst on deck the full benefit of the breeze, what there was of it, was to be obtained.

Such, at all events, was Mr Ritson's opinion, as he sauntered listlessly fore and aft, between the taffrail and the main-mast, glancing now aloft at the all but idle canvas, then into the binnacle, then over the side at the tiny bubbles creeping lazily past the ship's side, and finally forward, to where the man on the lookout could be seen seated upon the rail, facing ahead, with his arms folded and his back leaning against the great wooden stock of one of the anchors, his form showing black as that of an ebony statue against the brilliant silvery sheen of the moonlight on the water. The remainder of the crew were dimly visible seated on the deck in the black shadow of the bulwarks, a tiny red spark or two indicating that some of them were solacing the idle hours with a whiff or two of the fragrant weed. Officers who were strict disciplinarians would have forbidden smoking in the watch on deck, and would have insisted on the whole watch keeping constantly on the move, as a safeguard against dozing; but Ritson was not a strict disciplinarian; he liked to spare the men all unnecessary labour of every kind, and, as there was no sail-trimming to be done, he just allowed them to rest their weary bodies as much as they could.

He would have liked greatly to rest his own weary body, too, for indeed he felt it to be almost a torture to be pacing ceaselessly to and fro there on the deck, hour after hour.

He pulled out his watch, the hands indicated that it was ten minutes to ten; it would be full two hours more before he would be relieved. There was a most inviting-looking chair standing on deck near the skylight, which Captain Leicester had been using during the day, and poor Ritson thought how pleasant it would be to rest his tired limbs in it for a few minutes. Then he took a stroll round the decks, just to wile away the time, and to make sure that the watch—and especially the lookout—was not "caulking." The shadowy figures scrambled somewhat hurriedly to their feet on his approach, giving rise to just the faintest suspicion that perhaps after all they *might* have been "shutting their eyes to keep them warm;" but the lookout man seemed unconscious of his presence, and was humming, scarcely above his breath, the air of a homely song as Ritson passed him, his gaze resting on a brig ahead, which had been in sight all day, and which, from the fact that she was steering in the same direction as the *Aurora*, was thought to belong, like themselves, to the dispersed fleet. When Ritson again reached the quarterdeck, it was ten o'clock, so he struck "four bells" sharply; the wheel and lookout were relieved, and then everybody settled down once more, to pass away the remaining two hours of the watch.

As has been already hinted, Ritson was not so strict a disciplinarian as to forbid smoking by the watch on deck, so long, of course, as the smoking was not allowed to interfere with the duty of the ship. Nay, more; he sometimes allowed himself the luxury of a pipe under similar circumstances, and he thought he might safely do so on the present occasion. So, seating himself in the skipper's chair, he drew out his pipe, tobacco, and knife, and prepared to enjoy his whiff.

Oh! how comfortable a chair that was! How great a relief to sit in it, even for the minute or two during which he was cutting up his tobacco and filling his pipe! This work, though performed with great deliberation, was at length accomplished; his steel and tinder-box furnished him with a light; and he began to smoke.

Somehow he forgot to get up out of the chair again when his pipe was lighted, but, leaning back restfully in it instead, watched the little rings and wreaths of smoke which issued from it and went floating lazily away until they vanished in the soft cool air of the night. Then, by association of ideas, Ritson's thoughts strayed away to the little flaxen, curly-haired urchin at home, his one-year-old son, who used to be so delighted to watch the wreathing smoke issue from his father's pipe, that he would crow and jump and kick upon his mother's knee, until the good woman had hard work to hold him. He fancied he could see the young rascal still, his fat, dimpled cheeks wreathed with smiles of delight, his blue eyes sparkling, and his fat chubby arms and legs flourishing in the air as he made frantic grasps at the little blue smoke-rings floating toward him. Yes; and he could hear Anna's, his wife's voice, half-jestingly, half in earnest, scolding the happy father for keeping the child awake. And, letting his thoughts have free play on *so* pleasant a theme, he could recall the same voice crooning a soothing lullaby to the little fellow as, later on, he nestled into his mother's breast, tired out with his romp, and softly sank to sleep. Very soothing was that lullaby—very soothing indeed—yes—it was—very—a—very—soothing—little—song—and—and—

And Ritson's head sank upon his breast, as he, too, yielded to the seductive influence of sleep.

A few feet away stood or rather lolled the helmsman, his body drooping over the wheel, on the upper rim of which he had crossed his arms for the sake of the welcome support. On taking charge of the wheel he had been given the course, and, glancing into the binnacle, he found that the barque was heading in the required direction; upon which, like a good helmsman, he at once selected a star to steer by, a star which was just a finger's breadth clear of the main-royal yard-arm. By the time that he had been at the wheel a quarter of an hour he discovered that the ship was steering herself, and he accordingly relaxed his vigilance, allowing his thoughts to travel away whithersoever they would. Gradually his weary eyelids closed, and a short period—perhaps a minute or so—of forgetfulness followed, from which he would suddenly start guiltily and glance first aloft at the star, and then at the motionless figure of Ritson. This glance of inquiry showing that the star still occupied its proper position, and that the second mate had not observed his dereliction of duty, the eyelids again closed, and a longer period of forgetfulness would ensue, which of course ended, as it was sure to do, in the man falling soundly asleep as he stood.

As for the man on the lookout, he was notorious for his somnolent powers. He made no pretence of an effort to keep awake. There was no reason, he argued, why he should. It was a fine night, as light as day; there was nothing in sight but the brig ahead, and, although the *Aurora* was clearly gaining on her, there was no likelihood of her running over her in *his* watch; therefore to keep a lookout just then was quite a useless formality. Besides, there was the officer of the watch, who would keep all the lookout required on such a brilliantly fine night. And, arguing thus, he settled himself comfortably into the position vacated by his predecessor, and, folding his arms across his breast, tranquilly composed himself to sleep.

The remainder of the watch had settled down to sleep, as a matter of course; *they* had not the lookout; and they were within call of the officer of the watch, should their services be required; that, they considered, was all that was just then expected of them; and they closed their eyes, and yielded to their feelings of drowsiness without a shadow of compunction.

Thus, by half-past ten o'clock that night, the entire ship's company of the *Aurora*, fore and aft, were fast asleep.

Whilst all hands were thus wrapped in peaceful oblivion a small object gradually merged into view immediately ahead of the *Aurora*. Had the lookout man been broad awake—instead of fast asleep, as he was—he would certainly not have noticed this object until it was within a mile of the ship—unless his gaze had happened to have been attracted by an occasional momentary flashing gleam of silvery light—because its colour so artfully matched the delicate steely blue grey of the gently-rippled sea that it was absolutely invisible beyond that distance. Even at the distance of *half* a mile a cursory careless glance ahead might have easily missed it. But when a quarter of a mile only intervened between it and the barque the look out man, had he been wide-awake and with all his wits about him, would suddenly have become conscious that a large boat, painted grey, and full of men, was pulling swiftly and noiselessly toward the ship. On she swept, silently as a dream; not a word was uttered on board her; there was no warning roll and rattle of the oars in the rowlocks to apprise the sleeping crew of the approach of danger; there was not even the plashing sound of the oar-blades dipping into the water, they rose and fell silently as the misty oars of a phantom boat; and when at length she swept up alongside the *Aurora*, a *sign* was all that was needed to convey the orders of the officer in charge to his crew: his right hand was gently raised, the oars were noiselessly lifted from the rowlocks and laid in without a sound upon the padded thwarts, the boat sheered alongside, without absolutely touching, the painter was made fast to the *Aurora's* fore-chains, and sixteen armed figures climbed noiselessly as ghosts over the bulwarks, leaving two in charge of the boat.

Chapter Fourteen.

Sold into Slavery.

When George Leicester retired to his cabin that night, it was with the full intention to at once retire to his cot. Instead, however, of doing this, he flung himself down on the sofa, to indulge in a few minutes of entirely undisturbed thought, and there sleep overtook him.

From this he was abruptly startled into complete wakefulness by a sudden cry, immediately followed by a confused sound of struggling on deck, and of a dull crunching blow, a cry of "Oh, God! have mercy upon my dear—" another blow, a heavy fall on the planking overhead, a deep groan, and then a splash in the water alongside.

Conscious at once that something terrible had happened, he sprang to his feet, buckled on his cutlass, and, snatching up a pistol in one hand and a lamp in the other, hurriedly stepped out of the cabin to investigate. He was just in time to encounter at the foot of the companion-ladder a motley crowd of swarthy-skinned strangers, who, with bared daggers and sword-blades, were making their way down to the cabin. That they were enemies was so instantly apparent that George unhesitatingly levelled his pistol at the foremost man and fired. The bullet struck the man in the shoulder, shattering the bone, and he staggered to one side,—only to make way for others, however, who, pressing upon George, disarmed and overpowered him before he had opportunity to do further harm. Mr Bowen, who had dashed out of his cabin just behind George, was similarly disarmed and overpowered; and then the crowd pressed on into the cabin, where they found and secured Walford and the lad Tom.

Having made a thorough search of the various state-rooms, the strangers—who were evidently Spaniards—hurried their prisoners on deck. Here a single glance sufficed to show Captain Leicester that his ship had been taken from him by a clever surprise, aided—or rather rendered possible—by terrible carelessness on the part of those left in charge of the deck. The crew, as he found on rapidly counting heads, were all present—with one exception—securely bound hand and

foot, and huddled together under the bulwarks. The exception—the missing man—was Ritson; and the overturned and broken chair, the blood-spattered deck in its immediate vicinity, and the heavy splash into the water alongside, which George had heard, rendered the whole story as plain and clear as the moon which rode so serenely in the heavens above. Poor Ritson! he had paid with his life the penalty of his disastrous lapse of duty. And the drowsy helmsman—who had obviously awakened in time to spring to the assistance of his superior—was lying near the skylight, white and ghastly in the moonlight, with his skull cloven, and a great black pool of blood slowly spreading on the planking beneath his head. The brig ahead, now hove-to and evidently awaiting the approach of the *Aurora*, told George from whence his enemies had sprung; and—now that it was all too late—he bitterly reproached himself for his lack of caution with regard to her.

The individuals who had thus cleverly gained possession of the barque were as ruffianly a set of scoundrels as could well be met with on the high seas. Their leader, a brawny, thick-set Spaniard, with a skin tanned to the hue of well-seasoned mahogany, his ragged black locks bound round with a filthy red silk handkerchief, and surmounted by a broad-brimmed straw hat, his body clad in a red and yellow striped worsted shirt, confined at the waist by a cutlass-belt, into which a long-barrelled pistol was thrust, and his legs encased in sea-boots reaching nearly to the thigh, was a particularly truculent-looking ruffian; and a powerful negro, somewhat similarly clad, who seemed to be his chief *aide*, was little if anything better.

That they were pirates there could be no possible doubt, and poor George Leicester expected nothing less than that he and his ship's company would all have their throats cut, and then be unceremoniously pitched overboard, to keep poor Ritson company. It soon appeared, however, that his career was not to be thus summarily brought to an end, for after a few words between the leader and the negro, George and his crew were, after their bonds had been looked to and made more secure, distributed about the deck, and chained to the ring-bolts in the bulwarks and elsewhere.

The *Aurora*, under the influence of a slightly freshening breeze, soon joined company with the brig, from which a boat then put off, bringing on board the barque a tall handsome man, whose features were, however, spoiled by the expression of cunning and cruelty legibly imprinted on them. He said a few words to the Spaniard in charge, glanced round the deck at the helpless prisoners, made a jesting remark or two, at which of course everybody dutifully laughed, gave George—who unfortunately happened to be nearest him—a playful kick in the mouth with his heavy boot, and then sauntered leisurely down into the cabin, where, from the repeated loud bursts of laughter, and the singing which soon arose, a carouse seemed to have been promptly entered upon.

The sky to the eastward was brightening with the approach of dawn, when the revellers at last staggered once more on deck. Here the handsome man—who seemed to be the chief of the pirate crew—paused for a moment, apparently to reiterate and emphasise certain commands already laid upon his subordinate, after which he went down the side into his boat, and some five minutes afterwards the two craft filled away once more upon their former course.

It would be impossible to convey to the reader, without going into the most shocking and disgusting details, any clear idea of the sufferings and indignities to which the unfortunate captain and crew of the *Aurora* were subjected during the next three weeks. Suffice it to say that during the whole of that time they were *never* released from the ring-bolts to which they were chained; that they lay there on the hard planking day and night, alternately scorched by the fierce rays of the noonday sun, and chilled by the heavy dews of night; that they were sparingly and irregularly fed—and then only upon the coarsest and most loathsome of food—and still more sparingly and irregularly supplied with water; that they were the recipients of incessant abuse and brutality from the wretches who were in possession of the ship; and some slight conception can be formed of their dreadful state of body and mind during that interminable three weeks.

At the end of that time the land was made, and late at night both ships glided into an anchorage, where they brought-up, the canvas was furled in a slovenly fashion which drove poor Bowen—in spite of all that he had suffered—half-distracted, the boats were lowered, and preparations were at once made for the transport of the prisoners to the shore.

This operation, under the direction of the truculent-looking and ruffianly Spaniard already mentioned as the head of the gang in possession of the *Aurora*, was speedily effected. The prisoners, handcuffed with their hands behind them, were sent down into one of the boats lowered for their reception, and there secured to a length of heavy chain, so that where one went, the rest were compelled to go also; and, thus yoked together, they were transferred to the shore. A glance at the star-lit sky, in which the pole-star hung, only some twenty to twenty-five degrees above the horizon, told poor Leicester that they were landing upon a shore open to the northward, and that, from the position of Polaris in the sky, they were somewhere within about twenty-five degrees of the equator; but, beyond that, he was just then unable to learn anything further concerning their whereabouts.

As the boat's keel grated upon the beach, the prisoners were ordered by sufficiently significant gestures—none of them understanding a single word of Spanish—to climb over the side and make their way up the beach.

The Spaniard in charge pointed significantly with a long whip which he carried to a break in the dense growth of trees which clustered close to the water's edge and then, with an ominous flourish of the lash, gave the word for the miserable band to move forward. A toilsome march of some four or five miles along a track of heavy sand then commenced; a march which, fatiguing enough in itself, after the long period of close confinement to which they had been subjected, was rendered trebly so by the constraint of the heavy chain to which they were secured. Staggering, reeling, and stumbling forward, conscious of nothing beyond their dreadful state of misery and suffering, it took them over three hours to perform that horrible journey, urged on though they were by the incessant application of the cruel whip; and then they found themselves outside an enclosure formed of heavy slabs of planking some nine feet in height. A narrow door gave admittance to the place, and, this being unlocked, the prisoners were driven in, and after the door had been again securely fastened, they were released from the chain, and, still with their hands secured behind them, allowed to stretch their exhausted bodies upon the ground, and take such repose as was possible under the circumstances.

The first definite idea to take possession of George Leicester's mind, after he had fully realised the calamity of his capture, was escape. Whilst chained immovable to a ring-bolt on his own vessel's deck, this was clearly a simple impossibility; and as he now glanced round the enclosure in which he found himself, he recognised the fact that it was still equally so. It was true that the place was open to the sky, and that the scaling of the barricade would be, to a strong, active, *free* man, simply a pleasant gymnastic exercise; but he was *not* free; his hands were shackled behind him; a sentinel, armed with cutlass and gun, was promptly placed on guard over the wretched group of captives; and last, but not least, the three weeks of confinement, exposure, and privation to which he had been subjected had left their mark upon him; he could no longer call himself a strong and active man. Besides this, there was Walford. George's vow to watch over and protect this man, and, if possible, to restore him to Lucy's arms, was ever present to him, and he recognised from the very first that, if ever he should be so fortunate as to escape, Walford must certainly accompany him. When Leicester contemplated the additional difficulties which this necessity forced upon him, his courage *almost*—

though not quite—failed him; for since the capture of the *Aurora* Walford had, under the influence of the sufferings to which he, in common with the rest, had been subjected, relapsed into a state of almost complete imbecility; so that, so far as assisting in the matter of his own escape was concerned, he was helpless as an infant. There was, however, one point in Leicester's favour; and it was this. Walford still *knew* him, and appeared to recognise, in spite of the mists which obscured his intellect, the fact that George was keenly interested in him; and he was always passively obedient to any injunction which the latter laid upon him.

The unfortunate crew of the *Aurora* were kept confined in this enclosure four days, during which their condition was somewhat ameliorated by the administration of a better quality and a more liberal quantity of food than before, and also by the permission—or rather, the command—to exercise their cramped and stiffened limbs by a daily-increasing amount of exercise.

The cause for this altered treatment soon became apparent. On the morning of the fifth day—by which time their haggard, half-starved, and feeble appearance had to some slight extent passed away, and they were once more able to keep upon their feet for an hour or so without dropping exhausted to the ground—the Spaniard who had charge of them made his appearance in the enclosure, still arrayed in the filthy habiliments which he wore on board the *Aurora*, and armed as usual with whip, cutlass, and pistol; and, flourishing the former threateningly in the air, roughly bade them rise to their feet. This command being obeyed, a chain was produced—somewhat lighter than the one before used—the prisoners were secured to it, and then the negro who acted as the Spaniard's *aide* or chief mate, unlocked the door, and the whole party marched out.

The route on this occasion, as on the last, was along a narrow bridle-path of heavy sand, which led through a dense growth of tropical trees and plants. Following this path for about a mile, the party emerged upon a road crossing the path at right angles, into which they turned, when, at a distance of about two miles, a straggling town of low, white, flat-roofed houses became visible, with blue water beyond, just beginning to be ruffled by the sea-breeze.

A toilsome march, of about an hour's duration, along the glaring white road, during which they were scorched by the fierce rays of the sun, and nearly blinded by the whirling clouds of fine dust, and they entered the town. Passing along a number of narrow sandy streets—deserted, save for the presence of a few negroes and miserable-looking Spaniards, ragged and dirty, bearing barrels of water strapped upon their shoulders, and a goat-herd or two driving his flock of milch goats from door to door—they emerged at last into a large open square, in the centre of which stood a tall, ugly stone fountain, from which more negroes and Spaniards were filling their barrels. From the wide basin of this fountain George and his companions in misery were allowed to slake their thirst, and then they were conducted to a large open shed which stood on one side of the square, and, under the welcome shade of its wide shingled roof, ordered to sit down.

They had not been here long when another gang of unfortunates—negroes this time—were driven into the square and under the shed; then another, and another; making in all some four hundred human beings huddled together there, like cattle in a pound.

Then, for the first time, the full horror of their position burst upon George and his wretched companions; they were in a slave-market, and were about to be sold as slaves.

The conviction that this was actually to be their fate fell upon them like a thunder-bolt; it was almost too much for even George's courage to bear up against; and as for poor Bowen, for a moment it seemed that he would go out of his senses altogether; he prayed; he cursed himself and everybody else; he swore solemnly that he would kill the man who dared to buy him, and finally, in a paroxysm of mad fury, started to his feet, dragging at the chain and exerting such an extraordinary amount of strength—in spite of all his recent sufferings—in his efforts to break away, that for a moment it seemed almost possible that he would succeed. A cruel lash across the face from the Spaniard's whip—a lash which tore away the skin and left a livid bloody weal on both cheeks—only maddened him the more; seeing which, the negro who, with the Spaniard, was in charge of the party, sprang upon him, and, gripping him by the throat, hurled him to the ground with such brutal force that the poor fellow lay there, for a time stunned.

At about nine o'clock the square gradually began to fill, a large number of Spanish gentlemen arriving upon the scene; some on horseback, and others in gigs drawn by a pair of horses driven tandem-fashion. They all smoked incessantly, and nearly all of them, on reaching the square, proceeded at once to the shed, and, walking up and down its entire length, examined with the utmost minuteness every individual beneath its roof, frequently stopping to make some inquiry of those who had the poor wretches in charge.

At ten o'clock a small shrivelled-up specimen of a Spaniard, dressed entirely in white, made his appearance in the square, followed by four negroes bearing a couple of chairs and a lightly-constructed rostrum, and accompanied by a sallow cadaverous-looking individual, with a large book under his arm, a pen behind his ear, and a silver-mounted ink-horn at his button-hole.

Selecting a suitable spot for the purpose, the negroes placed the rostrum on the ground, with one chair in and the other in front of it; the shrivelled-up Spaniard mounted into position, his clerk seated himself in front, a negro perambulated the square, ringing a large hand-bell, and the sale began.

The blacks were offered first, and of these a large proportion had evidently been landed very recently from a slaver. For the most part they were a tall, fine-looking set of men and women; that is to say, they *had* been; but disease and privation had done almost their worst upon them; and as they took their places upon the block, one by one, their forms showed gaunt and spare as so many skeletons. In spite, however, of their poor condition, competition ran high; the bidding was brisk, and they were rapidly "knocked down," one after the other, until the whole of the cargo was cleared.

Then came a gang of negroes—slaves already—belonging to the estate of a tobacco planter, recently deceased, whose heir was disposing of everything prior to a trip to Europe.

Most of these poor wretches had been born on the estate; others had been on it long enough to form family connections upon it; and now husbands and wives, parents and children, were in many cases about to be ruthlessly torn from each other for ever. It was pitiful—it was heart-breaking—to those unaccustomed to such a scene to witness the expression of utter despair on the faces of these poor creatures. Then, as the sale proceeded, this expression would sometimes give way to one of feverish hope as the purchaser of a husband or parent would become a bidder for the wife or child. In one or two rare cases the hope was realised; and as husband and wife, or parent and child, found themselves once more reunited—once more the property of the same man—their joy was enough to wring tears from the heart of a stone. But in most cases the families were utterly broken up, no two members becoming the property of the same purchaser; and then their dreadful misery, their heart-broken anguish, was simply indescribable, and must be left to the imagination of the reader.

At length it came to the turn of the *Aurora's* crew, and Mr Bowen was selected as the first man to be "put up." On being released from the chain, instead of at once stepping up on the block, as he was signed to do, he turned to George, whose arms were still bound behind him, and, extending his hand, touched the latter lightly on the head by way of farewell, exclaiming—

"Well, cap'n, the moment of parting's come at last, and a sorrowful enough parting it is! Battle, storm, fire, or shipwreck I *was* prepared for; but when we sailed out of London, I never dreamed that I was on the highway to *slavery*. Well, God's will be done! Here we are, and I s'pose we must make the best of it while it lasts, which won't be a minute longer than either of us can help, if I know anything of you or myself. If I get clear first, I vow never to steer to the east'ard until you've joined company; and if *you* should happen to be off first, I hope—"

An impatient exclamation from the Spaniard in charge of the party, with a savage lash of the whip, and a gesture of command to mount the block at once, here cut short the rest of poor Bowen's farewell speech.

The mate fairly reeled under the force of the blow, but he steadied himself in an instant, and turned upon his assailant with eyes literally blazing with fury; the veins on his forehead stood out like cords, the muscles of his arms and legs swelled, as he gathered himself together, and his body quivered like that of a tiger crouching to the leap. In another instant he would have had the presumptuous Spaniard in a death-grip, but a cry from Leicester stopped him just in time.

"Steady, Bowen!" exclaimed George eagerly; "steady, dear old friend; resistance is *worse* than useless just now. It is their turn to-day; but ours will come, it *shall* come, some day; and then we will repay them with interest for all our present sufferings."

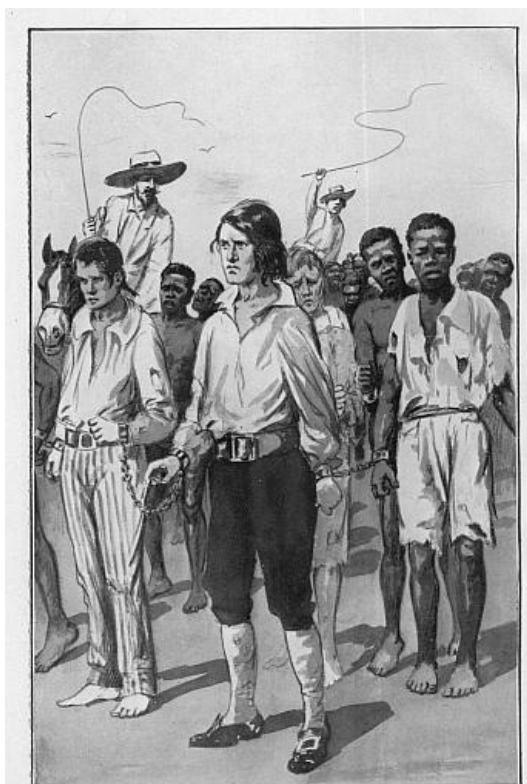
"Right you are, cap'n," was Bowen's reply, as he stepped quietly up on the block; "but," turning to the Spaniard, "if ever you and I meet on blue water—well, you shall rue this day, that's all."

This incident, being of a somewhat exciting and novel character, seemed to afford great gratification to the crowd of buyers gathered round the spot, who eagerly remarked to each other upon the courage and indomitable spirit of the British seaman, and dwelt upon the pleasure it would afford them to quell that courage and humble that proud spirit to the dust. The result of it all was a keen competition for the possession of the man, and Bowen was at length "knocked down" to a tall man with thin aquiline features, the expression of which was pretty evenly made up of pride, resolution, and relentless cruelty.

Walford was next put up, but the miserable condition of the unfortunate man, and his vacant look of imbecility, excited nothing but laughter and ridicule, and no one would make a bid for him.

Seeing that it would be impossible to sell this "lot" alone, the Spaniard with the whip ordered George to be released and placed upon the block also, stepping forward at the same time and whispering eagerly in the ear of the auctioneer.

The latter thereupon explained to the crowd that while the first of the two men offered was undoubtedly valueless of himself and alone, he could be made very useful if purchased along with the second, who had been found to have great influence over him, and could, in fact, persuade him to do anything which might be required; and so on, and so on.



THE THREE WHITE MEN—NOW SLAVES—FOUND THEMSELVES CHAINED TO A GROUP OF NEGROES
V.O.T.A. (p. 196)

A little brisk bidding then ensued for the two on the speculative among the buyers, who were willing to risk a little possible loss on the chance of obtaining two slaves for a trifle more than the price of one; and finally they were purchased by a man who had all the appearance of being an overseer on some extensive estate. The lad Tom, who was next put up, was also bought by the same purchaser; and in a few minutes the three white men—now slaves—found themselves chained to a gang of negroes—men and women—who had also fallen into the hands of the same owner.

Half an hour afterwards the gang was put in motion, and, with the overseer (for such he eventually proved to be) at

their head, and three other men, mounted—one riding on each side and one in the rear—as a guard, took their way through the town (which George at last ascertained was Havana), out into the country, and inland toward the hills, along a fairly good road, well shaded for the most part with a dense growth of tropical verdure.

A wearisome tramp along this road for a distance of some ten miles brought them late in the afternoon to the plantation which was to be their future home, or prison; and George, Walford, and the lad Tom, with an old negro who possessed a slight smattering of English, were installed into a small, but fairly comfortable, wooden hut, thatched with sugar-cane-leaves. Here the clothing which they had been wearing when purchased was taken from them, and they were supplied instead with short drawers and jumpers of blue dungaree; a plentiful meal of ground maize with a little salt was served out to them, and they were left for the remainder of the day to recover themselves and prepare for the labours which awaited them on the morrow.

Chapter Fifteen.

A Dash for Freedom.

To find one's self sold into slavery must be a thoroughly unpleasant experience; yet when George Leicester that night found himself actually a slave, the tenant of a slave-cabin, and with slaves only for his future companions and associates, he felt by no means discouraged. There was no oppressive feeling of despair weighing down his heart and crushing his spirit into utter hopelessness; on the contrary, he had the feeling as if a great load of care and anxiety had been lifted from off his heart; he now knew the worst of what was to befall him; he fully recognised that the life before him was to be one of unrequited hardship at least, and, it might be, also of suffering and bitter tyranny; but he braced himself to meet it all, whatever it might be, with unflinching fortitude, sustained by the steadfast, inextinguishable hope of eventual escape.

This hope indeed of eventual escape rose high within his breast, now that he had actually arrived upon the spot from which it must be made. The estate of which he was now one of the chattels was that of a tobacco and sugar planter. Of its extent he could at present form no opinion; but he saw that it was of considerable size, the whole of the cultivated ground within sight being the property of his owner. It was situated upon a tolerably level plain, with a road running through it, from the main road along which they had recently travelled, up to the planter's house, a wide straggling stone structure, with a thatched roof and a verandah all round, occupying the summit of a slight eminence nearly in the middle of the estate. Behind the house, at a distance of some twenty yards, stood another building, which George rightly guessed to be the stables; the slave-huts, of which there were thirty-four, were built, at a distance of about a quarter of a mile from the house, on a gentle slope, at the foot of which stood the boiling-house and sugar-mill, the store-houses, the tobacco factory, etcetera; and just beyond them, again, ran a tiny sparkling stream, from which was obtained the power for driving the crushing machinery.

The slave-cabins were wholly unenclosed, and George had not failed to notice on his arrival upon the estate that, though it was certainly fenced in, the fencing consisted of nothing more than a common rough post-and-rail fence, evidently intended merely to keep out cattle, and in his innocence he began to think that escape from such a place would prove a very easy matter, after all. "What, indeed," he asked himself, "was to prevent his rising from his bed upon the very first favourable night which should arrive, and quietly walking off the estate?" What, indeed?

But escape was far too precious a thing to be risked by being undertaken in ignorance of whatever perils might attend the attempt, so he resolved that for the present he would not attempt to frame any plans whatever; he felt pretty certain that, as a new acquisition, he would be closely watched for some time to come by those who might have the more immediate charge of him, and his first task, he told himself, must be to disarm any suspicion which might exist in their minds as to an intention on his part to escape. The time necessary to the accomplishment of this might also be profitably employed in acquiring a knowledge of Spanish, without which he fully realised that his attempt must inevitably fail; and he believed that, by the time he had thus paved the way for the great attempt, his ingenuity would have proved sufficient to gain without suspicion from his fellow-slaves a tolerably accurate idea of the perils and difficulties with which he would have to contend.

He took the lad Tom into his confidence at once, intending, of course, that the poor boy should, if he were willing to incur the risk, go with him and Walford, and share with them at least the *chance* of freedom; and so, from the very first day of their thralldom, there were two keen, intelligent brains incessantly at work, diligently clearing the way to recovered liberty. To Walford George said nothing whatever of his purpose; the unfortunate wretch could not possibly aid them, and there was the possibility that he *might* unwittingly betray them.

At six o'clock next morning the great bell at the engine-house rang, this being the signal for the slaves to turn out and get breakfast. Half an hour was allowed for this, and at half-past six they were formed into gangs, and marched off to the fields in charge of the overseers.

George and Walford were handed a hoe apiece, and attached to one of the gangs detailed for work in the tobacco-fields. The lad Tom was attached to another gang, and he spent his first day of slave-labour among the sugar-cane.

The tobacco was fast ripening, and was just then at one of its many critical stages, the plants requiring individually almost as much care and attention as a new-born child. Each plant required that the earth should be hoed up round its stalk with almost mathematical accuracy to a certain height and no more; and every leaf had to be tenderly and scrupulously examined twice or thrice daily, to guard against the ruinous attack of the tobacco-grubs. It was exhausting, back-breaking labour, particularly for those unaccustomed to it, and the drivers' whips were freely used to stimulate the sluggards or those who exhibited any signs of a *tendency* to shirk the work; but George soon saw—and congratulated himself upon the circumstance—that the rule was evidently a mild one on this particular plantation, the whip being rarely used without provocation. It is scarcely necessary to say that Leicester was quite resolved to save himself from the indignity of the lash, if hard work would do it; and he was fortunate enough to return to his hut on that first day without the whip having once been raised against him.

Thus passed day after day, and week after week; the only variation being that, when the tobacco was in proper condition, the fields had to be gone through with the utmost care, and those leaves which were sufficiently ripe were then picked, and laid in little heaps in the sun to "sweat" and cure, this process being repeated daily until the entire crop was gathered in. Then followed the "cleaning" of the fields and their preparation for another crop, and so on, upon all of which it is unnecessary to dwell.

George and Tom devoted the whole of their brief leisure after the work of the day was over to the cultivation of a knowledge of Spanish, being fortunate enough, in their pursuit of this acquirement, to make the acquaintance of a young and very intelligent negro, who had been for many years valet to his master, but, being unlucky enough to incur that gentleman's displeasure, had been sent in disgrace into the field-gang. With him as a tutor their progress was rapid, and in little over six months they were able to converse in Spanish with tolerable fluency.

When at length George found that he was fairly master of the language, he began cautiously to touch on the subject of escape, a topic upon which Pedro, his tutor, was luckily always ready to enlarge. This gentleman, regarding himself as an injured individual, was always threatening—among his fellow-slaves, of course—to run away; and George was once on the point of declaring to the fellow his own intention of doing the same thing, but luckily his discretion stepped in and prevented his committing so great an imprudence, the reflection occurring to him just in time, that a man who *talked* so much about the matter was, after all, very unlikely to *act* to any purpose.

One night, however, Pedro entered George's cabin, looking very gloomy and sulky; and, flinging himself down on a stool, he announced that he had called to say farewell, as he was fully determined not to submit any longer to such base treatment.

"Why, what has happened now, Pedro?" exclaimed George, when he heard this announcement.

"I will tell you, friend George," answered Pedro. "You may possibly have observed that miserable piece of insolence called Juan, who has been promoted to the post from which I was so unjustly expelled? Well, this wretched ape must needs send—*send*, mind you, not come down and himself ask, but *send*—for a man to move some furniture up at the house there. I have no doubt he specially named *me*, as I was ordered to go; and I—I refused; I declined to be subjected to such an indignity, and for this I was at once flogged. I have been humiliated, disgraced, dishonoured, and I am resolved not to bear it any longer; I shall fly to-night."

"Well," said George, "I hope you will get off clear; I see no reason why you should not."

"You do not?" exclaimed Pedro. "Ah! my good friend, that is because you are new to this wretched country. Are you not aware, then, that the master keeps quite a pack of bloodhounds for the purpose of hunting runaway slaves, and that these bloodhounds are turned loose every night to scour the estate? They have been trained to watch over us and prevent our escape. If I should happen to encounter one to-night, I shall be compelled to abandon the attempt; for he will follow me about, and, should I attempt to pass the fencing, spring upon and hold me until his baying brings the overseers to the spot. Have you never encountered any of these fiends of dogs?"

"Never," answered George, his heart sinking at the startling news. "This is the first I have heard of them. Then is it quite impossible to walk about the estate at night without being pounced upon by a bloodhound?"

"Oh, dear no," was the reply. "They are so trained that they will not molest you so long as you keep within the boundaries of the estate; but they will watch and follow you until you return to your cabin. And, of course, as there is only a dozen of the dogs in all, you *may* perchance get away without encountering one of them. But if you do, your prospects of escape are still small, for you would be missed in the morning, the dogs would at once be put upon your track, and a regular slave-hunt would then begin. A slave-hunt is rare sport, I promise you—for everybody but the slave."

"Then it seems," remarked George, "that, even in the event of your getting clear of the estate, you have very little hope of escape, after all?"

"None," was the reply, "none whatever—unless you happen to possess a certain secret, the secret of *hiding the scent*, so that the dogs cannot follow your trail. Then, indeed, you *may* hope to escape, but not otherwise. I am fortunate enough to possess this secret, and as we have been good friends—you and I—I do not mind letting you into it—provided that if you make one in the hunt to-morrow—they take slaves to help sometimes—you will aid my escape in any way you can."

"Agreed!" exclaimed George joyously. "In any case I would do that. Still, the secret is a valuable one, and I should like to be made acquainted with it."

"You shall, *amigo*," said Pedro. And, placing his hand inside the bosom of his shirt, he produced a handful of leaves.

"Do you see these?" he asked.

George intimated that he did.

"Take particular notice of them, so that you may recognise them again with certainty whenever you see them," urged Pedro. "Note their shape, their exact colour; note their peculiar odour; and, above all, note their taste; for there are other plants, quite worthless for the purpose, closely resembling this one; but the *taste* will at once tell you when you have found the right one."

George eagerly took a quantity of the leaves in his hand, and carefully examined them, noting that, though they varied in size, they were all of exactly the same shape and hue; then he held them to his nostrils and inhaled their odour until he thought he had become fully acquainted with it. And finally he put one in his mouth, and masticated it. The juice had a very peculiar flavour indeed, so peculiar that he felt sure he should never forget it.

"And how do you use these leaves?" asked George.

"If," answered Pedro, "you have an opportunity to gather them only a few hours before you wish to use them, so that they are perfectly fresh, all that you have to do is to bruise and crush them, so that their juice shall be free to escape, and then rub them well all over your feet. This imparts the odour of the plant to the skin, and so 'hides the scent' that the dogs are quite unable to follow it. But if the leaves have been gathered so long that they have become dry, you must put them in water to soak until they become soft once more; then first wash your feet in the water, and afterwards rub them thoroughly with the leaves. Only, in the latter case, you will require a much larger quantity of leaves."

"Thanks, Pedro, I shall remember that," answered George. "One more question, and I have done. Where is this plant to be found?"

"Ah! now you have given me a puzzle," exclaimed the black. "The plant is very scarce, and is growing daily more so, for the reason that the slave-owners carefully root it up and destroy it wherever they find it. They are fully acquainted with its peculiar properties, they know that it has freed many a persecuted slave from the bondage of a cruel and tyrannical master, and that, if allowed to flourish, it would free many more; so it is carefully sought out, and ruthlessly dug up when found. Notwithstanding which, a plant is to be found here and there by diligently searching after it. It grows generally in wet or marshy ground, and in such spots you will have to seek for it, if ever you need it. Now, I must go; it is close upon the time for the head overseer to go his rounds, and I want him to see me in my own cabin. As soon as he is gone more fairly out of the way I shall be off. Good-night—and good-bye."

"Good-bye," answered George, grasping the negro's proffered hand; "good-bye, and thank you for your valuable secret. I heartily wish you good luck; and if they get up a hunt, and take me to help, I'll do what I can to throw them off the scent. Which way do you go?"

"You had better know nothing about that," answered Pedro cautiously. "All I ask is, that if you catch sight of me, or observe any sign of my having passed, you will simply keep quiet about it. And now, once more, good-bye."

Ten minutes later the head overseer, going his rounds, on looking into Pedro's cabin, found that individual apparently fast asleep on the floor, with his back against the wall, and such an utterly fagged, worn-out look pervading his entire personality that the man was almost betrayed into a momentary feeling of pity for "the poor boy."

His surprise was therefore proportionally great when, on the following morning, it became apparent that Pedro had succeeded, in spite of the dogs, in making good his escape from the estate.

A slave-hunt was at once organised, and about nine o'clock, as George was hard at work in the fields, he saw the hunters—some half a dozen in number, mounted, and accompanied each by a bloodhound—pass down the main road through the estate and out on to the open ground beyond. Here the party divided, half going in one direction, and half in the other, to encircle the estate, and endeavour to pick up the trail. They were absent the whole day, but when they returned at about midnight, the unfortunate Pedro was with them, handcuffed, and secured by a rope round his neck to the saddle of one of the horsemen. It afterwards transpired that he had been perfectly successful, not only in evading the dogs during his actual escape from the estate, but also in "hiding the scent" from them; and his capture was due to the unfortunate circumstance of his having been met by a friend of his master's who, an hour afterwards, encountered the party in pursuit of him, and so put them upon his track. Next morning the unhappy wretch was "made an example of," by being flogged so severely in the presence of all the other slaves belonging to the plantation that at first it seemed doubtful whether he would ever recover from the effects of it; and, though he did eventually, it was nearly three months before he was again fit for work.

This incident of Pedro's escape and its unfortunate failure was naturally the chief topic of conversation among the slaves for a long time afterwards, and George heard so much of the many difficulties attending such attempts, that he often felt upon the very brink of despair. The obstacles were so great as to be almost insurmountable when those who made the attempt were strong, healthy, thoroughly inured to fatigue, and had all their faculties about them; but when it came to not only making good one's own escape, but also that of a feeble and weakly companion of unsettled reason, the task seemed so utterly hopeless, so thoroughly impracticable, that it appeared almost worse than madness to dream of undertaking it.

Yet, in spite of all this, and notwithstanding the terrible example which had been made of the unhappy Pedro, George clung tenaciously to the idea, and never let slip an opportunity to do anything which in ever so slight a degree might contribute to his success when the time should come for the effort to be made. As time passed on, and his knowledge of the Spanish language became perfected, his uniform industry and good conduct procured him many little indulgences; such as a few hours of release from field-labour now and then, in order that he might instead be despatched, duly provided with a "pass," on some errand or message, either to a neighbouring plantation or to Havana itself. These little journeys not only afforded him an opportunity—of which he made the most—of studying the physical geography of the island, but also of hunting for the precious plant by means of which he hoped to successfully hide his trail; and in this latter quest he was so far fortunate that he found at different times as many as eight of them, five of which he successfully transplanted to a favourable spot on the estate itself in such an out-of-the-way locality that he fervently hoped they would escape discovery.

The next task which he set himself—and Tom—was that of propitiating and making friends with the dogs which nightly guarded the estate; but in this they were wholly unsuccessful; the creatures had been too well trained, and they absolutely refused all overtures from men who wore the detested garb of slavery. The circumstance, however, that they were of white instead of negro blood was a point in our adventurers' favour, and George accidentally made the discovery that, probably in consequence of this circumstance, when he was able by any means to conceal the uniform he usually wore, the hounds, though still suspicious, were puzzled and undecided how to behave towards him.

In the meantime, whilst steadily cultivating the favour of the overseers by his unvarying industry and good conduct, he as sedulously cultivated the good-will and friendship of his fellow-slaves; and by the exercise of great tact and circumspection he gradually won from them, without exciting their slightest suspicion, such a mass of valuable information as quite decided him, when the time should come, to make his way inland and to the southward, rather than to the northward, the latter route, though that which would soonest enable him to reach the coast, being chiefly, in consequence of that circumstance, by far the most perilous one.

The next matter requiring attention, was the acquisition of arms of some description, with which the party could defend themselves in the event of their being pursued and overtaken. These, by a lucky chance, he was at length enabled to procure, in the shape of three cane-knives, weapons closely resembling a cutlass as regards the length and curve of the blade, but provided merely with a wooden handle, instead of the metal guard usually fitted to the latter weapon. The same lucky chance which enabled him to secure these cane-knives—namely, the finding of a gold five-dollar piece on the road during one of his excursions into Havana—also supplied him with the means of purchasing three coarse canvas jackets, such as were commonly worn by the Cuban coasting seamen at that time, and with these he hoped to sufficiently disguise himself and his companions to avoid any inconvenient questioning on the road, when the time for the great attempt should arrive.

The auspicious moment arrived, as such moments frequently do, quite unexpectedly, and it came about in the following manner.

When George and his comrades had been in slavery a trifle over a year, a message reached the estate to the effect that a ship had that day arrived from Europe, in the cargo of which there were certain household articles that had been ordered expressly for the use of the planter's wife, and that, as they happened to be stowed on the top, and the ship had

already begun to discharge, it was desirable that they should be sent for at once, in order that they might escape damage. This message reached the estate quite late in the evening, in fact it was within half an hour of the time for knocking off work for the night; but so impatient was the lady to see her new possessions, that she insisted upon their being sent for at once, and George, as the most trustworthy slave on the plantation, was ordered to take the mule-waggon and a couple of companions, and proceed into town forthwith to fetch them, so that they might be at the house and all ready for unloading by the first thing next morning. He was instructed that, as it would probably be very late, or rather, early next morning, before he returned, he was to drive the waggon down to the engine-house, and place it under the shed there for the remainder of the night, instead of driving up to the house, so that he might not disturb the occupants by the noise of his arrival.

Leicester at once saw that this errand would afford him probably the best opportunity he would ever have for the attempted escape; he therefore mentioned to the overseer that he thought Tom and Walford would be the most handy men he could take with him as helpers, and at once went off in an unconcerned manner, but with a well-assumed air of imperfectly concealed dissatisfaction at the prospect of his night journey, to harness up the mules. On his way to the stables he sought out Walford and the lad Tom, bidding them both be ready to go with him, and imparting to the latter his determination to take advantage of this opportunity to attempt their joint escape.

This done, he hurried away to the spot where he had concealed his treasured plants, and arrived there, only to find that they were gone. Whether they had been discovered and destroyed by the overseers, or had been found and appropriated by some fellow-slave acquainted with their valuable properties, it was impossible to tell; the one indisputable fact was that the plants had vanished.

This was a most unfortunate circumstance, but George would not allow it to dishearten him; the fugitives would have several hours' start before the pursuit would commence, and then there was always the possibility that other specimens of the plant might be found.

Thinking thus, he slowly wended his way to the stable, where he harnessed up the mules, threw into the waggon a quantity of grass and cane-leaves, together with a canvas cover and rope, supposed to be required for packing and protecting the articles, and then drove to the hut, where Tom and Walford awaited him. The former, a very shrewd and intelligent young fellow, had immediately, upon being apprised by George of his intention, hurried off to prepare "supper," recognising the great importance of a good substantial meal before starting, especially in view of the uncertainty as to when they would be able to secure another; and when George reached the hut, this meal was just ready.

The trio partook of this, their last meal in slavery, as they hoped, with great deliberation, George being most anxious not to start until darkness should so far have settled down upon the scene as to allow of his smuggling the cane-knives and canvas jackets in under the grass in the waggon without detection.

This was at length successfully managed, and, first taking a careful look all round the hut, to see that they were leaving nothing behind them which might possibly prove useful, they clambered into the cart, and drove slowly off.

Night had by this time fairly set in; the stars were just beginning to peep out from the deepening blue of the cloudless vault above them, and the moon, in her first quarter, and hanging almost in the zenith, was already flooding the scene with her soft silvery radiance. It promised to be a magnificent night for their enterprise, though excessively close and hot; and as they turned into the main road leading into Havana, and left the estate fairly behind them, George and the lad Tom felt their spirits rising and their pulses bounding with joyous anticipation of a speedy return to freedom.

Whilst harnessing the mules, Leicester had rapidly turned over in his mind the *pros* and *cons* of the situation, and had come to the conclusion that it would be necessary in the first instance to proceed some three or four miles on the road toward Havana. This necessity arose from the circumstance that the planter's house stood upon a slight eminence commanding a perfect view of the road for that distance, and as Leicester could not possibly be sure that some one might not be idly watching, from the verandah, the progress of the waggon as long as it remained in view, he deemed it only common prudence to keep to the road until he had passed completely out of the range of any such chance watchers. This done, he intended to turn sharp off and make the best of his way southward, utilising the waggon and mules for as great a distance as possible, and then abandoning them and pressing forward on foot. The distance which they would have to travel was not very great, the island being, according to such information as had been available to him, only some twelve and a half Spanish leagues, or about thirty English miles wide at that part. Thus, if they were fortunate in their choice of a route, so as to be able to use the waggon for the whole distance, they might succeed in reaching the southern shore of the island before their escape was so much as suspected.

George explained all this to Tom as the mules trotted cheerily along the road, and by the time that the plan of escape had been fully elucidated, they had reached a point where they might with perfect safety branch off and make their way to the southward. This they did at once, branching square off to the westward in the first instance, until they were about a mile distant from the road, and completely hidden by the bush from the observation of any one upon it, and then turning in a southerly direction. A dense belt of forest then lay before them, at a distance of some six miles, with a lofty hill-top rising behind it, and toward this latter object George now headed the mules as straight as the scattered clumps of bush would permit.

The soil was very light and sandy, but it was covered with a thick growth of grass, which prevented the mules' feet or the waggon-wheels from sinking, so that the travelling was nearly, if not quite as rapid as it had been along the road. A sharp lookout was maintained for signs indicative of their approach to the neighbourhood of plantations, and two or three bridle-paths, evidently leading to such, were crossed; but at length they reached the welcome skirts of the forest without having had the least cause to suppose that they had been observed.

In the meantime, however, a heavy bank of thundercloud had been observed rapidly gathering on the southern horizon, and the runaways had scarcely plunged a mile into the forest before the heavens were obscured, and it at once became so pitch-dark that it was utterly impossible for them to proceed. The mules were consequently pulled up, and the three adventurers made what few preparations were possible for their protection from the coming storm.

Soon the low threatening rumble of the thunder was heard, and then, as it rapidly increased in volume of sound, bright flashes of light were seen blazing out beyond the interweaving branches of the trees. The storm, as in all tropical countries, quickly gathered force and intensity, and very soon it was raging in all its fury above and around them. The loud reverberating roll of the thunder was incessant, the lightning flashed with ever-increasing rapidity, and at last the entire atmosphere seemed to be in one continued tremulous glare of unearthly light.

The mules started and quivered, as the lightning-flashes grew more rapid and intense; and finally they became so

terrified that George had as much as he could do to restrain them from bolting, and so dashing themselves, the waggon, and its occupants to pieces against the trees.

The storm was at its fiercest when suddenly the party found themselves enveloped in a blinding blaze of greenish-blue light; simultaneously there came a terrific rattling crash, as though the universe had burst asunder; the occupants of the waggon—blinded, and deafened by the dazzling brilliancy of the flash and the tremendous report which accompanied it—felt themselves hurled violently to the earth, and then followed oblivion.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Pursuit.

When George Leicester at last awoke from his stupor, and had sufficiently recovered his scattered senses to remember where he was, the strength and fury of the storm had passed, the lightning-flashes being much less vivid, and coming at considerably longer intervals. But the rain was descending in a perfect deluge, and, notwithstanding the shelter of the thick overhanging foliage, the ground was already so completely flooded that George at first thought he was lying in the bed of some shallow watercourse. He staggered to his feet, chill and dripping wet, and, taking advantage of the intermittent light afforded by the lightning, looked around him to ascertain, if possible, what had actually happened; and he then saw that an immense tree close by had been shivered from top to bottom by the lightning, and, falling across their path, had killed both mules, and completely wrecked the waggon.

His own escape and that of his companions, if indeed they *had* escaped, had been simply miraculous, a huge branch having struck the waggon only about one foot behind the seat upon which they had been sitting. The ground was littered with splinters, and encumbered with the spreading branches of the fallen tree, and among these he proceeded to search for Tom and Walford.

A low moaning sound some short distance on his right told him that in that direction he would probably find one of the missing, and, groping his way cautiously to the spot, he found the unfortunate Walford lying on his back, with the water surging round him like a mill-race, and a large branch of the fallen tree lying across his breast and pinning him down. By exerting his whole strength, George managed to bear up the branch sufficiently for Walford to work his way from underneath it, and then he helped the poor wretch to his feet, inquiring at the same time if he had received any serious hurt. Unfortunately one of the apathetic fits which occasionally seized Walford had come upon him, and George was quite unable to gain anything like an intelligible answer from him; but he was scarcely able to stand, and his continued moaning and the constant pressure of his hands upon his breast showed that he was evidently suffering great pain.

Seating the unfortunate man at the foot of a tree, where he would be beyond the reach of the water, and making him as comfortable as was possible, George then went in search of the lad Tom, whom he found standing bewildered over the wreck of the waggon, with a thin stream of blood slowly trickling down his face from a scalp-wound, probably inflicted by a blow from one of the branches of the tree as it fell.

“Ha! Tom, is that you?” exclaimed George joyously. “I was just coming to look for you. How have you fared in the general smash?”

“Is that you, cap’n?” answered Tom. “Well, I’m very glad to find you’ve turned up all right. It *has* been a smash, and no mistake; a total wreck, and no insurance, I’ll be bound. Well, it’s unfort’nate; but it can’t be helped; it might ha’ been much worse. I got a whack on the skull that knocked the senses out of me for a while, but I don’t feel very much the worse for it a’ter all. Where’s poor Mr Walford, sir? What’s become of him?”

“He is close by,” answered George; “but a big branch fell across his chest, and I am afraid he is very much hurt.”

“Let’s have a look at him,” said Tom. And the two men groped and stumbled their way without more ado to the place where Walford was still seated, with his back resting against the giant bole of the tree.

A few trials were sufficient to establish the fact that the poor fellow was practically helpless, for the time at least; and it then became a question of what it would be best to do under the circumstances. The first idea was that George and Tom should each take an arm of the injured man over their shoulders, and so assist him along; but he moved with such great difficulty that it was soon apparent some other plan would have to be adopted.

“I have it!” exclaimed George, as a bright idea struck him; and hurrying away to the waggon, he secured the canvas and rope which had been thrown into it, together with the cane-knives, canvas jackets, and other trifling belongings, and hurried back to the tree.

“Now, Tom,” he said, “look about you, my lad, and see if you can find a nice light handy branch, tolerably straight, and about ten feet long, and bring it here as quickly as you can.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” answered Tom, starting off on his errand at once.

Whilst he was gone, George spread out the canvas upon the ground, and, with the aid of a pocket-knife, which he had seen lying about in the stable that evening, and had taken the liberty of appropriating, proceeded to roughly shape a hammock out of the material, leaving enough canvas at each end to form, with the rope, an eye, through which to pass the branch from which he intended it to be slung.

He had hardly finished his preparations when Tom reappeared with the waggon-pole, which he had found fortunately unbroken.

“Will this do, sir?” asked Tom.

“The very thing,” was George’s delighted reply. “Now, Walford,” he continued, “lie down on that canvas, old fellow, and we’ll soon have you slung comfortably in your hammock between us, where you will travel without much pain to your poor chest. That’s it; now, Tom, pass the end of the pole through this eye; capital! now through the other; that’s your sort! Now I’ll take the fore end of the pole and you the after end; lift handsomely; have you got your end on your

shoulder? Then off we go. We have not such a very great distance to travel—only some twenty miles or so—but we must get over the ground as quickly as possible; for when once nine o'clock to-morrow morning has passed, we may make certain that they'll be after us; so we must reach the coast by that time, or soon after it, if we wish to get clear off."

And in this manner, with Walford slung in his impromptu hammock between them, George and Tom set off upon the wearisome journey which lay before them, and which, they fondly hoped, was to end in the absolute recovery of their liberty.

Tramp, tramp; splash, splash; on they trudged,—stumbling over the roots of trees, tripping over the long, tough, straggling creepers which crossed their path, sometimes brought-up "all standing" and half-strangled by the cord-like *lianas* which hung festooned from tree to tree, their naked feet and legs torn by thorns and stabbed by the spines of the wild cactus—in thick impenetrable darkness for a couple of hours, and then the clouds suddenly vanished away on the wings of the land-breeze, the stars reappeared, the soft silvery rays of the moon streamed down once more through the gaps in the foliage, and the weary fugitives flung themselves down upon the sodden ground for a short breathing-space.

George was of opinion that, from the time they had been tramping through the forest, they ought to have very nearly reached its southern skirts; but as far as the eye could penetrate, in the uncertain moonlight, through the sylvan vistas, there was no sign of break or opening of any kind; nothing but an apparently endless succession of trees and dense undergrowth. Seeing this, Leicester began to feel uneasy. He knew that they had been travelling through the timber in anything but a straight line—indeed, to do so would have been simply a physical impossibility—and he began to fear that, in spite of all his efforts to avoid such a misfortune, they had been journeying along the arc of a circle, instead of progressing steadily in a southerly direction.

The wanderers were beginning to feel thoroughly fatigued, what with their day's work in the fields, their exposure during the storm, and their painful tramp afterwards; but George felt that, fatigued or not, they must push on; liberty *must* be secured first; when that was won, they could afford time to rest, but not until then.

The first thing to be done, however, was to get a definite idea of whereabouts they were; it was obviously useless to continue plodding on, they knew not whither; besides, it was frightfully fatiguing and painful work, this marching through the forest, and George felt that it would be a positive advantage even to deviate somewhat from their direct course, if by so doing they could earlier gain the open ground once more. So, looking around him, he picked out the most lofty tree he could find, and, leaving Tom to keep watch by Walford's side, nimbly scrambled up its trunk, and was soon among its topmost branches.

A single glance around sufficed to show him that his suspicions were correct; they were only about half a mile from the *northern* edge of the timber; and, consequently, rather worse off than if they had never left the wrecked waggon at all. And, worse still, George found that, after all their travelling, they were little more than three miles from the estate, the whole of which was distinctly visible from his lofty stand-point. This was rather discouraging, but there was no help for it; he now knew exactly where they were, and how much greater than even he had imagined was the necessity for immediate action; so he turned his glances in a southerly direction, and sought to discover the most direct road out of their unpleasant predicament. Here he met with an ample reward for his trouble in climbing the tree, for he saw that, if they pursued their way due south—as they could now do, directing their course by the moon—they would have to travel through at least seven miles of forest; whilst by heading in a south-westerly direction, keeping the moon a little on their left hand, they would only have to traverse some two miles of forest, after which there seemed to be tolerably open ground as far as the eye could reach. About three miles East-South-East of him he detected the gleaming white walls of a number of buildings, which he judged to be a portion of the town of Santiago; beyond it rose a curiously-shaped, double-coned mountain; away on his right lay the table-land of Mariel; and—joyous sight—through a break in the rising ground to the southward he caught a glimpse of the sea, with, far away on the utmost verge of the horizon, an appearance of land, which he conjectured must be the Isle of Pines. Noting all these matters carefully, and making a rough mental sketch of "the lay of the land," George rapidly descended to where he had left Tom and Walford, and rapidly detailed to the former the result of his observations.

"We must be off at once," he explained, "for we have no time to spare; we have lost nearly three good hours blundering about here blindly in this wood; it must be now nearly or quite midnight; and, if so, it leaves us only ten hours at most to reach the sea, if we are to do so without being overtaken."

Accordingly, weary and stiff as they were, they again shouldered the pole from which Walford in his hammock was slung, and once more set out upon their journey, which, now that they were favoured by the light of the moon, they hoped would be of a somewhat more prosperous character than it had hitherto been.

Another painful and toilsome tramp of a couple of hours and they emerged, to their unbounded joy, from the southern side of the forest on to comparatively open ground. Trees and dense straggling clumps of bush were still abundant enough—far too much so, in fact—but there were wide patches of grass-land between, over which their progress was tolerably rapid. Once clear of the thick timber, George again shaped his course due south, intending to pass through the break in the rising ground which he had seen from his lofty lookout; but somehow they missed it, and this involved a great deal of toilsome climbing. At length they plunged once more into a belt of timber which stretched, seemingly for miles, across their path; and here exhausted nature gave out; Tom declared his utter inability to walk another yard, George felt scarcely better than his companion, and so, notwithstanding the terrible loss of precious time which it involved, they selected the first suitable spot they could find, and flinging themselves upon the ground, one on each side of Walford, gave themselves up to the sweetest sleep which had ever sealed their eyelids.

George was the first of the trio to awaken, and when he did so, he found, to his dismay, that the sun was already several hours high in the heavens. He immediately aroused the lad Tom, and, greatly refreshed by their sleep, the pair once more shouldered poor helpless Walford and his hammock, and resumed their flight. They were as hungry as healthy men usually are after great exertion and a fast of several hours' duration, but they had not a particle of food with them, so they were compelled to subsist for the present upon hope, the hope that ere long they would meet with something more substantial. They felt no particular anxiety upon this score, as George knew that wild fruits of several kinds were tolerably plentiful on the island, and about half an hour after they had started they were fortunate enough to fall in with a wild plantain, the fruit of which was just in the right condition for eating. No time was lost in securing a goodly bunch of this very nutritious fruit, upon which they feasted, as they went along, until their appetites were completely satisfied.

After trudging manfully along for about a couple of hours, they found themselves upon the crest of a range of low hills, from which they caught, through a break in the scrub, a glimpse of the sea, sparkling invitingly under the noonday sun. They also caught a glimpse of something, by no means so pleasant—namely, a town of considerable dimensions immediately before them and only about two miles distant.

To avoid this they were compelled to make a wide detour, and much valuable time was lost in this way and in reconnoitring; for they knew there would be several plantations in immediate proximity to so important a place, and through these they would have, as it were, to run the gauntlet. And, notwithstanding all their caution, they failed to effect their passage entirely unobserved through this dangerous district; it unfortunately happening that, just as they emerged from the bush, and were about to cross a high-road, which they had been watching for nearly half an hour, a vehicle appeared in sight, suddenly wheeling into the road close to them from a bush-path which they had failed to observe. This vehicle was occupied by two persons, a white man and a negro driver; and as it was utterly impossible to avoid the observation of these two persons, George told Tom, in a few low hasty words, to continue moving, to carefully conceal all appearance of chagrin, and to leave him to answer any questions which might be put to them. As the vehicle approached the fugitives, its owner signed to his driver to pull up, but he immediately changed his mind and passed on, contenting himself with a careful and prolonged scrutiny of the travellers. This disagreeable incident caused George and his companion to push on with renewed vigour, and it was with sincerely thankful hearts that they at last plunged into a shallow ravine, which promised to lead them directly down to the sea, then not more, in Leicester's opinion, than some four or five miles distant.

The sun was by this time sinking low in the heavens and the travellers, unutterably weary as they were, pressed eagerly forward, hoping to reach the coast before nightfall, and to discover a craft of some kind which they could appropriate, and in which, later on, when the night was well advanced, and they could hope to do so unobserved, they might venture to put to sea. This was the only effectual method of escape which George could devise—to put to sea upon the chance of being picked up by some passing vessel. He knew that, when once the fact of their escape became established, the news would travel faster than they possibly could; the whole country for many miles round, would be apprised of their number and appearance, and recapture would be certain. To get afloat, therefore, as speedily as possible was their first object; after that they must trust to chance—or Providence, rather—for their ultimate rescue.

As they advanced along the ravine, it grew deeper, whilst its sides became steeper and more rugged, until at last the place assumed quite the appearance of a mountain-gorge or defile, with rocky, precipitous sides, to which a few scattered shrubs clung here and there. At length, in the deep silence of the breathless evening, the thrice welcome sound of the sea breaking upon the shore came faintly to their ears. It was the merest, faintest murmur, it is true, but their experienced ears told them in a moment what it was; they were within the sound of the sea, and in a few short hours at most, please God, they would be safe from pursuit.

A bend in the defile was before them, about a quarter of a mile distant, and toward this they eagerly pressed believing that when they had passed it they would find themselves face to face with the sea. In their eagerness they broke into a run, notwithstanding their terrible state of fatigue, and soon rounded the bend—to find themselves in a *cul-de-sac*, with a perpendicular wall of cliff in front of them nearly two hundred feet high. With a groan of bitter anguish and disappointment they deposited Walford in his hammock on the ground, and turned to ask each other what should be done in the face of this new difficulty. As they did so, the deep bay of a dog smote upon their ears from the higher end of the ravine. The sound was instantly repeated again and again, in a slightly different key, proving that the cries were uttered not by one, but by several animals.

“The dogs! *The dogs!*” exclaimed Tom. “They are after us, by Jove; and here we are, caught like rats in a trap.”

George glanced eagerly about him, up and down the ravine. To go back was simply to throw themselves into the arms of their pursuers, for that they *were* pursued he did not for an instant doubt; to hide, even if a hiding-place could be found, was impossible, with those keen-scented brutes upon their tracks; and to remain where they were was to await inevitable capture. Could they go *forward*? That meant scaling that terrible wall of rock. As George glanced despairingly up the lofty perpendicular cliff, he thought that an active man, unencumbered, *might* possibly accomplish the feat; at all events, were he so circumstanced, he would try it. And what he could do, he knew the lad Tom could do also; but there was Walford, unable to walk, much less to scale that awful precipice. As he stood thus, the baying of the dogs again came floating down the ravine; and how much nearer and clearer were now the sounds! The brutes must be coming down after them at a run, as of course they easily could upon a red-hot scent. The sounds decided George to make one more desperate effort for freedom.

“Look here, Tom,” said he; “after coming thus far, we must not be taken for want of a little extra effort. If we *are*, you may be sure we shall never be allowed to make a second attempt. Now our only chance is to scale that cliff; we *must* do it, and we *can* do it, if we only go resolutely to work. It will be difficult, fatiguing, and awfully dangerous, for we must take poor Walford with us; but *liberty* awaits us at the top; the sea is not half a mile off, I know, by the sound of it; and we can reach it before those fellows can ride round to intercept us; so let us set to with a will, my lad, and we shall scrape clear yet, you take my word for it. Now out with your cane-knife, and cut away at the grass; we must well pad poor Walford all round with it, so that he may not be hurt by bumping against those rocks; then we'll lash him hard and fast in the canvas, lash ourselves one to each end of him, and away aloft we go.”

Chapter Seventeen.

On the Face of the Precipice.

The cane-knives were speedily at work; the grass was long and abundant, and as the two men were working for liberty—nay, probably for life itself—they were not long in cutting a sufficient quantity for their purpose. Walford was then lifted carefully out upon the ground, the grass was thickly and evenly distributed over the inner side of the hammock, and then the invalid was again deposited within it, and securely lashed up, his head only being left free. This done, two lanyards were securely attached to the extempore hammock, one at its head, and the other at its foot.

“Well done; that's capital!” exclaimed George, as the last turn was taken, making all secure. “Now slip the bight over your—ah! here come the dogs, by all that's unfortunate. We must defend ourselves with the cane-knives. I'll tackle the first one, you take the next, and—mind—we have no time to waste; luckily there are only three of the brutes as yet; we must kill them, and be up out of reach before the others or their masters arrive. Keep steady, Tom, my lad, and strike so that one blow shall be sufficient. Now then—come on, you devils!”

As George finished speaking, the dogs—three superb specimens of the Cuban bloodhound—dashed up to within about ten feet of the fugitives, and there stopped, not attacking them, as they had expected, but merely baying loudly.

“This will not do,” exclaimed George; “if we turn our backs upon them for a single instant, they will seize us; and we cannot afford the time to stand looking at them. I will take the dark one, you attack the light fellow, and mind what you are about, for they are as strong and active as tigers. *Now!*”

At the word both men sprang forward with uplifted cane-knives, and made a slash at the dogs. The creatures tried to dodge the blows, and one of them—the one attacked by Tom—succeeded. George, however, was more fortunate; he made a feint, and as the dog sprang aside, he followed him up, recovering his weapon smartly at the same time, and bringing it down in another second on the creature's head with such strength and effect that the skull was cloven open, and the poor brute, with a yell of agony, rolled over dead. Tom, meanwhile, was battling ineffectually with the dog he had attacked, and George turned just in time to see the hound spring savagely at the lad's throat, and hurl him to the ground. With a single bound Leicester reached Tom's side, and raising the cane-knife above his head, and grasping the handle with both hands, he brought it down with all his strength across the dog's neck, taking care to avoid the thick leather collar which protected it. The blow clove through skin and bone, dividing the spine and nearly severing the head from the body; but even then it was difficult to free poor Tom from the iron jaws which had seized him. With a vigorous wrench, however, this was effected, and George then dragged the lad to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" panted Leicester.

"No," gasped Tom. "The beast only seized me by the collar of my jacket, and—"

"Then come on at once," interrupted George; "the third dog has turned tail, like a craven, luckily for us. Now slip the bight of the lanyard over your neck, and follow me. Leave the cane-knives; they will only encumber us, and perhaps throw us down the face of the precipice. Now, look out, I'm going to start."

As George spoke, he approached the face of the precipice, and, taking advantage of whatever projections he could find, began the task of scaling it, Tom following behind, and Walford slung in his make-shift hammock between the two.

They worked desperately, these two men, knowing how much depended upon the next few minutes, and an onlooker would have been astounded at the progress they made, encumbered as they were with the weight and bulk of their helpless companion.

In one minute from the time of starting they had gained a height of forty feet, and then the sudden trampling of horses' hoofs, and the loud shouts of their pursuers told them that the latter had rounded the bend, and that they were seen.

In a few seconds the sounds ceased at the foot of the cliff, and in another instant the voice of the head overseer was heard shouting to them—

"Hola there! Giorgio—you miscreant—come down, or I will fire!"

"Keep steady, Tom," gasped George. "Let them fire; the chances are ten to one that they will miss us. Do you feel nervous, lad?"

"Not I," answered Tom; "never felt steadier in my life, cap'n. This rope *is* cutting into my shoulders awful bad, though."

"So it is into mine," returned George; "but we must grin and bear it now, until we get to the top. And—whatever you do—look up, boy; if you look down, you'll grow dizzy, and, likely enough, slip; then down we must all inevitably go."

"Are you coming down, you rascals?" shouted the overseer.

"It don't look much like it, I reckon, senhor," chuckled Tom to himself, hoisting himself over the edge of a good broad ledge of rock as he spoke, a ledge some ten feet in width.

"Now!" exclaimed Leicester, as he helped the lad up, "we'll rest here a minute or two, and recover our breath. They may blaze away at us as long as they like now; we're as safe from their bullets as if they were a dozen miles away."

The overseer and his companions, however, seemed to think differently, for the fugitives had scarcely settled themselves comfortably, when a regular fusillade was opened upon them; but, as George and Tom were completely sheltered by the projecting ledge, none of the shot came near them.

They were now about half-way up the cliff, and from this position an excellent view presented itself for some distance up the ravine which they had just left; but both George and Tom, now that they were sitting quietly down, and had leisure to think about it, felt the sense of empty space immediately before them, and of the sheer precipice which they knew lay beyond that narrow ledge, to be exceedingly trying to the nerves.

Presently the clatter of horses' hoofs came ringing upward to them from the bottom of the ravine, and, peering cautiously over the edge of the rock, George saw that the party of man-hunters, accompanied by four bloodhounds, had started off at a gallop on their way back to the entrance of the *cul-de-sac*. He at once guessed that their intention was to ride round over the hills, and endeavour to pick up the trail again at the top of the cliff.

The act of looking downward from so great an elevation, and the sight of the sheer precipice, on the very edge of which he was hanging, with absolutely nothing to prevent him from falling over and going whirling headlong down to the bottom, produced in George a sudden attack of vertigo. The whole landscape appeared to rock to and fro; the ledge upon which he was standing seemed to sway suddenly forward over the abyss and threaten to launch him into space; he felt himself wavering upon the very brink, and an almost uncontrollable impulse seized him to spring off and take that terrible downward flight. Another glance downward, and the impulse became irresistible. He drew back a step, braced himself for the terrible leap, flung his arms above his head, and, uttering a piercing cry, was in the very act of launching himself forward over the edge, when Tom, happening to glance at him, and to detect his suicidal determination just in time, sprang up, and, with a cry of amazement and horror, dragged him forcibly back against the wall of rock behind.

"Why, cap'n!" exclaimed the lad, as soon as he had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to speak,—“why, cap'n, whatever's the matter with yer? What was you goin' to do?"

For the moment poor George was too unnerved to speak. The instant that he was dragged back from the ledge, the horrible fascination lost its hold upon him; he suddenly realised in its fullest extent the frightful peril from which he had been so providentially snatched, and, covering his face with his hands, as the revulsion of feeling came upon him, he shook and quivered like an aspen-leaf. A minute or two more and this dreadful feeling also passed away, his calmness

and self-possession returned to him, and, placing himself upon his knees, there on that narrow ledge of rock he humbly returned his hearty thanks to God for his preservation, and prayed for help and deliverance for himself and his companions in their present sore need. Then, turning to Tom, he said—

“Thank you, Tom; you have saved my life as surely as ever man’s life has been saved by a fellow-creature in this world. I was in the very act of springing off the rock when you dragged me back, and, but for you, my body would at this moment be lying mangled and lifeless a hundred feet below. I do not know how it was, but when I looked down over the edge, I turned giddy and sick all in a moment, and then I felt that I *must* fling myself down the precipice. Let this be a warning to us both, my lad; for it shows that, steady as are our heads aloft at sea, they are not to be too much depended upon when climbing precipices on shore. But, come! it is high time that we should be moving again; those fellows are half-way to the head of the valley by this time, and if we are not smart, they will have us yet. Do you feel sufficiently rested to tackle the other half of this cliff?”

“Ay, ay, cap’n, I’m ready,” answered Tom; “but, for the Lord’s sake, sir, and for all our sakes, don’t you go for to look down and get tempted to jump off again. Perhaps I mightn’t be able to stop you next time, you know.”

“All right, Tom, never fear,” answered George; “I’ll take care not to run such an awful risk again, you may be sure. Now are you ready? Then take your end of this poor fellow, and let us be moving.”

But, now that they were ready to resume their ascent, another terrible difficulty presented itself. On looking upward for a projection by which to raise himself, Leicester for the first time became aware that the ledge on which they stood marked a change of strata. Below them it was all hard rock; above the ledge he could see nothing but a vertical unbroken face, some twenty feet in height, of soft crumbling sandstone, so soft indeed that it scarcely merited the name of stone at all, but might be more fitly described as solidly compressed red sandy soil, of such slight tenacity that it was possible to scrape it away with the naked finger. To climb this smooth crumbling face, even with the aid of a ladder, George at once saw would have been utterly impossible; for, though it has been spoken of as vertical, it was not strictly so; it inclined slightly forward, so as actually to overhang them, and a ladder would therefore not have stood against the face; how, then, could they hope, encumbered as they were, to surmount it? The task was an obvious impossibility, and George saw that it would be necessary to seek for a practicable place elsewhere.

Accordingly Walford was once more laid upon the rock, with Tom to watch him and guard against any possible mishap, whilst George went off upon an exploring expedition.

He first tried to the left, passing along the ledge very cautiously, with his face turned to the wall, so that he might not again be exposed to the terrible temptation from which he had so recently escaped. At first he had great hopes of success, the ledge beginning to slope upward as he passed along it to the eastward; but when he had traversed some fifty yards or so, it suddenly narrowed away to nothing under a projecting angle of the superimposed sandstone, and in endeavouring to get a glimpse round this angle, the soft material crumbled in George’s grasp, he lost his hold, staggered, reeled, struggled ineffectually to recover his balance, and fell. For a single instant he gave himself up as lost, and suffered in anticipation all the agonies of a frightful death; but he had not fallen more than six feet, when his outstretched hand encountered a long, stout, flexible twig, or rather a young tree, shooting out from an interstice in the rocks. He grasped it with the iron grip of a drowning man, grasped it with both hands, and, though it bent double with his weight, it held out bravely, and enabled him to regain his footing on the face of the precipice. In another moment he had scrambled once more on to the ledge, where he lay panting, breathless, with torn and bleeding hands, but safe.

The appalling peril from which he had thus a second time so narrowly escaped, inflicted a terrible shock on George’s nerves, and it was some time before he could find courage to once more raise his head and look about him. The reflection, however, that two men, one of them utterly helpless, were in the same perilous situation as himself—having indeed been brought directly into it by him—helped him to once more recover the command of his nerves, and, somewhat ashamed of their unexpected weakness, he scrambled to his feet and set out to explore in the opposite direction.

By the time that he had once more reached the point where Tom sat patiently awaiting him, the dusk was closing down upon the landscape with all the rapidity peculiar to the tropics, and, shrouded as they were in the deep shadow of the precipice, it was already difficult for them to see each other clearly. This meant still another danger added to those which already confronted them, and George felt that, unless a way of escape could quickly be found, they would be compelled to remain where they were all night, a prospect which involved so many horrible contingencies that he dared not allow his mind to dwell upon it, but, turning his attention strictly to the matter in hand, hurried away on his quest to the westward.

In this direction he was more successful, the ledge, at a distance of some thirty yards, running into a steep earthy slope, some ten or a dozen yards in height, above which the precipice again rose sheer to the top. And, as far as he could see in the quick-gathering darkness, this precipice again presented a rocky face, up the inequalities of which it might be possible for them to climb.

But a single glance was enough to assure George that the most perilous portion of their journey still lay before them. In the first place, the slope was frightfully steep, rising at an angle of fully fifty degrees from the horizontal; and, in the next place, it was covered with a long thick growth of grass, rendering its face almost as slippery as ice. And its lower edge terminated abruptly in a vertical overhanging face, similar to that which towered above the place where he had left Tom and Walford, so that, should either of them slip in traversing this dangerous part of their journey, they must all, lashed together as they were, inevitably slide and roll helplessly down and over the edge into the depths below.

As George contemplated the fearful dangers attending their further progress, the idea occurred to him that perhaps, after all, now that their pursuers had gone, and the ground was left clear below, it would be better to retrace their steps and endeavour to find another and more practicable way out of the ravine.

But a few seconds’ consideration of this plan convinced Leicester of its utter impracticability. They had, by superhuman exertions, succeeded in climbing *up* the precipice; but he knew that they could never get Walford safely *down* again. There was nothing for it, then, but to go on, and *upward*, even though they should find their pursuers awaiting them at the top, a contingency which so much lost time rendered only too probable.

Before going back, however, and attempting the passage up that awful slope, encumbered with Walford’s helpless body, George thought it would be prudent to essay the passage alone, so that he might learn, from actual experience, the full extent of the danger, and thus be the better able to guard against disaster.

Accordingly down he went upon hands and knees, and forthwith began the ascent. His first attempt proved to him that he had in no wise magnified the perils of the journey, for his knees slipped helplessly from under him the moment that they touched the grass, and it was only by clinging desperately with his hands to the long tough herbage that he escaped being shot down to the bottom and over the edge.

Returning once more to the friendly ledge, which, after the dangers he had so recently passed through, seemed to afford a position of absolute safety, George began to cast about in his mind for some means of overcoming this new difficulty, and at last he hit upon the idea of making a narrow pathway up the slope by pulling up the grass by the roots. This, however, he soon found would be a work of considerable time; but he also discovered that it would be possible, without any great difficulty, to remove small patches of just sufficient size to give a precarious, but comparatively secure, foothold, and this he at once proceeded to do.

Half an hour of arduous labour in this direction enabled him to safely reach the top of the slope, where, to his great gratification, he discovered another platform of rock, about six feet wide. Passing along this, he came suddenly upon an irregular fissure in the rocky face of the precipice. This fissure was about four feet wide at the bottom, the walls sloping inwards, like a roof, until they met at a height of seven or eight feet from the ground. George at once unhesitatingly entered the opening, and found that it widened somewhat as it receded from the face of the rock, until at a distance of some five and twenty feet inwards it abruptly terminated in a small, cave-like aperture, some six feet in height, and perhaps twelve in diameter, being, as nearly as he could ascertain, by the sense of touch only, roughly of a circular form.

George was inexpressibly thankful that he had been guided to this place of refuge, for here, he resolved, the party should pass the night, as they easily could, with the most perfect safety. It was by this time far too dark to attempt the awful risk of a passage up the precipice, and he felt sure that, even could they succeed in safely reaching the top, their pursuers would be found there, awaiting them. But this cavernous fissure afforded them the very shelter they required; its existence was, in all probability, absolutely a secret; and, even were it not so, it was inaccessible to all but those who chose to risk their necks in an effort to reach it; and, lastly, they could seek in it the rest they so absolutely needed, without the haunting fear of rolling over the precipice in their sleep.

Thinking thus, Leicester rapidly, but cautiously, made his way back to Tom, whom he found in a state of the greatest mental perturbation, owing to his prolonged absence.

Hastily describing to the lad the fortunate discovery which he had made, George made what few preparations were required for the short but dangerous journey before them, and then the two resumed their load, and with cautious steps wended their way along the ledge to the treacherous slope, it was by this time as dark as it would be throughout the night; but this circumstance rather lessened than increased their peril, for it prevented their realising as fully as in broad daylight the giddy height of the narrow path along which they were travelling; whilst the brilliant light from the stars overhead was sufficient to enable them to pick their steps, and find the bare patches in the grass, in which it was so imperatively necessary for them to plant their footsteps. At last, after nearly a quarter of an hour's arduous labour, and several narrow escapes from a disastrous accident, the welcome shelter of the cave-like fissure was reached, and, feeling their way cautiously into it, they laid Walford down, released him from his uncomfortable bonds, and hungry, thirsty, and utterly fagged out as they were with the arduous labours of the day, threw themselves down beside him, and, with a half-unconscious thanksgiving for their preservation trembling upon their lips, fell at once into a profound slumber.

Their sleep lasted until late on in the following day, the sun being already low in the heavens when George was awakened by Walford with a querulous demand for food and drink. He at once rose, and, proceeding to the mouth of the fissure, effected a cautious reconnaissance, the result of which was the establishment of the satisfactory circumstance that no one was visible in the ravine below. The next point to be ascertained was, whether his pursuers—any or all of them—were still maintaining a watch for them on the cliff above. George had not the slightest doubt but that, when he saw them riding up the valley on the previous evening, they had resolved to ride round and intercept the fugitives, or pick up their trail at the cliff-top, if possible; the question to be settled was, whether, having failed in both these objects, they would establish a watch upon that part of the cliff at which the fugitives might be expected to make their appearance; or whether, believing that pursuit had been baffled, and an escape effected, they would return discomfited to the estate. Leicester was of opinion that, failing to detect any sign of the fugitives, and the dogs being unable to pick up the scent, a suspicion might occur to the minds of the pursuers that their prey was still lurking in some precarious resting-place on the face of the precipice, and, in that case, no doubt a strict watch would be maintained for some hours; but as to how long it would be before the patience of the watchers became exhausted, or before the conviction should thrust itself upon them that the fugitives had escaped, he could of course form no opinion. But, having thus far evaded capture, he thought it would be only prudent to make sure that the coast was clear before proceeding further in the prosecution of their flight.

Having come to this conclusion, he returned to the inner recesses of the cave, acquainted Tom with his intention to make a trip of exploration as far, if necessary, as the top of the cliff, and forthwith set out upon his mission.

George's first act, on issuing from the fissure, was to cast a look aloft, in order that he might judge of the nature of the task still before them. The sight was anything but encouraging, the task of climbing that vertical face—perfectly smooth, to all intents and purposes, the projections and inequalities being so slight as to be barely distinguishable beyond a height of twenty or five-and-twenty feet—seeming to him, even after his recent experience of cliff-climbing, a sheer impossibility. To climb it, even unencumbered as he then was, was a task not to be lightly entered upon, and he determined that, before attempting it, he would seek further, and endeavour to discover a somewhat less difficult path to the summit.

With this object in view, he continued his way along the rocky platform upon which he was then standing, until he rounded a sharp angle, where it abruptly came to an end, and gave place to a rough, jagged, and broken face, very similar to that which they had ascended on the previous evening. Casting his eye over and up this uneven face, in an effort to pick out the most suitable path, his gaze was arrested by the sight of a bush growing out of the face of the rock. The bush was only some ten feet distant, and he was therefore close enough to it, not only to see that it was evidently a species of wild raspberry, but also to discern the very welcome circumstance that it was literally bending beneath its weight of ripe fruit. He was not long in making his way to the spot where it stood, and then, removing his jacket, and knotting the sleeves round his neck, he, with a seaman's readiness of invention, converted it into a sort of bag, which he rapidly filled to its utmost capacity with the cool, ripe, refreshing juicy fruit. With this he hurried back to the inmates of the cave, and, laying it before them, bade them eat freely, returning himself to the bush, since it lay exactly in the way he intended to take, to satisfy the cravings of his own appetite.

The Fugitives make good their Escape.

Having partaken of as much of the fruit as he deemed prudent, George at once betook himself to the task of climbing the precipice, and was agreeably surprised at the rapidity and ease with which he accomplished the ascent. Now that he was unencumbered with Walford's weight, and was free from the horrible dread which had before haunted him—that a false step on Tom's part might precipitate all hands to the bottom—his confidence in his own powers enabled him to coolly approach and successfully surmount obstacles which, under less favourable conditions, he would have dreaded to face, and in a few minutes he was within a foot or two of the top.

Here he deemed it prudent to pause for a moment and survey the path by which he had ascended, so that, in the event of danger, he might be able to effect a rapid retreat. The glance downward which he permitted himself to take, though only momentary, brought on again, though happily only in a mitigated degree, the same feeling of vertigo and nausea from which he had before suffered; and he was obliged to close his eyes for a short time, clinging convulsively to the rock meanwhile, to avoid falling headlong to the bottom.

Having at length once more recovered his steadiness, he rose cautiously higher and higher, until his head was level with the top edge of the precipice, and then he ventured to raise his head rapidly, cast a flying glance round, and dip it again. But the latter precaution was needless; the ground still sloped upward, so that he could see for a distance of some forty yards only, but all the visible space was perfectly clear; there was no human eye to detect his presence there. Once more raising his head, and this time taking a more leisurely and deliberate glance round, to make assurance doubly sure, he proceeded to make his way up over the edge on to the comparatively level ground at the top. This was a task demanding the utmost caution, for a depth of some eighteen inches of light soil crowned the rock, thickly covered with long rank grass, which, owing to the lightness of the soil, afforded but a very precarious and uncertain hold. The soil itself, too, crumbled away immediately beneath his touch, so that at the very top of the precipice he was unable to find anything to which he could safely hold. For a short time it almost seemed as if these apparently trifling obstacles were about to baffle him altogether, and it was not until he had actually laid bare the rock immediately in front of him, as far as his arm could reach, that he accomplished his object, and stood safely on the top of the cliff.

He now threw himself flat on the ground in the long grass, thus effectually concealing himself from the view of any chance passer-by, and crawled to the crest of the hill, where he again peered cautiously about him. The ground, from the spot whereon he knelt, declined pretty steeply to the sea, only a quarter of a mile distant; slightly to his right there lay a valley, with a tiny river flowing through it into the sea; and on either bank of this stream there stood two or three crazy wattle-huts, scarcely worthy the name of human habitations, with a net or two spread behind them on poles in the sun to dry. Three or four fishing-canoes and a boat—a ship's boat, which looked as though it had been picked up derelict—were moored in the stream; but human beings, there were none visible. In line with the river, commencing at a distance of about two miles from the shore, and extending right out to the horizon, there lay a group of islets, some forty or more in number; and far away beyond them, lying like a thin grey cloud of haze on the water, he could see the Isle of Pines.

"So far, so good," thought George. The spot was evidently a lonely one, inhabited by a few fishermen only; there was no sign of any watch being maintained on the chance of the runaways putting in an appearance, so the chase had doubtless by this time been abandoned as hopeless; there was a capital boat—which, in his urgent necessity, he felt he need not scruple to appropriate—lying in the stream below, and everything promised favourably for a successful escape from the island.

But though the scene below looked so quiet and deserted, and though the boat lay there so temptingly within sight, Leicester felt that the evening would be the most suitable time for making their final effort; they were in no immediate hurry now, and it was scarcely worth while to risk detection by putting off in broad daylight. Besides, the sea-breeze was blowing half a gale, and in their exhausted condition they would scarcely be able to drive the boat ahead against it; whilst, by waiting until sundown, they would have it calm to start with, and the breeze, when it came, would be off the land and in their favour.

Thus arguing the matter with himself, he rose to his feet, and sauntered leisurely back to the cliff-edge on his return journey.

He was surprised and greatly disconcerted now to discover how easy it was to miss the spot at which he had made his ascent. The strong breeze, sweeping over the grass, had obliterated every trace of his recent passage through it, but he confidently walked in what he believed to be the right direction—only to find himself mistaken. The bare patch of rock which he had cleared to facilitate his passage over the edge was of course, when once found, an unmistakable landmark; but he was quite five minutes walking to and fro on the cliff-edge before he hit upon it, and quite long enough to have insured his capture had he been surprised and closely pursued.

Having at last found it, however, he forthwith began his descent; and here again he was disagreeably reminded of the much greater difficulty which is experienced in the *descent* than in the *ascent* of a cliff. His difficulties began with his first attempt to lower himself over the cliff-edge; and, notwithstanding his utmost care, he several times found himself in positions of the most appalling peril. He, however, got down safely to the cavern at last, and, after detailing to Tom the result of his observations, threw himself down on the rocky floor, to recover in sleep, if possible, the strength and nerve necessary for their final ascent.

When George awoke, the sun was within about an hour of setting. There was, therefore, time for him to go out and secure for his companions and himself another meal of the wild raspberries, which he accordingly did.

The fugitives had all their preparations complete in good time, and, when everything was quite ready, Leicester went out and stood at the entrance to the fissure, watching the shadows creep gradually higher and higher up the eastern side of the ravine as the sun declined toward the horizon. At length the last golden gleam vanished, the entire landscape assumed a hue of rich purple-grey, rapidly deepening in tone as the darkness of the tropical night settled swiftly down; and the supreme moment had arrived.

Returning at once to the interior of the cave, George briefly announced that it was time to start; Walford, already securely lashed in his hammock, was at once hoisted up between George and Tom as before, and, issuing from the mouth of the fissure, the fugitives forthwith began the last and most perilous part of the ascent.

They had scarcely risen a couple of yards when rapid hoof-beats were heard in the valley below, and, pausing for a moment to glance down, George saw a mounted figure galloping rapidly up the valley. He recognised it at once as one of their former pursuers, and saw in a moment how completely these pertinacious man-hunters had outwitted him. It immediately became clear to him that, failing to pick up the trail at the top of the precipice, these fellows had jumped to

the conclusion that, improbable as it might seem, their prey must still be lurking hidden somewhere on the face of the precipice, and, doubtless during the previous night, the individual just seen had returned, and, secreting himself among the bushes below, had maintained an untiring watch on the face of the cliff. There could be no doubt that he had seen George's ascent of the cliff that morning, and, observing him to be alone, had rightly concluded that the journey up the cliff had been made for the purpose of a reconnaissance, and had therefore remained *perdu*, satisfied that before long his patience would be rewarded, as it had been, by witnessing the attempted flight of the whole party.

These reflections flashed like lightning through George's brain, and helped him to an instant decision.

"We *must* go on *now!*" he exclaimed to Tom. "They have discovered our hiding-place, and if we were to return to it, they would simply blockade the top and bottom of the precipice, knowing that, sooner or later, we must inevitably fall into their hands; and, in addition to that, they would spread the information of our position all over the country, and perhaps offer a reward for our capture, in which case we should have perhaps a hundred watching for us instead of half-a-dozen. We have a chance yet; for it will take them fully twenty minutes to ride round, by which time, if we are fortunate, we can reach the boat. Now, Tom, my lad, do your utmost; in twenty minutes we shall either have won our freedom or relapsed into slavery for ever."

Not another word was now said by either of them until that awful climb was over and they had, after countless hair-breadth escapes, safely reached the top of the cliff. When at last they once more stood on comparatively level ground, they felt as though their limbs had no strength to carry them another yard upon their way, so exhausting had been the superhuman efforts which they had put forth. But there was no pause—no rest for them yet; onward they must still press at their topmost speed, or all that they had hitherto endured would be in vain. The short journey from the top of the precipice to the summit of the rising ground was a cruel one; the slope, gentle though it was, telling upon them terribly as they staggered forward over the long slippery grass, panting, breathless, staggering and stumbling at every step, and dreading every moment to hear the triumphant shout announcing the arrival of their pursuers upon the scene.

But, so far, save that of their own laboured breathing, not a sound of any kind broke in upon the deep stillness of the evening hour; and, when at last they surmounted the crest of the hill, the scene below was one of peaceful solitude.

"Now one more—one *supreme* effort, Tom, and in five minutes we shall be free," gasped George. "Muster all your courage and resolution, and let us make a run for it. Can you do it?"

"Ay, ay, sir, I'll try," was the scarcely articulate reply, and without more ado they set off down the slope at a run.

A run? Well, yes, it was a run, if it was anything at all; but such a run! Their limbs felt like lead, and Walford's weight seemed to them enough to drag them down to the very centre of the earth. Every individual blade of grass seemed to be invested with the toughness of a hempen cable, and to trail directly across their path for the express purpose of retarding their progress and tripping them up. Their breath was gone; their mouths were open and gasping; their hearts were beating like sledge-hammers against their ribs, and pumping the blood in a great red-hot tide up into their heads; their brains reeled; their sight began to fail them; and what little of the scene was still perceptible to their disordered vision was apparently whirling in a mad dance up and down, round and round them, until they could not tell whether they were going right or wrong.

Yet on they still staggered and stumbled, first one, then the other, falling prone to the earth, but up again in an instant, and on once more.

At last they were at the base of the hill; another half-a-dozen yards, and they would be beside the stream; another twenty, and they would be in the boat. Hark! what sound is that? The dull thud of horses' hoofs upon the turf! With what headlong speed the riders are pressing forward! And—ha! there is the exultant shout which tells that the prey is in sight.

"Thank God, there are no dogs with them," thinks George. "Are there not?" Then what means that deep, sonorous baying sound which breaks with such startling distinctness on his frenzied ear? "On! on! for the love of God, press on!" gasps George; and with something almost like renewed effort the fugitives once more spring forward.

Hark! now you can hear the deep panting of those hell-hounds as they lunge forward at a gallop, silent now that their prey is in sight, their flaming eyes fixed upon the flying men in front of them, and their jaws champing in horrible anticipation.

One more bound, and the boat is reached. Poor Walford is tumbled unceremoniously into her; George and Tom follow, the latter wrenching from the foetid mud the stake to which the rotting painter is attached, whilst the former, with a last desperate effort, sends the crazy craft into the middle of the stream. As he rolls in over the gunwale a heavy splash is heard, and some cumbrous body scurries from the slimy bank into the water, whilst at the same moment the foremost hound, a magnificent creature, as big and as lithe as a panther, springs boldly after the receding boat. He *almost* reaches her, not quite, his front paws catch upon the gunwale, but the rest of his body falls short and drops into the water. A thrust from one of the oars sends him clear of the boat, and, with a baffled howl, he turns and swims for the shore. He is within three feet of the bank when a something, which looks like a log of charred timber, rises to the surface behind him, two gleaming eyes glare at him, and, with a horrid snap, a pair of serrated jaws close upon his hind quarters, and he is dragged back and under, to furnish a meal to the terrible *cayman*.

But the fugitives have no time for more than the merest superficial glance at this canine tragedy, for their human pursuers are now close at hand. The thowl-pins, luckily, are already in their places, left there by the fishermen, who have been too lazy to remove and stow them snugly away; the oars are therefore hastily caught up and tossed into their places, the boat is spun round like a top until her head points seaward, and, with vigorous strokes, the two men send her foaming out along the narrow river-channel toward the sea.

The pursuers rein up upon the bank, and with one accord draw their pistols, and open a fusillade upon the flying boat. Fortunately it is a harmless one; one bullet lodges in the stern transom, a second chips a shaving off the loom of George's oar, a third passes harmlessly through the planking of the boat's bow and skims a few yards along the surface of the water beyond, and the remainder fly wide.

But, after *so long* and persevering a hunt, these men are not disposed to sit still tamely and witness the escape of those whom they have sworn to take back with them, dead or alive, to the plantation; so, after a few minutes of hurried consultation, three of them dismount, and, hauling one of the canoes to the bank, enter her and start in chase.

The way in which they handle the paddles and send the light craft surging down the river in the wake of the boat

proves that they are no novices in the boatman's art, but neither are the two of whom they are in chase. George and Tom have already nearly forgotten their terrible fatigue; they are fast recovering their wind; their legs—the members in which they suffered most severely—are now comparatively at rest, an entirely new set of muscles is brought into action, and, as they are perfect masters of the art of handling an oar, they are getting a surprising rate of speed out of the old boat without very much effort. In a couple of minutes they are clear of the river's mouth, through the rollers which are breaking on the miniature bar, and heading fairly out to sea.

But human endurance has its limits, and after they had been tugging away for half an hour at the clumsy, ill-made oars, their exertions began to tell upon them. Their strength began to flag, and the canoe, which they had hitherto contrived to keep at a distance, began slowly to gain on them, though how much they could not well tell, as it was by this time quite dark, and they could only distinguish her as a small, dark, shapeless blot on the surface of the water, with a tiny luminous ripple under her bow. They were just beginning to discuss their probabilities of success, should it come to a hand-to-hand fight with those three armed and unfatigued men, when a faint puff of warm air fanned their faces.

"Thank God!" exclaimed George fervently, "thank God! there is the first puff of the land-breeze."

With that he began to fumble with one hand at the lashings of the sail which lay stretched fore and aft along the thwart beside him, working his oar with the other hand meanwhile, and after a little difficulty the knot which secured them was cast loose, and the turns partially thrown off.

"Now, Tom, you must finish the job," exclaimed George; "you can reach and throw off the rest of the turns where you sit; the sail is a lug by the feel of it—at all events, here is a yard of some sort lying alongside the mast—and when you have cast off the lashings and are ready to step the mast, say the word, and lay in your oar; then I'll scull the boat, whilst you step the mast and hoist the sail. Hurrah! here comes the breeze, hot and strong; get the canvas on her, and at last we shall be able to enjoy a rest. If those fellows are wise now, they'll 'bout ship at once, and make for the shore, five minutes hence it will be blowing fresh, and, if they don't look out, they'll be blown off the land altogether. Are you ready? Then in oars, step the mast, and sway away upon the halliards."

So said, so done; Tom tossed in his oar, seized the mast, and stepped it. The halliards were already bent to the yard—laziness again, the fishermen evidently having been too indolent to cast them adrift, knowing that they would only have to bend them on again when next they wanted to use the sail—and in another minute Tom had the sail mastheaded, the tack lashed down, and the sheet aft in George's hand; whilst the latter, sinking down in the sternsheets with a sigh of ineffable relief, and too tired yet to ship the rudder, steered the boat with the oar which he had used for sculling, whilst Tom was busied in the operation of making sail.

The canoe, meanwhile, had crept up to within her own length of the chase, and oaths and exclamations of mutual encouragement were freely mingled with peremptory orders to the fugitives to surrender, and threats of the punishment awaiting them when caught; but no sooner was the sail set than the boat drew rapidly away, and in ten minutes more the canoe, with its occupants still paddling furiously out to sea, was invisible. George confidently expected to be saluted with a parting shower of bullets, but he was agreeably disappointed, owing possibly to the circumstance that in the hurry of pursuit the crew of the canoe had omitted to bring their ammunition with them.

For the first four hours of their flight the voyagers were sailing continuously among the group of low islets which George had seen from the top of the hill; but about midnight, as nearly as they could guess, the last rock was passed, and they found themselves in open water.

And now the want of a chart made itself disagreeably manifest. George was quite seaman enough to be able to steer a tolerably straight course, using the stars as a guide by night and the sun by day; but unfortunately, having nothing but his memory to go by, he had only a very vague notion of the proper course to steer, and of the distance which they would have to travel. His plans, moreover, were by no means fixed. One of his ideas was, to stand boldly out to sea in a south-easterly direction, in the hope of hitting Jamaica, where they would at once find themselves among friends able and willing to help them. But against this plan there were several grave objections, the chief of which was his uncertainty as to the exact position of the island and the consequent probability that, from its small size, they would miss it altogether. Then, again, they were absolutely without food or water. It is true, there were a few scraps of putrid fish in the boat, and Tom had found a fishing-line under the bottom-boards forward, so that, having a line and the wherewithal to bait it, they might possibly succeed in catching a *few* fish. But then it would obviously not do to rely on such a mere chance as that. Another idea was to get into the open water southward of the Isle of Pines, and look out for either an English frigate—one of which would be pretty certain to be cruising in that direction—or an eastward-bound merchantman from Honduras.

This plan seemed to George the most feasible under the circumstances, and in favour of it he finally decided.

The first matter to which they devoted themselves, on finding that they had no longer anything to fear from the canoe, was Walford's comfort. The poor fellow made no complaint—indeed he had scarcely opened his mouth to utter a word since the moment when he received his injury,—but it had for the last two days been growing increasingly apparent to George that his unfortunate rival was rapidly sinking into a very critical condition. Under the combined effects of the injury, exposure, and want, he was wasting visibly away; his strength was so completely gone that he was quite unable to move without assistance; and George had once or twice asked himself the question, whether he was justified in involving this poor weak demented creature in the sufferings which there was only too much reason to believe still awaited them. Would it not have been truer kindness, he asked himself, to have left Walford in some sheltered spot where there would be a certainty of his being speedily found and taken care of? But reflection satisfied him that it would not. To have left him in the hands of the Spaniards would have been to leave him in slavery for the remainder of his life; and, judging by himself, Leicester felt that death itself would be preferable to such a fate. Then, again, there was the possibility—a slender one, it is true, but still a possibility—of their speedy rescue; in which case, with the care and nursing which he would be sure to receive, there was no reason why Walford should not recover both his health and his intellect.

So, comforting himself with the reflection that he was doing the best he could for the unfortunate man, George arranged a comfortable berth for him in the sternsheets of the boat, and deposited him thereon, still lashed up in his canvas hammock, the grass packing of which formed a comparatively soft and comfortable support to his emaciated frame.

Chapter Nineteen.

Death claims a Victim.

The breeze continued fresh until about midnight, after which it lessened a trifle, and came off from the larboard quarter. Daybreak found the boat off the north-eastern extremity of the Isle of Pines, and about five miles distant from that curious chain of islets called by the Spaniards the Islas de Mangles, which curves out like a breakwater across the northern face of the island. Their hunger, which had to some extent been appeased by their last plentiful meal of wild raspberries, and which had been altogether forgotten in the excitement of their subsequent flight now returned to them in full force, and, the breeze failing them, George determined to put the line overboard and try for a few fish.

He was successful beyond his most sanguine expectations, half-a-dozen fine but grotesque-looking fish speedily rewarding his efforts. The idea of devouring them raw was rather repulsive, but as there was no possible means of cooking them, they had either to do that or go without breakfast; so, selecting the most tempting-looking, they cut it up, and, after making a wry face over the first mouthful or two, managed to satisfactorily dispose of it. That is to say, George and Tom did; but poor Walford, on being offered a share, shook his head, murmured that he was not hungry, and closed his eyes again in patient suffering. The balance of the catch was carefully cleaned and strung up on the yard, in the hope that it would dry in the sun.

Their great want now was *water*. Their hunger being satisfied, thirst began to assert itself, and George would have landed upon the Isle of Pines and endeavoured to find fresh water, but for the fact that he caught sight of several people on the shore, who appeared to be watching the boat with pertinacious curiosity. In this strait he tried the plan of dipping his shirt into the sea, and putting it on again dripping wet; and, to his great delight, he found that this proceeding had a very sensible effect in mitigating thirst. Upon this, Tom tried the same plan, with equally beneficial results, and then they well soused poor Walford with sea-water, hoping that it would, to some extent, revive and refresh him.

By mid-day the Isle of Pines was broad on their starboard quarter, the last *Cay* on the "Jardines" shoal had been passed, and they were fairly at sea and in deep water. They might now reasonably look out for a frigate at any moment; but, as it would not do to depend upon this source of rescue alone, George continued to stand boldly to the southward and eastward, hoping that by so doing he would not only improve his prospects of falling in with a British frigate, but that he would also—failing the frigate—meet with a friendly merchantman.

By sunset they were fairly out of sight of land, but, so far, nothing in the shape of a sail had greeted their longing eyes. Once or twice a white speck on the horizon had temporarily raised their hopes, but it had vanished the next moment, being probably nothing more than the sunlight flashing upon a sea-bird's wing.

George was hourly growing more and more anxious for a speedy rescue, not so much on his own account as for Walford's sake, the condition of the latter being such as to give rise to the liveliest apprehension. He had eaten nothing since the previous day, pleading want of appetite, and as the sun went down he watched its gradual disappearance beneath the purple waves with wistful eagerness, murmuring, "The last time, the last time!" Then as the solemn darkness swept down over the sea, and the stars came out one by one in the great blue vault above, the little consciousness of his surroundings which he hitherto retained left him, and he fell to murmuring snatches of songs, mingled with babblings of his childhood's days. The word "mother" was frequently upon his lips, and once he burst into a passion of hysterical tears, murmuring, child-like, that "he was very sorry; and that, if she would forgive him, he would be a good boy for the future, and would never do it again."

This state of things gravely alarmed George, who began to fear that the last great solemn change was at hand. It was therefore with a feeling of intense relief that he heard a hail of "Sail, ho!" from Tom, whose sharp eyes had at last caught sight of a genuine and unmistakable sail broad on the boat's lee bow.

There was nothing, however, to be done but to carefully watch the helm of the boat; she was already under canvas and steering the best course possible for intercepting the stranger; the only thing, therefore, was to steer *straight*, otherwise the chances were that the ship would be missed, after all. The strange sail was steering about east-south-east, being close-hauled on the larboard tack, and, from her position, George thought it just possible that he might intercept her, or, at all events, near her sufficiently to permit of her crew hearing his hail as they passed.

As the night deepened, the breeze freshened, and by the time that the strange sail had been in sight half an hour it was blowing so fresh that it was as much as they could do to keep the lee gunwale above water. Yet they dared not shorten sail, for the breeze which was threatening at every moment to capsize them was also hurrying the stranger more rapidly along, and consequently lessening their chances of intercepting her. Thick clouds, too, began to gather in the sky, threatening more wind, and, by obscuring the light of the moon, rendering it just so much the more unlikely that the crew of the approaching vessel would see them.

At last a heavy squall burst about a mile to windward of them, and George was reluctantly compelled to order Tom forward to shorten sail. Unfortunately the halliards had somehow got jammed aloft in the sheave, and the sail would not come down. Tom tugged and tugged at it desperately, but all to no purpose; there it stuck, with the squall rushing down upon them like a race-horse.

"Cast off the tack, Tom, and let the sail fly!" shouted George, and the lad had scarcely time to obey the order when the squall burst furiously upon them. The sail streamed out in the wind like a great banner from the top of the mast, lashing furiously, and shaking the boat to her keel. The crazy craft careened gunwale-to, notwithstanding that George had put his helm promptly up, and in another moment she would undoubtedly have gone over with them; but just as the water was beginning to pour in over the gunwale, *crack!* went the mast and the thwart with it over the side. The boat was nearly half full of water, and in their anxiety to free her, and get her before the wind, the mast and sail parted company from the boat, and they never saw them again.

The squall lasted about five minutes, and then passed off, leaving only a gentle breeze behind it. As soon as this was the case, they had a look round for the strange sail, and made her out—a topsail-schooner—about a mile and a half distant. George saw that there was still a chance for them, so they out oars and pulled vigorously. All was going well, when, to their intense surprise, the craft, after approaching to within little more than a quarter of a mile of them, suddenly put up her helm, and, wearing round, stood away upon a south-westerly course. With one accord George and Tom started to their feet and shouted lustily and repeatedly, "Ship ahoy! *Ship ahoy!* Ship ahoy!" until their throats were so strained that their voices failed them, and they became unable to utter another sound. It was all to no purpose; their cries attracted not the slightest notice; the schooner ran rapidly away from them and at last George in despair laid in his oar, flung himself down in the sternsheets, and covered his eyes with his hands, to shut out the tantalising sight.

Half an hour afterwards the reason for this extraordinary conduct on the part of the schooner became apparent, the upper canvas of a large ship under a heavy press of sail appearing in the south-east quarter. That this ship was a man-o'-war was evident at a glance, from the cut of her sails; and the course which she was steering, together with her large spread of canvas, showed that she was in pursuit of the schooner.

The first impulse of those in the boat was to out oars and pull toward her, but five minutes' work sufficed to show them that their chance was almost hopeless; the frigate would pass them at a distance of about six miles, and with every eye on board her intently fixed upon the chase, what prospect was there, in that uncertain light, of so small an object as the boat being seen at so great a distance? Nevertheless, they toiled on with dogged perseverance, and did not abandon their efforts until the frigate had passed them, and her topsails had sunk below the horizon. Then indeed they laid in their oars, and directed their whole attention to Walford, whose condition became more alarming every moment.

Not that he made any complaint. The poor fellow indeed seemed to be quite unconscious of his pain and weakness; but his ghastly pallor, his laboured breathing, and the convulsive shudders which agitated his frame from time to time were to George a tolerably clear indication that dissolution was near at hand.

He was still quite light-headed, his mind wandering in feverish haste from scene to scene of his boyhood, as was evident from the rapid disjointed sentences which poured uninterruptedly from his lips. George was able to gather pretty clearly from them that, even as a lad, Walford had been wilful, headstrong, and obstinate, prone to go his own way without much consideration for the wishes of others, and there were occasional wild words and broken exclamations which seemed to indicate that, even whilst little more than a mere child, he had allowed himself to be betrayed into actual crime. And as he lay there, gasping his life away, the follies of boyhood and the graver offences of more recent days seemed to be in some way jumbled up hopelessly in his disordered mind with a confused idea of the urgent necessity for speedy repentance of both. There could be no doubt that, notwithstanding the disordered state of the unhappy man's intellect, conscience was busily at work with him; that he was already beginning to dimly see the error of his ways and the hollowness—the utter unprofitableness—of his past life, and possibly also the critical nature of his position. But the mind was too completely shattered to avail itself of these promptings, and the remorse and regret which had tardily come to him found expression only in the simple pleadings for pardon which a child offers to its grieved parent. This distressing state of things lasted at intervals all through the night and well into the following day, when the dying man, utterly exhausted, sank into a fitful, troubled sleep.

The pangs of hunger and—still worse—of thirst again making themselves felt, George once more put the fishing-line over the side, and, after waiting patiently for nearly an hour, had the satisfaction of feeling a smart tug at it. He gave a sharp jerk, to strike the hook firmly into his fish, and at once began to haul smartly in, but he had only gathered in a foot or so of the line when there came a terrific pull at it, which sent the cord flying through his fingers in spite of all his efforts to hold it. He promptly called Tom to his assistance, but even with this aid he was unable to hold the fish; and, as a last resource, he threw a couple of turns round one of the thowl-pins. The result was disastrous; the line snapped short off at the pin, and when they came to investigate further, they found that they had lost the whole of it, except a bare fathom, which still remained in the boat.

This was a misfortune indeed, as it deprived them of their only means of obtaining that sustenance which was now becoming so urgent a necessity to them. But sailors are not easily disheartened, and they forthwith set to work to manufacture a new line out of the rope which they still had in the boat; Tom carefully unlaying the strands and jointing the yarns, whilst George tried his best to manufacture a hook out of a nail drawn from the gunwale of the boat. This task occupied them for the remainder of the day, and when it was completed the hook and line together constituted such a very make-shift, hopeless-looking affair that George, in spite of his hunger, could not repress an incredulous smile at the idea of any fish with his wits about him being beguiled by it. They tried it, however, but it was an utter failure; they could not secure even the barren encouragement of a nibble; and at last the attempt was given up in despair.

Shortly before sunset Walford once more opened his eyes, and began to stare blankly about him. For a minute or two there was a look in his eyes which encouraged George to hope that reason was returning to her abandoned throne, but the look quickly passed away, and the incoherent mutterings recommenced. The sun went down, night's mantle of darkness once more descended upon the sea, and then the full moon in all her queenly beauty rolled slowly into view above the horizon, flooding the scene with her silvery light, and investing it with a magical beauty which was not without its influence even on those poor famine-stricken creatures, who were watching with such sympathetic solicitude beside their dying companion.

Suddenly Walford's mutterings ceased, an expression of joyous surprise lighted up his ghastly wasted features, he seized George's hand with a firm clasp in one of his, and, raising the other, exclaimed—

"Hark! what was that?"

"I heard nothing, Ned," answered George tremulously; he knew instinctively now that the last dread moment was close at hand,—“I heard nothing; what was it?"

"My mother," answered Walford,—“my mother calling to me as she used to call me, when I was a little innocent child, when she—ha! there it is again. It is her own dear, well-remembered voice. She is calling me to go to her; I must not stay out at play any longer; I did so last night, you know, and it grieved her. She said I was a naughty, disobedient boy, and I made her cry. But she forgave me and kissed me after I had said my prayers, and—and—‘Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; *and forgive us our trespasses.*’”

As the first words of this simple, beautiful prayer issued from Walford's dying lips, George and Tom threw themselves upon their knees in the bottom of the boat, their hands clasped, their heads bent, and their hearts earnestly uplifted to Him who was thus mercifully taking the poor sufferer to Himself. The first sentence was spoken with child-like simplicity, but, after that, every word was uttered with increasing fervour and an evident conception of its momentous import, until the clause was reached, “and forgive us our trespasses,” which was breathed forth with a solemn intensity that thrilled the very souls of the listeners. Then the voice suddenly ceased, and as George looked up with startled eyes he saw Walford's lips tremble, a radiant smile parted them for an instant, and he sank heavily back on the boat's thwart—dead.

George gazed long and earnestly in the face of the dead man, his thoughts travelling rapidly back to that eventful evening when they two met—the one going humbly and doubtfully to declare his love, the other hurrying triumphantly away from a successful wooing; and Leicester grieved, as he pictured the sorrow of that loving woman's heart, when the news should be taken to her of the sad event just past. He thought, too, of the strange meeting in mid-ocean, of the helpless state in which Walford had remained since then, of his own vow, and all that it had cost him, and as he reverently gathered the folds of canvas about the lifeless form he felt comforted with the reflection that, though he had failed, he had honestly done his best to keep that vow.

He did what he could to dispose the corpse decently and to prepare it for its last long sleep beneath the waves; it was not much that he was able to do, but he did what he could, “for Lucy's sake,” as he kept on muttering to himself; and when all was ready he turned to Tom. The poor lad, utterly worn-out, had sunk down in the bottom of the boat, and, with

one arm supporting his head on the thwart, was fast asleep.

"Well, better so," thought George to himself; "he is enjoying at least a temporary respite from his miseries; I will not disturb him;" and, murmuring a short but earnest prayer, he raised the body in his arms, lifted it over the side of the boat, and allowed it to pass gently away from his grasp into the peaceful depths below. "God have mercy on his soul," he murmured, and with clasped hands stood and watched the shrouded form passing slowly out of sight for ever.

Chapter Twenty.

Mr Bowen unexpectedly reappears.

About an hour afterwards a fine breeze sprang up from the north-east, and, putting the boat before it, George seated himself in the stern, tiller in hand, and steered as near a southerly course as the boat, without canvas, would go.

Very gloomy and despondent were his thoughts as he sat there, idly watching the crisp-curling waves racing past. One of the trio had passed away, and, without food or water, without mast or sail, with their strength rapidly ebbing away, the situation of the remaining two was hourly growing more critical. Had they not had the misfortune to lose both mast and sail, George would have endeavoured to return to the Isle of Pines; but to do so with the oars alone, now that they had scarcely strength to use them, was impossible. There was no alternative, therefore, but to wait patiently, and hope that they might be picked up before it should be too late.

The boat drifted on hour after hour, the sun rose, the wave-crests sparkled and glanced under his cheering rays, and still the horizon remained sail-less. At last Tom, after stirring uneasily, awoke from his stupor, glanced with eager, haggard eyes around him, and uttered a groan of despair.

"Then it is *not* true, after all," he gasped; and George noticed with consternation the difficulty with which the poor fellow articulated,—*"it is not true; it was only a dream."*

"What was a dream, Tom?" asked George, and he started at the hollow sepulchral tones of his own voice.

"I dreamt that a noble ship had hove in sight and was bearing down upon us under stunsails. She was painted white from her truck down to her water-line; her canvas was white as snow; she was flying a great white flag from her main-royal-masthead, and the people on board her were all dressed in white. It was a grand sight to see her sweeping down toward us, with the cool clear water flashing up under her sharp bows, and there was—ah! see, it was no dream, after all; hurrah! she comes—*she comes!*"

And the poor fellow pointed away to where the rays of the sun fell upon the water in a broad white dazzling glare.

"Merciful Heaven!" muttered George, "this is horrible; the lad is out of his senses, gone mad with hunger and thirst. Sit down, Tom," said he coaxingly, "sit down, there's a good fellow; I can see no ship. What you see is only the glare of the sun on the water. But if we are only patient, please God, a ship *will* come and pick us up before long. But we must be cool and steady, and keep a sharp lookout, so that when she heaves in sight we may be ready to signal to her."

Tom passed his hand wearily over his forehead, shaded his eyes with his hand, again peered long and anxiously over the gleaming sea, and shook his head despondingly. The bright vision had vanished, and he sank moodily down in the bottom of the boat, his arms resting upon the thwart, and his head bowed upon them.

Oh! that terrible time of *waiting*; with the sun beating mercilessly down upon their uncovered heads and scorching up their brains; with the hellish tortures of hunger and thirst, already unendurable, momentarily increasing in intensity; with a horrible feeling of deadly weakness fast paralysing their energies and dragging like leaden weights upon their aching limbs, what wonder that each moment lagged until it seemed an hour, each minute a day, and that the hours stretched themselves out into eternities of overwhelming anguish! At last George feebly felt, with a curious mingling of despair and relief, that his own senses were leaving him. Soon the boat was—to his disordered vision—no longer drifting helplessly upon a lonely sea; she was tranquilly gliding under silken sails up the winding reaches of a gently flowing stream, the crystal waters of which flowed over golden sands and between banks of richest flowery verdure, with overshadowing trees whose boughs drooped beneath their load of blushing fruit; whilst, in the distance, palaces of whitest marble gleamed amid the many-tinted foliage, and all the air was musical with the songs of birds. He no longer felt the agonies of hunger or the fiery torment of thirst; he plucked the ripe fruit as the boat swept gently past, and his pangs were assuaged; he no longer suffered from the scorching rays of the sun, for a silken awning floated over his head, and the cool breeze crept refreshingly beneath it and gently fanned his aching brow; and he no longer suffered from weariness, for his body reclined upon cushions of the softest down, and he felt himself gradually sinking into a luxurious slumber under the soothing influence of the most entrancing melodies.

"Ou ay; he'll do weel eneuch, he's comin' roun' brawly; it's joost a plain common case o' starvation an' exposure; there's naething complicatit about it at a'; pairfect rest and a guid nourishing diet 'll set him on his pins again in less than a week."

Such were the words which fell upon George Leicester's ear as he once more became feebly conscious of the fact of his own existence. The words came to him mingled with other sounds, to wit—the creaking of bulkheads, the rattling of cabin doors hooked back to allow the free passage of fresh air, the grinding of a rudder and the clank of rudder-chains, the sonorous hum of the wind through a ship's rigging, the flapping of a sail, the distant subdued murmur of men's voices, and the soft plashing of water. He at the same time became conscious of a gentle swaying and pitching motion, such as is felt on board a ship close-hauled, with a moderate breeze and a correspondingly moderate sea.

For a minute or two George felt languidly puzzled as to his whereabouts, but he was by no means anxious for enlightenment upon the subject; he was in a state of blissful comfort, and he was quite content to remain in passive enjoyment of the same, to feel the gentle current of air softly fanning his brow, to yield himself to the easy, luxurious swing of the cot in which he was lying, and to listen dreamily to the soothing sough of the wind and the splash and gurgle of the water along the ship's side.

It was whilst he remained in this semi-conscious state of beatitude that another voice broke in, in cheery response to

the words of the first speaker, with—

“That’s capital news, doctor; I heartily congratulate you on the successful result of your efforts. And the other one is also likely to do well, you say?”

“Ou ay; he’ll do weel eneuch, too; though—mind ye—the puir laddie has had a narrow escape. But they’re a’ richt the noo; I ken richt weel what tae do wi’ baith noo that I hae succeedit in bringin’ back some signs o’ life in them. And noo, captain, if ye’ll excuse me, I’ll—eh, weel! hoo’s a’ wi’ ye the noo, my mon?”

This exclamation was elicited by the circumstance that George had at last mustered sufficient resolution to open his eyes and look curiously about him.

And this is what he saw. He saw that he was the occupant of a snow-white canvas cot, which hung suspended from the beams of a ship’s roomy after-cabin, the situation of the apartment being manifested by the presence of stern-ports fitted with glazed sashes, all of which were open. There were also two side-ports, one on each side of the cabin, out of which grinned a couple of eighteen-pound carronades, the carriages of which, as well as the whole of the gun inside the port, were painted white. The walls of the cabin, the deck-beams, and the underside of the deck were also painted white with gilt mouldings; a few pictures—one of which was the portrait of a lady—were securely fastened to the walls; the floor was covered with fine matting, and a large writing-table with three or four solid, substantial-looking chairs completed the furnishing of the apartment.

But the chief objects of attraction to George were two figures, which stood beside his cot. One of these was a tall, lanky individual, clad entirely in white, with red hair, prominent cheek-bones, and a pair of piercing grey eyes surmounted by shaggy eye-brows. The other was a shorter, stouter man, light-haired and blue-eyed, a genuine Saxon all over, his fair complexion tanned to a rich ruddy-brown hue, and with a hearty, kindly, genial expression of countenance which won George’s heart in an instant. This individual was also in white, his clothing being reduced to a shirt and a pair of white duck trousers supported at the waist by a belt. George had no difficulty in deciding that he was on board one of his Majesty’s frigates, and that the persons who stood beside him were her captain and the medico.

“Hoo’s a’ wi’ ye the noo, my mon?” repeated the doctor, placing his fingers upon George’s pulse.

“I—I—scarcely know,” stammered George drowsily. “I feel all right and very comfortable. Is anything the matter? And—and *where am I?*”

“Ye feel a’ richt, do ye?” returned the doctor, ignoring George’s question. “Ye’re no’ hungry—nor thirsty, eh?”

“Not particularly,” answered George. “And yet I think I could take some breakfast, if it would not be troubling—”

“Brackfast! Hear til him; brackfast! why, mon,”—drawing out a huge, turnip-like silver watch—“it’s nearly sax o’clock p.m. Will a bite o’ dinner no’ serve ye as weel? Hech, hech,” and the queer, grumpy-looking visage of the really genial-hearted doctor beamed into a smile, as his lips uttered the strange sounds which with him passed for laughter.

Doctor Pearson’s laughter was infectious, perhaps because of its singularity. George smiled in response, and Captain Singleton smiled too; then, turning to the doctor, the latter said—

“My dinner will be served in a few minutes, doctor. If you think it would not injure your patient, I will send him in something from my table.”

“Weel,” responded the doctor with the caution characteristic of his countrymen, “I’ll no’ commit mysel’ by any positvee statement just; I’ll wait and see, since ye’ve been so vera kind as to ask me to dine wi’ ye. But I think I may venture to say that a wee drappie o’ soup will no’ hurt the chiel. And noo, wi’ your leave, captain, I’ll just tak’ the sma’ leeberty o’ turnin’ ye oot o’ your ain cabin, as there’s been an ample suffeency o’ conversation for the present.”

The captain laughed good-naturedly, and turned, with a friendly nod to George, to leave the cabin. Doctor Pearson also turned to go, but paused for an instant to once more feel George’s pulse, and then, with an amiable grunt of satisfaction, he also walked out, saying as he went—

“Never fash your brains, my mon, by wonderin’ whaur ye are. Ye’re in guid han’s, ye may tak’ my word for it, and in guid time, when ye’re strong eneuch to talk, you’ll be told everything. Noo lie still, and keep your ’ees open for a few minutes, and I’ll see that ye hae a decent bit of dinner sent in til ye.”

The worthy doctor was as good as his word; a substantial basin of nourishing soup, with a small quantity of fresh, white, wholesome cabin-biscuit broken into it—“soft tack” was a comparatively unknown luxury at sea in those days—and a glass of port wine being brought in to George by the captain’s steward about ten minutes later; and, having demolished these, the patient once more dropped off to sleep, and passed a comfortable night.

Three days more of Doctor Pearson’s skilful treatment sufficed to put both George and Tom upon their pins once more, and then, and not until then, Captain Singleton asked of the former an account of the circumstances which had resulted in placing them in the desperate situation in which they had been found.

“Well,” said the captain at the conclusion of George’s story, “I heartily sympathise with you, Mr Leicester, in all that you have suffered, and I as heartily congratulate you on your plucky escape. It was rather a clever trick, the way in which those rascals took your ship from you, I *must* say that. It is a wrinkle which, possibly, I may some day play off in turn upon their own countrymen. By your description of them, I should say that the fellows were undoubtedly pirates; the sea swarms with them all round about here—indeed, we are now cruising for the purpose of putting a stop to their depredations, and were returning from an unsuccessful chase after a very suspicious-looking schooner when we picked you up. There is one craft in particular—a barque of undoubtedly English build—which we are most anxious to lay our hands upon; her crew are a peculiarly bloodthirsty set of ruffians, and have perpetrated an unusually large number of atrocities. By-the-bye, did you not say that your vessel was barque-rigged and a fast sailer? I should not be at all surprised to find that she is the identical craft we are so anxious to get hold of. Would you mind giving me a particular description of the *Aurora?*”

George, of course, readily acceded to this request, detailing with seaman-like fidelity every peculiarity of hull and rigging. When he had finished, Captain Singleton said—

"Thank you. The set of the spars and rigging, and the cut of the canvas, does not coincide with the description with which I have been furnished; but your description of the *hull* tallies with mine in every particular, and I have not a doubt that it is the same vessel. And now, to turn to other matters, what do you propose to do with yourself when we land you at Kingston?"

"Well," said George, "I scarcely know; but I suppose I shall endeavour to get a berth on board a homeward-bound ship, or work my passage home. There is nothing else that I can do, for I am absolutely penniless."

"Well," said Captain Singleton, "if a sufficient sum to defray the expenses of your passage home would be of any service to you, I dare say I could manage to raise such an amount, and you shall be heartily welcome to it."

"Thank you, very much," returned George; "but I could not possibly accept your exceedingly kind offer, even as a loan, for I could not be certain of ever being in a position to repay it. No, I shall have to get a berth of some kind."

Four days after the above conversation the cruise of the *Hebe* terminated, and on the day following George and Tom found themselves cast adrift, as it were, in the sandy streets of Kingston.

They were not absolutely penniless, however; for, in addition to a good serviceable suit of clothes apiece out of the slop-chest, Captain Singleton had insisted upon George's accepting a ten-pound note, to meet their more immediate needs, and, being in a friendly port now, the two seamen had very little doubt of getting employment of some kind or other before long.

Their idea was first to make the round of the various shipping agents' offices, and endeavour to obtain a berth on a homeward-bound ship. If that failed, then George thought they might possibly, aided by Captain Singleton's influence, obtain work in the dockyard at Port Royal; and, if the worst came to the worst, they could always depend with absolute certainty upon being received on board a man-o'-war.

In pursuance of the first-mentioned plan, they were wending their way along the street, when, as they passed the entrance to a large general store, they were violently jostled by a man who was making his exit from the place with considerable precipitation.

"Beg pardon, shipmates, no damage done, I hope. I ought to have kept a better lookout when crowding sail to the extent—why—why—no, it *can't* be; and yet—hang me if it *ain't*, after all. Well, this *is* a pleasant surprise, and no mistake. Cap'n, how are ye? And you, Tom, how did them damned slave-drivers treat you?"

It was Mr Bowen, the late chief mate of the *Aurora*. He was dressed in the somewhat rough garb of the mate of a coasting schooner, but was looking well and hearty nevertheless, and certainly had nothing of the appearance of a man who had recently been suffering the horrors of slavery.

George and Tom both shook hands heartily with their old friend, and then Mr Bowen—who seemed to be pretty well acquainted with the town—led the way into a quiet, respectable tavern near the water-side.

Having called for some sangaree in honour of the unexpected and very agreeable meeting, George, at his friend's request, proceeded to recount all that had happened since the eventful morning when they were separated (for life, as each then feared) in the square at Havana. When he had finished the story, he added—

"And now, Bowen, my dear old friend, let us know how *you* fared among the Dons."

"Badly enough, cap'n, badly enough," was the reply. "But you shall hear the whole story, such as 'tis. Maybe you happen to remember the chap as bought me—a tall, thin feller, with a nose like the beak of an eagle, and a wicked look in his glittering black eyes. Well, as soon as this here Don Christoval—that was his name—as soon as he'd bought all the slaves he wanted, we was all chained together, and started on a march to the south'ard. We travelled the whole width of that cursed island, taking two days over the trip, and was then shipped across in a little flat-bottomed sailin'-boat to the Isle de Pinos, where this here Christoval had a big 'baccy plantation. It took us a whole day, after we'd landed on the Isle of Pines, to reach the place, and on the following morning we were set to work.

"As it happened, I was the only white slave on the plantation, and, whether 'twas on this account, or whether 'twas because I was an Englishman, I can't tell, but I soon found out that all hands, from Don Christoval downwards, had a special spite against me, and seemed determined to make the place as hot as they could for me. I was put to all the heaviest and dirtiest work about the place, and if there was a job that had to be done after knockin'-off time, I was the man that had to do it.

"There was nothing but Spanish spoke about the place, so I very soon got acquainted with the lingo, whether I liked it or not; and almost the first thing I understood was that Mr Don Christoval had boasted that, fierce as I was, he'd tame me so that in six months I wouldn't dare to say my soul was my own.

"Well, you may be sure that my temper hadn't grown much more amiable from being made a slave of, and this palaver about *taming* just made me worse than ever. I vowed by all that was holy I *wouldn't* be tamed, let 'em do what they would, and a pretty miserable time of it this stupid vow and my own obstinacy brought me. They used to amuse themselves by seein' what they could do to rouse me; the overseers, as they were riding by, would pull up and begin to abuse and scoff at me, flicking at me with their whips all the time, and I dare say you know pretty well how clever those same overseers are with their whips—they'll hit a fly twenty feet off. And when they'd see my eyes begin to sparkle, they'd just let out with the infernal whip, fetching me a regular 'stinger' across the shoulders, and gallop off, laughing. I can tell you, they made a regular devil of me before all was done.

"Well, one morning there was a regular rumpus on the estate. Don Christoval had sold some cattle the day before, and had been paid for 'em. The money was stowed carefully away by him when he turned in that night, and next morning 'twas gone—somebody'd crept into the house during the night, and had stole it. Well, as there was nobody about the estate but the regular hands, it was clear enough that some of these must have got hold of the cash, and the lying scoundrels had the impudence to say that I was the thief. They came down, two of the overseers did, and searched my hut fore and aft, from deck to keelson; but, of course, they didn't find it, for the simple reason that I hadn't took it. Hows'ever, they would insist that I knew where 'twas, and at last they dragged me up to the house, and told the Don that I'd took it, but that they couldn't find it because I'd hid it away somewhere.

"The Don happened to be just starting off for a ride, and was mounted on a splendid black horse. He sat there in the saddle and listened to all that the overseers had to say, and when they'd finished, he spurred his horse at me, and swearing that he'd get the secret out of me, if he had to cut my heart out to find it, raised his heavy riding-whip, and made a slash at me.

"Well, cap'n, and Tom, old shipmate, you needn't be told that I had already been made pretty savage by all this business, and when this hawk-nosed Don Christoval struck out at me, why, it just roused all the devil there was in me. I put up my hand—so—as if to ward off the stroke, and as the whip came down, I caught it in my hand, wrenched it out of the Don's grasp, and, as quick as lightning, returned the blow with all my strength, lashing him fair across the face and cutting his cheek open. He reeled backwards in his saddle, and I, first letting out right and left at the two overseers, who stood one on each side of me, and bowling them over like a couple of ninepins, sprang upon him, seized him by the collar, and dragged him out of his saddle, and, leaping upon the frightened horse's back, gave the poor brute a lash across the flank, which sent him flying down the road, through the 'baccy plants, and out upon the open country like a shot out of a shovel.

"Well, I don't know that I'd ever been on horseback in my life before, but somehow I managed to stick to the saddle, it didn't seem at all difficult, and on I went, straight ahead, as fast as the horse could gallop, for an hour or more, and then we fetched up somewhere on the shore. There was a schooner in the offing with the British flag flying at her gaff-end, and, as luck would have it, I'd just managed to hit the spot where a boat's crew belonging to her were ashore, filling up their fresh water. I told the middy in charge who and what I was, and he shoved off at once with me, took me aboard, and told the lieutenant in command all about me; and, after knocking about with 'em for a fortnight, I landed here, just six months ago. And that ends my yarn."

"And what have you been doing since then?" asked George, after congratulating Bowen on his escape.

"Well, cap'n," was the reply, "I never once forgot the promise I made to you the day we were separated in Havana. I felt certain that you'd manage to get away somehow some day; and I felt just as certain that, sooner or later, you'd turn up here in Kingston. So, as soon as I was landed here, I made inquiries, and, not being able to learn that anything had been heard of you, I just looked about me a bit, and got a berth on board a little coaster, so's to be on the spot whenever you might happen to turn up. I'd told our story pretty freely here in Kingston, so that, even if I'd happened to have been at sea at the time, there's plenty of people that would have taken you in tow, and provided you with the needful until I came in again. Now that you've put in an appearance, of course I shall throw up my berth, and we'll all sink or swim together."

"Thanks, Bowen, thanks; that's just like your disinterestedness," answered George; "but what are we to do? The only thing I can see for it is to get berths, if possible, on board some homeward-bounder."

"Homeward-bounder?" exclaimed Bowen with contemptuous emphasis, "why—but there, I suppose you don't know anything about it, or you wouldn't talk like that."

"About what?" asked George, completely mystified.

"Why, about our prize that we took that dark night on the passage out—the privateer brig—the *Jeune Virginie*. She's lying down there at Port Royal, safe and sound, with a British crew on board her; and all you've got to do, cap'n, is to make your claim, and establish your identity, and the ship or her value will be handed over to you."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed George. "Then we are lucky indeed. But you must explain the whole affair to me."

"That's easy enough," answered Bowen. "The very first time I entered Port Royal harbour I saw the craft lying there, and knew her again at once. Thinks I to myself, 'Now, Dick Bowen, my lad, your first duty is to recover possession of that prize on behalf of the skipper.' So off I goes to the admiral, stated my case, and made my claim.

"'That's all very well, my fine fellow,' says he, 'and I don't doubt but what you're telling the truth; but, you see,' says he, 'you can't *prove* it. Now I *must* have something beyond your bare word before I give up possession of the brig. When you can bring me something in the shape of proof that what you say is true, come to me again, and I'll see what can be done in the matter.'

"Of course that was all right and straight-for'ard enough, so I went away, and troubled no more about it. The craft is safe enough; they've been using her as a cruiser, and taking care of her, and I don't doubt but what she's in just as good order as she was on the night when we took her. And now, all we've got to do is to go to the admiral again, and make our claim. There's *three* of us this time, so that there'll be no difficulty at all in getting her delivered over to us."

Chapter Twenty One.

The "Aurora" turns up again.

That same day George waited upon the admiral and formally laid claim to the *Jeune Virginie*. He was very well received, his statement patiently listened to, and—to make a long story short—in about three weeks afterwards the claim was actually allowed, and the vessel handed over to her rightful owners.

George was agreeably surprised, for—notwithstanding Bowen's implicit confidence—he fully anticipated that there would be some trouble over the matter. Legal possession once obtained, Leicester had no difficulty in raising money by means of a bottomry bond, and with this he provisioned the brig for six months, intending to take out letters of marque, and endeavour to make good his losses—a resolution in which he was cordially seconded by Bowen.

But, though all this gave him plenty of occupation, he had not forgotten his old crew, and he found—or rather took—not only to prepare a complete list of the names and a full description of all those who were still—so far as he knew—in a state of slavery, but also to put it into the hands of the proper authorities, with such an urgent representation of their probable sufferings, that the matter was at once taken up; and he had the satisfaction of knowing, before he sailed, that negotiations were already in progress for their discovery and deliverance.

Considerable difficulty was experienced in obtaining a crew for the brig, good men being scarce; but at last this was

overcome, and on a bright September morning the anchor was hove up, and the *Virginie* started upon her cruise. The shoals outside the harbour were cleared in due time, the brig working like a top, and sailing like a witch, to the unbounded delight of all hands; and then George hauled sharp up on the port tack, his intention being to cruise for a few days in the Windward and Caycos Passages before shaping a course for home.

For the first five days of their cruise they were singularly unlucky, seeing nothing but a man-o'-war schooner, which, on speaking, they found had been equally as unfortunate as themselves.

On the morning of the sixth day, however, being then in the neighbourhood of the Hogsties, the lookout aloft reported at daybreak a couple of sail dead to windward, hove-to close together. On the usual inquiries being made, the lookout further reported that one of the strangers was a barque; the rig of the other, which happened to be lying end-on, he could not clearly make out, but, from her size, he judged her to be a ship. Mr Bowen, whose watch it was, at once went below and informed George of this circumstance, and then, leaving him to don the most indispensable portions of his attire, returned to the deck, and proceeded thence aloft to have a look at the strangers for himself.

By the time that he had seen all that it was then possible to see, and had descended again to the deck, George was awaiting him there.

"Well, Bowen, what do you make of them?" was Leicester's first inquiry.

"Well, there's two of 'em there, sure enough, close together—a good deal too close together to be up to any good, to my thinking," was the reply.

"What do you think they are, then?" asked George.

"One of 'em is a privateer—or a pirate; and t'other is her prize, in my opinion," answered Bowen.

"Then we'll make their further acquaintance," said George. "Perhaps if we trim the canvas a bit slovenly, and act as though we had not seen these craft, we may coax down towards us the privateer, or whatever she is."

"That'll be the best plan, no doubt," acquiesced the chief mate; and he proceeded forthwith on a tour round the decks, easing up a brace here, and a halliard there, with a touch also at the sheets and bowlines, by way of insuring an agreeable and harmonious result. When he had finished, the brig looked like a collier, and her speed had decreased from eight to a little over five knots.

"There," said Bowen to George, with an admiring glance aloft at his own handiwork, "I think that'll do pretty well; we look helpless enough now for anything. Masthead, ahoy!"—to the lookout aloft—"what about the strangers now?"

"They've dropped alongside one another, sir," was the reply.

"Very well; keep your eye upon them, and let us know when you see any change in their movements."

The stereotyped "Ay, ay," by way of reply, was duly given, and then George and Bowen, side by side, and with hands folded behind them, began to trudge fore and aft, from the main-mast to the taffrail, patiently awaiting the course of events.

About a quarter of an hour elapsed, and then the lookout hailed again—

"On deck, there! The barque has cast off, and is standing down towards us. They're busy getting the stunsails upon her now, sir."

"All right; stay where you are, and let's hear, if you see anything worth reporting," replied Bowen.

A few minutes later another report was made to the effect that the other sail—a full-rigged ship—had filled, and was standing to the northward under all plain sail. That was the last news from either of the vessels, and, the barque shortly afterwards becoming visible from the deck, orders were given to clear the brig for action, and the lookout was ordered down on deck.

There was a capital working breeze, and not much sea; it was, consequently, not very long before the barque had raised her hull above the horizon. As soon as she was fairly in view, George brought his telescope to bear upon her, and ten minutes' careful scrutiny sufficed to satisfy him that, though her spars were heavier, and she now showed a wider spread of canvas than of old, she was undoubtedly, as he had suspected, his own old ship, the *Aurora*. He further noted that she was not very deep in the water, being in fact just in her very best sailing-trim; and, remembering her former capabilities, he was not long in making up his mind that, if her present crew happened to become suspicious of the character of the *Virginie*, and shunned an engagement, it would be a very difficult matter to bring the *Aurora* to action.

But if those in possession of the barque entertained any misgivings, they certainly gave no visible indication of them: on the contrary, they came sweeping down upon the *Virginie* under a perfect cloud of canvas, and in a manner so obviously threatening, that, in order to maintain the illusion to the last, George thought it advisable to exhibit some slight signs of uneasiness, and he accordingly ordered the royals to be loosed and set, and edged away a point or two off his course, at the same time, however, checking his weather braces to such an extent that the brig's speed was not very greatly improved by the manoeuvre. In the meantime the decks had been cleared, the guns loaded, and the crew fully armed with cutlass, pike, and pistol. The port-lids however, were kept carefully closed, so that the presence of the guns on board might not be revealed until an action should have become inevitable.

Mr Bowen had, in the midst of all his work, been watching the approach of the *Aurora* with grim satisfaction, gradually developing into a condition of supreme exhilaration. He rubbed his hands gleefully, laughed softly to himself, and exhibited, in short, all the outward characteristics of a thoroughly gratified man. Then he would draw a pistol from his belt, and carefully inspect the priming, pass his thumb meditatively along the edge of his cutlass, or casually test with his finger the sharpness of a pike-head, and at these times the expression of his countenance boded no good to the approaching enemy.

The *Virginie's* crew were kept carefully out of sight, except some three or four hands, who were ostentatiously posted on the forecastle, with orders to assume an appearance of deep interest in the approach of the barque; but Bowen had

carefully placed each man exactly where he wanted him, and as the *Aurora* came sweeping down upon the brig, invisible hands on board the latter gradually tautened up halliard, brace, tack, sheet, and bowline, until by the time that the two ships were within a mile of each other, every trace of slovenliness on board the *Virginie* had vanished, every sail was standing as flat as a board, and the brig was once more in a condition to be worked to the best advantage. This done, the men were ordered to their guns, and all was ready for the commencement of the struggle.

When within a distance of about three-quarters of a mile from the brig, the studding-sails of the *Aurora* were seen to suddenly collapse, and in a few seconds they had entirely disappeared, being taken in, all at once, man-o'-war fashion. This showed George, not only that his old craft was heavily manned, but also that she was in the command of a man who knew how to handle her. But the sight did not greatly disturb him; he had had time to discover that his own crew was a good one; he had studied the brig, and mastered her little peculiarities; and he awaited with perfect calmness the conflict which was now inevitable.

As the *Aurora's* studding-sails fluttered out of sight, she sheered broadly to port; a flash, accompanied by a puff of white smoke, issued from her side, and in another instant a nine-pound shot skipped along the water and across the *Virginie's* bow.

George decided to take no notice of this hint, and the brig held steadily on her course. Another shot followed, with a like result; and the pirates then decided apparently to waste no more powder and shot upon so contumacious a craft, but to make short work of the affair by simply running alongside and taking possession. The *Aurora* was accordingly steered in such a way as would admit of her making a wide sweep and shooting up alongside on the brig's weather quarter. She was handled magnificently, there was no doubt of that; and presently, with a graceful sweep, she came surging up alongside, with the water spouting up in a clear transparent sheet under her sharp bows, her yards swinging simultaneously to meet her change of course, her white canvas gleaming in the brilliant sunlight, six long nine-pounders grinning through her bulwarks, and her deck crowded with men, as fair, yet as evil, a sight of its kind as the eye of man ever rested upon. At the same moment a blood-red flag streamed out over the taffrail and soared away aloft, until it fluttered out from the gaff-end—a fit emblem of rapine and murder.

"Red this time, by way of a change," remarked Bowen to George, in allusion to their encounter with the pirate schooner, which fought under a *black* flag. "Well, a change is good sometimes," he added philosophically. "Shall we give her a taste of our quality now, cap'n; she's just shooting into the right position to get the full benefit of the dose of 'round' and 'grape' I've prepared for her?"

"Yes, give it her," answered George, drawing his cutlass with one hand, and a pistol with the other.

"Throw open your ports, lads!" commanded Bowen; and at the word the port-lids flew apart, six twelve-pounders were run out on each side, and, as the barque was in the very act of sheering alongside, the *Virginie's* starboard broadside was poured into her with murderous effect, as was evidenced by the frightful outburst of yells, groans, and imprecations which at once arose on board her. The broadside was returned, but without inflicting much damage, the pirates evidently having been taken completely by surprise by the sudden and unexpected unmasking of the brig's guns.

The next moment the two vessels collided with a crash.

"Now look alive with your grappling-irons, and *heave!* Boarders, follow me!" cried George, dashing to the rail, and making a spring thence in upon the *Aurora's* deck, Mr Bowen at the same time leading his detachment on board by way of the fore-rigging.

The Englishmen were met by a very formidable party, which had evidently been told off to board the brig, and in an instant a fierce and sanguinary *mêlée* arose on the *Aurora's* deck. The Spaniards—for such they proved to be—though taken by surprise, and greatly disconcerted by the unexpectedly warm reception which they had met with from the brig, fought with the fury and desperation of demons, and for perhaps five minutes the crew of the *Virginie* had all their work cut out to maintain their position on the deck of the barque. The pirates, with that sanguinary symbol floating over their heads, and believing that they had been entrapped into attacking a man-o'-war, felt that the halter was already about their necks, and that there was literally no alternative but victory or death for them; and they pressed forward with such recklessness and ferocity that the deck speedily assumed the aspect of a human shambles, and the planking grew so slippery with blood that it became difficult to retain one's footing upon it. There was one Spaniard in particular who appeared to possess the gift of ubiquity; he seemed to be in all parts of the ship at the same time, notwithstanding the crowded state of the confined space wherein the fight was raging, and in him George speedily recognised the truculent-looking individual who had led the pirates on the eventful night of the *Aurora's* capture, and who had so brutally ill-used poor Bowen on the morning of the sale in the square at Havana. There could be no possible doubt as to his identity. There was the same ferocious cast of countenance, the same mahogany-brown skin, even the same filthy red handkerchief—now more filthy than ever—bound about his ragged locks, apparently the same broad-brimmed straw hat, in short, every mark of identification; nothing was wanting. This individual dashed from point to point, apparently by a mere effort of his will, encouraging here, chiding there, and helping everywhere. The mere fact of his presence, the mere sound of his voice, appeared to endue the pirates with renewed life and courage, and George speedily saw that there would be little hope of victory until this man could be placed *hors de combat*. He therefore pressed in toward him, plying his cutlass vigorously with one hand, and laying manfully about him with the butt of his empty pistol with the other, and calling upon the fellow by every despicable epithet he could think of to turn and meet him. He had very nearly reached him—there were only some half-a-dozen people between the two—when another voice, that of Bowen, was heard, and the next instant the chief mate, his eyes literally blazing with fury, appeared, forcing his way into the thickest of the throng. With the strength of a madman he seized and dashed aside all who ventured to bar his path, and in a single moment, so it seemed to George, forced himself within reach of his especial enemy.

"At last—at last—you bloodthirsty scoundrel—you white-livered coward—you who were not ashamed to strike a chained man—at last we meet again, as I told you we should!—and the time has come for me to pay off part of the debt I owe you—no, you don't,"—skilfully guarding a savage down-stroke from the Spaniard's cutlass, "and take that," he added, launching out a terrific blow with his left fist, catching the Spaniard fairly between the eyes, and felling him to the deck senseless, as neatly as a butcher fells an ox. In another moment George was at Bowen's side, and, placing themselves back to back, these two managed to successfully defend themselves until the crew of the *Virginie*, inspired by their leader's example, had pressed in to their assistance, when the pirates, becoming scattered, were driven irresistibly to opposite ends of the ship, and some were actually driven overboard. Then recognising that they were defeated, and suddenly losing heart, they threw down their weapons, and cried for quarter. But the worst passions of the *Virginia's* crew were by this time fully aroused; they thought of nothing but the fact that their enemies were *pirates*, men steeped to the lips in crime of the vilest description, and guilty of unnumbered deeds of blood-curdling atrocity, and many of the Spaniards were ruthlessly slaughtered before George and Bowen could induce them to stay their hands. Then, when order and authority were once more restored, heads were counted, and it was found that, out of a crew of

over eighty, twenty-three pirates only—their leader included—remained alive, and these were promptly clapped in irons and bundled unceremoniously below. Strange to say, notwithstanding the desperate character of the fighting, the *Virginie's* crew had suffered but slightly in comparison—nine killed and thirteen wounded being the total of the casualties. A short breathing-space was allowed the men to recover themselves after their extraordinary exertions, and then all hands set to work to clear the decks of the sickening evidences of the contest; the crew were next divided equally between the two ships, and, with Mr Bowen in command of the *Aurora*, both craft then made sail to windward in company.

The third craft—the full-rigged ship—meanwhile was still in sight from aloft, dodging about under easy canvas, and evidently waiting for the *Aurora* to rejoin. There could be little doubt, therefore, that she was in the possession of a prize-crew of the pirates, and George earnestly hoped he might be able to reach her in time to save the lives of some at least of those to whom she rightfully belonged.

A couple of hours later they were alongside—the *Virginie* on the weather and the *Aurora* on the lee quarter—with ports open, guns run out, and the English ensign flying at the peak, the red flag having been allowed to remain aloft on board the *Aurora* until ranging alongside the strange ship, when it was hauled down, and the English flag run up on board the barque and the brig simultaneously.

The pirates in possession were completely paralysed by the turn events had taken; they had evidently been under the impression that the *Aurora*, and not the *Virginie* had proved victorious; and now that they found themselves under the guns of both ships their mistake was past rectification.

Accordingly, at George's order, they backed the main-yard and hove-to the ship, upon which a strong party, armed to the teeth, proceeded on board and took possession.

The ship proved to be the *Vulcan*, of and from Liverpool, bound to Kingston with a valuable general cargo and several passengers. She was a noble ship, being of nearly a thousand tons register, and a regular clipper.

On boarding her, George found the state of affairs pretty much what it had been on board the *Aurora* after her capture by these same pirates, her crew and the male passengers being discovered scattered about the deck, lashed helplessly neck and heels together, or chained to ring-bolts in the deck and bulwarks, whilst the pirates had taken possession of the cabin and had held a regular saturnalia there, in the progress of which the unfortunate lady passengers had been subjected to the vilest outrages, and one poor little child had been cruelly murdered before its distracted mother's face. The captain and the chief mate of the ship were both found in the cabin in a dying condition, they having been mutilated in a most cruel and horrible manner in an ineffectual effort to wring from them the secret of the hiding-place of a large amount of specie which the pirates had somehow ascertained was on board. A tall and burly negro, the identical one who had acted as lieutenant to the Spaniard in charge of the *Aurora* on the occasion of her first capture, was at the head of the gang, and had been the instigator and chief perpetrator in the many outrages which had followed the capture of the *Vulcan*.

No time was lost in freeing the passengers and crew from their exceedingly unpleasant situation; and this done, the pirates, ten in number, heavily ironed, were transferred to the *Virginie* and stowed carefully away below. The *Vulcan* then proceeded on her voyage, in charge of her second mate, by whom George forwarded a letter to the admiral at Jamaica, informing him of the capture of the now notorious *Aurora*.

George now felt that, with two ships and so many desperate men to look after, he had his hands full, and he therefore decided to make the best of his way to England forthwith. He accordingly hailed Bowen, requesting him to give the *Aurora's* stores an overhaul, and to ascertain whether her provisions and water were sufficient in quantity to justify them in making a push across the Atlantic. In about an hour an answer was returned to the effect that not only was there an abundance of everything, but that the ship herself was more than half full of a varied and very rich cargo, the spoils, doubtless, from many a missing vessel. Upon the receipt of this intelligence, orders were at once given for both ships to fill and make the best of their way to the northward in company, and by nightfall they were clear of the Caycos Passage and standing to the northward on a taut bowline under a heavy press of canvas.

The *Virginie* and *Aurora* made an excellent passage across the Atlantic. They stood to the northward until the Trades were cleared, when they fell in with fresh westerly winds, which carried them all the way across; and, as the weather was fine, they had no difficulty in keeping each other in sight during the whole passage, the two craft regulating their spread of canvas so that neither should outsail the other.

The passage was consequently an uneventful one, nothing worthy of note occurring until they were in the chops of the Channel. Then, indeed, an adventure befell them, which proved George to have been wise in his determination that the two vessels should make the voyage in company.

It was the last week in October. They had just struck soundings, when the two craft ran into a dense, raw fog, which compelled all hands to seek warmth and comfort in their thickest jackets, and necessitated, as a matter of prudence, the immediate shortening of sail.

The fog lasted a couple of hours, and when it cleared up the *Aurora* was discovered about two miles astern of the brig, and a large ship was at the same moment made out directly ahead. The stranger was hove-to under single-reefed topsails, with her head to the northward, her topsail-yards being just visible from the deck. The fact of her being hove-to in such a position seemed to point to the conclusion that she was a man-o'-war, and this supposition was confirmed when George took a look at her through his glass from the fore-topgallant-yard. She was a frigate, and French apparently, from the cut of her canvas; but of course it was quite possible that she might be in English hands, the English often taking French prizes into their own navy, and sending them to sea again with little or no alteration. Still, George thought it best to be on the safe side, and he accordingly at once ordered the *Virginie* to clear for action, the *Aurora* being signalled to do the same, his intention being to attack the frigate, if an enemy, since, as far as he could make out, she carried only twenty-four guns.

In the meantime, however, the brig and the barque had been discovered by the frigate, which at once made sail, and manoeuvred in such a manner as to intercept them.

Bowen, on the other hand, guessing at once what was in the wind, crowded sail upon the *Aurora*, and soon recovered his position alongside the *Virginie*, approaching the latter vessel within hailing distance, in order the better to concert plans for the possible coming engagement. These were soon arranged, but not before it had become pretty evident, from the comparatively clumsy handling of the stranger, that she was indeed French. Their doubts, such as they were, were

set at rest when the frigate had approached within a mile of them, by her hoisting a tricolour at her gaff-end, and soon afterwards she sent a shot across their fore-foot as a polite intimation that they would oblige her by heaving-to.

They, however, did nothing of the kind; a piece of discourtesy which *so* preyed upon the French captain's mind that, without more ado, he bore down upon them, and opened fire from his starboard broadside.

The three ships at that moment formed the three angles of a nearly equilateral triangle, the sides of which measured each about a quarter of a mile; the *Virginie* and the *Aurora* occupying, as it were, the two ends of the base, and the Frenchman being at the apex. This allowed both English ships to attack their enemy on the same side—the starboard—and compelled the Frenchman to fight them both with only half his battery. He soon saw how great a disadvantage he laboured under by this arrangement, and did all he could to get between them. But it was all to no purpose; George and Bowen were fully as wide-awake as he was, and they successfully defeated every effort of his in this direction, principally, it must be confessed, by some lucky shooting on their part, whereby the Frenchman's spars and rigging were so cut up that the craft soon became practically unmanageable. At length, after a brisk fight of about twenty minutes, the Frenchman's fore and main-topmasts both went simultaneously over the side, the frigate luffed into the wind, and obstinately remained there, and she was at George's mercy. The *Virginie* at once made sail and took up a position across the enemy's bows, the *Aurora* placed herself across his stern, and from these two advantageous positions a raking fire was opened, which, in less than five minutes, caused the Frenchman to haul down his flag and surrender.

The prize—which proved to be the twenty-four-gun frigate *Cigne*—was at once taken possession of by boats from both the *Virginie* and the *Aurora*, her crew secured, and her damages repaired; and about midnight the three vessels made sail in company, arriving without further adventure at Spithead on the day but one following.

Chapter Twenty Two.

"All's Well that Ends Well."

The anchors were no sooner on the bottom than George found himself a busy man. There were certain authorities to be communicated with as to the disposal of the French prisoners, other authorities to be consulted as to the disposal of the pirates, and still others, again, to be seen and arranged with as to the disposal of the prizes. Then there were the owners of the *Vulcan* to be dealt with in the matter of the salvage of that vessel, so that, altogether, he was kept going to and fro from morning until night.

Then there was Lucy to be called upon. But knowing—or thinking he knew—that the sad news he had to communicate would go far toward breaking the heart of the poor girl, he eagerly availed himself of every excuse which offered, to defer his visit; and so it happened that whilst Lucy—who had heard, with astonishment and joy unspeakable, the news of his strange reappearance and good fortune—waited impatiently for the longed-for visit, George was postponing it day after day, until nearly a fortnight had passed.

And in truth he was so worried and harassed with unexpected difficulties that, even if he could have found the time, he lacked the heart for such a call. To his intense surprise, he learned that, though he had arrived at Spithead with three ships, neither of them belonged to him. To begin with, the *Virginie*, having been captured whilst her captors were under the protection of a convoying squadron, was claimed as being actually the prize of that squadron, though not one of the ships belonging to it had fired a shot or struck a blow to aid in the capture. Then, as to the *Aurora*, having not only bought and paid, but *also fought*, for her, George was strongly of opinion that *she* at least was his. But, here again, it appeared that he was mistaken. She had been taken from him by pirates, and had been out of his possession more than twenty-four hours: she was therefore, *de facto*, a pirate, and the lawful prize of the *Virginie*, or rather, of the *Virginie's* owners, namely, the convoying fleet aforesaid. And the same reasoning applied with equal effect to the *Cigne*. The naval authorities certainly were good enough to admit that George and his crew were, in virtue of their having been the actual captors of these vessels, entitled to a certain moderate share of the prize-money accruing therefrom, but further than that they would not go.

But if George found himself a busy man, he also found himself—outside the circle ruled by official jealousy—famous. The story, not only of his gallant achievements, but also of his misfortunes, leaked out, as such stories will; and he soon found himself a much-sought-after man, quite a lion, in fact. To such an extent, indeed, was this the case, that even the curiosity of royalty itself was aroused, and in the very midst of all his perplexities Leicester received a summons to present himself at court. This summons George of course dutifully and promptly obeyed, and whilst there not only told the whole story of his adventures, but also laid before his most gracious Majesty the grievances from which he considered himself to be suffering. He was well rewarded for his pains; for, when the king came to be fully informed of the details of the case, he took the matter in hand himself, with the result that a speedy and, on the whole, fairly satisfactory settlement was arrived at. He was also offered a commission in the navy, his Majesty sagely remarking that so good a man ought to be serving his country in some better way than by commanding a mere merchant-ship, and this time George was sensible enough to accept the offer. At his suggestion a commission was also offered to and accepted by Bowen.

All this business being at length satisfactorily concluded, George had no further excuse for shunning Sea View, and accordingly, on the first opportunity, he set out with considerable perturbation of spirit for Alverstoake.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening, and quite dark when George reached the house, and, passing through the gate, strode up the well-remembered pathway, and administered a sounding *rat-tat* at the door. A smart, fresh-looking maid-servant answered the summons, and, on his inquiry for Miss Walford, showed him into the familiar parlour, and asked for his name.

"Captain Leicester," answered George.

"Yes, sir, certainly, sir," said the girl, eyeing George with such undisguised curiosity and admiration as showed that she had undoubtedly heard some portion at least of his story. "Missus 'll be down in a minute, sir. Please to take a seat, sir."

George settled himself comfortably in a chair near the fire, and, looking round at the well-remembered pictures and "curios" which still adorned the room, fell into a reverie in which his mind travelled backward and took him again in imagination through all that had happened to him since he last sat in that room. From this he was brought back abruptly to the present by the opening of the door and the entrance of Lucy.

Ah! how George's heart leapt within his bosom as he looked at her. She was just the same charming girl as when he had seen her last, and yet there was a subtle difference. She was a trifle more womanly, her form was more fully developed, and if she was a shade paler, it only made her loveliness more distractingly bewitching than ever.

"Lucky Ned!" thought George. "To have been the chosen lover of such a woman as this—ay, though only for a few short hours, how willingly would I change places with you!"

"So you have come at last, captain," said Lucy, offering her delicate little hand. "I was beginning to think that, with all the honours which have been showered upon you, you had quite forgotten your former friends."

"No, Lucy, I have not," answered George; "I have not forgotten one of them—least of all have I forgotten you. Forgotten! Why, I have never ceased to remember you; I do not believe a single waking hour has passed over my head since we last met, that I have not thought of you."

Lucy laughed blithely; she saw by the earnestness of his manner that he was speaking the literal truth; he had *not* forgotten her, and all would yet be well.

"Fie, fie, captain," said she, "it is easily to be seen that you have been to court; you have learned so thoroughly the art of flattery."

"Ha!" exclaimed George, "have you heard of my visit to his Majesty, then?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Lucy, "I have heard not only that, but, I believe, your whole story. Is it possible you are ignorant of the fact that your name is in everybody's mouth, and that your story is public property?"

"So you have heard *all* about me?" remarked George. "Then I hope to Heaven that you have also already heard the sad news which I came over to break to you this evening. I see you are in black."

"Yes," said Lucy, growing very grave at once, "I am in mourning for poor mother; she died nearly a year ago. But what is the sad news of which you have to speak to me?"

"You have *not* heard, then?" said George. "Well, it is about your cousin Edward. I regret to say that I bring you bad news of him."

"Are you referring to his death?" asked Lucy with just the faintest suspicion of a tremor in her voice. "Because, if so, I have already heard of it, and of all your noble, self-sacrificing behaviour on his behalf. And as a relative, as indeed his *only* surviving relative, let me here and now thank you, George, in all earnestness and sincerity, for your devotion to my unfortunate cousin."

"By Jove, she bears it well; she can't have cared so *very* much for him, after all," thought George.

"No thanks are necessary, I assure you," was the reply. "I only did for him what I would have done with equal readiness for a stranger. But I had vowed that I would be a protector to him, and that I would—if God willed it—restore him to your arms; and I am grieved that I failed to keep my vow. Believe me, it was through no fault of mine that I failed, Lucy; I did the best I could, but God willed it otherwise."

"Yes—yes," answered Lucy in a dazed sort of way; "yes, God willed it otherwise. But—whatever do you mean, George, by talking about restoring him to my arms? Any one would think, to hear you speak, that I was married to him."

"Well," said George, "betrothal *is* a sort of marriage, is it not?"

"Betrothal!" exclaimed Lucy, looking more bewildered than ever. "Pray explain yourself, Captain Leicester; I assure you I have not the *slightest* idea of what you mean."

It was now George's turn to look mystified.

"No idea of what I mean?" he stammered. "Why—why—you were engaged to your cousin, Edward Walford, *were you not?*"

A new light suddenly flashed into Lucy's mind. All along she had been convinced that there was some reason for George's failure to visit her on the occasion of his previous arrival in port, and now the matter was assuredly on the eve of explanation. So she looked up into George's face, and said quietly—

"No, George, I never was engaged to my cousin. He proposed to me, but I refused him, explicitly and in most unmistakable terms."

"You did?" panted George, his heart throbbing tumultuously. "When was that?"

"On the evening of the day when you last arrived in Portsmouth harbour in the *Industry*."

Then, all in a moment, a suspicion of the truth dawned upon George.

"And it was on that same evening that I met him out there, close to the church, and he confided to me, as a great secret, the circumstance that you had just accepted him."

"You were so near as that, and yet you never called? For shame, George!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Well, you see—I—that is—in fact I could not. The—the plain truth is that I—I was on my way to you at the time, to try my own fortune with you, and when I was told that you had accepted your cousin, I—well, I felt that I couldn't meet you just then," stammered George with desperate energy.

"Poor George!" murmured Lucy. "How well my cousin understood your unsuspecting character! He *knew* it would

never occur to you to doubt his word, and he told you that tale to keep you away from—from—”

“From what? from whom?” asked George. “Oh Lucy! is it possible that, if I had carried out my original resolution that night, you would have accepted me?”

“Yes, George, I would indeed,” was the murmured reply. “I have loved you, and you only, for a long time. But not longer than you have loved me,” she added roguishly, as George took her in his arms and—

But, avast there! whither are we running? It is high time that we should 'bout ship and haul off on the opposite tack, if we would not be regarded as impertinent intruders. Love-making is a most delightful pastime, particularly when it comes in at the end of a long period of suffering, hardship, and misunderstanding; but it loses all its piquant charm if it has to be performed in the presence of strangers, no matter how sympathetic. So we will leave it to the lively imagination of the intelligent reader to picture for him, or herself, according to his, or her, particular fancy, the way in which the remainder of the evening was spent, merely mentioning that the lovers found time to come to a thoroughly and mutually satisfactory understanding, and that, when George left Sea View that evening, he was—to make use of a somewhat hackneyed expression—“the happiest of men.”

My story is now ended, or nearly so, the intelligent reader aforesaid having doubtless already anticipated the little that remains to be told.

The pirates were tried, found guilty, and executed, as a matter of course; the evidence of the crew of the *Virginie* alone being sufficient to insure their conviction. Captain Bowen went, at considerable personal inconvenience, to witness the execution, being desirous, as he said, of assuring himself with his own eyes that the wretches were so effectually dealt with as to render any further trouble from them an absolute impossibility.

George Leicester did not accompany his friend, being, in fact, more agreeably engaged at the time in spending with Mrs Leicester—*née*; Walford—a brief honeymoon in London, prior to taking command of the frigate *Cigne*, which had been purchased into the navy, and was then undergoing the process of refitting at Portsmouth.

In this ship, and in others, George afterwards fought many gallant actions, greatly distinguishing himself, and eventually retiring from the service, at an advanced age, with a wooden leg, a baronetcy, and the title of rear-admiral. His wife Lucy, with most commendable liberality, presented him with no fewer than seven sons, all of whom grew up to be fine stalwart fellows, and, entering the navy one after the other, followed worthily in the footsteps of their gallant father.

The End.

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