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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUNTING THE SKIPPER: THE CRUISE OF THE "SEAFOWL" SLOOP ***

George Manville Fenn

"Hunting the Skipper"

Chapter One.

H.M.S. "Seafowl."

"Dicky, dear boy, it's my impression that we shall see no blackbird's cage to-day."

"And it's my impression, Frank Murray, that if you call me Dicky again I shall punch your head."

"Poor fellow! Liver, decidedly," said the first speaker, in a mock sympathetic tone. "Look here, old chap, if I were you, I'd go and ask Jones to give me a blue pill, to be followed eight hours later by one of his delicious liqueurs, all syrup of senna."

"Ugh!" came in a grunt of disgust, followed by a shudder. "Look here, Frank, if you can't speak sense, have the goodness to hold your tongue."

The speakers were two manly looking lads in the uniform of midshipmen of the Royal Navy, each furnished with a telescope, through which he had been trying to pierce the hot thick haze which pretty well shut them in, while as they leaned over the side of Her Majesty's ship *Seafowl*, her sails seemed to be as sleepy as the generally smart-looking crew, the light wind which filled them one minute gliding off the next, and leaving them to flap idly as they apparently dozed off into a heavy sleep.

"There, don't be rusty, old fellow," said the first speaker.

"Then don't call me by that absurd name—*Dicky*—as if I were a bird!"

"Ha, ha! Why not?" said Frank merrily. "You wouldn't have minded if I had said 'old cock.'"

"Humph! Perhaps not," said the young man sourly.

"There, I don't wonder at your being upset; this heat somehow seems to soak into a fellow and melt all the go out of one. I'm as soft as one of those medusae—jellyfish—what do you call them?—that float by opening and shutting themselves, all of a wet gasp, as one might say."

"It's horrible," said the other, speaking now more sociably.

"Horrible it is, sir, as our fellows say. Well, live and learn, and I've learned one thing, and that is if I retire from the service as Captain—no, I'll be modest—Commander Murray, R.N., I shall not come and settle on the West Coast of Africa."

"Settle on the West Coast of Africa, with its fevers and horrors? I should think not!" said the other. "Phew! How hot it is! Bah!" he half snorted angrily.

"What's the matter now?"

"That brass rail. I placed my hand upon it—regularly burned me."

"Mem for you, old chap—don't do it again. But, I say, what is the good of our hanging about here? We shall do no good, and it's completely spoiling the skipper's temper."

"Nonsense! Can't be done."

"Oh, can't it, Ricardo!"

"There you go again."

"*Pardon, mon ami!* Forgot myself. Plain Richard—there. But that's wrong. One can't call you plain Richard, because you're such a good-looking chap."

"Bah!" in a deep angry growl.

"What's that wrong too? Oh, what an unlucky beggar I am! But I say, didn't you see the skipper?"

"I saw him, of course. But what about him? I saw nothing particular."

"Old Anderson went up to him as politely as a first lieutenant could—"

"I say, Frank, look here," cried the other; "can't you say downright what you have to say, without prosing about like the jolly old preface to an uninteresting book?"

"No, dear boy," replied the young fellow addressed; "I can't really. It's the weather."

"Hang the weather!" cried the other petulantly.

"Not to be done, dear boy. To hang calls for a rope and the yard-arm, and there's nothing tangible about the weather. You should say—that is, if you wish to be ungentlemanly and use language unbecoming to an officer in His Majesty's service—Blow the weather!"

"Oh, bosh, bosh, bosh! You will not be satisfied till I've kicked you, Frank."

"Oh, don't—pray don't, my dear fellow, because you will force me to kick you again, and it would make me so hot. But I say, wasn't I going to tell you something about old Anderson and the skipper?"

"No—yes!—There, I don't know. Well, what was it?"

"Nothing," said Frank Murray, yawning. "Oh, dear me, how sleepy I am!"

"Well, of all the aggravating—"

"That's right: go on. Say it," said Murray. "I don't know what you were going to call me, dear boy, but I'm sure it would be correct. That's just what I am. Pray go on. I'm too hot to hit back."

"You're not too hot to talk back, Franky."

"Eh? Hullo! Why, I ought to fly at you now for calling me by that ridiculous name *Franky*."

"Bah! Here, do talk sense. What were you going to tell me about old Anderson and the skipper?"

"I don't know, dear boy. You've bullied it all out of me, or else the weather has taken it out. Oh, I know now: old Anderson went up to him and said something—what it was I don't know—unless it was about changing our course—and he snarled, turned his back and went below to cool himself, I think. I say, though, it is hot, Dick."

"Well, do you think I hadn't found that out?"

"No, it is all plain to see. You are all in a state of trickle, old chap. I say, though, isn't it a sort of midsummer madness to expect to catch one of these brutal craft on a day like this?"

There was an angry grunt.

"Quite right, old fellow. Bother the slavers! They're all shut up snugly in the horrible muddy creeks waiting for night, I believe. Then they'll steal out and we shall go on sailing away north or south as it pleases the skipper. Here, Dicky—I mean, Dick—what will you give me for my share of the prize money?"

"Bah!" ejaculated the youth addressed. "Can't you be quiet, Frank? *Buss, buss, buss!* It's just for the sake of talking. Can't you realise the fact?"

"No, dear boy; it's too hot to realise anything?"

"Well, then, let me tell you a home truth."

"Ah, do! Anything about home and the truth would be delicious here. Wish I could have an ice!"

"There you go! I say, can't you get tired of talking?"

"No, dear boy. I suppose it is my nature to. What is a fellow to do? You won't."

"No, I'm too hot. I wish every slaver that sails these muddy seas was hung at the yard-arm of his own nasty rakish schooner."

"Hee-ah, hee-ah, hee-ah! as we say in Parliament."

"*Parliament! Parler*, to talk!" grunted the other. "That's where you ought to be, Frank, and then you'd be in your element."

"Oh, I say! I was only politely agreeing with you. That was a splendid wish. The beasts! The wretches! But somehow

they don't get their deserts. Here have we been two months on this station, and I haven't had so much as a squint of a slaver. I don't believe there are any. All myths or fancies—bits of imagination."

"Oh, there are plenty of them, lad, but they know every in and out of these mangrove-infested shores, and I'll be bound to say they are watching us day by day, and as soon as we are lost in one of these foggy hazes it's up with their lug sails, and they glide away like—like—like—here, what do they glide away like? I'm not as clever as you. I'm at a loss for words. Give me one—something poetic, Frank."

"Steam out of a copper."

"Bah!"

"What, won't that do?"

"Do? No! There—like a dream."

"Brayvo! Werry pretty, as Sam Weller said. Oh, here's Tommy May—Here, Tom, what do you think of the weather?" said the lad, addressing a bluff-looking seaman.

"Weather, sir?" said the man, screwing up his face till it was one maze of wrinkles. "Beg pardon, sir, but did you mean that as one of your jokes, sir, or was it a conundydrum?"

"Oh, don't ask questions, Tom, but just tell us plainly what you think of the weather."

"Nothing, sir; it's too hot to think," replied the man.

"Quite right, May," said the other midshipman. "Don't bother the poor fellow, Murray. Here, May, what do you fellows before the mast think about the slavers?"

"Slippery as the mud of the river banks, sir."

"Good," said Murray. "Well spoken, Tom. But do you think there are any about here?"

"Oh yes, sir," said the man; "no doubt about it. They on'y want catching."

"No, no," cried Murray. "That's just what they don't want."

"Right you are, sir; but you know what I mean."

"I suppose so," said Murray; "but do you chaps, when you are chewing it all over along with your quids, believe that we shall come upon any of them?"

"Oh yes, sir; but do you see, they sail in those long, low, swift schooners that can come and go where they like, while we in the *Seafowl* seem to be thinking about it."

"Poor sluggish sloop of war!" said Roberts.

"Nay, nay, sir," said the man, "begging your pardon, she's as smart a vessel as ever I sailed in, with as fine a captain and officers, 'specially the young gentlemen."

"Now, none of your flattering gammon, Tom."

"Begging your pardon, gentlemen," said the man sturdily, "that it arn't. I says what I says, and I sticks to it, and if we only get these here blackbird catchers on the hop we'll let 'em see what the *Seafowl* can do."

"If!" said Roberts bitterly.

"Yes, sir, *if*. That's it, sir, and one of these days we shall drop upon them and make them stare. We shall do it, gentlemen, you see if we shan't."

"That's what we want to see, Tom," said Murray.

"Course you do, gentlemen, and all we lads forrard are itching for it, that we are—just about half mad."

"For prize money?" said Roberts sourly.

"Prize money, sir?" replied the man. "Why, of course, sir. It's a Bri'sh sailor's nature to like a bit of prize money at the end of a v'y'ge; but, begging your pardon, sir, don't you make no mistake. There arn't a messmate o' mine as wouldn't give up his prize money for the sake of overhauling a slaver and reskyng a load o' them poor black beggars. It's horrid; that's what it just is."

"Quite right, May," said Roberts.

"Thankye, sir," said the man; "and as we was a-saying on'y last night—talking together we was as we lay out on the deck because it was too stuffycatin' to sleep."

"So it was, May," said Roberts.

"Yes, sir; reg'lar stifler. Well, what we all agreed was that what we should like to do was to set the tables upside down."

"What for?" said Murray, giving his comrade a peculiar glance from the corner of his eye.

"Why, to give the poor niggers a chance to have a pop at some of the slavers' crews, sir, to drive 'em with the whip and make 'em work in the plantations, sir, like dumb beasts. I should like to see it, sir."

"Well said, Tom!" cried Murray.

"Thankye, sir. But it's slow work ketching, sir, for you see it's their swift craft."

"Which makes them so crafty, eh, Tom?" cried Murray.

"Yes, sir. I don't quite understand what you mean, sir, but I suppose it's all right, and—"

"Sail on the lee bow!" sang out a voice from the main-top.

Chapter Two.

Bother the Fog.

A minute before those words were shouted from the main-top, the low-toned conversation carried on by the two young officers, with an occasional creak or rattle from a swinging sail was all that broke the silence of the drowsy vessel; now from everywhere came the buzz of voices and the hurrying trample of feet.

"It's just as if some one had thrust a stick into a wasp's nest," whispered Frank Murray to his companion, as they saw that the captain and officers had hurried up on deck to follow the two lads' example of bringing their spy-glasses to bear upon a faintly seen sail upon the horizon, where it was plainly marked for a few minutes—long enough to be made out as a low schooner with raking masts, carrying a heavy spread of canvas, which gradually grew fainter and fainter before it died away in the silvery haze. The time was short, but quite long enough for orders to be sharply given, men to spring up aloft, and the sloop's course to be altered, when shuddering sails began to fill out, making the *Seafowl* careen over lightly, and a slight foam formed on either side of the cut-water.

"That's woke us up, Richard, my son," said Murray.

"Yes, and it means a chance at last."

"If."

"Only this; we just managed to sight that schooner before she died away again in the haze."

"Well, that gave us long enough to notice her and send the *Seafowl* gliding along upon her course. Isn't that enough?"

"Not quite, old fellow."

"Bah! What a fellow you are, Frank! You're never satisfied," cried Roberts. "What have you got in your head now?"

"Only this; we had long enough before the haze closed in to sight the schooner well."

"Of course. We agreed to that."

"Well, suppose it gave them time enough to see us?"

"Doubtful. A vessel like that is not likely to have a man aloft on the lookout."

"There I don't agree with you, Dick. It strikes me that they must keep a very sharp lookout on board these schooners, or else we must have overhauled one of them before now."

"Humph!" said Roberts shortly. "Well, we shall see. According to my ideas it won't be very long before we shall be sending a shot across that schooner's bows, and then a boat aboard. Hurrah! Our bad luck is broken at last."

"Doesn't look like it," said Murray, who had dropped all light flippancy and banter, to speak now as the eager young officer deeply interested in everything connected with his profession.

"Oh, get out!" cried Roberts. "What do you mean by your croaking? Look at the way in which our duck has spread her wings and is following in the schooner's wake. It's glorious, and the very air seems in our favour, for it isn't half so hot."

"I mean," said Murray quietly, "that the mist is growing more dense."

"So much in our favour."

"Yes," said Murray, "if the schooner's skipper did not sight us first."

"Oh, bother! I don't believe he would."

"What's that?" said a gruff voice.

"Only this, sir," said Roberts to the first lieutenant, who had drawn near unobserved; "only Murray croaking, sir."

"What about, Murray?" asked the elderly officer.

"I was only saying, sir, that we shall not overhaul the schooner if her people sighted us first."

"That's what I'm afraid of, my lads," said the old officer. "This haze may be very good for us, but it may be very good for them and give their skipper a chance to double and run for one or other of the wretched muddy creeks or rivers which they know by heart. There must be one somewhere near, or she would not have ventured out by daylight, and when we get within striking distance we may find her gone."

The lieutenant passed the two lads and went forward, where he was heard to give an order or two which resulted in a man being stationed in the fore chains ready to take soundings; and soon after he was in eager conversation with the captain.

"Feeling our way," said Murray, almost in a whisper, as he and his companion stood together where the man in the chains heaved the lead, singing out the soundings cheerily till he was checked by an order which resulted in his marking off the number of fathoms in a speaking voice, and later on in quite a subdued tone, for the haze had thickened into a sea fog, and the distance sailed ought to have brought the *Seafowl* pretty near to the schooner, whose commander might possibly take alarm at the announcement of a strange vessel's approach.

"I'm afraid they must have heard us before now," said Roberts softly. "Ah, hark at that!"

For as the man in the chains gave out the soundings it was evident that the depth was rapidly shoaling, when, in obedience to an order to the helmsman a turn or two was given to the wheel, the sloop of war was thrown up into the wind, the sails began to shiver, and the *Seafowl* lay rocking gently upon the swell.

"Bother the fog!" said Murray fretfully. "It's growing worse."

"No, sir," said the seaman who was close at hand. "Seems to me that it's on the move, and afore long we shall be in the clear, sir, and see where we are."

The man's words proved to be correct sooner than could have been expected, for before many minutes had passed, and just when the mist which shut them in was at its worst, the solid-looking bank of cloud began to open, and passed away aft; the sun shot out torrid rays, and those on board the *Seafowl* were seeing the need there had been for care, for they were gazing across the clear sea at the wide-spreading mangrove-covered shore, which, monotonous and of a dingy green, stretched away to north and south as far as eye could reach.

"Where's the schooner?" exclaimed Murray excitedly, for the *Seafowl* seemed to be alone upon the dazzling waters.

"In the fog behind us," said Roberts, in a disappointed tone. "We've overdone it. I expected we should; the skipper was in such a jolly hurry."

Frank Murray took his companion's words as being the correct explanation of the state of affairs; but they soon proved to be wrong, for the soft breeze that had sprung up from the shore rapidly swept the fog away seaward, and though all on board the sloop watched eagerly for the moment when the smart schooner should emerge, it at last became plain that she had eluded them—how, no one on board could say.

"It's plain enough that she can't have gone seaward," said Roberts thoughtfully. "She must have sailed right away to the east."

"Yes," said Murray thoughtfully.

"Of course! Right over the tops of the mangroves," said Roberts mockingly. "They hang very close, and there's a heavy dew lying upon them, I'll be bound."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Murray. "She couldn't have passed in through some opening, I suppose?"

"Where is the opening, then?" cried Roberts shortly.

"I don't know," replied his companion coolly; "but there must be one, and the captain of the schooner must be quite at home here and know his way."

"I wish my young officers would learn to know their way about this horrible shore instead of spending their time in talking," cried an angry voice, and the two midshipmen started apart as they awoke to the fact that the captain had approached them unheard while they were intently sweeping the shore.

"Higher, my lad—higher up," cried the captain. "The cross-trees, and be smart about it.—Yes, Mr Murray, you're right; there's a narrow river somewhere about, or perhaps it's a wide one. Take your glass, sir—the opening is waiting to be found. What do you think of it, Mr Anderson?"

"I don't think, sir. I feel sure the schooner has come out of some river along here, caught sight of us, and taken advantage of the mist to make her way back, and for aught we know she is lying snugly enough, waiting till we are gone."

"Thank you, Mr Anderson," said the captain, with studied politeness, "but unfortunately I knew all this before you spoke. What I want to know is where our friend is lying so snugly. What do you say to that?"

"Only this, sir—that we must run in as far as we can and sail along close inshore till we come to the opening of the river."

"And while we sail south we shall be leaving the mouth behind, Mr Anderson, eh?"

"If it proves to be so, sir," replied the first lieutenant gravely, "we must sail north again and again too, until we find the entrance."

"Humph! Yes, sir; but hang it all, are my officers asleep, that we are sailing up and down here month after month

without doing anything? Here, Mr Murray, what are you thinking about, sir?"

The lad started, for his chief had suddenly fired his question at him like a shot.

"Well, sir, why don't you answer my question?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied Murray now. "I was thinking."

"Yes, sir, you were thinking," cried the captain passionately. "I know you were thinking, and saying to yourself that you had a most unreasonable captain."

Murray was silent, and the first lieutenant and the other midshipman, after exchanging a glance, fixed their eyes upon the monotonous shore.

"Do you hear me, sir?" thundered the captain, as if he were speaking to the lookout at the mast-head instead of the lad close to him. "That was what you were thinking, was it not? Come: the truth."

He bent forward to gaze straight into the boy's eyes as if determined to get an answer.

"Yes, sir," said the lad desperately, "something of that sort;" and then to himself, "Oh, murder! I'm in for it now!"

"Yes, I knew you were, Mr Murray," cried the captain. "Thank you. I like my junior officers to speak out truthfully and well. Makes us place confidence in them, Mr Anderson, eh?"

"Yes, sir," growled the chief officer, "but it isn't always pleasant."

"Quite right, Mr Anderson, and it sounds like confounded impudence, too. But we're wasting time, and it is valuable. I'm going to have that schooner found. The sea's as smooth as an inland lake, so man and lower down the cutters. You take the first cutter, Mr Anderson, Munday the second. Row or sail to north and south as the wind serves, and I'll stand out a bit to see that you don't start the game so that it escapes. You young gentlemen had better go with the boats."

Murray glanced at the old officer, and to the question in his eyes there came a nod by way of answer.

"You always have the luck, Franky," grumbled Roberts, as soon as they were alone.

"Nonsense! You have as good a chance as I have of finding the schooner."

"What, with prosy old Munday! Why, he'll most likely go to sleep."

"So much the better for you. You can take command of the boat and discover the schooner's hiding-place."

"Of course. Board her, capture the Spanish—"

"Or Yankee," said Murray.

"Captain!" snapped out Roberts. "Oh yes, I know. Bother! I do get so tired of all this."

Tired or no, the young man seemed well on the alert as he stepped into the second cutter, and soon after each of the boats had run up their little sail, for a light breeze was blowing, and, leaving the sloop behind, all the men full of excitement as every eye was fixed upon the long stretches of mangrove north and south in search of the hidden opening which might mean the way into some creek, or perhaps the half-choked-up entrance into one of the muddy rivers of the vast African shore.

Chapter Three.

The Cute Visitor.

The first cutter had the wind in her favour and glided northward mile after mile along a shore thickly covered with the peculiar growth of the mangrove, those dense bird-affecting, reptile-haunted coverts, whose sole use seems to be that of keeping the muddy soil of the West Afric shores from being washed away.

The heat was terrible, and the men were congratulating themselves on the fact that the wind held out and saved them from the painful task of rowing hard in the blistering sunshine.

Murray's duty was to handle the tiller lines as he sat in the stern sheets beside the first lieutenant, and after being out close upon three hours he began to feel that he could keep awake no longer—for his companion sat silent and stern, his gaze bent upon the dark green shore, searching vainly for the hidden opening—and in a half torpid state the midshipman was about to turn to his silent companion and ask to be relieved of the lines, when he uttered a gasp of thankfulness, and, forgetting discipline, gripped the officer by the knee.

"What the something, Mr Murray, do you mean by that?" cried the lieutenant angrily.

"Look!" was the reply, accompanied by a hand stretched out with pointing index finger.

"Stand by, my lads, ready to pull for all you know," cried the lieutenant. "The wind may drop at any moment. You, Tom May, take a pull at that sheet; Mr Murray, tighten that port line. That's better; we must cut that lugger off. Did you see where she came out?"

"Not quite, sir," said Murray, as he altered the boat's course a trifle, "but it must have been close hereabouts. What are you going to do, sir?"

"Do, my lad? Why, take her and make the master or whatever he is, act as guide."

"I see, sir. Then you think he must have come out of the river where the schooner has taken refuge?"

"That's what I think," said the lieutenant grimly; "and if I am right I fancy the captain will not be quite so hard upon us as he has been of late."

"It will be a glorious triumph for us—I mean for you, sir," said Murray hurriedly.

"Quite right, Mr Murray," said his companion, smiling. "I can well afford to share the honours with you, for I shall have owed it to your sharp eyes. But there, don't let's talk. We must act and strain every nerve, for I'm doubtful about that lugger; she sails well and may escape us after all."

Murray set his teeth as he steered so as to get every foot of speed possible out of the cutter, while, sheet in hand, Tom May sat eagerly watching the steersman, ready to obey the slightest sign as the boat's crew sat fast with the oars in the rowlocks ready to dip together and pull for all they were worth, should the wind fail.

"That's good, my lads," said the lieutenant—"most seamanlike. It's a pleasure to command such a crew."

There was a low hissing sound as of men drawing their breath hard, and the old officer went on.

"We're not losing ground, Mr Murray," he said.

"No, sir; gaining upon her, I think."

"So do I—think, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant shortly, "but I'm not sure. Ah, she's changing her course," he added excitedly, "and we shall lose her. Oh, these luggers, these luggers! How they can skim over the waves! Here, marines," he said sharply, as he turned to a couple of the rifle-armed men who sat in the stern sheets, "be ready to send a shot through the lugger's foresail if I give the order; the skipper may understand what I mean." And the speaker, sat frowning heavily at the lightly-built lugger they were following. "I don't see what more I can do, Mr Murray."

"No, sir," said the midshipman hoarsely. "Oh, give the order, sir—pray do! We mustn't lose that boat."

"Fire!" said the lieutenant sharply; and one marine's rifle cracked, while as the smoke rose lightly in the air Murray uttered a low cry of exultation.

"Right through the foresail, sir, and the skipper knows what we mean."

"Yes, capital! Good shot, marine."

The man's face shone with pleasure as he thrust in a fresh cartridge before ramming it down, and the crew looked as if they were panting to give out a loud cheer at the success of the lieutenant's manoeuvre, for the little lugger, which was just beginning to creep away from them after a change in her course, now obeyed a touch of her helm and bore round into the wind till the big lug sails shivered and she gradually settled down to rock softly upon the long heaving swell that swept in landward.

As the cutter neared, Murray noted that the strange boat was manned by a little crew of keen-looking blacks, not the heavy, protuberant-lipped, flat-nosed, West Coast "niggers," but men of the fierce-looking tribes who seem to have come from the east in the course of ages and have preserved somewhat of the Arabic type and its keen, sharp intelligence of expression.

But the midshipman had not much time for observation of the little crew, his attention being taken up directly by the dramatic-looking entrance upon the scene of one who was apparently the skipper or owner of the lugger, and who had evidently been having a nap in the shade cast by the aft lugsail, and been awakened by the shot to give the order which had thrown the lugger up into the wind.

He surprised both the lieutenant and Murray as he popped into sight to seize the side of his swift little vessel and lean over towards the approaching cutter, as, snatching off his wide white Panama hat, he passed one duck-covered white arm across his yellowish-looking hairless face and shouted fiercely and in a peculiar twang—

"Here, I say, you, whoever you are, do you know you have sent a bullet through my fores'l?"

"Yes, sir. Heave to," said the lieutenant angrily.

"Wal, I have hev to, hev'n't I, sirr? But just you look here; I don't know what you thought you was shooting at, but I suppose you are a Britisher, and I'm sure your laws don't give you leave to shoot peaceful traders to fill your bags."

"That will do," said the lieutenant sternly. "What boat's that?"

"I guess it's mine, for I had it built to my order, and paid for it. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what your boat is and what you was shooting at?"

"This is the first cutter of Her Majesty's sloop of war *Seafowl*," said the lieutenant sternly, "and—"

But the American cut what was about to be said in two by crying in his sharp nasal twang—

"Then just you look here, stranger; yew've got hold of a boat as is just about as wrong as it can be for these waters. I've studied it and ciphered it out, and I tell yew that if yew don't look out yew'll be took by one of the waves we have off this here coast, and down yew'll go. I don't want to offend yew, mister, for I can see that yew're an officer, but I tell yew that yew ought to be ashamed of yewrself to bring your men along here in such a hen cock-shell as that boat of yourn."

"Why, it's as seaworthy as yours, sir," said the lieutenant good-humouredly.

"Not it, mister; and besides, I never go far from home in mine."

"From home!" said the lieutenant keenly. "Where do you call home?"

"Yonder," said the American, with a jerk of his head. "You ain't got no home here, and it's a mercy that you haven't been swamped before now. Where have you come from?—the Cape?"

"No," said the lieutenant; "but look here, sir, what are you, and what are you doing out here?"

"Sailing now," said the American.

"But when you are ashore?"

"Rubber," said the man.

"What, trading in indiarubber?"

"Shall be bimeby. Growing it now—plantation."

"Oh," said the lieutenant, looking at the speaker dubiously. "Where is your plantation?"

"Up the creek yonder," replied the American, with another nod of his head towards the coast.

"Oh," said the lieutenant quietly; "you have a plantation, have you, for the production of rubber, and you work that with slaves?"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" laughed the American, showing a set of very yellow teeth. "That's what you're after, then? I see through you now, cyaptain. You're after slave-traders."

"Perhaps so; and you confess yourself to be one," said the lieutenant.

"Me?" said the American, laughing boisterously again. "Hev another try, cyaptain. Yew're out this time. Ketch me trying to work a plantation with West Coast niggers! See those boys o' mine?"

"Yes; I see your men," replied the lieutenant.

"Them's the stuff I work with. Pay 'em well and they work well. No work, no pay. Why, one of those fellows'd do more work for me in a day than one of the blacks they come here to buy up could do in a week."

"Then slave-traders come here to buy, eh?"

"Yes, they do," replied the man, "but 'tain't none of my business. They don't interfere with me, and I don't interfere with them. Plenty of room here for both. Yew're after them, then?"

"Yes," said the lieutenant frankly.

"Phew!" whistled the man, giving his knees a slap. "Why, you'll be after the schooner that came into this river this morning?"

"Possibly," said the lieutenant, while Murray felt his blood thrill in his veins with the excitement of the position. "What schooner was it?"

"Smart sailing craft, with long rakish masts?"

"Yes, yes," said the lieutenant; "I know all about that. A slaver, eh?"

The American half shut his eyes as he peered out of their corners at the British officer, and a queer smile puckered up his countenance.

"Slaving ain't lawful, is it, mister?" he said.

"You answer my question," said the lieutenant testily.

"Means confiscation, don't it?"

"And that is not an answer," cried the lieutenant angrily.

"Yew making a prize of that theer smart schooner from her top-masts down to her keel, eh?"

"Will you reply to what I say?" cried the lieutenant. "Is she a slaver?"

"Lookye here, mister," said the American, grinning. "S'pose I say yes, you'll jest confiscate that there schooner when her skipper and her crew slips over the side into the boats and pulls ashore."

"Perhaps I may," said the lieutenant shortly.

"Exackly so, mister. Then you sails away with her for a prize, eh?"

"Possibly," said the lieutenant coldly.

"And what about me?"

"Well, what about you?"

"I can't pull back to my rubber plantations and sail them away, can I?"

"I do not understand you, sir," said the lieutenant sharply.

"No, and you don't care to understand me, mister. 'No,' says you, 'it's no business of mine about his pesky injrubby fields.'"

"Why should it be, sir?" said the lieutenant shortly.

"Exactly so, mister; but it means a deal to me. How shall I look after you're gone when the slaver's skipper—"

"Ah!" cried Murray excitedly. "Then she is a slaver!"

The American's eyes twinkled as he turned upon the young man.

"Yew're a sharp 'un, yew are," he said, showing his yellow teeth. "Did I say she was a slaver?"

"Yes, you did," cried Murray.

"Slipped out then because your boss began saying slaver, I suppose. That was your word and I give it to yew back again. I want to live peaceable like on my plantation and make my dollahs out of that there elastic and far-stretching projuice of the injrubbery trees. That's my business, misters, and I'm not going to take away any man's crackter."

"You have given me the clue I want, sir," said the lieutenant, "and it is of no use for you to shirk any longer from telling me the plain truth about what is going on up this river or creek."

"Oh, isn't it, mister officer? Perhaps I know my business better than you can tell me. I dessay yew're a very smart officer, but I could give you fits over growing rubber, and I'm not going to interfere with my neighbours who may carry on a elastic trade of their own in black rubber or they may not. 'Tain't my business. As I said afore, or was going to say afore when this here young shaver as hain't begun to shave yet put his oar in and stopped me, how should I look when yew'd gone and that half-breed black and yaller Portygee schooner skipper comes back with three or four boat-loads of his cut-throats and says to me in his bad language that ain't nayther English, 'Murrican, nor nothing else but hashed swearing, 'Look here,' he says, 'won't injrubber burn like fire, eh?' 'Yes,' I says, civil and smooth, 'it is rayther rum-combustible.' 'So I thought,' he says. 'Well, you've been letting that tongue of yours go running along and showing those cusses of Britishers where I anchor my boat and load up with plantation stuff for the West Injies; so jes' look here,' he sez, 'I've lost thousands o' dollahs threw yew, and so I'm just going to make yew pay for it by burning up your plantations and putting a stop to your trade, same as yew've put a stop to mine. I shan't hurt yew, because I'm a kind-hearted gentle sorter man, but I can't answer for my crew. I can't pay them, because yew've took my ship and my marchandise, so I shall tell them they must take it outer yew. And they will, stranger. I don't say as they'll use their knives over the job, and I don't say as they won't, but what I do say is that I shouldn't like to be yew.' There, Mister Officer, that's about what's the matter with me, and now yew understand why I don't keer about meddling with my neighbours' business."

"Yes, I understand perfectly," said the lieutenant, "but I want you to see that it is your duty to help to put a stop to this horrible traffic in human beings. Have you no pity for the poor blacks who are made prisoners, and are dragged away from their homes to be taken across the sea and sold like so many cattle?"

"Me? Pity! Mister, I'm full of it. I'm sorry as sorrow for the poor niggers, and whenever I know that yon schooner is loading up with black stuff I shuts my eyes and looks t'other way."

"Indeed!" cried Murray. "And pray how do you manage to do that?"

"Why, ain't I telling on you, youngster? I shuts my eyes so as I can't see."

"Then how can you look another way?"

The American displayed every tooth in his head and winked at the lieutenant.

"Yew've got a sharp 'un here, mister. I should keep him covered up, or shut him up somehow, 'fore he cuts anybody or himself. But yew understand what I mean, mister, and I dessay you can see now why I feel it my business to be very sorry for the black niggers, but more sorry for myself and my people. I don't want to be knifed by a set o' hangdog rubbish from all parts o' the world. I'm a peaceable man, mister, but you're a cap'en of a man-o'-war, I suppose?"

"Chief officer," said the lieutenant.

"And what's him?" said the American, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the midshipman. "Young chief officer?"

"Junior officer."

"Oh, his he? Well, I tell you what: yew both go and act like men-o'-war. Sail up close to that schooner, fire your big guns, and send her to the bottom of the river."

"And what about the poor slaves?" said Murray excitedly.

"Eh, the black stuff?" said the American, scratching his chin with his forefinger. "Oh, I forgot all about them. Rather bad for them, eh, mister?"

"Of course," said the lieutenant. "No, sir, that will not do. I want to take the schooner, and make her captain and crew prisoners."

"Yew'll have to look slippery then, mister. But what about the niggers?"

"I shall take them with the vessel to Lagos or some other port where a prize court is held, and the judge will no doubt order the best to be done with them."

"Which means put an end to the lot, eh?" said the American.

"Bah! Nonsense!" cried Murray indignantly.

"Is it, young mister? Well, I didn't know. It ain't my business. Yew go on and do what's right. It's your business. I don't keer so long as I'm not mixed up with it. I've on'y got one life, and I want to take keer on it. Now we understand one another?"

"Not quite," said the lieutenant.

"Why, what is there as yew can't take in?"

"Nothing," said the lieutenant. "I quite see your position, and that you do not wish to run any risks with the slaver captain and his men."

"Not a cent's worth if I can help it."

"And quite right, sir," said the lieutenant; "but I take it that you know this slaver skipper by sight?"

"Oh, yes, I know him, mister—quite as much as I want to."

"And you know where he trades to?"

"West Injies."

"No, no; I mean his place here."

"Oh, you mean his barracks and sheds where the chief stores up all the black stuff for him to come and fetch away?"

"Yes, that's it," cried Murray excitedly.

"Have the goodness to let me conclude this important business, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant coldly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Murray, turning scarlet; "I was so excited."

"That's one for you, mister young chief officer," said the American, grinning at the midshipman, and then turning to the lieutenant. "These young uns want sitting upon a bit sometimes, eh, mister?"

"Look here, sir," said the lieutenant, ignoring the remark; "just listen to me. I want you to guide me and my men to the foul nest of this slave-trader and the town of the black chief."

The American shook his head.

"You need not shrink, for you will be under the protection of the English Government."

"That's a long way off, mister."

"But very far-reaching, sir," continued the lieutenant, "and I promise you full protection for all that you do. Why, surely, man, you will be able to cultivate your plantation far more peacefully and with greater satisfaction with the river cleared of this abominable traffic."

"Well, if you put it in that way, mister, I should," said the man, "and that's a fine range of rich land where the black chief has his people and their huts. I could do wonders with that bit if I could hold it safely. The rubber I'd plant there would be enough to—"

"Rub out all the black marks that the slave-trade has made."

"Very good, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant, smiling pleasantly, "but this is no time to try and be smart."

"Eh?" said the American. "Was that what he was aiming at? I didn't understand; but I tell yew that there is about a mile of rich syle there which if I had I could make it prouice a fortune."

"Look here, sir," said the lieutenant, "I have no doubt about the possibility of your being helped by the British Government to take possession of such a tract after we have done with it."

"Why, you don't mean, Mister Chief Officer, that you will let your British Lion put his paw upon it and stick to it till you've done with it, as you say?"

"No, no, no," said the lieutenant, smiling. "I mean that the British Lion will put its paw upon the horrible settlement in this way and will root out the traffic, and we shall only be too glad to encourage the rise of a peaceful honest culture such as you are carrying on."

"You mean then that you'll root out the slaves and burn the chief's town?"

"Most certainly," said the lieutenant. "And help me to get hold of that there land?"

"I believe I may promise that."

"And take care that the Portygee slaver cock has his comb cut so as he dursen't meddle with me?"

"I feel sure that all this will follow if you help us to capture the slaver, and point out where the abominable traffic is carried on."

"Shake on it," said the American, thrusting out a thin yellow hand with unpleasantly long nails.

"Shake hands upon the compact?" said the lieutenant good-humouredly. "Very good;" and he gave the yellow hand a good manly grip.

"Then I'm on!" cried the man effusively. "But look here, yew're in this too;" and he stretched out his hand to Murray. "Yew're a witness to all your chief said."

"Oh, all right," said Murray, and he let the long, thin, unpleasantly cold and dank fingers close round his hand, but not without a feeling of disgust which was expressed by the making of a grimace as soon as the American turned to the lieutenant again.

"That's settled, then," said the latter, "so go on at once and lead while we follow."

"What!" said the American, with a look of wonder.

"I say, go on and guide us to the slaver's nest."

"What, just alone like this here?"

"Yes, of course. You see we are well-armed and ready to board and take the schooner at once. Fire will destroy the chief's town."

"Well, you do 'maze me," said the American, showing his teeth.

"What do you mean?" said the lieutenant sternly. "Are you going to draw back?"

"Not me, mister. That's a bargain," said the man, grinning. "I mean that you 'maze me, you Englishers do, by your cheek. I don't doubt you a bit. You mean it, and yew'll dew it. Why, I dessay if yew yewrself wasn't here this here young shaver of an officer would have a try at it hisself. You would, wouldn't you, youngster?"

"Why, of course I would," said Murray proudly; and then, feeling afraid that his assertion might be looked upon as braggadocio, he hastened to add, "I—I—er—meant to say that I would try, and our brave fellows would take the prisoners."

"Nay, nay, yew would," said the American. "There ain't nothing to be ashamed on in being brave, is there, mister?"

"Of course not," said the lieutenant.

"Of course not," said the American; "but look here, sirree, it's no good to lose brave men by trying to do things that's a bit too strong and starky for you."

"What, do you mean that the schooner's crew would be too strong for us?"

"Nay, not me, mister. Yew'd chaw them up safe. But there's the black king; he's got close upon a hundred fighting men, chaps with spears. He'd fight too, for though they ain't got much brains, these niggers, he'd know you'd be going to do away with his bread and cheese, as you may say. No, sirree, I ain't a fighting man; rubber's my line, but I want to *get* hold of that bit of syle—make sewer of it, as you may say; and if I'd got that job to do I should get another boatful of men if you could. Don't know of a British ship handy, do you?"

"Of course. My captain is off the coast not far away. You did not suppose that we came alone?"

"Oh, I didn't know, mister. Could you bring your captain then?"

"Yes."

"And another boat?"

"Of course."

"Then if I was you I should tell him to sail up the river."

"What, is there water enough—deep water?" asked the lieutenant.

"Whatcher talking about?" said the man contemptuously. "Why, didn't you see me sail out?"

The lieutenant shook his head.

"Think o' that!" said the American. "Way in's bit narrer, but as soon as you get threw the trees you're in a big mighty river you can sail up for months if yew like. I have heerd that there's some falls somewhere, but I've never seem 'em. Water enough? My snakes! There's water enough to make a flood, if you want one, as soon as you get by the winding bits."

"The river winds?" said the lieutenant.

"Winds? I should think she does! Why, look yonder, mister," continued the man, pointing. "It's all trees like that for miles. You've got to get through them."

"Deep water?" asked the lieutenant.

"Orful! On'y it's 'bout as muddy as rivers can be made."

"And you assure me that you could pilot us in and right up to the slaver's stronghold?"

"Pilot yew? Yew don't want no piloting; all yew've got to do is to sail up in and out through the big wilderness of trees. Yew wouldn't want no piloting, but if you undertake to see that I have that chief's land, and clear him and his black crews away, I'll lay yew off his front door where you can blow his palm-tree palace all to smithers without losing a man."

"And what about the slaver?" asked Murray.

"What about her? She'll be lying anchored there, of course."

"With any colleagues?" asked the lieutenant.

"Whatche'r mean—t'others?"

"Yes."

"Not now, mister. There's as many as four or five sometimes, but I only see her go up the river this time. Yew should have come later on if you wanted more."

"The slaver is up the river now, then?" said the lieutenant, looking at the man searchingly.

"Yes, of course," was the reply, as the American involuntarily gave a look round, and then, as if taking himself to task for an act of folly, he added laughingly. "If she wasn't up there she'd be out here, and you can see for yourselves that she ain't."

"You could show us the way in?" said Murray.

"Why, didn't I say I could?" replied the man sharply.

"Yes; but I should like to have a glimpse of her first," said Murray.

"What for, youngster? To let her know that you're coming? You take my advice, mister, and come upon her sudden like."

The lieutenant gazed intently upon the man.

"Yes; I should like to reconnoitre a bit first. With your assistance we ought to be able to run our boats close up under the shelter of the trees and see what she is like."

"See what she's like, mister? Why, like any other schooner. You take my advice; you'll slip off and fetch your ship, and I'll wait here till you come back."

Murray looked at the man searchingly, for somehow a sense of doubt began to trouble him as to the man's trustworthiness, and the lad began to turn over the position in his mind. For though the man's story seemed to be reasonable enough, an element of suspicion began to creep in and he began to long to ask the lieutenant as to what he thought about the matter.

But he did not speak, for the keen-looking American's eyes were upon him, and when they shifted it was only for them to be turned upon the lieutenant.

"Wal," he said at last, "whatcher thinking about, mister?"

"About your running me up to where you could point out the schooner."

"But I don't want to," said the man frankly.

"Why?" asked the lieutenant sharply.

"'Cause I don't want to lose the chance of getting that there mile of plantation."

"There ought to be no risk, sir, if we were careful."

"I dunno so much about that there, mister. Them slaver chaps always sleep with one eye open, and there's no knowing what might happen."

"What might happen! What could happen?"

"Nothing; but the skipper might hyste sail and run his craft right up towards the falls. As I said, I never see them, but there must be falls to keep this river so full."

"But we could follow him."

"Part of the way p'raps, mister, but he could go in his light craft much further than you could in a man-o'-war."

"True," said the lieutenant; "you are right."

"Somewhere about," said the man, showing his teeth. "There, you slip off and fetch your ship, and I'll cruise up and down off the mouth of the river here so as to make sure that the schooner don't slip off. She's just as like as not to hyste sail now that the fog's all gone. She'd have been off before if it hadn't come on as thick as soup. Say, 'bout how far off is your ship?"

"Half-a-dozen miles away," said the lieutenant.

"That ain't far. Why not be off at once?"

"Why not come with us?" asked Murray.

"Ain't I telled yer, youngster? Think I want to come back and find the schooner gone?"

The lieutenant gazed from the American to the midshipman and back again, with his doubts here and there, veering like a weather vane, for the thought would keep attacking him—suppose all this about the slave schooner was Yankee bunkum, and as soon as he had got rid of them, the lugger would sail away and be seen no more?

"You won't trust him, will you?" said Murray, taking advantage of a puff of wind which separated the two boats for a few minutes.

"I can't," said the lieutenant, in a whisper. "I was nearly placing confidence in him, but your doubt has steered me in the other direction. Hah!" he added quickly. "That will prove him." And just then the lugger glided alongside again, and the opportunity for further communing between the two officers was gone.

"That's what yew have to be on the lookout for, mister, when yew get sailing out here. Sharp cat's-paws o' wind hot as fire sometimes. Well, ain't you going to fetch your ship?"

"And what about you?" said the lieutenant.

"Me?" said the man wonderingly, and looking as innocent as a child.

"Yes; where am I to pick you up again?"

"Oh! I'll show you. I'll be hanging just inside one of the mouths of the river, and then lead yew in when yew get back with yewr ship."

Murray softly pressed his foot against his officer's without seeming to move, and felt the pressure returned, as if to say—All right; I'm not going to trust him—and the lieutenant then said aloud—

"But why shouldn't you sail with us as far as our sloop?"

"Ah, why shouldn't I, after all?" said the man. "You might show me your skipper, and we could talk to him about what we're going to do. All right; sail away if you like to chance it."

The lieutenant nodded, and a few minutes later the two boats were gliding about half a mile abreast of the dense mangrove-covered shore in the direction of the *Seafowl*, and only about fifty yards apart.

"You'll be keeping a sharp lookout for treachery in any shape, sir?" said Murray, in a low tone.

"The fellow's willingness to fall in with my proposal has disarmed me, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant quietly, "but all the same I felt bound to be cautious. I have given the marines orders to be ready to fire at the slightest sign of an attempt to get away."

"You have, sir? Bravo!" said Murray, in the same low tone, and without seeming to be talking to his chief if they were observed. "But I did not hear you speak to the jollies."

"No, Mr Murray; I did not mean you to, and I did not shout. But this caution is, after all, unnecessary, for there comes the sloop to look after us. Look; she is rounding that tree-covered headland."

"Better and better, sir!" cried Murray excitedly. "I was beginning to fidget about the lugger."

"What about her, Mr Murray?"

"Beginning to feel afraid of her slipping away as soon as we were out of sight."

"You think, then, that the lugger's people might be on the watch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Quite possible," said the lieutenant. "Well, we have her safe now."

"Yes, sir; but won't you heave to and wait?"

"To be sure, yes, Mr Murray; a good idea; and let the sloop sail up to us?"

"Won't it make the captain storm a bit, sir, and ask sharply why we didn't make haste and join?"

"Most likely, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant quietly; "but if he does we have two answers."

"The lugger, sir."

"Yes, Mr Murray, and the discovery of the schooner."

"Waiting to be boarded, sir," said the midshipman.

"Exactly, Mr Murray. Any one make out the second cutter?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried Tom May. "There she is, sir—miles astarn of the *Seafowl*, sir."

"I wish we could signal to her to lay off and on where she is."

"What for, sir?"

"There may be one of the narrow entrances to the great river thereabouts, and the wider the space we can cover, the greater chance we shall have of preventing the slaver from stealing away."

Chapter Four.

The Yankee's Food.

"Grand, Mr Anderson," said the captain, after a time. But his first words had come pouring out like a storm of blame, which gave the first lieutenant no opportunity to report what he had done. "Yes: could not be better sir. There, we are going to capture a slaver at last!"

"Yes, sir, if we have luck; and to stamp out one of the strongholds of the accursed trade."

Then the captain became silent, and stood thoughtfully looking over the side at the indiarubber planter's lugger.

"Humph!" he ejaculated, at last. "Rather a serious risk to run, to trust to this stranger and make him our guide."

"So it struck me, sir, as I told you," said the lieutenant.

"Let me see, Mr Anderson, did you tell me that?"

"Yes, sir, if you will recall it."

"Humph! Yes, I suppose you did. But I was thinking. Suppose he plays us false."

"Why should he, sir?"

"To be sure, why should he, Mr Anderson? All the same, we must be careful."

Meanwhile, Murray was being cross-examined by his brother midshipman, who looked out of temper, and expressed himself sourly upon coming aboard.

"You have all the luck," he said. "You drop into all the spirited adventures, while I am packed off with prosy old Munday."

"Oh, nonsense! It is all chance. But didn't you see anything, old chap?"

"Yes—muddy water; dingy mangroves; the tail of a croc as the filthy reptile slid off the tree roots into the water. That was all, while there I was cooking in the heat, and listening to old Munday prose, prose, prose, till I dropped off to sleep, when the disagreeable beggar woke me up, to bully me about neglecting my duty, and told me that I should never *get to* be a smart officer if I took so little interest in my profession that I could not keep awake when out on duty."

"Well, it did seem hard, Dick, when he sent you off to sleep. I couldn't have kept awake, I know."

"I'm sure you couldn't. But there: bother! You couldn't help getting all the luck."

"No; and you are going to share it now."

"Not so sure, Frank. As like as not the skipper will send me away in a boat to watch some hole where the slaver might slip out. So this Yankee is going to act as pilot and lead us up the river to where the schooner is hiding?"

"Yes, and to show us the chief's town, and the place where he collects the poor unfortunate blacks ready for being shipped away to the Spanish plantations."

"My word, it's fine!" cried Roberts excitedly. "And hooroar, as Tom May has it. Why, the lads will be half mad with delight."

"And enough to make them," said Murray. "But I say, how does it strike you?"

"As being glorious. Franky, old fellow, if it wasn't for the look of the thing I could chuck up my cap and break out into a hornpipe. Dance it without music."

"To the delight of the men, and make Anderson or Munday say that it was not like the conduct of an officer and a gentleman."

"Yes, that's the worst of it. But though of course we're men now—"

"Midshipmen," said Murray drily.

"Don't sneer, old chap! And don't interrupt when I'm talking."

"Say on, O sage," said the lad.

"I was going to say that of course, though we are men now, one does feel a bit of the boy sometimes, and as if it was pleasant now and then to have a good lark." As the young fellow spoke he passed his hand thoughtfully over his cheeks and chin. "What are you grinning at?" he continued.

"Not grinning, old fellow; it was only a smile."

"Now, none of your gammon. You were laughing at me."

"Oh! Nothing!" said Murray, with the smile deepening at the corners of his mouth.

"There you go again!" cried Roberts. "Who's to keep friends with you, Frank Murray, when you are always trying to pick a quarrel with a fellow?"

"What, by smiling?"

"No, by laughing at a fellow and then pretending you were not. Now then, what was it?"

"Oh, all right; I only smiled at you about your shaving so carefully this morning."

"How did you know I shaved this morning?" cried the midshipman, flushing.

"You told me so."

"That I'll swear I didn't."

"Not with your lips, Dicky—*Dick*—but with your fingers."

"Oh! Bother! I never did see such a fellow as you are to spy out things," cried Roberts petulantly.

"Not spy, old chap. I only try to put that and that together, and I want you to do the same. So you think this is all glorious about yonder planter chap piloting us to the slaver's place?"

"Of course! Don't you?"

"Well, I don't know, Dick," said Murray, filling his forehead with wrinkles.

"Oh, I never did see such a fellow for pouring a souse of cold water down a fellow's back," cried Roberts passionately. "You don't mean to say that you think he's a fraud?"

"Can't help thinking something of the kind, old man."

"Oh!" ejaculated Roberts. "I say, here, tell us what makes you think so."

"He's too easy and ready, Dick," said Murray, throwing off his ordinary merry ways and speaking seriously and with his face full of thought.

"But what does Anderson say to it?"

"He seemed to be suspicious once, but it all passed off, and then the skipper when he heard everything too talked as if he had his doubts. But now he treats it as if it is all right, and we are to follow this American chap wherever he leads us."

"Yes, to-morrow morning, isn't it?"

"No, Dick; to-night."

"To-night—in the dark?"

"I suppose so."

"Oh!" said Roberts thoughtfully, and he began to shave himself with his finger once more, but without provoking the faintest smile from his companion. "I say, Franky, I don't like that."

"No; neither do I, Dick."

"It does seem like putting ourselves into his hands," continued Roberts thoughtfully. "Oh, but I don't know," he continued, as if snatching at anything that told for the success of the expedition; "you know what Anderson often tells us."

"I know what he says sometimes about our being thoughtless boys."

"Yes, that's what I mean, old fellow; and it isn't true, for I think a deal about my duties, and as for you—you're a beggar to think, just like the monkey who wouldn't speak for fear he should be set to work."

"Thanks for the compliment," said Murray drily.

"Oh, you know what I mean. But I suppose we can't think so well now as we shall by and by. I mean, older fellows can think better, and I suppose that the skipper and old Anderson really do know better than we do. It will be all right, old fellow. They wouldn't let themselves be led into any trap; and besides, look at the Yankee—I mean, look at his position; he must be sharp enough."

"Oh yes, he's sharp enough," said Murray. "Hear him talk, and you'd think he was brought up on pap made of boiled-down razor-strops."

"Well, then, he must know well enough that if he did the slightest thing in the way of playing fast and loose with us, he'd get a bullet through his head."

"Yes—if he wasn't too sharp for us."

"Oh, it will be all right," cried Roberts. "Don't be too cautious, Franky. Put your faith in your superior officers; that's the way to succeed."

"Then you think I am too cautious here, Dick?"

"Of course I do," cried Roberts, patting his brother middy on the shoulder. "It will be all right, so don't be dumpy. I feel as if we are going to have a fine time of it."

"Think we shall have any fighting?"

"Afraid not; but you do as I do. I mean to get hold of a cutlass and pistols. I'm not going to risk my valuable life with nothing to preserve it but a ridiculous dirk. Don't you be downhearted and think that the expedition is coming to grief."

"Not I," said Murray cheerily. "I suppose it's all right; but I couldn't help thinking what I have told you. I wish I didn't think such things; but it's a way I have."

"Yes," said his companion, "and any one wouldn't expect it of you, Franky, seeing what a light-hearted chap you are. It's a fault in your nature, a thing you ought to correct. If you don't get over it you'll never make a dashing officer."

"Be too cautious, eh?" said Murray good-humouredly.

"That's it, old chap. Oh, I say, though, I wish it was nearly night, and that we were going off at once. But I say, where's the Yankee?"

"What!" cried Murray, starting. "Isn't he alongside in his boat?"

"No; didn't you see? He came aboard half-an-hour ago. Old Bosun Dempsey fetched him out of his lugger; and look yonder, you croaking old cock raven. We always have one jolly as sentry at the gangway, don't we?"

"Of course."

"Very well, look now; there are two loaded and primed ready for any pranks the lugger men might play; and there are the two cutters ready for lowering down at a moment's notice, and it wouldn't take long for Dempsey to fizzle out his tune on his pipe and send the crews into them."

"Bah! Pish! Pooh! and the rest of it. What do you mean by that? Look, the lugger is a fast sailer."

"Well, I dare say she is, but one of our little brass guns can send balls that sail through the air much faster. So drop all those dismal prophecies and damping thoughts about danger. Our officers know their way about and have got their eyes open. The skipper knows about everything, and what he doesn't know bully Anderson tells him. It's all right, Franky. Just look at the lads! Why, there's Tom May smiling as if he'd filled his pockets full of prize money."

"Yes," assented Murray, "and the other lads have shaped their phizzes to match. But let's get closer to the lugger."

"What for?" said Roberts sharply.

"To have a good look at her Indiarubber-cultivating crew."

"Not I!" cried Roberts. "If we go there you'll begin to see something wrong again, and begin to croak."

"No, no; honour bright! If I do think anything, I won't say a word."

"I'd better keep you here out of temptation," said Roberts dubiously.

"Nonsense! It's all right, I tell you. There, come along."

Chapter Five.

Trusting a Guide.

The two lads made for where they could get a good view of the lugger swinging by a rope abreast of the starboard gangway, and as they passed along the quarter-deck, the shrill strident tones of the American's voice reached them through one of the open cabin skylights, while directly after, Murray, keen and observant of everything, noted that the two marines of whom his companion had spoken were standing apparently simply on duty, but thoroughly upon the alert and ready for anything, their whole bearing suggesting that they had received the strictest of orders, and were prepared

for anything that might occur.

Roberts gave his companion a nudge with his elbow and a quick glance of the eye, which produced "Yes, all right; I see," from Murray. "I'm afraid—I mean I'm glad to see that I was only croaking; but I say, Dick, have a good quiet look at those fellows and see if you don't find some excuse for what I thought."

"Bah! Beginning to croak again."

"That I'm not," said Murray. "I only say have a look at them, especially at that fellow smoking."

"Wait a moment. I have focussed my eye upon that beauty getting his quid ready—disgusting!"

"Yes, it does look nasty," said Murray, with the corners of his lips turning up. "The regular Malay fashion. That fellow never came from these parts."

"Suppose not. Why can't the nasty wretch cut a quid off a bit of black twist tobacco like an ordinary British sailor?"

"Instead of taking a leaf out of his pouch," continued Murray, "smearing it with that mess of white lime paste out of his shell—"

"Putting a bit of broken betel nut inside—" said Roberts.

"Rolling it up together—" continued Murray.

"And popping the whole ball into his pretty mouth," said Roberts. "Bah! Look at his black teeth and the stained corners of his lips. Talk about a dirty habit! Our jacks are bad enough. Ugh!"

"I say, Dick," whispered Murray, as the Malay occupant of the boat realised the fact that he was being watched, and rolled his opal eyeballs round with a peculiar leer up at the two young officers.

"Now then," was the reply, "you promised that you wouldn't croak."

"To be sure. I only wanted to say that fellow looks a beauty."

"Beauty is only skin deep," said Roberts softly.

"And ugliness goes to the bone," whispered Murray, smiling. "Yes, he looks a nice fellow to be a cultivator of the indiarubber plant."

"Eh? Who said he was?" said Roberts sharply.

"His skipper. That's what they all are. Splendid workers too. Do more than regular niggers."

"Do more, no doubt," said Roberts thoughtfully. "But they certainly don't look like agricultural labourers. Why, they're a regular crew of all sorts."

"Irregular crew, you mean," said Murray. "That one to the left looks like an Arab."

"Yes, and the one asleep with his mouth open and the flies buzzing about him looks to me like a Krooboy. Well, upon my word, old Croaker, they do look—I say, do you see that blackest one?"

"Yes; and I've seen them before, you know."

"But he opened and shut his mouth just now. You didn't see that, did you?"

"Yes, I saw it; he has had his teeth filed like a saw."

"That's what I meant, and it makes him look like a crocodile when he gapes."

"Or a shark."

"Well," said Roberts, after a pause, "upon my word, Frank, they do look about as ugly a set of cut-throat scoundrels as ever I saw in my life."

"Right," said Murray eagerly. "Well, what do you say now?"

"That I should like to point out their peculiarities to the skipper and old Anderson, and tell them what we think. Go and ask them to come and look."

"I have already done so to Anderson."

"But you ought to do it to the skipper as well. Look here, go at once and fetch him here to look."

"While the American is with him? Thank you; I'd rather not."

"Do you mean that?"

"To be sure I do. What would he say to me?"

"Oh, he'd cut up rough, of course; but you wouldn't mind that in the cause of duty."

Murray laughed softly.

“Why, Dick, I can almost hear what he would say about my impudence to attempt to teach him his duty. No, thank you, my dear boy; if he and Anderson think it right to trust the American, why, it must be right. If you feel that the nature of these fellows ought to be pointed out, why, you go and do it.”

Roberts took another look at the lugger’s crew, and then shrugged his shoulders, just as the captain came on deck, followed by the American and the first lieutenant.

The American was talking away volubly, and every word of the conversation came plainly to the ears of the two lads.

“Of course, cyaptain, I’ll stop on board your craft if yew like, but I put it to yew, how am I going to play pilot and lead you in through the mouth if I stop here? I can sail my lugger easy enough, but I should get into a tarnation mess if I tried to con your big ship. Better let me lead in aboard my own craft, and you follow.”

“In the darkness of night?” said the captain.

“There ain’t no darkness to-night, mister. It’ll be full moon, and it’s morning pretty early—just soon enough for you to begin business at daybreak. I shall lead you right up to where the schooner’s lying, and then you’ll be ready to waken the skipper up by giving him a good round up with your big guns.”

“And what about the slaves?”

“Oh, you must fire high, sir, and then yew won’t touch them. High firing’s just what yew want so as to cripple his sails and leave him broken-winged like a shot bird on the water.”

The captain nodded, and the two midshipmen, after a glance at the first lieutenant, to see that he was listening attentively with half-closed eyes, gazed at the American again.

“Lookye here, mister,” he said, “yew must make no mistake over this job. If yew do, it’s going to be pretty bad for me, and instead of me being rid of a bad neighbour or two, and coming in for a long strip of rich rubber-growing land, I shall find myself dropped upon for letting on to him yewr craft; and I tell yew he’s a coon, this slave cyaptain, as won’t forgive anything of that kind. He’s just this sort of fellow. If he finds I’ve done him such an on-neighbourly act, he’ll just give his fellows a nod, and in less time than yew can wink there’ll be no rubber-grower anywhere above ground, for there’ll be a fine rich plantation to sell and no bidders, while this ’ere industrious enterprising party will be somewhere down the river, put aside into some hole in the bank to get nice and mellow by one of the crockydiles, who object to their meat being too fresh.”

“Ugh!” shuddered Roberts.

“Oh, that’s right enough, young squire,” said the man, turning upon him sharply. “I ain’t telling you no travellers’ tales. It’s all true enough. Wal, cyaptain, don’t you see the sense of what I am saying?”

“Yes, sir. But tell me this; do you guarantee that there are no shoals anywhere about the mouth of the river?”

“Shoals, no; sands, no, sir. All deep water without any bottom to speak of. But where you find it all deep mud yew can’t take no harm, sir. The river’s made its way right threw the forest, and the bank’s cut right straight down and up perpendicular like, while if *you* were to go ashore it would only be to send your jib boom right in among the trees and your cut-water against the soft muddy bank. Why, it’s mostly a hundred feet deep. Yew trust me, and yew’ll find plenty of room; but if yew don’t feel quite comf’table, if I was yew I’d just lie off for a bit while you send in one of your boats and Squire First Lieutenant there, to see what it’s like, and the sooner the better, for the sun’s getting low, and as I dessay yew know better than I can tell *yew*, it ain’t long after the sun sinks before it’s tidy dark. Now then, what do yew say? I’m ready as soon as yew are.”

“How long will it take us to get up to the chief’s town?”

“‘Bout till daylight to-morrow morn’, mister. That’s what I’m telling of yew.”

“Then it’s quite a big river?”

“Mighty big, sir.”

“And the current?”

“None at all hardly, mister. Yew’ll just ketch the night wind as blows off the sea, and that’ll take yew up as far as yew want to go. Then morrow mornin’ if yew’re done all yew want to do yew’ll have the land wind to take yew out to sea again. Though I’m thinking that yew won’t be able to do all yew want in one day, for there’s a lot of black folk to deal with, and I wouldn’t be in too great a hurry. Yew take my advice, cyaptain; do it well while yew’re about it, and yew won’t repent.”

“Never fear, sir,” said the captain sternly. “I shall do my work thoroughly. Now then, back into your lugger and show us the way. Mr Munday, take the second cutter and follow this American gentleman’s lead, and then stay alongside his boat while Mr Anderson comes back to report to me in the first cutter. You both have your instructions. Yes, Mr Roberts—Yes, Mr Murray,” continued the captain, in response to a couple of appealing looks; “you can accompany the two armed boats.”

Chapter Six.

Into the Mist.

Murray thought that the American screwed up his eyes in a peculiar way when he found that the two boats were to

go in advance of the sloop, but he had no opportunity for telling Roberts what he believed he had seen, while so busy a time followed and his attention was so much taken up that it was not till long afterwards that he recalled what he had noted.

The American, upon rejoining his lugger, sailed away at once with the two boats in close attendance and the sloop right behind, their pilot keeping along the dingy mangrove-covered shore and about half-a-mile distant, where no opening seemed visible; and so blank was the outlook that the first lieutenant had turned to his young companion to say in an angry whisper—

"I don't like this at all, Mr Murray." But the words were no sooner out of his mouth than to the surprise of both there was a sudden pressure upon the lugger's tiller, the little vessel swung round, and her cut-water pointed at once for the densely wooded shore, so that she glided along in a course diagonal to that which she had been pursuing.

"Why, what game is he playing now?" muttered the lieutenant. "There is no opening here. Yes, there is," he added, the next minute. "No wonder we passed it by. How curious! Ah, here comes the moon."

For as the great orb slowly rose and sent her horizontal rays over the sea in a wide path of light, she lit-up what at first sight seemed to be a narrow opening in the mangrove forest, but which rapidly spread out wider and wider, till as the three boats glided gently along, their sails well filled by the soft sea breeze, Murray gazed back, to see that the sloop was now following into what proved to be a wide estuary, shut off from seaward by what appeared now in the moonlight a long narrow strip of mangrove-covered shore.

"River," said the lieutenant decisively, "and a big one too. Now, Tom May, steady with the lead."

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the man, and he began to take soundings, one of the sailors in the second cutter receiving his orders and beginning to follow the example set.

Then there was a hail from the lugger.

"What game do you call this?"

"Soundings," replied the lieutenant gruffly.

"Twenty fathom for miles up, and you can go close inshore if *you* like. It's all alike."

"P'raps so," said the officer, "but my orders are to sound."

"Sound away, then," said the American sourly; "but do you want to be a week?" And he relapsed into silence, till about a couple of miles of the course of the wide river had been covered, sounding after sounding being taken, which proved the perfect truth of the American's words.

Then the two cutters closed up and there was a brief order given by the first lieutenant, which resulted in the second cutter beginning to make its way back to where the sloop lay in the mouth of the estuary.

"What yer doing now?" came from the lugger.

"Sending word to the sloop that there's plenty of water and that she may come on."

"Course she may, mister," grumbled the American. "Think I would ha' telled yew if it hedn't been all right? Yew Englishers are queer fish!"

"Yes," said the lieutenant quietly. "We like to feel our way cautiously in strange waters."

"Then I s'pose we may anchor now till your skipper comes? All right, then, on'y you're not going to get up alongside of the schooner this side of to-morrow morning, I tell yew."

"Very well, then, we must take the other side of her the next morning."

The American issued an order of his own in a sulky tone of voice, lowering his sails; and then there was a splash as a grapnel was dropped over the side.

"Hadn't yew better anchor?" he shouted good-humouredly now. "If yew don't yew'll go drifting backward pretty fast."

For answer the lieutenant gave the order to lower the grapnel, and following the light splash and the running out of the line came the announcement of the sailor in charge as he checked the falling rope—

"No bottom here."

"Takes a tidy long line here, mister," came in the American's sneering voice. "Guess your sloop's keel won't touch no bottom when she comes up."

The lieutenant made no reply save by hoisting sail again and running to and fro around and about the anchored lugger, so as to pass the time in taking soundings, all of which went to prove that the river flowed sluggishly seaward with so little variation in the depth that the soundings were perfectly unnecessary.

It was tedious work, and a couple of hours passed before, pale and spirit-like at first, the other cutter came into sight in the pale moonlight, followed by the sloop, when the American had the lugger's grapnel hauled up and ran his boat alongside of the first cutter.

"Look here," he said angrily, "yewr skipper's just making a fool of me, and I may as well run ashore to my plantation, for we shan't do no good to-night."

The man's words were repeated when the sloop came up, and a short discussion followed, which resulted in the captain changing his orders.

"The man's honest enough, Anderson," he said, "and I must trust him."

"What do you mean to do, then, sir?" said the first lieutenant, in a low tone.

"Let him pilot us to where the slaver lies."

"With the lead going all the time, sir?"

"Of course, Mr Anderson," said the captain shortly. "Do you think me mad?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied the chief officer. "Perhaps it will be best."

It proved to be best so far as the American's temper was concerned, for upon hearing the captain's decision, he took his place at the tiller of his lugger and led the way up the great river, followed by the stately sloop, whose lead as it was lowered from time to time told the same unvarying tale of deep water with a muddy bottom, while as the river's winding course altered slightly, the width as far as it could be made out by the night glasses gave at least a couple of miles to the shore on either hand.

From time to time the first cutter, in obedience to the captain's orders, ran forward from where she was sailing astern—the second cutter swinging now from the davits—crept up alongside of the lugger, and communicated with her skipper; and Murray's doubts grew more faint, for everything the American said sounded plausible.

The night was far spent when another of these visits was paid, and as the coxswain hooked on alongside of the lugger the American leaned over to speak to the lieutenant, but turned first to Murray. "Well, young mister," he said; "sleepy?"

"No, not at all," was the reply. "Good boy; that's right; but if your skipper hadn't been so tarnation 'spicious yew might have had a good snooze. Wall, lieutenant, I was just waiting to see you, and I didn't want to hail for fear our slave-hunting friend might be on his deck and hear us. Talk about your skipper being 'spicious, he's nothing to him. The way in which the sound of a shout travels along the top of the water here's just wonderful, and my hail might spyle the hull business."

"But we're not so near as that?" asked the lieutenant.

"Ain't we? But we jest are! See that there bit of a glimpse of the mountains straight below the moon?"

"Yes," said the lieutenant; "but I should have taken it for a cloud if you had not spoken."

"That's it," said the skipper; "that's where the river winds round at the foot, and the quieter yewr people keep now the better. Oh yes, yewr skipper has knocked all my calc'lations on the head, I can tell yew. That there sloop sails A1, and she's done much more than I 'spected."

"I'm glad of it," said the lieutenant, while Murray's spirits rose.

"So'm I," said the man, with a chuckle; "and now it's turned out all right I don't mind 'fessing."

"Confessing! What about?"

"Why, this here," said the man. "Your skipper had wasted so much time with his soundings and messing about that I says to myself that if I tried to see the business out our Portygee friend would see me mixed up with it all and take the alarm. Yewr sloop wouldn't get near him, for he'd run right up the river where you couldn't follow, and he'd wait his time till you'd gone away, and then come down upon me as an informer. D'you know what that would mean for me then?"

"Not exactly," replied the lieutenant, "but I can guess."

"Zackly," said the man, and he turned sharply upon Murray and made a significant gesture with one finger across his throat.

"Look here," said the lieutenant, "don't talk so much, my friend."

"That's just what I want yew to go and tell your skipper, mister. Tell him to give orders that his men are not to say a word above a whisper, for if it's ketched aboard the schooner our friend will be off."

"I will tell him," said the lieutenant; "but now tell me what you mean to do?"

"To do? Jest this; put your vessel just where she can lie low and send three or four boats to steal aboard the schooner and take her. Yew can do that easy, can't yew, without firing a shot?"

"Certainly," said the lieutenant; "and what about you?"

"Me? Get outer the way as fast as I can, I tell yew. I'm not a fighting man, and I've got to think of what might happen if you let the slaver slip. See?"

"Yes, I see," said the lieutenant; "but you need not be alarmed for yourself. Captain Kingsberry will take care that no harm shall befall you."

"Think so, mister?"

"I am sure so, my friend. But now tell me this; how soon do you think that you can lay us abreast of that schooner?"

"Jest when you like now, mister. What I've set down as being best is, say, about daybreak."

"Exactly; that will do."

"Jest what I said to myself. Daybreak's the time when everybody aboard will be fast asleep, for they don't carry on there like yew do aboard a man-o'-war with your keeping watch and that sort of thing."

"Of course not," said the officer. "Well, then, I may go and tell the captain what *you* say?"

"That's jest as yew like, mister. I should if it was me."

"Exactly. And you feel sure that you can keep your word?"

"Wish I was as sure of getting hold of that there piece o' territory, mister, and the nigger chief cleared away."

"Then you don't feel quite sure?" put in Murray.

"Course I don't, young officer. There's many a pick at a worm as turns out a miss, ain't there? How do I know that my Portygee neighbour mayn't slip off through your boats making too much of a row instead of creeping up quiet? You mean right, all of you, but I shan't feel sure till you've made a prisoner of that chap and scattered the nigger chief and his men where they'll be afraid to come back. Now then; you said something about talking too much. I'm going to shut up shop now and give my tongue a holiday till I've laid you where you can send your boats to do their work. But I say, just one word more, mister," said the man anxiously; and the lieutenant felt his hand tremble as he laid it upon his arm; "yew will be careful, won't yew?"

"Trust us," replied the lieutenant.

"That's what I'm a-doing; but jest you think. It puts me in mind of the boys and the frogs in your English moral story—what may be fun to yew may be death to me. Tell your skipper that he must take all the care he can."

"I will," said the lieutenant.

"But look here; perhaps I'd better come aboard and say a word to him. Don't you think I might?"

"No," was the reply.

"But what do yew say, young mister?"

"I say no too," replied Murray. "Your place is here aboard your lugger."

"Wall, I suppose you're right," half whimpered the man, "for we're getting tidy nigh now, and I don't want anything to go wrong through my chaps making a mistake. I'll chance it, so you'd best get aboard your vessel. Tell the skipper I shall do it just at daylight. Less than half-an-hour now. Then'll be the time."

"One moment," said Murray, as the lieutenant was about to give the order for the coxswain to unhook and let the cutter glide back to the sloop.

"Yes, mister; what is it?"

"What's that dull roaring sound?"

"Roaring sound? One of them howling baboon beasts in the woods perhaps. Calling its mates just before sunrise."

"No, no; I mean that—the sound of water."

"Oh, *that!*" said the man. "Yes, yew can hear it quite plain, and we're nigher than I thought. That's on my ground over yonder. Bit of a fall that slops over from the river and turns a little sugar-mill I've got. There, cast off and tell your skipper to look out and be smart. Less than half-an-hour I shall be taking yew round a big point there is here, and as soon as it's light enough when yew get round, yew'll be able to see the chief's huts and thatched barracks where he cages his blackbirds, while the schooner will be anchored out in front, waiting for you to have sailed away. Her skipper will be taken all on the hop. He'll never think of seeing you drop upon him."

"He'll never suspect that the way up the river will be found out?" said the lieutenant.

"That's it, mister; but you'll tell your skipper to be spry and careful, for if yew don't do it right it'll be death to me."

"I see," said the lieutenant rather hoarsely from excitement. "Now then, my man, cast off."

"One moment," said the American, and Murray saw him through the paling moonlight raise his hand as if to wipe his brow. "You quite understand, then? The river gives a big bend round to left, then another to the right, and then one more to the left, jest like a wriggling wum. Tell your skipper to follow me close so as to run by me as soon as he sees the schooner lying at anchor. She'll come into sight all at once from behind the trees like, and whatever you do, run close aboard and grapple her. Her skipper'll have no time to show fight if you do your work to rights. I'm all of a tremble about it, I tell yew, for it means so much to me. There; my work's jest about done, and I'm going to run for the shore out of the way. I don't want the Portygee to get so much as a sniff of me."

"Cast off," said the lieutenant; and as the cutter dropped back free, the lugger seemed to spring forward into faint mist, which began to show upon the broad surface of the great river, while the sloop glided up alongside, one of the men caught the rope that was heaved to them, and directly after Murray missed their pilot and his swift craft, for it was eclipsed by the *Seafowl* as she glided between, right in the lugger's wake.

Chapter Seven.

Trapped.

"Well, Mr Anderson," said the captain, as the latter briefly related the last sayings of the American, "that's all plain enough, and in a few minutes we ought to be alongside."

"Yes, sir, after following the windings of the river, or in other words following our guide, till we see the masts of the schooner above the trees." And the lieutenant stood anxiously watching the lugger, which seemed to have rapidly increased its distance. "I presume, sir, that we are all ready for action?"

"Of course we are, Mr Anderson," said the captain stiffly. "We shall keep on till we are pretty close, then run up into the wind, and you and Mr Munday will head the boarders. We shall take them so by surprise that there will be very little resistance. But I see no signs of the schooner's spars yet."

"No, sir, but we have to make another bend round yet."

"Yes, of course," said the captain, as he swept the river banks with his night glass.

"The river seems to fork here, though, sir," said the lieutenant anxiously.

"Humph! Yes; but I suppose it's all right, for the lugger keeps on. We must be on the correct course if we follow him."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Murray excitedly. "I caught sight of the masts of a vessel lying yonder."

"Eh? Where, Mr Murray?" said the captain, in a low voice full of excitement.

"Yonder, sir, about half a mile to starboard, beyond the trees on the bank."

"To be sure! Tall taper spars. I see, Mr Murray."

"But the sloop is running straight away to port, sir," said the lieutenant anxiously.

"Well, what of that, Mr Anderson? Did not the American tell you that we were to follow certain bends of the river?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Yes, sir, but!" said the captain, in an angry whisper. "Is this a time for raising butts? According to your own showing, the schooner was to be found at anchor in one of the bends where the black chief's town lay."

"Yes, sir, but I see no sign of any thatched huts."

"All in good time, Mr Anderson. We shall see the lugger swing round that next point directly, and then we shall be in full view of our prize."

The captain turned from his chief officer impatiently, and then in a low tone issued a few orders with respect to future proceedings, the master following out the instructions, while the two boarding parties, each armed and ready, stood waiting for the command which should launch them on board the now invisible slaver.

"Bah!" ejaculated the captain. "We are half-an-hour too late. We ought to be alongside now. Hang the fellow, Mr Anderson! Can he be taking us the right way round that point?"

"I hope so, sir, but I have my suspicions," replied the lieutenant anxiously.

"What, that he is playing us false?"

"No, sir, but that he has lost heart and is afraid to pilot us right to where the schooner lies."

"The scoundrel! If he has—" began the captain, sharing now in his subordinate's anxiety. "Oh, impossible! He must know better than we do. Ahoy, there!" he cried, speaking just loud enough for the lookout to hear. "Can you make out where the lugger is making for?"

"Ay, ay, sir! Bit of a creek yonder, right inshore."

"That's it, sir," cried the lieutenant excitedly; "he has taken fright. We must run round that bend yonder, keeping to mid-stream."

"Or anchor," exclaimed the captain sharply. "Why, confound it, man! The river forks here, and we are in a branch with a current running in another direction. Stand by there to lower the anchor!" he roared, "or we shall be ashore."

The order came too late, for as in obedience to order after order, the sloop's course was altered and her sails began to shiver, there was a preliminary shock as if bottom had been lightly touched, then a shiver which seemed to communicate itself upward from the deck through Murray's spine, and the next minute the *Seafowl* heeled over slightly as she seemed to cut her way onward into the soft mud, where she stuck fast with the fierce current into which they had run pressing hardly against her side as it raced swiftly by.

"Trapped!" said a voice from close to Murray's ear, and the young man turned swiftly from where he had been gazing over the side in the direction of the further shore, to encounter the first lieutenant's angry eyes. "Well, Mr Murray," he said bitterly, "where is that Yankee snake?"

"Just gliding in yonder among the trees, sir," cried the young man passionately. "I suspected him from the first."

"Well, Mr Anderson," said the captain, hurrying up, and as coolly as if nothing whatever was wrong, "either you or I have placed the sloop in about as unpleasant a position as it was possible to get. Now then, how about getting out of it?"

"We're on soft mud, sir," said the gentleman addressed.

"And with a falling tide, I'm afraid. There, get to work man, and see what can be done with an anchor to haul her upon a level keel before the position is worse, for we shall board no slaver to-day."

"Beg pardon, sir."

"What is it, Mr Murray?"

The midshipman pointed right aft, where the faint mist was floating away from where it hung about a mile away over the distant shore.

"Well, sir, why don't you speak?" cried the captain, now speaking angrily. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr Murray; another mist was in my eyes. That must be the course of the other fork of the river. I see it plainly now. We have been lured up here and run upon this muddy shoal in the belief that we shall never get off; and there goes our prize with her load of black unfortunates. Do you see her, Mr Anderson?"

"Too plainly, sir," said the chief officer sadly.

For it was now broad daylight and the swift-looking schooner was gliding along apparently through the trees which covered a narrow spit of land.

"Hah!" said the captain quietly. "Yes, that's it, Mr Anderson—our prize, and a beautiful morning for her to make her start for the West Indies. Bless that straightforward, timorous, modest American skipper! Do you know, Mr Anderson, I am strongly of opinion that he commands that craft and that he will find his way through some of the muddy creeks and channels of the mangrove forest back to where she will be waiting for him. Well, master, what do you think?" he continued, as that officer came up hurriedly. "Will the sloop lie over any further?"

"No, sir; that is stopped; but we are wedged in fast."

"So I suppose. Well, Mr Thomson, it does not mean a wreck?"

"No, no, sir, nor any damage as far as I can say."

"Damage, Mr Thomson," said the captain, smiling at him pleasantly; "but it does, man; damage to our reputation—mine—Mr Anderson's. But you were going to say something, to ask me some question."

"Yes, sir; about taking steps to get the sloop out of the bed in which she lies."

"Poor bird, yes; but you see no risk for the present?"

"Not the slightest, sir. The mud is so soft."

"Mud generally is, Mr Thomson," said the captain blandly. "Well, then, let her rest for a while. We are all tired after a long night's work. Pass the word to Mr Dempsey, and let him pipe all hands for breakfast. I want mine badly."

There was a faint cheer at this, followed by another, and then by one which Murray said was a regular "roarer."

"I say," he said to Roberts, "doesn't he take it splendidly!"

"Don't you make any mistake," replied that young gentleman. "He seems as cool as a cucumber, but he's boiling with rage, and if he had that Yankee here he'd hang him from the yard-arm as sure as he's his mother's son."

"And serve him right," said Murray bitterly.

"What's that, young gentlemen?" said the captain, turning upon them sharply, for he had noted what was going on and placed his own interpretation upon the conversation—"criticising your superiors?"

"No, sir," said Murray frankly; "we were talking about punishing the Yankee who tricked us into this."

"Gently, Mr Murray—gently, sir! You hot-blooded boys are in *too* great a hurry. Wait a bit. I dare say we shall have the pleasure of another interview with him; and, by the way, Mr Anderson, I think as we are so near, we might as well inspect the indiarubber plantations of our friend. We might see, too, if he has any more work-people of the same type as those who manned his galley."

"I'm afraid we should only find them on board the schooner, sir," said the chief officer bitterly.

"Exactly," said the captain; "but I wonder at you young gentlemen," he continued—"you with your sharp young brains allowing yourselves to be deceived as you were. Those fellows who formed the lugger's crew ought not to have hoodwinked you."

"They did me, sir," said Roberts, speaking out warmly, "but Murray, here, sir, was full of suspicion from the first."

Chapter Eight.

Amongst the Horrors.

The crew of the *Seafowl* had a busy day's work after a good refresher, during which officers and men had been discussing in low tones the way in which "the skipper," as they called him, had let himself be tricked by the Yankee. The younger men wanted to know what he could have been about, while the elder shook their heads sagely.

"Ah," more than one said, "it has always been the same since the revolution; these Yankees have been too much for us. There's something in the American air that sharpens their brains."

Then old Dempsey, the boatswain, who had heard pretty well all that the captain had said, chewed it over, digested it, and gave it voice as if it was something new, to first one knot of listeners and then another, ending with the two midshipmen.

"You see, Mr Murray, and you too, Mr Roberts, it was like this. That schooner had just started for the West Injies with a full load of niggers, when she sighted the *Seafowl* and knowed she was a king's ship looking after a prize."

"How could the Yankee skipper know that?" said Murray. "He could only get just a glimpse before we were hidden by the fog."

"Cut of the jib, sir—cut of the jib," said the old man. "What else could he think? 'Sides, Yankee slaving skippers have got consciences, same as other men."

"Rubbish, Mr Dempsey!" said Roberts contemptuously.

"Course they are, sir—worst of rubbish, as you say, but there's bad consciences as well as good consciences, and a chap like him, carrying on such work as his, must be always ready to see a king's ship in every vessel he sights. But well, young gentlemen, as I was a-saying, he sights us, and there was no chance for him with us close on his heels but dodgery."

"Dodgery, Mr Dempsey?" said Roberts.

"Yes, sir; Yankee tricks. Of course he couldn't fight, knowing as he did that it meant a few round shot 'twixt and 'tween wind and water, and the loss of his craft. So he says to himself, 'what's to be done?' and he plays us that trick. Sends his schooner up the river while he puts off in that there lugger and pretends to be a injy rubber grower. That ought to have been enough to set the skipper and Mr Anderson thinking something was wrong, but that's neither here nor there. He pretends that he was a highly respectable sort of fellow, when all the time he was a sorter human fox, and lures, as the captain calls it, our sloop into this sort of a branch of the big river where the current runs wrong way on because part of the waters of the great river discharges theirselves. And then what follows?"

"Why, we were carried by the strange current into the muddy shallow and nearly capsized, Mr Dempsey, while we had the satisfaction of seeing the slaver sail away with her crew," interposed Murray impatiently.

The grizzly-headed, red-faced old boatswain turned upon the lad with an offended air and said with dignity—

"If you'd only had a little patience, Mr Murray, I was going to tell you all that."

He grunted audibly as he walked away, and as soon as he was out of hearing Murray cried impatiently—

"What did he want to bore us with all that for? Tiresome old fogey! But I say, Dick, you take my advice—don't you get anywhere near the skipper if you can help it to-day. He took things very smoothly before breakfast, but you'll see now that he will be as savage as a bear with a sore head, as they say, and lead every one a terrible life."

"Oh, if you are going to deal out old saws, young man," replied Roberts, "you go and teach your grandmother how to suck eggs. Just as if I was likely to go near him until he has got the sloop well afloat!"

But what proved to have been every one's opinion turned out entirely wrong, for the captain had never shown himself to better advantage.

As soon as breakfast was over, and had been partaken of in the most deliberate way as far as he was concerned, he turned to the officers, all smiles, and began giving orders in the coolest of fashions and all guided by so much judgment that by carefully laying out anchors, the use of the capstan, haulage, and taking advantage of the wind, the sloop soon rose upon an even keel and rested at last in a safe position. The tide that ran up as far as the black king's city did the rest, and the next day the sloop lay at anchor just where the schooner had been the previous morning, that is to say, in a position where she could easily gain access to the sea.

Once the sloop was in safety and the officers had pretty well mastered the intricacies of the river's course, and the tidal and other currents which protected the slaver's lair, a couple of armed boats pulled ashore to examine the place with caution, lest they should encounter some other trap.

"There's no knowing, Mr Anderson," said the captain, "so at the slightest sign of danger draw back. I don't want a man to be even wounded at the expense of capturing a score of the black scum, even if one of them proves to be the king."

The captain's orders were carefully carried out, while once more the two midshipmen succeeded in accompanying the landing parties, to find that the king's town of palm-thatched hovels was completely deserted. It had evidently been a busy, thickly inhabited place, where prisoners were herded together by the brutal savages who made incursions in different directions, and held their unfortunate captives ready for the coming of the slaver. But now the place was a dreary silent waste, and the trail well marked showed plainly the direction taken by the native marauders to some forest stronghold, near at hand or far distant, it was impossible to say which.

"Pah!" ejaculated Murray, as he sprang back with disgust from the strongly palisaded enclosure which was evidently the prisoners' barracks. "Let's get away, Dick."

"I'm ready," was the reply, "but I say, did you go round the other side yonder?"

The lad pointed as he spoke.

"No. What was there to see?"

"Tom May found it out," replied the midshipman, "and I was idiot enough to go. Here, Tom," he cried, signing to the generally amiable-looking sailor to approach; and he strode up, cutlass in hand, musket over his shoulder, scowling and fierce of aspect. "Tell Mr Murray what you showed me over yonder, Tom."

The man's face puckered up as he turned and met Murray's eyes.

"It's 'most too horrid, sir," he said, "and don't do no good but make a man savage, sir. There's just fourteen of 'em among the trees there."

"What, prisoners?" said Murray excitedly.

"Yes, sir, and six on 'em got the chains on 'em still."

"Well, what about the armourer?" cried Murray excitedly, turning upon Roberts. "Didn't Mr Anderson have them struck off?"

"No, lad," replied Roberts. "There was only one of them alive out of the whole fourteen, and I don't think she'll be alive when Munday comes back."

"Comes back! I didn't know he had put off again."

"Gone for the doctor," said Roberts. "Go on, Tom May. Tell him what you made it out to be."

"Just this, sir—that they'd got more than the schooner could take away, and they finished off the sick and wounded."

"How could you tell that?" said Murray, with a look of horror.

"Seemed pretty plain, sir. All the men had old wounds as well as what must have been given them to finish 'em yes'day morning, sir, when the black fellows forsook the place."

"But you said—finished the men who had old wounds?"

"Yes, sir; half healed. T'other wounds was fresh, and the women and children—"

"Women and children!" cried Murray excitedly.

"Yes, sir; knocked on the head—clubbed. Didn't care to take 'em away with them, sir, when we come."

"Oh, Dick," said Murray, whose face now looked ghastly, "I knew that there were horrors enough over the slave-trade, but I never thought it could be so bad as that. Here, Tom, where is this? Show me."

"Don't be a fool, old chap," whispered Roberts, grasping his companion's arm. "You've heard what Tom said. I've seen it too, and I could tell you, but I won't. It's too horrid to go and see again."

"Yes, it must be horrible," said the young man passionately; "but you said one poor creature was still alive?"

"Yes, and the doctor's being fetched."

"But something might be done—water—carried into the shade."

"We did all that, sir," said the sailor gruffly.

"Who did?" asked Murray excitedly.

"Well, I helped, sir, and the poor black lass looked at me as if she thought I was one of 'em going to take her aboard a slaver."

"But didn't you tell her—Oh, you are right, Dick; I am a fool! She couldn't have understood unless it was by our acts."

"Oh, don't you worry about that, Mr Murray, sir," said the man eagerly. "The poor thing took quite a turn like when I knelt down and held my waterbottle to her lips."

Murray stood looking at the man, with his brow furrowed, and then he nodded.

"Now then," he said, "where was this?"

"T'other side of this barrack place, sir," said the man; "just over yonder."

"Show me," said Murray abruptly.

"I wouldn't go, Frank," whispered Roberts.

"I must," was the reply. "Lead the way, Tom."

"One of our lads is with her, sir," said the man, hesitating.

"So much the better," cried Murray firmly. "You heard what I said?"

Roberts, who was nearest to the sailor, heard him heave a deep sigh as he gave his trousers a hitch, and led the way past the vile-smelling palm and bamboo erection which had quite lately been the prison of a large number of wretched beings, the captives made by the warlike tribe who kept up the supply of slaves for bartering to the miscreants. Those who from time to time sailed up the river to the king's town to carry on the hateful trade content if they could load up



TOM MAY TOOK AS ROUNDABOUT A ROUTE AS HE COULD CONTRIVE, SO AS TO SPARE THE YOUNG OFFICERS THE GRUESOME SIGHTS.

Hunting the Skipper.

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with a terrible cargo and succeed in getting alive to their destination in one of the plantation islands, or on the mainland.

one-half of the wretched captives

Tom May took as roundabout a route as he could contrive so as to spare the young officers the gruesome sights that he and the other men had encountered; but enough was left to make Murray wince again and again.

"Why, Tom," he exclaimed at last, "no punishment could be too bad for the wretches who are answerable for all this."

"That's what me and my messmates have been saying, sir; and of course it's going to be a nasty job, but we're all ready and waiting for our officers to give the word—Course I mean, sir, as soon as we get the chance."

"Only wait, my lad," said Murray, through his set teeth.

"That's what we keep on doing, sir," said the man bitterly. "You see, it's pretty well all wait."

"The time will come, Tom."

"Yes, sir; course it will, and when it does—"

The man moistened the palm of his right hand, clapped it to the hilt of his re-sheathed cutlass, and half drew it from the scabbard. "My!" he ejaculated, and his eyes seemed to flash in the morning sunshine. "It's going to be a warm time for some of 'em. I shouldn't like to be in that Yankee gentleman's shoes, nor be wearing the boots of his men where they had 'em."

"Oh, but these people could not be such inhuman wretches," said Murray excitedly. "The murderous, atrocious treatment—the killing of those poor prisoners must be the act of the black chief and his men."

"Hope so, sir," said the sailor bluntly. "It's too black to be done by a white. But all the same, sir, if the white skipper didn't want his cargoes, the nigger king and his men wouldn't supply 'em; and here's the doctor come ashore, sir," added the man, in a whisper.

For the two parties met just at the edge of a clump of trees, within whose shade the unfortunate creature who had interested the midshipman in her fate was lying with one of the seamen standing by her head, his musket grounded and his crossed arms resting upon the muzzle.

"Ah, gentlemen, you here!" said the doctor, nodding shortly. "Nice place, this. Humph!" he ejaculated, as with brows contracting he went down on one knee.—"There, don't be frightened, my lass," he continued softly, for as he drew near, the poor creature, who had been lying in the shade with her eyes half-closed, startled by the footsteps, suddenly raised her lids in a wild stare of horror and shrank away. "Poor wretch!" continued the doctor. "The sight of a man can only mean horrors for her."

"Horrors indeed, doctor," cried Murray excitedly; "but pray do something for her!"

"No," said the doctor gravely. "Nature is her doctor now."

"What do you mean?" said the young man, half annoyed by the doctor's inaction.

"That she is in the hands of a kinder doctor than I could be—one who knows what is best for her. Look!"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Let your men cut a few of those big leaves, Mr Murray, and lay over her."

"You are too late?" said Roberts excitedly.

"Yes, my dear boy," replied the doctor. "With such hurts as the poor girl had received it was only a matter of time. Ah, I wish to goodness we had caught that schooner! It's time all this was stamped out. There, come away and bring your men. Oh, here comes Mr Anderson. Well, what are you going to do?" For the first lieutenant came up, followed by some of his men, glanced at the motionless figure and the action being taken, and turned away.

"What am I going to do?" he replied, frowning angrily. "Nothing but communicate with the captain for fresh instructions."

"But aren't we going to pursue the black chief and his people through the forest, sir, and punish them?" asked Murray, who was strangely moved by his first encounter with the horrors of a slave encampment.

"No, Mr Murray, we certainly are not," replied the lieutenant, "for the chief and his men will take plenty of care that we do not overtake them. Here, come away, my lads; this place is pestiferous enough to lay every one down with fever."

"Yes; I was just going to give you a very broad hint. Fire, eh?" said the doctor.

The lieutenant nodded.

"I must just have a word or two with the captain first," said the lieutenant, and giving the order, the men began to march to where the boats lay with their keepers, and a sentry or two had been thrown out to guard against surprise.

Murray closed up to the doctor, who was looking sharply about him at the trees which remained standing amongst the almost countless huts.

"Not many cocoanuts, Murray," he said.

"Oh," cried the young man, who felt more annoyed by the doctor's indifference than ever, "I was not thinking about palm-trees!"

"But I was," said the doctor; "they'll burn tremendously."

"Ah," cried the midshipman, "that was what I wanted to speak about. Did you mean to suggest that the place should be burned?"

"Certainly, sir," said the doctor shortly.

"The village—but with the slave barrack?"

"Of course," said the doctor shortly. "Don't you think it would be best?"

"I—Oh! It seems so horrible," began Murray.

The doctor looked at him searchingly, and laid his hand upon the youth's shoulder.

"I understand, Murray," he said quietly. "It does seem as you say repugnant; but it is necessary, my lad, for several reasons, one of the first of which is that it will be a lesson for the black king."

"But he could soon have another village built."

"Then we ought to come and burn that, and his people with him, if we could get hold of the wretches. I'm sure you must have seen enough this morning to make you feel how necessary it is for this slave traffic to be stamped out."

"Yes, of course," said Murray, "but—"

"Then take my advice, my lad," said the doctor, gripping the lad's arm; "leave these matters to your superior officers, and don't look at me as if I were a heartless brute. My profession makes me firm, my lad, not unfeeling."

"Oh, I don't think that, sir," said the lad quickly.

"But you thought something of the kind, Murray, my lad, and I like you, so it hurt me a little. You ought to have known that black and white, good and bad, are all one to a doctor. He sees only a patient, whatever they may be. But in this case I saw that this poor black woman was at almost her last gasp. Understand?"

"Yes, I see now, sir, and I beg your pardon," said the midshipman.

"We understand one another, Murray, and—Ah, here is the first luff doing just what I wanted him to do."

For that officer had gathered his men together in the shade of a clump of trees where the moving branches blew from off the river in a breeze that was untainted by the miasma of the marshy ground and the horrors of the village, for it brought with it the odour of the floating seaweed and old ocean's health-giving salts.

By this time one of the boats was despatched, and the lieutenant joined the pair.

“Ah, Mr Murray, you have lost your chance. I was going to send you to the captain for instructions, but you were busy with the doctor, so I sent Mr Roberts.—Giving him a lecture on the preservation of health, doctor?”

“Just a few hints,” said that gentleman, smiling. “We were taking opposite views, but I think Murray agrees with me now.”

Chapter Nine.

“Fire! Fire!”

“Now, Mr Murray,” said the lieutenant, “I don’t want to expose the lads to more of this unwholesome place than I can help, so you must use your brains as soon as we get word from the captain, and see that they start the fire where it will have the best effect. This abomination must disappear from the face of the earth, so where you begin to burn, start your fire well. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Murray, drawing a deep breath as he glanced at the doctor and found that he was watching him.

“I can’t help it,” he said to himself, as he stood alone in the shade watching the departing boat making for the sloop, “and I don’t know that I want to help it. It does seem a horrible thing to do, but they’re right, and it’s one’s duty. Wish I’d been handy, though, when the first luff wanted to send his message to the captain. Dick Roberts does somehow seem to get all the luck.”

It was just a dash of envy; but the feeling did not last, for his common sense began to make itself felt directly after, as he withdrew his gaze from the boat to watch the group of sturdy-looking men sharing his shelter, and all excited and eager as they discussed the events of the morning and the task they evidently knew that they had to do.

“Yes, it’s all envy, and envy is a poor, small, contemptible thing to encourage. I wish I had none. How stupid of me! One never knows. It would have been nice enough to sit back holding the lines and steering while the lads pulled, but only a lazy sort of a task, and here I am put in command of half-a-dozen or so of these stout lads to carry out the captain’s orders and see that they do the work well.”

Perhaps the fact of his thinking about the men and the work in prospect made him fix his eyes upon Tom May and think that he would like to have him in his party; perhaps not, but all the same the man turned his head just then and met his eyes, gave his waistband a hitch in front and rear, and then crossed a patch of sunshine and joined him in the shade.

“Yes, sir?” he said enquiringly.

“I did not call, Tom.”

“No, sir, but I thought you looked as if you was signalling me. Beg pardon, sir; I s’pose you know we’re going to burn out this here wasp nest?”

“I expect so, Tom.”

“Yes, sir, that’s so, and the lads are getting so hot to begin that we all feel warm enough to set fire to the place without matches.”

“Well, it is hot, Tom,” said Murray, smiling, while the man showed his big white teeth in a broad grin.

“I expeck we shall be ’vided into squads, sir, and there’s about half-a-dozen of my messmates will fall nat’ral along o’ me. Couldn’t manage, I s’pose, sir, to have us under your command, could you?”

“I don’t know, Tom,” replied the young man. “You’ll see that Mr Anderson will settle all that.”

“Yes, sir; I know, sir; but I thought p’raps that if you happened to be standing along with us just as if you and us was ready for a start, it might happen as the first luff, sir, would see as it was all sootable like. They’re a handy lot, so I promise you, and used to work with me.”

“Oh, I know all about that, Tom, and I should be glad to have you.”

“Thankye, sir; and you’ll try, sir?”

“I will, Tom.”

“Thankye again, sir, and I’ll tell the lads.”

“I make no promise, mind,” said the midshipman.

“I know, sir; it’s all right, sir. It’ll be like this. Mr Munday will take the lead, sir, with one lot; old Dempsey another; you the next, and then Mr Roberts, sir, and the first luff’ll be like tip-top of all. I shouldn’t wonder a bit, sir, if me and my squad falls to you.”

Murray never troubled himself to analyse whether it was accident or management, but somehow or other he found himself, soon after the return of the second cutter, in command of six of the best foremast men of the sloop’s crew, headed by Tom May, who bore a lighted ship’s lantern, while each man was provided with a bundle of dry, easily-igniting wood.

The men were drawn up and the first lieutenant gave his very brief instructions as to the way in which the fires were to be started, the officers in command being duly urged to exercise all care in making the conflagration thorough, while at the same time guarding against surprise.

"You see, gentlemen," said the lieutenant in conclusion, "we have not had a sight of one of the blacks, but we may be sure that they are in hiding not far away, ready to take advantage of any sign of weakness; and their spears are not very sharp, but are handled well and can be thrown a long way with good aim. In an ordinary way they would not risk our bullets, and certainly would not give our bayonets a chance, but I feel that the sight of their burning village will rouse them up, and hence an attack upon scattered men is very possible. I have *no* more to say but this; I want the village to be burned to ashes, and every man to get back to the boats unhurt."

The men cheered, and the next minute they had begun to open out till they were in line ready to advance, with the now briskly blowing wind, when a final order was given in the shape of a prolonged whistle from the boatswain, which was followed by the starting forward of the extended firing party with their freshly ignited torches blazing high.

"Bravo!" cried Murray excitedly, as he stood with Tom May behind ten of the bee-hive shaped palm-walled and thatched huts, which were so close together that five of his men were easily able to fire to right and left, Tom and another man musket-armed ready to cover them, and their young leader standing sword in one hand, the lantern in the other, well on the watch, and at the same time ready to supply fresh ignition to any of the rough torches which should become extinct.

"Bravo!" shouted Murray, for at the first start of his little party the torches were applied to the dry inflammable palm fabrics, and the flames sprang into fiery life at once. "Good, my lads—good! That's right," he cried. "Right down at the bottom. Couldn't be better."

For at the first application there was a hiss, then a fierce crackling sound, and the fire literally ran up from base to crown of the rounded edifice, which was soon roaring like a furnace.

"Hooray, boys!" cried Tom May. "Don't stop to save any of the best chayney or the niggers' silver spoons and forks. They belong to such a bad lot that we won't loot anything to save for prizes. And I say, that's it, going fine. Never mind getting a bit black with the smoke. It'll all wash off, and that's what these brutes of niggers can't do."

The men shouted in reply and roared with laughter at their messmates' sallies, as they hurried from hut to hut, every one blazing up as rapidly as if it had been sprinkled with resin.

Murray's idea was that they would be able to keep on steadily in a well-ordered line, firing hut after hut as they went; but in a very few minutes, in spite of discipline, he soon found that it would be impossible to follow out his instructions. Once the fire was started it roared up and leaped to the next hut or to those beyond it. The heat became insufferable, the smoke blinding, so that the men were confused and kept on starting back, coughing, sneezing, and now and then one was glad to stand stamping and rubbing his hair, singed and scorched by the darting tongues of flame.

"Hold together, my lads; hold together!" shouted Murray. "We must look to ourselves; the others will do the same; but keep on shouting so as to be in touch."

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried Tom May. "You hear, my lads?"

Half-heard shouts came back out of the smoke, but it soon became impossible to communicate with the men with anything like regularity, for the roar and crackle of the flames grew deafening, many of the bamboo posts exploding like muskets, and before long Murray had hard work to satisfy himself that the men were not using their pieces.

"That you, Tom May?" he cried, at last, as he became aware of a dimly seen figure emerging from the smoke.

"Not quite sure, sir," was the reply, "but I think it's me."

"Where are the lads?"

"Oh, they're here, sir, somewheres, only you can't see 'em. I've just been counting of 'em over, sir, by touching 'em one at a time and telling 'em to shout who it was."

"They're all safe, then?"

"Hope so, sir; but I wouldn't try to go no furdur, sir. Now the fire's started it's a-going on like furnaces, sir, and it's every man for himself. We can't do no more. Can't you feel how the wind's got up?"

"Yes, Tom; it comes rushing from seaward and whistles quite cold against the back of my head, while in front the glow is quite painful."

"Yes, sir, and it's growing worse and worse."

"It's my belief, Tom, that this wind will fan the flames till the forest will take fire before long as well as the huts."

"Fore long, sir?" said the man, in the intervals of coughing and choking. "Why, it's been on fire ever so long, and roaring away right up to the tops of the trees. We shall be hearing some of them come toppling down before long."

"I wish this smoke would blow over, for I can't make out where we are."

"No, sir, nor nobody else neither. Oh! Here's one of us, if it ain't a nigger. Here, who are you?"

"I'm Jenks, messmet, I think," came hoarsely. "But I say, where's the ofricer?"

"I'm here, Jenks," cried Murray. "What is it?"

"On'y this, sir; I just wanted to know whether fresh clothes'll be sarved out after this here job, for I'm sure as I shan't

be decent.”

“What, have you got your shirt burned, my lad?”

“Tarn’t on’y my shirt, sir; I’m ’most all tinder, and I had to back out or I should soon ha’ been cooked.”

“Keep back, my lads!” cried Murray now, and by degrees he managed to get his little party all together in what seemed to be an open space where all was smoke and smouldering ashes, where the men stood coughing, while the heat was terrific.

“Stand still, my lad; stand still!” cried Murray.

“Can’t, sir,” growled the dim figure addressed; “it smarts so.”

“Tut, tut, tut, tut!” ejaculated Murray. “Can you make out which way the sea lies, May?”

“No, sir; I’ve been a-trying to.”

“We can’t stay here, my lads, and we must make for the shore. It would be madness to go on now.”

“That’s a true word, sir,” growled Tom May.

“I want to know where our chaps are, but I can’t hear nothing but the fire going it. Seems to me as if we’ve set all Africa afire, and it’s going on a mile a minute.”

“Who knows where the slave barrack lies?” cried Murray. “It seems horrible, but we must make sure that the fire has caught there.”

“Seems to me, sir,” said one of the men, “that we’re a-standing in the middle of it here.”

“I know it ketched fire, sir,” said May.

“How can you be sure, man?” said Murray angrily, for he was smarting with pain, and forced to close the lids over his stinging eyes.

“Set it afire myself, sir, and the flames run up the bamboo postesses which set ’em snapping and crackling and going on popping and banging just as if the marine jollies was practising with blank cartridge on an exercise day.”

“But are you sure, Tom?”

“Sure as sure, sir. Mr Anderson never thought it would go like this here. He’d got a kind of idee that we should be able to light all the niggers’ huts one at a time, ’stead of which as soon as we started a few on ’em they set all the rest off, and the job was done.”

“Done, my man!” said Murray. “Why, hark at the roar right away yonder.”

“Oh, yes, sir,” grumbled the man; “I’m a-harking fast enough. There she goes, and as somebody said, I dunno now whether it was me or one of my messmates, we seem to ha’ set all Africa going, and it won’t stop till there’s no more wood to burn.”

“Well,” said Murray decisively, “one thing’s very plain: we can do no more, and we must make for the river.”

“But what about orders, sir?” said the man. “We was to do it thorough, and see as the whole blessed place was a-blazing.”

“Well, it is, my man,” said Murray. “The first lieutenant didn’t mean me to get my men burned as well.”

“Skeercely, sir,” said one of the men. “I don’t know how my messmates are, but I feel as if I was a bacon pig after killing time, and the singeing’s done.”

“Forward, then, and keep close, my lads. I think it looks lighter ahead there. Keep together.”

The midshipman started forward through the blinding smoke, panting and gasping, while at every step the hot ashes emitted sparks and the heat became more intense. But at the end of a score of painful paces a strong hand gripped him by the arm and a hoarse voice growled—

“Beg pardon, sir, but this here won’t do.”

“Right, May,” cried the midshipman. “I was just going to say so. Halt, my lads. Here, right wheel!”

Tramp, tramp, tramp, with the smoke and sparks rising; and the big sailor growled again in protest.

“Wuss and wuss, sir.”

“Yes.—Let’s try this way, my lads.”

“This here’s wusser still, your honour,” growled another of the men.

“Yes: it’s horrible,” cried Murray. “Halt! Now, all together, shout with me, ‘*Seafowl* ahoy!’”

The men shouted, and then again, three times, but elicited no reply, and the roar and crackle of the blazing forest

seemed to increase.

"Here, which of you can make out where the river lies?" cried Murray.

"Not me, sir," grumbled one of the men out of the stifling smoke, "or I'd soon be into it!"

"Here, once more. I don't think we have tried this way," cried Murray, almost in despair. "Look, Tom May, this does look a little lighter, doesn't it?—No," continued the lad huskily, and without waiting for the able-seaman's reply. "Here, try this way, for the flames seem to be mounting higher there. Keep up your pluck, my lads, and follow me. Are you all there?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the sailor. "We're all here, arn't we, messmates?"

"Ay, ay!" came in a deep growl.

"Then follow me close," said Murray. "Everything depends upon your keeping together."

"Oh, we'll keep together, sir," said May. "Won't we, messmates?"

"Ay, ay!" said another of the men. "But I don't quite like this here job."

"No, no, my lads; it's horrible for you," said Murray, as he tramped on, fighting with his despair.

"Tarn't wuss for us, sir, than it is for you," said Tom.

"Poor fellows!" thought the midshipman, and he ground his teeth with rage and pain. "But I ought to have led them better." Then aloud, as an idea struck him, "You, Tom, fire a shot upward, and then as he reloads, the next man fire, as I give orders. The others listen for the reply. Some of our fellows must hear the shots.—Halt!"

The men stood together in the deep gloom, for the smoke rose from around them in every direction.

Then, heard distinctly above the roar and crackle of the flames, came the clear sharp-sounding report of the seaman's musket.

"Number two make ready!" cried Murray, and then, "What's that?" For something passed them with a faint hiss, and as it seemed to the lad, stuck in the smoking earth.

"Spear, I think, sir," growled Tom May.

"Impossible! Piece of bamboo or palm fallen from above. Now then, Number Two—Fire!"

There was the sharp report, followed directly by another whishing sound and a thud in the earth.

"Spear it is," growled May.

"Ay, ay," said another of the party; "and I've got it too!"

"Hush! Silence there!" whispered Murray excitedly. "Not wounded, my lad?"

"Nay, sir," came in a subdued voice, "but it would have stuck in my shirt, on'y it was gone to tinder and wouldn't hold nowt. Here it is, though, sir—nigger's spear, and they can see us, though we can't see them."

"From which way did it come?"

"Way we're going, sir," said the man, in a muffled voice; and as he spoke once more came the whish of a well-thrown spear, making another of the men wince, and proving plainly from which direction the missile had come.

The imminence of the fresh danger made the little party forget their sufferings, and with the quickness of highly disciplined men, they were apt to obey the orders whispered sharply by the midshipman. They fell into line, made ready, and at the command given by their officer, six muskets flashed out, sending their bullets whizzing breast high through the smoke, out of which, as if crossing them, came as many spears, this time the deadly missiles being followed by a burst of savage yells.

"Load!" whispered Murray, as the yells were followed by a silence so strange and nerve-startling that the young officer felt his heart thump heavily against his breast.

Then, as the whistling of the air arose caused by the driving down of the cartridges, he bethought himself and uttered a hurried question—

"Any one hurt?"

"Yes, sir," came in Tom May's familiar voice; and the midshipman, new to the heart-stirring horrors of a real engagement, waited anxiously for the man's next words.

"None of us, sir," came after what seemed to be a long pause, "but some o' them got it bad and made 'em yell and run i'stead o' keeping on the slink."

"Hah!" ejaculated Murray, as he pressed his hand to his painfully throbbing breast. "I thought you meant—"

"Our lads, sir? Oh no; we're all right: the enemy, sir. That volley started 'em. I heard 'em rush off quite plain. Like us to give 'em another?"

Murray was silent as he stood straining his eyes and ears, to pierce the smoke and hear the *whish* of another spear.

"No," he said, at last, in a low tone full of relief, "waste of powder;" and then he started, and gave vent to a cry of joy. "Hear that, my lads?" For from some distance away to their left came a shout which meant in this peril-fraught position, help and the companionship of friends.

"Ay, ay, sir," cried Tom May.

"Shout, lads—shout!" cried Murray excitedly; and as a hearty *Ahoy!* rang out the lad winced, for he felt that he had given an order which would show the enemy once more where they were, and he once more strained his senses in the full expectation of the coming of another spear.

But he gave vent to his pent-up breath with a feeling of intense relief, as instead of the *whish* of a spear came another hearty "ahoy!" from certainly nearer at hand, followed by the tramp of feet and the crackling sound of charred wood.

"Where are you?" came directly after, in a well-known voice.

"Here, sir!" cried Murray. "Forward, my lads!" And the men followed him at the double.

"This way," cried the same voice. "That you, Mr Murray?"

"Yes, sir," replied the midshipman, halting his men in the smoke, feeling more than seeing that they were close up to their friends.

"All your men there?"

"Yes, sir. None hurt," replied the lad.

"That's good! Spears have begun to fly, for the enemy are creeping up through the smoke. You started the huts burning, of course?" he continued, after a pause.

"Yes, sir; burning everywhere."

"Exactly, Mr Murray. I think the work has been thoroughly done, and I am glad you found us, for I am getting to be at fault as to how to reach the shore. There, I can hear nothing of our friends, so you had better lead on. I suppose they have made for the boats."

"Lead on, sir?" faltered Murray.

"Yes, sir," cried the chief officer petulantly; "and don't repeat my words in that absurd way. Haven't we had enough of this stifling smoke?"

"But I thought you had come to help us, sir."

"To help you, sir? Why, weren't you firing to let us know the way out of this horrible furnace?"

"No, sir—at the blacks who were hemming us in and throwing their spears. Don't you know the way down to the boats?"

"No, my lad," cried the lieutenant angrily. "Tut, tut, tut! What a mess, to be sure!—Silence there! Listen.—Well," he continued, after some minutes, during which nothing but an occasional crack from some half-burned bamboo reached their ears. "There, we must give a shout or two. I don't know, though, Mr Murray; you said that the blacks had begun throwing their spears?"

"Yes, sir; so did you."

"Yes, Mr Murray, and if we begin shouting all together we shall be bringing them again."

"That's what I thought, sir."

"Well, what of that, sir?" cried the officer petulantly; and for the moment it seemed to the lad that his superior had caught the captain's irritating manner. "So would any sensible person. Here, I have it! Pass the word for Mr Dempsey. The boatswain's whistle will bring the stragglers all together."

"But Mr Dempsey is not with us," suggested Murray.

"Then where in the name of common sense is he, sir? He had his instructions—strict instructions to keep well in touch with the rest; and now in the emergency, just when he is wanted he is not to be found. Listen, all of you. Can you hear anything?"

There was plenty to hear, for the half-burned posts of the savage town or the fragments of the forest still kept up a pettillation, and flames flashed up here and there and emitted more smoke; but no one ventured to speak.

"Bah!" ejaculated the chief officer angrily. "We shall never get out of the smoky maze like this. Now then, all together, my lads, when I give the word; a good hearty shout; but every man make ready, and at the first spear thrown fire in the direction—fire low, mind—Who's that—Mr Murray?"

"Yes, sir," whispered the lad, who had suddenly laid a hand upon his officer's arm. "I fancy I can hear the rustling of steps away to the left, as if the enemy is creeping nearer."

"Fancy, of course, sir!" snapped out the officer. "Bare-footed savages are not likely to be stealing amongst these red-

hot ashes.”

Bang! and directly after *bang! bang!* The reports of three muskets rang out in a dull half-smothered way, followed by a piercing yell and a distinctly heard rush of feet. Then once more silence, which was broken by a low hail close at hand.

“Who’s that?” cried the lieutenant.

“May it is, sir,” responded that individual. “Here’s one on ’em, sir, as has got it.”

“Who is it?” whispered the lieutenant, accompanying his question with an ejaculation full of vexation.

“Oh, I dunno, your honour—Sambo or Nigger Dick, or Pompey, sir. But he’ll never answer to his name again. Here he is, spear and all.”

“One of the enemy whom you shot down?” said the lieutenant, in a tone full of relief.

“Not me shot him, sir, but one of my messmates.”

“Speak softly, my man,” said the lieutenant, “and be all ready to fire again. I’m afraid they’ve been creeping up all round.”

“Not all round, sir,” said the sailor, “but a whole lot on this side, and them three shots drifted them. There was a regular rush as soon as the lads opened fire.”

“Good,” said the lieutenant. “But they may be coming on again. Stand fast, my lads, ready to fire at the slightest sound. I don’t know how they can stand it, Mr Murray,” he added, “for I feel as if my boot soles are being burned through.—Yes: what were you going to say—that yours are as bad?”

“No, sir,” replied the lad excitedly; “I was going to suggest that the men who fired should stand fast.”

“Why, of course, my lad; but why?”

“Because, sir, they can tell the direction in which they fired, and know the way in which the enemy retreated.”

“Of course, sir; but what good will that do?”

“It ought to be the way in which their friends are gathered, and the opposite direction to that in which we ought to retreat.”

“Good, my lad,” said the lieutenant, clapping the lad on the shoulder. “You’ll make a smart officer some day. I should not have thought of that. It may prove to be the way towards the shore. We’ll draw off at once. Oh!” he added. “If a good sharp breeze would spring up, to drive off this smoke!”

“But wouldn’t it set the remains of the fire blazing up again, sir?”

“Here, Murray,” whispered the officer pettishly, “you’d better take command of the expedition. You are sharper than I am.”

“I beg your pardon, sir.”

“Not at all. I’m not so weak as to resent hearing a good suggestion. You are quite right, my lad. I only wonder that your brain keeps so clear in the horrible confusion this smoke brings on. Here, let’s put your suggestion into use. Where’s Tom May?”

“Here, sir.”

“Can you tell which way the enemy retreated?”

“For sartin. This here nigger’s lying on his back with his head pynted the way his party came from—shot right through his chesty; and there’s a spear, sir, sticking slahntindickler in the ashes as shows the way which it was thrown from. Both being from the same bearings seems to say, sir, as that’s the way the niggers would run.”

“Humph!” ejaculated the lieutenant thoughtfully. “Not quite sure, my man?”

“No, sir, but I heerd them seem to run same way, so I thought it was a bit likely, sir.”

“Likely enough for us to follow, my lad,” said the officer; “so lead off, and keep on in the direction you think that the shore will lie.”

“Can’t do that, sir,” said the man bluntly. “Only think, sir, as it will be farthest from where the enemy came.”

“Lead on,” said the officer shortly. “It’s the best thing for us now. Forward, my lads. You, Mr Murray, keep alongside of me. We’ll bring up the rear.”

The retreat began, with the midshipman nowise happy in his own mind, for he could not help feeling that after all they might be marching into fresh difficulties instead of towards safety; but before long, as they tramped on over the heated ashes, suffering badly, for they began to inhale more and more the heated dust thrown up by their men’s feet, they had something else to think of, for Murray suddenly caught hold of his officer’s arm to check him.

“Don’t, do that, my lad,” came in response. “It’s as dark as can be, and if we are left behind we shall be worse off than ever.”

"Yes, sir," whispered the midshipman; "but listen."

"I am listening, Mr Murray, and I can hear the crackling of the men's shoes as they trample up the burning embers. That's what you hear."

"Yes, sir, but something more."

"Eh? What?"

"Listen again, sir. Just stop for a moment."

The officer stopped short on the instant, and then caught the lad by the arm.

"Forward," he whispered, "and keep step with me. Close up to the men, and we'll halt, fall into line, give the brutes time to get within throwing distance for their spears, and then give them a volley. You are quite right, Mr Murray. Your ears are sharper than mine. We are followed, my lad, and if we hear their footsteps cease we must dash forward to put our movement into effect, for they will have halted to throw their weapons.—Yes, they are creeping after us quite fast now."

"Yes, sir; I can hear them quite plainly."

"Never mind so long as we don't feel them quite plainly, Murray, my lad," continued the officer, with a faint laugh. "I don't know how you feel, my boy, but I am suffering from a peculiar tickling sensation about the upper part of my spine. It is a sort of anticipation of the coming of a spear; and the worst of it is that we can't run, though I'll be bound to say you feel as if you would like to. Now, frankly, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," said the lad; "I'd give anything to run now, as fast as I could."

"That's honest, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant, in a low, eager whisper, and he squeezed his companion's arm. "But then, you see, we can't. That's the worst of being an officer, Murray, with all his responsibilities. If we were to run we should throw our men into confusion by causing a panic. If the officer shows the white feather his men will whisk it out directly, and, what is worse, they will never believe in him again, and that would not do, would it?"

"No, sir," said Murray quietly; "but I've got that tickling sensation in my back badly now."

"Of course you have, Murray, but not so bad as I have, I'm sure."

"Oh, I don't know, sir," said the lad, rather huskily.

"Better not talk, Mr Murray," said the first lieutenant; "the ashes are getting into your throat."

"Think it's that, sir?"

"Some of it, my boy. Well, no: it does not do for officers to be too sure. We'll say it is, though. Nasty sensation, however, that of feeling your enemies are waiting to hurl a spear through the air with such an aim that it will stick right into your back."

"Yes, sir; it's a horrible sensation."

"But we must put up with it, Murray," continued the lieutenant, "and be thankful that chance comes to our help."

"Chance, sir?"

"Yes: the savages may miss us, for we are on the move, and besides, it is very smoky and hard for them to take aim. These blacks have very sharp eyes, but I doubt whether they get more than a shadowy glimpse of us, even at the nearest. You see, we have not had a man hit as far as we know. But speaking seriously, Murray, my lad, I do think that we officers have the worst of it, and the men the best. We have to cover them and lead them, and a good officer would never think of setting his men to do anything we would not do ourselves. There, Mr Murray, I have finished my lecture upon an officer's duty, and I have only to add that I think you have behaved very well."

"Thankye, sir," said Murray drily; "but, begging your pardon, sir, what about you?"

"About me? Oh, I'm old and seasoned, my dear boy. And besides, I don't think that if we had been hit, a spear would kill."

"But it would make a very ugly wound, sir."

"Horrible, my boy, so let's hope none of our brave fellows will be giving the doctor a job. Now then, quick; double up to the lads, and we'll halt and fire, for the enemy are getting too close to be pleasant, and it's time that they had a check."

Chapter Ten.

Hard Times.

It was, quite, for the rustling behind seemed to be terribly near, and it was with a feeling of intense relief that the lad felt his arm pressed, and fell into step with his officer, who directly after cried "Halt!" in a low, stern voice, and formed his men in line, before giving the orders: "Make ready! Fire!"

Quite time, for spears and bullets crossed, the former in a curve, the latter direct, and drawing from the enemy yells

of mingled defiance, rage and pain.

"That's give it 'em, sir," whispered Tom May, who was close to Murray, and he made his rifle hiss as he rammed down a fresh cartridge.

"Any one hurt?" asked the lieutenant, in a low, eager tone.

"I got a spear a-sticking in me, sir," said one of the men, in the same subdued tone of voice, "but I can't say as it hurts."

"Let me see," said Murray excitedly, and he stepped to where the man was standing tugging at himself instead of following his comrades' example and reloading.

"Don't think you can see, sir! it's so smoky. Would you mind ketching hold here and giving a good pull?"

As the man spoke, the midshipman did as he was requested, so far as to take hold of the shaft of a spear. But there he stopped short, his imagination suggesting consequences to which he gave voice in a strangely unnatural tone.

"I daren't draw it out," he said. "It may be wrong to do so."

"But I can't march with a thing like that all wibble wobble at every step, sir."

"Then you must be helped, my lad," said Murray hastily. "If I draw it out the wound may burst out bleeding."

"Think so, sir?"

"Yes. You must be helped back till the doctor has seen to you."

"Here, what is it?" said a familiar voice out of the gloom.

"Titely has a spear through his shoulder, sir."

"Tut, tut, tut! Here, let me look."

"Oh, never mind me, sir," said the injured man; "it don't hurt much, on'y feels like a scratch; but it's orfly in the way."

"Who's this?" asked the lieutenant.

"Murray, sir."

"Let me see. Yes: right through, evidently."

"He wants it drawn out, sir," said the midshipman, and he was holding up the spear-shaft where he stood facing the injured man; "but it would be dangerous to meddle with it, wouldn't it, sir?"

"Yes, certainly," said the lieutenant. "He must be helped back. What's that?"

"More spears, sir," growled Tom May, as there was the whizz and thud of the missiles once more.

"Present! Fire!" said the lieutenant sharply; and a fresh volley was fired, with the result of a rush of feet being plainly heard from the enemy, now in full retreat.

"Keep silence, my lads," said the lieutenant, who had been waiting till the thudding of the ramrods came to an end and denoted that the little party was once more ready to deliver fire.

Silence ensued, save where Murray stood half supporting the wounded man.

"Here, give it a good pull, Mr Murray, sir," whispered the man. "I'll hold a couple o' plugs ready for you to stop the bleeding."

"No, no, my man; you must be patient," whispered Murray sympathetically.

"But I can't be patient, sir. You don't know what it means."

"Does it pain you so much?"

"No, sir; not so werry much. I can bear it well enough, but it makes me feel as if I'd got a skewer through me."

"Silence there," said the lieutenant.

"It's all very fine," muttered the man; and then, leaning towards Murray, "Say, sir, these here niggers on the coast are cannibals, aren't they?"

"Yes, some of them, I believe," whispered back the midshipman.

"Don't leave me behind, then," said the man softly, and he uttered a low chuckling laugh. "I don't want 'em to come upon me and find a fellow skewered and trussed ready for cooking."

"Can't you keep that man quiet, Mr Murray?" said the lieutenant angrily, and he came up to where the pair stood together. "It's like telling the enemy where to throw again, for they are wonderfully quick of hearing."

"I am trying, sir," whispered the midshipman, "but I wish you would place your hand here."

"Place your hand there, Mr Murray!" said the officer, in a voice full of vexation. "I have no time to feel the poor fellow's wound."

"But it isn't quite that, sir," said the lad. "I can't help thinking—"

"Think, then, sir, but don't bother me."

"I can't help it, sir," whispered the lad excitedly.

"What do you mean, Mr Murray?" said the officer, alarmed by the lad's excitement. "Don't say you are wounded too?"

"No, sir, and I don't think that Titely has got anything worse than a scratch."

"Eh?"

"Feel here, sir. The spear has gone right through the bandolier and his shirt from the front and gone out through the shirt and bandolier at the back, running all up a bit."

"Well, but what about the poor fellow's flesh and bone?" said the officer excitedly.

"I think it's only gone through the skin, sir."

"Yes, that's right," said the man. "I telled Mr Murray, sir, as I didn't think I should bleed much if he pulled the skewer out."

"We must wait for daylight, my lad—till the smoke lifts. Ah, what are you doing?"

"On'y wiggling the spear a little, sir," replied the man gruffly. "Just give a tug at it. Does hurt a bit. I seem to have teared some'at. There, I knowed it! You try, Mr Murray, sir; you can lift it like now, and—yes, that's it. I'm a-shoving it back'ards and for'ards, and it moves the cross-belt and my shirt, and nothing else."

"But, my good fellow—" began the officer.

"It's all right, sir. I've shoved my hand right under my shirt and over my shoulder. It's just bleeding a little, but—well, it's about the humbuggin'est humbug of a wound I ever knowed a chap to have. Here, Mr Murray sir, you ketch hold of my cross-belt fore and aft, and if his honour wouldn't mind giving the spear a haul through the belt I shall be as right as can be."

The two officers obeyed the man's request and stood holding spear and belt, but hesitated to proceed farther.

"That hurt, my lad?" said the lieutenant.

"Hurt, sir? Not a bit. On'y feels preciously in the way."

"Got hold tightly, Mr Murray?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, now then."

It took more than one good tug, but after the first tentative trial, which seemed to cause the man no suffering, the first lieutenant pulled hard, and at last drew the spear right through the two pierced portions of the tough buff leather.

"That's your sort, gentlemen," said the man. "Here, who's got my musket?"

"Steady, my lad," said the lieutenant. "Now, then, do you feel faint?"

"Orfle, sir, inside," said the man, "but I want a drink o' water worst."

"But are you in pain?" asked Murray.

"Smarts a bit, but it don't hardly bleed at all. I'm all right, sir, only tickles enough to make a chap a bit savage. Here, don't you worry about me, sir. I'm as fit as a fiddle, gentlemen, and I on'y want now to play the niggers such a toon as'll make them jump again."

"Hah!" ejaculated the lieutenant. "Only a bit of a false alarm, Mr Murray."

"Thankye, sir. Yes, that's right. Does me good to grip my musket again."

"Then try and use it, Titely," said the midshipman, "for here they come again.—Yes, May; we hear them."

The lieutenant's command was given directly after, and again a volley rang out, this time to check the enemy's advance and drive them back so thoroughly that the silence was once more intense; and as the party stood with strained ears, listening, Murray uttered an exclamation.

"What is it, Mr Murray?"

"Firing, sir. I heard shots."

"Are you sure?"

"I heard it too, sir," said the injured man.

"Attention there!" said the lieutenant sharply.

"One, two, and three from the left make ready. Present—Fire!"

The three shots rang out like one, and directly after they were replied to, the reports sounding faintly enough but perfectly distinguishable through the distance.

The lieutenant waited while twenty could be counted, and then ordered the men to fire again. This drew forth a reply, and so evidently from the same direction that the order was given for the party to march; but directly after the lieutenant called *Halt*, for from behind them and quite plainly from the direction they were leaving, came the deep-toned *thud* of a heavy gun.

Chapter Eleven.

"The Smoke's Lifting."

"Well done, *Seafowl!*" said the lieutenant, and the men gave a cheer which drew forth a "Silence!" from the officer.

"You're holloaing before you're out of the wood, my lads," he said. "Ah, there they go again—nearer too. Those must be Mr Munday's or Mr Dempsey's men. Halt, and stand fast, my lads. Let's give them a chance to join, and then we can retire together. No doubt, Mr Murray, about the direction we ought to take."

"No, sir," replied the midshipman, "and we are going to be quite out of our misery soon."

"What do you mean, my lad?"

"The smoke's lifting, sir."

"To be sure, my lad, it is. A cool breeze too—no—yes, that's from the same direction as the *Seafowl's* recall shot. If it had been from the forest we might have been stifled, after all."

The signals given from time to time resulted in those who had fired coming before long within hail, and the men who now joined proved to be a conjunction of the second lieutenant's and boatswain's, who had met after a long estrangement in the smoke, and without the loss of a man. Then, as the smoke was borne back by the now increasing sea breeze, the general retreat became less painful. They could breathe more freely, and see their way through the burned forest in the direction of the anchored sloop.

It was a terribly blackened and parched-up party, though, that struggled on over the still smoking and painfully heated earth. For they had no option, no choice of path. The forest that lay to left and right was too dense to be attempted. There were doubtless paths known to the natives, but they were invisible to the retreating force, which had to keep on its weary way over the widely stretching fire-devastated tract that but a few hours before had been for the most part mangrove thicket interspersed with palms. But the men trudged on with all the steady, stubborn determination of the British sailor, cheered now as they were by the sight of the great river right ahead, with the sloop of war well in view; and in place of bemoaning their fate or heeding their sufferings the scorched and hair-singed men were full of jocular remarks about each other's state.

One of the first things observable was the fact that to a man all save the officers were bare-headed, the men's straw hats having suffered early in the struggle against the flames, while the caps of the officers were in such dismal plight that it was questionable as to whether it was worth while to retain them.

Titely, the seaman who had been speared, was the butt of all his messmates, and the requests to him to show his wound were constant and all taken in good part; in fact, he seemed to revel in the joke.

But there was another side which he showed to his young officer as, cheering at intervals, the party began to near the river edge and get glimpses of the boats waiting with a well-armed party to take them off to the sloop.

"It's all werry fine, Mr Murray, sir," said Titely, "and I warn't going to flinch and holloa when one's poor mates wanted everything one could do to keep 'em in good heart; but I did get a good nick made in my shoulder, and the way it's been giving it to me all through this here red-hot march has been enough to make me sing out *chi-ike* like a trod-upon dog."

"My poor fellow!" whispered Murray sympathetically. "Then *you* are in great pain?"

"Well, yes, sir; pooty tidy."

"But—"

"Oh, don't you take no notice, sir. I ought to be carried."

"Yes, of course! Yes, I'll tell Mr Anderson."

"That you don't, sir! If you do I shall break down at once. Can't you see it's the boys' chaff as has kep' me going? Why, look at 'em, sir. Who's going to make a party of bearers? It's as much as the boys can do to carry themselves. No, no; I shall last out now till I can get a drink of cool, fresh water. All I've had lately has been as hot as rum."

"Hurray!" rang out again and again, and the poor fellows joined in the cheers, for they could see nothing but the welcome waiting for them, and feel nothing but the fact that they had gone to clear out the horrible hornets' nest with fire, and that the task had been splendidly done.

Chapter Twelve.

After the Lesson.

As the suffering party gathered together upon the river shore preparatory to embarking in the boats, Murray's first care was to see that A.B. Titely was placed where he could lie down and rest, and while looking after the poor fellow, and seeing that he was one of the first to be helped into the stern sheets of the first cutter, Roberts came up.

"Oh, I say!" he cried. "Who's that wounded?"

"Hallo! Who are you?" said his fellow middy sharply. "Don't disturb the poor fellow."

"Why, eh? Yes—no," cried Roberts, with a mock display of interest, "I was wondering where—well—it can't be! Why, Frank, you do look a pretty sweep! Hardly knew you. I say: is it you?"

"Is it I, indeed!" growled Murray. "You're a pretty fellow to try that on! Go and look at your face in the water if you can find a still pool. I might grin at you."

"Am I browned, then—scorched?"

"Are you scorched brown! No, you are scorched black! Where are your eyebrows? I say, Dick, those two little patches of hair in front of your ears that you believed were whiskers beginning to shoot—they're quite gone. No, not quite; there's a tiny bit left in front of your right ear."

The conscious lad clapped his hands up to the sides of his face.

"I say, not so bad as that, is it, Frank? No games; tell us the truth."

"Games? No, I'm too sore to be making game," cried Murray, and he gazed carefully at both sides of his messmate's cheeks. "You're scorched horribly, and the whisker shoots are all gone—No, there's about half of one left; and you'll have to shave that off, Dick, so as to balance the other bare place. No, no; it's all right; that's not hair, only a smudge of sooty cinder off your burnt cap. I say, you do look a beauty, Dick."

"Oh, I say!" groaned the youth, patting his tingling cheeks tenderly.—"Here, what are you grinning at, sir?" he cried, turning upon the wounded sailor angrily.

"Beg pardon, sir. Was I grinning?" said the sailor apologetically.

"Yes; and he can't help it, Dick. Don't be hard upon the poor fellow; he has had a spear through the top of his shoulder. But you do look an object! Enough to make a cat laugh, as they say."

"Well, I don't see that there's anything to laugh at."

"No, old fellow, because you can't see your face; but I say, you can see mine."

"Humph!" grunted Roberts sulkily, and his fingers stole up to pat the scorched portions of his face.

"Case of pot and kettle, eh, Dick?" said Murray, laughing, then pulling his face straight again as he winced with pain. "Oh, I say, don't make me grin at you again. It's just as if my skin was ready to crack all over. There, poor old chap, I'm sorry for you if you feel as bad as I do. But you began it."

"Beg pardon, then," grumbled Roberts.

"Granted. But I say, why doesn't Anderson hurry us all on board?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do," cried the midshipman excitedly. "The beggars—they must have quite escaped the fire! They're gathering together over yonder, hundreds of them, with spears. I believe they're going to make a rush. Fancy, after destroying the hornets' nest!"

"Then we shall have to kill the hornets," said Murray; and the two lads were among the first to answer to the boatswain's whistle, which now chirruped out loudly.

"Here we are, Mr Murray, sir," said Tom May, as the midshipman hurried up to his little party. "This is us, sir—your lot."

"Well, I know that," said the lad petulantly, as he winced with pain.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man. "Thought you might take us for the niggers, seeing what colour we are and how our clothes are tumbling off."

"Yes, we're black enough, Tom, but I hope you don't feel as I do," said his leader.

"Much of a muchness, sir," said the man, with a grin half of mischievous mirth, half of pain. "The first luff said something about hornets, sir. I don't know much about them insecks, but we chaps feel as if we'd been among their first cousins the wopses; eh, lads?"

"Ay, ay!" growled another of the men. "But aren't we soon going to have a chance to use our stings?"

At that moment the preliminary order rang out—an order which sent a thrill through the suffering band, making them forget everything in the opportunity about to be given them for retaliation upon the advancing body of warlike blacks

stealing cautiously forward from the shelter of a patch of mangroves away to the left, which had from its nearness to the margin escaped the flames.

"The savage brutes!" muttered Murray, as he drew his sword, and winced with pain.

"Hold your fire, Mr Murray," shouted the lieutenant. "Wait, my lads, till you see the whites of their eyes, and then let them have it sharply when you hear the word."

But the little volley from the midshipman's party of reserve was held longer, for the lieutenant's words had little more than passed his lips when there was a flash, followed by what resembled a ball of grey smoke from the *Seafowl* where she lay at anchor. Then almost instantaneously came the roar of one of the sloop's bow guns and her charge of canister shot tore through the sheltering bush-like trees, while a cheer burst from the shore party, discipline being forgotten in the excitement caused by what came as a surprise.

The heartily given cheer was followed by another puff of grey smoke, and the crack of shot through the sheltered trees, the effect being that the advancing party of the enemy was turned into a running crowd of fugitives scattering and running for their lives, leaving the boats' crews to embark quite unmolested, this last example of the white man's power proving a quite sufficient lesson for the native king.

Chapter Thirteen.

A Visit from the Hornets.

"Upon my word, Mr Anderson," said the captain, as he had the men drawn up before him as soon as they reached the *Seafowl*—"Upon my word, sir, I am delighted. I entrust you with a couple of boats' crews to carry out a necessary duty, and you bring me back a scorched-up detachment only fit to go into hospital."

"I beg pardon, sir," said the chief officer shortly; "only one man wounded, and his injury is very slight."

"Don't talk to me like that, sir!" cried the captain. "Look at them, sir—look at them!"

"I have been looking at them, sir, for long enough—poor fellows—and I am truly sorry to have brought them back in such a state."

"I should think you are, sir! Upon my word of honour I should think you are! But what have you been about?"

"Burning out the hornets' nest, sir," said the lieutenant bluffly.

"Well, I suppose you have done that thoroughly, Mr Anderson: but at what a cost! Is there to be no end to these misfortunes? First you allow yourself to be deluded by a slave-trading American and bring the *Seafowl* up here to be run aground, with the chance of becoming a total wreck—"

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Well, not total—perhaps not total, Mr Anderson; but she is in a terribly bad position."

"One from which you will easily set her at liberty."

"Fortunately for you, Mr Anderson; and that is to my credit, I think, not yours."

"Granted, sir," said the lieutenant; "but do you give me the credit of being tricked by the slave skipper?"

"Well, I suppose I must take my share, Mr Anderson; but don't you think it would be more creditable to dismiss these poor fellows at once and have them overhauled by the surgeon?"

"I do, sir, certainly," said the chief officer.

"Have them below, then, at once, and let Mr Reston do his best with them. Only one seriously wounded, you said?"

"No, sir; slightly."

"Good. But to think of the *Seafowl* being turned at one stroke into a hospital hulk.—You thoroughly destroyed the town and the slave barracks?"

"We completely burned out the wretched collection of palm and bamboo huts, sir, and the horrible barn and shambles where they keep their wretched captives. It was a place of horror, sir," said the lieutenant angrily. "If you had seen what we saw, sir, you would have felt that no punishment could be too great for the wretches."

"Humph! I suppose not, Mr Anderson. And that iniquitous Yankee scoundrel who has slipped through my fingers. But look here, Mr Anderson, I am going to find that wretch; and when I do—yes, when I do! He has had the laugh of me, and I was too easily deceived, Anderson; but I'm going to follow that fellow across the Atlantic to where he disposes of his unfortunate cargo. It's thousands of miles, perhaps, and a long pursuit maybe, but we're going to do it, sir, no matter what it costs, and I hope and believe that my officers and my poor brave fellows who have suffered what they have to-day will back me up and strain every nerve to bring the *Seafowl* alongside his schooner, going or coming. Hang him, Mr Anderson!—Ah, I did not mean to say that, sir; but hang him by all means if you can catch him. We'll give him the mercy he has dealt out to these poor unhappy creatures, and for the way in which my brave fellows have been scorched and singed I'm going to burn that schooner—or—well, no, I can't do that, for it must be a smart vessel, and my sturdy lads must have something in the way of prize money. Look at them, Mr Anderson; and look at those two! You don't mean to tell me that those are officers?"

He pointed at the two midshipmen so suddenly that they both started and turned to look at each other, then stared

at the captain again, and once more gazed at each other, puzzled, confused, angry and annoyed at their aspect, looking so comical that the captain's manner completely altered. He had been gazing at his young officers with an air of commiseration, and his tones spoke of the anger and annoyance he felt to see the state they were in; and then all was changed; he turned to the first lieutenant, whose eyes met his, and, unable to maintain his seriousness, he burst into a fit of laughter, in which he was joined by the chief officer. Then, pulling himself together, he snatched out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Bah!" he ejaculated. "Most unbecoming! I did not mean this, gentlemen; the matter is too serious. But for goodness' sake get below and make yourselves presentable. Mr Anderson, you ought not to have laughed. See to all the poor fellows, sir. The men must have fresh clothes served out, and all who are unfit for duty go into the sick bay."

Then, frowning severely, he turned sharply upon his heels and marched to the cabin door.

"Well," exclaimed the first lieutenant, "of all—'Mr Anderson, you ought not to have laughed!' Well, gentlemen," he cried angrily, as he turned upon the two young officers, "pray what do you find to laugh at? Is my face black?"

"No, sir," cried Murray, in a half-choking voice. "I beg your pardon, sir. It seemed so comic for the captain to turn upon you like that."

"Eh? Humph! Well, I suppose it was. I laughed too. Well, better laugh than cry over spilt milk. It's the excitement, I suppose, and what we have gone through. Now then, we had better go below and interview the doctor; but he will be busy over the lads for a long time before our turn comes."

"I believe the skipper's half-cracked," said Roberts, as the two lads went below to their quarters.

"Then I'd keep my opinions to myself, old fellow," grumbled Murray; and then as he seated himself upon a locker he uttered a low hissing sound suggestive of pain.

"Pooh! This is a free country—no, I don't mean that," cried Roberts, pulling himself up short. "I mean, every man has a right to his own opinions."

"Yes, but not to give them aboard a man-o'-war."

"Bah! We're not slaves. Haven't we come to suppress slavery?"

"I dare say we have," said Murray, "but you'd better not let the skipper know that you said he was a bit of a lunatic."

"Shall if I like. You won't be a sneak and tell. Why, it was ghastly to see him turn as he did. One minute he was speaking feelingly and letting us all see that he meant to spare no efforts about pursuing and punishing that Yankee skipper, and the next he was laughing like a hysterical school-girl."

"He couldn't help it, poor old boy," said Murray. "Old Anderson was just as bad, and we caught the infection and laughed too, and so did the men."

"Well, I can't see what there was to laugh at."

"That's the fun of it. But it is all through every one being so overstrung, I suppose. There, do leave off riddling about your cheeks."

"Who's fiddling, as you call it, about one's cheeks?"

"You were, and it's of no use; the miserable little bits of down are gone, and there's nothing for it but to wait till the hairs begin to grow again."

"Er-r-r!" growled Roberts angrily; and he raised his fingers to the singed spots involuntarily, and then snatched them down again, enraged by the smile which was beginning to pucker up his companion's face. "There you go again. You're worse than the skipper."

"Then don't make me laugh, for it hurts horribly."

"I'll make you laugh on the other side of your face directly."

"No don't—pray don't," sighed Murray; "for the skin there's stiffer, and I'm sure it will crack."

"You're cracked already."

"I think we must all have been, to get ourselves in such a mess, old fellow. But it was very brave, I suppose, and I don't believe any one but English sailors would have done what we did."

"Pooh! Any fools could have started those fires."

"Perhaps so. But what's the matter now?" For Roberts had raised his face from the water he was beginning to use, with an angry hiss.

"Try and bathe your face, and you'll soon know."

"Feel as if the skin was coming off? Well, we can't help it. Must get rid of the black. The skin will grow again. But I'm thinking of one's uniform. My jacket's like so much tinder."

A wash, a change, and a visit to the doctor ended with the sufferers being in comparative comfort, and the two lads stood and looked at each other.

"Hasn't improved our appearance, Dick," said Murray.

"No; but you must get the barber to touch you up. One side of your curly wig is singed right off, and the other's fairly long."

"I don't care," cried Murray carelessly. "I'm not going to bother about anything. Let's go on deck and see what they're about."

Roberts was quite willing, and the first man they encountered was the able-seaman Titely.

"Why, hallo!" cried Murray. "I expected you'd be in hospital."

"Me, sir! What for?"

"Your wound."

"That warn't a wound, sir; only a snick. The doctor put a couple o' stitches in it, and then he made a sorter star with strips o' stick-jack plaister. My belt got the worst of it, and jest look at my hair, sir. Sam Mason scissored off one side; the fire did the other. Looks nice and cool, don't it?"

The man took off his new straw hat and held his head first on one side and then the other for inspection.

"Why, you look like a Turk, Titely," said Murray.

"Yes, I do, sir, don't I? Old Sam Mason's clipping away still. The other chaps liked mine so that they wanted theirs done the same. It's prime, sir, for this here climate."

"But your wound?" said Roberts.

"Don't talk about it, sir, or I shall be put upon the sick list, and it's quite hot enough without a fellow being shut up below. Noo canvas trousis, sir. Look prime, don't they?"

"But, Titely," cried Murray, "surely you ought to be on the sick list?"

"I say, please don't say such a word," whispered the man, looking sharply round. "You'll be having the skipper and Mr Anderson hearing on you. I ain't no wuss than my messmates."

"No, I suppose not," said Roberts, "but—why, they seem to be all on deck."

"Course they are, sir," said the man, grinning. "There's nowt the matter with them but noo shirts and trousis, and they allers do chafe a bit."

Murray laughed.

"But you ought to be on the sick list."

"Oh, I say, sir, please don't! How would you young gentlemen like to be laid aside?"

"But what does the doctor say? Didn't he tell you that you ought to go into the sick bay?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, grinning; "but I gammoned him a bit."

"You cheated the doctor, sir!" said Roberts sternly.

"Well, sir, I didn't mean no harm," said the man, puckering up his face a little and wincing—"I only put it to him like this: said I should only fret if I went on the sick list, and lie there chewing more than was good for me."

"Well, and what did he say?"

"Told me I was a himpident scoundrel, sir, and that I was to go and see him every morning, and keep my left arm easy and not try to haul."

In fact, singeing, some ugly blisters, a certain number of hands that were bound up by the doctor, and a few orders as to their use—orders which proved to be forgotten at once—and a certain awkwardness of gait set down to the stiffness of the newly issued garments—those were all that were noticeable at the first glance round by the midshipmen, and apparently the whole crew were ready and fit to help in the efforts being made to get the sloop out of her unpleasant position in the mud of the giant river.

As for the men themselves, they were in the highest of spirits, and worked away hauling at cables and hoisting sail to such an extent that when the night wind came sweeping along the lower reaches of the river, the sloop careened over till it seemed as if she would dip her canvas in the swiftly flowing tide, but recovered almost to float upon an even keel. Twice more she lay over again, and then a hearty cheer rang out, for she rose after the last careen and then began to glide slowly out into deeper water, just as the captain gave orders for one of the bow guns to be fired.

"Why was that?" said Murray, who had been busy at his duties right aft. "Didn't you see?"

"No. Not to cheer up the men because we were out of the mud?"

"Tchah! No. The niggers were beginning to collect again ashore there by that patch of unburned forest."

"I didn't see."

"That doesn't matter," said Roberts sourly; "but the blacks did, and felt too, I expect. Anyhow, they sloped off, and now I suppose we shall do the same while our shoes are good, for the skipper won't be happy till we're out to sea again."

"Here, what now?" said Murray excitedly. "What does this mean?"

"This" meant cheering and excitement and the issuing of orders which made the deck a busy scene, for the men were beat to quarters ready to meet what promised to be a serious attack. For in the evening light quite a fleet of large canoes crowded with men could be seen coming round a bend of the river, the blades dipping regularly and throwing up the water that flashed in the last rays of the sinking sun, while from end to end the long canoes bristled with spears, and the deep tones of a war song rhythmically accompanied the dipping of the paddles.

"Why, they must be three or four hundred strong, Anderson," said the captain. "Fully that, sir."

"Poor wretches!" muttered the captain. "I thought we had given them lesson enough for one day."

"Only enough to set them astir for revenge," said the lieutenant.

"Well, the lesson must be repeated," said the captain, shrugging his shoulders. "See what a shot will do with that leading canoe. We have come upon a warlike tribe, brave enough, or they would not dare to attack a vessel like this."

Chapter Fourteen.

Dealing with a Fleet.

"I know what I should do," said Murray, as, forgetting the smarting and stiffness from which he suffered, he stood watching the savage fleet steadily gliding down stream.

"What?" said Roberts.

"Get out of the river as soon as I could. We could sail right away now."

"Cowardly," grumbled Roberts. "Why, it would be throwing away the chance of giving the wretches a severe lesson."

"They've had one," said Murray, "and if we sink half-a-dozen of them they'll be ready enough to come on again."

"Then we could sink some more. Why, if you sailed away they'd think we were afraid of them."

"Let them! We know better. It seems a bit horrible with our great power to begin sending grape and canister scattering amongst these slight canoes."

"Oh yes, horrible enough; but they must be taught that they can't be allowed to make war upon other tribes and sell their prisoners into slavery."

"I suppose so," said the lad, with a sigh, possibly due to the pain he still felt from the late fight with the flames.

"Look at that," whispered Roberts excitedly. "Why, the skipper seems to think as you do."

For orders were given, the capstan manned, and the sloop glided towards the anchor by which they now swung, the sails began to fill and help the men in their task, and soon after the anchor stock appeared above the water.

It was quite time, for the canoes were nearing fast, and to the two midshipmen it appeared as if the enemy would be alongside and swarming aboard before their vessel had time to gather way.

"Why don't we fire, Frank?" said Roberts excitedly.

"Because we're not in command," replied Murray coolly, as he tried to measure mentally the length of time it would take for the leading canoe to reach them, rapidly advancing as it was in obedience to the lusty strokes given by some thirty paddles which made the water foam on either side of the frail craft packed with men.

"But it's absurd. The skipper ought to have given the order long ago."

"And filled the surface with dead and dying men floating and struggling amongst the shattered pieces of the canoe?"

"Yes: why not? It's war, sir—war."

"But war when it is a necessity ought to be carried on in as humane a fashion as is possible."

"With people like this? Bah! Why, if they once get aboard they will spear us to a man, or batter our heads with their war clubs."

"They would if they could," said Murray quietly.

"They will, I tell you," said Roberts excitedly.

"No, they will not, old chap, for the skipper won't let them."

"Oh, you!" exclaimed Roberts, who stamped one foot down upon the deck in his excitement. "Why, you are as foolish as our officers."

"Speak gently, or some one will be hearing you," said Murray quietly.

"I want some one to hear me!" exclaimed the lad. "We are giving all our chances away."

"That we are not! I've been trying to calculate how we shall stand for distance when the *Seafowl* glides off on the other tack."

"So have I," cried Roberts furiously, "and it will be with the crews of two of those war canoes on board spearing and stabbing us."

"Indeed!" said Murray, in quite a drawl. "That doesn't agree with my calculation. I make it that they will be about fifty yards astern, and beyond spear-throwing distance."

"And I tell you that you are all wrong, Frank."

"Well, one of us is, old chap, for certain."

"You!" said Roberts emphatically. "No, I think not, old fellow. You see, too, that I have the skipper's opinion on my side."

"The skipper's opinion isn't worth a pinch of powder. He's a crack-brained lunatic. Here, what do you mean by that?"

"Only to turn my hand into a tompion to stop your fiery, foolish words, old fellow," replied Murray. "You'd look nice if any one carried your remarks to the captain."

"I'm only doing my duty, sir, and am trying to save our ship from the attack of these savages who are bearing down upon us."

"And setting your knowledge of navigation and the management of the *Seafowl* above that of the captain."

"I tell you I have lost faith in the skipper."

"Of the lieutenant—"

"He does not see our peril."

"And the wisdom of our old and experienced warrant officers," continued Murray.

"There," said the midshipman, "look at that! Not a shot fired, and those two leading canoes abreast of us. There'll be a massacre directly."

"Bravo!" whispered Murray excitedly. "Wonderfully done! You miserable old croaker, wasn't that splendid?"

A minute before, the lad who had remained cool and self-contained during what seemed to be a perilous time, had watched without comprehending the action of the forward guns' crews, who, in obedience to the orders given by the first lieutenant, seized upon the capstan bars and stood ready to starboard and port, waiting for something anticipated.

Then as the *Seafowl* answered to her helm and Roberts was turning frantic with excitement as he felt that the savages were bound to be aboard directly, the sloop careened over from the force of the breeze when her course was altered, there was a dull crashing sound and her stem cut one long war canoe in two amidships, leaving the halves gliding alongside in company with some fifty or sixty struggling and swimming naked savages, some of whom began to climb aboard by the stays, others by the fore chains; but as each fierce black head rose into sight, there was a tap given by a well-wielded capstan bar, and black after black dropped back into the water, to glide astern, stunned or struggling, to be picked up by his companions in the second boat, which was being overtaken by others, bristling with spears, while the vessel was a cable's length ahead and steadily increasing its speed.

"Now then, Dick, what about my calculation?" said Murray, giving his companion a poke in the side. "Pretty near, wasn't it?"

"Humph! Luck—chance," grumbled Roberts ill-humouredly.

"Of course! But wasn't the captain right?"

"No; he ought to have given the savage wretches another lesson."

"A bloodthirsty one," said Murray. "Pooh! Don't be such a savage, Dick."

"I'm not, sir," retorted the midshipman angrily. "What are our weapons of war for unless to use?"

"Oh yes; of course, when they are wanted. If I were a captain I shouldn't shrink for a minute about firing broadsides and sinking our enemies in times of necessity, any more than I should have minded burning out such a hornets' nest as that yonder; but the captain was quite right over this business. Look at the wretched creatures, regularly defeated."

"They've been allowed to escape, sir," said Roberts haughtily, "and I feel ashamed of our commander."

"I don't," said Murray, laughing. "I think he's a peculiar eccentric fellow, ready to say all kinds of unnecessary things; but he's as brave as a lion—braver, for I believe lions are precious cowards sometimes."

"Pooh!" ejaculated Roberts.

"And the more I know of him the better I like him."

"And I like him the less, and I shall never rest till I can get an exchange into another ship."

"I don't believe you," said Murray, laughing merrily.

"You don't! Why—"

"Pst! The skipper," whispered Murray.

For the captain had approached the two midshipmen, his spy-glass under his arm and his face puckered up with a good-humoured smile.

"Laughing at it, eh?" he said. "That was a novel evolution of war, young gentlemen, such as you never saw before, I'll be bound. There; we might have shattered up the noble black king's fleet and left the river red with what we did and the sharks continued afterwards, but my plan and the master's conning of the vessel answered all purposes, and left my powder magazine untouched ready for the time when we shall be straining every nerve, gentlemen, to overtake that Yankee's schooner. That's what we have to do, Mr Roberts; eh, Mr Murray?"

"Yes, sir; and the sooner the better," replied the latter.

"The sooner the better? Yes," said the captain, nodding; "and if we have to sink her that will be work more worthy for our metal. But patience, patience. Yes; for sailors like better work than sinking a few savage canoes. But, as I said, patience. You hot-blooded boys are always in such a hurry. All in good time. I'm not going to rest till I have got hold of my smooth, smiling Yankee, and I promise you a treat—some real fighting with his crew of brutal hounds. I'll sink his schooner, or lay the *Seafowl* alongside, and then—it will be risky but glorious, and you boys shall both of you, if you like, join the boarders. What do you say to that?"

The captain did not wait for an answer, but tucked his telescope more closely under his arm and marched aft, to stand gazing over the stern rail at the last of the war canoes, which disappeared directly in one of the river bends, while the sloop glided rapidly on towards the muddy river's mouth.

"Well, Dick, how do you feel now?" said Murray, smiling.

Roberts knit his brows into a fierce frown as if ready to resent any remark his messmate might make. But the genial, open, frank look which met his disarmed him of all annoyance, and he cleared his throat with a cough.

"Oh, I don't agree with him about the treatment of those blacks," he said. "There's a want of stern, noble justice about his running down that canoe."

"But it answered all purposes, Dick."

"Humph! Maybe; but it looked so small, especially when we had all our guns loaded and the men ready for action."

"Patience," said Murray merrily, taking up the captain's words. "Patience! You boys—hot-blooded boys are always in such a hurry. Wait a bit, old chap, and when we catch up to the Yankee we're to have a turn at the boarding. You'll have a try, eh?"

"Will I?" said the boy, screwing up his features and setting his teeth hard. "Will I! Yes!"

"Mean it?"

"Yes, I believe so," said Roberts thoughtfully. "I felt ready for anything when those war canoes were coming on, and I believe I should feel just the same if the lads were standing ready to board the schooner. But I don't know; perhaps I should be all of a squirm. I don't want to brag. It all depends. Those who make the most fuss, Frank, do the least. We shall see."

"Yes," said Murray, looking at his comrade with a curious, searching gaze; "we shall see."

Chapter Fifteen.

The Doctor is Riled.

It was with a peculiar feeling of relief that all on board the sloop passed out into the open and saw the dull green banks of the mangrove forest fading away astern. For there had been a haunting feeling of depression hanging over the vessel which seemed to affect the spirits of officers and men.

"Hah!" said the doctor, coming up to where the two middies were gazing over the stern rail, "that's a comfort, boys. I can breathe freely now."

"Yes," said Murray; "the air seems so much fresher and makes one feel more elastic, sir. Gives one more of an appetite."

"What!" said the doctor drily. "More of an appetite, eh? I never noticed that you two wanted that. Gracious, how much do you want to devour!"

"Oh, I say, doctor, I don't eat so much," said Murray, protesting.

"No, sir; it isn't *so* much; it's too much."

"You're mixing us up, doctor," said the lad mischievously, and he gave the professional gentleman a peculiarly meaning look. "You were thinking of Roberts."

"Here, what's that?" said the middy sharply. "I'm sure I never eat more than a fellow of my age and size should."

"Oh, I say, Dick," said Murray. "Hear him, doctor? Why, I've seen the mess steward open his eyes sometimes with wonder."

"Tchah! He's always opening his eyes with wonder, staring at everything. He's a regular idiot."

"Ah, well," said Murray, "I don't want to draw comparisons."

"Then don't do it," cried Roberts warmly.

"Don't be so peppery, my lad," said the doctor.

"Well, I don't want to be accused of gluttony or eating to excess."

"Pooh! Don't mind what he says," said the doctor good-humouredly. "I hate excess, but it does me good to see growing boys make a hearty meal."

"Frank Murray's too fond of bantering, doctor," said Roberts; and then, involuntarily passing a finger tenderly over the spots where the incipient bits of whisker had been singed off, "I don't quite look upon myself as a growing boy."

"Oh, don't you?" said the doctor, rather gruffly. "I should have thought you had not done putting on inches. There, never mind Murray's chaff. By the way, why do you keep shaving yourself down the cheeks with that finger? does the skin feel tender where you were so much scorched?"

"Yes, doctor, a little," replied the youth innocently enough.

"H'm, yes, but that cream I gave you does good, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes, doctor."

"Nasty scorching you fellows all had. I quite expected to have some bad patients—burns and spear wounds. Lucky escapes, all of you. That Titely was the worst, but the way in which a good healthy sailor's flesh heals up is wonderful. It's just like cutting into a piece of raw native indiarubber before it has been fooled about and manufactured up with brimstone—vulcanised, as they call it. You lads ought to bear it in mind, in case you get a cut or a chop. All that's wanted is to see that the wound is thoroughly clean and dry, and then squeeze the sides up together and the flesh adheres after the fashion of a clean cut in indiarubber. Ah, I like a good clean cut."

"What!" cried the lads together, as half laughingly they stared at the speaker in surprise.

"Well, what are you both looking at? I don't mean that I personally like cuts; but they're pleasant to get healed up—not like bullet wounds or ragged holes through a fellow."

"No," said Murray; "not like holes."

"Not that I mind a clean bullet hole through the flesh so long as it does not encounter a bone."

"Exactly, doctor; so long as it does not encounter a bone," said Murray drily.

"That's where the trouble begins, sir," said the doctor, smacking his lips and making the two middies exchange glances. "You see, you get a complicated fracture of the bone with tiny fragments that refuse to show where they are commencing irritation and that sort of thing."

"Yes, doctor," said Murray drily; "but aren't we getting into an uncomfortable discussion?"

"No, sir, a most interesting one; but when I spoke it was not all about injured bones or ordinary shot-holes or cuts; I was saying how glad I was to be out of that river and mangrove swamp where your West Coast fever haunts the low lands, and miasmatic emanations are always ready to pounce upon people and set up tasks for the hardest-worked man in the ship."

"To do what, doctor?" said Roberts.

"I thought I spoke very plainly, young gentleman; I said set up tasks for the hardest-worked man in the ship."

"But that sounds as if you—that is to say—I—I—You don't mean yourself, sir?" said Roberts, in a stammering, half-confused way.

"Not mean myself, sir?" said the doctor angrily. "Why, who else could I mean?"

"That's what puzzled me, sir," said Roberts, staring. "Frank Murray and I have always thought—"

"Here, I say," cried Murray, laughing and enjoying the verbal engagement that had sprung up like a squall in the tropics, "don't you begin dragging me into the discussion."

"Exactly! Certainly not," cried the doctor hotly. "If there is any need for it I can tackle Master Murray afterwards. I am dealing with you, sir. You gave me to understand that you did not consider I was the most hard-worked man in the ship."

"Very well then," cried Roberts warmly, "if you will have it that way, I don't."

"Oh! Indeed!" said the doctor angrily. "Then what about the last few days, when I am suddenly brought face to face with a score of wounded men, and with no one to help me but a surgeon's mate or dresser who is as stupid as men are made?"

"Wounded, sir?" said Roberts.

"Yes, sir, wounded. Burned, if you like it better. Singed and scorched. It all comes under the broad term of casualties, does it not?"

"I suppose so, sir," said Roberts sulkily.

"Better tell me that my services were not called for, and that you could all have done without me. I call what I have gone through hard work, and tell you, sir, that it was a time of great anxiety."

"So it must have been, doctor," put in Murray, "and I feel very grateful for the way you did away with my pain."

"There's a sneak!" cried Roberts angrily. "Who began to bully me for dragging him into the discussion?"

"You are the sneak, sir," said the doctor, "for trying to dodge out of the matter like this. Murray spoke out like a man."

"Boy," growled Roberts.

"Very well, sir; like a grateful boy, if that pleases you better. Like one who appreciates my service and is not ready to turn up his nose at what such fellows as you call 'doctor's stuff,' just as if a medical man or a surgeon thought of nothing but wasting the ship's stores upon those who are glad enough to come to them when they are out of sorts, and most often from their neglect of common sense precautions, or from over indulgence in the good things of life."

"Precious lot of chances we get to indulge in the good things of life on board ship!" said Roberts bitterly.

"Let me tell you, sir," said the doctor, shaking his finger at the midshipman, "that there is nothing better for a growing lad than the strict discipline and the enforced temperance and moderate living of shipboard. Better for you, though, if you had not so much idleness."

"Idleness, sir!" cried the lad.

"Yes, sir. You want more work. Ah! You may sneer. Perhaps not quite so much as I have to do, but more than you get. Yes, sir, when you know better you will learn to see that the doctor's life is a very arduous one."

"But you get lots of time, sir, for natural history and fishing and shooting."

"Not 'lots of time,' sir, as you term it, but some time certainly; and what is that but work in the cause of science? And look here, Mr Roberts, whenever I do get an opportunity for going ashore shooting or botanising, or have a boat out for fishing or dredging, do I not invariably enlist the services of you or Mr Murray?"

"Hear, hear!" cried the latter, in the most parliamentary way.

"Thank you, Mr Murray," said the doctor. "I shall not forget this."

"Don't you believe him, doctor," cried Roberts. "He doesn't mean it. He's only currying favour."

"Nothing of the kind, sir," said the doctor sharply. "I flatter myself that I understand Mr Murray better than you do, sir. I understand his temperament quite as well as I do yours, sir, which is atrabilious."

"Eh?" exclaimed Roberts. "What's that, sir?"

"Black bilious, sir, if you really don't know. I have studied your temperament, sir, and let me tell you that you would be doing very wisely if you came to me this evening for a little treatment."

"But I've only just got out of your hands, sir," cried the midshipman, in a voice full of protest.

"That was for the superficial trouble, sir, due to the scorching and singeing. Now it is plain to me that what you went through in that attack upon the blacks' town has stirred up the secretions of your liver."

"Oh, doctor, that it hasn't!" cried the lad. "And I'm sure that I want no physicking."

"I think I know best, sir. If you were in robust health there would be none of that display of irritability of temper that you evince. You as his messmate must have noticed this irritability, Mr Murray?"

"Constantly, sir," said that individual solemnly. "Oh you!" growled Roberts fiercely. "Just you wait!"

"There!" cried the doctor triumphantly. "You are proving the truth of my diagnosis, Mr Roberts. Come to me before night, and I will give you what you require. There, you have given me ample reason for strongly resenting your language, Mr Roberts, but now I fully realise the cause I shall pass it over. You require my services, sir, and that is enough."

"I don't require them, sir," cried the lad, boiling over with passion now. "I was hurt a good deal over the expedition, but now that's better; there's nothing whatever the matter with me; and you are taking advantage of your position and are about to force me to swallow a lot of your horrid stuff. I won't, though; see if I do!"

"You see, Mr Murray," said the doctor, smiling in a way which irritated one of his hearers almost beyond bearing, "he is proving all I have said to the full. There, be calm, Roberts, my dear boy; we have left the horrible river and coast behind, and a few days out upon the broad ocean will with my help soon clear away the unpleasant symptoms from which you have been suffering, and—"

"Not interfering, am I, doctor?" said a voice which made the two lads start round.

"Not in the least, Anderson; not in the least. Mr Roberts here is a trifle the worse for our run up that muddy river, but I shall soon put that right with our trip through the healthier portions of our globe."

"Through the healthier portions of the globe, doctor!" said the chief officer. "Why, what do you mean?"

"Mean? Only that the West Coast of Africa is about as horrible a station as unhappy man could be placed in by the powers that be, while now we are going where—"

"Why, doctor, you don't mean to say that you do not understand where we are going?"

"I mean to say I do know, sir—away from the swampy exhalations and black fevers of the horrible district where we have been cruising, and out upon the high seas."

"Yes, to cross them, doctor," said the lieutenant drily. "We are going to leave the black fevers behind, but in all probability to encounter the yellow."

"What!" cried the doctor. "I did not understand—"

"What the captain said? Well, I did, sir. The skipper has only just now been vowing to me that he will never rest until he has run down that slaver."

"Ah! Yes, I understand that," said the doctor. "Then that means—?"

"A long stern chase through the West Indian Islands, and perhaps in and out and along the coasts of the Southern American States—wherever, in fact, the plantations are worked by slaves whose supplies are kept up by traders such as the scoundrel who cheated us into a run up that river where his schooner was lying. Why, doctor, it seems to me that we are only going out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"Dear me, yes," said the doctor. "You are quite right. Then under these circumstances, Mr Roberts," he continued, turning sharply round upon the midshipman, "the sooner you commence your treatment the better."

"But really, sir," began Roberts, who looked so taken aback that his messmate had hard work to contain himself and master the outburst of laughter that was ready to explode.

"Don't argue, Mr Roberts," said the doctor importantly. "I do not know how you find him in your dealings, Anderson," he continued, "but as a patient I must say that of all the argumentative, self-willed young men I ever encountered Mr Roberts carries off the palm."

"Yes, he has a will of his own, my dear doctor," said the lieutenant, giving the middy a meaning glance, "but you must take him in hand. I prescribe my way; when you take him in hand next you must prescribe yours."

"I intend so doing," said the doctor, and he walked aft with the chief officer.

This was Frank Murray's opportunity, and hurrying to the side, he leaned his arms upon the bulwarks and laughed till his sides ached before his companion fully realised the fact, his attention having been taken up by the pair who were going towards where the captain was slowly pacing the deck with his hands behind him.

"Oh, grinning at it all, are you?" said Roberts now. "It's very funny, isn't it! An abominable, pragmatical, self-satisfied ass, that's what he is; and are we almost grown-up men to be handed over to be treated just as he pleases? No; I'll resign the service first. Yes, laugh away, my fine fellow! You see if I don't pay you out for this! Oh, go it! But you see if I take any of his beastly old stuff!"

Chapter Sixteen.

"Cold Pison."

Roberts kept his word that same evening, for just as the darkness was setting in and the two lads had walked forward to lean over the side and gaze down at the unruffled transparent sea and wonder which were reflections of the golden glory of the stars and which were the untold myriads of phosphorescent creatures that, as far down as eye could penetrate, spangled the limpid sea, the lad suddenly gave his companion a nudge with his elbow.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Murray.

"Look here, and I'll show you."

"Well, I'm looking; but it's too dark to see what you are fumbling over."

"How stupid! What a blind old bat you are! Well, it's a piece of plum duff."

"Why, you're like a school-boy," said Murray.

"Oh no, I'm not."

"You may say oh no you're not, but fancy me saving up a bit of cold pudding from dinner and bringing it out of my jacket pocket to eat!"

"Ah, but you have no reason for doing it. I have."

"What, are you going to use it as a bait?"

"That's it, my son; but I'm not going to use hook or line."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Throw it over for one of the sharks we saw cruising about before sundown."

"But what for? You don't want to pet sharks with cold pudding."

"No. Guess again."

"Stuff! Speak out."

"Poison—cold pison."

"What! Why, you would never see the brute that took it turn up in the darkness."

"Don't want to, my son," said the lad solemnly.

"Look here, Dick, it's too hot, to-night, and I'm too tired and sleepy to try and puzzle out your conundrums, so if you want me to understand what you're about you had better speak out. What a rum chap you are!"

"I am."

"One hour you're all a fellow could wish; the next you are red-hot to quarrel. See how you were this afternoon when the doctor was talking to you."

"Ah! I was out of temper then, but now I feel so happy that a child might play with me."

"Glad to hear it, but I don't want to be child-like, and I don't want to play."

"Perhaps not, but you'll be interested."

"Fire away, then. What has made you so happy?"

"I had an idea."

"Well, look sharp, or I shall fall asleep with my head resting on my arms."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Roberts. "You see that solid lump of pudding?"

"I told you before I can't see it."

"Feel it then."

"No, I'll be hanged if I do! Why should I feel a nasty piece of cold pudding?"

"Don't be so jolly particular; it's quite dry."

"Look here, Dick, are you going off your head?"

"I thought I was when the idea came, for it set me laughing so that I could not stop myself."

"Come, tell me what it all means, or I shall go below to my berth. What is there in all this?"

"Poison, I tell you."

"Yes, you told me before; but what does it mean?"

"You see that lump of pudding; well, there's poison in it."

"Dick Roberts, I'm hot and easily aggravated. If you go on like this I shall be as quarrelsome as you were this afternoon."

"Well, there, it was all my idea that I had this afternoon. I got that lump of pudding from the cook, took it down to my berth, pulled out my knife, put the box on the side of the pudding, and cut out a piece exactly the size of the box."

"Wh-a-a-t! You mean you cut a piece out of the box just the size of the pudding?"

"No, I don't, my son. You don't understand yet. Can't you see I'm talking about a pill-box?"

"Oh-h-h!"

"Now don't you see? I cut a hole in the pudding and slipped the box in, and then made a stopper of the pudding I had cut out, and corked up the hole with the box inside."

"I begin to see now," said Murray. "A pill-box full of poison to kill the shark that swallows the poison."

"I don't care whether it kills the fish or no as long as I get rid of the stuff."

"Now you are getting confused again. Why should you try to poison a shark like this? What good would it do—what

difference would one shark make out of the thousands which infest the sea?"

"Oh, Franky, what a Dummkopf you are, as the Germans say!"

"Don't care what the Germans say, and I dare say I am a stupid-head, for I can't make out what you are driving at."

"You can't? Why, I'm going to make the shark take the poison instead of taking it myself."

"But what poison?"

"Old Reston's: the two blue pills. Then I shall pitch the bottle of horrible draught overboard. I don't care what becomes of that so long as it sinks to the bottom."

"Oh, I see plainly enough now," said Murray.

"And pretty well time, my boy! Wasn't it a capital idea?"

"No," said Murray bluntly. "Stupid, I say."

"Not it, old chap. Don't you see that it is liver medicine?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, sharks have livers. They fish for them in the Mediterranean, take out the livers, and boil them down to sell for cod liver oil."

"Then that's a lie," said Murray. "Perhaps it's being a lie made you think of it."

"Why?"

"Because you'll have to tell the doctor a lie when he asks you if you took the medicine."

"But he won't ask."

"He will, for certain."

"How do you know? Did he ever ask you?"

"Well, no," said Murray thoughtfully; "I can't say that he did. He never gave me any, only touched me up a bit when I was hurt."

"Then don't you be so jolly knowing, my fine fellow," cried Roberts. "You can't tell if he hasn't doctored you, and I'm quite sure about it, for I know well from nasty experience of his ways that he will not bother one with questions as you think. He gives the fellows physic to take, and just asks them next day how they feel."

"Well, that's what I say," cried Murray triumphantly. "Isn't that just the same?"

"No, not a bit of it. He just asks them how they feel next day; that's all. He takes it for granted that they have swallowed his boluses and draughts. He'll ask me to-morrow how I feel, and I shall tell him I am all right."

"You'll tell him a lie then. Very honourable, upon my word!"

"Here's a pretty how-de-do, Mr Ultra-particular, with your bully bounce about telling a lie! I shan't do anything of the kind. I shall tell him I'm all right because I am quite well, thank you. Bother him and his horrible old stuff! I know I should be pretty mouldy and out of sorts if I took it. Let him ask the shark how he feels, if he gets the chance, for here it goes. Pudding first, which means pills—there!"

A faint splash followed a movement on the part of the midshipman, and Murray saw the calm sea agitated, and faint flashes of phosphorescent light appear, while directly after it was as if something made a rush; the depths grew ablaze with pale lambent cold fire, and Roberts gave vent to an ejaculation expressive of his delight.

"A shark for a shilling," he cried, "and a big one too. You see if he doesn't hang about the sloop and show himself in the morning, turning up his eyes on the lookout for whoever it was that tried to poison him."

"Turning up his eyes!" said Murray. "Nonsense! If it was as you say the shark would be turning up its white underparts and floating wrong way up."

"Maybe; but hold hard a minute; it's rather soon to exhibit the other dose, as old Reston calls it. I'm not going to make an exhibition of myself, though, this time, so here goes. You see if Jack Shark doesn't go for the bottle as soon as I throw it overboard. Here goes!" *Splash!*

"How stupid!" said Roberts. "I ought to have drawn the cork."

"Oh no," said Murray, laughing. "I don't suppose the directions said, to be taken in water."

"Um—no. But what's to be done? Look; he's got it."

For as the descent of the bottle Roberts had thrown in could be traced by the way in which the tiny phosphorescent creatures were disturbed, lower and lower through the deep water, there was another vivid flash made by some big fish as it gave a tremendous flourish with its tail, and the midshipman rubbed his hands with delight.

"He's got it, I'm sure," he cried. "But what's to be done? No use to pitch in a corkscrew."

"Not a bit, Dick," replied Murray cheerily.

"What a pity! I ought to have known better. He's got it, but the glass will stop the draught from having the proper effect."

"Oh no; perhaps not," said Murray, laughing. "I've read that sharks have wonderful digestions."

"Well, let's hope this one has. I shall like to look out for him to-morrow watching for the doctor, as he squints up from the wake of the sloop."

"More likely to be looking up for you, old fellow. The doctor didn't throw the bottle in."

"Oh, well, never mind that. I don't suppose the horrible beast knows the difference. I've got rid of the stuff, anyhow; that's all I care about; and nobody knows but you."

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," said a voice out of the darkness; "was you a-chucking anything overboard?"

There was a short time of silence, for Murray waited so as to give his messmate a chance to answer the question; but as the latter made no reply he took the duty upon himself.

"That you, Tom May?" he asked.

"Ay, ay, sir. Somebody chucked somethin' overboard twiced, and I was wondering whether it was you gents."

"Why?" said Roberts shortly. "Couldn't it have been one of the watch?"

"No, sir; they're aft, or t'other side of the ship."

"Well, it was, Tom."

"Oh, all right, sir. You'll 'scuse me asking? I only did 'cause the skipper's very partickler since one of the lads got making away with some of the ship's stores, and there's no knowing what mischief the boys might be up to. Then, o' course, sir, there's nothing for me to report to the officer of the watch?"

"No: nothing at all, Tom. Haven't got anything more to throw in, have you, Murray?"

"Not so much as a single pill," said Murray drily.

"Eh? No, of course not. The water's so still and clear, Tom," continued the middy hurriedly, "you can see the fish dash after anything, making the sea flash quite deep down."

"Oh yes, sir, I've seen that. It's the sharks, sir; there's often one hanging about right below the keel on the lookout for anything that may be chucked overboard. I believe, sir, as they've got sense enough to know that they may have a bit o' luck and have a chance at an onlucky chap as slips overboard or gets tempted into having a bathe. Wonderful cunning critters, sir, is sharks. I'm always glad when there's a hook with a bit o' pork trailed overboard and one's hauled aboard and cut up to see what he's got inside."

"What!" said Roberts excitedly. "Ripped up to see what's inside?"

"Yes, sir. Don't you remember that one we caught 'bout a month ago? Oh no, of course not. You was ashore with the skipper's gig at Seery Leony. That there was a whopper, sir, and he did lay about with his tail, till the cook had it off with a lucky chop of his meat axe. That quieted the beggar a bit, and give him a chance to open Mr Jack Shark up and see what he'd had for dinner lately."

"And did you find anything, Tom?" asked Roberts.

"Find anything, sir!" replied the man. "I should just think we did! I mean, the lads did, sir; I warn't going to mess myself up with the bloodthirsty varmint."

"Of course not," said Murray mischievously; "but what did they find? Anything bad?—Physic bottle, for instance? Bother! What are you doing, Roberts?" For his companion gave him a savage dig in the dark with his elbow. "Oh, nothing!"

"Physic bottle, sir?" continued the sailor wonderingly. "Not as I know on. More likely to ha' been an empty rum bottle. Wouldn't ha' been a full un," added the man, chuckling. "But I tell you what they did find, sir, and that was 'bout half-a-dozen o' them round brass wire rings as the black women wears on their arms and legs."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Roberts, with a shudder. "How horrible!"

"Yes, sir; that seemed to tell tales like. Looked as if Jack had ketched some poor black women swimming at the mouth o' one of the rivers as runs down into the sea."

"Possibly," said Murray.

"Yes, sir; that's it. I did hear once of a shark being caught with a jack knife inside him. It warn't no good, being all rusted up; but a jack knife it was, all the same, with a loop at the end o' the haft where some poor chap had got it hung round him by a lanyard—some poor lad who had fell overboard, and the shark had been waiting for him. You see, sir, such things as brass rings and jack knives wouldn't 'gest like, as the doctor calls it."

"No; suppose not," said Murray, who added, after drawing back a little out of the reach of Roberts's elbow, "and a

bottle of physic would not digest either."

"Not it, sir," replied the man, "unless it got broken, or the cork come out."

"Er-r-r!" growled Roberts, in quite a menacing tone.

"He wouldn't like it, o' course, sir," said the man, speaking as if he were playing into the midshipman's hand and chuckling the while. "Doctors' stuff arn't pleasant to take for human sailors, and I don't s'pose it would 'gree with sharks. I've been thinking, though, that I should like to shy a bottle o' rum overboard, corked up, say, with a bit o' the cook's duff. That would 'gest, and then he'd get the rum. Think it would kill him, sir?"

"No, I don't," said Murray. "Ask Mr Roberts what he thinks. He's very clever over such things as that; eh, Roberts?"

"Oh, stuff!" cried the middy. "Nonsense!"

"You might tell him what you think, though," said Murray. "You know how fond you are of making experiments."

"Do talk sense," cried the lad petulantly. "Look here, May, I think it would be a great waste of useful stores to do such a thing."

"Yes, sir; so do I," said the man; "and that's talking sense, and no mistake. Beg pardon, gentlemen, but what do you think of the skipper's ideas?"

"What about?" asked Murray sharply. "We don't canvass what our officers plan to do."

"Don't know about canvassing them, sir," said the man, "but I meant no harm, only we've been talking it over a deal in the forc'sle, and we should like to know whether the captain means to give up trying after the slave skipper."

"No, certainly not."

"That's right, sir," said the man eagerly. "Glad on it. But it's got about that we was sailing away from the coast here, which is such a likely spot for dropping upon him."

"Well, I don't mind answering you about that, Tom. Mind, I don't want my name to be given as an authority, but I believe that Captain Kingsberry means to cross to the western shores and search every likely port for that schooner, and what is more, to search until he finds where she is."

"Hah!" ejaculated the sailor. "If the skipper has said that, sir, he has spoken out like a man. Hooroar! We shall do it, then, at last. But I dunno, though, sir," added the man thoughtfully.

"Don't know what?" asked Murray.

"Oh, nothing, sir."

"Bother! Don't talk like that," cried Murray. "Nothing is more aggravating than beginning to say something and then chopping it off in that way. Speak out and say what you mean."

"Tain't no good, sir," said the man sulkily.

"No good?"

"No, sir. Why, if I was to say what I'd got inside my head you'd either begin to bullyrag me—"

"Nonsense, May! I'm sure I never do."

"Well, then, sir, call me a hidjit, and say it was all sooperstition."

"Well, that's likely enough," said Murray. "You sailors are full of old women's tales."

"Mebbe, sir," said the man, shaking his head slowly; "but old women is old, and the elders do grow wise."

"Sometimes, Tom," said Murray, laughing, "and a wise old woman is worth listening to; but you can't say that for a man who talks like a foolish old woman and believes in all kinds of superstitious nonsense."

"No, sir: of course not, sir," said the man solemnly; "but there is things, you know."

"Oh yes, I do know that, Tom—such as setting sail with a black cat on board."

"Oh, well, sir, come!" protested the sailor warmly. "You can't say as a man's a hidjit for believing that. Something always happens if you do that."

"I could say so, Tom," replied the middy, "but I'm not going to."

"Well, sir, begging your pardon as gentleman, I'm werry sorry for it; but there, you're very young."

"Go on, Tom."

"That's all, sir. I warn't going to say no more."

"But you are thinking a deal more. That was as good as saying that I'm very young and don't know any better."

"Oh, I didn't go so far as to think that, sir, because you're a hoffer and a gentleman, and a scholar who has larnt more things than I ever heerd of; but still, sir, I dessay you won't mind owning as a fellow as has been at sea from fourteen to four-and-thirty has picked up things such as you couldn't larn at school."

"Black cats, for instance, Tom?"

"Yes, sir. Ah, you may laugh to yourself, but there's more than you think of about a black cat."

"A black skin, for instance, Tom, and if the poor brute was killed and skinned he'd look exactly like a white cat or a tortoise-shell."

"Oh, that's his skin, sir; it's his nature."

"Pooh! What can there be in a black cat's nature?"

"Don't know; that's the mystery on it."

"Can't you explain what the mystery is?"

"No, sir, and I never met a shipmate as could."

"Bother the cat! It's all rubbish, Tom."

"Yes, sir, and it bothers the man; but there it is, all the same. You ask any sailor chap, and—"

"Yes, I know, Tom; and he'll talk just as much nonsense as you."

"P'raps so, sir, but something bad allus happens to a ship as has a black cat aboard."

"And something always happens to a ship that has any cat on board. And what is more, something always happens to a ship that has no cat at all on board. Look at our *Seafowl*, for instance."

"Yes, sir, you may well say that," said the man sadly. "The chaps have talked about it a deal, and we all says as she's an unfortnit ship."

"Oh, you all think so, do you, Tom?"

"Yes, sir, we do," said the man solemnly.

"Then you may depend upon it, Tom, that there's a black cat hidden away somewhere in the hold."

"Ah! Come aboard, sir, in port, after the rats? That would account for it, sir, and 'splain it all," cried the man eagerly. "You think that's it, do you, sir?"

"No, I don't, Tom; I'm laughing at you for being such an old woman. I did give you the credit of having more sense. I'm ashamed of you."

"Thankye, sir," said the man sadly.

"You are quite welcome, Tom," said Murray, laughing; "but I suppose you can't help all these weak beliefs."

"No, sir, we can't help it, some of us," said the man simply; "it all comes of being at sea."

"There being so much salt in the water, perhaps," said Murray.

"Mebbe, sir; but I don't see what the salt could have to do with it."

"Neither do I, Tom, and if I didn't know what a good fellow you are, and what a brave sailor, I should be ready to tell you a good deal more than I shall."

"Go on, sir; I don't mind, sir. I know you mean well."

"But look here; I'm sorry to hear that your messmates think the *Seafowl* is an unfortunate craft. But not all, I hope?"

"Yes, sir; we all think so."

"That's worse still, Tom. But you don't mean to forsake her—desert—I hope?"

"Forsake her—desert? Not me! She's unlucky, sir, and no one can't help it. Bad luck comes to every one sometimes, same as good luck does, sir. We takes it all, sir, just as it comes, just as we did over the landing t'other day—Titely was the unlucky one then, and got a spear through his shoulder, while though lots of their pretty weapons come flying about us no one else was touched; on'y got a bit singed. He took it like a man, sir."

"That he did, Tom. It was most plucky of him, for he was a good deal hurt."

"Yes, sir—deal more than you young gents thought for. But no, sir: forsake or desert our ship? Not we! She's a good, well-found craft, sir, with a fine crew and fine officers. They ain't puffick, sir; but they might be a deal worse. I'm satisfied, sir."

"I believe you, Tom," said Murray, laughing, "and there is no black cat on board, for if there were some one must have seen her or him before now, and it wouldn't have made a bit of difference."

Chapter Seventeen.

Overhauling a Stranger.

It was the very next morning just at daybreak that the lookout on the fore-top hailed the deck with the inspiring cry that sent a thrill through all who heard, and brought the officer of the watch forward with his glass.

“Sail ho!”

A short inspection sufficed, and the news hurried the captain and Mr Anderson on deck.

“A schooner. The same rig!” exclaimed the captain, without taking his glass from his eye. “What do you make of her, Mr Anderson?”

“A schooner, sure enough, sir. The same heavy raking spars and spread of sails. It looks too good to be true, sir.”

“Hah! Then you think it is the same craft?”

“Yes,—no—I daren’t say, sir,” replied the lieutenant; “but if it is not it’s a twin vessel.”

“Yes,” said the captain, closing his glass with a snap. “We’ll say it’s the Yankee slaver, and keep to that till she proves to be something else.”

Holding to that belief, every stitch of canvas that could be crowded on was sent aloft, and a pleasant breeze beginning to dimple the water as the sun arose, the spirits of all on board the sloop rose as well. Soon, however, it began to be perfectly plain that the schooner sighted paid no heed whatever to the sloop of war, but kept on her course, sailing in a way that proved her to be unusually fast and able to hold her own so well that the spirits of those on the *Seafowl* began to sink again.

“Now we shall see what she’s made of, Dick,” said Murray excitedly, when a blank charge was fired.

“Made of impudence,” said Roberts quietly; “but there’s no doubt about her being the craft we want,” he continued, “for she means to set us at defiance, and she’s going to make a run for it, and you see if she doesn’t escape.”

“If she does,” cried Murray impetuously, “I shall say it’s a shame for the Government to send the captain out with such a crawler as the *Seafowl*. Why, for such a duty we ought to have the fastest sailer that could be built and rigged.”

Directly after, there was another gun fired from the sloop, and the course of the shot sent skipping over the sea could be traced till it sank to rise no more, after passing right across the schooner’s bows.

The men cheered, for in answer to this threat of what the sloop would do with her next gun, the schooner was seen to glide slowly round into the wind, her great sails began to flap, when in quick time, one of the cutters was manned, with the second lieutenant in command of the well-armed crew.

Roberts had been ordered to take his place in the stern sheets, and as he descended the rope he darted a look of triumph at Murray, whose face was glum with disappointment as he turned away; and as luck had it he encountered Mr Anderson’s eyes.

“Want to go, Mr Murray?” he said, smiling.

“Yes, sir, horribly,” was the reply.

“Off with you, then. Be smart!”

The next minute the lad had slipped down by the stern falls to where the officer in command made room for him; the hooks were cast off, the oars dipped, and the stout ash blades were soon quivering as the men bent to their work with their short, sharp, chopping stroke which sent the boat rapidly over the waves.

“I don’t see the Yankee captain,” said Mr Munday, searching the side of the vessel, which was now flying English colours.

“You think that fellow with the lugger was the captain?” asked Murray.

“Not a doubt of it,” was the reply. “I wonder what he’ll have the impudence to say.”

“He’ll sing a different song, sir,” said Roberts, “if he is on board.”

“If? Why, of course he’ll be on board; eh, Murray?”

“Most likely, sir; but won’t he be playing fox in some fresh way? He may be in hiding.”

“If he is he’ll come out when he finds a prize crew on board, and that his schooner is on its way to Cape Coast Castle or the Cape. But I don’t see him, nor any of the sharp-looking fellows who formed his lugger’s crew.”

“No, sir,” said Murray, who was standing up shading his eyes with his hand. “I hope—”

The middy stopped short.

“Well, go on, sir,” cried the lieutenant—“hope what?”

"That we are not making a mistake."

"Oh, impossible! There can't be two of such schooners."

"But we only had a glimpse of the other, sir, as she sailed down the river half hidden by the trees," said Murray.

"Look here, Mr Murray, if you can't speak sensibly you'd better hold your tongue," said the lieutenant angrily. "The captain and Mr Anderson are not likely to make a mistake. Everybody on board was of opinion that this is the same vessel."

"Then I've made a mistake, sir," said the midshipman. "But that can't be the skipper, sir," and he drew attention to a short, stoutish, sun-browned man who was looking over the side.

"Of course it is not, sir. Some English-looking fellow picked to throw us off our guard."

But the officer in charge began to look uneasy as he scanned the vessel they were rapidly nearing, till the cutter was rowed alongside, several of the crew now plainly showing themselves and looking uncommonly like ordinary merchant sailors as they leaned over the bulwarks.

Directly after the coxswain hooked on, and the lieutenant, followed by two middies and four of the well-armed sailors sprang on board, to be greeted with a gruff—

"Morning. What does this here mean?"

"Why didn't you heave to, sir?" cried the lieutenant sharply.

"'Cause I was below, asleep," said the sturdy-looking skipper. "Are you the captain of that brig?"

"No, sir. What vessel's this?"

"Because," said the skipper, ignoring the question, "you'd better tell your captain to be careful. He might have done us some mischief. Any one would think you took me for a pirate."

The lieutenant made no reply for a minute or two, being, like his two young companions, eagerly scanning the rather slovenly deck and the faces of the small crew, who were looking at their invaders apparently with wonder.

"Never mind what we took you for," said the lieutenant sharply, and in a tone of voice which to Murray suggested doubt. "Answer me at once. What schooner's this?"

"Don't be waxy, sir," said the skipper, smiling good-humouredly. "That's reg'lar English fashion—knock a fellow over, and then say, Where are you shoving to! What's yours?"

"H.M.S. *Seafowl*," said the lieutenant haughtily. "Now then, will you answer?"

"Of course I will, Mr Lieutenant. This here is the schooner *Laura Lee*, of Bristol. Trading in sundries, machinery and oddments, loaded out at Kingston, Jamaica, and now for the West Coast to take in palm oil. Afterwards homeward bound. How does that suit you?"

Roberts and Murray exchanged glances, and then noted that the men were doing the same.

"Your papers, sir," said the lieutenant.

"Papers?" said the skipper. "All right, sir; but you might put it a little more civil."

"I am doing my duty, sir," said the lieutenant sternly.

"All right, sir, all right; but don't snap a man's head off. You shall see my papers. They're all square. Like to take anything? I've got a fine bottle or two of real Jamaica below."

"No, sir; no, sir," said the lieutenant sternly. "Business if you please."

"Of course, sir. Come along to my cabin."

"Lead on, then."

The skipper took a few steps aft, and Roberts followed his officer, a couple of the sailors closing in behind, while two others with Murray kept the deck in naval fashion, though there seemed to be not the slightest need, for the schooner's men hung about staring hard or leaned over the side looking at the men in the cutter.

"Here, I say," said the skipper sharply, "I should have thought you could have seen plain enough that what I said was quite right. What do you take me for? Oh, I see, I see; your skipper's got it in his head that I'm trading in bad spirits with the friendly niggers on the coast yonder; but I ain't. There, I s'pose, though, you won't take my word, and you've got to report to your skipper when you go back aboard."

"If I do go back to report, sir," said the lieutenant.

"If you do go back, sir? Oh, that's it, is it? You mean if you take my schooner for a prize."

"Perhaps so, sir. Now then, if you please, your papers."

The skipper nodded and smiled.

"All right," he said; "I won't turn rusty. I s'pose it's your duty."

The papers were examined, and, to the officer's disappointment, proved the truth of the skipper's story.

"Now, if you please, we'll have a look below, sir," said the lieutenant.

"Very good," said the skipper; and he hailed his men to open the hatches. "You won't find any rum puncheons, captain," he said.

"I do not expect to, sir; but I must be sure about your fittings below. This schooner has not been heavily rigged like this for nothing."

"Course she arn't, sir. I take it that she was rigged under my eyes on purpose to be a smart sailer worked by a smart crew. But my fittings? Here, I've got it at last: you're one of the Navy ships on the station to put down the slave-trade."

"Yes," said the lieutenant shortly.

"Then good luck to you, sir! Hoist off those hatches my lad; the officer thinks we're fitted up below for the blackbird trade. No, no, no, sir. There, send your men below, or go yourself, and I'll come with you. You've got the wrong pig by the ear this time, and you ought to be off the coast river yonder where they pick up their cargoes. No, sir, I don't do that trade."

The lieutenant was soon thoroughly satisfied that a mistake had been made, and directly after, to his satisfaction, the skipper asked whether the captain would favour him with a small supply of medicine for his crew.

"I'm about run out of quinine stuff," he said. "Some of my chaps had a touch or two of fever, and we're going amongst it again. It would be an act of kindness, sir, and make up for what has been rather rough treatment."

"You'd better come on board with me, and I've no doubt that the captain will see that you have what is necessary; and he will be as apologetic as I am now for what has been an unpleasant duty."

"Oh, come, if you put it like that, squire, there's no need to say any more. To be sure, yes, I'll come aboard with you. I say; took many slavers?"

"No; not one."

"That's a pity. Always search well along the river mouths?"

"Yes."

"Hah! They're about too much for you. Now, if I was on that business, say I was on the lookout for these gentlemen, I shouldn't do it here."

"Where, then?" said the lieutenant eagerly.

"Well, I'll tell you. As I said, they're a bit too cunning for you. Of course you can sail up the rivers and blow the black chiefs' huts to pieces. Them, I mean, who catch the niggers and sell 'em or swap 'em to the slave skippers; but that don't do much good, for slavers slip off in the dark, and know the coast better than you do."

"Yes. Well, what would you do?" said the lieutenant eagerly.

"Do? Why, I'd go across to the plantations, sir, and lay wait for them there. They wouldn't be half so much on the lookout."

"There's a good deal in what you say, sir," said the lieutenant thoughtfully. "But where would you watch—round Jamaica?"

"Nay-y-y!" cried the skipper. "I'd study up my charts pretty thoroughly, and then cruise about those little islands that lie nigh the Cays. There's plenty of likely places where these folk land their cargoes; and you'd find them easier to work than the West Coast, where there's a wilderness of mangrove creeks and big and little rivers where a slaving schooner can lie up and hide. You go west and try. Why, I could give your captain half-a-dozen plantations where it would pay him to go—places where I've seen often enough craft about the build of mine here."

"Indeed!" cried the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir," said the skipper thoughtfully. "Why, of course; I never saw before how likely you were to take me for one of 'em. Well, you want to go, so I'll have one of my boats lowered down and come over to your brig. I'll ask your skipper for a bit of quinine, and then if he'll lay out his charts before me, I'll put his finger upon three or four likely spots where the slavers trade, and if he don't capture two or three of their fast boats loaded with the black fellows they've run across, why, it won't be my fault. I should like to see the whole lot sunk, and the skippers and crews with them. Don't sound Christian like o' me, but they deserve it. For I've seen them landing their cargoes. Ugh! It has been sickening, and they're not men."

The skipper's words were broken in upon by the report of a gun from the *Seafowl*, whose commander had grown impatient from the long delay of the boat; and hence the imperious recall.

Captain Kingsberry's countenance did not look calm and peaceful when the boat returned, but the clouds cleared away when the skipper came on board and a long conversation had taken place over the charts of the West Indian Islands and the Caribbean Sea.

"Quinine, captain?" he exclaimed at last. "My good sir, you may have all the medicine—well, nearly—that I have on board!"

"Thankye, sir," said the bluff skipper, laughing. "Enough's as good as a feast of that stuff."

"And I'm very sorry," said the captain politely, "that I had to overhaul your schooner."

"I arn't," said the skipper. "I'm very glad, and thankful too for the physic stuff. Fever's a nasty thing, sir, and as I said, I'm very glad. Good luck to you, sir, and good-bye."

"There's no doubt this time, Mr Anderson," said the captain, as soon as the skipper had gone over the side, "that man's as honest as the day."

"That he is, sir, and so is his schooner."

"Yes, Mr Anderson. Now, then, let's go back to those charts, and we'll then make right for the plantations. I begin to think that we shall do some business now."

Chapter Eighteen.

Rather Fishy.

"What!" said the first lieutenant sharply. "Now, look here, Mr Roberts—and you too, Mr Murray, for you are just as bad. You both give yourselves airs, and though you say nothing you are always showing off, trying to impress the men with the idea that you are men grown."

"I beg your pardon, sir—" began Roberts.

"Now, don't deny it, sir. I know it for a fact. Do you think that I can't read you through and through—you in particular, Mr Roberts, for you are far the worst. Not that you have much to boast about, Mr Murray."

"I am very sorry, sir," said the latter. "No, you are not, sir," said the chief officer abruptly. "Let's have deeds, not words. If you were really sorry that you had been playing the imitative monkey you would pitch the antics overboard."

"Antics, sir?" cried Roberts. "Yes, sir—antics. I said antics," cried the officer sharply, "so don't repeat my words and force me to do the same. A boy's a boy, sir, and a man's a man. A good boy is a rarity on shipboard, but very valuable when you get him; and a good man—a really good man at sea is worth his weight in gold; but I detest a hobbledehoy who apes the man, and I generally look upon him as worthless. Don't grunt, Mr Roberts. It's disrespectful to your superior officer. You might very well follow the example of Mr Murray, who never resents reproof when he deserves it. There, you need not make that disparaging grimace. You might follow Mr Murray's example in a good many things. Now, I am sure he would not have come and asked leave like you did. It must have been your idea alone."

"I'm afraid I had as much to do with it as Roberts, sir," said Murray frankly.

"More shame for you to have to own it, sir," said the first lieutenant; "but I like you to own up all the same. Still, I don't like two young fellows who are trying to impress their elders that they are men to be seizing every opportunity to prove that they are mere boys with all the instincts wide awake of children."

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Roberts again, this time very stiffly. "I am sorry I asked for permission."

"I don't believe you, Mr Roberts," said the officer stiffly. "Now, both of you tell me this—are you perfectly efficient in your navigation?"

Roberts uttered a snort.

"No, sir," said Murray, "of course not. I'm a long way off being perfect."

"Then why in the name of common sense don't you seize upon every opportunity to master that grand study, like a man, and not come bothering me like a little boy who wants to go out to the pond to catch tittlebats? I'm ashamed of you both."

"It was only to have a little recreation, sir," said Murray.

"What do you want with recreation, I should like to know? Do you ever see me running after recreation?"

"No, sir," said Murray; "but then, sir, you're a first lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, and that's what you will never be so long as you hanker after childish pastimes."

"I'm very sorry, sir—" began Murray.

"Don't keep saying you are very sorry; it only makes the matter worse, when I have so much upon my mind. It's absurd, gentlemen. I wonder at you. Just because you see a few dolphins and albigores swimming below the ship's counter you must want to begin playing with the grains. There, be off, both of you. What would be the good of the fish if you harpooned them?"

"Make a nice change for the table, sir. The cook said—"

"Hang the cook!" cried the officer angrily. "What are you laughing at?"

"Only smiling, sir."

"And pray what at? Is there anything peculiar in my face?"

"No, sir," said Murray merrily. "I was only thinking of the consequences if we two obeyed your orders."

"Orders! I gave no orders."

"You said, hang the cook, sir," said Murray.

"Rubbish! Absurd! There, I told you both to be off. I'm not going to give you leave to play idle boys. If you want leave, there's the captain yonder; go and ask him."

"He'd only say, sir, why didn't we ask leave of you."

"And very proper too," said the first lieutenant, "and if he does say so you can tell him I would not give you leave because I thought it waste of time for young men who want to rise in their profession. What was that you muttered, Mr Murray?"

"I only said to myself, sir, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.'"

"Yes; very true, my lad," said the officer, with a grim smile. "I'm not unreasonable, and I'd give you leave; but perhaps you had better ask your chief."

"Thank you, sir," said Murray.

"And look here, Murray; if you get permission, be careful. I don't want the routine of the ship to be interfered with and my men set hovering about to pick up a couple of useless idlers, and every one upset by the cry of a man overboard—I mean, a boy."

"I'll try not to be that boy," said Murray, smiling; and the chief officer gave him a friendly nod and walked forward.

"Bah!" grumbled Roberts. "There's favouritism."

"Nonsense!"

"'Tisn't. He always favours you."

"Not he."

"To turn upon us like that just because it's almost a calm! A growling old snarly! I never saw such a temper. Now he has gone forward to set the men to do something that doesn't want doing."

"He's a bit out of temper this morning because the skipper has been at him about something."

"Yes; I heard him at it. Nice pair they are, and a pretty life they lead the men!"

"Oh, well, never mind that. Tom May has got the grains and the line ready, and I want to begin."

"A boy! Apeing a man, and all that stuff!" muttered Roberts. "I suppose he never was a boy in his life."

"Oh, wasn't he! There, never mind all that."

"But I do mind it, sir," said Roberts haughtily, as he involuntarily began to pass his fingers over the spot just beneath his temples where the whisker down was singed. "I consider that his words were a perfect insult."

"Perfect or imperfect, what does it matter? Come on, *sir*. I want to begin harpooning."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Roberts, turning upon him angrily.

"What do I mean?"

"Yes; by using the word *sir* to me in that meaning way."

"You got on the stilts, and I only followed suit. There, there, don't be so touchy. Go on and ask the skipper for leave."

"No, thank you. I don't want to play the idle boy."

"Don't you? Then I do, and what's more, I know you do."

"Then you are quite wrong."

"If I'm wrong you told a regular crammer not half-an-hour ago, for you said you'd give anything for a turn with the grains this morning."

"I have no recollection of saying anything of the kind," said the lad angrily.

"What a memory! I certainly thought I heard you say so to Tom May; and there he is with the line and the jolly old trident all ready. There, come on and let's ask the chief."

"If you want to go idling, go and ask him for yourself. I'm going down to our dog-hole of a place to study navigation in the dark."

"Don't believe you, Dicky."

"You can believe what you please, sir," said Roberts coldly.

"All right. I'm off, and I shall ask leave for us both."

"You dare! I forbid it," cried Roberts angrily.

"All right," said Murray, turning on his heel, "but I shall ask for us both, and if you mean to forbid it you'd better come with me to the skipper."

Murray waited a few moments, standing watching the captain where he was marching up and down the quarter-deck, and timing himself so as to meet him full as he walked forward.

Roberts hesitated for a few moments and then followed closely, looking fiercely determined the while.

"Well, Mr Murray," said the captain sharply, as he became aware of the presence of the lad, who touched his cap. "What is it—a petition?"

"Yes, sir. A good many bonito are playing about the bows."

"Yes; I saw them, my lad. Want to go fishing—harpooning?"

"Yes, sir. Roberts and I."

"Oh yes, of course, my lad. A good time for it, and I shall expect a nice dish for the cabin table. But look here, Mr Murray, I like to keep to the little forms of the service, and in cases of this sort you had better ask Mr Anderson for leave. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said Murray.

"No, no; I have not given you permission. Ask Mr Anderson. He will give you leave at once."

Murray saluted; the captain marched on; and directly after the two midshipmen were face to face.

"Then you have dared—" began Roberts.

"Yes, all right," said Murray, laughing to himself, for he noticed that his companion spoke in a low tone of voice so that his words might not be heard by their chief. "Yes, it's all right, only we're to ask Anderson."

"Yes, I heard what the skipper said, but I tell you at once I'm not going to stoop to do anything of the kind. Do you think I'm going to degrade myself by begging for leave again?"

"No, old chap, of course not," cried Murray, thrusting his arm beneath his companion's. "I'll *do* all that. But you must come now. Don't let's keep Tom May waiting any longer."

"But I tell you that—"

"Hush! Hold your tongue. Here's Anderson coming."

"Well, young gentlemen," said that officer, coming up sharply, "have you asked the captain?"

"Yes, sir, and he said that he would give us leave, but that he should prefer for us to ask your permission."

"That's right, my lads; quite right," said the first lieutenant, speaking quite blandly now. "You'd better start at once, for I don't think this calm is going to last. Who is going to help you?"

"Tom May, sir."

"Oh yes, I see. A very good trustworthy man. Mind, we shall expect some fish for dinner."

"He's a humbug, that's what he is," said Roberts angrily. "Blowing hot and cold with the same breath. I've a good mind to—"

"Come and have the first try? And so you shall, old chap. Look alive! We must get a good dish now, and for the lads too."

"Oh, I don't want to have anything to do with it," grumbled Roberts.

But his companion paid no heed to his words, for just then Tom May, who had been watching their proceedings as he waited until the permission had been obtained, stepped out to meet them, armed with the trident-like grains and fine line, looking like a modern Neptune civilised into wearing the easy-looking comfortable garb of a man-o'-war's man, and offered the light lissome staff to Murray.

"No, no," cried the lad. "Mr Roberts is going to have the first turn."

"I told you I didn't—" began Roberts, with far less emphasis, but Murray interrupted him.

"Best from the fore chains, won't it, Tom?"

"Yes, sir. Hold on with the left fin and strike with the right."

"Yes, of course. Now then, Dick, over with you; and don't go overboard, or I shall have to come after you."

"Better let me make a slip-knot for you, sir," said the man, "so as you don't lose your line and the grains at the same time."

The midshipman's lips parted for him to make another protest—a very faint one—but before he had spoken a word the sailor threw a running noose over his wrist, and, unable to resist the temptation of playing the part of harpooner of the good-sized fish that were playing in the clear water not far below the surface, he climbed over the bulwark and took his place in the chains outside the blocks which secured the shrouds, gathered the line in loops, and grasped the shaft of the long light implement, which somewhat resembled a delicately made eel spear, and stood ready to plunge it down into the first of the swiftly gliding fish which played about the side.

"I say, Dick," cried Murray eagerly, "don't be in too great a hurry. Wait till you get a good chance at a big one."

"All right," replied the lad, who at the first touch of the three-pronged spear forgot all his sham resistance and settled himself in an easy position with his left arm round one of the staying ropes, standing well balanced and ready to dart the implement down into one of the great beautifully-marked mackerel-natured fish, which with an easy stroke of its thin tail, shaped like a two-day-old moon, darted along the side, played round the sloop's stem, plunged beneath the keel and appeared again, to repeat its manoeuvres so rapidly that its coming and going resembled flashes of light.

"I'll have one directly," said Roberts, after letting two or three chances go by, "and you, Tom, when I spear one and haul him up, you take hold of the fish just forward of his tail, where you can grip him easily."

"Close up to his flukes, sir?" said the man, cocking one eye at Murray with a droll look which suggested the saying about instructing your grandmother. "All right, sir; I'll take care."

"Yes, you'd better!" said the midshipman, who was now all eagerness. "I'll spear one, Frank, and then you shall take the next turn."

"No, no; get a couple first, old chap," replied Murray, "or say three. We don't want to change too often."

"Oh, very well, just as you like. Ha!"

For a chance had offered itself; one of the bonitos had risen towards the surface and turned sharply preparatory to swimming back to pass round the stem of the *Seafowl*, and Roberts plunged down his spear; but he had not been quick enough.

"My word, that was near! Eh, Tom?" cried Murray.

"Near as a toucher," grunted the sailor, with his eyes twinkling.

"Never mind, Dick; you'll do it next time. Straight down, old chap; but you must allow for the water's refraction."

"Oh yes, I know," said the lad coolly, as he gathered in the dripping line in loops once more and again grasped the light ash pole ready for another stroke.

As if perfectly satisfied of their safety, a couple more of the bonitos glided along from following the sloop, and the midshipman made as if to throw, but hesitated and let the first fish glide beneath his feet, but darted the spear down at the second, and struck a little too soon, the swift creature apparently seeing the spear coming and with one wave of its tail darting into safety.

"Bother!" grunted Roberts.

"Third time never fails, sir," growled the sailor. That sailor told a great untruth, for when for the third time Roberts drove the trident he failed dismally, for in his excitement and hurry he took no care to hold the three-pronged fork so that it should strike the fish across the back, so that one or the other tooth should be driven into the flesh, but held it so that the blades were parallel with the fish's side, beside which they glided so that the bonito passed on unharmed.

"Oh, hang the thing!" cried the lad.

"Well, strike it first," said Murray, laughing. "We'll hang it then if you like."

"Do it yourself, then," growled Roberts angrily, hauling up the line and trident, before preparing to loosen the noose from his wrist.

"Nonsense!" cried Murray. "Stop where you are, man. You were in such a hurry, and didn't half try."

"No, you come and try. You are so much more handy with the grains than I am."

He spoke sourly, but his companion's last words had softened him a little. "Stop where you are, man!" sounded pleasant, and he hesitated.

"That's right. There, tighten the line again. I want to see you get one of those big ones, and you are not going to be beaten."

"But I'm not skilful over it, Frank," said Roberts.

"Be skilful, then, my lad. It's just the knack of it, that's all. Get that, and you'll hit one every time. Won't he, Tom?"

"Yes, sir. It's just the knack; that's all. Just look down, sir; there's no end of thumpers coming along, and if you wait your time, sir, you're sure to have one."

Roberts knit his brows as he gazed down beneath him at the shadow-like fish, which now looked dark, now reflected golden and greenish tints from their burnished sides, and once more prepared to strike; but he hesitated, and the bonito

was gone.

"Here, you're nervous, Dick," cried Murray. "You're too anxious and want to make too sure. Be sharper and more careless. Just measure the distance as the next one comes along, make sure of him and let drive."

Roberts said nothing, but set his teeth hard as he balanced the ash pole in his hand, being careful to hold the spear



HE STOOD UP . . . WAITING TILL ONE OF THE FINEST OF FISH
BELOW HIM CAME GLIDING ALONG.

Hunting the Skipper.

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so that the prongs were level with the horizon, and was in the act of driving the implement down when Murray whispered hoarsely—"Now then!"

horizon, and was in the act of driving

That interruption proved to be just sufficient to throw the lad off his aim, and once more he missed. "My fault, Dick; my fault, Tom. I put him out," cried Murray excitedly.

"Yes, sir, that was it," said the sailor. "He'd have had that one for certain. You try again, Mr Roberts, sir; and don't you say a word to put him out, Mr Murray, sir, and you'll see him drive the grains into one of them biggest ones."

"All right, Tom. I'll be dumb as a dumb-bell. Go on, Dick; there are some splendid ones about now."

Roberts said nothing, but frowned and set his teeth harder than ever as he stood up now in quite a classic attitude, waiting till one of the finest of the fish below him came gliding along beneath his feet, and then reaching well out he darted the trident down with all his might. The line tightened suddenly, for he had struck the fish, and the next moment, before the lad could recover himself from his position, leaning forward as he was, there was a heavy jar at his wrist, the line tightened with quite a snap, and as the fish darted downward the midshipman was jerked from where he stood, and the next moment plunged head first with a heavy splash into the sea, showing his legs for a brief space, and then, in a shadowy way that emulated the fishes' glide, he went downward into the sunlit depths, leaving his two companions staring aghast at the result of the stroke.

Chapter Nineteen.

"Man Overboard!"

Murray leaned over the side, looking down at the dimly seen figure of his companion, hardly visible in the disturbed water, and full of the expectation of seeing him come up again directly.

"What a ducking!" he thought to himself, and his features were corrugated with mirth. Tom May too was indulging in a hearty grin, which however began to smooth into a look of horror in nowise behind the aspect of Murray's face, for both now began to realise the fact that the tightened cord at which the harpooned fish was evidently tugging was rapidly drawing the middy farther and farther down, while the sloop was steadily gliding onward and leaving the unfortunate youth behind.

It was a time for action, and the moment Murray could throw off the nightmare-like feeling which held him motionless he sprang upon the rail, shouted loudly "Man overboard!" and then without a moment's hesitation plunged headlong down, taking a header into the glittering sunlit water below.

"A man overboard!" The most thrilling words that can be uttered at sea—words which chill the hearers for a moment and then are followed by a wild feeling of excitement which pervades more than runs through a ship, awakening it as it were with one great throb from frigid silence to excited life. In this instance, as Frank Murray made his spring, his words seemed to be echoed by Tom May in a deep roar as he too sprang upon the rail, from which he leaped, throwing his hands on high as he described a curve outward from the *Seafowl's* side, and then in the reverse of his position as his

fingers touched the water there was a heavy splash, and those who ran to the side caught sight of the soles of his feet as he too disappeared for a short space beneath the rippled sea.

There was but a trifle of confusion on deck: the orders rang out, but almost before they were uttered the men were running to their stations in connection with one of the boats, which was rapidly manned; the blocks of the falls creaked as she sank down and kissed the water; the varnished ash blades flashed in the sunshine as they were seized and run from the rowlocks into regular double lines; and then, as they dipped, the cutter seemed to be endued with life, and darted forward to the rescue.

Meanwhile, confused by his sudden drag from daylight into semi-darkness and confusion, Roberts had recovered himself sufficiently to begin trying to free his wrist from the thin line which cut into it deeply as tug, tug, tug, it was drawn tighter and tighter by the harpooned fish, into whose back the barbed iron prongs had plunged deeply, and, far from robbing it of life, seemed only to have nerved it and stimulated it with a power that was extraordinary in a creature of its size. For the midshipman, as he struck out with one arm, felt himself dragged beneath the surface by his victim, whose efforts were directed entirely towards sounding deeply to seek the safety offered by the darkness fathoms below.

Tug and jerk, tug and jerk, in the midst of a confusion that grew more and more wild, as the midshipman strove to free himself from the bond which held him fast. The water thundered in his ears in a series of strange sounds which deepened into one deafening roar. The power of thinking of his position was rapidly passing away; the water above him grew darker and darker; and at last in one involuntary effort the lad ceased his struggle to free his wrist, and struck out wildly with arms and legs to force himself to the surface.

It was quite time, and fortunately the efforts of the fish to drag him down were for the moment weakening, while in response to his wild struggle the light grew brighter, and just as consciousness was about to leave him, the lad's head rose above the surface again and he gasped for breath.

It was life, but the respirations were succeeded directly by a renewal of the sharp tugs at his wrist, and the water was about to close over his head again, when he felt the touch of a hand and heard the panting voice of some one whose tones were familiar, as he was turned over face upward and his descent was checked.

Then amidst the confusion and his attempts to recover his breath, the unfortunate lad heard another voice, and the gruff tones seemed to be those of one giving orders.

"Hooroar, my lad!" came, close to the middy's ear. "That's good. Wait a moment. My knife'll soon cut him clear."

"No, no, Tom; don't cut. We can keep him up now. Shout for the boat."

"They don't want no shoutin', sir. They'll be here directly."

These words all seemed to reach the ears of Roberts from somewhere far away, and then the water was thundering in them again, and he began once more to struggle for life. Then again he seemed to get his breath in a half-choking confused way, as he heard the gruff tones begin again.

"I'd better cut, sir, on'y my knife won't open."

"No, no, Tom; we can manage. Keep his head well up."

"All right, sir. That was the beggar's flurry. Dessay he's turning up his white."

"Hooray!" came like another echo, along with the splash of oars, and then half consciously Roberts felt himself dragged over the side of the boat. There was another cheer, and a strange sound as of a fish beating the planks rapidly with its tail, while Murray's breathless voice, sounding a long way off, said—

"My word, he is a strong one! I am glad we've got him."

Then several other voices seemed to be speaking together, but in a confused way, and Roberts felt as if he had been asleep, till some one whose voice sounded like the doctor's said—

"Oh, he's all right now, sir."

"Who's all right now?" thought the lad; and he opened his eyes, to find himself lying upon the deck with the doctor upon one knee by his side, and pretty well surrounded by the officers and men.

"Nice wet fellow you are, Roberts," said the doctor.

"Eh?" said the lad, staring confusedly. "Have I been overboard?"

"Well, yes, just a trifle," replied the doctor.

"Oh yes, I remember now. Ah! Where's Frank Murray?" cried the lad excitedly.

"Here I am all right!" came from behind him.

"Ah!" ejaculated the half insensible lad, and he gave vent to a deep sigh of relief and closed his eyes. "I was afraid that—that—"

"But I am all right, Dick," cried Murray, catching the speaker by the hand.

"Ah, that's right. I was afraid—somehow—I thought you were drowned."

"There, there," cried the doctor, bending over the lad and patting his shoulder, "nobody has been drowned, and you are all right again, so I want you to get below and have a good towelling and then tumble into some dry things while I mix

you up a draught of— What's the matter now?"

Roberts had suddenly sprung up into a sitting position, as if the doctor's last words had touched a spring somewhere in the lad's spine.

"Nothing, sir—nothing," he cried excitedly. "I'm all right again now. I recollect all about it, and how Frank Murray saved my life."

"Oh, it was Tom May did the most of it, Dick."

"Did he help?" continued the lad. "Ah, he's a good fellow,—Tom May. But I'm all right now, doctor; and where's the fish?"

The lad stared about him in a puzzled way, for he had become conscious of the fact that those around him were roaring with laughter, an outburst which was gradually subsiding, while those most affected were wiping their eyes, when his last query about the fish set them off again.

"Why, doctor," said the captain, trying to look serious, but evidently enjoying the mirth as much as any one present, "who is going to doubt the efficacy of your medicine after this? The very mention of it in Mr Roberts's hearing acted upon him like magic. Did you see how he started up like the man in the old tooth tincture advertisement—'Ha, ha! Cured in an instant!'"

"Oh yes, sir," said the doctor grimly; "but it's all very fine. You are all glad of my help sometimes."

"Of course, my dear Reston," said the captain. "No one slights you and your skill; but you must own that it was comic to see how Mr Roberts started up the moment you said physic."

"Oh yes, it was droll enough," said the doctor good-humouredly. "There, Roberts, if you feel well enough to do without my draught I will not mix one. What do you say?"

"Oh, I'm all right now, sir," cried the lad—"at least I shall be as soon as I've changed."

"Off with you, then," said the doctor; and catching hold of Murray's proffered arm, Roberts and his friend hurried below.

Chapter Twenty.

In the Doctor's Hands.

Before the two middies had completed their change there was a tap at the cabin door, and in answer to the "Come in" Tom May's head was thrust through the opening, his face puckered up into a friendly grin.

"Getting all right again, gentlemen?" he said.

"Oh yes, Tom," cried Roberts excitedly, and he eagerly held out his hand, and catching the sailor by the shoulder dragged him inside. "I wanted to see you, Tom, and thank you for saving my life."

"For what, sir?" said Tom sharply.

"For so bravely saving my life."

"Oh, I say, sir," grumbled the man, speaking bashfully, "if I'd ha' knowed as you was going on like that I'm blessed if I'd ha' come down."

"Why, there was nothing to be ashamed of, Tom," said Murray warmly.

"Oh no, sir; I warn't ashamed to come down. I were on'y too glad to say a word to Mr Roberts like and see him come round."

"I'm glad too," said Murray; "and he feels very grateful to you for being so brave."

"I warn't brave, Mr Murray, sir. I did nowt. It was you—it was him, Mr Roberts, sir. He sings out, 'Man overboard!' and takes a header arter you, and what was I to do? He's my oficer, sir, and I was obliged to go arter him. You sees that?"

"Yes, yes, Tom," cried Roberts warmly. "He acted very bravely."

"Oh, drop it!" cried Murray.

"Course he did, sir," said the sailor. "I on'y obeyed orders."

"Will you both drop it!" cried Murray angrily. "What's the use of making a fuss about nothing? You're all right again, Tom?"

"Me, sir? Right as ninepence. Never had nowt the matter with me. 'Sides," continued the man, with a grin, "I had the doctor to look at me."

"Oh, I say," said Roberts eagerly, "he didn't give you any of his stuff, did he?"

"No, sir; but he wanted to."

"What did he say?"

"Said it would keep off the chill."

"Yes, and what then?" said the lads, in a breath.

"I telled him, gentlemen, that the first luff had sent Mr Snelling the purser to me with a dose, and he just grunted at me and went up again. Oh, I'm all right enough. What about you, Mr Roberts, sir?"

"Thanks to you, Tom, I'm just as you say you are. But what about that fish?"

"Oh, it's in the pot by now. The cook says it's the biggest albicore he ever see in his life, and for sartain, gentlemen, I never see one much more than half as big. There's bigger ones, of course, somewheres, but I never see one speared afore as would touch him. But I say, Mr Roberts, sir," continued the man, "you do feel all right again, don't you?"

"Oh yes, quite right, Tom; only a little bit achey about the back of the neck."

"Course you do, sir. I felt like that both times when I got pretty nigh drowned. That's 'cause you throws your head so far back, and it strains your muscles, sir. But never mind that, sir. It'll soon go off. I was going to say, sir, if you felt right enough I should punish that there fish pretty hard."

"I will, Tom," said the lad merrily; and the man went on deck.

"Ready?" said Murray, as he finished dressing.

"Yes, I'm ready, and at the same time I don't feel so," was the reply.

"Don't feel coming on poorly, do you?"

"Oh no," replied Roberts, "but I don't much care about going on deck again."

"Why not?"

"There's the skipper, and old Anderson; they're both sure to begin to grumble now."

"Oh no! I don't think they'll say anything."

"Well, you'll see," said Roberts decisively; and the lad proved to be right when the pair went on deck, for no sooner did they appear than the first lieutenant, who was forward with the men, giving some instructions, caught sight of them and began to approach.

"Look at that," whispered Roberts.

"Yes, and look at that, Dick," whispered Murray. For the captain, who was on the quarter-deck, had apparently caught sight of them at the same time, and began to make for them.

There was no retreat, for the lieutenant would have met them. But it so happened that the latter saw his chief approaching and returned at once to the group of sailors, leaving the captain to have the first words.

"You're right, Dick," whispered Murray. "Now for a wiggling!"

"Well, young gentlemen," saluted them the next minute; "what have you to say for yourselves?"

"Thank you, sir," said Murray, drawing himself up and saluting, "we're not a bit the worse for our little adventure."

"Humph!" ejaculated the captain, looking at him sternly. "None the worse, eh?"

"No, sir, not a bit, and I don't think Roberts is; eh, Roberts?"

"Perhaps not, Mr Murray; but perhaps you will allow me to question Mr Roberts."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Murray, colouring warmly.

"I do not grant it, sir," said the captain stiffly; "and perhaps you will be good enough to bear in mind what are our relative positions—those of commander of this sloop of war and very junior officer. Now, Mr Roberts," continued the captain sternly, as he half turned his back to Murray, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Only that I'm very sorry to have been the cause of the trouble, sir."

"Humph! That's better," said the captain, "if your sorrow is real."

"Oh yes, sir; it's quite real, sir," said the youth hurriedly.

"Indeed! Well, I have my doubts, sir."

"But it really was quite an accident, sir," cried Roberts excitedly.

"Well, do you suppose, Mr Roberts, that I give you credit for purposely hitching yourself on to that fish and trying to get yourself drowned?"

"Oh no, sir; of course not."

"Don't interrupt me, Mr Roberts," said the captain sourly.

"Why, you asked me a question," thought the lad, "and I was only answering you;" and he turned very red in the face.

"I have been talking to Mr Anderson about this business, and he tells me that you both came worrying him for permission to use the grains and to waste your time trying to harpoon these fish that were playing about the bows, eh?"

"It was I, sir, who went to ask Mr Anderson for leave."

"I was not addressing you, Mr Murray," said the captain coldly; and then he continued: "Mr Anderson tells me that he put before you the fact that you would both have been better employed in continuing your studies of navigation. Now, you neither of you had the candour to tell me this. Anything but work, gentlemen, and the display of a determination to master your profession and grow worthy of trust, with the possibility of some day becoming worthy of taking charge of a vessel. I consider that you both—I say both, Mr Murray—took advantage of my kindly disposition and obtained the permission that Mr Anderson would have very properly withheld. Now look at the consequences of your folly; one of you was nearly drowned; the other was almost the cause of my losing one of my most valuable seamen in his efforts to save your lives; and the discipline of my ship is completely upset—a boat has to be launched, the doctor called upon to resuscitate one of you; and now what have you to say for yourselves? Nothing, but give me the paltry excuse of this being an accident. I tell you, gentlemen, that it cannot be considered an accident or mischance, for I look upon it as being a wilful disregard of your duties, and—er—er—that will do."

The captain put his hands behind his back and stalked off, leaving the two lads looking at each other.

"That's nice," said Murray, in a whisper.

"Lovely!" whispered back Roberts.

"And this isn't the worst of it," said Murray softly; "here comes Anderson."

"Oh, I do feel so bad!" muttered Roberts. "I'll tell him so."

"Well, young gentlemen," said the lieutenant, coming up, "I hope the captain has taken you both well to task."

"Yes, sir, he has," said Murray, with a drily comical look upon his countenance. "I'm sure if you had heard him you wouldn't think it necessary to say another word."

The lieutenant gave the lad a severe look, frowning hard, and he was evidently about to say something sharp, but after being silent for a few moments his face relaxed and he smiled pleasantly.

"Well," he said, turning again to Murray, "I will take it for granted that you have both had a thoroughly good talking to, and I will say no more."

"Thank you, sir," said Murray, with a sigh of relief.

The lieutenant turned upon him sharply.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose you do mean that. Well, Mr Roberts, I hope you feel none the worse?"

"No, sir; yes, sir, I—no sir, not at all the worse."

"I am glad of it. But you had a very narrow escape. Your life was saved by Murray's bravery. A very gallant action, my lad—manly and brave; but no more of such gallant actions, if you please. I have quite enough responsibilities in connection with my duties on this ship without being worried with a pack of boys risking their lives for the sake of catching a fish or two, so let me have no more of it. Do you hear? There, you need not speak."

The lieutenant turned short round and marched away frowning, leaving the lads looking at one another for a few minutes, before Murray whispered, "Come along forward," with the result that they made for a favourite spot where, well out of sight of the quarter-deck, they could rest their folded arms upon the rail and gaze down into the transparent water which glided by the sloop's cut-water with hardly a ripple, so soft was the breeze which filled the crowd of canvas that had been set.

"I thought we should get it," said Roberts, after a few minutes' silence.

"Oh, never mind, old chap," said his companion quietly. "You got off pretty easy."

"I did? Oh, come; it was you who got off easy. 'A very gallant act,' didn't he say?"

"Something of the kind."

"Yes; 'a very gallant act.' You always get the praise, Frank," said Roberts gloomily. "It has always been so ever since we joined. One is expected to devote himself in every way possible to learning one's profession, and for reward one gets bullied and blamed for pretty well everything. Nobody ever told me that I had performed a very gallant act."

"Well, look here, what do you say to me tumbling overboard so that you can come over after me and save my life?"

"Bother! Look here, Frank, if you can't talk sense you'd better hold your tongue."

"If I did you'd only get more rusty. I say, Dick, I once read about a fellow being saved from drowning."

"Me, of course," interrupted Roberts, in an angry tone. "What are you up to now—fishing for praise of your 'gallant act'?"

"Not likely," was the reply, good-humouredly. "I was going to tell you about some one who was saved from drowning."

"Well, you needn't. I know all about it now, thank you, and I don't want to hear."

"Never mind, old chap; I want to tell you, and it's very interesting and quite true."

Roberts grunted and gave himself a hitch so as to turn half away from his companion and stand staring away to sea.

"It said that when the poor fellow was on the deck again—you see, he had fallen from the yard and they had to lower down a boat so as to get him aboard, and when they did he seemed to be quite dead—same as you did."

"Tchah! Nothing of the kind. I was only a bit insensible."

"Well, you were quite bad enough," said Murray, "and the doctor had to bring you round same as this chap; and when he was able to sit up and talk it was quite curious—"

"I don't see anything curious about a half-drowned chap coming to and being able to talk."

"No," said Murray, smiling, as he watched his companion intently, "but that wasn't the curious part."

"Well, then, what was? Oh, I say, I do wish you wouldn't keep on prosing about what nobody wants to hear. There, go on and get it finished."

"All right; don't hurry a fellow," said Murray. "I can't dash off things as quickly as you can."

Roberts wrenched himself round so that he could look fiercely at his companion, and he spoke with quite an angry snap.

"Is that meant for a sneer?" he said.

"No, my son; not a bit of it, unless it contains just a go at myself for being so slow."

"Ho!" ejaculated Roberts. "Well, what's the curious thing about your chap who had been nearly drowned?"

"They brought him to—" said Murray deliberately.

Roberts gave himself an angry jerk and reached out his hand to snatch at a marlin-spike stuck just beneath the rail.

"What's the matter now?" asked Murray.

"You'll know directly if you don't finish your twaddling stuff. You told me all that before," cried the lad irritably.

"Did I? Well, you keep on interrupting me so."

"There, go on."

"All right," continued Murray, in the most imperturbable way. "Well, as I was saying, that when they brought the poor fellow round—"

"Bravo, oh prince of story-tellers!" cried Roberts sneeringly. "They brought him round, did they? I wonder he didn't stop drowned if he was surrounded by people who kept on prosing like you are."

"Well, he didn't," said Murray coolly; "they brought him round."

"Here, Frank, old chap," cried Roberts, with mock interest, "it's as well to be quite certain when you are making history—are you sure that they didn't bring him square?"

"Oh yes, quite," said Murray quietly; "they brought him round, and it was remarkable what an effect it had upon his temper."

Roberts turned upon him again quite fiercely.

"He seemed to have turned acid right through, and snapped and snarled at those about him; and then—"

"Now, look here, young fellow," cried Roberts, interrupting his companion, "I'm not all a fool, Frank Murray, and I can see quite plainly enough that this is all meant for a go at me. Do you mean to tell me that I have turned upon every one to snap and snarl at them? Because if you do, say so like a man."

"Well, old chap—" began Murray, smiling.

"Oh, you do, do you? You've made up your mind to quarrel with me, have you? Very well, sir. I don't want to be on good terms with a fellow who, in spite of the way in which I have made myself his friend ever since he joined, is determined to—determined to—Here, this is beyond bearing, sir. We're too big now to settle our quarrels, like a couple of schoolboys, with our fists, but the wretched state in which we are compelled to exist by the captain's absurd prejudices against settling a dispute in a gentlemanly way compels one to put off all consideration of age and position; so come down below. We can easily get to where the men will take care that we are not interrupted by the officers; and if I don't give you the biggest thrashing you ever had, it's because I am weak from the effects of that accident and being dragged under water for so long. Now then, come on, and—don't irritate me any more by grinning in that absurd way, or I shall strike you before you put up your hands on guard, and then—"

The lad, who was gazing wildly at his companion, stopped short, for, half startled now by his brother middy's manner, Murray had laid his hand upon his arm.

"Steady, Dick," he said quietly. "You're not yourself, old chap. I didn't mean to irritate you. Don't go on like that; here's the doctor coming forward, and I don't want him to come and see you now."

These words wrought a complete change, for to Murray's surprise the agitated lad slipped his wrist free, and brought his hand down firmly upon that of his companion, to close it in a firm grip.

"Here, Frank," he whispered, "don't take any notice of what I said. I couldn't help it. I don't know what has come to me. I must be like the fellow you were talking about, and if the doctor knows, I feel—I'm sure that I shall be much worse."

"Hist! Keep quiet. Let's be looking at the fish. Look at that."

He pointed downward through the clear water, and making an effort Roberts leaned over the rail.

"Yes; I see," he said huskily. "A shark, sure enough."

"Yes; only a little one, though," said Murray aloud. "I say, isn't it curious how those brutes can keep themselves just at a certain depth below the keel, and go on swimming easily at just the same rate as we are going, without seeming to make any effort!"

"Yes, very strange; very, very strange," said Roberts loudly, and with his voice sounding husky and faint. "Hah!" he ejaculated, at last, in a tone of relief. "He's not coming here." For the doctor had suddenly caught sight of Titely and crossed the deck to speak to the man.

"No, he's not coming here," said Murray quietly.

"I oughtn't to be afraid to meet the old fellow, though, Frank," said Roberts, with a sigh, "for I must be ill to turn like that."

"Not ill, old chap," said Murray quietly. "Come on down below."

"Then you think I'm bad?" whispered the midshipman, turning upon his companion sharply.

"Not bad, but upset by the accident."

"And nearly losing my life," whispered Roberts.

"Yes, that's it. Come down and take off your jacket."

"Not to fight," said the lad bitterly. "Oh, Franky! And after you had just saved my life! I must have been half mad, old chap."

"Bah! Drop it, Dick," said Murray quietly. "You come down, and turn into your berth."

"Yes; for a good nap."

"That's right, old chap. Have a good snooze if you can; but don't mind if you can't get to sleep. I'll open the port-hole as wide as possible so as to get as much cool air as I can into the place. All you want is rest. You don't want the doctor."

"No; that's right; I don't want the doctor." And then, eagerly taking his companion's arm, the lad permitted himself to be led below, where he threw off his jacket and turned into his cot with a sigh of relief.

"Ah," he said, "that's better! Never mind me now. Go up on deck, and if any one asks about me say I'm having a sleep after the ducking."

"All right," replied Murray, and he saw in the semi-darkness that the middy had closed his eyes tightly but seemed to have to make an effort to keep the quivering and twitching lids still.

"I say, Franky," came from the cot, after a short pause.

"Well?"

"You're not gone on deck."

"No, not yet. Come, off you go. Like a glass of water?"

"No! No water."

"Well, what is it?"

"I only wanted to say something, Frank," whispered the poor fellow, in a faltering voice.

"Better not, old chap. You want rest, and not to bother your brain with talking."

"Thank you, doctor," said the lad, with a faint smile. "Why, you're ever so much better than old Reston. Yes, I want sleep, for my head seems to be all of a buzz; but I must say something before I can get off."

"Well, then, look sharp and say it. Well, what is it?"

"Only this, Franky, old fellow—"

"Well, what is it?" said Murray, after the pause which followed the last words. "There, let it go; I'm sure it will keep."

"No, no," whispered the lad excitedly. "It won't keep. I feel as if I can't bear to say it, and yet that I can't bear to keep it back. There, that sounds half mad, doesn't it? I—I—"

"Is it anything to do with what you said to me a bit ago?"

"Hah! Thank you, old fellow; you've made me feel as if I could say it now," whispered the lad hoarsely. "Franky, I feel as if I've been an ungrateful beast to you."

"Hold hard, Dick," said Murray quickly; and he laid his hand upon the one lying close to the edge of the cot. "I understand how hard it must be for you to talk about it, and it's just as hard for me to listen. So look here, Dick. You haven't been yourself, lad; when a fellow's a bit off his head he isn't accountable for what he says. I know; so look here. Am I hurt and annoyed by what you said? Not a bit of it. That's right, isn't it?" he continued, as his hand closed firmly upon that of the half hysterical lad. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"Hah! Yes!" sighed the lad gently; and it sounded to Murray as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off the poor fellow's breast.

"Then now you can go to sleep, and when you wake up again I hope you will have forgotten all about it, for that's what I mean to as a matter of course, and— How rum!" said the lad to himself, for the hand that had been returning his pressure had slowly slackened its grasp and lay perfectly inert in his. "Why, he must be asleep! Well, I shall soon know."

As the lad thought this he loosened his own grasp, and the next minute was able to slip his fingers away. Directly after he drew back a little more, and quietly rose from the locker upon which he had been seated close to his companion's side with his back to the cabin stairs.

Then turning to go up on deck, Murray started to find himself face to face with the doctor, who had followed the lads down and stepped in without being heard.

"Asleep?"

Murray pointed to the occupant of the cot without a word, and the doctor bent low and then drew back.

"That's good," he whispered. "It was a nasty shock for the poor fellow, but there's nothing for me to do, my lad. A few hours' sleep will quite set him right. I like this, though, Murray," he continued, laying his hand upon the lad's shoulder and giving it a friendly grip. "You boys are thoughtless young dogs sometimes, but this sort of thing shows that you have got the right stuff in you—the right feeling for one another."

"Oh, I say, doctor, don't!" whispered Murray.

"Not going to, much," said the gentleman addressed. "I'm a rough fellow sometimes, I know, but I notice a deal, and I like to see a bit of feeling shown at the right moment. You don't know how it pleases me when one of our foremast fellows has been laid aside, and I see that a messmate has sneaked down to keep him company, and take care that he is not short of tobacco to chew—Hang him for trying to poison a man who would be far better without it!—Yes, looks as guilty as can be, and quite shamefaced at having been caught playing the nurse. It shows that the dog has got the true man in him, Murray, and though I don't let them see that I notice anything I like it more than you think. There, Roberts is all right," said the doctor gruffly, "but don't stop here breathing up the cool air I want for my patient. Come on deck, my lad; come on deck."

Chapter Twenty One.

"Niggah, Sah."

A month passed swiftly away, during which the *Seafowl* sighted and chased vessel after vessel, each of which had been forced to lie to in response to a shot fired across her bows, but only with a disappointing result—one which sent the captain into a temper which made him dangerous to approach for a full half-hour after the strangers' papers had been examined, to prove that she had nothing whatever to do with the slave-trade.

Then the captain would calm down, and something like the following would take place:

"Did I speak rather sharply to you when the boat returned, Mr Anderson?"

"Oh! Well, rather hastily, sir," said the chief officer drily. "But that's nothing, sir. I'm afraid I was not very polite to you. I was horribly disappointed, sir."

"Naturally," the captain cried excitedly. "Here we are, getting well within range of the islands where we know this wretched traffic is carried on, where the plantations are cultivated by the unfortunate blacks, and we seem bound to encounter a slaver, and yet the days pass on and we prove to be hunting a will-o'-the-wisp."

"Yes, sir, it is maddening," replied the lieutenant. "Day after day I have swept the offing, feeling certain that fate would favour us by letting the sloop come up with that Yankee, or with one of his kidney; but disappointment is always the result."

"Yes, Mr Anderson," cried the captain; "always the result. Never mind," he continued, speaking through his closely set teeth; "our turn will come one of these days." And then with his telescope tightly nipped beneath his arm he would tramp up and down the quarter-deck, pausing now and then to focus his glass, take a peep through, close it again with a snap and renew his march.

"Look at him," said Roberts, one bright morning, as the two lads stood together well forward, where they fondly hoped that they were quite out of their chief's way.

"No, thank you, Dick," was the response; "it isn't safe. He's just in one of his fits, ready to pounce upon any one who gives him a chance. Every one is getting afraid of him. I wish to goodness we could overtake something and have a chance of a prize."

"Well, we must find something to do soon, lad. We're right in amongst the islands, and we shall have to land and hunt out some nigger driver's nest."

"But we can't do anything if we do. We daren't interfere with any plantation where the blacks are employed."

"No, I suppose not; but it would be a glorious change if we got orders to land at one of the islands and could pick up some news or another."

"What sort of news?"

"What sort? Why, information that a slaver was expected to land a consignment, and then—"

"Oh yes, and then! Well, we shall see."

"Yes, we shall see; but I don't believe any of the planters will give us a bit of information."

"Don't you? I do," said Murray. "There are good planters as well as bad planters, and I feel full of hope."

"I don't," said Roberts bitterly. "I think we ought to go back to the West Coast and watch the rivers again. We shall do no good here."

But Murray proved the more likely to be right, for after touching at the little port of one island, where the *Seafowl* was visited by the English gentleman who acted as consul, and who had a long interview with the officers in the cabin, it became bruited through the vessel that something important was on the way, and after boats had been sent ashore and a plentiful supply of fresh water and vegetables taken in, the sloop set sail again, piloted by a fishing boat. Under its guidance the *Seafowl* lay off the shores of what seemed through the glasses to be an earthly paradise, a perfect scene of verdant beauty, with waving trees and cultivated fields, sheltered by a central mountain the configuration of which suggested that it must at one time have been a volcano, one side of which had been blown away so that a gigantic crater many miles across formed a lake-like harbour. Into this deep water, after careful soundings had been taken, the sloop glided and dropped anchor, the pilot with his two men hoisting sail directly after receiving pay.

"This is something like," said Roberts, rubbing his hands. "I wonder how soon we shall go ashore."

"Almost directly, I expect," replied Murray.

"Why? What do you know?"

"Not much; only what Mr Anderson let drop to me."

"Let drop to you!" cried Roberts pettishly. "He never lets things drop to me."

"Well, what does that matter? I always tell you anything that I hear."

"Never mind that. What did Anderson let drop?"

"That the skipper has learned that there is an English gentleman here who farms a plantation with a number of slaves."

"Well, lots do," said Roberts sharply.

"And on the other side of the island there is a very large sugar plantation belonging to an American who is suspected of having dealings with slaving skippers who trade with the West Coast. What do you say to that?"

"That sounds likely; but what then?"

"Well, according to what Mr Anderson told me, the skipper will, if he waits for a chance, be able to catch one if not more of the slavers who come here to land their cargoes, for this American planter to ship off by degrees to other planters who require slaves."

"Ah, yes, I see," cried Roberts. "This Yankee, then, keeps a sort of slave store?"

"Something of the kind," replied Murray, "and if we are careful I suppose that the skipper will have his chance at last; only he says that he is not going to trust any stranger again."

"Well, never mind that," said Roberts, speaking excitedly now as he scanned the slopes of the old verdure-clad hollow in which the sloop lay as if in a lake. "If we are about to lie up here for a time and go ashore and explore we shall have plenty of fun and adventure, with a bit of fighting now and then."

"Likely enough," said Murray.

"But I should like for us to have hit upon the place where that West Coast Yankee brought his cargoes. There's no possibility of this being the spot?"

"One never knows," said Murray thoughtfully.

"Too much to hope," said his companion.

"Oh, I don't know. We've been horribly unlucky, but the luck is bound to turn some time. One thing we do know for certain: that Yankee skipper brings slaves across to the West Indies."

"Yes, we know that."

"Well, this is one of the West Indian Islands."

"A precious small one, though," said Roberts in a depreciatory tone.

"What of that? We know for certain that there is the owner of a plantation here who trades in slaves, and there is nothing to prevent his having dealings with the man we want."

"M-m-no; but there must be several such men as he. Well, we must get some fun," cried Roberts, "and if we don't find all we want—"

"We may get something," said Murray cheerfully. "Now then, which of us will have the first chance of going ashore?"

"You, of course," replied Roberts bitterly. "Some fellows get all the luck. No, no; I don't mean that, old chap."

"Look at Anderson," cried Murray; "he's taking orders from the skipper. Hooray, Dick! See if it isn't for a boat to be sent ashore. Whose turn is it going to be?"

That question was soon answered, for the captain, who was pacing to and fro searchingly overlooking the preparations for a boat going ashore, suddenly caught sight of the two lads.

"Oh, there you are, Mr Murray!" he exclaimed. "Well, has not Mr Anderson given you your orders to accompany the boat?"

Roberts's face puckered up.

"No, sir," said the lieutenant, taking upon himself to answer. "I intended to take Mr Roberts with me."

Murray felt disappointed, but all the same he could not refrain from laughing at the sudden change which came over his fellow midddy's face, to the latter's wonder.

"Oh, I see," said the captain, raising his hat and re-adjusting it in a fidgety way he had when excited, which was followed by a fresh settling of the head-covering. "Quite right; quite right; but here's Mr Murray growing dull and sluggish with doing nothing; you had better take him too. One will help to keep the other out of mischief."

Roberts winced, and turned sharply to glance at Murray angrily, as the latter hurried to take his place in the stern sheets.

"What's the matter, Dick?" Murray whispered, as soon as the pair were in their places.

"Matter? Any one would think I was a child and ought to have some one to take care of me. Now, look here, young fellow, if you grin at me before old Anderson there's going to be a quarrel."

"All right," said Murray coolly; "but keep it till we get back."

Roberts looked round sharply, but he had no opportunity to say more, for the chief officer descended to his place, Murray moved aside to let his comrade take the tiller ropes, the boatswain gave the cutter a vigorous thrust off, the men lowered their oars, and then bending low to their task they made the smooth water of the natural harbour begin to rattle beneath the bows.

The boat was run across beside the heavily forested shores, where, before long, but after many disappointments, an opening was found which seemed to be the entrance to a sluggish river, and as they glided in the overhanging trees soon shut them off from all sight of the sunny bay they had crossed. The bright light gave place to a dim twilight which at times grew almost dark, while the river wound and doubled upon itself like a serpent, and twice over, after a long pull, the lieutenant bade the men lie upon their oars, to rest, while he hesitated as to whether he should go farther.

But all seemed so mysterious and tempting that, in the full expectation of reaching some town or port belonging to the island, the rowing was again and again resumed till hours had passed, and at last the chief officer exclaimed—

"It's like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, gentlemen, but I cannot help feeling that we are on the highroad to the interior, and, in spite of the utter loneliness of the place, I don't like to give up."

"Of course you don't, sir," said Murray, as the men rested upon their oars, and he scanned the heavily wooded banks. "I wonder whether there are any plantations worked by the slaves: I can see no sign of a house."

"No, I was thinking of that," said Roberts, who was sweeping the distance with a glass; "but there is a bit of an opening yonder which looks as if the river branched there, and—Hallo! I didn't see it at first. There's some sort of a boat lying moored in that nook."

"Where?" cried Murray.

"Yonder among the trees. Take the glass, sir."

Mr Anderson took the telescope.

"To be sure: the river does branch there. Steer for that cove, Mr Roberts, and let us see what the little vessel is like.

At all events here is some sign of the place being inhabited. Give way, my lads."

The men pulled hard, and as they progressed, instead of obtaining a better view of the vessel, it seemed only to glide in behind the trees until they were close in and passed up what proved to be the mouth of a little creek, when Murray uttered an ejaculation.

"What is it, Mr Murray?" cried the lieutenant.

"The lugger, sir!"

"Well, I see it is, my lad. I dare say its owner's house is close at hand."

"But don't you see, sir?" cried Murray excitedly.

"Of course I do, but there's no one aboard, apparently."

"Oh, I don't mean that, sir!" cried the lad. "It's the lugger we first came upon off that African river."

"What!" cried the lieutenant. "Impossible! Run close in, Mr Roberts." And the men pulled the cutter close alongside the swift-looking boat with its raking masts and lowered lug sails.

"Humph!" said the lieutenant. "The same build, the same rig, the same coloured canvas. Well, really, Mr Murray, it is a strange resemblance."

"I'm almost sure it is the same boat, sir," cried Murray.

"That's as good as saying that the Yankee who tricked us so has sailed right across the Atlantic with the slaving schooner, and we have had the luck to follow in her track, and caught up to her."

"Yes, sir; I don't think there's any doubt of it," cried Murray.

"Then, if you are right, Mr Murray, the slaving schooner will be somewhere close at hand."

"Yes, sir; I hope so," replied Murray. "I am ready to hope so, my lad, but I say it is impossible. That was a lugger, and this is a lugger, and of course there is a certain amount of resemblance in the rig; but you are jumping at conclusions just because this is similar."

"I think not, sir. I took so much notice of the boat; but look here, sir, Tom May was with me when I went forward to speak to the Yankee, and he would know.—Here, May, isn't that the lugger the American planter was on when we brought her to?"

The sailor stared hard at the vessel hanging by a line fastened to what seemed to be a cocoanut tree.

"Same build, sir; same rig, sir. Might have been built up the same river, but it arn't the one we saw that day, sir—Wish it was!"

"There, Murray, what do you say now?"

"That I didn't think it possible that I could have been so deceived. Would it be possible that it could have been built by the same shipwright, sir?"

"Quite, my lad; and it is quite possible that we may come across a schooner or two built just like the one we saw escape. There is no doubt that many slaving schooners are built in these islands especially for the trade. Look out, my lads, and don't miss anything. There may be one of them moored safely in a snug creek.—What was that?"

"Nigger, sir," said Tom May. "I just ketched sight of him squinting at us among the trees. There he is again, sir."

This time Roberts had caught sight of a black figure wearing the very simple costume of a pair of loose cotton drawers, his round woolly head covered with a broad-brimmed hat formed of extremely thin strips of thin cane.

"Scared at us," said the sailor, for as the cutter was rowed alongside of the lugger, the black darted out of sight, but, evidently curious to know what was going on and the object of the strangers, he peered out again.

"Ahoy there!" shouted one of the sailors.

That was enough. The black disappeared once more, but only for a few moments before he was peeping again.

"You hail him this time, Mr Murray," cried the lieutenant.

"Ahoy there!" cried Murray. "What boat's that?"

The black clung to one of the trees on the bank of the river and watched the speaker eagerly.

"He doesn't understand," said the lieutenant. "I dare say he only speaks bad Spanish. But try him again."

"Can you speak English?" cried Murray.

"Yes, massa!"

"Come, that's better," said the lieutenant. "Try him again, Mr Murray." And the lad shouted—

"Whose lugger is that?"

"Massa's, sah."

"Oh!" cried Murray; and then obeying a sudden thought, "Where is the schooner?"

"Gone sail round um ilum, sah."

"With slaves?" said Murray.

"Gone take big lot black fellow, sah."

"What for?"

"Hoe de cotton, sah; plant de sugar, sah," said the black, showing his white teeth.

"When will the schooner come back, Sambo?" said Murray.

"Name not Sambo, sah," said the black.

"What is it then?"

"Jupe, sah, Jupiter."

"Ask him where his master lives."

"Yes, sir!—Where does your master live?"

The black rested the heavy hoe he carried among the thick growth of the trees which rang alongside of the stream, and pointed away into the dense cover at the back.

"Jupe show massa."

"Is your master away with the schooner?" asked Murray.

"No, sah. Massa never go to sea. Cap' Huggum go in um schooner."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Mr Anderson. "Now then, my lad; if we land you will show us the way to your master's place?"

"Yes, sah. Massa Huggum's 'long with massa now."

"Who is Master Huggums?" said the lieutenant.

"Massa, sah. Make um niggah work, sah;" and as he spoke the black showed his teeth, raised his hoe, and brought the handle sharply against the trunk of some kind of palm-tree. "That's de way make um work. Lazy rascal go to sleep. Massa Huggum wake um up."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Does he wake you up like that?"

The black burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Iyah, iyah, iyah!" he cackled out, and evidently thoroughly enjoying the questioning, he threw himself down in the thick cane growth, rolled over and over, and then sprang up again. "No give Jupe de whip, massa. Find Jupe fas' sleep. *Ck, ck, ck!*"

And he threw out one bare foot as if emulating some one who had heavily kicked a slave who was lying asleep.

The feeling of fear that had made the black dart back into the cover of the trees had now passed away in favour of a display of eager curiosity, and he came close to the boat, where he watched the sailors laying in their oars and the coxswain hook on to one of the trees, while the officers prepared to land.

"Now, then," said the lieutenant, "show us a dry place; it is all muddy here."

"Jupe show landum place, sah," said the man sharply.

"Very well, and then you can lead us up to the house."

"Yes, sah. Take buccra up through plantashum, but Jupe no dare go."

"What do you mean?" said Mr Anderson. "You offered to go just now."

"Yes, sah; but Jupe forget all 'bout Massa Huggum. De overseer go in great big pashum, sah. Call Jupe ugly black nigger, sah."

"What for?"

"Take buccra officer up to plantashum see de niggers, sah."

"Oh, that's how Mr Huggins or Huggum goes on, is it? Well, never mind him," said the lieutenant; "lead us up to your master."

The black showed his teeth again and indulged in his cackling laugh.

"Well, what does that mean, sir?"

"Jupe no dah go, sah. Massa Huggum say cut him libbah out."

"Never mind Mr Huggins, my lad. He'd better! Here, what's your real master's name?"

"Massa Allum, sah."

"Well, take us to him."

The black shook his head.

"Mass' Allum 'fraid Massa Huggum, sah. Massa Huggum call um big name."

"Then this Huggins is the real master; eh, boy?"

"Dat's the trufe, sah. Ebbery boy in plantation 'fraid of Massa Huggum."

"Well, look here, my sable friend, please understand this: nobody here is afraid of your Mr Huggins. Show us the way to the plantation, and if he dares to touch you I'll take him on board, and the boatswain's mate shall tie him up and give him the cat—flog him; do you understand?"

"Mass' say give Mass' Huggum whip?"

"Yes, or any one else, boy. Now then, show us the way."

"Massa say quite sewer?"

"Yes, quite sure. Now then, lead on."

The black grinned at everybody in turn, and tramped along by the edge of the sluggish stream for some hundred yards before stopping short by the trampled bank which was plainly marked, and the commencement of a rough path was seen running in amongst the trees.

The lieutenant gave orders for the men to land, a couple of boat-keepers were left, and the well-armed crew were ready for starting when a black face suddenly presented itself peering round a good-sized tree-trunk and gazing curiously at the newcomers.

Murray was the first to catch sight of the fresh comer and draw the lieutenant's attention to his appearance.

"Is this one of your men, you sir?" cried the chief officer, and he pointed down the winding path.

The black stared for a moment or two before following the direction of the officer's pointing hand. Then catching sight of his fellow black he uttered a yell, raised his hoe in both hands, and sent the heavy iron implement whirling along the path, to be brought up with a crash against a good-sized tree. But before it came in contact with the trunk the black at whom it was aimed sprang in among the bushes and disappeared, while the guide trotted on to where the hoe had fallen and picked it up, shouting in through the thick growth—

"You let me catch you 'way from your work, you ugly, lazy, black rasclum, I crack you cocoanut!" Then striking the haft of the hoe he had picked up against the tree-trunk to tighten the loosened head, he turned again to the approaching boat crew. "Lazy black rasclum," cried the grinning guide, as if for the benefit of all the newcomers. "Jupe gib um toco catch him again. Massa come along now.—Black dog! Let me catch um again!"

The lieutenant frowned and glanced at the two midshipmen, who were exchanging glances which meant a great deal. Then with a shrug of his shoulders he made a sign to the black guide to go on, a sign which was grasped at once, and the fellow stepped out with his heavy hoe shouldered and a grin at the lads.

"Jupe make um run fas'," he said. "Jupe teach um leave um work!"

"Look sharp, sir, and show the way," cried the chief officer angrily.

"Yes, massa; yes, massa," cried the fellow, grinning. "Jupe show massa de way. Jupe de boy teach de black fella do de work. Lazy rasclum. Ketchum 'sleep under tree."

"Here, May," cried the lieutenant angrily, "take this black brute forward a dozen yards and make him show the way and hold his tongue the while."

"Ay, ay, sir!" growled the sailor, with a grim look, as giving his musket a hitch and then turning it in his hands he brought the butt roughly against the guide's chest. "Now then, Ebony," he cried, "for'ard it is, and drop all that there palaver. Lead on and show the way."

"Yes, sah; Jupe show de—"

"D'yer hear, you black swab!" cried the sailor. "Show the way to your master's house, and keep that talking box of yours shut up, or—"

May made an offer at the black as if to bring the butt of the musket he carried down upon his toes, and accompanied it with so meaning a look that the guide's eyes opened widely and he was in the act of making a dash sidewise into the cane brake at the side, but the sailor's free hand came down upon the fellow's shoulder with a loud clap.

"Ah, would you!" he cried. "None of that! Bullets run faster than legs, my lad."

"That will do, May," cried the lieutenant; "but mind he does not slip through your fingers."

"No, sir; right, sir," said the sailor, keeping a firm grip upon the black's shoulder and seeming to steer him in and out along the windings of the rough track, while the boat's crew and officers followed behind.

"The black fellow disgusted me, gentlemen," said the lieutenant, turning a glance at the lads. "Jack in office generally proves to be the worst tyrant."

The distance from the creek proved far greater than the officers expected, and they threaded the forest for hours before they came upon cultivated plantations dotted with black figures hard at work, and evidently superintended by men of the same type as the guide, who moved forward quietly and quite cowed by the stern-looking seaman who had him in custody, and who at last stopped short pointing at a long, low, well-built house half hidden amongst the trees and beautiful enough to raise an exclamation from Murray.

"Yes, the place looks beautiful enough," said the lieutenant, "but I'm afraid its beauty depends upon the supply of poor wretches who are forced to labour beneath the burning sun with the lash as a stimulus whenever they show signs of slackening. Oh, here we are," continued the speaker. "Is this the redoubtable Mr Huggins?"

"No, sir; I should say it would be Mr Allen," replied Murray.

"Yes, you must be right, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant. "He looks more like a sick man than the owner of a slave plantation."

For a quiet, subdued-looking individual in white cotton garments had stepped out of a wide window with green painted open jalousies, to take off his Panama straw hat and stand screening his eyes with his hand.

The next minute the officer had halted his men in front of the place, and May touched his hat.

"Let the prisoner go, sir?"

"Yes: we can find our way back;" and as the sailor slackened his grasp and gave his head a jerk in the direction of the well-tilled fields, the black made a bound and dashed off, turning sharply before reaching the edge of the trees which backed up the house and seemed to shelter a range of buildings, to raise his hoe and shake it threateningly at the sailor.

"That man ought not to behave in this way," said the gentleman who had stepped out. "Has he been insolent to you, sir?"

"More unpleasant than insolent," replied the lieutenant. "I have required him for a guide to find your house, sir."

"Ah!" said the former speaker slowly, as he looked slowly round. "You are an officer from one of the King's ships?"

"Yes, sir; exactly so," replied the gentleman addressed.

"And I presume that your ship is off the island. Can I be of any service to you?"

"Well, yes," said Mr Anderson, "by giving me the information I am seeking."

"I shall be glad to do so, sir, of course. May I ask what you require?"

"Information about the slaving that is carried on here. I see you employ many slaves."

The stranger winced slightly, and then bowed his head.

"Yes," he said; "I have a large tract of cultivated land here in sugar, cotton and a little coffee, but I have a right to employ slave labour after the fashion of many of my fellow-countrymen."

"No doubt, sir," said the lieutenant firmly, while the two midshipmen and the boat's crew stood listening and looking on—"slaves born upon your estate."

The owner of the plantation winced again, and then in a nervous hesitating way continued—

"I have employed slave labour for many years now, sir, and I hope with humanity and quite in accordance with the law."

"I am sorry to say, sir," said the lieutenant, "that my captain has been otherwise informed. He has been given to understand that at this plantation and in connection herewith a regular trade in the unfortunate blacks is systematically carried on."

"Do I understand, sir," said the planter, in the same low hesitating fashion, "that you are connected with one of the King's ships whose object is to suppress the slave-trade?"

"Yes, sir; that is quite right."

"Will you step in, sir?" said the planter. "You are heated with your walk in the hot sun, and your men must need refreshment."

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders and said gravely, "I am here, sir, to do my duty."

"Yes, of course, sir," said the planter; "and I beg you will not think that I am trying to bribe you in any way. I am not surprised at this visit. I have expected it for years. I am sorry, sir, but I must own it: I am not my own master."

At this moment another figure appeared upon the scene in the shape of a little thin yellow-complexioned man, dressed like the planter in white cotton, and wearing a similar hat of Panama make. He stepped out of the French window where the late speaker had appeared, but with a quick, eager movement, and as he stood glancing sharply round the lieutenant and the midshipmen simultaneously gave a start which seemed to be communicated to the whole of the party, and with a thrill of excitement running through him Murray whispered sharply—

“Our friend the Yankee, Dick!”

“Yes,” whispered back that individual, “and we’re going to hold him tight.”

As for the lieutenant, he took a couple of steps forward, and exclaimed in a sarcastic tone of voice—

“How do, sir! I think we have met before.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Overseer.

The American turned quickly at the officer’s words, and looked at him curiously.

“Met?” he said, without the slightest sign of recognition. “Very like, sirr,” he added, in a peculiar drawl; “where was it?”

“You do not seem to remember,” said the lieutenant. “Let me refresh your memory: a few weeks back, off the coast of Africa.”

The man half-closed his eyes and stared hard at the first lieutenant and then at the two middies in turn.

“Last year, yew mean, squire?” he said. “No: don’t seem to know you again.”

“Then I shall have to refresh your memory a little more. Mr Murray,” continued the officer, “who do you say this man is?”

“The indiarubber planter, sir, who played us that trick.”

The man turned sharply upon the lad.

“And who do you say he is, Mr Roberts?”

“The skipper of the lugger, sir, who guided us up the African river.”

“There,” said the lieutenant; “will that do for you?”

“I guess I don’t know what you are talking about, mister,” said the man sharply. “You said something about a trick. Is this some trick of yours?”

“Why, confound your impudence, sir!” cried the lieutenant hotly. “How dare you speak like this to a King’s officer!”

“Don’t get in a fuss, mister,” said the Yankee coolly. “We don’t deal in King’s officers here, and don’t want to. Here, Mr Allen, you’re an Englishman; these people are more in your way. What do they want?”

“It is the lieutenant of a ship that has cast anchor here, Huggins,” said the gentleman addressed agitatedly. “It is about the slaves.”

“Eh? About the slaves? Our slaves—your slaves? Well, what about ‘em?”

“Yes; about the slaves we have here. You understand?”

“Not me! Not a bit. He’s been talking to you, has he?”

“Yes—yes.”

“Well, then, you’d better finish the business. Tell him I don’t want to trade any away. We’ve got no more than will get in the crops.”

“Speak to him,” said the other, who seemed to grow more nervous and agitated.

“Oh, very well. Look here, mister; you’ve come to the wrong shop. I don’t understand what you mean by making believe to know me, but I don’t know you, and I’m not going to trade in blacks with any British ship. Understand?”

“Understand, sir?” cried the lieutenant, who was growing scarlet with heat and wrath. “It seems to me that you do not understand. Pray, who are you?”

“Business man and overseer of this plantation for my friend here, Mr James Allen, who trusts me to carry on his affairs for him, being a sick man just getting over a fever. There, I don’t want to be surly to an English officer, though I never found one civil to me. You’ve dropped anchor off here, and I suppose you want water. Well, if you do I’ll put a gang of my slaves on to help your men fill their casks.”

“I am exceedingly obliged to you, sir,” said the lieutenant sarcastically.

"Wal, that's spoke better," said the American. "And if you want some fresh meat and vegetables you can have a boat-load or two if you like to pay for 'em with a chest or so of tea. You'd like a few bottles o' port wine, too, for your complaint, wouldn't you, Allen?" he continued, turning to the pale, nervous man at his side.

"Yes—yes," faltered the poor fellow.

"Really, you are too condescending," cried the lieutenant. "Mr Roberts—Mr Murray—did you ever hear the like of this? Here, May—Titely—what do you say to this American gentleman?"

Tom May took off his straw hat and gave his curly hair a rake with his fingers, while Titely stared with all his might.

"It caps me, sir," said the latter, while Tom May looked at the American, then at the two middies in turn, and shook his head.

"Well, sir, why don't you speak?" cried his officer angrily.

"'Cause it's such a rum un, sir."

"Bah! Speak out, man, and don't hesitate. You remember seeing this man before?"

"Well, sir, I seem to ha' seen him afore, and then I don't seem, and get kind o' mixed up. Sometimes it looks like him and sometimes it don't look like him, sir. Beg your pardon, sir, but would you mind asking my messmate here—Titely?"

"Bah, man! The sun has made you giddy."

"Well, skipper, when you like I'm ready for an answer. Want the water and fresh vittles?"

"My dear Huggins," said the trembling owner of the place, "it would be far better if you explained to the King's officer —"

"You leave me and the King's officer alone, James Allen," said the American sturdily.

"But I'm sure—" whispered the planter.

"So'm I. You keep your tongue between your teeth, and I dessay we can settle matters. Look here, Mr Officer, I'm boss of all the business here, and you needn't take no notice of this gentleman. I telled you that Mr Allen has been in bed with fever, and it's left him, as you see, very shaky upon his legs. Your coming has upset him and made him a bit nervous. Here, I'll put in a word for him, poor chap. Jes' you ask your skipper to give him a small bottle o' quinine. You won't want paying for that, being charity."

The lieutenant turned his back upon the speaker angrily, and spoke to the feeble-looking planter.

"Look here, sir," he cried, "you are nominally owner of this plantation and the slaves upon it."

"Now, look here, mister," said the American angrily; "I spoke civil to you, and I offered to help you and your ship with what you wanted in the way of fresh meat and vegetables. What's the good of returning stones for stuff?"

"My good fellow, will you be silent," cried the lieutenant, "and let me deal with your master?"

"My master!" snarled the American. "I am my own master, sirr. I tell you I'm boss of all this here show, and if I like to turn nasty—"

"My dear Huggins—" interposed the planter.

"Shut your mouth, you old fool," growled the American, "and don't interfere."

"Why, you insulting scoundrel!" roared the lieutenant. "Here, Mr Allen—that is your name, I believe?—you had better leave this matter in my hands, and I will settle it."

The American stood listening with his eyes half closed and a peculiarly ugly look upon his countenance, while the planter made a deprecating sign with his hands.

"I see very plainly, sir," continued the lieutenant, "that this insolent Yankee is presuming upon your weak state of health and assuming a power that he cannot maintain. You have been placing yourself in a position in which it would be better to—"

"Now see here, stranger," burst in the American, "I'm a man who can stand a deal, but you can go too far. You come swaggering here with a boat-load of your men and think that you're going to frighten me, sirr—but you're just about wrong, for if I like to call up my men they'd bundle you and your lot back into your boat—for I suppose you have got one."

"Look here, sir," said the lieutenant, as he caught the flashing eyes of the two middies and the fidgety movements of his men, "I am loth to treat an American with harshness, but take this as a warning; if you insult your master and me again I'll have you put in irons."

"What!" cried the man, with a contemptuous laugh. "You'd better!"

The lieutenant started slightly, and that movement seemed to tighten up the nerves of his men.

"Can't you understand, sirr, that if I like to hold back you'll get no provisions or water here?"

"Confound your supplies, sir! And look here, if I must deal with you let me tell you that I have good reason to believe that under the pretence of acting as a planter here, you are carrying on a regular trade in slaves with the vile chiefs of

the West Coast of Africa."

"I don't care what you believe, mister," said the American defiantly. "I am working this plantation and producing sugar, coffee and cotton—honest goods, mister, and straightforward merchandise. Who are you, I should like to know, as comes bullying and insulting me about the tools I use for my projuce!"

"You soon shall know, sir," said the lieutenant, and he just glanced at the pale, trembling man, who had sunk into a cane chair, in which he lay back to begin wiping his streaming brow—"I am an officer of his Britannic Majesty's sloop of war *Seafowl*, sent to clear the seas of the miscreants who, worse than murderers, are trading in the wretched prisoners of war who are sold to them by the African chiefs."

"Don't get up too much of it, Mr Officer," said the American, deliberately taking out a very large black cigar from his breast pocket and thrusting it between his lips, before dropping into another cane chair and clapping his hands; "this here ain't a theayter, and you ain't acting. That there's very pretty about his Britannic Majesty's sloop of war. Look here, sir; bother his Britannic Majesty!"

At these last words a thrill of rage seemed to run through the line of sailors, and they stood waiting for an order which did not come, for the lieutenant only smiled at the American's insolent bravado and waited before interfering with him to hear what more he had to say.

"It sounds very lively and high faluting about your sweeping the high seas of miscreants, as you call 'em, and all that other stuff as you keep on hunting up with African chiefs and such like; but what's that got to do with an invalid English gentleman as invests his money in sugar, coffee and cotton, and what has it to do with his trusted Aymurrican experienced planter as looks after his black farm hands, eh?"

"Only this, sir," said the lieutenant, "that if he or they are proved to be mixed up with this horrible nefarious trade they will be answerable to one of the British courts of law, their mart will be destroyed, and their vessels engaged in the trade will become prizes to his Majesty's cruiser."

"Say, mister," said the American coolly—and then to a shivering black who had come out of the house bearing a coarse yellow wax candle which he tried to shelter between his hands, evidently in dread lest it should become extinct,—"Take care, you black cuss, or you'll have it out!"

Murray heard the poor fellow utter a sigh of relief, but he did not even wince, only stood motionless as his tyrant took the wax taper, held it to his cigar till it burned well, and then extinguished it by placing the little wick against the black man's bare arm, before pitching the wax to the man, who caught it and hurried away.

"Say, mister," said the overseer again, "don't you think you fire off a little too much of your Britannic Majesty and your King George fireworks?"

"Go on, sir," said the lieutenant, biting his lip. "Yes, that's what I'm going to do," continued the man coolly. "What's all this here got to do with a free-born Aymurrican citizen?"

"Only this, sir, that your so-called American citizen will have no protection from a great country for such a nefarious transaction."

"There you go again, mister! That's I don't know how many times you've let off that there prize word of yours, neefarious. There, don't bluff, sir; to use your old country word, them as plays at bowls must expeck rubbers. No, no, no, don't you begin ordering your fellows to meddle with me, because I'm rather nasty when I'm interfered with, 'sides which I've got some one inside the house to take care of me if it was wanted, as you can see for yourself—twenty of 'em, boys who can use a rifle; and that's what your chaps can't do."

In spite of himself the lieutenant started and raised his eyes, to become aware of the fact that some dozen or fourteen rifle barrels were protruding from the windows of the long low house, while others were being thrust from another building away to the right—a shed-like place that had been unnoticed before, through its covering of densely growing creepers.

"Don't do that, youngsters," said the American, with a sneering laugh; "they wouldn't hurt anybody if you pulled 'em out, and some of my fellows indoors might take it as what you call a signal to draw their knives."

"Trapped!" muttered the lieutenant to himself; but he did not wince, only stood thinking out to himself what would be his best course to pursue, and his musings were interrupted by the American, who lay back sending forth great puffs of smoke without a quiver visible in his face.

"Looks nasty, don't it, Mr Officer?" said the man, in his long, slow drawl. "But don't you be skeart; they won't fire without I give the order or they see me hurt. Then I won't answer for them. 'Tain't because they're so fond of me, youngsters," he continued, with an ugly cat-like grin, "because they ain't; but they're afraid, and that's a good deal better for me. And look here, they're lying back there in the dark because I told 'em to, and you can't see them; but they're not niggers—oh no! You can't trust niggers to fight. Your Jack Tars there would send a hundred of 'em running. Niggers are good field hands, and my chaps are bad at that, but they can fight, and so I tell you. Now, skipper," he continued, turning quietly to the lieutenant, who was pressing his lower lip hard between his teeth, "I think we understand one another now, and that you see I didn't put up any bunkum when I telled you that I was boss of this show. So you let me alone, and I'll let you."

"Sir," said the lieutenant firmly, "I give you fair warning that if harm happens to a man of my party my captain will land a force that will burn this place to the ground."

"Very kind of him, too," said the man grimly, "but he won't, because he mustn't. You don't seem to savvy, skipper, that you ain't at home here. Do you know, sir, where you are?"

"Yes, sir; on the shores of one of his Majesty's West Indian Islands."

"I thought so, squire; well, then, you're jest about wrong, and you've no more business here than if this here was Spain. I dessay you think you can hyste the British flag here, but I tell you that you can't, for this here island is called

South Baltimore, and whenever a flag is hysted here it's the stars and stripes and the Aymurrican eagle, what some fellows call the goose and gridiron; and that's so."

"South Baltimore!" cried the lieutenant, who looked puzzled by the announcement. "And pray, sir, who gave the island that name?"

"I did," said the Yankee drily. "Now then, will that do for you?"

"No, it will not do," cried the lieutenant hotly. "My officer will need some far better explanation—one based upon greater authority than this—before he gives up the duty he has to fulfil."

"Vurry well, sir, let him go and find a better explanation, then. It don't trouble me. Only you had better march your men back aboard your schooner, or brig, or whatever you call it, before they get falling out with my fellows. You see you men's sailors like yours are, and my fellows may get upset by your chaps, for I always find that British sailors get a bit sarcy and quarrelsome when they come ashore, and no matter how quiet and patient the Aymurricans, they lay themselves out for a fight."

"As in the present case, sir," said the lieutenant sarcastically.

"Jes' so, squire. So now you take my advice and march your chaps back again. You see how the land lies, and as I've said afore, I don't want to ride rusty over your skipper. You've on'y got to send word ashore as you wants fresh provisions and water, and say as you're ready to make a fair swap with a few things as we want, and there you are."

The lieutenant stood frowning in silence, turning his eyes from the American to the feeble-looking planter, and from him to the two middies and his men, in each case finding that he was being watched eagerly, every eye seeming to ask the same question—what are you going to do?—while on his part he felt the impossibility of responding.

For the responsibility he felt was almost maddening. It was plain enough that his men called upon him to resent the American planter's insolence, and that if he did not do so at once, not only would the two lads and his men look upon his behaviour as cowardly and degrading to the British *prestige*, but the Yankee and his faintly seen scum of followers would treat the whole party with contempt.

It was a painful position, for the Yankee had plainly shown him the risks he ran. He would not have hesitated for a moment, in spite of the display of armed men ready to attack, for if he had felt free to act he would have chanced everything, depending as he felt he could upon his little party of thoroughly well-drilled able-bodied seamen, and boldly attacked at once; but he had to think of his captain and the great risk he ran of bringing him into difficulties and forcing him to answer for some international difficulty over the rights of the United States, which, if the American overseer was right, were sure to be jealously maintained.

It was hard to do, and Murray noticed a peculiar twitching about his officer's lips as he turned at last to the smiling, sneering man, his first words showing his hearers how bitterly he felt his position and the necessity for obeying the teachings of the proverb that discretion is the better part of valour.

"Well, sir," he said, in a cold, hard fashion, "I have heard all that you have to say. As to the correctness of your statement that we are not upon British soil, I must leave that to my superior's judgment and decision, for certainly I cannot feel that it is my duty to proceed farther without drawing off my men and going back to lay the matter before Captain Kingsberry."

"That's right, Mr Lieutenant," said the overseer. "Nothing like it. You always do that; when you find yourself in a tight corner, you get out of it as soon as you can."

"Ha, ha, ha!" rang out in a harsh, discordant tone from somewhere inside the house, and this acted as the signal for a burst of jeering laughter which made the lieutenant wince and his face turn pale even to his lips, which he bit until they were white, while a low, dull murmur that sounded like the threatening premonitory growl of the British bulldog being pricked by an insult, ran through the group of sailors.

"Silence, there!" cried the lieutenant, in a choking voice; and the murmur died away.

"That's right, Mr Officer," said the American. "Yew always drop on to your fellows sharply when they show signs of mutiny. I allus do. And you within there, none of that row. Quiet, do you hear?"

There was another low mocking laugh, but the American paid no heed, only went on talking at Mr Anderson.

"That was very good of you, squire, but while you're about it if I were you I'd just say a word or two to them two bantam-cock-like boys of officers of yours, who keep on sneering like at my men and setting their backs up. You don't mean it, of course, being ready to do what's right. So you give 'em a good talking to when you get 'em back safe aboard. You'd best do it, for if them puppies keep on that how they may make my chaps wild. Now just look at that!"

For the two midshipmen had been growing warmer for some minutes past as they listened to the American's insulting language, and at last, hot with annoyance, Murray, unable to contain himself and forgetting discipline, clapped his hand upon his side-arms and took a step forward, his eyes flashing with boyish anger, and exclaimed—

"Do you mean that insulting language for me, sir?"

Perhaps there was something in the lad's manner, as in that of Roberts', who immediately followed his example, or maybe the overseer's men were only waiting for an opportunity to be aggressive. At any rate, they seized upon the opportunity to burst out into a derisive laugh.

"Quiet! Steady, my lads!" cried the lieutenant fiercely.

"But, sir—" began Murray hotly.

"Silence, sir!" roared his officer; and then what happened was too much for him, for a dark shadow came from

somewhere amongst the trees, a shadow-like something which described a curve and struck the speaker full in the chest, and fell to the ground in the shape of a great unhusked coconut.

In an instant the lieutenant's hand flew to his sword, but he checked himself. His act, though, had its effect, for there was a yell of laughter, and the one great nut was followed by a shower, two of which half drove the two young officers mad as they struck heavily, the rest having effect amongst the sailors, who with one impulse fell into line and presented arms.

There was another yell of laughter, and the overseer sprang up from his cane chair.

"That'll do!" he shouted; but he made no effort further to check his men, but dashed in through one of the open windows of the house, just as from another came the sharp flash and puff of smoke from a rifle, followed by a ragged volley from the creeper-covered building that lay farther back.

This was answered by a fierce British cheer and a rush on the part of the sailors, who either carried their officers with them or were led—no one afterwards seemed to know—but in almost less time than it takes to describe, the little party of sailors swept through the plantation house from front to back, driving its defenders before them, and without firing a shot till a few desultory rifle-shots began to spatter from the thick patch of tropic forest which sheltered the back of the attractive dwelling. Then, and then only, three or four volleys silenced the enemy's fire, and it was evident that the overseer and his men had now fled, taking with them the planter, if he had not retreated by his own efforts, for he was nowhere visible. Then all was silence as soon as the rustling and crackling of cane and the heavy shaddock-like foliage had ceased.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Murray's Mission.

"Hah! I did not mean this," cried the lieutenant; and his eyes lit upon Murray, who winced and felt guilty as he stood dirk in hand panting and waiting for his superior officer's reproof, which he felt must come. "Ah, Mr Murray," he continued, as he took off his hat and wiped his forehead, "you there? Any one hurt?"

"I saw Tom May fall, sir," replied the lad, as the incident was brought to his mind by his officer's question.

"Picked him up again, sir," came in a deep growl, "but two of our messmates has got it, I find."

"That's bad," said the lieutenant. "Who are they?"

There was no response, and the lieutenant turned sharply upon the midshipman.

"Mr Murray," he said, "take two men, May and another, and try if you can find your way down to the boat. Do you think you can?"

"Yes, sir."

"Off with you, then, at the double. When you reach the boat, out oars, and with the two boat-keepers try and reach the sloop. Don't run more risks than you can help. If you are cut off by enemies on the banks, retreat back to me here and help me hold this place until the captain sends a force to my relief. You will report to Captain Kingsberry that I did everything possible to avoid an encounter. But there—you know. I trust to your discretion, my lad, in spite of your late mistake. There, take May and Titely. Now off."

Just at that moment Roberts, who had been standing close at hand, stepped forward, to cry eagerly—

"Did you say I was to go with Murray, sir?"

"What, you? Go with Murray?" cried the lieutenant. "No, sir. What! Do you want to leave me in the lurch?" Then, knowing from old experience the jealous motive which animated the lad who was left out of the commission, the officer clapped the midshipman on one shoulder warmly. "No, no, Roberts; I can't spare you. I want your help, my lad; and besides, you will be safer with me than with Murray."

Roberts winced and turned a reproachful look upon his officer.

"I wasn't trying to make myself safe, sir," he said bitterly. "I wanted to be in the thick of it all, sir, and not left out as usual."

"Of course you did, my boy; and that's where you are going to be, I expect."

By this time Murray and his two men were passing out of sight, followed by the midshipman's longing eyes; and directly after the lad had forgotten his disappointment in the orders he was busily trying to obey. For in the full belief that the overseer would return with his followers, the lieutenant set to work trying to put the house in a state of defence.

This was no easy task, for with four times the number of men that were at his service the officer would have found it difficult to bar and barricade the lower windows of the plantation house and secure the doors back and front.

Fortunately it was soon found that the occupant or builder of the house must have had some notion of the possibility of an attack being made upon the place, for the doors were strong, the lower windows were each furnished with stout shutters and bars, and these having been secured and the bottom of the staircase carefully barricaded, a better chance was offered for holding the house, that is, of defending the first floor from any attack that might be made from within or without.

"There, Mr Roberts," cried the lieutenant, "I think that is all we can do for the present, and if our friend the overseer ventures to bring his men on we shall be able to give a good account of a few of them. Can you suggest anything more to

strengthen the bottom of that staircase?"

"I think we might drag some of those chests out of the rooms, sir, on to the landing, ready to pile in front of the stairs."

"Good, my lad; it shall be done," cried the lieutenant; "but in addition let the lads fill up every bucket, can and jug we can find."

"I did see to that, sir, and I am sure that we have more than the men can drink."

"I was not thinking of drinking, my lad," said the lieutenant, "but of quenching the fire that may be started by our enemies."

"You don't think that they will try to fire the place, sir?" said the lad.

"Indeed, but I do, my lad. But at any rate we must be prepared for such an attack."

Roberts puckered up his forehead and looked aghast at his officer, and then bidding four of the men follow him, he did his best to collect together on the landing of the well-appointed building a pretty fair supply of the element necessary for extinguishing the first out-breakings of fire which might be started by the expected foe.

"Well done, Mr Roberts," said the lieutenant; "but we've rather upset this Mr—Mr—What's his name?"

"Allen, sir."

"Yes—Allen. Upset Mr Allen's house. It's a bit of a surprise to find an English gentleman.—Yes, gentleman, Mr Roberts: he is evidently quite a gentleman, although he is completely under that Yankee scoundrel's thumb. But what was I saying? Oh, it's rather a surprise to find an English gentleman living like this in an out-of-the-way West Indian island?"

"That's what I thought, sir," replied Roberts.

"Ah, well, you need not feel so again, for numbers of men of our best families have settled out like this in the plantations, built themselves good houses, and surrounded themselves with every comfort, and grown rich producing sugar, coffee, cotton and rum by means of a large staff of slaves. We have fallen upon one of these estates, but in this case the Yankee overseer seems to be the master, and the real master the slave."

"It seems strange, sir, doesn't it?" said Roberts, who was standing by one of the first floor windows keeping a sharp look out for danger.

"To a certain extent, my lad," said the officer, "but I have made a shrewd guess at what has been going on, and it strikes me that our friend Mr Allen has been dabbling largely in the trade that we are here to suppress."

"You think that, sir?"

"Yes, my lad—and repented of it when too late, and found himself, after growing disgusted with it, unable to draw back on account of this man, who has committed him deeply."

"Yes, I see, sir," cried Roberts eagerly. "That would account for the American's overbearing insolence to this Mr Allen and to you, sir. But surely he cannot be right about the island here being under the American Government?"

"Certainly not, I think, Mr Roberts," said the lieutenant decisively; "but I do think this, that he might have kept up the assertion that he was correct and made complaints to the Americans and called our visit here a trespass. This would have caused an enormous amount of trouble to the captain, and so much official correspondence that we should have bitterly repented coming here in search of a newly-run cargo of slaves."

"Do you think we shall find one here, sir?" asked Roberts.

"I feel pretty certain, my lad, as certain as that we should not have dared to prosecute our search in face of the scoundrel's defiance and bravado. But now the tide has completely set in our favour."

"In our favour, sir?" said Roberts wonderingly.

"Why, of course, my lad. If our visit here had been aggression, all the rascal had to do was to call upon us, after his declaration, to withdraw; and that was what he meant to do, although the fellow's natural insolence induced him to do so in that bullying way."

"And instead of keeping to what he had a right to do, sir," cried the middy eagerly, "he let his blackguardly followers attack us as they did."

"That's right, Mr Roberts," said the lieutenant; "though I must give him the credit of saying that I am sure he never intended that attack. He has evidently such a loose rough lot of followers that they became out of control, and the result is that they have completely given their leader away and played into my hands."

"Of course, sir. Nothing could excuse that attack."

"Nothing, my lad. I am master here now, and I feel sure that we shall find more than I dared to expect. I believe now that this is a regular Western depot for slaves, and a find that will make up to Captain Kingsberry for all previous disappointments."

"Glorious, sir!" cried Roberts. "But of course this Huggins can't be the man we saw in the lugger off the African river."

"Of course not, my lad; but he quite deceived me for the time. He is almost exactly the same in appearance, in voice, manner and speech, and the only way in which I can account for it is that both men are engaged in the same hideously brutal trade, and that has in time made them similar in habit."

"There seems something in that, sir," said Roberts thoughtfully.

"Seems, Roberts? Is," said the lieutenant, smiling; "and you must add to it another point of resemblance: they are both Americans of the same degenerate type—little, thin, dark-haired, and speaking in the same tone of voice and in the same sneering contemptuous fashion. But of course if we had them both together we should see a strong difference. What are you looking at? See anything?"

"I fancied I could make out something moving across that opening yonder, sir," said the lad, leaning a little out of the window.

"I trust not," said the lieutenant, shading his eyes with his hand. "I was in hopes that we had given the fellows such a lesson that they would keep away for the present, at all events, for I want no fighting, no wounding the enemy, no injuries more than we have received upon our side. I want just to hold our own, Roberts, till our friend Mr Murray or Mr Munday brings us help."

"Yes, sir, but there is some movement going on there just among the tall-growing coarse reeds."

"Sugar-cane stems, Mr Roberts," said the lieutenant firmly. "Yes, you are right; there is movement there, and the scoundrels have not taken their lesson to heart. Well, I do not see what more we can do to prepare for them. They cannot get up to us without ladders or poles, and from our sheltered position we ought to set firing at defiance, while they allow us plenty of opportunities for giving them another lesson.—What is it, my lad?"

The speaker turned to the big sailor who had just trotted up to the door.

"Beg pardon, sir, but Lang reports enemy creeping through the sugar-cane a bit for'ard here to the left, and Duncombe says he can see 'bout a dozen on 'em out at the back looking as if they meant a rush."

"Hah! That is fresh," said the lieutenant. "Mr Roberts here made out those amongst the canes. I'll come and look. You, Mr Roberts have the goodness to keep your eye on them and hold your fire until they show a determination to come on. Then you must fire; but fire low. We must cripple and not kill."

"Yes, sir," said Roberts, and he sheltered himself behind one of the curtains of the well-furnished English-looking bedroom where he and the officer had been watching. And then, as the latter walked quickly out, followed by the sailor who had made his report, a terrible sense of loneliness fell upon the youth, accompanied by a shortness of breath, as his heart began to beat with a heavy dull throb that sounded loud and strange.

He was gazing out at a scene of tropical beauty, the wild and the cultivated blending so that at another time he could have stood in the perfect silence dwelling upon the loveliness of the place. But now there was a feeling of awe that seemed to over-master everything, while the very fact that where he had plainly made out the movement of figures as they evidently sought concealment, all was now motionless, and not a leaf waved or was pressed aside, added to the weirdness of his position, and made him draw farther back in the full expectation that the next moment the vivid green of the surroundings would be cut by a flash of light and then turn dim as it was deadened by the rising smoke of a shot.

"I wish I wasn't such a coward," he muttered. "I do try hard to stand it all, and get on beautifully when the firing and spear-throwing are going on, but now, when the enemy may be going to throw a spear or fire a shot at one, it does seem so hard to bear. No worse for me than for other fellows," he muttered bitterly, "but I am myself and they are other fellows. Ugh! I suppose it's a very beautiful place, but it seems very horrible, and it makes a fellow wish that if he is to be wounded it would come off at once so that one could get it over. There's some one creeping along there now," he muttered. "I'll shout a warning to Mr Anderson. No, whoever it is doesn't seem to be coming on, and it looks so stupid to shout for help when there's no need."

For all was perfectly motionless amongst the vivid green leaves, save where from time to time there was a flash of light—red light—topaz light—and that changing to a vivid green that looked as if it were blazing in the burning sun, and he grasped the fact that he was gazing at some lovely humming bird that darted here and there and then poised itself, apparently motionless, till he made out that there was a faint haze visible which must be caused by the rapid vibration of the tiny creature's wings.

"Yes," he said to himself, "it's as beautiful as can be—that is, it would be if everything wasn't so silent and still and one didn't know that people were ready at any moment to take aim at one with rifle or musket. He said that they used rifles—the wretch! It's a nasty sensation, when you don't want to shoot any one, to feel that they want to shoot you."

"Oh, what a while Mr Anderson is!" muttered the lad again. "He might make haste back to a fellow. He can't be obliged to stop away watching, and he ought to visit his posts regularly so as to give each of us a bit of company."

Roberts gazed from his sheltering curtain as far as his eyes could sweep to left and round to right, going over and over again the arc of the circle formed by his vision where he had plainly seen movement going on and people creeping amidst the rich growth of the huge saccharine grass; but all was motionless and still, and the silence seemed to grow more and more awful as he watched.

"Oh," he groaned to himself, "why didn't I make a dash for it and follow old Murray without saying a word? It wouldn't have been half so bad as this, and even if it had been a more risky task—no, it couldn't have been more risky than this—I could have borne it better. Wonder where he is, and whether he would have felt as bad as I do now if he had had my job. Ugh! It's horribly still, and if old Anderson doesn't come soon I shall make some excuse and go to him."

"Yes," he continued, "Franky would have felt just as bad as I do. He must have done. No one could help it. No man could stand this terrible silence and the sensation that a shot was coming at him. No man could bear it—no man. Oh, I say, doesn't it seem bumpitious for one to think of himself as a man? Well, why shouldn't I be? It's man's work, at all events. Oh, I can't stand it. I must make some excuse. I'll ask Mr Anderson to come and see if he doesn't think there is some one crawling along there to the right. No, I won't—I can't—I must master it. It's sheer cowardice! And if it is," he added, after a few moments' pause, "it's Nature's fault for making a fellow like this. I don't want to be a coward; I want to

be as brave as brave—well, as brave as Murray is. I wouldn't care if I was just as full of pluck as he is. Anyhow I won't be a sham and go and pretend that some one is coming. I could never look him in the eyes again for fancying that he was reading me through and through. And he would—I'm sure he would."

"Oh!" ejaculated the lad excitedly, for just then one of the floor-boards gave out a sharp crack.

"Hallo!" said the familiar voice of the lieutenant. "Did I startle you, Roberts?"

"Something of the kind, sir," said the lad, breathing hard. "I didn't hear you come."

"No, I suppose not. Seen anything?"

"No, sir. All is as still as if there wasn't a soul for miles, and I felt at times as if I must come and ask you if you could hear anything."

"Ah, this silence is very trying, Roberts, my lad," said the lieutenant. "The men are all suffering from it and feeling as if they would give anything to be watching together."

"They feel like that, sir?" cried the lad eagerly.

"Yes, of course they do, sir. So do I: the utter stillness of the place, and the expectation of a shot coming at any moment, is most trying to a man. Here, how long do you think Mr Murray has been gone?"

"Can't say, sir. It feels to me like hours; but it can't be."

"I don't know, my lad. It certainly does, as you say, feel like hours. But he ought to be back by now, with at least a dozen men. Let's see, twelve men with Mr Munday and Mr Murray and his two will make sixteen. Sixteen picked men; and they will bring plenty of ammunition. Well, I should like the reinforcement before friend Huggins makes his attack. I don't care then how many he brings with him. I wonder, though, whether he will use any of his slaves to help him."

"He said they won't fight, sir," said Roberts.

"But he may force them to fight, my lad. Ah! Look out! Here they come with a rush. There's no mistake about this."

And the officer ran to the door to shout a warning to the watchers at the other windows, for not only away in front were the giant green grass-like leaves of the Indian corn in full motion, but the rustle and crush of feet reached the listeners' ears, while *click, click*, from within, the cocking of the men's muskets was heard.

Chapter Twenty Four.

"Seafowls Ahoy!"

Murray lost no time in making for the spot where the two men were in charge of the boat; but simple as the task appeared on the surface, it proved to be far otherwise.

He had told himself that he had only to follow in reverse the faintly-marked track taken by the black who had been their guide; and that he set himself to do, until he felt that he must be close to the stream that they had ascended; but if close by, it was by no means visible, and after making a cast or two in different directions without result, he pulled up short, the men following his example and looking at him wonderingly.

"It was just here that we left the boat-keepers, wasn't it, Tom?" he said.

"Don't seem like it, sir," replied the man, "'cause if it was just here, where is it?"

"But it must have been here," cried Murray, growing irritable and confused.

"That's what I thought, sir," said the man, "but it don't seem to be nowhere near. What do you say, messmate?"

"I warn't a-looking out, lad," replied Titely. "You see, I didn't take no bearings 'cause I says to mysen, 'Mr Murray 'll see to that,' and what I does was to foller with my eyes screwed back'ards over my shoulders like a she hare at the dogs."

"Same here, messmate," says Tom May. "'Mr Murray took the bearings to begin with,' I says to myself, 'and I'll keep a sharp lookout for the enemy, who maybe 'll try to run us down.'"

"Then you neither of you feel that you can remember the black fellow's trail?" said Murray, speaking excitedly, and looking hard at the big sailor the while.

"Well, I can't answer for Titely, sir," said the man.—"Why don't you speak up like a man, messmate, and say what you know?"

"'Cause I can't, lad," replied the man addressed. "It warn't my watch, and I telled you I was too busy looking out for squalls. I dunno which way we ought to go, messmate. Don't you, Mr Murray, sir?"

"No, my lad; I've lost our bearings for a bit, but you two try off to right and left while I go straight on, and the first that comes upon the river holloa gently. Not loud, because it may bring the enemy down upon us. Now then, off with you, and when you shout, stand fast so that we may come and join you."

"Stand fast it is, sir," said Tom May, and without further hesitation the three separated and began to thread the dense cane brake, each fully expecting to come upon the windings of the overshadowed river at once. But somehow

every step seemed to lead the seekers into greater difficulties. It was plain enough that the river must be near, for their steps were in and out among the dense patches of cane and over soft spongy soil into which their feet sank slightly, the earth being springy and elastic; but though Murray expected to see the dense foliage open out and the brake look lighter from the presence of the river, he was disappointed again and again, and to all intents and purposes the stream had ceased to exist.

For some minutes, as Murray strode on, the steps of his companions were audible in two directions, and making up his mind to proceed in that being taken by May, he struck off so as to cross the man's track.

This seemed practicable enough for a while, and he went on till the brake began to grow more dense and he had to force his way through the thicket. Then to his disgust he found himself entangled in a little wilderness of thorny palms, out of which he had a hard struggle to free himself, and he stood at last, panting and exhausted, rubbing the bleeding spots beneath the rents in his garments which asserted themselves plainly.

Murray rubbed himself and listened, and then listened and rubbed, but he could not hear a sound.

"Let me see," he thought. "Oh, how vexatious, just when we ought to be close to the boat and sending her down stream! Must be this way where I heard Tom May—if it was Tom May. Well, it doesn't matter if it was Titely. Let's get to either of them, and then we'll hail the other."

The lad hesitated for a few minutes longer, listening hard the while, and then more in passion than in despair he started off in a bee line through the thick canes, hopefully now, for the earth felt softer than before.

"Must be right here; and as soon as I reach the river I have only to see which way the stream runs and follow it down to where the boat lies. Oh, look sharp, old fellow," he muttered, "for this is horrible."

He increased his pace, with the earth certainly growing softer, and then he pulled up short, turned and darted back, for as he stepped forward the soft spongy earth seemed suddenly to have grown horny and hard and to heave up beneath his feet, convincing him that he had stepped upon one of the horrible alligators of the Western swamps. There was a violent splashing, the reptile struck to right and left, mowing down the canes, and the midshipman, suffering from a sensation of horror and creepiness, stopped at last, panting.

"Why, that must be the direction of the little river," he thought; "and instead of following the horrible brute here have I run away; and now how am I to find the way that it pointed out? That's soon done," he said, as he thought of the broken and crushed-down canes which must mark the alligator's track; and he began at once to search for what proved to be absent. There were bruised and trampled growths which he sprang at directly, but his reason soon pointed to the fact that they had not been made by the huge lizard he had started from its lurking place where it had crawled ashore to watch for the approach of prey, but by himself in his flight, and though he tried over the swampy ground again and again, it was only to grow more confused, and at last he stopped short, baffled and enraged against himself.

"Oh!" he ejaculated, as he raised one foot to stamp it down heavily upon the earth, with the result that he drove it through a soft crust of tangled growth and sent up a gush of muddy, evil-smelling water, and then had to drag his shoe out with a loud sucking sound, while the foot he had not stamped was beginning to sink. "It's enough to drive any one mad," he muttered. "Just as I am entrusted with something important I go and muddle it all, and the more I try the worse the hobble grows."

He took a few steps to his right, to where the earth beneath him felt firmer, and listened, but the floundering and scuffling of the alligator had ceased, and he looked in vain for the traces of its passage.

"Think of it," he said, half aloud; "I trod on the brute, and it dashed off, frightened to death, to make for the river; and then what did I do?—Turned round and ran away as if the brute was coming after me with its jaws opened wide ready to take me down at a mouthful! Alligators are not crocodiles. Here, I'm a brave fellow, upon my word! I'm getting proud of myself, and no mistake!"

He stood and listened as he looked around and tried to pierce the dense growth, but in vain, for all was thick vegetation, and eye and ear were exercised in vain.

There was a soft, dull, half croaking sound here and there at a distance which suggested the existence of frogs, and from the trees whose clustering leaves overhead turned the brake into a soft twilight, he now and then heard the twittering of some bird. But he could see nothing, and for a few minutes he began to give way to a feeling of despair.

"I daren't shout," he thought, "for it would be like calling the attention of the enemy. The Yankee and his people are sure to be on the lookout to pounce upon one, and though if they took me prisoner—they wouldn't dare to do anything else—my being taken would not so much matter if May or Titely got down to the boat and reached the *Seafowl*. How do I know that they would get there? Oh, was ever poor wretch in such a hole before!"

"Here, I must do something," he cried, at last, rousing himself to take some action. "The river must wind about, and if I keep on I shall be sure to come across it at last."

He started off in what he hoped was the right direction, and forced his way through the tangled growth, to find that after a short time the earth began to grow firmer beneath his feet; and then he stopped short.

"Must be wrong," he thought, "for the river banks were swampy."

Striking out in a fresh direction, he was not long before he found that the ground began to yield again, and his spirits rose as he found that he was plunging into a swampy part once more, while his heart literally leaped as all at once right in front there was a rush as of one of the great alligators being startled from its lair.

The lad stopped short, but only for a few moments, before mastering the sensation of dread, and plunging on as nearly as he could make out in the direction the great lizard had taken.

"It's afraid of me," he muttered, as he drew his dirk, "and if it turns at bay on finding itself followed, I ought to be able to do something with this, though it is such a stupid ornament of a thing. I'm not afraid, and I won't be afraid, but I wish my heart didn't beat so fast, and that choking sensation wouldn't keep on rising in my throat."

But though the lad behaved as bravely as was possible to any man, by pressing on and determinedly following in the track of the alligator, his heart kept on with its heavy pulsation and the perspiration streamed down his face in the stiflingly hot swamp.

He had the satisfaction, though, of making out that the reptile was scuffling on before him, and now he grew more accustomed to the fact he was able to make out the creature's trail and just dimly see the movement ahead of the thick cane growth as it rapidly writhed itself along.

"It's getting softer," thought Murray, "so I must be getting towards the river. Won't turn upon me and attack, will it, when it gets in its own element?"

That was a startling thought, but it was only another difficulty in the way of one who had mastered his natural dread and determined in his peril to make a brave fight.

"It's no more an alligator's element than the land is," thought the lad. "The brute's amphibious, and I don't believe it will turn upon me unless I stick my dirk into it; and I don't care, I'll risk it, if I die for it. I don't believe they're so tough as people say."

Then a more staggering thought assailed him, and this time, instead of forcing his way through the tangle and dragging his feet out of the swampy soil, he stopped short. For the hope that had sustained him suddenly sank away. He had been feeling sure that the guide he feared to a great extent was after all leading him towards the little river, and that once he reached the bank he would know by the current, however sluggish, the way down to the boat; but now the terrible thought attacked him that the reptile might after all have its dwelling-place in some swampy lagoon such as he had read was common in the islands and the Southern States.

"It's of no use," he said to himself, as he stopped short, panting and exhausted; "this can't be the right way. There's no clear river down which a fellow could wade or swim; this is one of those dreadful swamps—dismal swamps, don't they call them?—and the farther I go the worse off I shall be. Oh, where's my pluck? Where it ought to be," he said, answering himself; and he struggled on again, for he had awakened to the fact that the rustling and splash made by the reptile was dying out.

Rustling and splash, for now he awoke plainly enough to the fact that he was sinking ankle deep at every step, and he roused himself fully once more.

"Giving up," he panted, "just when I had won the day! Hurrah! There's the river!" And making a tremendous effort he struggled on, for there was the alligator floundering through mud and water now where the growth was getting more open, and at the end of some dozen yards there was light—golden-looking light—coming down from above. Then there was a loud flopping, followed by a heavy splash, and the lad snatched at and seized the boughs that closed him in, and just saved himself from following the reptile he pursued by clinging with hands and legs to a stout cypress, to which he held on as he indistinctly made out the sobbing sound of the wave that the reptile had raised as it plunged into what seemed to be the edge of a swampy lake.

"He won't come back, will he?" thought Murray, and he obeyed the natural instinct which prompted him to drag himself up amongst the evergreen boughs of the tree, which slowly rocked to and fro with his weight.

But the water beneath him gradually settled down, the cypress in which he clung ceased to bend, as he got his feet settled better to support his weight, where he could look along a dark green verdant tunnel to a spot of golden light where the subdued sunshine fell upon a glistening level of amber-hued water so beautiful that for a time the lad could not withdraw his eyes.

"It's no river," he said, "but the edge of a lagoon, and it would be madness to go any farther. Let's have a rest. Might have been worse off after all, and it's no use to get despairing and tiring oneself out. I should have liked this adventure if my two lads had been with me, and—and—Yes, that's it," he groaned—"if I hadn't been sent on such a tremendous task! There, it's of no use to despair. I've done my duty, and no matter what happens now I can say that. Who knows what may come next? I mustn't think I can hang here till it grows dark. I could climb up higher, but this is a swamp, and though I might save myself from alligators and snakes—Ugh!" he shuddered. "This is the sort of place where they live!—I couldn't escape from fever. There, I must hail now till some one hears me and answers, even if it's the enemy. But it may be one of my fellows, or if not it's sure to be one of the slaves, for there must be plenty about here."

But Frank Murray did not shout for help. Perhaps it was due to exhaustion, that the place seemed to have a strange restful fascination, as he hung there in the thick growth of the cypress, gazing along the soft green tunnel at the little glistening lake, which he now saw was full of living things, for every now and then the surface was stirred by creatures which he made out to be tiny terrapins—water tortoise-like creatures which just thrust out their heads and drew them beneath again. Then water beetles skimmed about, forming glistening geometric figures for a time before they disappeared.

Then the lad shuddered, for from the side of the bright verdure-framed lagoon a snake writhed itself in horizontal waves across the surface and began to climb up the foliage, to glisten as it reached where the light fell strongest and the burnished scales flashed with bronze, silver grey and gold.

"I wonder whether it's a poisonous snake," thought Murray; and then he made an effort to awaken himself from the pleasant feeling of restfulness, for he knew that he must exert himself if he intended to find a way back to where he had been separated from his companions—those whom he must urge on to the fulfilment of his task.

"And I have not done what I felt that I must do at all risks," he said, as he once more made an effort to rouse himself from the drowsy inertia which was holding him in something resembling a trance.

Drawing a deep breath, he took more tightly hold of the cypress boughs, and was about to hail at any risk and with all his might, when he uttered a loud sob of relief, for suddenly from somewhere far away, came, strangely softened and subdued, though prolonged, the words—

"Ahoy-y-y! *Seafowls* ahoy-y-y!"

Chapter Twenty Five.

With Shot-Holes.

"Ahoy-y-y! *Seafowls* ahoy-y!" came again after a pause, and though he felt that he ought to have hailed in reply, Frank Murray's lips remained closed, and he still clung there listening for the hail to come again.

It was not until he heard the hail for the fourth time that the midshipman was able to throw off the nightmare-like feeling, and, drawing a deep breath, shout with all his might—

"*Seafowls* ahoy!"

Then he held his breath and waited, feeling that his voice could not have been heard, and a feeling of despair began to assail him and the fancy grew that he was sinking back into that horrible sensation of inertia which had mastered him for a time.

But it was fancy, for throwing off the weakness he shouted now joyously and lustily—

"*Seafowl* ahoy!"

There was silence for a few moments; then came the inspiring sound of some one struggling through the tangled growth and splashing over the mud and water—sounds which were followed by—

"Where away there? Ahoy!"

"Here! Is that you, Tom May?" shouted Murray, and from not far from the foot of the cypress where the lad clung there was a wallowing sound and a splash in the water which sent a wave-like movement across the little lake at the end of the tunnel.

"Tom May it is, sir! Where are you?"

"Up here in this fir-like tree, Tom. Where's Titely?"

"What, ain't you got him along o' you, sir?"

"No! I haven't seen him since we parted. Haven't you any notion where he is?"

"Not a haporth, sir. I on'y hope he arn't gone through."

"Gone through!" cried Murray, in horror.

"Yes, sir; I hope not, but it's solid soft everywhere I've been. I've been most through half-a-dozen times, and twiced over I've felt as if some of them there lizardy crotchendillo things had got hold of my toes and tugged at 'em to get me down."

"Oh, don't talk about it, Tom," groaned the midshipman.

"All right, sir; on'y you arksed me."

"But you have no right to think such a horror as that. He may have got down to the boat."

"Yes, sir, he may," said the man, in a low growl, "but I've been trying my best, and I couldn't."

"Then you haven't seen the boat-keepers, Tom?"

"Not a squint of 'em, sir, and there's going to be the wussest row that ever happened aboard ship if we don't make haste and find them and fetch the first luff help."

"It's horrible, I know, Tom, but I've tried all I could. What's to be done?"

"Dunno, sir. But anyhow I've found you—leastwise, a'most; and I'm coming to jyne yer. Whereabouts are you, sir? Hail again; it's rayther puzzling like."

"It is, Tom—dreadful. But here, where I told you—up in this fir tree—cypress. But mind how you come, for it's very soft."

"Soft ain't the word for it, sir. I've been going to make a swim on it over and over again. But it's reg'lar hugga-my-buff, sir; neither one thing nor t'other. It's too soft to walk in, and it ain't soft enough to swim."

"That's true, Tom," said the lad.

"Oh, you've found it so, have you, sir? Then look here; you arn't so heavy as I am, so s'pose you comes to me 'stead o' me coming to you. What do you say to that?"

"I'll try, Tom," cried Murray; and he began to descend, feeling the elastic evergreen begin to sway and vibrate as if before long it would double down with the weight of its load; and this it finally did, leaving the midshipman floundering on the surface of the cane and reed-covered swamp, so that it was only by a vigorous effort that he managed to scuffle along in the direction of the man, who kept on shouting encouragement until he was able to reach out a hand and drag the lad to his side.

"Hah!" panted Murray, with a sigh of relief.

"Hah it is, sir," said the man. "But beg your pardon, sir; arn't you a-spoiling your uniform?"

"Don't talk about it, Tom," said Murray, breathing hard. "Let's be thankful that we've saved our lives."

"Saved our lives! But have we, sir? Don't seem to me that we're out of the muddle yet. There, look at that!" added the man.

"Look at what?" cried Murray.

"I meant feel that, sir," said the man, correcting himself, and stamping with one foot. "It felt just as if one of them short four-legged sarpints had laid hold of my leg to pull me down for supper."

"Surely not, Tom," said Murray, with a shudder, as he felt attacked by a sense of horrible insecurity.

"All right, sir. Say so if you like; I'm willing. But I'd keep on stamping as long as we're here in this lovely place. I do hope, though, as they arn't making a meal of poor old Titely; he do desearve better luck after being speared as he was over yonder across the herring pond."

"Let's hail him again."

"All right, sir. I've wanted to do so ever so much more, but I wouldn't, for it was telling the enemy where we are, and if we do much of that sort of thing we shall be having that pleasant Yankee coming shooting with his men, and we don't want that."

"Of course not, Tom, but we must risk it, for the poor fellow may be somewhere within reach waiting for help."

"Then why don't he holler, sir?"

"Perhaps he has shouted till he is worn-out, Tom."

"Then he can't be within reach, sir, or else we should ha' heered him, for he's got a pretty good pipe of his own."

"Well, hail him, Tom."

"All right, sir, but 'tween you and me and the starn post your voice would go farther than mine would."

"Think so, Tom? Very well, then. *Seafowl* ahoy!"

It was a loud tenor shout that doubtless penetrated the cane jungle farther than would the deep bass of the able-seaman, and after a minute's listening, Murray hailed again; but somehow the shout did not seem to have any result.

"Let me have a try, sir," growled the sailor, and upon the middy nodding, the man shouted five times at intervals, listening with his hand to his ear after every hail.

"It's of no good, Tom," said Murray bitterly. "Come along, and let's be doing something."

"That's what I was a-thinking, sir, for if we stop here much longer we shall be reg'larly sucked down into the mud. 'Sides which, if my poor mate hears us he won't come here. He'd on'y hail."

"And if the enemy hear us they are quite at home here, and they'll come down upon us and put a stop to our getting across to the boat. What do you mean by that?—What are you chuckling about?"

"You, sir," said the man. "I was thinking what an orficer you will make some day."

"Do you mean that for banter, my man?" said Murray angrily.

"Banter, sir? What, chaff? Not me, sir. I meant it. I felt a bit proud of you, sir, for using your head like that."

"Well, this is no time for paying compliments, Tom. You take the lead."

"I'll do what you orders, sir, of course, you being my orficer, but you might tell me which way I oughter lead."

"I can't, Tom, my lad. We want to get down to the boat, and hope to pick up Titely on the way. I've tried till I grew more and more puzzled than ever; so now you try. You must chance it, my lad."

"Mean it, sir?"

"Mean it? Of course!" cried Murray; and the man shut his eyes close, knit his brow, and then began to mutter in a low tone, much to the midshipman's surprise.

"What are you doing, Tom?" he cried at last.

"What you telled me, sir—charnshing of it."

"Chancing it?"

"Yes, sir; that's right," said the man. "Same as we used to when we was little uns playing at *Blind Man's Buff*. 'How many horses has your father got?' Then the one as had the hankychy tied over his eyes used to answer, 'Black, white and grey.' Then the one who arksed about the horses used to say, 'Turn round three times and ketch who you may.'"

And as soon as the man had repeated these words with his eyes still closely shut he turned round three times and

then opened them and stared straight before him.

"This here's the way, sir; right ahead."

"What nonsense, Tom!" said the middy sadly. "You're old enough to know better."

"Maybe, sir, but you said I was to charnsh it, and that's what I'm a-doing of; and if I don't find the way down to the boat it won't do us no harm as I can see; so come along."

The man stepped off, keeping as nearly as he could to the line he had marked down, and without turning his head he called back to his young officer—

"Don't you mind me giving o' you orders, sir, but you telled me to lead on, and I should like to say, sir, as you'd find it better if instead of walking hard and stiff, sir, like the jollies march up and down the deck, you'd try my way, sir, trot fashion, upon your toes, with a heavy swing and give and take. You'd find that you wouldn't sink in quite so much, seeing as one foot's found its way out before t'other's got time to sink in."

"I'll try, Tom," said the middy quietly; and after following the man for a few dozen yards he whispered, "Yes, I think that's better, Tom; but I have no faith in your *Blind Man's Buff* plan."

"Give it time, sir; we arn't half tried it yet."

"Go on, then," cried Murray; and the man trotted on as fast as the tangled growth would allow him, pausing from time to time to listen before going on again.

"I'm afraid we must make a change, Tom," said Murray, at last, when the man drew up suddenly. "Are you, sir?"

"Yes; this seems hopeless."

"That's what it all seems, sir, but I don't like being in too great a hurry to pitch a hidee overboard. There's nothing like trying, sir, and just as like as not we may be getting nigher and nigher to poor old Titely."

"I'm afraid—"

Murray did not finish his sentence, but made a spring forward and clapped his hand hard upon his leader's shoulder.

"What's wrong, sir?" cried the sailor, turning sharply upon him.

"Hark! Listen!" cried Murray excitedly.

"Oh, Mr Murray, sir," groaned the man despairingly, "you've been and gone and done it now!"

"Nonsense! What do you mean?"

"Pitched me off my bearings, sir. I've looked round, and I shall never pick 'em up again."

"Well, what does that matter?" cried Murray. "Don't you hear?"

"Hear, sir? Hear what?"

"Oars. I heard them rattling in the rowlocks as plain as possible."

"Whereabouts, sir?"

"Away there through the canes yonder. Didn't you?"

"No, sir," said the man gloomily; "I didn't hear no oars."

"I did, quite plainly," said Murray, leaning forward and straining his ears. "No, it's stopped now."

"Yes, sir," said the man, shaking his head; "it's stopped now."

"Well, don't talk like that, Tom. You look as if you didn't believe me."

"Oh, I wouldn't go for to say as I don't believe anything you say, sir," said the sailor; "but all the same it do seem queer."

"Yes, queer because they've stopped rowing to listen. Don't you see?"

"No, sir," said the man, shaking his head sadly. "I don't see nothing, on'y as you're a bit overdone, sir, in the head, and gets fancying things."

"Fancy, man!" cried the middy angrily. "It was no fancy, I tell you. Now then, listen."

Tom May shut one eye and cocked his head on one side in obedience to his young officer's command; but all was perfectly still.



THERE WAS A SHOUT OF WELCOME, AND THE SLOOP'S CUTTER CAME INTO SIGHT.

Hunting the Skipper.

p. 74.

"It's very strange," said Murray.

"Yes, sir; very," said the sailor, in a tone of voice which made the young officer turn upon him fiercely.

"Oh, you obstinate—"

Murray did not say what, but ceased speaking and stood straining forward.

"Of course you thought you heered oars, sir, because you wanted to hear 'em," said the sailor; "but it's a pity you did, sir, because it made me lose my bearings, and I know I shall never—"

"There, then," cried the middy excitedly. "Now, did I fancy I heard rowing?"

"No, sir; that's oars, sure enough," replied the sailor; "and it seems to come from right for'ard there, and not far away."

"Hail the boat, then," cried Murray excitedly.

"I dunno as I would, sir," whispered the man, "because it mightn't be our boat."

"What! Oh, we must chance that. Hail away."

Tom May, who looked exceedingly unwilling, clapped his hand to his cheek and yelled out, "*Seafowls* ahoy!" just as the regular beat of oars had ceased once more.

But there was no further doubt, for in a dull smothered tone, as if the reply came through so much dense forest, there was the answering hail—

"Ahoy there! Where away?"

"Ahoy!" shouted Tom May. "That's the right sort, sir. Come along;" and stepping out, the sailor beat the dense growth to right and left, with his feet sinking deeper in the soft soil, till the cane brake began to open out and the forest grew lighter, the splashing of oars sounding nearer and nearer till there was a shout of welcome and the sloop's cutter came into sight, gliding towards them till the light vessel's nose was run into the river bank.

"At last!" cried Murray, as he scrambled over the bows, to sink exhausted into Titely's arms. "Why, how did you get here, my lad?" said the young officer.

"I d'know, sir. Lost my way, and couldn't find it nohow."

"But you managed to find the boat."

"Nay, sir; not me, sir! I didn't find her. I did find the side o' the river, but couldn't get no furdur. I was hanging on to a branch and trying to keep up because I was sinking into the boggy shore, when my two mates here come pulling up stream and picked me up. It was them found me, sir, not me found them."

"Well, never mind that now," cried Murray angrily. "What about you two? Your orders were to stay by the boat where

we landed.”

“Yes, sir,” said the first boat-keeper, “but they wouldn’t let us, sir.”

“They!” cried Murray. “Whom do you mean by they?”

“Oh, I dunno, sir, who they was, only that it was a big party o’ rough uns with guns and rifles as come up all to wunst as we sat hanging on by the grapnel and line, out in the middle o’ the river, and one on ‘em hails us and tells us to pull ashore.”

“Well,” said Murray, “and did you?”

“You go on, messmate,” said the man. “You can spin the yarn better nor I can.”

“Yes, go on,” cried Murray; and the second boat-keeper took up the narrative.

“Well, sir, we just didn’t.”

“Just did not what?” asked Murray.

“Pull ashore, sir. They warn’t our people, and him as hailed us warn’t our officer. ‘Sides, we didn’t like the looks of ‘em.”

“Well done, my lads,” said the middy; “that was right. But what did you do then?”

“I hystes up the grapnel, sir, and Harry Lang there gets an oar over the side.”

“Well?”

“Well, sir, then a Yankee sort of a chap as seemed to be the head on ‘em leans hisself up again’ a bush and rests his gun upon a bough of one of the trees on the bank, and he says to me, he says, as he looks along the barrel, ‘Now, you sir,’ he says, ‘just you run that boat’s nose into this here bank, and tidy quick too, ‘fore I draws this here trigger.’

“‘All right, sir,’ I says, and I shoves another oar over the side; and as soon as he sees me do that, quite easy like, he lowers down his gun—rifle, I think it was—and turns his head to say something to the chaps who was with him.

“‘Easy, messmate,’ I says then; ‘get her head straight first,’ making believe as Harry warn’t doing right. The ‘Merican chap was just turning round then, but I sees my chance, and I whispers to Harry, ‘Up stream, lad, for all you’re worth.’ ‘Right you are,’ he says, and my word! sir, we did take hold of the water and put our backs into it, ‘gainst stream as it was; and as I pulled I was all the time wishing as hard as I could that you’d got hold of the rudder lines so as to steer, sir, and leave us nothing to do but pull while you kept the boat’s head right in the middle of the river. ‘Here, hi, there! What are you doing? Pull ashore, or—’ He steps to the same tree again and rests his gun on the bough and takes aim, while I thinks to myself what a pity it was that we hadn’t turned the boat’s head down stream.”

“You said arterwards, messmate, as that would ha’ been like leaving the first luff and the lads in the lurch,” said the other boat-keeper.

“So I did, messmate; and so it would,” said the narrator.

“But he didn’t fire at you?” cried Murray eagerly.

“Didn’t fire at us, sir?” said the man. “But he just did, while we pulled with all our might.”

“And missed you?”

“He missed me, sir, but he hit the boat. Sent his bullet slap through the bow planks just between wind and water, and the brown juice come trickling in quite fast, but we couldn’t stop to plug it.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Murray, who was breathing hard with excitement. “Oh, do go on a little faster!”

“That we did, sir—pulled faster, for some of the enemy come shouting after us along the side of the stream. You see, they couldn’t come on the far side, ‘cause it was all trees, while luckily for us they couldn’t get along much where they were, for it was all boggy, and I see three of them sink in up to their knees and stick fast cussing and swearing. But they warn’t the only ones, for him as we took to be their boss, he let go at ‘em orful, sir, and yelped at ‘em to follow us up, knowing all the time that they couldn’t do nowt o’ the sort, and him not trying a bit, because he warn’t going to fill his boots.”

“But they kept on firing at you?” cried Murray.

“Fast as ever they could, sir. They kep’ on loading and firing, and Harry and me kep’ on pulling like hooray. You see, the shooting spurred us on a bit, for they kep’ on hitting the boat when they didn’t send the bullets spattering into the trees over our heads, and cut the little twigs and leaves and make them fall upon us.”

“But didn’t they get to the bank higher up?” asked Murray.

“I dunno, sir,” replied the man. “We was too busy to think about that. Precious hot it was too, pulling under boughs as kept all the air away. I don’t want to brag, Mr Murray, sir, but we had a precious nice time on it, pulling, and hearing the beggars shouting and firing till we got well round a bend and out o’ their sight, same as they was out of our sight, when I says to Harry Lang as best thing we could do was to see to damages, and seeing as it warn’t likely that they could get at us for a bit we run the boat’s nose into the far side bank where Harry could get hold of a branch, and then he outs with his Jack knife and whittles a peg to fit into the shot-hole, for the water kep’ on coming in tidy fast.”

"Is that the hole?" said Murray eagerly.

"That's it, sir, and there's two more plugged up astarn, 'sides that there chip out o' the back by the starn sheets."

"But you neither of you got hurt?"

"No, sir; you see they warn't very handy with the guns, and we kep' going pretty fast."

"But there's a blood-stain upon your shirt, my lad."

"Oh, that, sir? It did bleed a little bit, but it was only a scrat—nowt to speak about."

"Indeed!" said Murray. "Well, it has left off bleeding, but the doctor must see to it when we get back to the *Seafowl*."

"Oh yes, sir; that'll be all right," said the man, smiling; "and that's all, I think, 'cept that we baled out the boat till we began to pull on again, for we was obliged to put some distance 'twixt us in case they should find some way up to the bank and begin practice again. Same time, sir, of course we had to think of not getting too far, so as to be handy when our fellows came back and wanted the cutter."

"Well, but about finding Titely?" said Murray.

"Oh, there's nothing to say about that, sir, on'y we didn't quite get it settled whether he found us or we found him. Theer he was, hung up in one of the trees over the river, and glad he was to be took aboard—just as glad as we was to take him, sir, for you see it made another to share the 'sponsibility like of our not being where we ought to be with the boat. After that, sir, I wanted to hang about as close as we could to the enemy, ready to be handy and help our officers and men; but messmet Titely says we must go on pulling up stream in search of you and Tom May, and this must be all, sir, and my throat's as dry as dust. Think this here water's good to drink, sir? It looks too much like beer to be quite to my taste."

"No, my lad; I wouldn't venture to drink it. Better wait."

"That's what I says to Harry Lang, sir."

"And very wisely too. Now, Tom," continued Murray, turning to his companion in adversity, "you have said nothing. What do you think of the state of affairs?"

"I think it's hard, sir—precious hard on a man."

"But they have done splendidly, Tom."

"Yes, sir, I s'pose so, for them," said May sourly; "but I warn't thinking about them. I mean it comes hard upon a man like me, shut out of a fight like that. Don't you think we might drop down with the stream now, seeing as we're tidily strong like?"

"Yes, I do think something of the kind," replied Murray.

"And give 'em a right down good dressing, sir?"

"No; we have got something else to think of, Tom," said the middy sternly. "Dressing them down is tempting, but that is not what we want to do. We must get down to the bay as quickly as we can, and without the loss of a man. The fighting must rest till the captain sends up reinforcements."

Tom May nodded his head.

"Bit disappointing, though, sir."

"Yes, my lad, but we can wait. Now then, we must drop down a little farther, and then drop the grapnel or hook on to one of the trees of the farther bank."

"And not make a dash of it, sir?"

"No, my lad; not till it is quite dark."

Tom May stared.

"According to what your messmates said, the enemy was in pretty strong force. How many of them were there?"

"'Bout twenty, sir," said Lang.

"And all armed?"

"Yes, sir; they'd all got guns," said the other.

"Then they will be lying in wait for us," said Murray decisively. "I only said that we shall be trying to run by them as soon as it is dark."

"Well, sir, but we could do it," said May warmly.

"Yes, we could run by them if I risked everything, my lad," said the middy, "but I can't afford to lose a man. Besides, they will have been making arrangements to receive us. There is that lugger we saw lying in the mouth of the river; they have plenty of men, I am sure, and they may have brought her up to block our way, for they are bound to try and capture

us if they can.”

“Yes, sir; bound to take us if they can,” assented the sailor.

“How long do you think it will be before it is dark?” asked Murray.

“Not half-an-hour, sir,” was the reply.

“And how far are we above the landing-place?” said the middy, speaking in a low tone now and turning to the first boat-keeper.

“Can’t say, sir, for sartain,” replied the man. “What do you say, Harry Lang?”

The man shook his head.

“You see, sir, we put our backs into it when we started to row, and pulled and pulled, thinking of nothing else but getting as far up’ards as we could. Hour’s hard rowing, I should say, in and out, and we got a long ways before we come upon Bill Titely.”

“Then we’ll begin moving as soon as it is quite dark, my lads,” said Murray. “Till then, a careful watch and silence, for there is no knowing whether the enemy may not have a way through the cane brake which will enable them to come upon us by surprise.”

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Fight in the Dark.

It was sooner than they expected that the darkness came on—thick, black, dense darkness, which in spite of its gradual approach seemed strange and full of suggestions of being peopled with enemies ready to draw trigger on the banks and send lightning-like flashes at the occupants of the boat—flashes each of which might be a messenger of death.

The boat was set in motion and glided down stream slowly, with Murray in the bows peering straight before him, trying to pierce the darkness; Tom May right astern with one oar dipped, with which he kept the boat level; while the others sat with oars balanced ready for use in case of attack, and so as to ensure retreat.

In this fashion they floated down, carried along by the gentle current, not a word being spoken, and the midshipman hardly daring to breathe as he listened to the strange nocturnal sounds which came from the banks on either side—weird croakings, pipings, and strange trumpeting notes which sounded like a challenge to the strangers who were daring to penetrate the thick darkness of the night.

More than once there was a sudden motion, a heaving and a rising wave as of some huge fish or reptile which had been disturbed from its slumbers, and from which attack was expected at any moment.

It was a strange ride, with the black water whispering by the boat’s side, while the men as they listened hardly seemed to breathe.

Murray had laid down his plan of action to the men before starting, and that was to plunge oars and back-water with all their might to get out of the sphere of danger, for to press on in the darkness seemed too great a risk to run. But for quite two hours nothing occurred that could be attributed to the agency of man, and the midshipman, who had begun to grow used to the cries, croaks and movements of bird and reptile, felt his spirits begin to rise, his heart to swell with hope of reaching the mouth of the river unmolested, where he felt sure that another boat would be awaiting them, and then and there he would at last be able to perform his long-delayed mission.

“I’ve done wrong,” he said to himself, “and alarmed myself without reason. There have been no enemies waiting for us. They have settled in their own minds that we should not venture to come down the river in the darkness, and we might very well have had the oars out and come quickly.”

He had no sooner thought this than he mentally retracted his notion as being so much folly, feeling as he did that it would have been impossible to steer, and that in all probability they would have been aground—perhaps wedged in amongst the trees or shrubs of the bank.

“I don’t know what to do for the best,” said the lad to himself. “One moment I feel one way; the next something seems to tug at me the other. I wish I could come to a decision that I knew was for the best.”

He had his wish, for he had hardly had the desire when as the boat glided on through the profound darkness it came in contact with something hard with a heavy shock.

For the moment all was excitement. To the men it seemed as if the cutter was rising up to ride over some huge tree-trunk that was floating across the centre of the stream—some obstruction that had been washed out of the bank during a flood and whose roots still clung to the place of its growth.

“Boat-hook,” said Murray, in a low business-like tone. “Steady, lads. Try if you can shove her off.”

Then like a flash the lad grasped the reality of their position, for voices rose from the right bank of the river, to be answered from the left, and as the occupants of the boat came to the same conclusion, that the great trunk against which the boat had struck must have been placed there by their enemies, so many flashes of light streaked the darkness, followed by loud reports, and then came a fierce yell of despair or pain and a loud adjuration full of rage.

“Shove all you know with that boat-hook,” whispered Murray, “and strain all with those oars. Do you hear? Back-water!”

There was no question about the men hearing, for every one was striving his best in a fierce struggle to get free from a tangle of sharp water-washed boughs; but the boat, after running stem on to the floating trunk and making as if to climb over the impediment, had swung round almost parallel; the water pressed heavily all along its side, and then seemed to be engaged in heaving it over, so that when Murray thrust one hand down over to his left he found that the stream was rippling within an inch of the gunwale, and in another few moments would have been over the side.

It was a question of decisive action, and Murray shouted—

“Trim the boat starboard, all!”

That saved them for the moment, but at terrible risk, for it spoke loudly to the enemy of their position, and in rapid succession almost simultaneously three more streaks of light came from the right bank of the river with their reports.

Murray gave vent to a low hissing sound, and then remained silent, striving his utmost the while to thrust the boat away from the strong tree-trunk; but his efforts, like those of his companions, were in vain.

“It’s no good, sir,” whispered Tom May; “we’re a-shoving against one another. Let me lead, sir, and I think I can do it. There’s hard bottom here, sir, and we’re almost aground.—Fire away, you lubbers,” he added, in a whisper; “you can’t hit us in the dark. Now then, Mr Murray, sir, you take an oar along with the lads and wait till I say ‘Pull.’ Then all on you do your best.”

“But what about you?” whispered Murray.

“You leave that to me, sir. I’m big enough and old enough to take care o’ mysen.”

Murray was silent, for it was no time to dispute. Every now and then—as fast as their enemies could reload—there was a shot from the bank, and the bullets whizzed just over the heads of the men. The young officer’s disposition was to ask what the sailor intended to do, but he contained himself, and, feeling for an oar, thrust it over the side and into the rowlock, conscious the while that the others had done the same, but in his case and that of the man in front for the oar-blades to rest upon branches of the submerged tree. He realised, though, that his was the bow oar, and for a few moments that was all he could grasp. Beyond that everything was confusion, and he sat ready to pull, and in spite of himself starting violently at every shot from the shore when the bullet struck the boat or splashed in amongst the branches of the ingeniously contrived dam.

Then the lad felt something like a hysteric sob escape from his breast as the puzzle and confusion from which he suffered gave place to clear mental light, and he grasped the full force of the big sailor’s plan.

The noise of panting and splashing which accompanied what felt like a sudden lightening of the boat was caused by Tom May lowering himself over the side, after laying down the boat-hook with which he had been sounding the depth; and then Murray felt that the brave fellow had begun to wade with the water close up to his arm-pits, forcing the bows of the boat away from the tree-trunk against which it was pressed by the water, and gaining a little.

“That’ll do it,” he said, with a deep grunt.

“Shall I get to the boat-hook, messmate?” whispered Titely.

Bang! came from the bank.

“There’s your answer,” growled Tom May fiercely. “You ‘bey orders and stick to your oar. That was precious nigh, though.”

Murray heard every word, and it was to him as if he could see everything that the big sailor did, as with one arm over the cutter’s bows he forced it a little more and a little more away, fighting against the pressure of the water and meaning to get the boat at right angles to the dam and her stem pointing straight up stream before he gave the order to pull.

But it was slow work, for the pressure of the water was so great and the man’s foothold on the bottom so insecure that at last, and just as he was about to call upon the middy and the man who handled the third oar to try and pull, there was a slip and a splash, May’s feet glided over the bottom, and he was swept back, fortunately still clinging to the bows, back to where he had started from—close against the trunk.

“Are you there, Tom?” whispered Murray excitedly, for he feared the worst.

“Here I be sir,” growled the man. “I’m sticking tight enough.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the lad. “If it were only light!”

“Jolly for us it ain’t, sir,” said the man. “Bad if they could see. Hear that?”

That was another shot from the right bank of the river, followed by a couple more, and the bullets splashed up the water not far from their heads.

“Are you going to try again?” whispered Murray.

“Arn’t I, sir! I’m a-going to try till to-morrow mornin’ if I don’t do it afore. Now then, all on yer, I’m going to begin shoving off her bows again, and this time don’t wait, my lads, for any orders from me. Use your own gumption, and all on it at once. It’ll take all my wind to keep me going. You, Mr Murray, you get hold of the water first charnsh and pull, and you t’others back-water; on’y just remember this: a broken oar means done for.—Now here goes.”

Once more Murray felt right through his brain every movement of the big sailor as he began to wade, holding the cutter’s bows nipped between his arm and his broad chest; and as the boat began to move the middy felt among the boughs and twigs with the blade of his oar to such good effect that at the risk of breakage he turned the oar into a lever which slightly helped to move the boat’s head from its position.

"Good!" grunted Tom May softly, and he thrust away steadily a little and a little, while the two who held the stout ash blades on the other side began to back-water.

"Good!" grunted Tom again, and, as if in answer, *Bang! Bang!* came from the shore, and a couple of splashing sounds rose from the woodwork where the bullets struck.

"All together," whispered Murray, as he bent forward and got a fresh hold of the boughs, while to his intense satisfaction he felt that the man behind him had got a good grip too, and the boat's head was thrust farther and farther away.

"Good!" grunted Tom May again, and Murray could not refrain from uttering a low Hurrah! for at his next bending forward his oar cut down into the water so that he got a good hold and pulled with all his might—steadily too.

"Back-water hard!" he panted, and the men whose oars dipped on the other side thrust with all their might.

"Hooray!" came now from the man behind Murray. "I've got water!"

"Then pull all you know," panted Tom May as he gave the boat's head what he intended to be one last tremendous thrust, "for you've got it all your own way now."

"No, no," whispered Murray excitedly. "Keep on, Tom!"

"Can't, sir," said the man, with a low hiss. "I'm off the bottom. Pull all!" he shouted now, and Murray felt the boat lose its trim, and sank over on his side bending down, knowing full well now that the brave fellow was heaving himself up so as to get over and seize an oar.

But it was dark, black darkness. Every one was pulling his best now in obedience to the cry "Pull all!" There was no regular swing, but plenty of confusion, while a thrill of excitement half intoxicated the men, as they felt that they had mastered the pressure of the stream, and consequently they pulled away madly, conscious as they were that they were moving up stream and leaving the enemies, who were still firing, though with no effect, behind.

"Starn all, you lubbers!" literally roared Tom May. "D'yer want to scrat me right out of the cutter's bows?"

"Stroke there!" cried Murray to the man who wielded that blade. "Get your oar over astarn and steer. We're running into the bank."

There was a quick movement, the boat rocked, and a scraping sound and a splash told that the order had been obeyed.

"I can't see, sir," cried the man, who had begun to steer.

"Do your best, my lad. Pull gently, my lads. We must feel our way. What about you, Tom May? Are you all right?"

"Me, sir? I'm no use to steer," grumbled the man. "Let me come and take stroke oar; the lubbers pretty well scatted my eyes out."

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three shots came quickly now in succession, but the flashes were from fully fifty yards back.

"Keep silence, my lads," whispered Murray. "They're firing at the splashes of our oars."

A minute later those scattered irregular splashes became almost as one, and though they were given slowly, the effect was steady and the steersman proved to be doing his part so carefully and well that the flashes from behind became more distant and sounded fainter, and the last seemed to come from round a bend of the river.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Lost.

"Now, my lads," said Murray, at last; "speak out; let me know the worst. Who is hurt?"

There was no reply, the men tugging slowly and regularly at the oars.

"Well, speak out," cried the middy. "Don't be too modest to let me know. You, Tom May, what about your eyes?"

"Don't want 'em now, sir," said the man, in his deep, low growl. "Won't be daylight yet awhile."

"I know that," said Murray testily; "but you said that you were getting them scratched out."

"Yes, sir, but I just spoke out in time, or else they'd ha' gone. I'm all right, sir; don't you worry about me."

"But I shall worry about you, Tom May," said the lad, "especially when I make my report. You saved us all when it seemed all over with our chance of escape."

"Did I, sir?"

"Ay, ay, that he did," chorussed the men.

"Well, don't make such a fuss about it, messmets," grumbled the man. "Mere's two on 'em got a scarp from that shooting, sir."

"Ah!" cried Murray. "Well, the wounds must be seen to as soon as it's daylight. Can you tie the places up for the present?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said one of the men. "A hankychy's been teared up, and there's nothing bad, sir."

But though nothing could be seen till daybreak, the young officer, knowing his men as he did, insisted upon making an examination by touch during a short rest in the darkness, with the boat hitched up to an overhanging tree, after which the slow pull was resumed hour after hour, till overhead the stars began to pale, and Murray sat trying to scheme out some sensible course to be carried out in the daylight.

The lad thought and thought, gradually growing more low-spirited, as he was always face to face with the thought that he had made a miserable failure of the task he had attacked in such high spirits. He had hoped to reach the boat-keepers and take them down the river to the *Seafowl*, and return with the second lieutenant and a strong party of men to the aid of Mr Anderson and his lads, who would probably proceed to rout out the slaving nest. In fact, he had started full of glee to carry out his instructions, but only to be dogged at every step by mischance.

Murray sank down in his seat, the image of despair. He had pulled on for some hours, only to give up faint with hunger, and wearied by his efforts during the night; but all these were as nothing to the trouble that was to come with the rising sun. He would sooner or later have to face the first lieutenant, who would say to him, "I sent you for reinforcements and to make a report to the captain; and what have you done?"

"It is of no use to make excuses," the lad said to himself; "I have failed."

He was bending very low now with his elbows resting upon his knees, and the only comfort he could find was in the thought that if Dick Roberts had been sent instead, he could have done no better, when he roused himself with the thought that he must not run any more risks; he must reach the place where the boat had been left the previous day, and he was now face to face with the thought that he might over-run the spot during the dark hours, or, when full daylight came, be in the troublous position of incertitude as to whether they had rowed too far or not far enough.

The daylight at last, and the cane brake alive with the cries of the various strange occupants of its wilds. A light mist was floating overhead, the leaves were drenched with dew, and when the pale mist began to grow opalescent, shot as it were with purple, ruby and gold, everything was so beautiful that the lad's spirits rose with a bound.

"I did my best," he said to himself, "and though I shall get a good bullying for not doing more, old Anderson will come round and make me tell everything I have gone through, and then nod his head and say that I could have done no more."

There was a good deal too in the way of making the subject appear more cheerful, for the men were pulling at their oars easily and looked full of contentment, in spite of a few bruises, blood-smears and bandages, ready, too, to smile at him, when he fully expected to encounter surly glances full of reproach, while as soon as a question arose for discussion they plunged into it full of eagerness and excitement.

The first boat-keeper was thoroughly decisive about the spot where the boat had been left.

"Further on yet, sir," he declared. "I can recollect going along here yesterday."

"No, you don't," said Tom May surlily. "You don't know nothing about it, lad."

"Not know? That I do, messmate! Why, I'm sure on it."

"On'y a-guessing, sir. Don't you believe a word he says."

"Oh, come, mate," said Lang, the other boatman; "he's right enough. We ought to know better than you, because we stopped with the boat."

"Well, that's why you don't know, my lad," said the big sailor. "All you did was to stop and sit cutting sticks or pegs. We others know better because we landed and went with the first luff right inland."

"What of that?" said Lang. "You didn't go about the river high-up or low down; so now then!"

"Don't argue, my lads," cried Murray sharply. "Pull, and let's see if Lang and his fellow are right. For my part, I think we must be just about the place where we landed now. Why, yes; there, it's just beyond that overhanging tree."

"To be sure, sir," said Tom May excitedly. "That's the landing-place."

"Right you are, mate," cried the boat-keepers in a breath, "and there's the sticks we whittled when we cut down that furren sapling to make pegs."

A very few minutes' pulling brought the little party to the landing-place from which the start had been made for the plantation, and Murray stood up in the boat, trying to settle in his own mind what the next step ought to be.

It was his greatest crisis of responsibility, and his face puckered up as he glanced at his men and grasped the fact that they were looking to him to lead. They were ready enough to obey his orders, but not to give him the advice which he needed at such a crucial time.

"What can I do?" he asked himself. "It is a horrible task, but I must let Mr Anderson know of my failure. I feel as if I could find my way up to the plantation house now; but I can't leave the boat here, knowing that the enemy may follow us up the river and attack and capture it. That would be like cutting off Mr Anderson's retreat. I can't send one or two of the lads up to the house, for Tom May and Titely proved that they could lose themselves hopelessly, and if I sent the others they don't know the way at all. There's only one I feel as if I could trust—myself; and I can't trust him. Oh, was ever a fellow in such a hole before!"

He stood thinking, and the longer he thought the worse off he seemed to be; and his position grew more painful as he realised the fact that his men were waiting for his orders; and, though they remained silent, they kept on casting glances down stream as if expecting to see the armed party of the enemy in pursuit.

"It's of no use," he said to himself; "the more I think the worse the difficulties seem to grow;" and pulling himself together, he turned sharply upon May.

"Look here, my lad," he said sharply, "you must find your way up to the plantation and tell Mr Anderson how I am fixed. I can't leave the boat, for I must hold that in case the enemy comes on; and I can't spare any one to go with you, for three fellows will be small enough force to beat the enemy back."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the sailor promptly.

"You can tell Mr Anderson everything, and then he will settle whether he will hold the plantation house or come here and help us to get back to the sloop."

"Ay, ay, sir! Start?"

"One moment, Tom. You mustn't lose your way, but try and recollect the track that black fellow led us; and one word more—this is not a time for fighting, but for cunning. Now, off!"

The man stood for a few moments to thrust the ramrod down his piece and make sure that it was well loaded; then throwing it over his shoulder, he sprang ashore as lightly as if neither his rest nor his regular meals had been interfered with, gained the track, which now seemed plain enough, and disappeared.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

"Where's your Despatch?"

"It's all right, sir," cried Roberts. "Our lads coming."

"Well done!" said the lieutenant, with a sense of relief running through him. "Can you see who it is?"

"Tom May, sir."

"Only May? Well, he brings a message, I suppose.—Where's your despatch, man?" he cried, as the big sailor came within hearing.

"Not got none, sir; on'y a message from Mr Murray, sir;" and the man related his experience.

"A regular fight, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"But no one badly hurt?"

"No, sir."

"Tut, tut, tut! Whatever has Mr Murray been about to go astray like that? I did think I could trust him! And now it is quite open to his being taken, boat and men, by these scoundrels before I can get down to him?"

"Yes, sir," replied the messenger. "I don't think they'll be long afore they come up the river after him."

"Then how could he be so absurd as to send you, when either of the others would have done? He ought to have kept you."

"Thought I was a bit crippled, sir," said the man.

"But you didn't say you were much hurt."

"No, sir; no good to holloa, as I see."

"What to do?" muttered the lieutenant; and his first thought was to fire the building, his second to gather his men together and make a start.

He paused for a few moments to glance round in the full expectation of seeing a movement among the trees or some sign of their being watched; but the place was perfectly quiet and apparently deserted.

"Well, May," he said, as he caught the man's eyes fixed questioningly upon him, "what is it?"

"Thought perhaps you might be going to give orders to fire the place, sir."

"What for, man?" said the lieutenant, starting at the sailor's similarity of idea.

"Keeping 'em from holding it, sir."

"We may want to hold it ourselves, and there seems to be a want of fortification."

The next minute the big seaman was ordered to the front to act as guide, and being thoroughly now in an enemy's

country every needful precaution was taken—precautions which soon seemed to be highly necessary, for the little party had not proceeded far before, as Roberts with a couple of men brought up the rear, he became aware of the fact that they were being followed by what seemed to be a strong body of men stealing after them through the plantation.

A halt was called, and the rear-guard faced round, with the effect that those who followed could be seen to retire amongst the long lines of sugar-canes and maize, which offered plenty of cover.

The lieutenant impatiently gave the order again to advance, and this was followed by halt after halt; but the enemy seemed to be content with keeping just in touch, no attack being made; but it was evident that whoever was answerable for the tactics was pretty keen and ready, and the lieutenant thoroughly realised the precariousness of his position and the need for care if he intended to reach the boat.

“Nothing better can be done, Mr Roberts,” he said. “We must let them see that we are ready for them. It seems to check them every time.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the middy; “but doesn’t it mean that they are waiting till we reach some other party hidden between here and the river, and that as soon as we get close up they’ll make a dash for us?”

“Very likely, Mr Roberts,” said the lieutenant; “but if it does we must make a dash for them. Anyhow we must not let them think we are afraid.”

“Oh no, sir,” replied the middy excitedly. “But what about me letting my fellows give them a volley to drive them back a little faster?”

“A volley of two, Mr Roberts,” said the lieutenant sarcastically, “and a waste of ammunition that we must husband.”

“Beg pardon, sir; only what I thought,” said the middy.

“Quite right to speak, my lad; but tell me, can you make out what our pursuers are like?”

“Mixed lot, sir. They seem to be sailors and blacks.”

“Humph! Well, we are pretty well surrounded. I don’t like these cowardly-looking tactics, but I must get back to Mr Murray and the boat. We are gaining a knowledge of the country, and when we come again it must be in force. Much farther, May?” said the lieutenant, after pressing on to the front to where the big sailor was trudging steadily on.

“‘Bout two hours, sir,” replied the man.

“Two hours? Surely not!”

“Yes, sir; quite that.”

“Are you certain? Surely you have not lost your way?”

“Not this time, sir,” replied the man confidently. “It’s much further than you thought.”

The officer was silent, and always with the signs behind of a party getting ready to close up, the retreat was kept up, till all at once Tom May stopped short, and once more the lieutenant hurried to his side.

“What is it—enemy in front?”

“No, sir. All clear; but that comes from about where the boat lies, sir.”

“Firing?”

The answer came at once in the sound of a distant shot, a faintly heard report which sent a thrill through every man of the party, who needed no incitement to stretch out in a quicker step, one which would have been increased to a trot but for the checking of the officer in command, who kept the sturdy fellows well in hand so that they might come up to their companions with the boat, cool and ready to take action.

But as the pace was increased somewhat, Roberts was made fully aware of the presence of the secretive enemies, who still kept under cover—cover that was fast becoming cane brake and wilderness, as cultivation grew more sparse.

“It means a rush before long,” thought the lad, and he did not fail to utter a few words of warning from time to time as his heart began to beat heavily with excitement, and at the same time he had hard work to control the longing to hurry forward to the help of those who were plainly heard to respond to a steadily-kept-up fire which all felt must come from the enemy.

“We’re getting pretty close now, sir,” said May, in answer to a question from the lieutenant, who was marching by the guide’s side. “Enemy’s got a boat up the river, sir, I’m sartain, and that’s our Mr Murray and the lads keeping ’em in check. Don’t you think it might be double, sir, now?”

“I’d say yes, my man, but we must get in cool and steady.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” replied the big sailor, and he gave a sidelong glance at his officer as he spoke, shifted his musket from his right shoulder to his left, and passed a hand over his streaming face in a way which made Mr Anderson smile.

Another five minutes, during which the fire on both sides was evidently growing hotter, and then with a cheer which was answered from the river, the party of relief dashed forward, and the firing ceased as if by magic, while the lieutenant, as he reached the water’s edge at the head of his men, looked down the slowly gliding water in vain for signs of the enemy, the long curve of the bend to his right being unoccupied, and *no trace* of a boat in sight.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Where is the Slaver's Lugger?

"Murray!" came from the *Seafowl's* boat, as Murray gave orders for the men to let it float down from beneath the trees where he had kept it moored with his men, partly screened by the overhanging boughs, while lying down in the bottom firing from behind the bulwark.

"Thankye, sir," cried the lad excitedly. "We have been longing for you."

"But the enemy, my lad?"

"Place four men behind the trees there, sir, ready to fire. You'll see their boat come stealing out from round the bend, sir, directly. We have driven them back for the moment."

"A boat attacking from below?"

"Yes, sir; a lugger, full of men. We were quiet for some time;" and the lad hurriedly explained to his chief how that the enemy must have cleared away the tree-trunk with which the river had been dammed, and brought up a boat, from which for quite an hour they had been firing, after making one fierce attack, and being met with a steady fire which drove them back.

"Bravo! Well done, my lad!" said the lieutenant warmly.

"But it was quite time you came, sir. We couldn't have held out much longer."

"Nonsense!" said the lieutenant, laughing encouragement. "You would never have given up. Why, you had plenty of water."

"Yes, sir," said Murray, with a grim smile; "but the cartridges had nearly run out."

"Ours have not, Murray," said the lieutenant, for the men whom he had posted according to the midddy's advice just then opened fire upon a boat, which looked at the first glance uncommonly like the dismayed lugger which had been seen lying in the mouth of the little river when the *Seafowl* first entered the river.

A shot or two came in reply from the enemy before the lugger drew back round the bend, to be followed by the cutter, which came in sight of the enemy at last in time to see that the lugger's masts had been stepped and her sails hoisted, to be filled out by the breeze, which sent the boat rapidly gliding down stream.

The men looked sharply at their commander, as if fully expecting to receive orders to row with all their might; and Mr Anderson noticed it, for he turned to the two middies, and by way of answering the silent question—

"No," he said; "we're all fagged as it is, and no pulling on our part will bring us alongside of a boat that can sail like that. Pull steadily, my lads, and let the stream do the rest. The chances are that the captain has sent a boat up the river to look after us, and that we shall catch the lugger between two fires, if Mr Munday has not been first."

A good lookout was kept as the cutter dropped down the stream, and at every bend the men were ready to fire, but they searched with eager eyes in vain, and a general feeling of disappointment had attacked the hungry and exhausted party, while the lieutenant's countenance was over-clouded by a stern look which betokened the bent of his thoughts in connection with the coming meeting with his chief, when a glimpse was seen through the trees at a sharp curve which sent a thrill of excitement through the boat and made Murray spring to his feet.

"What's that?" cried the lieutenant.

"The lugger, I think, sir," whispered the midddy. "I just caught sight of one of her masts."

"Hist! Silence!" said the lieutenant. "Dip as quietly as you can, my lads. Two of you there, Titely and Lang, be ready to fire, and drop the steersman if they don't lower their sails."

"Ay, ay, sir!" came back, in a whisper, followed by the clicking of musket locks, and the oars dipped into the water with scarcely a sound.

"I can't make her out, Mr Murray," whispered the lieutenant. "Are you sure that you were not deceived?"

"Certain, sir," was the reply.

"I saw her too, sir," put in Roberts, "but the trees were very thick and there's a big bend there."

"Humph! Yes; the stream winds and doubles upon itself like a snake. You, Tom May, you've got a voice like a speaking trumpet; be ready to hail them, and if they don't lower their sail directly, fire, as I said before, at their steersman."

The minutes which followed were full of excitement, and then a low murmur arose, for one of the men forward turned to draw the attention of the officers in the stern sheets to the head of a mast which was seen for a few moments passing along above the bushes apparently at the edge of the river, and only some five hundred yards from where the cutter was gliding swiftly down.

"We shall do it, my lads," whispered the lieutenant to the middies.

"But they've altered their course, sir," said Roberts softly. "They're coming to attack."

"No, no; that's only because the stream winds so; or else—yes, that's it. They've caught sight of one of our boats coming up, and, bravo! we shall take the scoundrels, as I expected, between two fires."

The lieutenant sprang to his feet and clapped his hand to his sword, for a clean white lug sail came fully into sight. But he thrust his sword back into its sheath before dropping into his seat, for Tom May growled out in his siren-like voice

"Second cutter, sir, and yon's Mr Munday, sir, in the stern sheets."

"Then where's the slaver's lugger?" cried the first lieutenant, and a voice from the man-o'-war boat which was coming up stream under oars and a couple of lug sails shouted—

"*Seafowls* ahoy!"

"Bah!" cried Mr Anderson. "Then we must have passed some branch of the river; and I'm sure we kept a sharp lookout. How stupidly blind!"

"Perhaps Mr Munday's lads passed a branch, sir," cried Murray eagerly.

"Thank you, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant, clapping the lad on the shoulder. "I hope you're right, for I could never have forgiven myself if we had been met by this fresh misfortune."

Chapter Thirty.

Better Luck Next Time.

"Why, where have you been?" cried the second lieutenant, as the two boats ran alongside. "The captain's been nearly mad with excitement and anxiety."

"Oh, don't ask me," cried Mr Anderson. "But tell me this, has the stream forked anywhere as you came up?"

"Yes, once: about a mile lower down; but the river was very shallow and insignificant, and I did not think it was worth while to explore there. But why?"

"Shallow—insignificant!" said the lieutenant bitterly. "It was big and important enough to float a large lugger—the one we are pursuing."

"The one that we saw at the mouth of the river when we entered the bay? I was wondering where that had gone as we came up."

"No doubt the same," replied Mr Anderson. "Well, you've let the enemy slip, Munday."

"Nonsense! You don't mean that, man?"

"There's no mistake," said the lieutenant; "and it means this, that you will have to share the captain's anger and disappointment over my failure."

"I? But why?"

"For not catching the gang of scoundrels I was driving down before me. Oh, Munday, you ought to have taken that boat!"

"But how was I to know, man?"

"Don't stop to talk. Run on back and find the lugger if you can, while I keep on down the main stream. We may overtake the wretches after all, and if either of us sees the enemy in the offing of course we must pursue, even if it's right out to sea."

"But the captain—the *Seafow*? We must report what has happened."

"I will, of course, in passing. You, if you come up first, need only say that there is a nest of slavers up the river, and that I have had a sharp fight. If the captain has seen the lugger, tell him it is full of a gang of scoundrels who have fired upon us, and that the vessel ought to be sunk."

"You had better tell him all this yourself, Anderson," said the second lieutenant, in a whisper that the men could not hear, "and I wouldn't say a word about my missing the lugger on the way, for he's in a towering rage, and will only be too glad to drop on to me for what I really could not help."

"No, I suppose not," said the first lieutenant good-humouredly; "but you might take your share of his ill-humour."

"But it is all on account of your being so long away."

"Well, that was not my fault, man. We've had a rough time of it; but be off sharply, and as to the missing business, follow and catch the scoundrels, and I won't say a word."

"Oh, I say, Anderson!" protested the second lieutenant.

"Well, there, be off and I'll see." The second cutter's sails were sheeted home, and she glided off without more being said, while at little more than half the rate the first cutter went on under oars, but well helped by the current; and they had not gone far down the winding river before the silence of the cane brake was broken by a dull report which made the

two middies half rise from their seats by their leader.

"That means the *Seafowl* firing at the lugger to heave to, sir," said Murray.

"May you be right, my lad," replied Mr Anderson. "Step the masts, my lads, and hoist sail."

The orders were obeyed, and sometimes catching the light breeze and at others helped by the sturdy pulling at the oars, the cutter sped on, her occupants hearing shots fired from time to time, and reading clearly enough that the occupants of the lugger, if it was she who was being summoned to heave to, had not obeyed, but were racing on and trying to make their escape.

This grew more and more certain as the time glided on, and Roberts went so far as to assert that he could tell the difference between the unshotted and the shotted guns which followed.

Then, to the delight of the two lads, the firing ceased, and as they sat anxious and excited, they compared notes and passed opinions, while the lieutenant sat sombre and silent, looking straight out before him, only uttering an ejaculation of impatience from time to time as the wind dropped in some bend of the river, or filled the sails again upon a fresh tack.

Only once did the lieutenant rouse himself a little, and that was when they came in sight of the place where the river forked and down which the second cutter had long passed. Murray pointed it out, while Roberts exclaimed—

"Of course! I remember that well now; but I had forgotten all about it before."

"Yes; I can recollect it now," said the lieutenant bitterly; and he relapsed into silence again, though he was listening to the conversation of the two middies all the same, as he proved before long.

"You may be right or you may be wrong," said Murray, after a time. "I think you are wrong and haven't told the difference between the shotted and the unshotted guns; but the firing has quite ceased now, and that means that the lugger has given up, and lowered her sails."

"Maybe," said Roberts, "but more likely after holding on so long she has had an unlucky shot and been sunk."

"Lucky shot," said Murray grimly.

"Ah, that depends upon which side you take. I believe that our lads have grown pretty savage, and sunk her."

A low murmur of satisfaction arose from amongst the men who overheard the conversation, and then there was silence again, till the lieutenant suddenly spoke out.

"You've only provided for two alternatives, gentlemen," he said.

"Do you mean about the lugger, sir?" asked Murray.

"Of course. You settled that she had lowered her sails or been sunk."

"Yes, sir; there is no other way."

"Indeed, Mr Roberts?" said the lieutenant. "It seems to me that there is another alternative."

"I don't understand you, sir," said the lad.

"Perhaps Mr Murray does," said the lieutenant sadly. "What do you say, my lad?"

"I'm afraid so, sir, but I hope not," cried the lad; "but we shall soon know, for the river is opening out fast."

"Yes, that will soon be proved," said the first lieutenant; and he relapsed into silence.

"I say," whispered Roberts, giving his companion a nudge, "what do you mean by your alternatives? The lugger must either have lowered her sails or been sunk."

"What about the coast here?" replied Murray.

"Well, what about it?"

"Isn't it all wooded and covered with jungle?"

"Of course: don't we know it well!"

"Yes, and don't the slaving people know it well?"

"Of course they must."

"Then isn't it possible for them to have held on, sailing all they knew, and made for some other river or creek running into the shore right up perhaps into some lagoon or lake known only to themselves, and where we could not follow, knowing so little as we do of the country?"

"Oh, I say," cried Roberts, "what a miserable old prophet of ill you are, Frank! You shouldn't go on like that. Haven't we been disappointed enough, without coming in for worse things still? You might as well stick to it that the lugger has been sunk."

"I can't, old fellow," said Murray, "for I honestly believe—"

"Oh, bother your honest beliefs!" cried Roberts pettishly. "Be dishonest for once in a way. You might give us a bit of sunshine to freshen us up. Haven't we got enough to go through yet, with the captain fuming over our failure and being ready to bully us till all's blue?"

"Can't help it, old fellow; I must say what I feel. But there, we needn't talk, for we shall soon know now."

The lieutenant was of the same opinion, for he suddenly rose from where he was seated, and pressing the sheets on one side as he went forward he made for the bows, where he stood looking out where the mouth of the river became a wide estuary, and then came back to his place in the stern sheets, and as he sat down he pointed past the sails.

"There, gentlemen," he said; "there lies the *Seafowl*, in quite a different position; but there is no lugger."

"No, sir, but there lies the second cutter," cried Roberts; and he pointed to where their fellow boat was sailing far away and close in shore. "That means she had been chasing the *lugger* until a lucky shot from the sloop sunk her."

"No, my lad," said the officer gravely. "I hold to Mr Murray's idea—that the second cutter chased the scoundrels till they dodged into one of their lairs, and they have by this time penetrated far up the country, perhaps been able to get round by some back way through some forest labyrinth to where the plantation house is."

"Well, sir, we know our way better now," said Murray, "and we must go again. Better luck next time."

"Thank you, Mr Murray. Better luck next time. Now to hear what the captain has to say!"

Chapter Thirty One.

Mr Allen's Visit.

The captain had too much to say when the first cutter's crew went on board and learned that matters had taken place just as had been anticipated, the lugger having suddenly glided out of what had seemed to those on board the sloop to be a patch of dense tropical forest, and then sailed away as if to reach the open sea, paying not the slightest heed to the repeated summonses which she received from the *Seafowl*.

More stringent commands in the shape of shot would have followed, but for the fact that the second cutter, which had been despatched up the river in search of Mr Anderson's expedition, suddenly, to the surprise of all on board, glided out of the same patch of forest as the lugger had appeared from some little time before, and upon catching sight of the sails of the craft they had followed, had continued the pursuit as rapidly as the crew could force their boat along.

"The place is a regular maze, Mr Anderson," said the captain, as he described all that had taken place, "and the scoundrel who commands the lugger—I'll hang him to the yard-arm, Mr Anderson, whether he's a Yankee or English born, and the bigwigs of the United States and in Parliament at home may settle among themselves whether I've done right or not, for he has got the wrong man to deal with if he thinks he is going to play with me. He played with me, Mr Anderson, and tricked me into the belief that he had surrendered, so that I should not fire upon him, and manoeuvred his lugger so as to keep Mr Munday with the second cutter between us. Bah! I'll never forgive Mr Munday for letting himself be so out-maneuvred. He has been as bad as you have, sir."

"I'm very sorry, sir," said the first lieutenant meekly.

"And so you ought to be, sir! But, as I was telling you, the scoundrel led the second cutter a pretty dance, Munday following him till from the deck here it seemed that all he had to do was to tell his coxswain to put his boat-hook on board the lugger and bring his prisoners alongside here."

"Well, sir, and he did not?" asked the chief officer.

"No, sir, he did not!" cried the captain angrily; and then he stopped short for a few moments. "Well," he continued then, "aren't you going to ask why he didn't take the lugger a prize?"

"I was not going to interrupt you, sir, but I should be glad to hear."

"Very good, then, Mr Anderson, I will tell you. It was because the scoundrel played a regular pantomime trick upon us—yes, sir, a regular pantomime trick. Look yonder," continued the captain, pointing towards the shore. "What can you see there?"

"The edge of the forest that comes down to the bay nearly all round as far as I can make out, sir."

"Exactly. Well, somewhere over yonder the lugger suddenly sailed out, and of course we were astonished, for no glass that we have on board shows the slightest sign of an opening, while before we had got over our surprise, all of a sudden the second cutter, which went up the river to follow you, popped out of the same place as the lugger. Now, sir, how do you explain? Could you come out of the mouth of the river where you went in, while the second cutter, which I sent up the river after you, came out at the same spot as the lugger? Explain that, if you please."

"It is simple enough, sir; the little river forks and forms two mouths. I sailed down one, and Mr Munday after we had met sailed down the other in pursuit of the enemy, and came out as you saw. It is quite simple, sir."

"Then I must be too dense to understand it, Mr Anderson," said the captain angrily; "and now look here, sir," he continued, "you tell me that the river has two mouths?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's one, then," said the captain, pointing to where it could be plainly seen.

"Yes, sir."

"Then where's the other, sir?"

"Really, sir," replied the first lieutenant, glancing round and seeing that the two middies were hearing every word and striving hard to keep their faces straight in spite of an intense desire to laugh—"Really, sir, I cannot point out the exact spot, but I suppose that it is where the lugger and the second cutter came out."

"You suppose that, sir, do you—suppose it!" roared the captain, thumping the rail with his open hand. "Well, that's what Mr Munday supposes; but where is it, sir—where is it?"

"I must ask Mr Munday, sir, for I suppose he examined that part of the coast when he came out himself."

"Suppose—suppose—suppose!" cried the captain. "I'm sick of all this supposition. Mr Munday knows nothing whatever about it. The lugger sailed out, and after a bit the second cutter sailed out and continued the pursuit—for I suppose it was a pursuit?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Don't say of course, Mr Anderson. I tell you it was all like a pantomime trick. He has thoroughly examined the coast there, and he can find no second mouth."

"River's shut it up again, Dick," whispered Murray.

"He has regularly muddled it, Mr Anderson," continued the captain—"just as you muddled your part of the expedition; and the fact is that these slaver people have here an intricate what-do-you-call-it?—the same as the classical fellow. Here, you boys, it is not long since you left school: What did they call that puzzle? You, Mr Roberts."

"I forget, sir," said the midshipman, upon whom the captain had turned sharply.

"More shame for you, sir! Now, Mr Murray, I hope you have a better memory."

"Labyrinth, sir," replied the lad. "Of course—labyrinth! A child could have answered such a simple question;" and the speaker turned to the first lieutenant again, while Murray cocked his eye at Roberts and Roberts made a derisive "face" suggestive of scorn and contempt, and as much as to say, Then if a child could have answered it, why couldn't you?

"Yes," continued the captain—"a labyrinth, Mr Anderson, and it is very plain that the slaving scoundrels believe that their place is so confusing and strong that they can set his Majesty's sloop of war at defiance, and continue to carry on their abominable traffic as they please. But I think not, Mr Anderson—I think not, sir, for we are going to show them that we laugh at all their slippery talk about the island, or whatever it is, belonging to the American Government, and that we are a little too sharp to be deceived over their hiding-places. Only narrow ditches like so much network through swamps. Dreadfully confusing, of course, till you have been through them once, and afterwards as easy to thread as a big packing-needle. I'm disappointed in Mr Munday, I must say, but here is a splendid opportunity for you, you young gentlemen. You are not going to allow yourself to be baffled by a bit of a maze, Mr Murray?"

"No, sir; I hope not," said the lad. "And you, Mr Roberts?"

"No, sir, now we have been through forest, or cane brake, as Murray calls it."

"Of course you will not let such trifling obstacles stand in your way," said the captain, beginning to pace up and down now, and rubbing his hands. "We are going to find out here more than we expect, and after long disappointments make up for the past. Now, Mr Anderson, it is very plain that this Mr er—What do you say the American scoundrel is called?"

"His principal, Allen, addressed him as Huggins," replied the first lieutenant.

"Huggins! Bah! What a name! It suggests a convict of the worst type. It is a name bad enough, young gentlemen, to condemn any ruffian. Huggins! Why, it literally smells of villainy. But as I was going to say, this Huggins has placed himself completely in our hands by firing upon his Majesty's forces, and we are now going to give him a thoroughly severe lesson."

"I hope so, sir," said the chief officer. "Hope so, Mr Anderson!" cried the captain, turning. "We are going to, and at once. But look here, you tell me that the man's principal owns quite a handsome country seat up yonder?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you saw the slaving barracks where they collect the unfortunate wretches which are brought over from the West Coast of Africa?"

"No, sir; we saw nothing of that kind, but the surroundings are thickly wooded as well as highly cultivated, and this must all be done by numbers of slaves."

"Exactly, and this—what do you say his name is?—Allen?"

"Yes, sir."

"—lives the life of a wealthy slave-owner there?"

"Boat just slipped out from among the trees, sir!" cried Murray excitedly.

"How dare you interrupt me in that rude—Eh? Yes, of course! A boat, Mr Murray? What do you make her out to be?—Not coming to the attack?"

"No, sir," replied the middy, giving his fellow a quick glance full of mirth. "Row-boat, sir, pulled by a dozen black fellows—six oars a side. Man holding the ropes in white. Looks to me like—"

"The scoundrel Huggins coming out to surrender?"

"No, sir," said the lad eagerly. "I can't quite make out at this distance, but I think it's like the thin delicate-looking Mr Allen whom Huggins was so insolent to."

"What!" cried the captain.

"Yes, sir," said the chief officer, who had had his glass to his eye; "Mr Murray is quite right. This is the head man—proprietor, I suppose—of the plantation."

"Come to surrender," said the captain, rubbing his hands, and then taking the glass his chief officer offered to him. "A nice scoundrel!" muttered the captain, as he scanned the boat. "Everything in style, eh, and a black slave to hold a white umbrella over his head for fear the sun should burn his cheeks. Well, things are going to alter a good deal for him. The cowardly dog! This is showing the white feather, and no mistake. Well, Mr Anderson, I did not expect this."

The captain tucked the telescope under his arm and drawing himself up, marched off, while preparations were made for the coming boat's reception. The men were at their stations, and a couple of marines took their places at the gangway, while the young officers eagerly scanned the chief occupant of the boat, the doctor, who had just come on deck after seeing to the slight injuries of the first cutter's men, joining the midshipmen.

"Thank you, Murray," he said, handing back the glass the lad had offered him. "So this is the diabolical ruffian whose men fired upon his Majesty's able seamen and officers, is it? Well, he doesn't look very terrible. I think I could tackle him with a little quinine."

"Yes, doctor; he looked to me like a thorough invalid," whispered Murray.

"He is an invalid, my lad. Had fever badly. The fellow's come for advice."

"What's that?" said the captain sharply, for the doctor had made no scruple about giving his opinions aloud.

"I say your slaver or pirate captain looks as if he had come to visit the doctor and not the captain," replied the gentleman addressed.

"Come to go into irons," said the captain.

"Not he, sir. He doesn't want iron; steel is more in his way. Poor fellow! He looks as if you could blow him away."

"From the mouth of a gun? Well, he deserves it."

"But surely this is not the ruffian you folks have been talking about—firing upon the boats, and—Ah, here he is!"

For the well-made cutter now came alongside, the slave crew who rowed it and the coxswain being well-armed, and hooking on quite as a matter of course, the latter showing his white teeth, an example followed by the rest of the crew, while the occupant of the stern sheets rose feebly and painfully, gladly snatching at the hands offered to him, by whose aid he climbed the side with difficulty and stood tottering on the deck.

"The captain?" he said to Mr Anderson. "No; I saw you ashore, sir. Thanks," he added, taking the arm the chief officer extended to him. "I am greatly obliged, sir, for I am very weak."

"Yes," said the doctor, stepping forward. "A deck-chair, there. That's right, Mr Murray; a little more under the awning. Sit down, sir. Mr Roberts, a glass of water, if you please."

"You are very good, gentlemen," said the visitor, recovering a little, for he was evidently on the point of fainting. "I am better now. Can I speak to the captain?"

"Yes, sir," said that gentleman, coming forward frowning, and rather taken aback by the aspect of one he looked upon as a surrendered prisoner. "Now, sir, what have you to say?"

"Only that I wish to express my grief, captain, that the untoward business of the past twenty-four hours or so should have occurred."

"Very pretty, sir," said the captain sternly. "You set me at defiance, fire upon his Majesty's forces, and then presume to come aboard my ship having the insolence to suppose that all you have to do is to offer an apology."

"No, sir," said the visitor sadly. "This has all been none of my doing. I think your officers will bear me out when I tell you that it was far from my wish that any resistance should be made to one of the King of England's ships."

"Indeed! To one of your king's ships?"

"Yes; I own myself to be one of his Majesty's most unworthy subjects."

"Indeed!" said the captain sharply. "Why, Mr Anderson, I understood you to say that this man claimed to be a subject of the United States Government."

"No—no!" interrupted the planter. "I can bear this no longer; the end has come. All this trouble, sir, has arisen from my weakness in allowing myself to be subjected to the oppression and led away by the villainy of the man whom I at first engaged to manage my plantation."

"Look here, my good fellow," cried the captain sternly, "I do not want to know anything about your overseer, but I take it that you are a slaver. Answer me that—yes or no."

"Unwillingly, sir, yes."

"And you confess to having fired upon his Majesty's forces?"

"No, sir; no."

"What, sir!" cried the captain. "Do you deny that your servants—your slaves—have done this thing?"

"Sir," cried the planter bitterly, "for long enough my chief servant has made himself my master. I, the slave, have fought hard against what has been carried out in my name."

"Indeed?" said the captain sharply. "But *qui facit per alium jacit per se*. Eh, Mr Murray? You can render that for this gentleman if he requires an interpreter."

"I need no rendering of the old Latin proverb, sir," said the planter sadly, "and I know that I am answerable. I am a sick man, sick to death, sir, of the horrible life I have been forced to lead for the past two years, and I come to you ready to render you every assistance I can give in clearing away this plague spot."

"Indeed," said the captain, after exchanging looks with Mr Anderson, "but this plague spot is, I understand, a very prosperous one, and you seem to lead rather a lordly life with your state barge and retinue of slaves."

"I beg that you will not mock me, sir," said the planter. "I am indeed sincere in what I say, and I offer to do everything possible to enable you and your men to root out this nest of slavery."

"Exactly," said the captain; "now that I have found it out and do not want your help. Yours is rather a late repentance. Upon what terms do you propose this?"

"On very easy terms for you, sir," replied the planter; "only that you will let a broken man die in peace."

The captain looked at his visitor searchingly, and then turned to the doctor.

"What is your opinion of this gentleman's state?" he said.

"Most serious," replied the doctor, after a very brief examination of the visitor.

"Humph!" ejaculated the captain. "And I understand," he continued, "that you are ready to give me every assistance I need to root out this plague spot, as you term it?"

"Every help I can," replied the planter.

"Now that I do not need it, eh?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the planter; "you do need it. You have made your way to my house and plantations without help."

"Yes; my officers soon made their way there," said the captain.

"And it will be easy to burn and destroy there; but you will not be able to deal with the slave quarters in different parts of the island, nor with the three well-equipped slaving schooners that voyage to and from the West Coast of Africa and carry on their sickening trade with this depot and the other stations."

"H'm!" ejaculated the captain. "Perhaps not; but I have no doubt that we shall soon find out all I require."

The planter shook his head sadly.

"No, sir; the task will prove more difficult than you anticipate. Your officer here has some little experience of one of your opponents."

"Oh! There is more than one to deal with, then?" said Mr Anderson sharply.

"There are two, sir, who act as heads of the traffic—my overseer Huggins, and his twin brother."

"Ah! I see," said the chief officer, smiling. "I am of opinion, then, that we have met the brother yonder upon the West Coast."

"Most likely, sir," said the planter feebly. "If you have, you have encountered another of the most cunning, scheming scoundrels that ever walked the earth."

"And these are your friends that I understand you are ready to betray to justice?" said the captain sternly.

"My friends, sir?" said the planter bitterly. "Say, my tyrants, sir—the men who have taken advantage of my weakness to make me a loathsome object in my own sight. Captain," cried the trembling man, "I must speak as I do to make you fully realise my position. I am by birth an English gentleman. My father was one of those who came out here like many others to settle upon a plantation. In the past, as you know, ideas were lax upon the question of slavery, and I inherited those ideas; but I can answer for my father, that his great idea was to lead a patriarchal life surrounded by his slaves, who in their way were well treated and happy."

"As slaves?" said Mr Anderson sternly.

"I will *not* enter into that, sir," said the planter sadly, "and I grant that the custom became a terrible abuse—a curse which has exacted its punishments. I own fully that I have been a weak man who has allowed himself to be outwitted by a couple of scheming scoundrels, who led me on and on till they had involved me in debt and hopelessly so. In short, of late years my soul has not seemed to be my own, and by degrees I awoke to the fact that I was nominally the head of a horrible traffic, and the stalking-horse behind whose cover these twin brothers carried on their vile schemes, growing rich

as merchant princes and establishing at my cost this—what shall I call it?—emporium of flesh and blood—this home of horror.”

“Do I understand you to say that in this island there is a kind of centre of the slave-trade?”

“In this island and those near at hand, sir,” said the planter. “In addition there are depots on the mainland which the slavers visit at regular intervals, and from which the plantations are supplied.”

“And you are ready to give information such as will enable me to root out a great deal of this and to capture the vessels which carry on the vile trade?”

“I can and will do all this, sir,” replied the planter feebly. “I thought I had explained as much.”

“Yes, yes,” cried the captain impatiently, “but I want to know more about the bargain you wish to make.”

“What can I say more, sir?” replied the planter. “Your protection, so that I may die in peace, trying to make some amends for the past.”

“H’m!” ejaculated the captain thoughtfully.

The planter smiled.

“You are thinking, sir,” he said, “that you cannot trust me, and that you will be able to root out this accursed trade without my help.”

“Perhaps so,” said the captain drily.

“Let me tell you, then, that you are setting yourself to cleanse an Augean stable. You are pitting yourself against men who have made these swampy forests, these nets of intertwining water-ways, a perfect maze of strongholds in which your little force of sailors would be involved in a desperate fight with Nature at her worst. Your officers and men here have had some slight experience of what they will have to deal with, but a mere nothing. I tell you, sir, that you have no idea of the difficulties that await you. I am speaking the plain truth. You cannot grasp what strong powers you would have to contend with. Ah, you, doctor, you should know. Tell your captain. You must have some knowledge of what Nature can do here in the way of fever.”

“Humph! Yes,” said the gentleman addressed. “You are a proof positive.”

“Yes,” said the planter sadly; “I am one of her victims, and an example of what a strong man can become whose fate has fixed him in these swampy shades.”

“I’ll trust you, sir,” said the captain suddenly. “I must warn you, though, that at the slightest suspicion you arouse of playing any treacherous trick upon me, your life will be the forfeit.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then tell me this first; how am I to lay hands upon this overseer of yours? He is away somewhere in hiding, I suppose, on that lugger?”

“Oh no; that lugger is under the command of one of his men, a mulatto. He has gone off in a canoe, as I expect, to bring round one of his schooners.”

“What for? Not to attack us here?”

“I expect so; but I can soon tell.”

“Ah, how?” asked the captain eagerly.

“By sending a couple of men whom I can trust, to find out.”

The captain rubbed his ear and stood looking at the planter thoughtfully, and then turning to the first lieutenant, he took his arm and led him right aft, speaking to him hurriedly for a few minutes before they returned to where the doctor stood evidently looking upon their visitor in the light of a new patient.

“Now, Mr—Mr Allen,” said the captain sharply, “I have been consulting my chief officer, and he agrees with me that it will be wise to accept your offer; so tell me what you propose first.”

“To return to my little house.”

“How can that help us?” exclaimed Mr Anderson sharply. “How are we to communicate with you right away in that swampy forest?”

“You misunderstand me,” said the planter. “I mean I shall return to the place I have by the side of the bay here;” and he pointed across the water.

“I do not see where you mean.”

“Not from here. It is up one of the little rivers quite hidden amongst the trees.”

“Everything seems to be hidden amongst the trees,” said the lieutenant.

“Exactly,” replied the planter, smiling; “that is what I wish you to understand. You must trust me, sir.”

"Well," said the captain, "I will trust you, but you understand that you are offering to serve me at the peril of your life?"

"It is at the peril of my life I am offering to help you, sir. Ezekiel Huggins will not scruple about shooting me like a dog as soon as he finds that I am actively helping you."

"Then I must place you under my protection."

"If you please," said the planter gravely. "Your officer here will give me the credit of being upon your side from the first."

"Yes," said Mr Anderson; "I do that."

"Then I will go back home at once," said the planter, "and I shall look to you as a friend. It would be best if you sent a boat and men to lie up in the little river. When will you land?"

"At once," said the captain, and he walked slowly to the gangway with his visitor, saw him into his boat, where, in quite man-o'-war fashion, the black crew sat with oars erect, ready to lower them with a splash and row off for a few dozen yards, and then rest while the first cutter was lowered again with a well-armed crew, including a couple of marines.

"You will take command, Mr Murray," said the captain, "and take note of everything, being well on your guard. I trust to your discretion."

Murray listened, conscious the while that Roberts was looking on scowling blackly.

"In four hours you will be relieved."

"That means you're to take my place," said the middy, telegraphing with his eyes, greatly to the improvement of his brother middy's aspect.

"Off with you!" was the next command, and as the sailors lowered their oars, the black crew waiting received their orders to start, leading off in the direction from which they had come, the cutter following closely, while her young commander kept a sharp lookout for the mouth of the little river, which remained invisible, hidden away as it was by the dense foliage which on all hands came right down to the calm, smooth water of the great crater-like bay.

Chapter Thirty Two.

On Duty.

"I didn't expect this," said Murray to himself, as after sweeping the shore of the bay he once more fixed his eyes upon the well-manned boat in front; and then he started in wonder, for Tom May, who sat close to him astern, said in a low voice—

"I didn't expect that the captain would send us off again directly, Mr Murray, sir."

"Neither did I, Tom; and, what is more, I did not expect to hear you say that you were thinking just the same as I did."

"Was you, sir?"

"Yes. You didn't want to come, I suppose, after going through so much?"

"Not want to come, sir? I just did! But what sort of a game is this going to be?"

"I don't know, Tom," replied Murray gruffly, "only that we've got to watch this Mr Allen."

"Don't mean no games, do he, sir?"

"I think not; but I look to you to keep your eyes open."

"Which I just will, sir. But I say, look at that."

"Look at what, Tom?"

"That there little creek opening out, sir. Seems to me as if they've got little rivers all round the bay ready for going up or coming out on. It's just as if they shut 'em up and no one could see 'em afterwards."

Some little time later the planter's boat, which was only a short distance ahead, turned off at right angles in obedience to a pull at the starboard line, and seemed to disappear through a beautiful screen of tropic growth, and as the cutter was steered in after her it was to pass along a soft green tunnel, flecked with golden sunlight, into a smooth lake, at one side of which, standing back a short distance from the silver sandy shore, with its open windows, green shading jalousies, sheltering trees, and scarlet creepers, was as perfect a little Eden of a home as mortal eye ever looked upon. There was nothing to suggest slavery, sorrow, or suffering in any shape, but everywhere Nature decked the place with her richest beauties, and as the middy sprang up involuntarily, a low murmur of admiration ran through the crew. Then, as if ashamed of the habit in which he was indulging, Tom May doffed his straw hat, placed it upon his knees, thrust his crooked index finger into his capacious mouth, and hooked out from his left cheek a disgusting-looking quid of well-chewed tobacco, which dropped into the crown of the hat and was quickly tossed out, to fall *plop* into the deep still water of the lake. The next moment a golden-scaled fish made a rush for what suggested itself to its ignorance as a delicacy, which it took, delivered a couple of strokes with its tail which sent it to the surface, flying out and falling back again with a heavy splash, and then disappeared beneath the glittering rings which began to open out and widen more and more towards the borders of the little mirrorlike lake.

"And sarve you jolly well right too," growled the big sailor, as if talking to himself. "What call had you to meddle with luxuries as is on'y sootable for eddicated people?"

Murray suppressed a smile and looked as serious as he could, giving orders to the men to pull a few strokes with their oars, sufficient to send the cutter into the place that had been occupied by the planter's boat, which was now gliding away from the great bamboo piles driven in by the rustic steps and platform upon which their guide had landed, while he now stood resting upon a rail beneath the verandah, which offered ample shade for the cutter and her crew.

Murray gave a few further orders, sprang out and stepped to the planter's side as the feeble invalid signed to him to come.

"I heard the commands given to you, sir," he said, "and you will, I hope, forgive me if I do not seem hospitable."

"I know you are ill, sir," said Murray coldly, "so you need not trouble at all about me and my men."

"I thank you," said the planter, "and of course I know enough of the Navy and its discipline not to proffer drink to your men."

"Certainly not," said Murray stiffly.

"Still," continued the planter, "in this hot climate the shelter will be acceptable. There is a spring of excellent water in the rockery behind the house, of which I beg you will make every use you desire. I am going to lie down in the room to the left. You have only to ring, and my slaves—well, servants," said the planter, smiling sadly as he saw the lad's brow knit—"my servants will attend to your summons directly, and bring fruit—oranges, and what your men will no doubt appreciate, fresh green cocoanuts. They will make you fresh coffee and bring anything else you desire, sir."

"I am much obliged," said Murray, rather distantly, "but you must recollect that I am on duty."

"I do not forget that, sir," replied the planter, smiling; "but you will not find your duty a very hard one—to guard a poor feeble creature such as I. There, sir, you and your superiors are masters here, and I am, I know, only a prisoner."

"I shall make your position as little irksome as I can, sir," said Murray; and then, feeling a certain amount of pity for the wretched man, he added, "Not a very terrible-looking prison, this."

"No," replied the planter, "and when you begin to go amongst the slave-huts, you will, as a stranger, begin to wonder at their aspect, for the simplest shelter made with a few bamboos is soon turned by Nature into a home of beauty."

"But all the same it is a slave's prison," replied Murray.

"We had better not discuss that question, young gentleman," said the planter bitterly, "for I am sure that I could not convince you that I have tried for years past to render the slaves' lot more bearable."

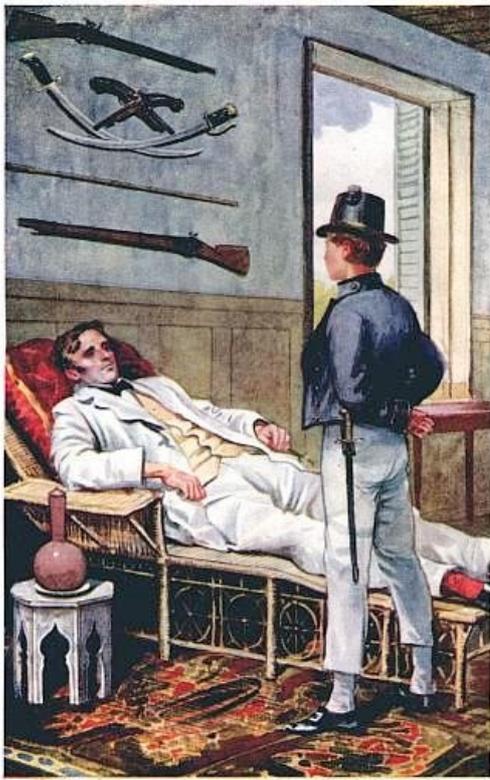
"Nothing could make it more bearable," said Murray sternly.

"Certainly not," said the other sadly, "as matters are here."

He raised his broad-brimmed Panama hat and turned to leave the bamboo platform, but, misjudging his strength, he reeled and would have fallen headlong into the placid water if it had not been for Murray's prompt action. For, starting forward, he flung his arm round the sick man's waist, and supported him to the doorway that had been pointed out beneath the broad verandah.

"Thank you! Thank you!" panted the sick man; and with a painful smile he continued, "Ah, it is a great thing to be young and strong, with the world before you and nothing to repent.—If you please, through that door to the left."

They were standing now in a simply but handsomely furnished hall, whose principal decorations caught the lad's eyes at once, being, as they were, sporting and defensive weapons of all kinds, and of



"WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE OUR DOCTOR, SIR?" ASKED MURRAY.

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Hunting the Skipper.

the best manufacture, hung about the walls; but for the moment Murray had no opportunity for inspecting these objects of interest, his attention being taken up by the planter, who availed himself of his guardian's help to pass through the door upon their left, where he sank upon a couch at one side of the room and closed his eyes.

"Would you like to see our doctor, sir?" asked Murray.

"No, no; thank you, no; it is only weakness," was the reply. "I have often been like this, and it will soon pass off. I shall go off to sleep before many minutes have passed, and wake up rested and refreshed."

"Then you would like me to leave you for a while?" asked Murray.

"I should be most grateful, sir," was the reply, "and I shall sleep in peace now, feeling safe in the knowledge that I have the protection of a guard."

The planter had opened his eyes to speak, and now closed them tightly, leaving his guardian to glance round the room, which had but the one door, that by which they had entered; while the window was open save that one widely arranged green jalousie shut out some of the sunshine and subdued the light that floated in.

Murray stepped out, after noticing that an oblong, shallow, brass-bound box lay upon a side-table—a box whose configuration had but one meaning for the lad, and that was of a warlike or self-protective character, an idea which was strengthened by the fact that an ordinary military sword was hung above the mantelpiece.

"Sword and pistols," thought the lad. "What does he want with so many weapons? I should have considered that there were enough in the hall without these."

He noticed that there was a hand-bell upon the side-table, a fact which suggested that a servant was within reach, and as the lad stood in the hall once more he looked about him, and then, feeling that he had entered upon a special charge, he crossed to the next door, that facing the one he had just left, and upon thrusting it open found himself in what was evidently used as a dining-room, being about double the size of the other, and having two windows whose lath-like shutters half darkened the room.

"I don't want to play spy all over the house," said Murray to himself, "but I am in charge of this planter fellow, and I ought to know who is about the place. But I don't know," he muttered; "it isn't the duty of a naval officer."

Frowning slightly, he stepped out on to the bamboo platform again and signed to the big sailor to follow him back to the door.

"Here, Tom," he said, and glancing down at the man's bare feet, he added, in a low tone, "You have no shoes on, so just go quietly through the bottom of the building and see what rooms there are and what black servants are about."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the man softly.

"Go quietly," added Murray; "the owner is ill and has dropped asleep."

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied the sailor, and in regular able-seaman swing upon the points of his toes he stepped out of the hall-like central room of the place, taking in the little armoury the while, and left his officer alone, the door closing behind him as silently as he stepped.

"How still it all is," thought the middy, and he went cautiously back to the little room which he looked upon as the

planter's study, pressed the door slightly open, and peered in, to see that the occupant had not stirred, while his deep breathing now sounded plainly, till Murray let the door fall to and went back towards that through which Tom May had passed upon his mission.

As the middy approached, it was drawn open again.

"Hallo, Tom!" said the lad. "Back already?"

"Ay, ay, sir! There's on'y two cabins to look at there, and one's a cook's galley, and t'other's stooard's pantry."

"Did you see the black servants?"

"No, sir, and there ain't no white uns neither."

"Sort of summer-house," thought Murray; and then in connection with his duty he told the sailor to go up-stairs and examine the bedrooms.

"Which way does the cabin ladder lie, sir?" asked the man.

"I don't know, Tom," was the reply. "Try that door."

He pointed to one that was on the far side of the hall and had struck him at first as a movable panel to close up a fire-place; but upon the light cane frame being drawn out it revealed a perpendicular flight of steps, up which the sailor drew himself lightly and lowered himself down again.

"Well?"

"Arn't no rooms there, sir," whispered the man, with rather an uneasy look in his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"It's just the ship's hold, sir, turned upside down like. Sort o' cock loft of bamboo spars jyned together at the top—rafters, don't they call 'em, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

"That's right, then, sir, and they're all thatched and caulked with palm leaves."

"Not a bedroom at all, then, Tom."

"No, sir, but it's a sort o' sleeping accommodation all the same, 'cause there's a couple o' netting sort o' hammocks slung all ready; but I shouldn't like to have my quarters there," continued the man uneasily.

"Why not? It must be cool and pleasant."

"Cool, sir, but not kinder pleasant."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, sir, it's so plaguey dark."

"What of that? So's the sloop's hold."

"Yes, sir, but this here's so unked dark."

"Well, you don't mind the dark?"

"No, sir, I dunno as I do so long as I've got my messmates nigh at hand."

"Look here, Tom, I don't understand you," said Murray. "You're keeping something back. Why are you hesitating? You don't mind the dark."

"No, sir; it's the rustling sounds as I don't like."

"Pooh! Rats," said Murray.

"Nay, nay, sir. I knows what a rat can do in a ship's hold as well as any one who has been to sea. What I heered arn't no rats."

"Birds, then."

"Tchah, sir! That arn't no birds."

"What is it, May, since you seem to know?"

"Some'at oncanny, sir."

"*Uncanny?* What can it be uncanny?"

"I dunno, sir. Some'at as arn't real."

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno, sir, and I 'spects—"

"Suspect what? Why, Tom, you don't mean to tell me that a great strong sailor like you fancies that the place is haunted?"

"Oh no, sir, I don't go so far as to say that," said the man.

"Then what do you mean?"

"That's what I can't exactly tell you, sir. All I knows is that as soon as I got my head and shoulders well up among them bamboos there was a roosh as if half-a-dozen people was a-comin' at me, and then some one whispered something to the others, and they whispered back. It was jest for all the world, sir, as if some one said 'Hist! It ain't him,' and t'others whispered back and that settled 'em into going on talking together oneasy like; and then I come down."

"Without making out what it was, Tom," said Murray, laughing softly.

"Nay, sir; I seemed to know right enough; and it arn't nothing to laugh at."

"What is it, then, Tom?"

"Why, sir, I don't go for to say as it is, but it sounded to me like oneasy slaves as had met their ends aboard some o' they slaving craft, and couldn't rest."

"Tom May!" said the midddy; and he would have burst out laughing, but for the thought that he might awaken the sick man in the room where he had lain down to rest. "Come out here."

"It's of no use to say anything to the lads outside," grumbled the big sailor, "for they think just the same as I do, sir."

"Why, you haven't spoken to them," said Murray.

"Not to-day, sir, but we often have talked about it, sir, and what might happen to them fellows as man the slaving schooners. Something must come to 'em some time or another after what they've done to the niggers. Stands to reason, sir, as they can't go on always as they do."

"I'm not going to argue about that at a time like this, but I do wonder at a big sensible fellow like you are, Tom—a sailor I always feel proud of—beginning to talk about ghosts and rooms being haunted, just like some silly superstitious old woman."

Tom May drew himself up proudly and smiled at the first portion of his young officer's speech, but frowned at the latter and shook his head.

"Ah, it's all very well, sir, for a young gentleman like you to talk that how, and you and Mr Roberts, sir, has been at me before and laughed at me and my messmates; but, you see, we're a deal older than you are, and been at sea two or three times as long. We've seen bad storms, and all sorts o' wonders such as young people don't come across."

"No doubt, Tom," said Murray quietly; "but come along outside. I want to station my posts."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the man, with a sigh of relief; but before he followed his officer he stepped on tiptoe to the opening leading up to the loft, and made an offer, so to speak, shrank back, then advanced again, and ended by sharply and shrinkingly closing the screen-like door and backing away with a sigh of relief.

"Feel better, Tom?" said the midddy, with mock seriousness, as they stood out in the full light of day again.

"Ah, you're a-laughing at me, sir," said the big sailor, shaking his head. "I know, sir, though you're a-pretending to look as serious as a judge."

"Enough to make me look serious, Tom. But are you sure that any of the restless ones didn't slip down after you before you shut the door?"

"Eh? What, sir?" whispered the man hurriedly.

"You don't think as—" He looked behind and round about him, before continuing. "Why, of course I am, sir. You're a-making fun of a fellow, sir. But if you'd been up yonder and heered 'em—"

"I should have poked about with the barrel of my musket and found that the rustling was made by birds or rats."

"Nay, sir," said the man confidently, "'twarn't neither o' they things. If it had been they'd ha' skilly wiggled away at once. And besides, sir, they wouldn't ha' made a man feel so 'orrid squirmy like. I felt all of a shudder; that's what made me know that they were something as didn't ought to be."

"Snakes, perhaps, Tom."

The man started, stared, snatched off his straw hat, and gave his head a vicious rub, before having another good look back at the thatch-roofed summer-house of a place.

"Say, Mr Murray, sir," he said at last, "did you say snakes?"

"Yes, Tom; perhaps poisonous ones."

The man gave his head another rub, and then ejaculated in a strange long-drawn way the one word—

“Well!”

“I’ve read that in places like this they creep in under the flooring, and then make their way up the holes and into the thatch after the birds or rats upon which they live.”

“Do they now, sir?” said the man excitedly.

“Yes, and some of them are horribly poisonous; so you must take care how you deal with them.”

“Poisonous, sir?” continued Tom. “Them sort as if they bite a man it’s all over with him and the doctor arn’t able to save his life?”

“Yes, Tom,” continued Murray; “in one of these islands particularly the people call the serpent the *fer de lance*, a bite from which is very often fatal.”

“Kills a man, sir?”

“I believe so.”

“Then I arn’t surprised at them calling it so, sir. Nothing could be too bad for it. That’s it, sir, and now I arn’t a bit surprised at my feeling as I did, sir. I wondered what made me come so all-overish like and fancy there was something about as oughtn’t to be. I arn’t a chap as gets skeared about a bit o’ danger, sir; now, am I, sir?”

“No, Tom; I believe you to be a brave fellow that your officers can always trust.”

“Thankye, sir; that’s what I want to be—chap as can stand a bit o’ fire, sir, eh?” said the man, with a broad grin.

“Yes, Tom, and that’s what made me feel vexed at your being so superstitious.”

“Sooperstitious, sir?” said the man, giving his head another rub. “That’s what you call it, is it, sir? Well, but arn’t it enough to make a fellow feel a bit creepy, sir, to have them dry-land eels squirming about overhead ready to give him a nip as means Dr Reston shaking his head all over you and calling your messmates to sew you up in your hammock with a twenty-four pound shot at your feet, and the skipper reading the sarvice over you before the hatch upon which you lays is tilted up, and then *splash*, down you goes out o’ sight at gunfire. I don’t see, sir, as a fellow has much to be ashamed of in being a bit shivery.”

“Nor I, Tom, if he shivered from an instinctive fear of a poisonous serpent. But you were not afraid of that, eh?”

Tom May screwed up his face again with a comical grin, shook his head, and then, after a glance here and there at his messmates who were to be stationed as sentries—

“Well, not azackly, sir,” he said. “I was reg’larly skeared at something, and I did not know what; but I see now, sir. It was my natur’ to—what you called ‘stinctive.’”

“Well, we’ll leave it there, Tom,” said Murray smiling, “but I’m not quite satisfied. I’ll go and have a look by and by.”

“Ah! But Mr Murray, sir, you won’t go and think I was a bit—”

“Never mind what I thought, Tom; and now come on. I want to see about the positions the men are to be in. To begin with, I should like the two men in the cutter to lie off a bit further.”

The order was given, and a fresh position was taken up before the middy walked carefully all round the planter’s rest-house and carefully stationed his men on duty, adding a few words about keeping a sharp lookout for the approach of danger, and at a whisper from the big sailor, including snakes.

This done, the lad began to amuse himself by examining the attempts that had been made to render the place beautiful, and it was while thus engaged, and noting that the forest all round the clearing and cultivation was apparently impenetrable, giving the idea that the cottage could only be approached by water, that Tom followed up three or four rather peculiar sniffs by one that was most suggestive of a desire to call his officer’s attention to something he wished to say.

Murray, who was pretty well acquainted with the sailor’s peculiarities, turned upon him at last sharply—

“Well, Tom,” he said, “what is it?”

“Oh, nothing, sir, on’y I didn’t want to seem imperent.”

“I’m glad to hear it, my lad; but what did you want to say?”

“I was on’y thinking, sir.”

“What about?”

“Why, sir, it seemed to me as if we was taking so much trouble to keep watch over this here sick gentleman.”

“Well, go on; don’t hesitate so.”

“Beg pardon, sir; I hesitate like ‘cause I don’t want to seem imperent.”

“Then I’ll forgive you if it is, Tom. Now then, what were you going to say?”

"Only this, sir; wouldn't it have been handier like to ha' kep' him aboard the *Seafowl* where the watches are going on reg'lar, and the doctor could ha' looked in upon him now and then?"

"Perhaps it would, Tom," replied Murray, "but Captain Kingsberry and the first lieutenant may have had special reasons for what they are doing."

"Of course, sir; azackly, sir; but somehow this here does seem a bit quiet like after what we was doing before."

"Less exciting, Tom?"

"Yes, sir. Don't think it likely, do you, sir, that the Yankee chap who has been giving the gent inside so much trouble and nearly wherriting his life out over the slaver, may drop in to see him, do you, sir?"

"No, Tom, I don't," said the middy shortly. "Neither do you."

Tom May shook his head and looked very hard at his officer.

"Beg pardon, sir, but you arn't quite right like, because that's just what I was thinking, and that you might like for us all to be quite ready for him if he did come."

"What more could I do, Tom?" said the lad anxiously, for the man's words made him think that he had been neglecting some precaution. "A good lookout is being kept, isn't it?"

"Seaward, sir," replied the man, "but I was thinking as the lads round the back arn't in sight of one another."

"Oh!" cried Murray. "And you think that the enemy might come stealing down one of the paths through the forest?"

"Didn't see no paths, sir," said the man, looking at him wonderingly.

"Neither did I, Tom."

"O' course not, sir," said the man, giving himself a punch in the ribs with his doubled fist. "Here, I don't know what I could be thinking of."

"Nor do I, Tom. Mine's rather a curious duty, namely, to take care that this gentleman does not leave this place, and to treat him as it seems to me so that while he is a prisoner he shall not in his state of health fancy that he is one."

"Skipper wants to keep friends with him so as he'll show us where all the niggers are, sir, and give us a chance to make a good haul of prize money?"

"Perhaps so, Tom."

"Well, sir, captain knows best, and the first luff knows what's second best. I dunno about Mr Munday, sir, but I wish some one else had my watch, that I do, sir. Our job burning out the black chief's place over yonder was a bit too hot a job, but I'd rather have orders to do the same sort o' thing again than be doing this here. It's too sleepy for me. Can't you set me 'sploring, sir, or something of that kind? For I'm no good at all onless I'm on active sarvice."

"You'll have plenty to do by and by, Tom, depend upon it."

"Hope so, sir, but I want something to do now. Couldn't do a bit o' fishing, could I, sir?"

"No, Tom; we have no hooks and lines."

"That's a pity, sir. Seems to me that one might catch a good dish for the gunroom mess, and a few over for the men, judging from the way they bit out in the lagoon there, sir."

"We're on duty, Tom."

"O' course, sir. What do you say to me and a couple of the lads cutting bamboos and routing out the snakes I heered yonder in the roof. Too dangerous, perhaps, sir?"

"Much, Tom, and I don't think it would accord with our duty here."

"No, sir; o' course not, but you'll excuse me, sir?"

Murray nodded, and then, feeling hot and drowsy with the heat and silence, he suddenly recalled what the planter had said about summoning the servants if he wanted anything.

"Fruit!" he said to himself. "Well, I'll begin with a good drink of water.—I'm going to have a look round, Tom," he said quietly.

"Thankye, sir; I'm glad of it," said the man eagerly; and he followed his officer promptly as he walked round the cottage, and said a few words to his sentries, who seemed to gladly welcome the coming of some one to relieve the silence and monotony of their task.

As he passed round the extreme pale of the garden-like clearing, Murray noted more than ever how the grounds were enclosed by a natural hedge of the densest kind, so that it was like a wall of verdure which was admirably tended and for the most part of the tropical kind, being kept clipped and intertwined to such an extent that it would have been impossible for wild creatures if they haunted the island to pass through.

Returning to the front, and after glancing at his boat, Murray signed to the big sailor to follow him, and entered through the verandah and the porch into the armoury-like hall, where he stood listening for a few moments before

making a gesture to silence his man, who was about to speak. For Tom stood with wrinkled brow gazing hard at the screen which covered the way up to where the hammocks hung, as if rather uneasy in his mind about what that screen covered.

"I'll be back directly, Tom," said Murray, and then he went on tiptoe into the room he had mentally dubbed the study, and found that apparently the planter had not stirred, but was plunged in the deep sleep of exhaustion.

"I will not wake him," thought the lad, and after gazing down at the worn and wasted countenance before him, his eyes again wandered over the walls and their decorations. He again noted the case upon the table, and then stepped back to where his man stood musket in hand watching the screen.

"Well, Tom," said the lad; "heard anything of the snakes?"

"No, sir, and I've been listening for 'em for all I'm worth. I don't think they'll stir unless they hear the way up shook. Seems a rum place to get up and sleep. I should expect to find the snakes had took the hammocks first."

"Well, we're not going to disturb them, my lad; but come into that other room; I want a glass of water, and I suppose you could manage a drink too."

"Thankye, sir; I just could—a big one. I should ha' ventured to ask if I might get one, only I'm pretty sure that lake water's as salt as brine."

"There must be a spring somewhere," said the lad, and making his way into the room that was used for meals, he advanced to the table at one side, where there was another hand-bell. "I don't want to awaken our prisoner, Tom," he said. "Here, take up the bell and go through to the back where the pantry place is, and ring gently."

"Ay, ay, sir!" And the man softly raised the bell, thrusting in his hand so as to secure the tongue, and then the pair stepped back into the hall and through the door at the back, Murray closing it after them, before he signed to his follower to ring.

The man obeyed, at first gently, but as there was no reply he rang more loudly, and followed up his summons by thrusting the bell through a window at the back and sounding it vigorously.

"Can't be no one at home, sir," said the big sailor, turning to gaze at his officer.

"So it seems," said Murray, as he stood in the intense silence listening; "but that Mr Allen said that his servants would come and attend to any of my wants."

"Them chaps as rowed was all his servants or slaves, I suppose, sir?" said the man.

"Yes; but it is the hottest time, and these people out here always sleep in the middle of the day. Go out and follow up the side of that stream where they poled up the boat."

Tom May looked at him in a peculiar way.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said Murray.

"I warn't with you when the blacks pulled the boat away."

Murray started, and stared at his man in turn.

"Neither was I there," he said, with a strange feeling of being puzzled assailing him.

"You said poled up the stream, not pulled, sir," said the man. "I didn't think when I spoke."

"How absurd!" said Murray. "Here, let's go out this way round to the front and hail the cutter. The boat-keepers will know."

"It's all right, sir," said May, for there was a rustling sound at the back and light steps, and the man exclaimed, "Here's one of them."

"Why, it's one of our lads," said Murray excitedly.

"There's a bell ringing somewhere, sir," said the sailor, who now came out of the deep shadow at the back of the cottage. "Was it you, messmate?"

"Yes, my lad," said Tom, speaking to his brother sailor, but staring hard at his officer the while. "This here's the bell, lad, and it was me."

Chapter Thirty Three.

Boiling over.

"Have you seen any of the black servants about?" asked Murray.

He was going to say slaves, but the word sounded so repugnant that he changed it.

"Them black chaps, sir?" replied the man. "You mean them as rowed the boat?"

"Yes, or any other ones about the place."

"No, sir, only them as rowed, sir, and I was wondering where they got to. They seemed to go out, boat and all, like a match. I see 'em one minute, and the next they'd gone in amongst the trees; but where it was I couldn't make out, and when I asked one of my messmates he didn't seem to know neither."

"Go back to your post, my lad," said Murray. "Keep a sharp lookout, and report everything you see."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the man, saluting and going back amongst the trees, watched by Murray and May till he disappeared, when their eyes met in a questioning look.

The sailor was the first to speak.

"Yes, sir!" he said. "Was you saying anything?"

"No, Tom; I thought you were going to speak."

"No, sir. I was only thinking it seemed precious queer."

"Yes, it does—queer is the word, Tom. I can't quite make it out."

"That's what's the matter with me, sir. Seems so lonesome like. Makes me feel as if somebody was dead here, and I was precious glad when you spoke. Something arn't right somehow."

"The place is lonely because the people have taken fright at our coming and gone off into the forest, I suppose. It is a lonely place, as we found out for ourselves when we had lost our way."

"Oh, that's it, is it, sir? Well, I'm glad to know it, but somehow that don't seem quite enough for me. I still keep feeling as something's wrong, and as I said sir,—don't laugh at me, sir, 'cause I can't help it. I arn't got a head like you as eggsplains everything for you. I get a bit silly and puzzled like sometimes, and just now it seems to me like a man might feel if some one was dead here."

As the sailor spoke he pushed his straw hat back from his forehead and wiped the big drops of perspiration away.

"Tom," said Murray sharply, "you're about the most superstitious fellow I ever ran against. You're frightened of shadows."

"Yes, sir, you're right," whispered the man eagerly, and he glanced sharply about him. "Shadders—that's it, sir; that's just what I am: things as I can't understand and feel like. I allers was, sir, and fell foul o' myself for it; but then, as I says to myself, I ain't 'fraid o' nothing else. I'm pretty tidy and comfy in the wusset o' storms, and I never care much if one's under fire, or them black beggars is chucking their spears at you, because you've got some'at to shoot at again."

"No, Tom; you're stout enough then."

"Thankye, sir; I am, arn't I? But at a time like this, when you've got pyson sarpents crawling about over your head, and what's worse, the sort o' feeling comes over you that you're in a place where as we know, sir, no end of them poor niggers as was torn away from their homes has come to a bad end, I'm that sooperstitious, as you call it, that I don't know which end of me's up'ards and which down. I don't like it, Mr Murray, sir, and you may laugh at me, sir, but I'm sure as sure that there's something wrong—some one dead, I believe, and pretty close to us too."

"Not that Mr Allen, Tom?" said Murray, starting, and in spite of his fair share of common sense, lowering his voice, as for the moment he seemed to share the sailor's fancies.

"Him, sir?" whispered the man. "Like as not, sir. He looked bad enough to be on his way for the locker."

"Yes," agreed Murray; "he looked bad enough. But pooh! Nonsense!"

"Pooh! Nonsense it is, sir. But mightn't it be as well to go in and see how he is, sir, and ask him 'bout where the black servants is?"

"Wake the poor fellow up from a comfortable sleep just because you have taken a silly notion into your head, Tom? Why, you are going to make me as fanciful as you are yourself!"

"Yes, sir, I wish you was," said the man. "I should feel a deal better then."

"But I don't know, Tom," said Murray suddenly. "I don't want to disturb him; still, as he told me to do just as I pleased here, and when I wanted anything to ring for the servants—"

"Yes, sir, and they don't obey orders, sir, as they should; it's like doing him a good turn, sir, to let him know that his crew's a bit mutinous, being on'y slaves, you know, and like us, sir, agen him."

"Come with me, Tom," said the lad, yielding to a sudden resolve. "I will just wake him and ask a question or two."

"Come with you, sir!" said the man to himself. "I just think I will! You don't ketch me letting you leave me all alone by myself in this here unked old place;" and after a sharp glance in the direction of the way up, he followed his young officer on tiptoe into the room where they had left the planter asleep; and then both started back in astonishment, to stare one at the other. For the couch was vacant, and for a few minutes the surprise sealed the middy's lips.

"Why, Tom," he said at last, "we left that Mr Allen there asleep!"

"He'd got his eyes shut, sir," said the sailor dubiously.

"And now he has gone, Tom."

"Well, he arn't here 't all events, sir."

"But where can he be?" cried Murray. "I did not see him come out."

"No, sir, I didn't neither," said the man, shaking his head very solemnly.

"I—I can't understand it, Tom. Can he have—"

"Gone up-stairs to get a nap there, sir, 'cause the hammocks is more comfy'able?" suggested the man.

"Impossible."

"I dunno, sir. He's used to snakes, o' course, and they knows him."

"But we must have seen him go, Tom. We have been about all the time."

"Must ha' been when we was out at the back, sir, ringing the bell. That's it, sir; you woke him up, and he turned grumpy like and went somewheres else so as not to be disturbed."

"That must be it, Tom, and you have hit the mark. There, slip up the stairs quietly and see if he is in one of the hammocks."

The sailor's face crinkled up till it resembled the shell of a walnut; then he twisted his shoulders first to the left, then to the right, and followed up that movement by hitching up his trousers, staring hard at his young officer the while.

"Well, Tom, look sharp!" cried the latter.

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied the sailor.

"Why don't you go?" cried Murray severely. "What are you thinking of?"

"Snakes, sir," said the man laconically.

"Bah!"

"And I was a-thinking, sir, that p'raps you'd do it easier than me."

"Why, Tom," cried Murray angrily, "that is disobeying your officer's orders."

"Disobeying, sir?" said the man sharply. "Nay, sir; not me. Only you see, sir, you was a-telling me about the way in which them snakes pricked a man with their tails."

"Tails! Nonsense, man! Teeth."

"I didn't 'member for sartin, sir, which end it was; but you said they did it so sharp, sir, that it killed a man out-and-out before the doctor could 'stract the sting."

"Yes, I did tell you something of the kind, Tom."

"Nay, sir, not something of the kind," cried the sailor reproachfully; "that's what it was azackly. And then you see, sir, I don't want to brag, but you telled me yourself another time that I was a werry useful man."

"That must have been a mistake, Tom, for you are not proving it now," said Murray, speaking sternly but feeling amused by the man's evasions all the while. "Why, Tom, I thought you were not afraid of anything that was solid."

"No, sir, but you can't call them squirmy tie-theirselves-up-in-a-knot things solid; now, can you?"

"Tom May, you're a sham, sir," said Murray sternly. "There, I am deceived in you. I'll go myself;" and he made for the screen quickly.

But the man was quicker, and sprang before him.

"Nay, you don't, sir! I am mortal skeared of snakes and sarpints, but I arn't going to let my officer think me a coward and call me a sham. Case I do get it badly, sir, would you mind 'membering to tell Dr Reston, sir, as they say whiskey's the best cure for bites? And as there's no whiskey as I knows on aboard, p'raps he wouldn't mind trying rum."

"I'm sure the doctor wouldn't like me meddling with his prescribing, Tom," said Murray shortly. "Now then, up with you!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the man, in tones which sounded like gasps; and Murray stood by, dirk in hand, ready to make a chop at any reptile which might appear, while Tom drew himself up into the shadowy loft, and after a good look round lowered himself down again with a sigh of relief.

"No Mr Allen's up there, sir," he said.

"Then where can he be?" cried the middy excitedly, and he ran back across the hall and into the study, to pass his hand over the couch, which still felt slightly warm.

"P'raps he's gone into the gunroom, sir," said Tom respectfully.

"What, the hall where the guns and things are?"

"Nay, nay, sir; I meant the eating quarters—the dinin'-room, as you call it."

Murray ran back across the hall to see at a glance that no one was beyond, and he turned upon his follower again.

"Tom," he exclaimed angrily, "what do you make of this?"

The man shook his head.

"But he can't have come out of the study while we were looking out at the back."

"That's so, sir," said the man, shaking his head the while. "It's quite onpossible, sir, but he did."

"Tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated Murray quickly. "We must visit all the posts and see if any one saw him pass."

"They couldn't, sir, 'cause if they had they'd have challenged and stopped him."

"Of course they would," cried the lad excitedly. "Here, let's have another look round the study. He must be there."

"That's just what I'm a-thinking, sir," cried the man solemnly.

"Then where is he? Don't stand staring at me like a figure-head! Haven't you anything to say?"

"No, sir; only you 'member how all-overish I come, sir."

"Yes, when you declared it was as if there was a dead man in the place."

"Yes, sir; I knowed there was something wrong."

"Well, then, stupid," cried the lad, in a passion, "there's no live man here."

"No, sir," said Tom, shaking his head.

"Well, then," cried Murray, passionately, striking his open palm with the blue and gold inlaid blade of his dirk, "where's your dead man?"

"Can't say, sir," replied the man, speaking very slowly. "Seems to me it's a mystery."

"A mystery?" cried the middy, looking round at the pictures and other decorations of the place and addressing them as if they were sentient, listening creatures. "Here's a big six-foot strongly-built British sailor talking to his officer like an old charwoman about mysteries! You, Tom May, if ever you dare to talk such nonsense to me again, I'll punch your silly head."

"Beg pardon, your honour," said the man coolly, "but don't the articles o' war say something 'bout officers not being allowed to strike their men?"

"Bother the articles of war!" roared Murray, leaping at the man, seizing him by the shoulders, and shaking him to and fro with all his might. "Bother the articles of war!" he repeated, breathless from his exertions. "They don't say anything about knocking an idiot's head off!"

"No, sir," said the man humbly and respectfully; "not as I knows on."

"Then I feel disposed to do it," cried the middy passionately. Then stooping to pick up the dirk, which had slipped from his hand, to fall with a loud jingle upon the polished floor, "No, I don't," cried the lad, in a vexed, appealing way. "I couldn't help it, Tom! Look here, old lad; you've always been a good stout fellow, ready to stand by me in trouble."

"Ay, ay, sir, I have," said the man quietly, "and will again."

"Then help me now, Tom. Can't you see what a mess I'm in? Here has the captain entrusted me with the care of this prisoner—for prisoner he is, and you can't make anything else of him."

"Ay, ay, sir; prisoner he is, and you can't make nowt else of him."

"That's right, Tom," cried the lad, growing quite despairing in his tones. "Sooner or later Mr Anderson or Mr Munday will be coming to relieve me of my charge, and the first question whoever it is will ask me will be, Where's your prisoner?"

"Ay, ay, sir! That's right enough."

"There, there! Look at it in a straightforward business-like way," cried the lad, and to his disgust the man slowly turned his eyes all about the place.

"Bah!" cried Murray angrily. "What are you thinking of? Can't you understand that I want you to help me?"

"Ay, ay, sir, and I'm a-trying as hard as nails, sir," said the man, rousing himself up to speak more sharply; "but somehow my head don't seem as if it would go."

"Think, man—think!" cried the middy appealingly.

"That's what I'm a-doing of, sir, but nothing comes."

"He must be somewhere, Tom."

"Yes, to be sure, sir; that's it," cried the man excitedly. "You've hit it now. I couldn't have thought that myself."

"Oh-h-h-h!" groaned Murray. "Was ever poor wretch so tormented! What shall I do?"

"Lookye here, sir, I want to help you."

"Oh, I feel as if I could knock your silly old head off!" cried the middy, with a stamp upon the floor.

"Well, sir, do. You just do it if you think it will help you. I won't mind."

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" groaned Murray. "This is the worst day's work I ever did."

"Think it's any good to search the place again, sir?"

"But there's nothing to search, Tom."

"Well, there aren't much, sir, sartainly, but it'll be more satisfactory to go over it once more."

"Come along, then," said the middy. "Anything's better than standing still here."

"Ay, sir, so it is," said the big sailor; and together the pair went from room to room, Tom May insisting upon looking under the couch in the study, under the table, and then lifting up the square of Turkey carpet that half covered the well-made parqueterie floor, which glistened with the polishing given to it by busy slave labour.

But there was no sign of him whom they sought, and a careful examination of the garden and plantation was only followed by the discovery which they had made before, that the place was thoroughly closed in by a dense natural growth of hedge, ablaze with flowers in spite of the fact that it had been closely clipped and had grown dense in an impassable way.

"Let's get the boat here," said Murray, at last; and going to the platform, Tom May hailed the cutter where it swung from its grapnel.

"Now then, you two," cried the middy angrily, "you have been asleep!"

"Nay, sir," cried the men, in a breath.

"What, you deny it?"

"Yes, sir," said one. "It was so hot that I did get precious drowsy once."

"There, I knew I was right!"

"Beg pardon, sir; just as I was going off my mate here shoves a pin into me and rouses me up with a yell. I was never asleep."

"And you are ready to say the same?" cried the middy.

"Jes' the same sir," said the other man, "only not quite. It was the same pin, sir, but he jobbed it into me further. We was both awake all the time, sir."

"Then you must have seen that Mr Allen come out of the cottage and be rowed away."

"What, to-day, sir?" said the first boat-keeper.

"Do you think I meant to-morrow, sir?" cried Murray, who was boiling over with rage and despair.

"No, sir, of course not," replied the man, in an injured tone; "but you might ha' meant yesterday, sir."

"Of course," cried Murray—"when you were not on duty here?"

"We done our best, sir, both on us."

"Yes, yes, of course, my lads. Here, paddle May and me along the edge of the lagoon."

The man paddled the boat slowly along, and it was not until several blind lead places, where the boat could be thrust in amongst the bamboos, had been explored, that a more satisfactory portion of the surrounding watery maze was found, in the shape of a narrow way opening into another lagoon which looked wonderfully attractive and proved to be more interesting from the fact that no less than six ways out were discovered.

"Try that one," said Murray, and the boat's nose was thrust in, when Tom May held up his hand.

"Well, what have you to say against it?" cried the middy.

"I only thought, sir, as we might be trying this here one twice if we didn't mark it somehow."

"To be sure," cried Murray. "Don't you pretend to be stupid again, Tom. Now, then, how are you going to mark it?"

"Only so how, sir," said the man, with a grin; and as he stood up in the boat he bent down some of the over-arching graceful grasses and tied them together in a knot. "These here places are so all alike, sir, and it may save time."

This waterway wound in and out and doubled upon itself for what must have been several hundred yards, but the

middy felt encouraged, for more and more it struck him as being a way that was used. Every now and then too it excited the lad's interest, for there was a rush or splash, and the water in front was stirred up and discoloured, evidently by a reptile or large fish; but whether those who used it had any connection with the missing man it was impossible to say.

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised, sir, if we come upon that Mr Planter's boat, sir, and his niggers. Looks the sort o' spot where they might have built a boathouse to hide their craft in when they didn't want it."

"At all events, my lad, it is one of their places, and—"

"Well, I'm blest, sir!"

"Eh? What do you mean? Why don't you go on?"

"Why, can't you see, sir?" said the big sailor sharply.

"No, Tom. Why, you don't mean to say that—"

"Yes, I do, sir," grunted the man; and he took off his straw hat to have a good puzzling scratch at his closely-cropped hair, while the midddy stood up to examine two lissome tufts of leafy cane which had been bent over and tied together.

"Oh," cried Murray, "anybody might have done that who wanted to mark the place, my lad."

"Yes, sir," said the sailor, grunting, "but anybody wouldn't ha' thought to make a clove hitch, same as I did a bit ago. That's my mark, sir—T.M.'s own. I'm T.M., sir."

"Don't laugh, man," said the lad passionately. "I suppose you're right; but it's horrible, for we've been wasting so much time, and come out again in the same spot that we went in."

"Can't see as it's wasted time, sir," growled the man. "I say it's time saved, for if it hadn't been for my knot we might have gone on round again."

"Don't talk so much, sir. Give way, my lads. Get back into the lagoon, and we'll try another of these wretched cuts."

Another was soon found and duly marked by breaking down a few of the bamboos level with the water, and plaiting them this time in an unmistakable way, the result at the end of close upon an hour proving to be just the same.

"Never mind," said the midddy, speaking through his set teeth. "It's horribly disappointing, Tom, but these blind water alleys haven't been made for nothing. They prove to me that there must be a special one which we have to hit, and when we do we shall find that it leads to some hiding-place—perhaps to where the planter has gone, and we must trace him."

"I don't see what good it will do, sir, if we do," said the big sailor, puckering up his brows.

"We must find him, Tom, and take him aboard as a regular prisoner this time, for he has been deceiving the captain, and all that he has said can't be true. Give way, my lads."

After further search which led to their passing another opening twice over, a spot was found where the growth seemed to be very thick; but it proved to be yielding enough at last, for the boat's prow glided through with a rush, and they passed into another tiny lagoon, where as the large reeds closed in behind them, Tom May slapped his knee loudly.

"I do call it artful, sir," he cried. "Why, who's going to show me which is the way out again? I've got my eye fixed on it, but if I shut it up I shouldn't be able to find it again. It's just this," he continued. "You holds the bamboos down or on one side, and as soon as you're gone by up they springs again; and that's why they're called bamboos, I s'pose—because they bamboozle you. Now for another way of marking this here one."

"Yes, let's have no more mistakes, Tom."

"No, sir," said the man, tightening up his lips as he pulled out his jack knife, before picking out of the biggest giant reeds, one of a tuft which towered up some five-and-twenty feet. Through this he drove his blade, the thick, rich, succulent grass yielding easily, and after keeping the wound open by the help of a messmate's knife he cut a slip, and thrusting it through the reed, he drew out the two knives so that the wound closed up tightly upon the green wedge.

"You are taking a great deal of trouble, Tom," said Murray impatiently.

"It's wuth it, sir—trust me if it arn't," said the man. "Saves time in the end; and I'm beginning to think as we're in the right cut at last."

"Give way, then, my men, and let's prove it," cried the midddy impatiently, for the time was passing swiftly, and the horrible feeling grew upon him that before long some one would appear from the *Seafowl* to demand where the prisoner was.

The men thrust the boat swiftly across the pondlike place, for on the other side the reeds seemed to have been lately disturbed; but here there was another disappointment, for though the bamboos which rose up had certainly been broken away recently, they grew together so densely that all efforts to pass through were vain, and Tom May declared at last that it was only another blind meant to deceive.

"Let's try t'other side, sir," he said, screwing up his face.

"No, no; that looks so easy," said Murray.

"That's some one's artfulness, sir. Let's try; it won't take long."

Murray was ready enough to try any advice now so long as it seemed good, and the word being given, the two boat-

keepers placed their oars in the rowlocks and rowed straight at the indicated place, with the result that they had to unship their oars, for the boat glided right through the light reeds, which gave way readily here, and almost directly after the rowing was resumed again, and they found themselves in comparatively open water for a couple of hundred yards.

"This won't want no marking, sir," whispered Tom.

"Mark it all the same, my lad, when we pass out."

"I will, sir, but we've hit the right way at last. Look how it rounds to starboard at the end, sir. I believe we're going into big water directly.—There you are, sir," added the man in a whisper, as, after rowing swiftly onward for nearly a quarter of a mile, the boat glided round a bend, where, to the midshipman's great delight, they came in sight of what was pretty evidently the long narrow barge in which the planter had paid his visit to the *Seafowl*.

The well-made, nattily painted craft was lying well away from the reeds which shut in the open water, moored by a rope whose grapnel was sunk not far distant, and Murray held up his hand to impress the need for silence.

"See the crew ashore anywhere, sir?" asked Tom May.

"No; I believe they're all on board asleep. Run her up quietly."

The men obeyed, and so cautiously that the next minute the cutter was close alongside, and there lay the black crew, sleeping profoundly in the hot sunshine, eyes tightly closed, mouths widely open, and quite a crowd of busy flies flitting and buzzing overhead, settling upon the sleepers in a way that would have proved maddening to ordinary people, but which seemed to have not the slightest effect upon the negroes.

"Hook on, Tom," whispered Murray excitedly. "Take care they don't slip away."

The big sailor picked up the boat-hook, and was in the act of reaching out to take hold of the boat's bow, when one of the sleepers closed his mouth, slowly opened it again in a wide yawn, and at the same time unclosed his eyes, saw the big sailor reaching towards him, and then, showing the whites of his eyes in a stare of horror and dismay, he uttered a yell which awoke the rest of the crew, who sprang up as one man, to follow their companion's example, for the first awakened as he uttered his yell bounded out of the boat and disappeared.

"No, you don't, my black friend," cried Tom, making a thrust with the boat-hook, and getting hold of the startled man by his waist-cloth, he brought him up again, kicking, splashing and plunging to the surface, and drew him hand over hand along the pole of the boat-hook till he had him alongside the now rocking cutter, when a tremendous lurch freed him. He would have got away but for the help rendered by the boat-keepers, one of whom took hold of a leg, the other of a wrist, when he was hauled in over the side, praying for mercy in very fair English, for the fact that the big sailor planted a bare foot upon his chest and pressed him down into the bottom of the cutter quite convinced him that his time had come.

"Hold your row, you black pig!" growled Tom. "Think it's killing time and you're going to be scalded and scraped?"

"Oh, massa! Oh, massa! Poor black niggah, sah!" wailed the shivering captive.

"Be quiet, or—"

Tom May turned the boat-hook pole downwards as if he were going to plunge it at the poor fellow, and his shouting came to an end.

"No use to go ashore after the rest, sir, eh?" said Tom enquiringly.

"Not the slightest," replied Murray, as the last of the crew reached the fringing bamboos and plunged in, to disappear. "But don't let that one go."

"No, sir; he's right enough. Better let him know that we're not going to kill him, though."

"Be quiet, sir!" cried Murray, stepping alongside to where May had his foot upon the shivering slave's chest. "No one is going to hurt you."

"Oh, massa! Oh, massa! Poor niggah, sah!" sobbed the poor fellow, and he placed his hands together as if in prayer.

"Hold your tongue! Be quiet!" cried Murray. "Now then, speak out. Where's your master?"

"Oh, massa! You massa now!" sobbed the poor wretch, shivering violently.

"Be quiet, sir!" cried Murray. "Don't be afraid to speak. Now then, tell me. Where is your master?" It was some minutes before the poor fellow could grasp the fact that he was not going to be killed outright, and in the meantime his companions had begun to show themselves, a face here and a face there, around the edge of the long winding lake, horribly frightened to a man, but fascinated and held to the spot by their strong desire to see what became of their companion.

"See 'em, sir?" whispered Tom May.

"Oh yes, I see them; but I want to try and get some information out of this poor shivering wretch."

"We might ketch the rest on 'em, sir," said the big sailor, "by using this one as a bait. Shall we try, sir?"

"No, no; this one will know all they could tell, if we can make him speak."

"Shall I try, sir?"

"No, no, Tom; you're too big and—"

"Ugly, sir?" said the man, with a grim smile, for Murray had stopped speaking.

"Too ugly to him," said the middy, laughing.

"Here, you sir," he added gently, as he bent down and tapped his prisoner upon the shoulder.

"Oh, massa! Poor niggah, sah!"

"Yes, yes; you said that before," cried Murray.

"Poor beggars, sir, they've been so ill-used that they think every white man is going to murder 'em."

"Well, let's show the poor fellow that we are not all savages; but we've begun pretty roughly, Tom, to win this one's confidence. You did give it him pretty hard."

"Well, yes, sir, I was a bit rough to him; but if I hadn't been he'd have got away."

"Now then, let me try. Here, my lad, I want your master."

"Massa, sah?" cried the shivering prisoner. "Yes, sah. Massa, sah!" And as he spoke eagerly he made a snatch at the midshipman's ankle, caught it between both hands, and raising the lad's foot placed it quickly upon his forehead.

"Hullo! What do you mean by that?"

"Massa! Massa now, sah. Poor niggah massa."

"Oh, bother! Nonsense!" cried Murray. "No, no. Where's your master, Mr Allen?"

"Massa Allen, sah. Good massa, sah. Sick man; go die soon."

"Good master?"

"Yes, sah! Good massa, sick bad, sah. Die, sah."

"Well, where is he—Massa Allen?"

"House, sah. Go sleep, sah," said the man, growing eager and excited, and making an effort to replace Murray's foot upon his head.

"No, no; don't do that," cried the lad impatiently. "Now tell me, where is your master?"

"Massa Allen, sah. House, sah. Go sleep, sah."

"It's very evident he does not know, Tom," said Murray. "What's to be done? Do you think we could get anything out of the others?"

"No, sir. If he don't know they don't."

"Well, what is best to be done?"

"Try t'others, sir. I don't think it's any good, but we might try."

"But we must catch them first."

"Oh, that's soon done, sir."

"But how?"

The big sailor laughed.

"When I was a youngster, sir, we boys used to get out in one of the Newlyn boats, sir—in Mount's Bay, sir, and trail a line behind to get a few mack'rel, sir, for our mothers. Well, sir, it was easy enough to trail the line and hook, but it warn't so easy always to get the bait; for we used to think the best bait was a lask."

"A what, Tom?"

"Lask, sir, and that's a strip out of the narrowest part of a mackerel, cut with a sharp knife down to the bone, so that when the hook was put through one end one side was raw fish and the other was bright and silvery."

"I see, Tom," said Murray.

"Nay, sir, you only fancy you can see it. If you could see it twirling and wiggling in the water when it was dragged after the boat and we pulled fast, you'd see it looked *just* like a little live fish, and the mack'rel shoot theirselves after it through the water and hook theirselves. That's the best bait for a mack'rel, and after the same fashion one nigger's the best bait to catch more niggers."

"Then you think we can get hold of more of the boat's crew by—"

"Yes, sir," said Tom, interrupting and grinning the while, "but without cutting a piece out of him with either a knife or a whip. Poor chaps, they get that often enough, I'll be bound. You only want to let this one see that he won't be hurt, and he'll soon bring the others up."

"But we've been so rough with him already. I'm afraid it will be a hard task."

"Not it, sir. They get so knocked about that a good word or two soon puts matters right again. You try, sir."

"Why not you, Tom? You seem to know their ways better than I do."

"Nay, sir, you try. See how he's watching of us, sir; he's trying to make out what we want him for, and he knows a lot of plain English. You try him, sir."

"What shall I say, Tom?"

"Oh, anything you like, sir. You're cleverer than I am, sir. Here, I know—tell him you want the other chaps to man the boat. They'll come fast enough if he calls 'em."

"Here goes, then, Tom; but I don't believe I shall do any good.—Here, Sambo!" he cried.

The man showed his glistening white teeth in a very broad grin and shook his head.

"Not Sambo?" said Murray. "Well, then, what is your name?"

"Caesar, sah—July Caesar."

"Well, Caesar, then. I want your master, Mr Allen."

"In de house, sah. De lilly house;" and the black pointed in the direction of the cottage. "Sick, bad, sah."

"Not there now, Caesar," said Murray.

"Big house, Plantashum," said the black sharply, and he pointed in quite another direction.

"Oh, at the plantation house?" said Murray.

"Yes, sah."

"Call your fellows, then, to row the boat to where he is," said the middy.

The black looked at him doubtfully.

"Boys run away, sah. 'Fraid massa take 'em sell to bad massa."

"Oh no," said Murray, reaching forward to pat the man upon the shoulder; but the poor fellow's action told its own tale. He started violently, shrinking right away with a look of dread in his eyes. "There, don't do that," Murray continued, "I'm not going to hurt you;" and following the man he patted his shoulder softly, when the look of horror faded away, to give place to a faint smile, one which broadened into a grin.

"Massa no take and sell boys away?"

"No; tell them we come to set them free," said Murray.

"Set niggah free?" cried the black excitedly.

"Yes; that's why my ship has come."

"Massa Huggin say come catch all de boy an' flog 'em heart out."

"Did your overseer tell you that, boy?" growled Tom May; and the man winced at the deep fierce voice of the sailor.

"Yes, sah; flog 'em all, sah."

"Then you tell your Massa Huggin he's a liar," growled the big sailor.

The black showed his teeth in a wider grin than ever as he shook his head.

"No tell um," he said. "Massa Huggin kill um dead."

"Where is he now?" said Murray sharply.

"Massa Allen sick, sah."

"No, no; Mr Huggins!"

"Massa sailor captain tell Massa Huggin—"

"No, no; I'm not going to tell your overseer anything."

The black looked at the speaker searchingly for a few moments, glanced round as if to see whether they were likely to be overheard; and then, as if gaining confidence, he leaned towards the midshipman and whispered—

"Massa overseer go to get men from schooner—fighting men come and kill sailor and burn up ship. Big fire. Burn ship. Burn, kill sailor. Massa no tell what Caesar say?"

"Oh no; I shall not tell Master Huggins, Caesar," said Murray, smiling. "Now tell your men to come back and row your boat. I want to find Mr Allen."

The black looked searchingly in the midshipman's face once more, and then apparently gaining confidence, he turned sharply upon the big sailor, when that which he had gained seemed to be dying out again and he glanced at the shore of the lagoon, and Tom read so plainly that the black was thinking again of flight that he gave him a sharp slap on the shoulder, making him wince violently and utter a low sob.

"Why, you are a pretty sort of fellow," cried the sailor, his face opening out into a jovial smile. "You seem to have a nice idee of a British sailor!"

"Bri'sh sailor?" said the black, slowly repeating the tar's words. "You Bri'sh sailor, hey?"

"To be sure I am, my lad—leastwise I hope so."

"Bri'sh sailor no hurt poor niggah?"

"Not a bit of it, darkie. Can't you understand we've come to set the slaves free?"

"No," said the black sadly. "Massa Huggin say—"

"Massa Huggin say!" growled the big sailor, frowning fiercely. "You tell your Massa Huggins that the British sailor is going to—See here, you benighted heathen. I want to make you understand some'at. There, hold still; I'm not going to hurt you. Now see."

As the sailor spoke he untied the knot of his neckerchief and threw it round the black's neck, made a fresh slip-knot and drew it tight, and with horrible realism held up one end of the silken rope, while with a low wail the poor shivering wretch sank unresistingly upon his knees in the bottom of the boat.

"Don't, don't, Tom! You're frightening the poor fellow to death."

"Nay, sir; he'll understand it directly. It's all right, darkie," he continued, with a broad grin at the black's fear. "I want to show you what a British sailor means to do with your Massa Huggins."

"Massa Huggin? No kill Caesar?"

"Kill Caesar, darkie?" cried the sailor. "No, no. Hang—yard-arm—Massa Huggins. We'll teach him to talk about burning his Majesty's Ship *Seafowl*. There, now do you understand?" cried Tom, slipping off the black silk handkerchief and knotting it properly about his own brawny neck, while as he gave the black another hearty clap on the shoulder the poor fellow's shiny black face seemed to have become the mirror which reflected a good deal of the tar's jovial smile. "There, sir," continued the big sailor; "that's our Mr Dempsey's way o' teaching a man anything he don't understand. 'Show him how it's done,' he says, 'with your fisties, and then he can see, and he never forgets it again.'"

"That's all very well, Tom," said Murray, smiling, "but it's rather a rough style of teaching, and you nearly made the poor fellow jump overboard."

"That was afore he began to grasp it, sir. He's got it now. You can see now; eh, darkie?"

"Bri'sh sailor kill Massa Huggin, no kill poor niggah," cried the black.

"There, sir, what did I say?" cried Tom. "British tar's the niggers' friend, eh, what's your name?"

The black sprang up and executed two or three steps of what he meant most probably for a triumphal dance.

"Steady, my lad, or you'll have one of them stick-in-a-brick pretty little foots of yours through the bottom planks of the boat."

Plop! went the black, letting himself down, not upon his feet, but upon his knees, and laying his head between the sailor's feet he caught one by the ankle, raised it and began to plant it upon his woolly head.

"What game does he call that, sir?" cried Tom, in astonishment.

"He's following up your style of teaching by an object-lesson, Tom," cried the middy merrily. "It's to show you he's your slave and friend for ever."

"Ho!" ejaculated the big sailor. "That's it, is it? Well, that'll do, darkie; we understand one another; but recklect this, you arn't civilised enough yet for object-lessons. Here, what are you up to now?"

For the black had shuffled upon his knees to the side of the boat, to hold his hands to the sides of his capacious mouth, while he sent forth a cry wonderfully like the blast given trumpet-like through a conch shell to call slaves to plantation work in the fields.

No sooner did the deep tone float across the water than there was a movement amongst the giant reeds, and first in one place and then in another and from both sides, black faces and woolly heads began to appear, while the black who had uttered the cry made for one of the oars, passed it through the rowlock astern and began to paddle the boat along cleverly enough towards his fellows, who one by one began to take to the water like so many large black dogs, springing in with heavy splash after splash and beginning to swim.

This went on, to the amusement of the sailors, till every member of the boat's black crew had been dragged into, or by his own effort had climbed into, the planter's boat.

"Better be on the lookout, my lads," said the middy. "They may play us false and row off."

"Not they, sir," said Tom confidently. "You may depend upon it they've been squinting at us through them bamboozling reeds, and took all my lesson in right up to the heft. I begin to think, sir, that when Mr Huggins shows his ugly yellow phiz to us again he'll find that we've been making a few friends among the niggers."

"I hope so, Tom; but all this time we've not been thinking about our prisoner that we were set to watch."

"Yes, sir, and that's bad; but just you cheer up, sir, and all will come right yet."

"But the prisoner, Tom—the prisoner," cried Murray sadly.

"Wait a bit, sir. Anyhow we've got his boat and his crew; and they knows his ways, and perhaps 'll find out his whereabouts a good deal better than we could."

"Yes, Tom, but—"

"Nothing like patience, sir," said the man. "You mark my words."

Chapter Thirty Four.

The Lost Prisoner.

Murray looked angrily at the big sailor for a few minutes, and then, mastering his annoyance at the easy way in which the man took his trouble, he said—

"Oh, I'll have patience enough, Tom; but what is to be done next?"

Tom May scratched his head and his eyes wandered round till they lit upon the shiny black face of the negro, who was watching him eagerly.

"I'd make that chap lead the way back to the cottage place, sir. He knows all the ins and outs, and he'll show us in half the time we could do it."

"That's good advice, Tom, but what for? I'm in no hurry to meet Mr Anderson."

"But you've got to do it, sir, and the sooner you get it over the better."

"That's true, Tom," said the middy sadly.

"Sides, sir, how do we know but what Mr Allen may have come back while we've been gone?"

"Tom!" cried Murray excitedly, and after the fashion of the proverbial drowning man, he snatched at the straw the sailor held out to him. Turning to the black, who was squatting at his feet, he cried, "Take us to Mr Allen."

The slave nodded and grinned as he settled himself down, chattering the while to his crew, who raised their oars ready to dip them in the placid water, when a thought seemed to strike him and he tucked the oar he had seized under one knee and turned to the middy, saying sharply—

"You go kill Massa Allen?"

"Kill him? No!" cried Murray, in surprise.

The man nodded and gave the black crew an order, and their oars dipped at once, while the little English party in the cutter followed the lead, and to Murray's surprise he found himself taken through an entirely fresh canal-like lead of water of whose existence he had not the slightest idea.

"I thought so, sir," said Tom May, in a low tone of voice. "This chap knows his way about, and it's worth a Jew's eye to have found him and made friends. You'll see that he'll show us where to go. Shouldn't wonder if he takes us straight to that Mr Allen."

"If he only would, Tom!" replied the midshipman, speaking as if a great load was being taken off his mind.

"Oh, you wait a bit, sir."

"Bother your wait a bit, Tom! I'm sick of hearing it," cried the lad angrily. "Why, look here, they're making straight for the cottage after all."

"Well, didn't you expect they would, sir?" cried the big sailor.

"No; what's the good of that?"

"What I said, sir. Maybe the gentleman has come back again."

"No such good fortune, Tom. Well, we shall soon know;" and the lad sat back in the cutter's stern sheets steering and watching the planter's boat, to which he kept close up, while the black crew threaded their way in and out amongst the canes, till they pulled up by the bamboo landing-stage.

"Massa Allen in dere, sah," whispered the black, pointing at the doorway of the cottage, and smiling with satisfaction as if delighted at the skill with which he had played the part of pilot.

Murray sprang on to the creaking bamboo stage, and, ready to believe that the sick man might have returned, he signed to May to follow him, hurried into the place, thrust open the study door and had only to glance in to satisfy himself that the little room was still vacant.

"Let's look in the other room, Tom," said the middy sadly, "but it's of no use; our prisoner has not come back."

A hurried glance was given to each portion of the cottage, and then Murray led the way back to the landing-stage, where the black coxswain sat grinning a welcome.

"He's not there, my lad," cried Murray, shaking his head. "Master Allen has gone."

"Massa Allen gone!" repeated the black, and then, as if placing no faith whatever in the young officer's assertion, he shuffled out of the boat on to the stage, and then ran up to the cottage doorway, where he hesitated for a few moments before entering cautiously on tiptoe.

"See that, sir?" whispered Tom May. "He knows all about them pisonous sarpents."

At the end of a few minutes, during which the midshipman and his follower caught a glimpse or two of the black as he hurried from room to room and evidently made a thorough examination of the place, the man reappeared, with the broad eager grin his countenance had worn entirely gone, to give place to a look of concern and scare. It seemed to Murray that the black's face no longer shone but looked dull and ashy, as if he had been startled, and his voice sank to a whisper as he crept up close to the young midshipman and whispered—

"Massa Allen gone!"

"Well, I told you so," said Murray sharply. "Where has he gone?"

The black raised one hand to his lips, upon which he pressed all his fingers together, while he looked behind him and then all about as if to see if any one could hear his words—words which he seemed afraid to utter.

"Well, did you hear what I said? Where has he gone?"

The black shook his head violently.

"There, Tom, your idea is worth nothing," said Murray sadly.

"I warn't sure, sir, of course," said the man, "but still I couldn't help thinking he might have come back, 'specially as the darkie here was so cock-sure. Hallo! What's he up to now?" continued the sailor. "Hi! Stop him, my lads!"

For the black had suddenly made a dash for his boat, and sprung from the stage into his place.

Murray's first thought was that the black was about to escape with his companions, but directly after he saw the cause of the man's scare, for there was the quick, steady chop, chop of oars, and the youth's heart sank with a feeling of despair, for the bows of the *Seafowl's* second cutter suddenly came into sight, with her crew pulling hard, and there in the stern sat the man, after the captain, whom he least desired to see, and close by him, sitting up smart and consequential to a degree, and seeming to fix his eyes at once keenly upon those of his brother midshipman, was Roberts, looking as if he divined that something was wrong.

"And ready to jump upon me," said Murray to himself. "Oh, how am I to begin?" he thought. "I wish I was anywhere out of this!"

But the first lieutenant did not wait for the lad to begin; he opened the ball himself.

"Well, Mr Murray," he cried, "what does this mean? Why have you got the planter's boat and crew out here?"

"We found them, sir, by accident," faltered the lad.

"Well, I suppose they did not want much finding. Where is your prisoner?"

Murray gazed at his officer vacantly, trying hard to reply, but, as he afterwards said to Roberts, if it had been to save his life he could not have uttered a word.

"What's the matter, my lad?" said the chief officer kindly. "Not ill, are you?"

"No, sir," replied Murray, finding his voice at last, and watching the lieutenant hard, followed by Dick Roberts, who was grinning as if he enjoyed hearing what he looked upon as the beginning of "a wiggling."

"Then why don't you speak? I said where is your prisoner?"

"I—I don't know, sir," was the extremely feeble reply.

"Wha-a-a-t!" shouted the lieutenant. "I don't know, sir," cried Murray, desperately now. "He's gone."

"Gone? My good sir," cried the lieutenant, "you were sent here in charge of him for some cryptic idea of the captain, and you tell me he's gone? You don't mean to tell me that you've let him escape!"

"I didn't let him escape, sir," faltered the lad, glancing at his brother middy and reading in his countenance, rightly or wrongly, that Roberts was triumphing over the trouble he was in—"I didn't let him escape, sir," cried Murray desperately, "for I was being as watchful as possible; but he was very ill and weak and said that he wanted to lie down in one of the rooms there. Tom May will tell you the same, sir."

"I dare say he will, sir, when I ask him," said the lieutenant sternly. "Now I am asking you the meaning of this lapse of

duty.”

“I did keep watch over him, sir, and posted my men all round the cottage; but when I came to see how he was getting on—”

“Getting on, sir! Getting off, you mean.”

“No, sir; I did not see him go off, sir,” faltered Murray.

“Don’t you try to bandy words with me, sir,” cried the lieutenant, beginning to fulminate with rage. “There, speak out plainly. You mean to tell me that when you came to look for your prisoner—for that is what he is—he was gone?”

“Yes, sir; that is right,” said the lad sadly.

“That is wrong, Mr Murray. Gone! And you stand here doing nothing! Confound it all, man, why are you not searching for him?”

“I have been searching for him, sir.”

“But you are here, my good sir, and have not found him.”

“No, sir, but I have done everything possible.”

“Except find him, sir. This comes of setting a boy like you to take charge of the prisoner. Well, it was the captain’s choice, not mine. I’ll be bound to say that if Mr Roberts had been sent upon this duty he would have had a very different tale to tell.”

Murray shivered in his misery, and tried to master the desire to glance at his brother midshipman, but failed, and saw that Roberts was beginning to swell with importance.

“Well, Mr Murray,” continued the lieutenant, after pausing for a few moments, after giving his subordinate this unkindly stab and, so to speak, beginning to wriggle his verbal weapon in the wound, “it is you who have to meet the captain when you go back after being relieved, not I. That I am thankful to say. But I fail to see, Mr Roberts, what is the good of setting you on duty with a fresh set of men to guard the prisoner, when there is no prisoner to guard. Here, show me where you bestowed the scoundrel.”

Murray led the way into the cottage, with his heart beating heavily with misery; the lieutenant followed him in silence; and Roberts came last, glancing at Murray the while and with his lips moving in silence as if he were saying, “I say, you’ve done it now!”

“Absurd!” cried the lieutenant, a few minutes later, and after looking through the room where the planter had lain down. “You might have been sure that the prisoner would escape. Then you did nothing to guard him?”

“Yes, I did, sir,” cried the lad desperately. “I posted men all round the cottage.”

“And a deal of good that was! Anything else?”

“I have been examining the place all about, sir, with Tom May and the two boat-keepers.”

“Well, and what was the result?”

“Only that I found one of the hiding-places of this maze of a place, sir.”

“With the prisoner safe within it?”

“No, sir; I only found the planter’s boat and crew, sir.”

“Of course—just come back after helping their master to escape. And of course they denied it?”

“The black coxswain was as much surprised as I was, sir,” said Murray.

“Of course he was, Mr Murray; perfectly astounded. Bah, man! How can you be so innocent! Well, I suppose I must try and get you out of this horrible scrape, for all our sakes. Which is the coxswain? That black fellow who has been staring at us all the time I have been listening to your lame excuses?”

“Yes, sir; and I have been thinking that he would be a valuable help to us in guiding us through the mazes of this strange place.”

“Let’s see first, Mr Murray, whether he will be any help to us in finding where the prisoner is. Call him here.”

“I have been trying to use him in that way, sir.”

“Humph!” ejaculated the lieutenant angrily. “Then now let Mr Roberts try. Here, Roberts!”

The midshipman stepped up to the officer quickly, after hearing every word that had been said.

“You called me, sir?”

“Of course I did, sir,” said the lieutenant sharply, and speaking as if annoyed with himself for what he had been about to do. “Go back to the boat. Sharp!” The lad’s eyes flashed with annoyance as he went back, and the chief officer turned his back and jerked his head to Murray. “Here,” he said, “you had better go on with this, my lad; it is your affair.”

"Thank you, sir," said the lad, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Not much to thank me for, Murray," said the chief officer kindly, "but you've made a horrible mess of this business. Now then, the black fellow."

Murray made a sign to the black, who had been listening all through with his eyes seeming to start out of his head, and he sprang out of the boat and hurried to his side.

"Look here, Caesar," he said quickly, "do you know where Mr Allen is?"

The black looked him sharply in the eyes, then gazed at the first lieutenant, and then all around as if on the lookout for danger, before he crept closer and whispered—

"Yes, massa. Caesar know."

"Hah! This sounds business-like," cried the lieutenant. "But why in the name of all that's sensible didn't you examine this fellow before, Murray?"

"I did, sir," cried the lad, trembling with excitement, as he laid his hand upon the black's arm. Then quickly, "Tell me where he is, my lad."

"Massa, Bri'sh sailor no tell Massa Huggin Caesar open him moufe?"

"No, my lad. No one shall know that you told me. Speak out."

"Massa Huggin cut Caesar all lilly pieces when he find out."

"We will take care no one shall hurt you," cried Murray excitedly. "Tell him, Mr Anderson, that we will set him free."

"To be sure," cried the lieutenant. "You shall be free."

"Bri'sh sailor officer set Caesar free,—Caesar open um moufe?"

"That's right, then open it wide, my sable friend," said the lieutenant. "Tell me."

"No, massa. Caesar tell young buccra officer;" and he turned with sparkling eyes upon Murray.

"Speak, then," cried Murray, trembling with excitement; and the black glanced round him again as if for danger, and then reached forward so as to place his lips close to the midshipman's ear.

"Massa Huggin come while Massa Allen fas' 'sleep and take um right away."

"Hah!" cried Murray. "But how, my lad, how?"

The black looked from one officer to the other, a smile of cunning overspreading his features, and he whispered—

"Caesar show Bri'sh officer. Caesar know."

Chapter Thirty Five.

Black Caesar.

Murray made a dash at the black and caught him by the arm, while Tom May sprang to the other side, for, startled by the sudden movement of the midshipman, the poor fellow winced and looked as if about to run.

"No, no," cried Murray; "it's all right, Caesar. Show us directly where Mr Allen is."

"Yes," whispered the man; "but no tell Massa Huggin. Him kill Caesar for sure. Caesar very frighten."

"You shan't be hurt, boy," cried the middy. "Now then; lead us to where Mr Allen is. Quick!"

The black nodded his head, gave a sharp glance round, and then with trembling hand caught hold of Murray's wrist and led him into the hall again, closely followed by the lieutenant and Tom May, who was as watchful as if he felt sure that their guide was bent upon making his escape.

"Shall I follow with some of the men, sir?" said Roberts, who was in a state of fret from the fear of missing anything that was about to take place.

"No, it is not necessary," said Mr Anderson.

"I beg pardon, sir," cried Murray; "from what this black fellow has said, I think you ought to have some of the men with us."

"Oh, very well, then," cried the lieutenant, "bring half-a-dozen of the lads with you, Mr Roberts;" and the hall had a very business-like aspect as, to Murray's great disgust, Caesar led him into the study.

"Why, what are you doing, man?" he cried. "Mr Allen is not in here. I've searched the place three times."

The black looked up at him quickly and showed his teeth; but it was in no grin of cunning, for the poor fellow's face

looked muddy and strange.

"Caesar know," he whispered hoarsely, and the midshipman felt the fingers which gripped his wrist twitch and jerk as he was pulled towards the corner of the room just beyond the window.

Here the black stopped short, trembling violently, and pointed downward, before darting back, loosening Murray's wrist and making for the door.

"Stop him, Roberts," cried Murray; but his words were needless, for the way of exit was completely blocked by the midshipman and his men.

"What does he mean by all this?" said Mr Anderson angrily.

"I don't quite know, sir," cried Murray; but he followed and caught the black by the arm. "Come," he continued; "show us where Mr Allen is."

"Caesar berry frighten', massa," whispered the poor fellow, whose teeth were chattering; but he yielded to Murray's hand and followed him back towards the corner of the little room, where his eyes assumed a fixed and staring look as he leaned forward and pointed downward at the thick rug of fur which covered that part of the floor.

"What does he mean?" cried the lieutenant. "Is the planter buried there?"

"Show us what you mean," cried Murray, and he tried to draw the black forward; but the poor fellow dropped upon his knees, resisting with all his might, and, with eyes starting and rolling and teeth chattering, he kept on pointing downward, darting his index finger at the floor.

"I beg pardon, sir," said Tom May gruffly. "I think I know what he means."

"What is it, then?" cried Murray.

"It's snakes, sir, same as I heered up-stairs."

"Perhaps so," said the lieutenant, "so take care; some of these serpents creep into the houses here, and they are very poisonous. Mind what you are about, Mr Murray. Let the black pull the rug away. Mr Roberts, a couple of your men here with cutlasses. Be smart, my lads, and strike the moment the brute is uncovered."

"Ay, ay, sir!" came in a chorus from the guard; but every Jack stood fast, waiting for his fellows to volunteer.

"Pull the rug away, Caesar," said Murray, as soon as the men had been ordered to advance, which they did after making a great show of spitting in their hands to get a good grip of the cutlasses they drew.

"No, no, no, massa. Caesar 'fraid, sah. Massa Huggin kill poor Caesar dead, for show."

"Is there a snake there, darkie?" said the lieutenant impatiently.

"No, massa. No, massa," panted the poor fellow. "Caesar brave boy; no frighten snake. Massa Huggin kill um for show."

"What does he mean? Master Huggin will make a show of him?"

"No, sir," cried Murray. "He's afraid of being murdered for showing the way. I have it, sir," he said now excitedly. "That explains everything. There's a way out here;" and stooping down the middy seized one corner of the rug, gave it a sharp jerk, and laid bare what seemed to be a trap-door neatly made in the polished floor.

A murmur of excitement ran through the room, and Murray exclaimed—

"Then the poor fellow has been killed, Tom."

"And buried, sir, seemingly," growled the sailor; and without waiting for orders, he went down on one knee to raise the broad square flap, while the black shrank a little more away where he knelt, and began rubbing his hands together excitedly.

"Well, my lad," cried Mr Anderson, "be smart! You're not afraid, are you?"

"Not a bit, sir," growled the big sailor; "but there seems to be some sort o' dodgery over this here hatchway. You see, there arn't no ring-bolt."

"Take your cutlass to it, Tom," said Murray; and as he spoke he drew his dirk.

"Ay, ay, sir; that'll do it," replied the sailor, and directly after the middy and he began to force in the edges of their blades so as to try and prise open the trap.

"Come, come, come," cried the lieutenant, "don't bungle like that;" and he drew his sword. "Let me try."

Murray made way, and the officer began to try and force in the edge of his service blade.

"Humph! Dear me!" he muttered. "The floor is made of mahogany. Very hard wood. Not so easy as I thought, May, my lad."

A broad smile covered the big sailor's countenance as he watched his officer's failure.

"Ay, ay, sir!" he growled. "Beg pardon, sir; you'll be breaking your sword."

"Yes, my lad, and I don't want to do that," said the lieutenant. "Here, hallo! What do you mean by that? Look here, Mr Murray; your nigger is trying to tell you how to do it. He knows all about it. Let him try."

For, as if recovering somewhat from his abject dread, the black knelt and shuffled about as if longing to perform the task himself.

"Yes, sir, that's it," said the midshipman eagerly. "Now then, Caesar, show us how it's done."

But this only made the black shrink away more and more, and begin shaking his head violently and resuming the pointing as before.

"Here, he must be made to show how it is done," cried the lieutenant impatiently. "We cannot waste time like this."

"I think I can manage now, sir," said Murray, for just then the black caught hold of his hand, slipped his own up the lad's wrist, and pressed him to one side of the square trap that refused to open.

The rest was plain, for it soon became clear that, though the black was afraid to do anything towards opening the trap himself, he was quite ready to use the hands of another party for the purpose.

"Oh, that's it, is it, Caesar?" cried Murray, who now submitted himself entirely to the slave's direction and let him press his hands down with a thrusting movement upon one of the floor-boards, with the result that the square trap glided away smoothly as if running upon rollers, while a dark opening appeared, showing a flight of ladder stairs running down into what seemed to be total darkness.

"A subterranean passage leading somewhere or another."

"It is the way out by which Mr Allen went," said Murray excitedly.

"Escaped, you mean," cried the lieutenant.

"Perhaps so, sir; but mayn't it be that he has been taken away by his enemies?" suggested Murray.

"Well, that we have to see," replied the lieutenant.

"Look here, Caesar," said Murray, addressing the black, "has Mr Allen gone this way?"

The black took a step or two towards the opening, listened, looked round cautiously, and then took hold of the lad's arm and drew him away, to whisper in his ear—

"Massa Huggin come and fesh him away."

"Then you think this Master Huggins is down there?"

The black nodded his head quickly and then pointed to the sailors, ran first to one and then to another and touched their swords and the muskets they carried, before pointing downward to the concealed flight of steps.

"I can understand that, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant. "He wants us to go down armed and follow the steps to where they lead; but we must have lights. Humph!" he added. "The fellow understands English well enough."

For the black darted to a corner closet, opened the door, and took out a bottle, a box and a silver candlestick which stood all ready, a wax taper which the black placed upon the side-table, and then, as cleverly as if he had seen it done scores of times, he took the stopper out of the little bottle, from which a strong odour of phosphorus arose, took a match from the box, and thrust it into the bottle, with the result that he brought it out burning, after the fashion of our fathers' time before the invention of lucifer matches and congreve lights—a fashion adopted when a letter had been written and the writer, who knew not adhesive envelopes and desired to seal his missive, made use of the phosphorus bottle instead of producing a light with a flint and steel.

"Well done," said the lieutenant. "Now then, are you going to light the way?"

The black shook his head and shrank away once more.

"We're to do it ourselves, it seems, Mr Murray;" and the lieutenant drew his sword. "I'll trouble you to light me, sir, for I must lead the way. Come, Mr Roberts, you can lead the men, and you will keep close up. Draw—no, no, leave that dress ornament in its scabbard. You too, Mr Murray. Take two of the men's cutlasses, and they can use their muskets. Here, darkie, are you coming too?"

"Yes, Massa buccra officer. Caesar come show the way. You no let Massa Huggin kill poor niggah?"

"That I promise you, my good fellow," said the lieutenant. "Now, Mr Murray, forward, please."

To the surprise of all present the black stepped quickly to the top of the stairs, and kneeling down thrust his head over and seemed to listen attentively before placing a hand upon the floor upon either side of the opening and lowering himself down.

"Massa come along quick. Nobody here."

"How's that?" cried Murray. "Isn't Mr Allen there?"

"No, massa. Him gone along Massa Huggin—take him right away, so him no tell Bri'sh officer where all de slabes hid ashore, and whar to fine de slaber ship."

"Light is beginning to dawn into my benighted intellect now, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant, following the midshipman, as, carefully sheltering the little taper from the damp wind which seemed to blow up from the hole in the floor, the lad stepped down quickly after the black. "And it seems to me, for your comfort, my lad, that you need not be in the slightest degree alarmed at the prospect of facing the captain and being called to account for the loss of your prisoner, for your loss is going to turn out a great gain. Here, follow close up with the men, Mr Roberts. No, not next; I'll have May behind me; he's big and strong, and he's something to depend upon if we have a sudden attack."

Roberts winced and frowned, for he felt as if his dignity had been a little touched at being put aside to make way for the big sailor, and in addition the chief officer had spoken in a way which made matters take a different turn from what he had expected.

If any one had asserted that he was a bit jealous and envious of his brother middy he would have denied it with indignation, but all the same there was a something near akin to envy somewhere in his breast, and he would have liked it a great deal better if he had been called upon to play several of the parts which somehow would fall to Murray's share.

So Dick Roberts frowned as he grasped the clumsy cutlass that had been handed to him by one of the men, and then after four of the party had received orders to mount guard at the entrance to the subterranean way, he followed closely upon Tom May's bulky form, ready to help protect those who had gone before; and grasping his weapon very tightly he stood at last at the foot of the stairs in a well-paved arched way just lit faintly by the wax taper, and was able to see that the passage was composed of the lava which had been quarried from one of the volcanic masses thrown from a burning mountain ages before.

"Keep together, my lads, close up," said the lieutenant; and his voice sounded whispering and strange as it seemed to reverberate down a passage, and finally died away.

"Where does this lead to, I wonder?" said the midshipman softly, and the walls repeated "I wonder" in a tone that sounded loud.

Chapter Thirty Six.

"Berry much 'fraid."

Julius Caesar, after getting over his first fear of the white strangers and a natural dread of the fierce American slaver, whose threats seemed to dominate his life, threw himself bravely into the enterprise upon which he was engaged and proved himself to be an admirable guide, one too with a full knowledge of the risks he ran. He grew more and more confident now of the strength to protect him of the man-o'-war's men, and every now and then, as the party continued its way along what proved to be a carefully constructed tunnel, he stopped short and whispered to Murray to shade the light while he hurried on into the pitchy darkness.

The first time he did this, after laying his black arm across both Murray's and the lieutenant's breasts, he seemed to be so long gone that the latter expressed it as his belief that he had tricked them and escaped; but this opinion had hardly been whispered in the middy's ear before there was a faint rustling as of bare feet heard, and then, breathing hard, the black was close upon them.

"Come 'long now, massa," he said. "Show light now."

Thrice more this was repeated, and then all at once upon their guide's return he exclaimed—

"Massa put out light now."

"What for?" said Murray sharply.

"Candle burn all away sure. Wantum go back. All dark."

"But how are you going to light it?" said Mr Anderson.

"July Caesar got lilly bottle o' fire; massa Allen lilly bottle, sah."

"But we can't see in the darkness," said Murray.

"Take hol' hand. Caesar show way. See with one hand run along top wall."

Setting aside the seeing, the black soon proved to those who followed him that he could feel his way along the rest of the distance, during which it was quite dark; and he hurried his followers along till the black gloom gradually became twilight, and that increased in power till it became possible to follow the dimly seen figure which went on in front. Then the twilight became a pale green, which grew brighter and brighter till all at once the black stopped short and whispered

"No make noise. Caesar go first and see Massa Huggin gone take Massa Allen 'way."

The party stopped and saw the black hurry on for a few dozen yards, and then disappear through what seemed to be a clump of bushes, which pretty well blocked up the end of the passage.

"I should like to know what's going to be the end of this," said the lieutenant; "but I suppose we must go on with it now and trust the black, for he seems to be proving himself honest. What do you say, Mr Murray?"

"I feel sure he is," replied the midshipman.

"But his motive? We are almost complete strangers."

"I think he is a faithful servant of the planter, sir, and wants us to save him from danger."

"Yes, that's how it suggests itself to me, Mr Murray, though I can hardly understand such conduct on the part of one of these wretched ill-used slaves towards the oppressor. But there, we shall see."

He ceased speaking, for just then the black seemed to spring through the bushes, and joined them where they were waiting in the tunnel.

"Find Massa Allen," said the black, in a quick excited whisper.

"Ah!" cried Murray joyfully, for somehow—he could not have said why—he had begun to feel the greatest interest in the sick man. "Ah! Where did you find him?"

"Massa Huggin got um."

"But where is he?"

The black pointed in the direction from whence he had returned, evidently indicating the forest which closed in the end of the tunnel.

"What is he going to do with him?" asked Mr Anderson—"Keep him a prisoner?"

"Kill um," said the black abruptly. "Come! Caesar show um;" and he caught hold of the middy's arm, gave it a tug, and then signed to the others to follow.

"Yes," said the lieutenant sharply; "it seems to me quite time we had a word to say about that. Let him lead on, Mr Murray. I want to have a few more words with our friend Mr Huggins. We must show him that there is a difference of opinion upon this question. Here, you darkie, does Mr Huggins indulge himself much in this kind of sport?"

The black, who was moving off sharply, stopped short, dropped his lower jaw to his breast, and stared vacantly at the speaker.

"What buccra sailor officer say?" he whispered.

"Don't speak in that way," said the lieutenant sharply. "Why don't you speak aloud?"

"Caesar berry much 'fraid massa Huggins hear um. Den kill poor niggah."

"That means, then, that Master Huggins does kill people sometimes?"

"Yes, massa often kill pore niggah when cross."

"Well, look here, my lad; don't you be very much afraid. I want you to show us all you can, for he is not going to kill our friend Master Allen."

"Massa Allen friend," said the black, nodding his head sharply. "Massa Allen kill pore niggah? No, nebber. Come 'long."

The man led the way, holding tightly by the middy's arm, and as soon as he had passed out of the tunnel, plunged into the dense forest, and threading his way among the trees, followed by the party, whose countenances were glowing with excitement, he carefully avoided every patch of earth which threatened to yield to the pressure of footsteps. This he kept on for over half-an-hour, when he stopped short and, bending down nearly double, pointed to where, instead of being firm, the way he had selected had suddenly become boggy, mossy, and of a rich green.

"Young officer, look dah," he whispered. "No speak loud. Massa Huggin men hear um."

"Well," said Murray, "I am looking *dah*, sir, but there is nothing to see."

"No see? Caesar see. Massa Huggin men come 'long. Carry Massa Allen, make men foot go down soft. Make mark."

"Perhaps so," said Murray, "but I can see nothing."

"Let him lead on, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant. "I want to get to business."

"Caesar show," whispered the man, and now, walking half doubled and with his hands hanging down, he broke into a trot, closely followed by the party, for another few hundred yards, before stopping short so suddenly that those who followed were on the point of over-running him.

"Massa officer look now," whispered the black. "Massa no say can't see now."

"No: I can see now," said Murray. "Look here, sir," he whispered, imitating the cautious utterance of the black, as the lieutenant closed up to him.

"Yes," said the officer eagerly; "this is real trail. So many seals impressed in the soft boggy soil; all leading off yonder in a fresh direction after evidently making a halt here. You can make it out, Mr Murray, eh?"

"I can make out the footsteps, sir," replied the lad, "but I can't say I understand them."

"Oh no, of course not," said the lieutenant, "but I suppose our black friend here can. Tell us all about it, what's your name—Caesar?"

"Yes, massa," said the black promptly; and he began eagerly to point out the various impressions in the earth, carefully keeping on one side and nearly touching the ground as he bent down.

"Dose niggah foots," he whispered, picking out carefully the trails of four pairs of footsteps which had passed to where they stood, evidently coming to an end. "Yes, sah; dose niggah foots. Carry Massa Allen. All 'tick down deep in de mud."

"Ah, to be sure!" cried Murray. "I see."

"Dey get tire' carry Massa Allen long way. No, Caesar t'ink Massa Allen say he walk bit now, and jump down. Dose Massa Allen foots. Got shoe on. Massa officer see?"

"To be sure he does, darkie. Well done! You see, Mr Murray?"

"Oh yes, sir; I can see now he shows me."

"Yes; young buccra officer see Massa Allen shoe 'tick down in de mud. Dose black niggah foots," continued the black, pointing.

"How do you know they are black footsteps?" asked Murray.

"All a toes 'tick out wide," replied the man promptly; and he raised one of his own feet with the toes spreading widely, stepped to a soft patch of green-covered mud, and pressed his foot down and raised it again. "Dah," he continued; "Massa buccra see? Dat black niggah foots, and dat are white man foot. Look toopid all queezum up in hard boot. Dat Massa Huggin foots."

"Ah!" cried the lieutenant eagerly. "How do you know, darkie?"

"Massa Huggin put foots in big hard boot. Caesar know um—kick Caesar. 'Get outah way, black dog!' he say."

As he spoke the black went through something of a pantomime so perfectly that the lieutenant and Roberts burst out laughing. Murray's countenance remained unchanged, and he met the black's eyes gravely, and noted their fierce aspect as his brow wrinkled up and his thick, fleshy, protuberant lips were drawn away from the beautifully perfect white teeth.

"Hurt pore black niggah, massa," he said, rather piteously. "Kill some niggah. Massa Huggin sabage. Pore niggah die dead. Hurt Caesar sometime. Wouldn't die."

"Well, go on, my lad," said the lieutenant; and the black continued his object-lesson.

"Massa Allen say walk now. Look at um foots. Lilly shoe dah, big boot, hard boot, dah. One boot, 'noder boot. Massa Huggin say Come along, sah. Look dah. Walk 'long dah, and niggah foots walk over um. Lot o' niggah foots walk all over cover um up."

"Well," said the lieutenant, "now you have found out the trail so well, lead on and let's overtake them."

"Ah!" cried the black excitedly, for he had suddenly caught sight of something at which he bounded and caught it up to hold it before him and gaze at it with starting eyes.

"What does that mean, Mr Murray?" said the lieutenant, in a low tone, his attention having been thoroughly taken up by the intelligent black's behaviour.

"I don't quite know, sir. It's a soft piece of plantain stalk notched at the edge in a peculiar way. Look, sir."

For, paying no more heed to his companions for the moment, the black began to search about to the right of the trail, till he suddenly bounded on for a few paces and caught up a piece of green cane about six inches long and evidently scratched in a special manner.

"What's that, Caesar?" asked the middy.

The black, who was gazing at the piece of cane with fixed and staring eyes which seemed to glow, started at the lad's address, and pressed forward to look him questioningly in the eyes, hesitating.

Then he smiled and nodded.

"Massa buccra. Good Bri'sh sailor. Come set pore niggah free. Him no tell Massa Huggin. Him no kill pore black darkie. Iss, Caesar tell um," he whispered now, with his lips so close that the lad felt the hot breath hiss into his ear. "Dat Obeah, massa. Dat black man's Obeah. Come along now Caesar know. Find fetish. Plenty many black boy speak soon."

"But you are going the wrong way," said Murray, clapping the black upon the shoulder to draw him back.

"No, sah. Caesar go right way. Way Obeah tell um."

"But Mr Allen: we want to follow Mr Allen."

"No can, sah. Not now. Come back. Not time yet."

"But you said that this Huggins would kill Mr Allen now that he has got him away."

"No," said the black, shaking his head. "No kill um now. Plenty black boy 'top um; no let um kill Massa Allen. Come back now. Massa wait."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried the lieutenant. "I am not going to be treated like this. Look here, you sir; you must go on and follow up the trail till we overtake this slaving scoundrel and make him prisoner. Do you hear?"

The black listened, and looked at the speaker gravely, but made no reply.

"Do you hear, sir?" cried the lieutenant again. "Speak to him, Mr Murray; he seems to listen to you better than he does to me."

"I'll try, sir," said Murray, "but I'm afraid he will not stir now."

"You tell him that he must, sir."

Murray repeated the lieutenant's words, with the result that the black listened to him with a face that for a few moments looked dull and obstinate, but which changed to a softer aspect as his bright eyes looked full in those of the frank young midshipman, before they closed slowly and their owner shook his head.

"Come, Mr Murray," said the chief officer; "you are not making the fellow understand."

"No, sir," said Murray gravely, "and I am afraid he is not to be forced." Then the lad's eyes flashed with annoyance, for Roberts glanced at him and said to his leader—

"Shall I try, sir?"

"Yes, do. These people want to be made to understand that when they receive orders they must obey them."

"Yes, sir," cried Roberts, making the most of himself, as he frowned at their black guide. "Murray is too easy with them. Here, you sir—"

Here Roberts's speech was cut short by the lieutenant, who had been watching the change in Murray's countenance, and he exclaimed—

"That will do, Mr Roberts, thank you. I think I can manage the matter better myself. Here, what's your name—Caesar?"

"Yes, sah; Caesar," said the black; and Murray looked at him sharply, for the man's manner seemed completely changed.

"Then listen to me. You ought to have learned with the power to speak English that a servant must obey his master."

The black drew himself up with his face growing hard from his setting his teeth firmly.

"Massa Huggin make me servant and call me slabe; beat me—flog me—but I was prince once, sah, in Obeah land."

The lieutenant's face flushed and he was about to speak angrily, but there was something in the slave's manner that checked him, and the two middies looked at him wonderingly, as instead of giving some stern order he said in a quiet, matter-of-fact, enquiring way—

"Indeed? So you were a prince or chief in your own country?"

"Yes, sah," was the reply; and it was given with such calm dignity that colour, the half-nude figure, and the blur of slavery were forgotten by the lookers-on, and the feeling of wonder at the lieutenant's treatment of their guide died out.

"How came you here?" said the lieutenant quietly.

"There was war, sah, and my people were beaten. There were many prisoners, and we were sold to the man—sold."

"Hah! Hard—very hard for you," said the lieutenant, looking at their guide thoughtfully. "How long is that ago?"

"Twenty year, sah."

"And you have been this Mr Huggins's slave ever since?"

"No, sah; not long time. Caesar sold free time before Mr Allen bought me; and he was good massa. He call me Caesar, and make me lub him."

"Not for christening you Caesar, of course. Then he treated you well?"

"Yes, sah. Then Massa Huggin come and make Massa Allen like slave."

"Indeed! Well, I have heard something of this from Mr Allen himself, and you will most likely see that this slave-driving scoundrel's reign is over. Do you understand my English?"

"Yes, massa," said the black quietly.

"Then you quite understand that you have been helping me as guide so that we can save Mr Allen from this man, and punish him for all the evil he has done—I mean for this buying and selling of the poor blacks who are brought from Africa here?"

"Yes, massa."

"Then why do you refuse to go on guiding us to find Mr Allen?"

"Massa no understand," said the black quietly. "Caesar want to save Massa Allen. Caesar want to kill Massa Huggin."

"Do you?" said the lieutenant, smiling. "Well, we do not ask you to do that. We will manage the punishing; but I want you to go on guiding me and my men to where this slave-dealer is."

"Yes, massa. Caesar want too, but massa mus' wait."

"What for? Why should we wait?"

"Massa no understand."

"I understand from your behaviour that you are afraid," said the lieutenant sternly.

"No, massa; not now. Caesar drefful 'fraid lil bit ago. Not now. Caesar want to save Massa Allen, but not time yet, massa. Bri'sh officer wait lil while."

"Why?" said the lieutenant sharply.

"Massa no understand. Massa go now and find Massa Huggin. Take one, two—five, ten man Bri'sh sailor; Massa Huggin got ten, twenty, forty, fifty men sword gun plenty powder shot. Plenty 'nough to kill officer and Bri'sh sailor. Plenty strong; two ship. Kill everybody; Massa Allen too. Massa no good."

"But how do I know that my men would not be too many for this scoundrel?"

"No, not many. Not 'nuff, sah," said the black, shaking his head.

"Then you think we had better go back to the ship and fetch more men?"

The black shook his head and smiled sadly.

"Caesar 'fraid massa get killed, sailor get killed, Caesar too get killed. Massa officer must wait."

The lieutenant gazed at the speaker searchingly, while the black returned his keen examination without flinching.

"Why must I wait?" he said.

"Too soon, massa. Time not come."

"Time for what? To give Mr Huggins time to collect his men? He has plenty of black sailors, has he not?"

"Yes, massa. Hundred, two hundred, tree hundred."

"So I supposed. Well, I do not feel disposed to wait longer than it will take me to get up some more of my men—as many as the captain can spare—and then I shall attack at once."

"No massa can," said the black quietly.

"Oh yes, I can, because you who have served us as guide so well, and who want to save your master, will show us the way."

"No, massa. Caesar no show the way."

"Why not?" said the lieutenant angrily.

"Massa Bri'sh officer and all men be killed. Massa must wait."

"And if I say I will not wait?" cried Mr Anderson.

"Caesar show Massa Bri'sh officer why must wait."

"When will you show me?" asked the lieutenant sharply.

The black stood silent for a few moments as if debating within himself sadly and doubtfully. Then turning his eyes upon Murray, his own brightened, and he thrust his hand within the cotton shirt which loosely covered his breast and shoulders. Then quickly drawing out the piece of young notched cane and the marked plantain leaf, he looked at them eagerly, turning them over in his hands and seeming to read the marks that were cut through rind and skin.

As he did this the black's face brightened and he seemed to have found the way out of a difficulty as he held out the tokens of something or another to Murray.

"What have you there, my man?" cried the lieutenant.

"Obeah, massa. Fetish. Massa officer come with Caesar to-night, Caesar show him why wait."

"Come with you alone?" said the lieutenant.

The black shook his head.

"No, massa come bring massa officer, Bri'sh sailor. Come and see. Caesar not 'fraid now. Massa come to-night."

"Come where?" cried Mr Anderson.

"Caesar show."

"You will show me a good reason why I should wait?"

"Yes, massa. Come 'long now."

"Come now? Where to?"

"Massa Allen sleep house. Come 'long. Caesar show."

And without waiting for further question or order, the black thrust the tokens he had found into his breast as he made his way back into the tunnelled passage, where he drew out the phosphorus bottle and taper, lit the latter and then led the way as swiftly as his companions could follow, the taper just lasting long enough to light the party back to within hearing of a call from the guards awaiting them anxiously at the entrance.

"Now for our rations, my lad, and a rest," said the lieutenant, as all stood once more in the cottage room and watched the black deftly replace the trap, drawing over it the rug and making all that had passed seem to the two midshipmen and the chief officer as if they had been taking part in a dream.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Obeah.

"This man is a puzzle," said the lieutenant. "One hour he is a shivering cowardly slave, the next he plays the part of a hero; and now he is like a clever household servant who does the best he can for visitors in his master's absence. Why, Murray—Roberts—we never expected such treatment as this."

"No, sir," said the two midshipmen together.

For Caesar had been bustling about, and one way and another had spread quite a supper in the planter's little dining-room for the officers, and afterwards supplied the men in one of the back rooms with delicious coffee and bread, to the great refreshment of the tired adventurers.

"What are you thinking about, Mr Murray?" said the lieutenant. "Come, out with it, my lad;" for the middy had hesitated and turned red.

"I was only thinking, sir, that we ought to send a messenger to the *Seafowl*."

"Humph! Strange, my lad. I have been thinking just the same, but I can spare neither man nor boat, and I have come to the conclusion that if Captain Kingsberry wants news he must send to us for it. What's that you are muttering, Mr Roberts?—He will be angry?"

"I didn't say so aloud, sir," replied the lad.

"No, but you thought it, sir. Well, if he is he will soon be in a good humour again when he finds how busy we have been and what we have made out. Ah, here is our guide. Well, Caesar, what now?"

"Berry dark now, massa. Come see."

"Come and see in the dark?" said the lieutenant, who appeared to be in the best of humours. "Well, what have you to show us?"

The three officers rose from the table and followed their guide out on the platform, where he pointed to a ruddy glow which rose from beyond the trees.

"Fire!" said Murray excitedly. "Can that be where the plantation house lies, sir?"

"No, Mr Murray, I think not. But if it is I should not be surprised if, taking advantage of their master's absence, the blacks have fired his house to burn it down. Here, Caesar, are they burning the place?"

"No, massa," replied the black. "Massa bring all sailor. Come see."

The lieutenant nodded, and said in a low tone to Murray—

"Look here, my lad, I believe this fellow is to be trusted, but one's caution and discipline will whisper that we ought to be careful, and it will not do for us to come back and find that our boats are burned."

"No, sir," replied the lad quickly. "Whom will you leave in charge of them?"

"I should like to leave May, but I want him with us. What do you say, Mr Roberts? It is an important charge."

"Yes, sir," faltered the midshipman, "but—"

"You want to go with us, eh? Well, it is only natural. Murray too, I suppose, feels the same. But you must take into consideration that this may be a very dangerous expedition we are going upon."

"Do you think so, sir?"

"I do, Murray, and I cannot help hesitating now and then—from ignorance, of course, for though our guide seems to be trustworthy, we know absolutely nothing of what his feelings may be towards us. Well, I shall leave six men in charge of the two boats, with Titely at their head and instructions to keep well off shore."

These arrangements were quickly made while the black stood looking on impatiently; and then Murray heard him utter a sigh of relief, for Mr Anderson told him to lead on.

The man sprang to the front at once, and was closely followed by the blacks who formed the crew of the planter's boat.

"Massa keep close to Caesar," said their guide, "and tell men not to talk and make noise. Soon get not dark."

For the time being the darkness seemed to be impenetrable, but somehow the black leader was quite able to thread his way along an invisible track, which however soon grew easier, for the glow in the distance increased till the tops of the forest trees began to stand out clearly against the ruddy light.

Murray had received whispered instructions from his officer, whose caution seemed to increase as they went on, and those instructions turned the midshipman into the head of a rear-guard made up of himself, Tom May and two men, with instructions to report upon anything that seemed to be suspicious.

It was not long before the lad began to follow out his instructions by leaving the big sailor for a few minutes and hurrying forward to join the lieutenant.

"That you, Mr Murray?" he said. "You've come to say that the fire is increasing, and that there is another one away to the left?"

"No, sir; I saw that," replied the middy.

"Then why have you left your men?"

"To tell you, sir, that we are being followed very closely by a body of blacks who are hemming us in."

"Hang it! You don't mean that!"

"I do, sir. Twice over we have seemed to pass through men who are hanging back on either side to let us pass, and who then close in behind us and follow up silently."

"Humph! Unarmed, I suppose?"

"No, sir; I have not had much opportunity, but I am pretty well sure that, some of them have muskets, while all have those clumsy hangers with which they clear away the canes and growth from the forest paths."

"Well, we are in for it now, Mr Murray. But look here, they are not many, I suppose?"

"They are, sir, and keep on increasing in numbers."

"But they seem peaceable?"

"Yes, sir, quite; but I can't help feeling suspicious."

"Yes, it is suspicious, but they may not mean harm. I believe in that black Caesar all the same. If I did not I should give the order to retreat at once. There, go back to your men, and keep close up. Take special care not to let the blacks get between you and us."

"There is no need, sir. They hang back to let us all pass."

"That may be part of their plan to shut us in. But I will go on believing in the fellow till I have good cause to turn upon him, and then it will be very hard if our lads can't keep any number at bay. There, stand fast till your men overtake you."

Murray halted and let the men march by till Tom May and his messmates joined him; and then as he resumed his place he became aware that the blacks in their rear had increased greatly in number. Short as had been his absence, it was now much lighter, so that it was plain to see that they were being followed by a dense mass of white-cotton-clothed plantation slaves, all bearing arms of some kind or another, and moving in comparative silence, their bare feet making hardly a sound upon the soft earth.

"They seem to be increasing fast, Tom," whispered Murray, as the sailors tramped steadily on.

"Yes, sir; tidy—tidy," replied the big fellow.

"But they don't seem to mean mischief, Tom."

"No, sir, not yet; but if that was their game they could eat our little lot without salt."

"You don't seem to be a bit alarmed, Tom."

"No, sir; no, sir, only a bit bothered."

"What about—the darkness?"

"Nay, sir; that's getting easier. It's twice as light as it was. I meant about what game's up. We seem to be going on some expedition or another, and I've been trying to settle it down in my mind. Don't think it's a coon hunt, do you, sir?"

"No, Tom; they are all too grave and serious for that."

"Yes, sir, but that might be 'cause they don't want to scare the game."

"No; this is no hunt, Tom."

"P'raps not, sir, and I only fancied that's what it might be. No, sir, I don't feel much worried about it—oneasy, you may say. Do you, sir?"

"Well, to be honest, Tom, I don't like to be shut up like this among these blacks. Why, they're growing thicker and thicker!"

"That's so, sir. They're hundreds upon hundreds strong. What does the chief officer think of it?"

"He doesn't say, Tom, but I could see that he felt the need of caution by the order he gave me about keeping close together."

"Oh, he did that, sir, did he? But I say, I wonder what the skipper would say about our being in such a hole."

Murray looked sharply round at the speaker, who to his surprise began to chuckle softly.

"I don't see anything to laugh at, Tom May," said the middy sharply.

"No sir," replied the man; "I s'pose not. There aren't really nothing."

"Then why do you laugh?"

"Couldn't help it, sir. Only you see it does seem such cheek on our part, just a boat and a half's crew and our officer marching right in here no one knows where, only as it's forest and just as cool as you please, and all these here niggers—reg'lar black thunderstorm of 'em—shutting us in, and all as quiet as mice. We're not a bit frightened of 'em, but I'll be bound to say as they're scared of us. It do make me laugh, it do; but I s'pose it's because we've got what they arn't, sir—discipline, you see."

"I think it takes something more than discipline, Tom," said the midshipman. "Our men's pluck has something to do with it."

"Well, sir, I s'pose it has," replied the man. "But look here, how they're standing on each side for us to pass through. Talk about hundreds, why if it goes on like this there'll be thousands soon."

For the rich red glowing light became stronger and stronger, until at the end of half-an-hour the trees grew more open and the party could make out flame and smoke arising, while the silence of the marching men was at times broken by the crackle of burning wood.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the big sailor, "I can't say as I can make it out yet what game this is going to be, but anyhow we're in for it whatever it is. I say, Mr Murray, sir, these here black African niggers arn't cannibals, are they?"

"Some of them, Tom, I believe."

"Then that's it, sir; they're all gathering up together for a great feed. Over yonder's a big opening like with the fire in the middle of it, and we're in for it now, and no mistake!"

"Oh, nonsense, Tom!"

"Is it, sir? Well, I never see such a turn out o' nonsense before. It's going to be a feast they're set upon, and it don't seem to me as we're going to have a bit o' room if the first luff makes up his mind to fight. All I can say is that cook me how they please, I'm sorry for the poor beggar of a black who's got to stick his teeth into me. Talk about a tough un, Mr Murray, sir, I'm one," chuckled the big fellow. "They're gathered together for a big feast, as I said afore, and it's no use to show fight, for there arn't room. They'll squeeze us all up pretty tight before the cooking begins, and that may make a bit o' difference in the way of being tender, but I shall give some of them the toothache for certain, and I don't think after the feed's over many of 'em'll want to try British tar again. British tar!" repeated the man jocosely. "Wonder whether I shall taste o' best Stockholm tar. I've got pretty well soaked in it in my time."

"Hush, Tom! Here's Mr Anderson waiting for us to join him."

For it had proved to be as the sailor had said. They had been marched into a wide amphitheatre of trees, in the midst of which a tremendous fire was burning brightly, and by its light the English party could make out the long serpentine line of men who were marching into the amphitheatre, which was lined with hundreds upon hundreds of blacks, whose eyes glowed in the firelight, while whenever lips were parted there was the glistening of the brilliantly white teeth.

It was a strangely impressive sight, as the lieutenant said when Murray joined him.

"I don't know even now," he added, "what it signifies. They don't mean harm to us, my lad; but if they did we should have small chance of resistance. It seems to me that they have gathered for some special reason. It is a sort of feast, I suppose."

Murray caught sight of Tom May's eyes fixed upon him, and he closed one eye very slowly and solemnly as he frowned at the midshipman, as much as to say, "There, sir, I told you so!"

"What is your opinion of it, Mr Murray?"

"It looks to me, sir, like a rising of the blacks, for they are all armed."

"Well," said the lieutenant, "they are not rising against us. If they were they would not be so civil. Besides, they have nothing against us to rise about. They can't rebel against those who have come to give them their freedom. Let's go and see what is going on there."

Just then their black guide came forward and stood before them, evidently for the purpose of stopping their progress, for the lieutenant had begun to cross the middle of the wide opening in the woods to where something important was apparently taking place.

"Well, Caesar," said the lieutenant, "what is going on there?"

The black shook his head and looked anxiously from one officer to the other.

"Massa not go dah," whispered the man. "Massa just look, see, and listen to what Obeah man say."

"Obeah man?"

"Yes, massa. Obeah man. Snake fetish. Big snake in great box dah. Priest Obeah man take snake out o' box soon. Not good for massa."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said the lieutenant. "Do you know anything about all this, Murray?"

"No," replied the lad, "only that I have heard something of serpent worship which the blacks have carried with them to Barbadoes and Jamaica, sir."

"Say Hayti too, my lad."

"No, sir," said Murray, smiling, his face looking bright in the warm glow spread by the tremendous fire now burning. "I can't say any more, for I have heard so little about these people and their religion."

"I expect you know as much as I do, Murray, my lad. This is Obeah, isn't it? Serpent worship, Caesar?"

"Yes, massa. Not good for Bri'sh officer and brave sailor. Snake in big box. Priest show um to people. Obeah. Berry dreadful, sah."

"Very dreadful nonsense, Murray," said the lieutenant to his companion, in a low tone. Then speaking aloud: "And what is it all for?"

The black shook his head.

"Caesar can't tell, massa. Priest show big snake Caesar people. Make all see fire and fight."

"Aha! Fight, eh?" said the lieutenant, after a glance at Murray.

"Yes, massa; make people fight—kill."

"Fight and kill us?" said Mr Anderson.

The man showed his white teeth and shook his head.

"No, massa; Caesar people no fight Bri'sh captain, Bri'sh officer. All come do poor black fellow good. Massa want know why not go fesh Massa Allen. Not good time. Caesar people all come to snake fetish. Obeah priest call people to come not know who Massa Huggin friend, who Massa Allen friend. Caesar bring Bri'sh officer, Bri'sh sailor, see Obeah night. See Obeah priest show big snake. Snake fetish. Caesar go now."

The black turned away and walked quickly to where several strange-looking negroes—probably Obeah men—had now begun to walk in procession around the blazing fire, in front of which a long coffin-shaped box had been placed, and behind which a black, who must have attained to some consequence among his superstitious brethren on account of his gigantic height, stood now in the ruddy glow tossing his arms on high, gesticulating and uttering a weird strange chant, until the English party saw that their guide had approached quite close to the huge giant, and was evidently talking to him eagerly and with a great show of respect.

"Well, we know where we are now, Murray," said the lieutenant. "Our guide has brought us here to see the mummery of their barbarous religion, and there is no doubt that the people have met to be stirred up to some rising against the planters who own them as slaves."

"You think so, sir?" asked Murray.

"Yes, I feel sure of it, my lad. But look here, Murray; the people are quite friendly towards us, so help me in making our lads behave themselves. I mean, there must be no ribald laughing at the poor wretches. That is not the way to appeal to their better feelings. Look at that! Poor benighted creatures. These slave-owners must keep them in a darkness as black as their skins."

For as the party from the *Seafowl* stood looking on, the strange chant rose and fell, while the huge black, who seemed to be the priest and leader, marshalled the people into a procession which he led round the fire, the blacks gesticulating, raising their arms in the air, and then bowing themselves down as they marched in a slow and solemn tramp about the blazing embers. Stamp, stamp, stamp; the vibration of the earth and the movement of the concourse of the excited people raised a current of air which fanned the flames and sent the sparks flying upwards eddying into the black night, while flakes of fire that were now and then dazzling in the brilliancy of their colour flashed and fluttered as they rose on high.

There was no need for the lieutenant's words to his young officer, for, far from giving vent to mocking laughter, the sailors stood together looking on with wonder and something like awe at the intensity of feeling displayed by the people, who as they marched slowly onward in the weird procession, kept on pausing with wonderful unanimity to stamp and utter a wild and stirring moan as if of despair. Then they tossed their hands on high in obedience to the movements of their leader, who seemed to tower up above them, and whose black skin, which had most probably been heavily anointed with palm oil, glistened in the firelight until when every now and then he stopped short and stood motionless, he looked like some great image cast in ruddy bronze.

Onward and onward tramped and stamped the great procession; the strange thrilling chant rose and fell, now uttered as a wild shrieking yell, and then descending gradually until the sailors were listening to a wail of despair, as if the wretched people were appealing for pity in their terrible position and asking for help to relieve them from their piteous

bondage.

"And I was afraid my lads would laugh, Murray," whispered the lieutenant huskily. "Why, my lad, there's something so terrible, so horrible, about it all that one seems to want no explanation. It tells its own tale of the poor wretches' sufferings."

"Yes, sir," whispered back the middy, "and I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Glad, boy!" cried the lieutenant, in an angry whisper. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that it makes me feel choky, sir," whispered Murray, "and I was a bit ashamed."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, my lad. I feel as if I should be glad of a chance to set our lads at some of the torturing, murderous wretches who drag the people from their own country and treat them as they do."

"I feel the same, sir," replied Murray, as he stared straight before him at something that had caught his eye; "but we shall have our chance, I feel sure, sir, and have the blacks to help us, for they are not working themselves up like this for nothing."

"Working themselves up," whispered the lieutenant, as the weird chant went on and the heavy beat of the people's bare feet grew more and more impressive, while the rate at which they now tore on increased. "Why, they are working my men up too. The great baby! I shouldn't have believed it possible that a big strong fellow like that could have been so impressed."

"What, Tom May, sir?" said Murray.

"Yes, my lad. There were two great tears rolling down his cheeks, and I suppose he didn't know how they were shining in this dazzling light, for he rubbed them away with his great ugly fists. Don't let him see that we noticed it, for I suppose it is genuine emotion, and no one can say that he is not as big and brave a fellow as ever stepped. Here, look, boy—look!" whispered the lieutenant excitedly.

"I am looking, sir," replied the middy, "and so is every one else. Oh, Mr Anderson, I am glad I didn't miss seeing this."

"I don't know, my lad, whether I am glad or whether I am sorry," replied his leader, "but I should not have thought it possible. It sets one thinking about what we read regarding the worships of the old idolaters, and I never imagined that such things could be going on now. Look, look; they seem to be growing frantic. It can't last long like this; the poor wretches are growing mad."

For the chant had grown louder and wilder, the wails in chorus more piercing and thrilling, and the heavy stamping of the bare feet more heavy and deep-toned, so that all round the great circle in which the slaves were stamping, the earth vibrated more thunderously than ever.

Then, as if by one impulse, every actor in the weird scene stopped short in response to a signal given by the huge leader, who threw up his arms just when the fire, fanned so strangely by the hundreds of figures sweeping round it, tore upward in a vast whirl of fluttering flame and eddying sparks, and all with a low, deep musical hum which strangely dominated the silence.

It was as if the multitude had ceased to breathe, and all present were reflecting from their staring protuberant eyes the ruddy light of the roaring cone of flame. The great bronze figure formed the centre upon which all eyes were fixed, and he stood now with his hands raised on high as if to hold his followers' attention and make them as statue-like as himself.

Murray felt impressed and held as it were by the gesture of the great leader, and for one brief moment turned his eyes upon his brother middy, to see that his face was thrust forward, his lips were apart, and his eyes and teeth were glistening in the light.

It was but a momentary glance, and then his own eyes were watching the great glistening black, who, perfectly nude, now lowered his arms till they were horizontal, and, with levelled and pointing fingers stalked towards where the great coffin-shaped box lay in the full light of the glowing and roaring fire.

He stood with his hands outstretched above the chest for what seemed to be long-drawn endless minutes; but no one stirred, and then, with one quick movement, he seemed to sweep off the long lid before him, stooped, and plunged his hands into the chest, just too as the fire burned the brightest; and as he rose erect again he tore from out of where it rested, a great writhing serpent, whose myriad scales flashed in the brilliant light as if it were of gold.

And then, and then only, a deep, low, moaning murmur rose from the many throats and died away as if in the distance in one deep sigh.

Silence again, and Murray's eyes were fixed, his breast thrilling, and a sensation ran through him as if some strange force were plucking at his nerves and making them vibrate throughout his frame.

For as the great bronze figure stood erect those who watched could see that the serpent was all in motion, gliding, twining and crawling all over the priest's stalwart frame, while he too seemed to be working hard with his hands, trying to control the reptile's movements, but only for it to go on gliding rapidly through his fingers; and as the midshipman watched, he kept on getting glimpses of an oval flattened head gliding over the negro's breast, passing beneath his arms, reappearing again over his shoulders to pass round his neck, and always eluding the busy hands which tried to restrain it.

The scene was wonderful. Murray had watched the black snatch the reptile from the box which held it, and then it was as if he had snatched forth a dozen serpents which were ever after twining and intertwining in continuous motion and flashing the while in a wonderful quivering, endlessly moving flame of glistening scales which seemed to throw off a phosphorescent mist of light that enveloped both reptile and man.

As Murray gazed, fascinated by the weirdly strange scene before him, it seemed to him a dozen times over that a deadly struggle was going on between the two writhing creatures, and that every now and then, as the golden oval head darted out of the confusion of movement, it was only to gather force for a dart at the man and fix its fangs in the quivering flesh. But there was no cessation; the reptile was ever strong, and the man as vigorous as ever. Darting at the struggling figure about which it was twined, and then—perhaps it was the boy's imagination—gaping wide to fix upon some part of the quivering flesh, breast, back, shoulder, or side, perhaps most often at the hands which kept on moving about as sharply as the flat head which played around with such wonderful rapidity. And the motion was ceaseless, always glistening and flashing with light, and watched by the hundreds upon hundreds of glowing opal eyes which reflected the cone of flame still going on spiralling upwards and burning more fiercely than ever.

What is going to be the end? Murray asked himself. Will the serpent conquer and the great black priest fall faint and powerless, strangled to death by the folds of the reptile, which were ever tightening round breast and neck? But they were ever loosening as well, and at one time the boy's chest expanded with a glow of satisfaction, for it seemed to him that the man was gaining the mastery over his enemy, having succeeded in grasping the serpent's neck with both hands, and begun to swing and whirl it round and round, whizzing through the air level with his neck. Murray could almost believe that it was whirled round so fast that he could even hear it hum and then snap and crack as if it were some mighty whip-lash with which the great black was flogging the golden darkness of the night.

The middy panted again, and there was a feeling of constriction about his chest, just as if the serpent or one of the many serpents that at times, it seemed, had thrown a fold about him—yes, and another had been cast about his neck, for in the struggle going on before his eyes the reptile seemed to be gaining the best of it once more, and the man was weakening rapidly.

He wondered too that the crowd eddying around remained so silent. It seemed to him only natural that they should give vent to their feelings with shouts of joy when the priest looked successful, and groanings when the serpent had him circled tightly in its coils.

But all the same the midshipman in his excitement realised that he was as silent as the rest, and stood there, with the perspiration trickling down from brow to cheek, watching and watching for the end which seemed as if it would never come.

It must be, he was sure, a struggle that could only end in one way—death for one of the combatants. And yet the lad felt doubt creep in, and he asked himself whether it might not end in death for both.

There were moments when, as he saw the great negro struggle and free himself partially from the serpent's folds, he foresaw the reptile's end in the glowing fire, which would become man's colleague as well as servant, and he could almost see the monster writhing and curling up in the roaring flames to which it was apparently adding fresh fury.

But the next moment there was another phase of horror, for one fold of the many convolutions seemed to be tightened about the man's arm, and he was evidently about to be dragged into the fire too, and, as he had before imagined, it was to be death for both.

But no; the serpent snatched itself away from the impending danger and tightened itself about the man, who was the next instant bound by the great living thong about and about his heaving body, and the struggle was resumed upon equal terms.

Was it never going to finish?

The end was at hand in a way that the watcher had never for a moment anticipated, for all at once, when the silence, save for the humming noise of the fire, was at its greatest depth, there arose the sudden hollow trumpet-like blast of a great conch shell, followed by a savage fiendish yell, and for one brief moment Murray saw the huge black, golden red in the fire's glow, standing wiping, as it were so to speak, the folds of the great serpent from off his arms, then from his neck, and again from his breast, about which it heaved and twined, before it was gone, as it were, twisted up by the great knotted arms of the huge negro, and thrown into the long coffin-shaped chest, whose lid was slammed down with a noise like the report of a gun; and this was followed by a noise as of a great wind passing over the amphitheatre, and Murray looked to see the fire swept away and growing extinct before the force of what sounded like a storm.

But the fire blazed still, and dominating the rushing wind a voice arose from close at hand with the familiar cry of—

"Seafo'wls ahoy!"

Chapter Thirty Eight.

A Night in the Woods.

The summons given in hearty English was responded to by a ragged volley of so many muskets, whose flashes came faintly from the edge of the amphitheatre, and wondering what it meant, Murray, as he looked round, was just in time to see the big black giant of a negro spring high in the air, come down with a crash upon the coffin-shaped chest, roll over, and writhe for a few moments before lying perfectly still.

As the big negro was seen to fall, the crowd of blacks who were hurrying here and there as if in dismay, uttered a series of shrieks and yells, and began to run in confusion towards the end of the woody amphitheatre farthest from the fire, but only to encounter another ragged volley of musketry which checked them and drove them back, leaving several of their number to fall struggling upon the ground, while Murray saw two more totter and go down as they ran shrieking, half mad with fear, towards another portion of the lit-up ring of light, for they avoided the little party of armed seamen as if they took them for one of the causes of the sudden attack.

"Stand fast, my lads," cried the lieutenant. "Now then, forward!"

He placed himself at the head of his men, who followed him with their muskets shouldered, but at the end of a few yards their commander called—

"Halt—I'm not at all sure of our way, gentlemen," he said, addressing the two midshipmen, "but I think we ought to take that end—yonder where the blacks are collecting."

"No, sir, I don't think that's right," cried Murray. "You see, every part of the circus-like place looks like the rest."

"Yes, I see that, Murray, but surely there is the path yonder by which we came."

But as he spoke, half-a-dozen more musket flashes came from the very spot to which he had pointed, and what might be called a wave of black figures came, dotting the earth with as many white cotton-clad wounded or dead unfortunates as shots had been fired.

"Bah! I'm wrong," cried the lieutenant angrily. "This looks like a planned massacre of the poor creatures gathered at this meeting. If we could only find our guide we might have a chance to get out of the horrible confusion. Here, let's try this way."

"Yes, sir; that is the way, I am sure, for it is just opposite to that chest out of which that poor fellow took the snake."

"You are right, sir," cried the lieutenant; "and we must retreat in that direction, for it is of no use to try and make a stand against a hidden enemy."

"Why don't those poor wretches show fight, sir?" cried Murray excitedly, as the little party began their march.

"Because they have no one to lead them, my lad."

"Can't we, sir?"

"We could if they knew us, Murray; but we are strangers, and it would be madness to try and head such a confused mob."

"I suppose so, sir," said Murray sadly, as he marched on beside his commander, who now gave an order to the men he led, which was heard plainly above the shouting and yelling of the blacks, who in their fear and confusion had cast away the heavy machetes with which they had armed themselves.

"Make ready, my lads, in case the enemy has taken possession of our line of retreat."

But all seemed perfectly still amongst the trees they approached, and their lit-up trunks and boughs offered shelter as well as a way of retreat, when at one and the same moment, just as Mr Anderson called out, "Forward, my lads! That is the right path," Tom May shouted from the rear—

"Here's that there Caesar, sir, coming after us full pelt."

"Yes," cried Roberts, "and he's bringing all the blacks with him to this end."

Then it was that a fresh burst of flashes came from the now plainly seen opening for which the *Seafowls* made, checking their advance and laying two of them low.

"Retreat!" shouted a voice which sounded father strange, and it was followed by a fierce roar from the lieutenant bidding the men reply.

In an instant a good steady volley was fired at the spots from which the last shots had come, and then obeying the order that followed, the whole party, cutlass in hand, with Tom May roaring "Go on, my lads—foward!" charged into the heavily-beaten forest path, trampling over three fallen blacks who lay struggling, faintly seen, upon the earth.

"Why, we're firing upon the wrong men," cried Mr Anderson.

"No, massa," said a familiar voice, hoarse with shouting. "All Massa Huggin men. Our boys no got gun."

"Then we're all right?"

"Yes, massa."

"And who are these coming on here?"

"All pore boy run away. Massa Huggin men come out of trees long behind, massa listen."

There was occasion to hearken, for above the murmurs, wails and shouts of the blacks who were flying from pursuit came the scattered firing of those who had been busy in the massacre that had been taking place.

"Guide us back along the path to Mr Allen's house," cried the lieutenant.

"No, massa; boy here do that. Caesar must stop fight."

"Good! Brave fellow!" cried the lieutenant. "Here, I'll give those who fired upon us a few shots first to clear the way."

"No, massa; all gone," cried the black; "all run away. Massa let poor black boy come 'long here. Make sailor man shoot Massa Huggin slave-catch-man. Hark! Um come 'long fast. Shoot, shoot!"

"Do you understand what he means, Mr Murray?" said the lieutenant, rather breathlessly.

"Yes, sir. He means let the poor wretches go by us and we hold the path till the enemy comes up, and give them a volley or two to check the advance."

"Very good tactics if you are right," said the lieutenant. "At any rate we'll try it. But what does this mean?"

The light from the fire barely penetrated to where they stood, but there was enough to show that Caesar was in a confused fashion sorting the flying blacks into two parties,—those who were unarmed he hurried down the path in the way of retreat, while those who had maintained enough courage to keep their machetes, he ranged upon either side of the path, while, to Murray's wonder and surprise, for they had been forgotten for the moment, four of the blacks came forward supporting two of the wounded man-o'-war's men.

"Oh, my poor lads!" cried the lieutenant eagerly.

"You, Mr Roberts, and you, Seddon. Are you badly hurt?"

"No, sir," cried the middy cheerily. "Only two *Seafowls* winged, sir!"

"Nay, sir, not me!" growled the seaman belonging to the second cutter. "I arn't winged, sir; I'm hind-legged, and I should have had to hop if it warn't for these niggers here."

"Mr Murray, I can't spare you. Tom May, you take Mr Murray's place and help me cover the retreat with all the men. Mr Murray, do the best you can with the wounded, and then join us here."

"No, no, sir," cried Roberts. "I've got a handkerchief round my arm, sir; Seddon tied it, and he's done his own leg up himself."

"Bravo!" cried the lieutenant. "Keep together, my lads. Here, you Caesar, can't you make some of your fellows fight?"

"Caesar try, massa; try berry hard. Much frighten of Massa Huggin."

"Tell them to fight for their lives if they won't for their liberty."

"Yes, sah. Caesar try all he can;" and the black made a rush at one of his retreating companions whom he saw in the act of throwing away his rough cutlass; and catching him by the shoulder he gave him a heavy cuff on the ear and then forced him to pick up the weapon he had discarded and join a few compatriots who were making something of a stand.

"There's no trusting them, sir," said Murray, who was breathing hard with excitement.

"And no wonder, Murray; all the courage has been crushed out of them, poor wretches."

As Mr Anderson spoke there was a burst of startled yells and cries, following directly upon the reports of several muskets, and what seemed to be quite a crowd of the retreating blacks came rushing along the path right upon where the *Seafowl's* men were making a stand.

"Here, where are you coming to?" roared Tom May, in his deep-toned voice. "Keep back, or go round, or crawl, or do something, or we'll give *you* a blessed good dose of butt-ending.—Who's to fire, do you think," continued the big sailor, "with you all coming in the way?"

At that moment Caesar made a rush in amongst the shivering retreating party, striking to right and left with the flat of his machete.

"Here, what are you up to, darkie?" cried the big sailor. "Them's friends."

"Yes, sah," panted the black. "Caesar know. Make 'em fight."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" growled May, "but I don't see as you will do any good. They won't fight, and I don't know as I want 'em to; but they might let us."

"Do what you can to clear the way, man."

There was the sound of more trampling feet, a burst of yells, more firing, and Tom May shouted in protest—

"Beg pardon, sir; what are we to do? Some more of our fellows will be down directly, and we can't fire a shot for fear of hitting our friends. I never see such friends," he growled; "they're worse than enemies."

"Look out, my lads," shouted Murray excitedly. "Fire! Here they come! No, no—over their heads," he cried. "These are more friends."

In his excitement the middy struck up a couple of presented muskets with the cutlass he handled, his example being followed by the lieutenant, doubtless the saving of Caesar's life, for the brave black had dashed in amongst his companions, thrusting them to the right and left in amongst the trees, just as several of the sailors fired, fully half of them firing in the air.

Fortunately the reports were as effective as a volley would have been aimed right into the advancing enemy, who pulled up short and then began to retire, giving the poor flying wretches an opportunity to recover themselves a little, and realise that there was some shelter to be obtained behind the sturdy English sailors, who stood firm, while Caesar worked hard at forming them up where they stood, and with such good effect that about forty of them grasped their rough cutlasses more firmly and showed some signs of using them against their foes now that these latter had ceased to advance.

"Well done, my lad," cried the lieutenant; "if you can find a couple of score like yourself we'll send these black fiends and their white leaders to the right-about."

"Steady there!" cried Murray, the next minute, for the effect of the volley had died out, and the enemy advanced

again, shouting, and fired once more.

"Fire!" cried the lieutenant, for there was no sign of the retreating blacks in front, and the levelled muskets of the sailors poured out a well-levelled volley, which was received by the slavers with a yell of surprise and the rush of feet in full retreat; and then once more there was silence.

"That has done its work, my lads," cried the lieutenant, as the men reloaded rapidly, the sound of the thudding ramrods as they were driven down raising a low murmur of excitement through the black fugitives, among whom, as far as could be made out in the darkness, Caesar was busy at work, talking loudly, and ending after dragging and thrusting his compatriots, by getting them well together and then making his way to where the lieutenant and Murray stood some little distance in advance, listening and trying to make out when the planter's men were coming on again.

"Boys say won't run away any more, massa," whispered the black breathlessly.

"Glad to hear it, my friend," said the officer bitterly.

"Yes, massa; so Caesar. Not frighten now. Ready 'tan' fast. Ready kill Massa Huggin sailor fellow."

"But I can't trust them, Caesar; can *you*?"

The black was silent for a few moments, and then he said sadly—

"Caesar do um bes', massa."

"So you have, my lad. But the next time the enemy come on your men shall try what they can do."

"Here they come again, sir," whispered Murray.

"Keep silence then," said the lieutenant. "May, all of you wait and let them come on till you hear their leaders' orders to fire, and let them have it first."

Then turning to the black, the speaker bade him head his men, who now began to be pretty steady, and lead them along the path in the direction of the planter's cottage.

"No, no, massa. Caesar make boys fight now."

"You do as I tell you, sir," replied the lieutenant sternly. "Go on back, collecting as many more of your men as you can, and my lads shall cover the retreat and check the slaves."

"Massa want Caesar do this?" said the black sadly.

"Yes, and I want you to obey my orders."

"Yes, massa," said the black, with a sigh, "only Caesar feel like fight and die for massa now."

Crash!

There was the sound of a volley, so many muskets going off together like one, while as the sound began to die away, it was mingled with loud yells and curses, and emphasised as it were by the rattling of the ramrods in the barrels of the muskets.

"I think that's checked them, sir," said Murray; but almost as he spoke there came three shots from some of the boldest of the enemy who had stopped short to snap off their vengeful retreating replies to the sailors' volley.

"Waste of powder," growled Tom May. "Hear 'em running through the trees, Mr Murray, sir?"

"Yes, and I should like to give them another volley."

"So should I, sir," panted the big sailor, as he drove down his ramrod till it nearly hopped out of the musket-barrel again; "but we can't afford it."

"Any one hurt there, May?" cried the lieutenant.

"Yes, sir; lots," replied the big sailor, with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"What's that?" cried the lieutenant, in anxious tones.

"Beg pardon, sir," growled the sailor hastily. "I didn't mean us."

"Silence, sir!" cried the lieutenant sternly.

The next minute, in the midst of that which the officer had commanded, they heard him giving orders to the black.

"You'll hear of this again, Mr Tom May," said Murray.

"Yes, sir, I s'pose so," said the big sailor grumpily. "That's just like me. It's just as an old mate of mine once said. 'You've got a horkerd sort o' mouth, Tommy, you have,' he says. 'You never opens it but you puts your foot in it.'"

"Hist! What does that mean, Tom?" whispered the middy.

"Means it's so plaguey dark that you can't see what's going on."

"Yes, but you can listen, sir."

"Oh, Mr Murray, sir, don't you come down upon me too. Just then it was Mister Tom May; and now it's *sir*. I didn't mean no harm, sir. It cheers a man up, to try and think a bit cheery, 'specially when you're expecting a bullet every minute to come in for'ard and pass out astarn."

"Don't talk, man," whispered Murray. "Can't you hear the enemy?"

"Yes, sir: that's them, sir, creeping up towards us through the bushes."

The man spoke with his lips close to the midddy's ear.

The silence seemed to be terrible, and to Murray the feeling was that he could not breathe.

"Won't you give us the order to let 'em have it again, sir, without waiting till the first luff comes back?" whispered the sailor.

"Isn't he there, Tom?"

"No, sir, he's gone off with them poor shivering niggers, sir, to try a bit o' manoeuvring o' some kind; but he won't do no good, sir. They arn't got a bit o' fight in 'em. But what can you expect of a poor beggar as lives on yam and a chew o' sugar-cane? It don't give a man pluck, sir. If I had 'em fed up a bit on salt horse and weevly biscuit I'd make 'em something like in a few weeks. There, sir; hear that?"

"Yes," whispered Murray. "Ah, they're getting ready to fire. Make ready. Each man aim at where he thinks they're coming on. Fire!"

A capital volley was the result, followed by the rush of feet of those who had been creeping up through the trees; and then above the crackling and breaking of leaf and twig, arose a furious yell and the groaning of human beings in intense pain.

"How horrible it sounds!" said Murray, as the thudding of ramrods arose.

"Does it, sir?" grunted Tom May. "Oh, I dunno, sir. Sounds to me black. Dessay it would ha' seemed to me horrid if it had been white. There, sir; Mr Anderson don't seem to think bad on it," growled the man.

For at that moment the chief officer hurried up to where they stood, uttering a few quick enquiries and listening to the results.

"No one hurt then?" he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "That's good, Mr Murray. Oh, by the way, Thomas May, I shall want a word or two with you when this business is over. Mr Murray, you will bring up the rear. Keep together, and follow me as silently as you can. Mr Murray, the blacks are well together now, following the planter's man, and we have to follow him, for I have to depend upon him to lead us back. I need not say that you must keep your ears well open, for in spite of the checks we have given them the enemy may come on again."

"The first luff don't seem to think it's very horrible, Mr Murray, sir," whispered the big sailor, as he trudged as silently as he could beside his companion of the rear-guard.

"No, Tom," replied the midddy; "but this fighting in the dark is very horrible all the same."

"Well, I dunno, sir. 'Tarn't nice, of course; but 'tarn't our fault, and wherever we've left one o' them black or white slaver chaps a bit sore on the nat'ral deck yonder you may say as he deserves all he's got."

Murray made no reply, for he had stopped short for a few moments to listen; and finding this, the big sailor followed his example.

"Hear 'em coming, sir?"

"No, Tom; I thought I did, but all seems quite still again. Here, I wish you'd listen. I don't know how it is, but you seem to hear much more plainly than I can."

Tom chuckled.

"Well, what is there to laugh at in what I said?"

"Oh, I dunno, sir, on'y it sounded rum to me."

"What did, sir?"

"You saying you couldn't hear so plain as I can."

"Well, what is there rum, as you call it, in that?"

"Nowt, sir, only the reason why. I can hear sharp as sharp, sir, because I was always getting my ears boxed when I was a boy. I was sent to what they call a Dame school, and I s'pose I was a very tiresome boy, for she used to box my ears—both on 'em—with the book. Then when I got bigger and I was at the school where there was a master he used to give it my ears precious hot, I can tell you, sir; but it made 'em as sharp as sharp, and I used to be so quick with 'em that I could hear his hands coming when he was going to hit me; and then he used to miss, and instead of hitting 'em he used to warm my ears with words."

"Then you can't hear the enemy following us, Tom?" whispered the midddy.

The man stopped short and dropped upon one knee to listen.

"N-n-n-Yes, I can, sir," whispered the man quickly. "Come on, sir; the sailors, they're not far behind. Gently; I don't think they can hear us then. Let's get up to the first luff and see what he says about giving them another shot or two."

"Yes, press on. We've let them get too far ahead," said Murray hastily. "We ought to have kept close up."

"Would ha' been better for some things, sir; but you can't keep close up when you're in the rear and hear the enemy too. Wish the first luff would let us have that nigger chap with us. He can feel his way in the dark when it's black as black."

"But he can't be spared. Can you tell how near the enemy are?"

"No, sir. Can't hear 'em now. Let's ketch up to our chaps, and then as soon as we're within touch with 'em we'll stop again and listen."

"Halt there, or we fire!" said a voice sharply, out of the black darkness in front.

"Hush! The enemy are close at hand," whispered Murray, in a low suppressed voice.

"Who's yon?" whispered another voice. "Look out, sir."

"Here, Tom, what does this mean?" said Murray excitedly.

"Means it ought to be my messmate, Billy Titely sir, only he's got winged, sir, and gone right on ahead."

"Nay, he arn't, Tom, lad, 'cause he's here," came in the familiar tones. "Say, Mr Roberts, sir, is that there Tom May talking, or has my wound made me a bit dillylerous. I wish you'd just say."

"Is Dick Roberts there?" whispered Murray excitedly.

"I should say he was, sir, only I keep on going off giddy like."

"But you ought to be right on ahead of Mr Anderson and the men," cried Murray.

"There, I telled you, sir, Mr Roberts, sir," said Titely. "I could feel like as we was somehow got into the wrong watch, and I did say so, sir."

"Oh, bother!" cried Roberts. "It was so dark, and my head was all of a swim. Well, never mind; let's get into our right place again. Where is it?"

"I dunno, sir. These here black chaps as is guiding us will show us right enough."

"Hist! Hist!" whispered Murray. "Can't you understand? We're the rear-guard of the column, Tom May and I, and the enemy is somewhere close behind. Haven't you got your men with you, and some blacks?"

"We had," replied Roberts, "but somehow we've got separated from them, or they've got separated from us; I don't know how it is. It's all through my wound, I suppose. Here, Murray, old chap, you'd better put us right again."

"Will you hold your stupid tongue, Dick?" whispered Murray excitedly. "Here, both you and Titely follow me. Get behind them, Tom May, and look sharp, or we shall be too late."

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied the big sailor; and Murray heard him throw his musket from one shoulder to the other before seeming to loosen his cutlass in the scabbard, which the lad could only interpret as putting himself in readiness for an immediate encounter.

"Listen again, Tom," whispered Murray.

There was a pause, and for a few minutes nothing broke the strange silence which reigned.

"Well?" whispered the middy impatiently.

"Well, sir, I can't make nothing of it," replied the sailor.

"Not so loud, Tom."

"All right, sir, but I don't think that was much of a pig's whisper."

"Oh, nonsense! What do you make of it now?"

"Nowt, sir, only as we've got ourselves into a great hobble. I can't hear nothing of our chaps."

"No; they've gone on, and we must overtake them and let Mr Anderson know that Roberts and Titely have lost their way, and have doubled back so that we have met them."

"Ay, ay, sir, that's the way; but how are we going to do it?"

"You take Titely by the arm, and I'll hurry on Mr Roberts. Let's start at once."

"Right, sir. Which way?"

"Follow Mr Anderson's track at once."

"Yes, sir, of course; but which way's that?"

"Why, you don't mean to say you've lost touch, Tom?" said Murray excitedly.

"Nay, sir, I arn't had nothing to touch lately. I s'pose I've turned stoopid through coming upon them two so sudden. But just you start me, sir, and then I shall go on as steady and reg'lar as can be."

"Tom!" groaned Murray.

"Ay, ay, sir! Which way?"

Murray uttered a gasp as he stood trying to pierce the darkness, turning slowly in different directions the while.

"Ready, sir," said the sailor. "I've got hold of Bill Titely, sir, quite tightly too," added the man, with a low chuckle.

Titely groaned aloud.

"Steady, sir!" whispered the man. "That was a regular pig's whisper, and no mistake.—Quiet, you lubber!" he added, giving his messmate a shake. "Don't bully him, sir; his wound's made him a bit silly like, and he don't quite know what he's about, or he wouldn't howl aloud like that."

"Here, stop that," came from out of the darkness. "Who is it—you, Frank? Don't play the fool with a fellow. It makes me so jolly giddy, and it hurts."

"I'm not doing anything, Dick," whispered Murray. "Oh, do be quiet, old chap! Can't you understand that your wound has made you turn weak, and that the enemy are somewhere close at hand?"

"No! It all goes round and round and round. Stop it, will you?"

"Dick, I'm doing nothing," said Murray despairingly. "Be quiet, or you'll betray us to the enemy."

"Hang the enemy! Who cares for the enemy? I'm not going to run away from a set of woolly-headed niggers. Let's fight them and have done with it."

"Say, Mr Murray, sir, we've got in a hole this time. Arn't you 'most as bad as me?"

"Worse, Tom—worse!" groaned Murray.

"Oh, you couldn't be worse, sir," said the man hastily; "but you can't tell me which way to go, can you?"

"No, Tom; the darkness seems to have quite confused me, and if I tell you to make a start we're just as likely to run upon the enemy as to go after Mr Anderson."

"That's so, sir; and that arn't the worst of it."

"There can be no worse, Tom," said Murray despondently.

"Oh yes, sir, there can, for you see it arn't you and me alone to look after one another; we've each got a messmate on our hands, for I s'pose it wouldn't be right for you to leave Mr Roberts to shift for hisself, no more than it would for me to leave Billy Titely."

"Of course not, poor fellows; we must stand by them to the last."

"That's your sort, sir. A sailor allers stands by his messmate; but they are a pair of okkard ones just now, just at a time when it's dark as the bottom of a pitch kettle full right up to the very top. But do say something, Mr Murray, sir."

"Say, Tom! I've got nothing to say."

"I know some one who will have, sir, when we come acrorst him, and that's Mr Anderson, sir." Murray groaned.

"I think I shall get behind you, sir," said the big sailor, with a chuckle, "so as he can take the sharp edge off his tongue on you first."

"Tom May!" whispered the midshipman bitterly. "How can you laugh at a time like this!"

"I dunno, sir, but I don't mean nothing disrespectful to my officer, sir. I thought a bit of a joke would cheer us up a bit. But it arn't nat'ral like, for I feel as if I could lay my cocconut up again' a tree and howl like a sick dog as has got his fore foot under a wheel. But it is a muddle, sir, arn't it? What shall we do?"

"I can only think one thing, Tom, and it is horrible. It seems like giving up in despair."

"Never mind, sir: let's have it, for I want to be doing something."

"I can think of nothing but waiting till daylight."

"Can't you, sir? Well, I thought that, but it seemed to me too stoopid. But I don't know as there isn't some good in it, for we might get them two to lie still and sleep, and that's about all they're fit for. It's orful dark, but that don't matter for the sick bay, and when they wake up again in the morning, perhaps they won't talk silly. You're right, sir; let's put our wounded to bed, and then divide the rest of the night into two watches. I'll take the first, and you take the second watch,

which will carry us well on till daylight. What do you say to that, sir?"

"That it is the best thing to be done; only we'll watch together, Tom, and rest."

"Not you go to sleep, sir?" said Tom dubiously.

"I could not sleep, Tom. We'll talk in whispers about the blacks' meeting and what they were planning to do."

"Very well, sir.—What say, Billy? No, no! No answering, my lad. You'll be telling the niggers where we are. You've got to lie down, for it arn't your watch.—That's the way.—Now, Mr Murray, sir, you let your one down easy. That's the way, sir—close up together. It'll keep 'em right, and p'raps ward off the fever. Now you and I sit down and have our palaver. I should say let's sit on 'em as soon as they're asleep, but I s'pose you wouldn't like to sit on Mr Roberts."

"Oh no, of course not," said the midshipman.

"All right, sir; you think it wouldn't be fair to your messmate, but it would, for it would keep him warm. But I shall do as you do, sir; or let's try t'other way."

"What other way, Tom?"

"Sit up close to one another, back to back; then I warms you and you warms me, and that keeps away the chill. You gets a bit tired after a time and feels ready to droop for'ard on to your nose, but when that comes on you can hook elbers, and that holds you upright.—Now then, sir, how's that? Right? Wait a minute; let's have a listen. Three cheers for well-boxed ears!"

The big sailor sat upright and listened intently for a few minutes, before he whispered—

"I can just hear the beetles crawling about among the dead leaves and things, sir, and seeming to talk to one another in their way, but I can't hear no niggers coming arter us. Strange thing, arn't it, sir, that one set o' blacks should take to capturing another set o' blacks and selling 'em into slavery? Them's a savage lot as that Huggins has got together, and it strikes me as we shall find 'em reg'lar beggars to fight if it's all right as Master See-saw says about their manning his ships. So far as I could make out he's got schooners manned with white ruffians as well as black blacks, and all as bad as bad can be."

"Yes, Tom," said Murray thoughtfully.

"Nice beauties," continued Tom, "and so far as I can make out, sir, there was going to be a reg'lar rising to-night, or last night. The plantation niggers had come to the way of thinking that it was time to mutiny and kill off them as had brought 'em here, and so that there Huggins—my word, shouldn't I like to have the job of huggin' him!—got to know of it and brings his schooners' crews to show 'em they was not the sort of chaps to carry out a mutiny of that kind."

"Poor wretches, no," said Murray sadly.

"That's right, Mr Murray, sir. Poor wretches it is. You see, sir, they're a different sort o' nigger altogether. I got to know somehow from a marchant skipper as traded off the West Coast that there's two sorts o' tribes there, fighting tribes as fights by nature, and tribes as 'tisen't their nature to fight at all. Well, sir, these here first ones makes war upon them as can't fight, carries off all they can as prisoners, and sells 'em to the slave-traders. Then it comes at last to a mutiny like this here we've seen, and the poor wretches, as you calls them, is worse fighters than they was afore, and slaving skippers like Huggins collects their schooners' crews together and drives the black mutineers before 'em like a flock o' Baa, baa, black sheep, kills a lot and frightens a lot more to death, and then things goes on just the same as before.—Comfortable, sir?"

"No, Tom. Are you?"

"No, sir. But that's about how it is, arn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so, Tom."

"Then it goes on as I said till their medicine man—sort o' priest, I suppose—stirs 'em to make another try to get the upper hand. Talks a lot o' that nonsense to 'em about fetish and Obeah, as they calls it, and shows the poor benighted chaps a bit of hanky panky work with a big snake like that we saw to-night. Makes 'em think the snake's horrid poisonous, and that it can't bite him as handles it, because he's took some stuff or another. Rum game that there was with that serpent, and—I say, sir, don't you think we'd better get up now for a bit and just mark time? You see, we can't walk, for if we do we shall lose ourselves."

"We might take it in turns, and just keep touch of one another."

"What, sir? No, thankye. Ketch me trying that way again! We've had enough of that. Fust thing, though, let's see how our wounded's getting on."

"Yes, Tom," said Murray; and they felt for their unfortunate companions in the darkness, with the result that Titely flung out one fist with the accompaniment of an angry growl, and at the first touch of Murray's fingers, Roberts uttered an angry expostulation, taking all the stiffness out of his brother middy's joints as the lad started, broke out in a violent perspiration, and caught hold of his wakeful companion, for the pair to stand listening for some sign of the enemy having heard the cry, and beginning to steal silently towards them.

"Cutlasses, Tom," whispered Murray, with his lips to the big sailor's ear, and together they unsheathed their weapons and stood back to back, ready to defend themselves.

"Thrust, Tom," whispered Murray again.

"Ay, ay, sir!" And then the terrible silence of the black darkness was only broken by a faint mutter from one or other of the wounded pair, while the listeners breathed hard in agony, trying the while to suppress the going and coming of the

prime necessity of life. Murray pressed the hard hilt of his cutlass against his breast in the faint hope that by so doing he could deaden the heavy throbbing that sounded loudly to his ear, while if any one was approaching at all near he felt certain that he must hear the dull thumps that went on within the breast of the big sailor.

There was another dread, too, which troubled the watch-keepers: at any moment they felt certain the disturbed sleepers might begin talking aloud. But that peril they were spared.

"Don't hear anything, sir," whispered Tom, at last. "I made sure we should have brought them down upon us. I say, sir, it seems to me as Natur must have made some mistake."

"How?" asked Murray.

"Forgot to wind up the sun last night."

"What do you mean?"

"So as it should rise again."

"Nonsense!" said Murray, in a voice which sounded to be full of annoyance. "That's the morning breeze beginning to blow."

"Well, I don't care, sir," grumbled the big sailor; "it ought to have been to-morrow morning before now. Sun must be late. I never knowed such a long night before."

"It's coming, Tom, and before long. Isn't that the warm glow?"

"No," said the sailor shortly. "As you said, there's a breeze coming up from somewhere or another, and tidy strong, too."

"Yes," said Murray.

"Well, it's blowing up the embers of the fire that was burning its way through the woods."

"Think so, Tom?" said Murray, his companion's words arousing his interest.

"Yes, sir; that's it. Can't you see that it looks reddish?"

"So does the sunrise."

"Yes, sir, that's true; but all the same I'm sartain that's the fire brightening up a bit. We haven't seen no pale dawn yet."

"If it would only come, Tom!"

"Yes, sir; and what then?"

"We shall be able to find our messmates and bring them to our side."

"Maybe we shall bring the black and white niggers instead, sir, and it'll mean a fight, for we're not going to give up quietly, are we?"

"No, Tom, and I hope that when those two wake up they may be able to fire a shot or two to help us."

"Hope so, sir. But look yonder: there's the dawn coming."

"Yes!" whispered Murray eagerly. "Look; I can just make out the branches of a tree against the sky."

"That's right, sir. Now for it; what's it going to be—enemies or friends?"

"Friends, Tom," whispered Murray confidently.

There was a pause, during which the pair stood gazing straight before them, striving to pierce the dim dawn which seemed to consist for the most part of a thick mist which lay low upon the surface of the earth, while above the top of the forest all was fairly clear.

Then all at once, very softly, but so clear of utterance that the word seemed to vibrate in the middy's ear, the big sailor uttered a whisper, as he pressed his firm, strong hand upon the lad's shoulder.

His word was "Enemies!" and in obedience to the warning, Murray sank down till he lay prone upon the dew-wet earth.

For about fifty yards away there were figures moving, and evidently in the direction of the spot where the two watchers lay.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

On the Strain.

Roberts and Titely lay close by, breathing heavily, but to Murray's horror it seemed as if, faintly spoken as it was, the

big sailor's warning had reached the sensitive nerves of both the wounded, making them stir uneasily and mutter something unintelligible, while the light of morning, which had before been so sluggish in its approach, seemed now to be coming on by a steady glide, as if the black darkness which had pressed so heavily upon the spirits of two of the party was now being swept away like a cloud.

A terrible dread came over Murray, for he saw in the moving figures death coming upon him in most probably some horribly brutal form, and he could feel his nerves thrill with an icy sensation which had its origin among the roots of his hair and then began to glide down his spine till it reached to and made its exit from his toes; while in spite of what he suffered, he could not help recalling some of the words which had passed between him and his waking companion as he was conscious of fresh movements on the part of Roberts and Titely, and he wished that he could carry out what had been proposed, namely, to sit upon the pair and keep them quiet.

"They'll let the wretches know where we are," he thought, and quietly reaching out one leg till he could reach Tom May's big body, he gave him a steady thrust.

"That will keep him on the *qui vive*," he thought to himself; and then the lad started violently, for the big sailor responded with a well-meant but decidedly forcible kick, which Murray took for a warning of impending danger, and raised his head to look, but dropped it again on the instant, throbbing with excitement, for there were the moving figures, clearly seen now, in the shape of a villainous-looking party of about a dozen well-armed men, clothed sailor fashion and graduated in colour from the sun-tanned skin of a white through the swarthiness of the Malay and Mulatto to the black of the East Indian and the intense ebony of the African black.

He gazed in that moment, as he knew for certain, upon a party of the cut-throat ruffians belonging to the crew of one of the slave-trade vessels, and as he subsided, it was with the feeling upon him that his head must have been seen, that in another instant he should be listening to the rush of feet, and would have to make a desperate effort to preserve his life, while all the while he was lying there suffering from a kind of paralysis which held him as if he were passing through the worst phases of a nightmare-like dream.

"Poor old Dick!" he thought, as if in a flash. "We were always quarrelling, and he was horribly jealous of me; but I liked him, and I'd do anything to save him. But he'll never know, for the brutes will kill him in his sleep. Poor Billy Titely the same. But Tom May must be ready to fight for his life, and he'll pay out some of the butchers, and I shall help him too, though I haven't got his strength. Why don't I spring up before they come?"

It seemed curiously misty and dream-like to him, and he fully realised that something must be wrong, as he seemed to fight hard to answer that question; but so far from replying to the mental query, and springing up to help his brave companion, he could not move, till he was roused into a state of action by the touch of the big sailor's foot, which did not come in a heavy kick this time, but in steady pressure.

Murray drew a slow, deep breath, and instead of starting up he softly turned his head sidewise till he could peer with one eye through the bushes, and see that the crew of ruffians had turned off to the right and were slowly and cautiously passing away.

So far Murray felt the murderous wretches had not seen them, but as he knew that the slightest movement on the part of the sleepers, or a muttered word, would bring them to their side, he lay quivering and trying involuntarily to press himself deeper into the soft earth for some minutes, clinging to hope, till once more the intensity of the strain was broken by a sharp clear snap which sounded awfully loud, and he started up, resting upon his right elbow, and gazed, not upon the fiercely savage face of one of the enemies, but upon the big, frank, apologetic countenance of Tom May, who was in precisely the same attitude.

"Who'd have thought it?" he whispered. "But they didn't hear."

"Oh, Tom," replied the lad, hardly above his breath, "how you frightened me!"

"Frightened you, sir?" chuckled the big fellow, with his face expanding into a grin. "Why, it frightened me."

"What was it?" whispered Murray, pressing his left hand upon his throbbing breast.

"This here, sir," replied the man, holding up a round brass tobacco-box. "Thought I'd take a quid just to put a bit o' life into me, and as soon as I'd got it I shut up the lid, and it went off like a pistol."

"But do you feel sure they didn't hear?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that, sir. There they go, and we're all right so long as none of 'em looks round, and Billy Titely and Mr Roberts don't sing out anything to bring them back."

"Oh, don't speak so loud," whispered the middy.

"Nay, they can't hear that, sir," said the man. "Lucky beggars!"

"What!"

"Lucky beggars, sir. Two on 'em's saved their lives, and a couple more's gone off without having any mark upon 'em. For I'm pretty handy with my cutlash, Mr Murray, sir; arn't I?"

"Handy, Tom? Yes, of course; but what an escape! I felt as if I couldn't have helped you."

"Yah! Nonsense, sir! I always feel like that, just as if I couldn't do anything. It's nat'ral, I suppose. I was allers that how when I was a boy, when I got fighting. Used to feel like running away, till I was hurt, and then my monkey was up directly and I began to bite. Whatcher talking about, sir? I just see you standing still and one of them ugly beggars sticking his long knife into *you*. You'd hold still, wouldn't you? Not much!"

"Oh, I don't know, Tom."

"Well, sir, I do," said the sailor, half closing his eyes as he kept careful watch in the direction the enemy had taken.

"What's to be done now, Tom?" said Murray, after a pause.

"Eh? What's to be done, sir? Why, I was waiting for orders. You're my officer, sir."

"Yes, Tom, but this is a terrible position."

"Oh, I dunno, sir. 'Tarn't a wreck."

"No, Tom, but I want your help."

"Say what I'm to do, sir, and here I am."

"Yes, I know, but can't you make a good suggestion?"

"No, sir; I arn't clever. I want some one to set me going. Seems to me, though, as the best thing we could do would be to—"

"Yes," said Murray eagerly, for the man had paused.

"Do nothing, sir," said the man slowly. "We know that gang is on the lookout so as we can't follow their way."

"No, Tom, but we might go in the opposite direction."

"Yes, sir, we might," replied the man, "but there's lots more on 'em about, and we may be tumbling out o' the frying-pan into the fire."

"Yes, Tom," said the middy, "and we are pretty well hidden. I propose that we lie here till those two poor fellows wake up. They may be better then and so far able to help us that they may get along with our arms."

"Yes, sir," said May quietly, "and I'd stop at that. Besides, Mr Anderson's looking after us, and perhaps he knows the way back to that ronyvoo of his, for it must be somewheres not very far-off. Don't you think the first luff may be sending that black See-saw chap to look for us?"

"Yes, very likely, Tom. Capital!"

"Yes, sir; it don't seem so bad now we come to think of it. See-saw knows all about these parts, sir, and it would be a pity for him to come to find us, and walk into this patch of trees and find as we'd gone."

"Yes, of course, Tom. Then you think that our wisest plan would be to lie here and wait for a few hours at all events and see what turns up?"

"That's it exactly, sir."

"Then that's what we'll do, Tom."

"Thankye, sir."

"Why do you say that, Tom?"

"Oh, 'cause you said what we'd do."

"Of course."

"Yes, sir, but some young gents—Mr Roberts there, for instance—would ha' thought he knowed best and wouldn't have listened to a bit of advice. Pst! Don't you hear some un coming along, making the trees rustle and crackle a bit?"

Murray listened eagerly, before turning to the big sailor again.

"No. Your ears are better than mine, Tom."

The middy had hardly ceased speaking before there was a heavy burst of coarse laughter, and then several voices came from some little distance away, while as the listeners crouched together and drew their cutlasses, after Tom May had raised the pan of his musket and closed it again, satisfied that the priming was correct, the pair gazed in each other's eyes, for Roberts started and turned uneasily, waking the wounded sailor, who began to talk aloud and incoherently about manning a boat and getting ashore.

"What's to be done, Tom?" whispered Murray; and as he spoke he loosened the knot of his neckerchief and slipped it off, to hold it to the big sailor.

"Right, sir. Can't do better than that." And taking the silk kerchief, Tom began to crawl close to where the man's voice was sinking to a low muttering, the poor fellow being perfectly unconscious of the fact that his messmate was leaning over him ready to use the silken tie as a gag and thrust it between his teeth if he went on talking and the enemy drew near.

Fortunately it seemed as if all the mutterings were about to die out, and though coarse mirth was on the increase, and the party of searchers were drawing nearer, it appeared to Murray that the rough means of quieting the wounded man would not be called into service, when all at once, when the peril of being discovered was growing to be more grave, Roberts started as if from pain, and threw out his arms sharply, striking Titely upon the side of the head.

It was not sufficient to cause pain, but the poor fellow's lips parted to cry out, and he gave forth an inarticulate sound caused by the sudden descent of the rolled-up pad of black silk vigorously planted in its place by the sturdy hand of Tom May.

The next minute there was a violent struggling to add to the gurgling noise, and in spite of the big sailor's efforts, the gagged one wrenched his head free from the pressure of the hand, and uttered a loud cry of annoyance and pain.

Chapter Forty.

Dealing with the Wounded.

"It's all over," thought Murray, and he turned sharply from watching for the approach of the enemy, for the big sailor whispered—

"Don't get up, sir, till they close in; then make one jump for it and stand back to hit, but take distance and give me plenty of room for a good swing."

The midshipman did not reply, but crouched down with his time divided between waiting for the enemy's approach and listening for the next utterance made by Titely or his brother officer.

The attention of the slaver's men had evidently been attracted by the sounds, for from where Murray crouched down among the thick growth, he saw that two of the party had stopped short to gaze straight away before them, but not in the direction where the fugitives waited to be discovered; and the young officer, when he afterwards thought over the matter, decided that though they must have heard the noise that was made, it was when several of their companions were talking aloud, so that the listeners had not been able to tell with certainty from whence the cry had come. For after a short colloquy, during which Murray could distinctly see that the two men in question were addressing their fellows who surrounded them, there was a little gesticulating, a pointing towards a different portion of the forest, and the gang went off along what proved to be a well-beaten track.

"Hah!" ejaculated Murray, after waiting impatiently for what seemed to be a full quarter of an hour. "I think we'll make a movement soon, Tom May."

"Right, sir. Where to? One moment first. You'd better take my musket, sir, because I shall have to carry Mr Roberts. I wish they'd come to their senses so as we could make sure that they don't let out again as if they wanted to tell the enemy where we are."

"What's the matter?" cried Roberts, in a tone which made his brother midshipman start. "Has some one been hurt?"

He was in pain, but seemed to be quite calm and sensible now, as he listened to Murray's explanation of the position in which they were.

"It's bad," he said. "I can hardly understand it, for I've been in a regular feverish dream. But tell me, what are you going to do?"

Before Murray could answer, Titely sat up suddenly.

"That you, Tom May?" he said huskily.

"Ay, messmate," was the reply. "Me it is. What is it?"

"Take the tin, mate, and dip me a drink o' water.—Why, hullo! Where are we now? Not out in the forest?"

"Out in the forest it is, my lad, and the enemy's close arter us," replied the big sailor.

"Enemy?" said the poor fellow, in a wondering tone of voice. "Why, that means—Yes, I remember now. I'm hurt, arn't I?"

"Yes, messmate; you got just touched by a bullet."

"To be sure," said Titely. "Yes, I remember now. Well, somebody's got to be hurt, of course. Anybody else just touched by a bullet?"

"Mr Roberts."

"Has he now? Well, oficers leads, and they has the best chance of it. Doctor seen him?"

"No."

"Course not; he wasn't with the expedition. Arn't seen me neither, I s'pose?"

"No," growled Tom May; "but look here, messmate, you and Mr Roberts atween you nearly give us up to the enemy."

"Me? I don't know about Mr Roberts, but you're not going to make me believe I should try and give you up to the enemy. Is it likely, Mr Murray, sir?"

"No, Titely; it's the last thing you would do."

"There, Tommy! Hear that?"

"Oh yes, I hear it plain enough," growled the big sailor, "but can't you see that you were off that thick head o' yourn,

and began shouting just when the enemy was close at hand?"

"Was that it, Mr Murray, sir?" cried the man.

"Yes, Titely; but you could not help it. Now be quiet and help us to watch," said the midshipman, "for the enemy can't be very far away, and they're evidently searching for us."

"*Phee-ew!*" whistled the man softly. "I do understand now. Very sorry, Mr Murray and Mr Roberts."

"Pst!" whispered Tom May. "Down flat, everybody. Here they come again;" and as the order was obeyed the sound of breaking twigs and the rustling of tropical leaves was heard; and before long the hiding party began to make out that the slaver's men were for some reason or another returning in their direction, spread over a pretty wide surface of the thick brake, and apparently so arranged that they were bound to cover the hiding-place of the unfortunate party.

But somehow the difficulties of the search favoured the concealed man-o'-war's men, who from where they lay saw the thick undergrowth so beaten that the outer leader of the line came within a few yards only of the hiding-place, giving Tom May a clue to the reasons for the enemy's return in the shape of one of the *Seafowl's* muskets, which he held on high as he pressed forward through the trees.

"But how could you tell?" whispered Murray, as soon as their foes had passed. "You can't be sure, Tom, that it was one of our muskets."

"Well, no, sir, I can't be sure, but it seems to me it was one of ours; otherwise why should he be carrying it like he was? P'raps I'm wrong, but there he was, holding it up in a niminy piminy way, as if he felt it was what them half-bred niggers calls a fetish as would help 'em to find the chap as let it fall. Anyhow just harkye there! I'm blest if they arn't coming again!"

"Yes," said Murray, after listening. "They are coming back."

"Well," said Tom May, "bad luck to 'em! There's four on us now to give 'em a shot."

"On'y three, messmate," said Titely, with a sigh. "I arn't got no gun. That there one the whitey brown chap carried must be mine."

There was no time nor chance for further conversation respecting their position. Nothing could be done but lie low crouching beneath the densest part of the undergrowth in the hope of escaping the keen eyes of the slaver's men; and twice over Murray caught sight of the man who seemed to be the leader, who evidently attached a great deal of importance to the gun he still carried on high, till at last, sick at heart, the middy gave up their position as hopeless, for the savage-looking wretch was leading his men straight for them.

Murray passed the cutlass he carried into his left hand, while he bent over his wounded comrade and stole his right down beside him to grasp that of Roberts.

"In case of the worst," he whispered, and he felt his brother middy's fingers close round his own, before he snatched his hand away so as to seize the cutlass, ready to strike at the leader of the final rush, when as the man turned his head and shouted to his followers to come on, he raised the musket to give it a wave in the air, but somehow caught it amongst the twining canes, when his progress was checked, and he fell headlong amongst the dense growth, the piece exploding with a loud concussion, upon which the men uttered a loud yell and dashed away, evidently under the impression that they had been attacked.

The leader staggered to his feet growling like some savage beast, and roared out to his followers to return. His words were unintelligible to the listeners, but their tones suggested plainly enough that he was cursing them fiercely and hurling anathemas and threats at them as to what he would do when he overtook them.

Then, as he found himself left alone, he snatched at the musket again, but without result, for it was fast in the tangle of twining canes, at which he tore and tore again till the tough green growth gave way and he stood up, examining lock and trigger now as if to try and make out whether the weapon was injured, when he roared again to his men and stood listening, but without avail.

If he had only turned upon his heels and taken half-a-dozen steps he must have walked over the hidden party of Englishmen, but the falling and explosion of the weapon and the flight of his men seemed to have completely upset his calculations; and hence it was that Murray, after giving up all hopes of escaping, saw the ruffian stand in the midst of the silence, snapping the flint and pan of the musket to and fro three or four times, begin to try and reload the piece without success, and then shoulder it and start off in search of his followers, now muttering angrily, now shouting to them again and again, without, however, any appearance of success.

Chapter Forty One.

Hunted.

"Think he's gone now, Mr Murray, sir?" said Tom May in a whisper.

"I'm afraid to hope for it," replied Murray.

"So'm I, sir," said the man; "but what a toucher! Just think of his bungling off that old musket and scaring the lot! He may think himself lucky that he didn't shoot some of 'em."

"Or hisself," growled Titely. "That makes me sure it was the one I was handling, for it had been strained a bit so as the hammer was a bit loose. But hadn't we better get on somewhere else for a bit, sir, 'fore he comes back?"

"I don't think I would, Frank," whispered Roberts sadly. "I'm so weak and helpless I don't know what to do, and we're

just as likely to blunder against the enemy as they are to come upon us. If I could only have some water I wouldn't care."

"Just wait for a half-hour or so, sir, and give the beggars a chance to get a bit further away, and then we'll have a look round and see if we can't find water, and if we don't come upon any at once we'll see what we can do in the way of digging some up with the cutlasses."

"Oh, I'll wait," said Roberts, with a piteous sigh, "but don't wait too long, or I shall die of thirst."

It was a guess at the time, but all being perfectly still, and as if the enemy had gone right away, it was determined to make a venture in search of water.

"Shall we go together, Tom?" asked Murray.

"It's like making half the chance, sir," replied the man. "I think I'd take one way and me the other."

"Very well; but let's go very carefully; and we ought to cut or mark the trees if we could, so as to find our way back."

"It's like showing the way we've gone, sir," said the man; "but there, we must run some risks."

"Whatever you do, Tom," said the midshipman, "be careful about finding your way back."

"I'll do my best, sir," replied the man.

"Water! For goodness' sake, water!" moaned Roberts; and those words started the pair off at once, each feeling perfectly despairing of success, in opposite directions, and each with the same precautions, till sick at heart and hopeless after marking his way step by step either by blazing the sides of the trees or cutting the cane in a way that he felt pretty sure of following back, Murray sank down faint and exhausted, to rest for a few minutes before deciding whether he should persevere a little more or return to his unfortunate companion in despair.

"It seems so cowardly to give up," he said to himself; "but Tom may have succeeded, and even if he has not, it would be better to try in a fresh direction."

He sat motionless listening for a few minutes in indecision, feeling that if he did not find water or food he would be in as bad a plight as his companion, when he suddenly caught at the nearest tree, drew himself up, and stood trembling. The next minute what had seemed to be an utter wilderness assumed a different form from that which he had observed before. He realised that some form of cultivation had been carried out, and following up the track, he passed on through a narrow, trampled patch, to find himself in an opening where, roughly hacked out of the forest, a clearing had been made, along one side of which ran a grip of water, cleared out for reasons connected with irrigation, and there stretching out before him were a few dozen of banana trees, Indian corn, and what he directly after made out to be the succulent yam plant.

Murray's despair was a thing of the past, and his spirits rose to a pitch of excitement now, for at the end of the clearing was the roughly-made hut of some negro, which appeared to have been only quite lately forsaken.

He entered the hut cautiously, expecting to find traces of inhabitants, and these were simple and plain in the shape of several cocoanut shells that had been used for food vessels, and close at hand a large dry calabash.

Trembling with excitement, the discoverer seized the latter vessel and one of the nut-shells, to bear them to the side of the grip, where he dipped with the shell and drank with avidity of the perfectly clear-looking water, which proved to be of a deep amber colour, but tasted sweet and refreshing.

He refilled the nut-shell and drank again with a feeling of excited hope running through him. Then filling the calabash, he drew the cutlass he bore, hacked through the fruit-stalk of the ripest banana plant he could find, shouldered it, and with the calabash in his right hand paused for a few moments to look excitedly round, fully expecting to find that he was watched.

But the place was quite forsaken, and, trembling with eager desire now to get back to the two sufferers he had left behind, he muttered to himself, "Saved!" and stepped out, but only for his heart to sink again, for in his excitement he felt that he had not taken sufficient precaution as to his way back.

It was after some minutes and only through forcing himself to step back and stand in the very position where he had



MURRAY . . . HELD THE HARD BROWN CUP TO THE LAD'S LIPS.
Hunting the Skipper. Frontispiece. [p. 426.]

first felt, that he was gazing upon the location of the place again, when he started back with the treasures he had found, and further encouraged himself with one of the sweet succulent fruit which with the water gave him invigoration and enabled him to recover his traces and blazings of the trees on his way back. clearing, that he caught his idea of

And now it was that he found how much further he had strayed away than he had thought, and twice over he seemed to have missed his marks entirely, and turned hot and faint.

A fresh draught of the water he bore, however, restored the failing clearness of his intellect, and he found that which he had missed, started afresh, and at last to his intense delight he staggered with his load to where he found Roberts lying asleep, but quite alone.

"Dick!" he cried excitedly, as he looked round in vain, while laying down his burden.

There was no reply.

"Dick! Here, Dick," he whispered softly, lest he might raise an alarm and bring upon them danger from their lurking foes.

There was no reply, but the poor fellow stared up at him in a half-delirious way.

As quietly as he could manage, Murray filled the coconut he had brought, raised his brother midddy's head upon his arm, and held the hard, dark-brown cup to the lad's lips.

There was no response for a few minutes, during which Murray contrived to moisten the parched and cracking membrane as if in vain, and he was about to try in despair to bathe the poor lad's temples when the lips softened, there was a choking gurgling sound, a gasp or two, and then with strange avidity the midshipman drank and drank, spilling much, but drinking a fair proportion, and as the cup was drained asking in a hoarse, dry voice for more.

Instead of refilling the half nut Murray tore off another banana, hastily skinned it, and placed that in his companion's hand, watching him eat it, gazing about him the while, and then as he found that the lad was recovering himself, he asked him if he could speak.

"Speak! Yes," cried the lad. "It is like life."

"That's right. Cheer up!"

"Water! More water;" cried Roberts.

"Yes, soon. Eat that first;" and he gave him another of the bananas. "Where's Titely?"

"Titely? There," said Roberts, pointing.

"No, he is not there," said Murray excitedly. "Where has he gone?"

"He was there when I fell asleep."

"Has Tom May been back?"

"No; I have not seen him. But have you found more water and more fruit?"

"Yes; I have found a plantation and a stream or long pool. But where can Titely be?"

"I don't know. Can Tom May have fetched him?"

"No; he would have spoken to you."

"Perhaps he did, but I was half insensible and did not hear. Oh, Frank, old man, you've saved my miserable life!"

"Thank heaven, old fellow! If we can only avoid the slavers we may hold out till Mr Anderson or the captain comes to our help. But I must find Titely. Perhaps he has crawled away. There, go on eating while I search round. Go on eating and drinking; only leave enough for Tom May when he comes back, and for Titely when I have found him."

"You have some too," said Roberts, who was beginning to recover fast, save that his wound gave him increasing pain.

And now began a search which grew more and more hopeless as hours glided by. There was no trace of the injured sailor, and no sign of Tom May's return; and at last, when the first signs of the coming brief tropical evening began to show themselves, and with them the desire for more water and fruit, Murray made up his mind to guide his companion to the negro's hut, after leaving by way of refreshment all the fruit and water that was left, trusting to the fact that upon finding the refreshments Tom May might go further and trace the way they had gone by means of the blazings and other signs he had left upon the canes and trees.

It took some making up of the boy's mind before he could decide to leave the place where they had hidden themselves for so long; but he felt himself bound to try hard to place his wounded comrade in safety, and where he could supply him amply with food and water; and at last, hesitating no longer, he induced his companion to make an effort to rise, and they started off together, after a final look round, for the idea had forced itself upon Murray that if they did not go at once they would not reach their haven of rest and refreshment before it grew dark.

As it was the task proved to be anxious enough before Murray succeeded in getting his companion within the hut, where he sank down in weariness and pain, but glad enough to drink heartily from a fresh nut cup of the sweet, rather peculiarly coloured water, after which he dropped into a complete state of insensibility, with a half-eaten banana grasped in his hand, while Murray eagerly seized his opportunity to follow his brother middy's example, drinking with avidity, and for his part eating almost ravenously to master the weakness and hunger from which he suffered.

Satisfied with this, he set himself to watch and think about the two men who were sharing their troubles.

"Tom must have come upon poor Titely somewhere, wandering from our hiding-place," he thought, "and taken him back after I had gone with Dick, and it is madness to go back to him. I couldn't do it in the darkness, any more than he could track me out; and yet I don't know—I ought to try and find him. Perhaps, poor fellow, he has found no food, and may be nearly starved. I think I could find him, even if it is dark. I ought to know the way to him after going over the ground twice. I ought to, and I will—after I've had about an hour's rest. I must have that, and then I'll start."

The midshipman sat and thought of the scene when they crouched together, expecting moment by moment to be discovered.

The next minute his mind had wandered away to his search, the fortunate discovery of the old hut and the cultivation carried out by some slave; and then he came to the determination that he would crawl to where Dick Roberts lay sleeping so heavily that his breathing had become a deep snore.

"Poor fellow," he sighed; "he has suffered badly enough, but I ought to try and put him in an easier position. It is his wound which makes him so uneasy."

Then he thought he would wait a little longer before waking his comrade and telling him that he was going back to the old hiding-place to say where they were.

Murray had just come to the conclusion that he ought to be content with the rest he had snatched, when there was a faint rustling sound just beyond the doorway where he had seated himself, and like a flash he recalled the scene in the planter's cottage where Tom May had shrunk from going up into the chamber behind the screen on account of the snakes—poisonous or not. This was a thatched cottage place, up whose angles or sides one of the reptiles that had lurked among the bananas and maize of the plantation could easily have made its way to the roof, ready to descend upon any one sleeping on the floor.

So suggestive was this thought that the midshipman felt startled and drew himself up slightly, feeling that he ought to go to his companion's assistance.

"Perhaps poisonous," he thought, "and I may get a bite if I disturb it in the darkness. Perhaps, too, it may be tired out as I am, and drop asleep without molesting either me or Roberts. He's not sleeping so heavily now," he thought, "and I ought to be off trying to find poor worn-out and hungry Titely. I wonder how far he has wandered away from where he was left. I ought to have found him, but it wasn't to be helped. Tom will know now. I wonder how long it will take me to get to where we left the poor fellow? But is that Dick Roberts breathing hard—snoring—or is it one of those snakes creeping about in the maize-leaf thatch? I wonder what I had better do! Of course I can't leave poor Dick, but it's a pity that he should make all that noise. It is like trying to betray himself.

"I think I must go and wake the poor fellow. It isn't fair to leave him, of course. And it isn't fair to leave poor Tom May lying done up and faint for want of water. It's rather hard, though, when I'm so done up too;" and then he thought how beautiful it was with the soft yellow moonlight of the tropical night shining through the Indian corn leaves down through the roof of the flimsy hut, on to the floor close by where Dick Roberts was sleeping so heavily.

But no, he was not sleeping so deeply now, for he was not snoring.

And then there was the snake, or snakes, that had been rustling about so heavily. It or they were quite silent now. They had not bitten the midshipman, for of course he would have shrieked out in pain or fear. So perhaps the reptiles had

crept right away, and it was quite time that he, Frank Murray, started upon his quest to find Tom May and Bill Titely. He ought in fact to have gone before, but he was so wearied-out that he felt obliged to rest for a few minutes; and now the moon was shining so brightly that it would be much better and easier to make a start through the forest lit-up by the soft yellow rays of the tropic night.

“Yes,” he muttered to himself; “it will be much better. What a beautiful night!”

And then he sat up; and again another moment and he had crawled out of the hut doorway with his eyes widely open from wonder.

“Why, it isn’t the moon, nor night!” he exclaimed, half aloud. “It’s morning, with the sun glowing through the shades of the forest, and I must have been asleep for hours.—Or else,” faltered Murray, after a pause, “I’m off my head with fever, and don’t know what I’m about.”

Chapter Forty Two.

Without a Doctor.

Fever? Brain heat? The poor fellow turned cold with horror, and hurried back, careless of any impending danger that there might be, into the rough hut within whose shades he could dimly make out the figure of his comrade, who appeared to be sleeping heavily, but not well, for he was muttering.

“I say, Dick,” he whispered, “how’s your wound?”

There was no reply.

“Dick,” he continued, “your wound doesn’t hurt much, does it?”

Still there was no reply, and beginning to realise now that his own brain was clear, and that he really had been fast asleep, wearied-out beyond the power of watching by the previous night’s exertions, he sank down upon one knee to lay his hand upon Roberts’s forehead, when, feeling that it was burning, and that at the slightest touch the poor fellow started with pain, he began to master himself.

“What fancies one does get into one’s head at a time like this! Of course I’ve been asleep, and no wonder. I was done up; but, thank heaven, I’m all right and able to think and act, while poor Dick’s feverish and bad with his wound.”

“Asleep, Dick?” he whispered again; and once more he laid his hand upon the poor fellow’s brow, but with no fresh result. His comrade was insensible, and as Murray bent over the mutterer a fresh chill of horror ran through him as he thought of his position.

Suppose he grew worse, and no help came. What should he do? The idea was horrible. Suppose he were to—

He determined not to dwell upon the thought, and drawing a deep breath, he whispered to himself, now full of excitement—

“That’s not the way to do any good,” he said. “It’s only playing the coward and thinking of one’s self. I’m playing with shadows.”

And setting his teeth, the middy sprang to his feet and stole quickly and silently to the doorway to peer out and listen as he gazed at the scene of beauty that opened out before him.

The rough plantation was mingled with wild growth, both of which, the cultivated and the natural, were flourishing luxuriantly. Wondrous creepers tangled themselves in the boughs which sheltered the hut from the morning sunshine, and bell-flowers of exquisite beauty hung in the pure limpid air; and as his eyes roamed here and there in search of danger, a couple of ruby-crested humming birds darted into a patch of sunshine, and chased one another round, sparkling, flashing and quivering in the light, till one of them darted away and seemed to suspend itself in front of one of the most beautiful bells, so as to probe the honied depth of the great blossom like a gigantic bee.

The lad snatched himself from this to gaze in a fresh direction, for all at once there was a prolonged whistle; but at its repetition he knew that it was no human utterance; and when fresh bird-calls came from the verdant tangle beyond the plantation, he felt encouraged by the feeling that even if there were no friends forcing their way towards the wild-looking hut in the forest, no enemy could be near, for the birds that played about were too bold.

The next thought which came to the lad’s eager, busy brain was of Tom May and his intent of the previous night to go in search of him. “But I can’t go now,” he thought, and, satisfied himself now that there was as far as he could make out no immediate danger, he hurried back to the side of Roberts, to try and take in his position and promptly decide upon his actions.

This was soon done.

There was water at hand; rough vessels in which to fetch it; and after a moment’s thought as to whether he should carry his companion out into the light, a smile crossed his lips as he thought of the old legend about carrying the well to the pitcher, and making use of his unsheathed cutlass, a few strokes resulted in his hacking away a portion of the rough leafy thatching and admitting a broad band of light right across his comrade’s reclining figure.

A few touches convinced the amateur surgeon that the injury was too tightly bound, and after removing the covering he set to work and bathed the wound with the soft cool water till the temperature was reduced, re-bound it tenderly, and soon after had the satisfaction of noting that his patient’s irritation and evident pain had grown less, while when he raised his head and applied the freshly-drawn nut-full of water to the poor lad’s lips he drank with avidity, and then sank back with a sigh of relief. The muttering grew less frequent, and he sank into a quiet sleep.

It was Murray's turn to sigh now that he had achieved thus much; but it was not with relief, for he was dripping with perspiration, the heat was dense within the hut, and a sense of faint weariness stole over him of so strange a nature that it seemed to him that his senses were passing away.

"I am going to be bad now," he thought, feeling that perhaps in spite of pluck and effort his time had come.

"What will poor Roberts do?" he felt in a queer, strange way, and somehow it never seemed in the midst of the feeble dizzy sensation that he was of any consequence himself.

"How hot!" he muttered feebly, and he made an effort to crawl out of the hut, and then on and on almost unconsciously until he had dragged himself to where a bright ray of light flashed from the glowing surface of the clear amber water and played upon the great, green, glossy leaves of a banana plant, one from whose greeny-yellow bunch of fruit he had plucked the night before.

That all seemed dream-like, but it did not trouble him, for his nature had prompted him to thrust forward his lips till they touched the water just where the ray shot forth glowing light and life as well, for he drank and drank, and as he imbibed the fluid, which looked like fire but tasted like water, the feeling of faintness grew less, his senses began to return, and he drew back to lie over with a sigh and gaze dreamily at the great arum-like leaves of the banana and the huge bunch of green and yellow finger-shaped fruit.

"Finger-like—thumb-like," he muttered, "just as if it was so many huge hands resting one upon the other."

Murray sighed at his fancy, closed his eyes for a few moments to dream about the refreshing water, and soon after opened them again to let them gaze up the curve of a tree till it rose higher and higher, perfectly straight now, and ended by resting his vision amidst the great fount of green leaves which started from the crown and curved outwards.

There was a curious clump of fruit there, flowers too, and small and large nuts; huge, semi-triangular and rounded masses of fibre, and he looked at the high-up cluster, realising the while that hanging far above him, where they would fall in front of the hut, was an abundance of good satisfying food in the shape of pulpy nut, milk and cream, as well as sweet water that he might drink; so that the occupant of that humble hut might partake, but which was out of his reach, for the fruit would not fall and he could not climb.

Murray lay thinking, as his senses grew stronger, of how blessed by nature the black who lived in that hut must be, with a home that he could easily construct, and with such ripe fruits ready to his hand with hardly a care in the production; and then somehow the feeling of envy seemed to turn to equally profound pity, as it flashed into his mind that the poor wretch paid for it at the cost of labour, misery, and despair forced upon him by some of the vilest wretches that lived beneath the sun.

"Slavery!" muttered the lad, and again slavery mingled with the thoughts of the horrible sufferings inflicted aboard the slave-ships—sufferings that he and those with him were there to check and sweep away.

As these thoughts flooded the lad's brain, he at the same time grew clearer and began to think of Tom May and Titaly, of where they were, and whether they would come to him and Roberts. He even pictured to himself the former, big, hulking, and strong, coming staggering into sight with his wounded comrade upon his back. Then his thoughts floated away to Mr Anderson and his men. How had they got on? he asked himself. Would the captain soon come with their vessel and by means of a few shots sweep the place clear of the slave-hunting miscreants?

The midshipman's brain was fast growing clearer still, and all at once he found himself gazing in imagination at the faithful black, shiny of face, and clothed in white. Would he find him and his wounded comrade and guide them back to the boats, or only perhaps to where he hoped Mr Anderson was holding out at Plantation Cottage? And as he thought, strangely enough it seemed to Murray in his faint, dreamy state, he stretched out one hand to separate the great green leaves of the banana near at hand so as to open a way for him to look beyond the great plant through the plantation and see if the blacks were coming.

Then somehow, half unconsciously, the midshipman's hand closed upon something soft to the touch and smooth—something that he plucked and peeled and ate, and then plucked and ate again and again, till he began to grow less faint, and refreshed as well as clear of brain, ending by feeling strengthened and ready to crawl back into the hut, half wondering at what had happened, until he fully realised it all and was able to tell himself that he had been thoroughly exhausted and was now refreshed as well as rested and ready to take fresh steps to help his less fortunate comrade.

"Asleep still, Dick, old chap?" he whispered cheerfully.

But there was no reply, and after bathing the poor fellow's injury again and watching him anxiously by the clear light that struck through the roof, Murray rose to his feet, feeling more and more refreshed and ready to act. He was encouraged, too, by the growing restfulness that came like a soft flood through his senses.

"Well," he said to himself, "there's nothing wrong with me now. I was completely done up. It's of no use to despair, for it is only cowardly. I'm in a bad position, but it might be worse, even as poor old Dick's is horribly bad, but as soon as I got to work I found that I could make him better. It was a very simple thing to do, and if I could make him better when he was so bad, now he is better I ought to be able to make him better still."

But first of all he tried to settle thoroughly within himself what it was his prime duty to do.

"Nature says to me, Try and save your own life. But then that seems to be so horribly selfish and unnatural. I am fairly healthy and strong now that I have got over that bit of a fit—bit of a fainting fit, I suppose."

Here the lad pulled himself up short to think a little more.

"Fainting fit," he said to himself. "That sounds like being a girl. I don't know, though: men faint as well as women when they are exhausted by pain or by bleeding. Well, I was exhausted, and now I'm strengthened and mustn't let myself get so weak again, and what's more, I mustn't let poor Dick grow so weak. Oh, if old Reston were only here with his bottles of stuff! But I don't know; perhaps I can get on without them, for it isn't as if the poor chap was bad of a fever. Fever there is, of course, but it's only the fever that comes from a wound, and wounds heal by themselves. So I'm not going to despair."

"I'm sure of one thing," he continued, after a little more thought, "as I'm so much better I don't want any doctoring, and it's my duty to attend to poor old Dick, and I'm going to do it. It's very horrible to be in such a hole as this, but I know that the first luff won't rest until he has found every one of his party, and the captain won't rest till he has found his officer, and—"

Frank Murray's cogitations were at an end, for just as he had come to the conclusion that matters were far better than he expected, and that all he had to do was to devote himself to his comrade's recovery, which was already on the way, he started suddenly, for he was conscious of a slight rustling noise somewhere apparently at the back of the hut, a sound as of some animal forcing its way through the dense growth which shut the building in upon three sides.

Murray's heart began to beat fast as he listened, for the noise was repeated, and though there was caution connected with the movement, the sound was of such a nature that he was not long in doubt as to its cause.

It was, as far as the lad could determine, a man forcing his way through the jungle at the back; and then, just as it came close at hand, so close that the rough walls of the hut seemed to quiver, the sound ceased again, and in the midst of the deep silence which ensued, the lad felt convinced that he was being watched by some one who was peeping through the wall opposite to where he crouched over his sleeping companion; and he waited in agony for some fresh movement, ready to spring up with his cutlass gripped in his hand.

His excitement seemed to grow till he could bear it no longer, and he rose to his feet, and stepped softly to the side of the door, just as there was a louder rustle than ever, and some one bounded out of the thicket right to the front of the doorway, stared into the darkness for a brief moment, and then turned and ran along the edge of the rough plantation, disappearing amongst a clump of maize-stalks. Murray was beginning to breathe freely, in the hope that in the brief glance he had not been seen in the darkness within, when his heart sank once more, for he recalled the hole he had hacked in the thatch—a hole which must have flooded the place with light.

At that moment there was the soft pad of footsteps again, and to his horror, in company with the rustle of the tall corn stalks, the figure of the black, who now seemed to be herculean in build, dashed into sight, armed, as the middy could see, with a heavy machete, and coming rapidly straight for the door of the hut.

Chapter Forty Three.

Nocturnal Visitors.

Desperate, but ready for action in defence of his comrade, Murray gripped his cutlass hard, and in those exciting moments found time, oddly enough, to congratulate himself upon the fact that he was armed with the heavy service weapon in place of the ordinary ornamental dirk that formed part of a midshipman's equipment. As to his chance, slight, well-built and youthful, he could not help feeling doubtful, pitted as he was about to be against a heavy, work-hardened negro wielding the heavy cutting weapon utilised for laying low the canes; but on the other hand he felt that skill would count somewhat on his side, for in company with the wounded lad he sought to defend he had devoted every opportunity that presented itself to small-arms practice, and was no mean handler of the service sword.

"I can only do my best," he thought; and in this spirit he stood on guard in the darkness, his eyes flashing, and fresh and active, prepared for everything that might befall him.

And that for the time being proved to be nought, for in those brief moments the black made for the doorway, Murray noting the glistening of the great fellow's opal eyes, and standing ready to receive him upon his point, when with a sharp swerve to his right, the man sprang at the broad-leaved banana plant which had supplied the lads' sustenance, and disappeared from his sight, and then there was the sharp hacking sound of a couple of blows being delivered at the fruit stem, before the huge fellow backed into sight again with a banana bunch thrown over his left shoulder.

A minute later the black had plunged in amongst the canes, and Murray, whose heart was still beating hard from excitement, was listening to a repetition of the sounds he had first heard, as the man worked himself round by the back, the imaginary danger passing away and leaving the middy wondering how it could have happened that the black had not caught sight of him, and coming to the conclusion that the poor fellow was so intent upon obtaining the food that he had been driven from by his enemies, that he had eyes for nothing else.

"What a coward I must be!" thought Murray, as he calmed down. "I'm precious glad that there was no one by to see what a fine brave-hearted fellow I am. Poor fellow, why, he must be the black who built this hovel and planted the fruit. Well, of course he's a slave, and I only hope we may have the opportunity to set him free."

Murray stood thinking for a few moments, and then in obedience to a sudden thought he made a dash for the spot where the black had plunged in. But all was silent again, and he felt that it would be impossible to follow his trail.

"It's a pity," thought the lad, as he went slowly back to the hut doorway. "Here was a friend, if I had only known—one who would have helped me to find the way back to the others—if I could have made him understand what I wanted."

Upon reaching the side of Roberts he had the satisfaction of finding him sleeping more calmly, and after making up his mind to be on the watch for the black's next coming, he crouched down by his wounded companion to think again about trying to hunt out Tom May; but he ended by wrinkling up his brow and coming to the conclusion that it would be cruel to forsake his friend in such distress.

"A hundred things might happen," he mused. "I should as likely as not lose my way and be unable to get back. Poor Dick—I don't think I care much for him, for he always sets himself against me and is as jealous as can be; but trouble seems to wipe all that away, and I suppose I am pretty fond of him or I shouldn't have been ready to fight for him. Yes," he mused, "he might recover his senses and find himself alone and so weak that he could hardly stir. Why, it would be enough to drive him nearly mad."

Murray employed himself twice over in the course of that day bathing and dressing his comrade's wound, and always with good results, for though the lad remained insensible, he sank each time into a more restful slumber, leaving his nurse and surgeon at liberty to watch and plan as to their future.

It was towards evening that he had another scare—one sufficiently real to make him feel that they were again in imminent danger, for though he could not identify a couple of fresh-comers of whose advent he had warning, their fierce aspect, the way in which they were armed, and their action, seemed to show for certain that they belonged to one or other of the slavers' crews.

Murray heard them approach suddenly, and darting out of the hut, he took refuge in the shelter of the cane plantation, from amidst whose thick growth he saw them step to the front of the hut, which in no wise excited their curiosity; but they stopped short for a few minutes, *just* long enough for one of them to climb one of the cocoanut trees and hack off a couple of the great husks, to fall with heavy thuds, before the climber slipped to earth again, when both set to work hacking off the husk and cutting away one end of the half-hardened shell.

They were moments of intense excitement for Murray, as he crouched a few yards away, almost afraid to breathe, fully expecting that one or other of the pair might rise from where he had thrown himself down, and entering the hut discover its occupant. But it seemed as if the rough little edifice only represented the hut of a slave in the fresh-comers' eyes, and having satisfied their thirst with the sweet sub-acid cream, they cast away the shells and sat talking together for a few minutes; and then the crucial moment seemed to have arrived for the discovery, for they suddenly sprang up—so sharply that the lad's hand flew to his cutlass, and then he had hard work to suppress a cry of relief, as the pair rapidly stalked away.

"It is too risky," muttered the lad. "I must find some safer hiding-place."

"So beautiful and yet so horrible," he thought, as he crouched in amongst the abundant growth, the narrow sunlit openings being visited from time to time by tiny birds whose scale-shaped feathers were dazzling in their hues as precious stones, while they were so fearless that he watched them hang suspended in the air or flit with a low hum to and fro within a few inches of his face. At another time he would be visited by butterflies that were the very perfection of Nature's painting, while wherever the sun's rays struck down hottest the jungle was alive with glistening horny-coated beetles whose elytra looked as if they had been fashioned out of golden, ruddy and bronze-tinted metal.

Just when the sun was beginning to sink lower and warning him that it would not be long before he would have the protection of another night, his attention was caught by a fresh rustling noise not far away, and it struck him that this might be the sound made by the returning of the builder of the hut.

So sure did the lad feel of this that he congratulated himself upon the fact that he was well hidden still amongst the foliage around, where he could suddenly start out upon the big black if he should enter the shelter.

But as the faint rustling continued, he awakened to the recollection of the previous night's alarm, for it now dawned upon him that the movement was not made by a human being, but by one of the reptiles with which he had peopled the thatch.

This was soon plain enough, and whether venomous or not it was enough to startle the watcher, as a serpent some seven or eight feet in length came into sight, travelling through the undergrowth, with its scales ever changing in tint as its folds came more or less into connection with the light that penetrated the leaves.

Murray felt the natural disgust for the lithe creature and dread of the poison fangs of which it might be the bearer, but at the same time he could not help feeling a certain admiration for its wondrous activity, the power with which it intertwined itself among the twigs and in loops and wreaths and coils, while the light played upon the burnished scales in silver greys, chestnuts and ambers, and softly subdued and floating over it as if in a haze of light, played bronze green and softened peacock blues.

For a time the serpent seemed to be making its way towards him, and there were moments when he felt certain that he was its goal, and that two brilliant points of light shot from the two hard jewel-like eyes were marking him down.

Then all at once there was a sharp movement as if a spring had been let loose, and the midshipman felt paralysed for a few moments, before his hand glided to the cutlass and he began to draw it slowly from its sheath ready to make a cut, for, following upon the sharp spring-like movement the serpent had disappeared, the next sound that met his ears being that of the reptile trickling, as it were, through the undergrowth in his direction.

For a few moments he could not stir, and the recollection of what he had read about the fascination displayed by snakes seemed to have a paralysing effect upon him, till his reason suggested that it was the eye that was said to produce the power described, while now the reptile had dropped out of sight amongst the undergrowth. His dread was increased, though, by the fact that the sun was rapidly passing out of sight, according to its way in the tropics, and it began to seem to him that he would be at the mercy of what might probably be a venomous creature approaching slowly amongst the leaves.

All at once there was another quicker and sharper movement, as if something passing amongst the undergrowth very slowly and cautiously had startled the reptile, which made where it was growing dark three or four rapid darts, each more distant, the last being followed by one that developed into a glide, which soon died away, the sound being supplanted by a steady slow rustle that was gradually approaching; and for a certainty the sounds were made by a human being forcing his way through the forest.

"Enemy or friend?" Murray asked himself, and then, freed from the horror of the approaching serpent, he roused himself to try and creep silently back towards the hut.

Chapter Forty Four.

"You Dah?"

Murray's movements were cautious in the extreme, and as he crept almost inch by inch he grew more confident of his power to do so without being heard, for the movements made by whoever it was that was drawing near were loud enough to cover his own.

To remain away from his companion during the long night was a thing not to be dreamed of, with the possibility of

the companionship of reptiles such as he had seen; and the opportunity of creeping back unseen as well as unheard grew more and more promising as the minutes glided by, and he listened now so that he might be in no danger of losing his way. But at the same time there was the risk of this being an enemy.

How he completed his short journey he could hardly tell, for he had to battle with nervous excitement as well as with the darkness that now began to fall rapidly in the deep shades of the forest, and at the last he was attacked by a fresh trouble which was as startling as the first, and showed him beyond doubt that some one was making for the hut. He had more than once nearly convinced himself that he who approached was the huge black, who had startled him with a false alarm of danger; but somehow, when this idea was still hanging in the balance and he felt doubtful of the wisdom of making his presence known to one who might after all prove an enemy, he grasped suddenly at a fresh development, for when at last the movements to which he listened had drawn very near, he felt his heart sink with something approaching dread on his fellow sufferer's behalf, for certainly now it could not be the huge black he had seen, for two people, evidently well accustomed to thread a way through the forest, were converging upon his hiding-place, and rapidly now.

"If it were only morning!" he said to himself, as, unable to keep down his hard breathing, he covered the last few yards which lay between him and his brother midshipman, and then, cutlass in hand, turned at bay.

The lad's experience had already been giving him lessons in wood-craft, and so it was that in his last movements he had hardly made a sound; but he had evidently been heard, for the duplex movement amongst the trees ceased at once, and a silence ensued which seemed terrible. So well was it sustained that as the lad crouched there, cutlass in hand, bending over his comrade, upon whose breast he had laid one hand, it seemed to him that his own breathing and that of Roberts was all that could possibly be heard. In fact, there were moments when the lad felt ready to believe that he had been a victim to imagination, and that he had been for some time fancying the presence of a snake. Yes, those were the heavy pulsations of his own breast—of that there could be no doubt; and those others which sounded like the echoes of his own heart were as certainly the result of the beating which kept on heavily in the breast of his wounded companion. It could not be—it was impossible that any one else was near. If there had been pursuers at hand, Murray felt that they must have gone by. And as he leaned forward, staring hard above where his comrade lay insensible, and trying to pierce the darkness, he at last found himself faintly able to make out a little opening which meant feeble light that was almost darkness; and this he now recognised as being the opening he had made with the cutlass by removing a portion of the leafy roof.

"We are alone," thought Murray, "and this is all half-maddening fancy."

The effort to retain silence had at last become greater than he could sustain, and even at the risk of bringing down danger upon their heads, Murray felt that he must speak—if only a word or two. If matters should come to the worst he was ready with his cutlass—ready to strike, and his blow would send the enemy, if enemy it was, or even enemies, scuffling rapidly away through the forest. At any rate the lad determined that he could retain silence no longer, and drawing a long, slow, deep breath, he was about to ask who was there in some form or another, and fend off at the same time any blow that might be struck at them, when the silence was broken from close at hand, and in a low deep whisper, with the words—

"Massa—massa! You dah?"

And now, suffering from the strange whirl of excitement which seemed to choke all utterance, Frank Murray felt that it was impossible to reply.

Chapter Forty Five.

A Friend in Need.

"Massa sailor officer, you dah?" came again; and still the midshipman could not respond.

"You dah?" came in an angry whisper. "You no open your mouf, sah?"

"Yes, yes," whispered Murray, recovering himself. "I could not speak. It is you, Caesar, isn't it?"

"Caesar. Come. Big black fellow Tullus come along to get plantain; see young sailor officer. Tell Caesar. Where big sailor?"

"Tom May? I have lost him."

"Not killed, sah, and other young officer?"

"No; he is here, Caesar. Where is Mr Anderson?"

"Gone; had big fight with Huggins's men."

"Any one hurt, Caesar?"

"Caesar no don't know. Nearly get kill. Where Massa young sailor hand, take hold?"

Murray raised his hand, and it was taken directly between those of the black speaker; and the midshipman started, for one of these was bandaged up as if the poor fellow had been wounded.

"Where other young sailor officer?"

"Hurt, and lying down here asleep."

"Very bad hurt?"

"Yes, my man. Where is Mr Allen?"

"Caesar don't know yet awhile. Want to find Massa Allen. Very much great deal of fighting, sah. Massa Huggins bring many men out of schooner ship kill much slabe boy. Kill very bad, and poor Caesar can't find Massa Huggins. Want kill um and save Massa Allen."

"Who wounded you, Caesar?"

"Massa Huggin, sah. Poor slabe fellow too much afraid. Run away. Caesar t'ink massa sailor officer killed dead."

"Is your wound very bad?" asked Murray.

"Yes, sah; dreffle bad."

"Let me examine it."

"Examine?"

"Yes; let me see how bad it is and tie it up."

"No time. Caesar tie corn-leaf all about and stop bleed. Caesar don't mind. What massa sailor officer call himself?"

"Murray—Frank," was the reply.

"Murray Frank, sah. Murray Frank, sah, come away dreckerly and bring your brudder sailor. Caesar couldn't find young massa for big long time. Now come?"

"Come where?" asked Murray quickly.

"Caesar don't know. Want find Massa Anderson lieutenant. Want find big Tom May chap. Massa know where?"

"No, Caesar. Can't you show me?"

"No, sah! Everybody run all away. Lot people get killed. Caesar glad find Massa young sailor 'gain."

"So am I, my lad. But now can you find Tom May and Bill Titely?"

"Caesar try, sah. Come along."

"But I can't leave my wounded friend here."

"No, sah. Take um 'long."

"That's right; but can you find the way in the darkness?"

"Caesar going try," said the black confidently; but he did not inspire the midshipman with the same amount of confidence. In fact, the little he felt was a good deal shaken by a great hand darting as it were out of the darkness and seizing him roughly by the shoulder.

"What does that mean?" he cried.

A deep-toned whispering ensued, and it seemed to Murray that the huge black who had so much startled him by his appearance before was eagerly whispering to his recovered friend.

"Big Tullus," whispered Caesar. "Say Massa Huggin men come along. Murray Frank come along quick."

"Yes, but I tell you I cannot leave my brother midshipman," whispered Murray.

"No, sah," said the black. "Big Tullus take um 'long on back."

"But you must be careful," whispered Murray. "He is wounded."

"Big Tullus fellow take care," replied the black, and he whispered to his invisible companion, with the result that, in spite of the darkness, Murray made out that poor Roberts, who moaned slightly, was easily lifted up, and the huge black seemed to have no difficulty in throwing the slightly-made wounded lad over his shoulder as if he had been a child.

"Now massa, come quick," whispered the black.

"But will your black friend keep up with us in the dark?"

"Yes, massa. Caesar knock um head off if don't. Him Caesar man. Come and tell young massa um find young sailor. Now carry other one. Come along quick, 'fore sailor crew find um and catch um. Now Murray Frank hear?"

"Oh yes, I hear plainly enough," replied Murray. "Now lead on."

It was evidently quite time enough, for from somewhere near at hand the voices of some of the overseer's crew of followers could be heard, as if making for the middle of the clearing where the big black had set up his hut, a spot which was evidently known to Huggins's people, by the way in which they had come in search of food.

So close were the men that the midshipman seized the big black by the arm and stopped his progress.

"What massa do?" whispered the black.

"Take care! They will hear you," replied Murray.

"Yes, hear massa if massa talk," whispered the man warningly. "Massa come along."

"But do you know the way to Mr Allen's cottage?"

"Iss—yes, Caesar know the way. Come along," whispered the man, and seizing the lad by the arm, he thrust him before his companion, who the next minute was making his way through the woodland, with the enemy so close behind that it was plainly evident that they were ignorant of the proximity of the fugitives, who pressed on steadily, with the huge black bearing his burden as lightly as if he were in no way troubled by the weight.

A very real danger, however, now began to show itself, for, becoming uneasy at being swayed about by Catullus, Roberts began to mutter impatiently, though in an incoherent way, with the result that the great black suddenly stopped short and, bending towards Caesar, uttered a few words in a tone full of protest.

"What does he say, Caesar?" whispered Murray.

"Say massa young sailor no talk so much. Bring Massa Huggin men come see what's all a bobbery and kill um all."

"I can't stop him, my lad," whispered back Murray. "He is insensible from his wound and does not know what he is saying."

"Caesar tell big slabe boy walk fast and get along a way;" and Murray heard a low whispering follow as he was thrust onward, with the canes and other growth being brushed aside. But, in spite of the extra pressure brought to bear, it became more and more evident that their enemies were keeping up with them and following their movements so exactly that it was hard to believe that they were not aware of their proximity.

Murray whispered words to this effect, but the black only laughed.

"No, no," he said; "Huggins's men don't know we come along here, or run fast and kill Massa Murray Frank, kill Roberts, kill Caesar, and big Tullus. Come along and see if Massa Allen find way back to cottage."

Chapter Forty Six.

Caesar's Proposal.

For the most part of that night all thought of sleep had passed away, and a feeling of wonder filled the middy's brain at the ease with which the black forced his way through the darkness.

"Black as a bat," thought Murray, "and just like one. It's wonderful how these fellows can see as they do. It can't be because they are used to it, for my eyes would never be of any good, I am sure."

But there it was all the same.

"Come 'long. Massa Huggins man dat way want to find Caesar;" and the black led the way and seemed to put pressure upon his white companion just at the right moment, "steering" him, Murray mentally called it, in and out among tree and cane so that he never came in contact with any obstacle, while the lad's anxiety about his wounded comrade was always alleviated when a halt was made by the comforting whispered assurance from Caesar after an examination.

"Massa sailor Roberts fas' 'sleep. No know nothing at all."

There were times, though, when at one of their many halts Murray's heart sank very low, for generally when all was silent save for some strange cry of night bird, croak of reptile, or weird whirr of insect that seemed to be magnified in power by the heated misty air, the black's fingers would tighten upon the lad's arm with spasmodic suddenness, in company with what seemed to be the piercing humming trumpet of a mosquito. Twice over Murray as he toiled on in the black darkness took it for granted that the black had stopped short to avoid being bitten or stung, but only to find afterwards that the sound came with perfect realism from the black's lips, being his warning to his big companion to halt while he reconnoitred as to the position of the enemy.

And now a fresh direction would be taken, or more than once it seemed to Murray that they completely retraced their steps; but after a time a feeling of dullness akin to despair came over the lad, and he resigned himself to his fate, satisfying himself that Roberts was being carefully carried, and then plodding on and on, plunging as it seemed to him in a state of torpidity or stupid sleep in which he kept on dreaming about the ship and the boats and going through various adventures at sea.

Then he would start awake with a strange suddenness, feeling as if his conscience had pricked him for his drowsiness and neglect, and he would begin to tremble with anxiety, for he felt that he must have spoken aloud just at a time when they were near their pursuers, and so have betrayed their whereabouts.

Thoroughly wakened then, Murray found that they were motionless with his black companions listening, while Caesar's fingers were pressing his arm very tightly.

"No speak," he whispered; and the man's breath came hot into his ear. "Huggins fellow chap everywhere. No catchee."

Murray's brain was closing up again, so it seemed to him, back into a deep sleep, and he remembered afterwards that during the latter part of that night he woke up from time to time when Caesar pinched his arm for him to stop, but directly the journey was continued he dropped asleep again.

Then it seemed to the middy that he must have been asleep an immensely long time, and he started up awake, staring hard at his guide, who had laid one hand over his lips while the other was offering him a ready-opened cocoanut.

"No speak, massa."

"Why?"

"Huggins man over dah. See sailor officer—see slabe boy—see Caesar—shoot, kill."

The man pointed over where Roberts lay half hidden by the undergrowth, while beyond him the big black was seated munching away at some half-ripe bananas, and ready to meet his eyes with a pleasant smile.

"It's morning, then!" whispered Murray, in surprise.

"Yes: to-morrow morning, sah," said the man, smiling; and it appeared to Murray that he had made a very absurd remark, for it must have been daylight for many hours, the sun being high.

"Whereabout do you think Mr Allen's cottage is?" he whispered now, as his head seemed to clear.

"Over dah," was the confident declaration. "Huggins man all round about come to fight."

"Fight? Who with?"

"Massa officer sailor men."

"Do you think they have got back to the cottage?"

The black nodded.

"Big very much fight. Sailor kill big lot Huggins man."

"How do you know that?" said Murray sharply, for it seemed to him now that the last dreamy feeling of exhaustion had passed away.

"Caesar find free dead men. Him tread on two," was his ready reply, "him" being the big black.

"But not white men!" said the midshipman, with his voice sinking to a whisper that was almost inaudible.

"Huggins man, massa. Bad fellow. Caesar berry glad."

"Hah!" sighed Murray, and he crept to where Roberts lay apparently sleeping comfortably now.

"Is it far to Mr Allen's cottage?" asked the lad, after a pause.

"Over dah, sah," replied the black, pointing.

"Then why not go on at once?"

The black showed his teeth as his face lit-up in a smile.

"Lots Huggins man all about. Wait shoot white man. Wait shoot massa sailor officer. Shoot big slabe boy and Caesar. 'Top here get dark again and Massa Murray Frank crawl up close to cottage 'long o' Caesar show de way. Massa Murray Frank put hand to mouf so how, like Caesar and say, Ahoy! No shoot, my boy! Friend!"

"Yes, I understand," said Murray eagerly.

"Dat's de way," said the black, laughing with satisfaction; and he placed his hollowed hand to the side of his mouth and cried very softly again: "Ahoy! No shoot, my boy! Friend! British sailor boy shoot more than Huggins man. Shoot drefful bad. Kill friend in a dark. Kill Murray Frank. Kill Roberts officer. Kill big slabe boy, and kill poor ole Caesar; and dat drefful bad job, eh, sah?"

"Yes," said Murray, responding to the black's smile most heartily; "that would be a dreadfully bad job, and no mistake."

"And no mistake, sah," cried the black, bringing to bear his natural imitative faculty apparently with a feeling of intense enjoyment, and repeating the expression, "And no mistake, sah. Ha, ha, ha, ha! Hallo! 'Top, 'top!" he added, in an excited whisper. "Caesar make too much noise enough and tell Huggins man where we hide umself. Massa Murray Frank eatum Caesar nut. Do um good and makum fight like sailor man."

"Yes, I'll eat it soon," replied Murray. "But you're right, Caesar; we must wait till it is dark, for fear that my people should shoot us by mistake."

"Yes, sah; dat be bad job and no mistake," whispered the black, bringing in the fresh expression again. "What Massa Allen do widout Caesar? Hey?"

"Mr Allen trusts you, then?" said Murray.

"Yes, sah. Massa Allen berry much trust Caesar. Massa Allen tell Caesar he berry sorry he ebber trust Massa Huggin. Wish um nebber come plantation. Caesar see big tear in Massa Allen eye, and make Caesar berry sorry. Make um fink a deal. Massa Huggins kill poor black niggah, sah, lots o' times. Massa Huggins got bad brudder come sometime with ship schooner full o' slaves. Flog um and sell um. Make um die sometime. Massa Huggins' brudder tell um bad sailor man. Talk like dis way;" and the man as he knelt by Murray's side gave an exact imitation of the keen Yankee skipper. "Say 'Chuck um overboard,' sah." As the black uttered the command he acted it, and added grimly: "Chuck um overboard to de shark?" and added now a horrible bit of pantomime, dashing and waving his arms about to represent the terrible fish gliding over one another in a wild struggle to seize their prey.

"Don't! Don't!" whispered Murray, with a look of horror which proved the realism of the black's word-painting and gesticulation.

"No, massa," whispered Caesar solemnly. "Um nebber chuck black niggah overboard. But," he added, with a fierce look that was even ferocious, "Caesar like chuck Massa Huggins overboard. Like see shark fish bite all a pieces and eat um. So—so—so!"

As he uttered the last words with hideous emphasis he brought his imitative faculty once more into action by laying bare his fine white teeth, throwing his head from side to side, and snapping like a savage animal.

"Horrible!" ejaculated Murray.

"Yes, sah; dreffle horrible see shark bite poor half-dead niggah a pieces."

"But you have never seen this?"

"Yes, massa—long time ago. Caesar brought in schooner ship from Caesar own country. Bring lot of poor niggah all shut up down below. Ship quite full, and ebery night some shut um eyes, and to-morrow morning some won't open eyes again. Gone dead. Sailor chap come along rope, haul niggah up on deck—haul on deck, and Massa Huggins brudder say: 'Chuck um o'erboard,' and chap come and take rope off Caesar and make um open um eye like say: 'What's de matter?' Den Massa Huggins' brudder say, 'What's dat, you lubber? Dat one not dead!'"

"Did you hear that?" said Murray, with his lips apart as he listened in horror to the black's narrative.

"Yes, sah. Caesar no understand den what um mean, but um say—'What's dat, you lubber? Dat one not dead!' Nebber forget um—nebber! Caesar shut um eye now and see it all again—those niggah chap chuck overboard and shark fish coming up out of water and roll over and over and snap, snap, snap—so. Make Caesar keep eyes open so dat couldn't go to sleep again for long time. Massa Huggins man come take hold of um by arm and leg and chuck down below. Caesar not dead a bit. Caesar quite 'live now. Go and talk lot o' time to pore black niggah when Massa Huggins' brudder bring schooner ship full of niggah. Caesar talk to um, not like um talk to Massa Murray Frank. Talk to um in own way sometime. Sometime poor niggah can't understand, but berry glad find Caesar sorry for um. Make um happy; laugh again."

"Poor creatures!" said Murray.

"Yes, massa. Poor creature! Come and talk togedder in de night sometime. Massa Huggins flog um when him find um out, but poor niggah don't mind dat. Like to talk about de ole country where um come from. Massa Allen find um out too, but um only laugh and say, 'Poor fellow!' But Massa Huggin flog um, and some shut eye and nebber open um again. Poor Massa Allen good massa, but won't do what Caesar say. He berry ill now, and get frighten of Massa Huggins. Tell Caesar one day he wish Massa Huggins die."

"He told you that!" said Murray, for the black had ceased speaking, and his narrative had so great a fascination for the lad that he wanted to hear more.

"Yes, massa; um say he wish Massa Huggin die so that poor niggah boy be happy again and do um work. Massa Allen say so free time to Caesar, and den Caesar wait till Massa Huggins go out and Caesar go in to Massa Allen in de cottage, where um sit down by de table like dat." And the black rested his head sidewise upon his elbow and hand. "'What you want, Caesar, lad?' he say, and um put um white hand on Caesar black arm. 'Poor niggah ill and can't work? Bad time, Caesar, to be sick man.' 'Yes, massa,' I say to um. 'Berry bad to be sick man.' 'Who is it, my lad?' he say. 'Caesar, massa,' I say to um. 'Caesar berry sick.' 'You bad, Caesar!' him say. 'Your massa berry sorry, for you de only frien' I got in de worl' now, Caesar.' 'Yes, massa,' I say. 'Caesar know dat.' 'What de matter, boy?' he say. 'Caesar bad to see massa so berry sick. Caesar 'fraid massa die.' 'Ah, dat's berry good of you, Caesar,' he say—'berry good. Then you no want me to give you doctor 'tuff?' 'No, massa,' I said. 'Nigger know what to do when niggah ill. Shut um mouf up tight free day, and niggah quite well again.' 'Ah, Caesar,' he say, 'dat do me no good, dat not do for your massa.' Then I say to um, 'No, massa, but you let Caesar do massa good and um quite well again and make all de poor niggah happy over again.' 'No, no, my boy,' um say; 'nebber again.' 'Yes, massa,' I say; 'you let Caesar try.' 'What wiv?' um say, laughing; and den I say in um whisper like: 'Fetish, massa.'"

"What!" cried Murray, half indignantly. "You don't believe in that nonsense, Caesar?"

"Not nonsense, massa."

"Well, my good fellow," said Murray, rather coldly, "I'm not going to argue with you now, but some other time, I hope. Now tell me, what did Mr Allen say?"

"Um say, 'No, my lad, no; I'll hab none of dat.'"

"Of course; but surely he does not believe in it?"

"Yes, massa; um believe for sure. Massa Allen know what niggah know and bring from own country. But Massa Allen say, 'Nebber, nebber, Caesar. Your massa done too much bad in dis worl', and he nebber do no more now.'"

"Well, that's very good of him, Caesar, but I don't quite understand what you mean."

"No, massa? Dat Huggins bad man do bad things to everybody. Make Massa Allen ill and go die. Massa Allen say not fit to live."

"And quite right too, Caesar."

"Yes, sah. Massa Allen quite right, and Caesar come one night and bring niggah Obeah and put in bad Massa Huggin rum. Den Massa Huggin drinkum, drinkum, and go drefful bad and nebber flog no more poor niggah. Nebber. Poor niggah dance and sing, and Massa Allen get well."

"But—what—here—I say, Caesar!" cried Murray, staring hard at the black—"You don't mean to say that you mean you would poison the wretch!"

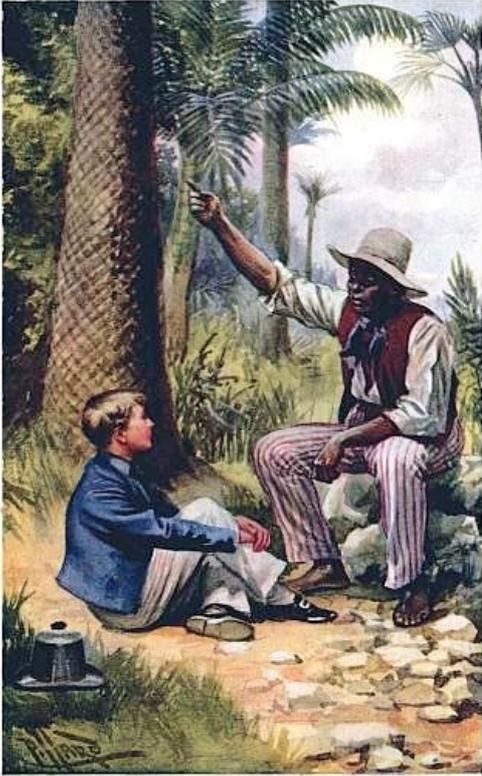
"Yes, massa," said the black, in the most innocent way. "Gib um Obeah snake poison. Gib um manchineel in um rum. Make um curl up and go dead."

"Oh, that wouldn't do at all, Caesar," cried Murray earnestly. "He's a horribly bad wretch, of course."

"Yes, massa; ollible bad wretch, and ought to be killed dead; but Massa Allen say no, he won't do any more wicked thing."

"And he is quite right, Caesar."

"No, sah," said the black, shaking his head. "Not do no wicked thing. Caesar do it, and it not wicked thing. All good."



"MASSA ALLEN SAY HE DESARVE BE HUNG AT UM YARD-ARM."

P. 457.

Hunting the Skipper.

"No, no; it would be murder, Caesar," cried the middy.

"What murder, massa?"

"Eh? What is murder? Why, to kill innocent people."

"What innocent people, massa?"

"What are innocent people, my man? Why, those who have done no harm."

"Massa Huggin not no innocent people, Murray Frank. Massa Huggin bad man; kill poor niggah. Try kill poor Massa Allen, take um plantation."

"Yes, that's all very bad," said Murray thoughtfully.

"Yes, sah; berry bad. What British captain do Massa Huggin?"

"Well, I hardly know, Caesar," said Murray thoughtfully. "I should say that if he catches him fighting against the king and setting those blackguards of his to murder the poor creatures he has been dealing in—throwing them overboard so as to escape—the captain will have him hung at the yard-arm."

"Yes, sah," cried the man, with his eyes flashing. "Dat what Massa Allen tell um. Massa Allen say he desurve be hung at um yard-arm for kill an' murder poor black niggah, and Massa Huggin laugh and say Massa Allen hang too. Dat right, sah?"

"No, no; that wouldn't be right, Caesar."

"Bri'sh captain not kill Massa Allen?"

"Certainly not, my man," said Murray earnestly. "No, sah. Much a bes' way for Caesar gib Massa Huggin Obeah."

"No, no, and that would not do either. Hallo! what do you mean by that?"

The black had suddenly thrown himself down upon his face and dragged the midshipman beside him, a movement instantly imitated by the big slave who was seated among the bushes beside Roberts, who lay motionless as if asleep.

"Massa see?" whispered Caesar.

"See what?" asked Murray excitedly.

The black slowly and cautiously extended his right hand while he placed the fingers of his left to his lips.

Murray gazed with wonder in the direction indicated, but for some minutes he could make out nothing more than the closely-packed canes that commenced before the patch of jungle in which they were concealed. Everything seemed to be dim, and in the distance it was as though the thick growth was formed into a soft twilight, but as the lad strained his eyesight, he fancied that in one part the canes were swaying slightly here and there, as if the wind was pressing them on one side. Then as he turned his head a little he started and his heart began to beat with excitement, for what had been for a time indistinct now grew plainer and plainer and shaped itself into what looked to be quite a strong body of men, evidently rough sailors, creeping slowly through a plantation of sugar-cane and making for some definite place. One minute they would be quite indistinct and faint; the next they would stand out quite clearly; and it soon became plain that they were well-armed, for from time to time there was a faint gleam that Murray made out to be shed from the barrel of some musket.

"Massa Murray Frank see um?" whispered the black.

"Yes, quite plainly," replied the lad.

"Dat Massa Huggin man go creep round plantation."

"What plantation is that?" asked Murray excitedly.

"Massa Allen plantation, sah. Massa Allen plantation cottage over dah, sah."

"And is he back there now?"

"No say dat where Caesar tink de lieutenant massa wait long o' Bri'sh sailor. Fink um wait till Massa Huggin bring all a men from two, free schooner. Wait kill all a Bri'sh sailor, sah."

"And if he doesn't look out, my man, he'll be killed instead."

"Caesar hope so, sah."

"When do you mean to go on and join Mr Anderson, then?" asked the midshipman.

"Caesar wait till come dark, sah. No go yet. Massa Huggins men watch all round and take—kill—Murray Frank if um go now."

"But can't you go and warn our people that they are in danger?"

"Massa Anderson know," said the black coolly. "Bri'sh sailor officer keep eye wide open. Dah!"

He uttered the last word in a low, excited fashion, for just then there was the distant smothered report of a musket, and Murray pressed the growth before him a little on one side.

"Was that one of the slavers' crew?" he whispered.

"No, sah. Dat sailor shoot. Look now."

The lad pressed forward again, but nothing was visible, for the densely packed party of sailors who the minute before had been seen to be in motion had quite disappeared, though Murray could grasp the fact that they must still be there.

Chapter Forty Seven.

"Wait till Dark."

Long hours of weary waiting and expectation of being discovered, for at intervals movements could be detected amongst the tall swaying canes and patches of maize that could be made out beyond the wilderness of undergrowth that lay between the little party of fugitives and the cottage whose presence the black insisted upon as being in the direction he pointed out.

But Murray had the satisfaction of noting that his brother midshipman was slowly recovering his senses. Twice over he had opened his eyes to gaze wonderingly in the face that looked down at him, and once when Murray whispered a few encouraging words he shook his head and seemed to sink back into a deep sleep again.

"What's to be done, Caesar?" said Murray softly.

"Do nothing, sah. Wait till come dark. Then creep, creep, creep froo trees and tell massa officer not to shoot. Then run fas', get in cottage."

Night at last, and with every nerve throbbing from excitement Murray started up in readiness, for the black had bent over to whisper to him that he was going to try and find a way past the several parties of the enemy who were beleaguering the holders of the little cottage, whom it was their aim now to rejoin.

"Massa stop now," said the man. "Wait till Caesar see."

The next minute there was a faint rustling sound, and Murray was alone with the big black and his companion, both silent, the former watchful and alert, and the latter as motionless as if plunged in the deepest sleep.

This silence was to the midshipman the most painful part of the task which he had been called upon to bear. His imagination began to set to work at once and surrounded him with perils that were ever on the increase. He knew from what he had seen that a strong body of the enemy must be lying between him and his friends, but directly Caesar had passed out of hearing it appeared to him that the crews of the slaver's schooners had started into motion and were creeping round behind him to cut him off, and twice over this was enforced by the great black beginning to creep away and leaving him alone with Roberts.

Then when he was beside himself with anxiety as to what he had better do, and more and more certain that he was completely left, he started to find that the great fellow had returned, to seat himself beside his burden, evidently ready to make a fresh start at any moment.

At last, when Murray felt that he could bear no more, there was a faint rustle and a whisper to prove that the black had returned, to lay a hand upon his shoulder.

"Well," whispered the lad excitedly, "have you found a way to get by them?"

"Caesar get by," said the man sadly, "but big slabe, Murray Frank, Roberts, not get by."

"Then what do you mean to do?"

"Try," said the man. "Murray Frank ready?"

"Yes, ready for anything," said the lad, springing up eagerly.

Caesar whispered a few words to his big fellow and as Murray strained his eyes he tried to make out the movements of the black when he caught hold of the midshipman, swung him round over his shoulder, and followed closely behind his leader and Murray, who now began to advance cautiously, hand in hand, pausing to listen from time to time, Caesar progressing more by thought than touch and evidently conscious that at any moment he might stumble upon those who were waiting ready to pounce upon him.

There were moments when hope began to illumine the lad's path, for so silent did everything remain that it seemed as if the enemy must have changed his position; and in this hopeful mood he was about to whisper his belief to his companion when the path was brightened by a totally different illumination. For there was utter silence one moment, and the next, flash, flash, from musket after musket, and the enemy's position was marked out by points of light as he concentrated his fire upon the cottage hidden amongst the trees.

This went on for a time without reply, and it now seemed to the midshipman that it must be the little party of his friends who had gone off. Then crack, crack, the reply began, and plainly mingled with the reports came the strange whistling whirr of bullets about their ears, in company with the crackling of cut-down leaves and twigs which now began to patter upon the earth.

"Come," whispered the black.

"Come where?" asked Murray excitedly.

"Back again," was the reply. "Massa no want sailor shoot massa?"

"No," whispered the lad; "but we were to shout to them that we are friends."

"Yes, massa," said the man drily, "but sailor man shout so loud um no hear massa speak, and massa get shoot dead long o' Caesar and big slabe. No talk; other fellow hear um, and sailor man shoot one side, Massa Huggin man shoot other side, and no get to cottage at all. Come back."

The lad submitted without a word, though it seemed to him maddening to give up when they were so near that every flash was quite plain, and he fully expected to hear himself hailed.

They seemed to him then to have crept exactly into the centre of the firing, and every whizzing whistle sounded as if it must be coming straight for its billet that would end one of their careers; but the moments passed on with the marvel growing more strange that they escaped being laid low; and then the excitement came suddenly to an end, when Caesar literally snatched the lad to earth and the big slave subsided with a low sigh of relief which indicated that he had sunk down too with his silent burden, to lie listening to the cross fire which still went on above their heads, till all at once a familiar voice shouted—

"Now, my lads, all together, forward! Let them have it!"

The order thrilled through Murray's breast, and seemed to rouse Roberts, helpless as he was, to action.

"Hurrah!" cried the midshipman, as he sprang to his feet, followed by his wounded comrade, who staggered for a moment or two, and then fell, clutching at Murray, dragging him down upon his less active comrade, just as there was a rush of feet, the crackling of wood, and the minute later a fierce yell of raging voices, and the sailors who had responded to the first lieutenant's call were borne back again by four times their number and driven as far as the entrance to the cottage, where they stood fast and delivered a little volley, which sent their enemies to the right-about, giving them time to barricade themselves again and hold the entrance fast.

"Answer to your names there," panted the lieutenant, who was breathless with his exertions. "What's that?" he cried directly after. "Prisoners! Two of them?"

"Four, sir," growled a deep voice. "Two black fellows, sir, and here's two youngsters, sir, as far as I can make out."

One of 'em's wounded, sir."

"Well, we don't want prisoners," cried the lieutenant, "but we must take them. See that you bind them fast."

"We don't want binding, sir," gasped Murray. "We've got away from the enemy and reached you at last."

"Mr Murray! This is grand!" cried the chief officer. "But have you seen anything of poor Roberts?"

"I've got him here, sir, but he's badly wounded."

"And we've no doctor with us."

"I don't think it's dangerous, sir; but have you had any news of May and Titely?"

"Tom May is with us, my lad."

"Hurt, sir?"

"Here, answer for yourself, my lad," cried the lieutenant.

"Hurt, sir? Yes, sir; pretty tidy, sir," growled the big sailor. "One of them slavers fetched me a crack on the head as knocked all the sense out on it; but I shall get a chance at 'em again one o' these times. But is it really you, Mr Murray, here and all right, sir?"

"It's your turn to answer, Mr Murray," replied the chief officer.

"Yes, sir; and yes, Tom May; I've got back safely. Where's Titely?"

"In the plantation house, sir—in hospital—sick bay, sir; doing pretty tidy. But they're coming on again, I think, sir, and we've them two blacks with us, sir. Where shall we put them?"

"They're not prisoners, sir," cried Murray. "They're friends, and have helped us to escape."

"Do you think we can trust them?" asked the lieutenant.

"Trust them, sir? Yes, and they'll fight for us to the end."

"You answer for them, my lad?"

"Yes, sir," cried Murray. "They're staunch enough."

"Here they come, sir!" cried Tom May.

For with a fierce yelling mingled with an imitation of the hearty cheering of a body of seamen, a strong party dashed up to the hastily barricaded entrance, and sent a volley crashing through the panels of the door and the window.

"You were ready for that, my lads?" cried the lieutenant. "No one hurt?"

"Nay, sir; we're used to that bit o' business," growled the big sailor.

"Then give it them back, my lads."

The words had hardly passed the officer's lips before a dozen muskets bellowed out their reply, lighting up so many roughly-made portholes, and as the volley was responded to by a fiercer yelling than before, mingled with the hurried footsteps of the repulsed attacking party, Murray turned in the darkness to his leader.

"I can't understand it, sir," he said. "I thought Caesar, the black, was retreating with us to the cottage by the lagoon."

"No, no, my lad; this is the plantation house where we came first. I only wish we could have reached the cottage by the water-side. We should have had help from the captain before now if we could have got there."

"Then we are right in the middle of the cane fields, sir?"

"Yes, Murray, and very glad I was to come upon it, for it has been strong enough to hold. Here: your black fellow who guided the expedition—where is he?"

"Here somewhere, sir."

"Ask him then if he can lead us by some path to the water-side."

"Do you hear this, Caesar?" asked Murray. "Is there any path down to the water-side without using a boat along the river?"

"Yes, sah, but Massa Huggin men all dah, and um think they come 'long again to burn Massa Allen house up. Murray Frank look! All de window burn fire."

"Yes, they're trying another way of attack," said the chief officer—"one that I have been wondering that they did not try before. Up-stairs with you, my lad. You go too, Mr Murray. You must pick off those who come up with their firebrands. You'll be able to see the scoundrels now. This is better than that horrible darkness. Ah, the business is warming up. Give them a cheer, my lads, as soon as you are up at the windows. The captain will hear our response, and it will let him know where we are."

"But is that the *Seafowl*, sir?" cried Murray excitedly.

"Without doubt, my lad; but she sounds a long way off."

For the steady fire of big guns had begun, but as the chief officer had said, sounding some distance away.

"Dat Massa Huggin big schooner, sah," said Caesar sharply; and he had hardly spoken when the heavy but sharp brassy sound of a big gun came from quite another direction. "And dat Massa Huggin oder schooner, sah. Dat um Long Tom."

"Confound the scoundrel!" cried the lieutenant excitedly. "Up with you, Mr Murray. Here they come to the attack again. Take May with you, or we shall be burnt out before help can come. Well, what's that then?" he shouted excitedly, as Murray rushed up the stairs towards the rooms he had helped before to put in a state of defence. "Surely that is one of our brig's carronades. It was time she began to speak."

Chapter Forty Eight.

"Let 'em have it."

"That's your sort, my lads! Let 'em have it!" came in the boatswain's gruff voice, as Murray reached the wide corridor-like landing of the planter's house; and directly after one of the sailors shouted—

"I'm after you, Tommy, old man. Show the ugly foreign varmint what a British bulldog is."

The words came from where a struggle was going on in one of the chambers which the midshipman had helped to barricade before he left upon his unfortunate mission to fetch help; and as the lad now crossed the corridor and ran into the room, followed by Caesar, it was to see that several of the enemy had gained a footing by rearing bamboos against the windows, and evidently in their first charge had beaten the English defenders back.

Murray rushed in just at the recoil, when Tom May had been roused to action and with a couple of companions was obeying the admonition of his messmate to show the varmint what British bulldogs might be.

Murray paused just inside the door of the lit-up room, excited and yet amused by the man's action, for he saw the big sailor in the act of rushing at a couple of the enemy, sticking the cutlass he bore between his teeth, as trusting to his great strength and weight he charged with doubled fists at the first, and in the contact drove him backwards with a heavy thud against the man who followed, with the result that both went down upon the floor and rolled over beneath the open window. Then as if in one movement the great fellow ducked down, avoiding a blow struck at him with a knife, seized the uppermost of the two enemies by the waistbelt, flung him up to the full extent of his reach, and then turning himself as it were into a human catapult, he hurled the fellow at another of his companions and caught him just as he was climbing over the window-sill.

The next instant the window-opening was clear, and the sound of a heavy thud came up from below, along with savage oaths and yells, while Tom May made at once for the man who had first attacked, and who was now struggling to his feet looking as if he had had his neck twisted.

Tom closed with the savage half-breed, Malayan looking sailor, and, to carry out his messmate's simile, seemed to regularly worry him as he bore him backward.

But there were others of the enemy watching the encounter—one who had previously reached the chamber, and another who had suddenly drawn himself up and sprung over the sill.

This fellow drew back for a few moments to watch the struggle and await his opportunity, before, heavy machete in hand, he sprang forward, to make a savage cut that would have gone hard with Tom May, but Murray saw the impending stroke, parried it with the cutlass he held, and then struck upward with the hilt, catching the assailant full in the nose with the heavy steel guard, staggering him for a moment, and then thrusting home, the man went down, just in time for May's antagonist to trip over backward, the two fellows yelling as they rolled over and over.

"Come on, messmates," growled Tom May; and there was a short continuation of the struggle before one after the other the enemy were driven headlong from the window and the room was clear.

"Thankye, Mr Murray, sir," said the big sailor, taking the cutlass from between his teeth. "You did that fine; didn't he, lads?"

"Splendid!" said the boatswain; "but what's the good of a cutlass, mate, if you don't use it?"

"Hah! That's just what I was thinking of," said the big sailor. "I just stuck it atween my tusks so as to tackle that ugly warmint, as I thought it would be easier to chuck overboard, and then you see I was too busy to ketch hold again. But it do seem comic, Mr Murray, sir, don't it? But it have kep' it clean."

"Yes, Tom; and you cleared the deck magnificently."

"Did I, sir? Well, I'm glad I do'd some good; and fingers was made afore forks, warn't they, sir? And pretty handy too."

"Yes, I suppose so, Tom; but look here, my lads," cried Murray sharply. "Lay hold of that big old bedstead and draw it across the window. It will block it up. Then clap that big wardrobe on the top."

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the men, as they seized the heavy framework and ran it across the opening, fastening it directly after in its place by laying the heavy wardrobe across.

"That's done it tidy," cried the big sailor; "and that's the beauty of having your officer with yer to show yer what to

do.”

“None of your banter, Tom,” cried the midshipman sternly.

“Beg pardon, sir,” said the man, in protest. “’Twarn’t done for that. I meant it honest, sir. I shouldn’t never have thought on it.”

“All right,” said Murray, smiling in the broad frank face. “Why, Tom, it’s a treat to be with you again.”

“Is it, sir?” cried the man.

“That it is, Tom.”

“But you don’t mean it, sir. I say, ain’t that what you called banter?”

“Banter? No, Tom; I’m only too glad to get back to you. But how are you, Tom? Haven’t you got hurt over these tussles?”

“Hurt, sir?” said the man, beginning to feel himself over. “I dunno, sir. Bit sore like just there, and my shoulder’s just a shade stiff.”

“Yes, and there’s some paint off your nose, Tommy,” said the boatswain, chuckling.

“Is there?” said the man, touching his rather prominent feature tenderly. “Humph! It do feel a bit like it. Never mind; I’ll report mysen to the doctor when I get aboard again, and he’ll put on a patch of his solid black—that as he keeps ready to lay on all at once. But I say, Mr Murray, sir,” he added, closing up to his young officer, “you did me good in saying what you did. I felt real bad without you, sir, and as if I’d not been doing my dooty like to let you get away from me as I did.”

“Nonsense, Tom! Who could help it? But it was awkward to be separated like that. I began to be afraid that we should never get together again.”

“Well, sir, that’s just what I got a touch of, sir, but I pulled myself up short, sir, and I says to myself, ‘Mr Murray’s too good an orficer,’ I says, ‘not to find his way out of any hole as these slave-hunting varmint would dig for him.’”

“There you go again, Tom,” cried Murray angrily. “You know how I hate flam.”

“I’m blest, sir!” cried the man, in an ill-used tone. “Oh, you are hard upon me, sir.”

“Then you shouldn’t stoop to flattery.”

“Flattery, sir? Well, if that warn’t honest I’m a Dutchman. I only wish I’d got a witness, sir, as heared me say it, sir; but I only says it to myself, and you don’t believe him.”

“Yes, I do, Tom,” cried Murray.

“Hullo, sir! They’re at it again somewhere else.”

“Pst!” whispered Murray, holding up his hand and stepping on tiptoe towards a door at one end of the room, partly hidden by a thick curtain.

The next moment he was signing to the men to follow him.

They were just in time, for a ladder had been raised against a narrow slit of a window of what was fitted up as a bathroom, and as the lad dashed in, it was to find that one of the slaver’s men was in the act of leaping down into the room, striking at the middy in his bound, and with such force that he drove the lad headlong backwards, half stunning him in his fall.

“Here, what is it?” cried Murray, after a few minutes, in a confused manner. “Who did that?”

“Why, it was this here chap, sir,” said Tom May. “Here, ketch hold of his heels, man, and let’s send him back to his mates; we don’t want him here.”

“Who wounded him—who cut him?” cried Murray excitedly.

“I’m not quite sure, sir,” said Tom May drily, “but I think as it was me, sir. You see, he let himself go at you, sir, and I just give him a tap.”

“You’ve killed him, Tom,” said the lad, in rather an awe-stricken tone.

“Nay, sir. Tap like that wouldn’t take it out of him. I might ha’ hit a bit softer, but I was ’bliged to be sharp, or he’d ha’ finished you off, sir, and of course we didn’t want that. There, let go your end, messmate,” continued the man, and still half dazed, Murray stood staring as he saw one of their fierce-looking, half European, half Lascar-like enemies passed out of the narrow window, bleeding profusely, and disappear, his passing through the opening being followed by the dull sound of a heavy fall.

“You’ve killed him, Tom!” cried Murray again, with his face drawn-looking and strange.

“Nay, sir,” grumbled the sailor, “but ’twouldn’t ha’ been my fault, sir, if I had. Some un had to have it, and it was my dooty to see as it warn’t my orficer, sir. I do know that.”

Murray was silent.

"Why, I say, sir, you'd ha' tapped one on 'em pretty hard on the head if you'd ha' seen him coming at me; now wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I should," said Murray, with something like a sigh. "Look here, Tom," he added hastily, "we have too many holes to keep closed. I want some of the pieces of furniture crammed into these places. It ought to have been done before."

"It was done, sir," grumbled the man. "That's what the first luff said, sir, and we've been doing nothing else; but as fast as we stopped up the beggars kep' on shoving the stuff out again with bamboos."

The high narrow window was, however, once more pretty securely blocked, and for many hours to come the defenders of the place had their work cut out to repel the attacks that were made, the two blacks proving invaluable in keeping up a supply of water to drench the woodwork that the enemy attacked with fire, so that pretty well a day had glided by without much change having taken place.

It was evident that the slaving chief had a strong force at his disposal in carrying on a desultory kind of siege of the plantation house, while at the same time it seemed to the besieged that a sort of running fight was being carried on with the *Seafowl*, whose guns were heard pretty constantly, though during the afternoon that followed Murray's arrival at the plantation it seemed that the brig must have followed the slaving craft to the opposite side of the island, where firing was still going on.

During a lull in the attack upon the planter's house, Lieutenant Anderson busily inspected his defences, and, like a prudent officer, saw to his supplies and examined as to whether he could not take further measures for their protection and the setting at defiance of the enemy for some time to come.

"He ought to have driven us out or taken us prisoners hours ago, Mr Murray," he said, "for he has five times our force."

"Yes, sir; he seems to have," replied Murray.

"And yet we have managed to keep him at bay. He has the advantage of being able to set scores of blacks to work fetching fuel to try and burn us out, bringing up provisions, doing everything but fight—they are of no use for that—while we have only two of the dark-skinned fellows; but I must say those two have proved to be invaluable."

"Yes, sir. That man, Caesar—we have him to thank for showing us how to utilise the water-tanks."

"Yes, and the underground supplies," said the lieutenant.

"And the whereabouts of the warehouses; otherwise we should have been starved out."

"Yes, Mr Murray; we have been pretty fortunate, and I think we should have been able to hold out if it were not for one thing."

"Should have been, sir?"

"Yes, of course, my lad. You see, I should have contented myself with having remained standing upon the defensive until the captain came to our help, though I should strongly have advocated a sally and the cutting of the way to the sloop so as to receive the help of the doctor for poor Mr Roberts—Eh? What were you going to observe?"

"That I venture to think that it would be the wisest plan in any case, sir."

"No, not in any case, Mr Murray. You see, our position is a very serious one."

"I don't think the men think so, sir."

"Eh? Do you think that they take a rosy view of it?"

"I'm sure they do, sir."

"Humph! Well, I mustn't damp them till the last extremity."

"But surely, sir—" began Murray.

"I surely see that you do not know what I know, Mr Murray."

"I suppose not, sir," said the lad.

"But I do not see why you as a youth growing into manhood, and who are sharing with me the responsibilities of this position, should not know everything."

"I think I do know everything, sir," said Murray, smiling, "and see fully how precarious our position is."

"Indeed, Mr Murray?" said the lieutenant sadly.

"Yes, sir; I think I see all, and it makes me feel very proud to know how brave and contented the men are, poor fellows! If I were in command, sir, I should be delighted to see the confidence the men have in their leader."

"Hah! Yes, my dear boy," said the lieutenant, smiling more sadly than before. "Well, I think that perhaps I shall tell you all."

"All, sir? Is there a graver peril than I know of?"

"Yes, my lad, and I think that you ought to know—that is, if you would rather share my knowledge than remain in ignorance."

"I would rather share the knowledge, sir, and try to help you," said the lad firmly.

"Good! Then you shall; Mr Murray, we have a strong little fort here, and provisions enough to last us a month."

"Yes, sir."

"But we shall be driven to cut our way somehow to the sloop."

"Why not attack one of the schooners, sir—board her—for there are evidently more than one."

"Because we want the sinews of war, Mr Murray."

"Money, sir?" cried Murray.

"Tchah! Nonsense! Powder, my boy—powder."

"Why, sir, I thought—" began Murray.

"So did I, my lad; but unfortunately those blacks in supplying us with water to saturate that last fire—"

"Threw it over the powder-supply, sir!" cried Murray, in horror.

"Yes, my lad; that is our position, and we have only a few charges left."

"Hah! Well, sir," said Murray drawing a deep breath, "then we must use the edges of our cutlasses."

"Good!" said the lieutenant, clapping the lad upon the shoulder. "I am glad I told you, Mr Murray, for it has taught me that I have a brave lad upon whom I can depend. Yes, my lad, we have edges to our cutlasses, and when it comes to the last we must use them too."

Chapter Forty Nine.

"Caesar don't know."

It was a little later on that, during a quiet interval and while in obedience to his officer Murray had been seeing to the men and taking care they were well refreshed ready for the next attack that might be delivered, the lieutenant joined the lad.

"Are the men satisfied?" he said quietly.

"Yes, sir; any one would think that we were out upon an excursion."

"Poor lads!" said the lieutenant. "I'm afraid it is going to be a sad excursion for them."

"Oh, I don't know, sir," said Murray cheerily. "Who knows, sir, but what the captain may come and cut us out at any time, and call upon us to help him rout out the horrible wasps' nest?"

"That's a good, bright, boyish way of looking upon things, my boy," said the lieutenant, "and we shall see. There, come and let's look at our wounded ones. Have you had a chat with your messmate lately?"

"I've been to see him three times to-day, but he is very weak yet. You have been with him too, sir. He told me. I wish you would speak to Titely, sir. He wants to get up and fight, and he is not fit."

"I've already forbidden it, Mr Murray," said the lieutenant; "and the poor fellow looked quite cut up, so I promised him a double allowance as soon as he got well enough."

The lieutenant was silent for a few minutes, and stood as if listening so intently that Murray grew uneasy.

"Do you hear anything, sir?" he asked.

"No, my lad; I wish I could. I am getting anxious."

"The men are keeping a very sharp lookout, sir."

"Oh yes; I am not afraid of that, my lad. My anxiety is for the *Seafowl*. It is so long since I have heard her guns, and then they were apparently a long distance away."

"Yes, sir," said Murray cheerfully; "but then it is a long while since we heard the slaver's guns, and that seems to mean that the captain has silenced and perhaps—"

"Perhaps what, Mr Murray?"

"I was going to say sunk the schooner, sir; but I hope he has not done that, for the men's sake."

"What, on account of prize money?" replied the lieutenant. "Oh, by the way, Mr Murray, I suppose you still believe in that black fellow, Caesar?"

"Oh yes, sir, thoroughly. I'm sure he saved my life."

"Humph! Well, I want to have faith in him, but it is hard work to trust in people sometimes. Then I get thinking a great deal about that Mr Allen. I suppose he is sincere."

"Oh, I feel sure he is, sir. The thorough reverence the black Caesar has for him is sufficient to prove that his master is good to his people."

"Well, after the ill these slave-owners have done the poor creatures they owe them something in the way of recompense. Humph! How strange! We begin talking of the black, and here he is. He wants to speak to you, seemingly. Call him up."

Caesar had come peering in at one of the doors, and as soon as Murray signed to him he hurried eagerly into the room, when the lieutenant looked at him searchingly and said—

"What about your master, my man? Where do you think he is now?"

Caesar started violently, and his lips quivered as he said huskily—

"Caesar don't know, sah. Berry much frighten."

"What, about the slavers and their schooners?"

"No, massa. Caesar 'fraid Massa Huggin take um and kill um."

"What for? Why should he kill one who is his master?"

"Bad man, massa. 'Fraid Massa Allen talk to Bri'sh cap'en and set all a black free. 'Fraid Massa Huggin kill um."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said the lieutenant.

"Caesar berry much 'fraid Massa Allen no let Caesar kill Massa Huggin."

"I should think not!" said the lieutenant; and Caesar looked at him curiously.

"Massa Huggin bad man, sah. Caesar kill, sua. Him take away and kill um. Caesar t'ink so first time. T'ink so now."

"Where would he take them?"

"Caesar know, sah. Show Bri'sh officer where. Oder side island where slabe barracks and slabe ship come."

"You could take us there, my man?" said the lieutenant.

"Yes, massa. Caesar show way when Bri'sh cap'en come wif plenty men. Not 'nough now. All get kill. Show Bri'sh officer all um slabes. All Massa Huggin strong men, berry strong men."

"Good. You shall, my man," said the lieutenant; "and as you say this Huggins's men are so strong we will wait for reinforcements, so as to make sure of taking them."

"Massa try," said the black. "Try sabe Massa Allen. Try quick."

"But what are you fidgeting about?" said Murray sharply.

"Caesar t'ink Massa Huggin man come and fight soon."

"What makes you think that?" asked Murray.

"Caesar don't know, massa. Caesar feel Massa Huggin man come soon. Look, massa. Big Tom May come 'long."

The black turned excitedly to point in the direction of the head of the open staircase, where the big sailor had suddenly appeared.

"Rocks ahead, sir," he said, in a low gruff whisper.

"Something wrong to report, my lad?"

"Ay, ay, sir. They arn't come out yet, but three lookouts report seeing the enemy just inside the edge of the plantation, sir."

"Off with you then, Mr Murray," cried the lieutenant, "and take your old station. Use your ammunition carefully," he added, with a meaning intonation and a peculiar look which made the lad nod his head quickly. "Keep the sharpest lookout for fire. They must not get hold of us there."

Murray hurried off with Tom May, followed by the black, and before many minutes had elapsed the expected attack had developed so rapidly, and was delivered with such energy, that but for the brave resistance, the enemy must have carried all before them. As it was the little party of defenders met them with so fierce a fire that the savage-looking mongrel crew were sent staggering back, followed by the triumphant cheers of the *Seafo'wls*, who were still cheering when Mr Anderson made a gesture and called for silence.

"Up on to the head of the staircase, my lads," he cried. "We must make our stand there."

"Beg pardon, sir," growled Tom May, with the look of an angry lion, "but will you have some cartridges sarved out, for me and my messmates have fired our last."

"Yes, my lads," said the lieutenant, "that is a bitter fact. We have fired our last shots, and we must fall back now upon our cutlasses."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the big fellow coolly. "D'yer hear, my lads? Cutlashes it is."

And at that crucial moment, as Murray ran his eyes along the faces of the men, there was no sign of dismay—just the cheery, contented look of Seaman Jack Tar ready for the worst, and the deep threatening tones of the beaten-back enemy were pretty well deadened by a hearty cheer.

But an hour later, the enemy were back in stronger force, to be driven off once more, but at a terrible expenditure of force, for as Murray and Tom May came back from the sheltered room where they had laid their gallant leader, badly wounded, by the side of Roberts, it was to find the members of their sadly diminished force sitting wearily together discussing another loss which Harry Lang unwillingly communicated to the young officer.

"But have you looked round well? Perhaps he's lying somewhere among the trees."

"Oh yes, sir, we've looked, and he arn't there. We've been talking it over, sir, and we all think the same: he's had enough of it, sir, and gone."

"Who has?" said Tom May gruffly.

"That there nigger, Caesar, Tom."

"Dunnot believe it," said Tom May fiercely, for he was very sore.

"Well, messmate," said Harry Lang, "he arn't here."

Chapter Fifty.

Caesar finds the Key.

It was at the end of a desperate struggle, during which the brave little party of sailors had again and again driven their assailants back and repaired the defences of the two windows they held by dragging fresh pieces of furniture to their breastwork from other rooms, and they had now thrown themselves down, panting and exhausted, so as to recover what strength they could before another attack was made.

Nothing could have been better done, but as Tom May said, they wanted time.

"Tain't wittles and drink, Mr Murray, sir," he said. "There's been plenty o' that, sir. I think we've all had too much. What we want is, as I says afore, time, sir, for it all to turn into strength."

"Yes, Tom," said the middy bitterly; "we are all completely exhausted—that is to say, you and all our brave fellows are."

"Well, arn't you too, sir? Seems to me as you're much more zausted than we lads is."

"Oh, don't talk about me, Tom. I'm as weak as a child now."

"Nat'rally, sir. Your muscles is done up, and what you ought to do now is to see if you can't hit on some dodge."

"Tom," cried Murray despairingly, "I've tried to hit on some plan till my brains refuse to act."

"Yes, sir; nat'rally, sir; but can't yer hit on something in the blowing-up-of-the-beggars line?"

"Tom!" cried the lad passionately. "How can I scheme an explosion and blow the wretches up without powder?"

"Zackly so, sir; that's what I've been thinking. You can't, can yer?"

"No, Tom."

"Couldn't make a big pot or kettle so hot that when they come along next time it would bust, could you, sir?"

"No, Tom, I certainly could not," said the middy decisively.

"Course not, sir," growled the man, frowning.

"We're beaten, Tom; we're absolutely beaten," said Murray bitterly; "and the next time the wretches come on it will be the last."

"Oh, I dunno, sir. Never say die! Don't you be downhearted, sir. There's a deal o' fight in us yet, as you'll see nex' time the beggars makes a roosh."

"No, Tom; we're getting weaker and weaker."

"Yah! I wonder at you, sir," said the sailor, moistening his hand, taking a good grip of his cutlass, and then laying it down again. "We're getting a bit longer rest this time, and jest as like as not, sir, they'll begin to tire soon."

"No, Tom; they fight with a desperate energy which is too much for us."

"Well, they do go it, sir, I must say. You see, it makes a deal o' differ when a man's got a noose round his neck. They knows that if they don't get the best of us they'll be strung up to the yard-arm, and it sets 'em thinking that they may as well fight it out as that. But there, we're not licked yet, sir, though I must say as it was a nasty knock for us when the first luff went down, knocked silly as he was by that swivel-eyed Molatter chap—'bout as ugly a ruffian as ever I did see. Then, too, it was a bit o' hard luck for us when that darkie chap got rooshed off in the muddle. He would ha' been useful to fetch powder and help load."

"When there was no powder, Tom?" said the lad bitterly.

"Yes, sir; I meant if there had been any, o' course. Poor chap, he couldn't help being a black un, could he, sir? I've thought over and over again that if he could ha' grown white and talked like a Christian, sir, he'd ha' made quite a man."

"Lie still, Tom," cried Murray, laying a hand upon the big sailor's arm.

"Thought they was coming on agen, sir?"

"No, no! I'll rouse you up the moment I hear them advancing. Rest all you can."

"Thankye, sir," said the man drowsily. "But you won't go to sleep, sir? You must be dead tired yourself, sir, and it's so dark it may tempt yer, sir."

"You may trust me, Tom."

"Course I may, sir. But I think if I was you I'd give the first luff another drink o' water, sir."

"I did a short time ago, Tom."

"And I been thinking, sir, that if you could tie three or four sheets together and slide down 'em you might get hold o' that ladder they put up again' the window to swarm up."

"I did, Tom, when you told me the last time."

"Course you did, sir, and I forgot," said the man drowsily. "But what's that there?"

"What?" asked Murray, as he sat listening in the darkness, with his exhausted comrades lying about beside the barricaded window.

"That there," whispered the man, pointing through the gloom over where a dark line was formed by a piece of furniture.

Murray made a snatch at the sailor's cutlass, took a firm grip of the hilt, and then creeping cautiously over two of the recumbent sailors, made for the opening, now quite satisfied that May's eyes even now had been sharper than his own, and that one of the enemy was stealing up by means of some bamboo pole or ladder, to guide his companions into the bravely defended room.

Murray rose slowly, threw back the heavy sharp blade till the hilt rested against his left ear, and gathering into the effort all his force he was about to deliver his cut upon the unguarded enemy's head, when there was a quick whisper:

"Massa Murray no hit. Take hold 'fore Caesar tumble down."

The middy loosened his hold of the cutlass just in time, and catching hold of the black's hand with both his own, dragged him over the barricade right into the room.

"Hullo, darkie," whispered Tom May; "it is you, is it?"

"Yes, Massa Big Tom," replied the black feebly, and as if speaking in weakness and in pain.

"Thought you'd come back to your friends again. Didn't bring in any more powder, did you?"

"No, Massa Tom," replied the poor fellow faintly. "Caesar nearly get kill. T'ink nebber see poor Massa Allen again. Couldn't find um."

"Did you, blackie? Well, we all began to think something of that kind."

"Massa Murray Frank and all Bri'sh sailor come 'long o' Caesar. T'ink take um where Massa Allen must be."

"No, my man," said the middy sadly. "I can't leave my friends here. We must hold this place to the last."

The black sank back on the littered floor and groaned.

"Poor Massa Allen!" he said.

"Lookye here, darkie," said the big sailor; "tain't no use to howl. What do you say to getting a good bunch of palm leaves and waiting till these slaver beggars come again, and then setting fire to the place and burning them all up together?"

"Yes, sah," said the black sadly. "Caesar go and set fire to sugar-barrel; all burn up."

"Bah! Take too long, darkie. Now, if you'd got a barrel o' powder!"

"Big Massa Tom want barrel o' powder?"

"Do I want a barrel of powder?" growled the big sailor, in a deep-toned voice full of contempt and scorn.

"Not big barrel sugar," said the black sadly; "lilly barrel black powder, all black like niggah."

"Here, what are you talking about, you old pitch kettle?" cried the sailor, full of animation now. "You don't know where there's a lilly barrel, do you?"

"Yes," said the man quietly.

"Not a lilly white barrel?"

"No, sah; lilly black barrel. Two—ten—twenty lilly barrel."

"What!" cried Murray excitedly. "Where is it?"

"Down'tair," said the black, speaking with more animation now. "Massa Murray Frank wantum?"

"Yes, of course," cried the lad. "Where do you say it is? Down-stairs?"

"Yes, massa. Down'tair long wi' Massa Allen bottle of wine. Plenty bottle o' wine. Two, ten, twenty lilly barrel black powder."

"Avast there, my lads," said the big sailor, in a deep, low whisper. "Rouse and bit, my chickens. Here's corn in Egypt and no mistake." And then, as the men sprang up ready to meet another attack, even if it might be the last, Tom May turned to Murray. "Beg pardon, sir, but what's it to be?"

"Get a barrel of powder up directly, Tom," replied the lad; "that is, if it doesn't turn out too good to be true. You serve it out to the lads, too, and be ready to give the enemy a surprise when they come on again."

"Beg pardon, sir, but hadn't we better make it a mine, sir? Clap a couple o' barrels just in their way. Lay a train, and one on us be ready to fire it just as they're scrowging together under the window."

"Yes, far better, Tom; far better than blazing at the wretches with the muskets. Here, Caesar, show us where the powder is. Is it locked up?"

"Yes, massa; down'tair. Caesar know where key."

The feeling that he was going to be of some great assistance to those who were the friends of his master seemed to rouse up the black, who staggered at first as he rose, and then seemed to grow stronger as he led the way towards the door, caught at the balustrade, and before he could be seized fell and rolled heavily down the stairs, to lie groaning feebly at the bottom.

"Look at that now!" cried the big sailor, as he helped Murray to raise the poor fellow to his feet. "Why didn't you speak out about the gunpowder before?"

"Caesar not know," moaned the shivering black. "Key dah," he panted. "Key dah."

"Key dah!" growled the big sailor. "Who's to know where *dah* is? Can't you show us? I believe we shall have the beggars here before we can find it, sir."

But the black began to recover a little and ended by leading the way in the darkness to a closet in the principal down-stairs room, leaving it open, and then, armed with a key and hurrying his companions back, he opened a door in the wide hall, and holding on by the big sailor, showed the way down into the cellar of the well-vaulted house.

The rest proved to be easy, though every step was taken under a state of intense excitement, while the wounded and worn-out sailors forgot every suffering, inspired as they now were by hope.

At last, armed with a couple of fair-sized kegs of powder, held in reserve in case of troubles with the large body of slaves that were always about the plantation and at the so-called barracks, the plan of laying a mine and firing it when next the enemy made an attack was modified at Murray's suggestion into the preparing of some half-dozen shells, each composed of an ordinary wine bottle or decanter fully charged and rammed down with an easily prepared slow match such as would occur to any lad to contrive ready for lighting from a candle held prepared in the upper chamber, risk being a matter that was quite left out of the question.

"Hah!" ejaculated Murray, as the shells were at last prepared. "Now they may come on as soon as they like. This must be the best plan, Tom—to wait till they begin to attack, and fire from here."

"Well, it's the safest, sir; but mightn't we load every piece we've got and give 'em a taste of that wittles as well, sir?"

"Of course," was the reply; and every piece was loaded; but still the enemy did not come.

"I say, sir, this here arn't going to end in a big disappyntment, is it, sir?"

"What, do you think they mayn't come?"

"Yes, sir, that's it."

"What could be better, Tom?" replied Murray.

"Oh, I want 'em to come, sir," grumbled the man. "They've made us so savage that we shan't none of us be happy

without we gets a chance to use this here dust.”

“They’ll come; depend upon it, Tom,” said Murray.

“Then how would it be to light a fire out yonder, sir?” suggested the big sailor.

“What, so as to see the enemy?”

“Nay, sir; we shall manage that, and when the shells busts, sir, they’ll light it up a bit; but what I meant was, sir, to start a pretty good fire just at a fair distance in front of the window, sir, just handy for some of us to make up good big charges of powder tied up in the sleeves of our shirts, sir, handy and light ready to heave into the hot parts where the fire’s burning. They’re pretty tough, them slavers, but a few of them charges set off among ’em would be more than they’d care to face. We’ve got plenty o’ powder, sir, to keep it on till to-morrow; so what do you say?”

“I say, certainly, Tom,” replied Murray; “and on thinking again of what we had first planned, I say that we will lay a train from the door under this window to a mine consisting of one of the barrels just hidden.”

“And me fire it, sir?” cried the big sailor eagerly.

“No; I shall do that myself,” said Murray firmly.

“All right, sir; you’re orficer,” said the big sailor, rather sulkily, “and a sailor’s dooty’s to obey orders; but I did think, sir, as a orficer in command was to give orders and let them as was under him do the work. I don’t mean no offence, Mr Murray, sir, but I thought you was in command now that the first luff was down in orspittle, or as we say, in sick bay.”

“Well, we’ll see, Tom,” said Murray. “I don’t want to disappoint you, my lad. What we’ve got to make sure of is that the mine is fired.”

“Ay, ay, sir; but you might trust me, sir.”

“I do trust you, Tom,” replied Murray. “There, let’s have the powder up and take the head out of another keg.”

“Ay, ay, sir. Give the word, sir, and we’ll soon do that.”

“Off with you,” cried Murray; and while the men were gone below, he carefully arranged the so-called shells that had been prepared, so that they were handy for hurling from the window, and once more examined the quick match that had been formed of strips of linen and moistened powder—a fuse that could be depended upon to keep burning when once set alight.

He had hardly satisfied himself as to the arrangement of the terrible weapons that had been prepared, before a sound that floated through the open window drew him close up, and he had hardly stood there in doubt a couple of minutes before his doubt was dispelled, for plainly enough, and apparently from the other side of the island, came the report of a heavy gun, which was answered by another report, evidently from a gun of different calibre.

Just then the men who had been below came hurrying up, bearing the powder as coolly as if it was so much butter.

“I’ve brought two on ’em, sir,” said the big sailor, “and if you’ll just look on, sir, we’ll make all right.”

“Be careful, my lad,” said Murray. “Remember the light’s here.”

“Ay, ay, sir; we’ll be on the lookout for sparks,” replied the man; “but hullo, sir! Hear that?”

“Yes,” said Murray; “firing over there, and the captain at work.”

“Three cheers for ’em, my lads! We shall have the beggars at us here soon.”

Chapter Fifty One.

Laying the Train.

The dangerous preparations were soon made, and Tom May’s and his comrades’ hands were plainly seen trembling as they handled their kegs.

“Look at that now, sir,” said the big sailor. “Did you ever see such a set o’ cowards in your life?”

“Cowards, Tom? Never,” said Murray, who was all of a quiver too.

“More did I, sir. I wouldn’t ha’ believed I could ha’ been in such a shiver and shake. I supposed it’d be for fear we shouldn’t be ready for the warmint; but it don’t look like it, do it?”

“Yes, Tom, for your hands are steady enough now you’ve done.”

“Well, I hope so, sir,” said the man, “because it seems such a bad example to the lads, and they’ve all ketched it. Hullo, darkie! What, are you shaking too?”

“Yes, Massa Tom,” replied the black, with his teeth chattering. “Caesar drefful frighten we no get the gunpowder go off when Massa Huggin man come. You let Caesar take lilly barrel now and light um, massa.”

“Why, here’s another awfully cowardly chap, Mr Murray, sir. It’s a rum un, arn’t it?”

"You make has'e, Massa Tom May; not talkee so much palaver," cried the trembling black, seizing hold of one of the barrels and hoisting it upon his shoulder. "You bring candle; set light."

"No, no, Caesar," cried Murray. "Not ready yet. Wait."

The man parted with the little keg unwillingly, and stood with his hand to his ear straining his neck out of the window, and listened.

"Massa Huggin man come along," he panted.

"Well, we're ready for them, my coal-dust messmate."

"Hush!" whispered Murray. "Who's that calling?" For a voice reached them from the next room.

"It's Mr Roberts, sir. Ahoy, there! Coming, sir."

Murray ran through the opening to where the middy was lying trying to make himself heard.

"Were you calling, Dick?" said Murray, his voice still trembling with excitement.

"Calling? Yes! Shouting till I was hoarse. I could hear. You've got powder now. Bring some here, and the fellows' muskets. I can load if I can't do anything else."

"Yes, bring powder," said another voice, one, however, that sounded very weak and faint. "I think I can reload, too, for the lads."

"No, no, Mr Anderson," cried Murray excitedly; "leave it all to us, sir. The enemy are coming on again, and there is no time to make fresh preparations."

"Ahoy, there, Mr Murray! Now's your time!"

"Off with you, my lad, and Heaven help you!" groaned the lieutenant. "Roberts, we must bear our lot, and be satisfied with our defenders."

Murray was already through the door which separated the two rooms, to find the men waiting, as ready and eager as if not one amongst them had been wounded.

"Are they very near?" asked Murray excitedly.

"Quite nigh enough, sir," growled the man who was hugging one keg, another able-seaman holding another, while the black grasped a couple of the extemporised shells.

"No, no, Caesar," said Murray sharply. "Put those down here; they are for throwing. You lead the way out through the lower door along the path the enemy will come."

"Yes sah. You come too?" cried the black.

"Yes; quick! Off with you!"

The man hurried down the staircase, followed by the two sailors, whose comrades had received their orders to stand fast at the upper window to cover the engineering party. The door was thrown open, and Murray led the way out into the darkness, Caesar holding his hand tightly.

"Too late!" said the lad hoarsely; and he drew back.

"No, no, sah; plenty time," whispered the black. "Come 'long."

"Ay, ay, sir!" growled Tom May. "Sharp's the word."

"But we shall be running into their arms, my lad, and lose the powder."

"Not us, sir. They can't see us coming, and we mustn't let 'em hear us."

"Forward, then," whispered Murray. "What! there, Caesar?" he continued, for the black had run forward a few steps and then stopped short in a dark alley leading towards the side of the plantation and the quarters of the black servants.

"Yes, massa. Huggins man mus' come 'long here."

There was no time for consideration, for the enemy was evidently approaching cautiously, and before any further order could be given Tom May had plumped down the keg he carried, and his companion was about to follow suit with the other, but Murray checked him.

"No, no," he whispered; "one first. Is the top quite open, Tom?"

"Open it is, sir," was the reply.

"Now then, my lad, take the other keg and lay the train. Sprinkle it thickly, walking backward right away along the path here to the door."

"Right it is, sir," growled the big sailor. "No, no, messmate; you keep hold o' the barrel and walk alongside. I'll ladle it out. Mind, all on you, not to tread in the dust. D'y'er hear, darkie? Keep back, I tell you; too many cooks 'll spoil the

broth."

It was rough work, and clumsily executed, but somehow or other, and in spite of the near approach of the enemy, who seemed to be aware of their proximity, the train was effectively laid, and the engineers regained the doorway, just in front of which the train was made to end.

"Now for the candle, Tom," whispered Murray. "Here, you, Caesar, where are you going?"

There was no reply, for the black had dashed in and run up the staircase, to seize the light from the upper room where the covering party were standing ready to fire from the window.

It was a risky proceeding, and Murray stood below in the doorway looking on, but afraid to speak for fear of doing more harm than good, as he saw the faithful black steal rapidly down the stairs, his black fingers enclosing the burning candle like an open lantern which threw its glowing fluttering flame upwards over the black weird-looking face with its glistening eyes and white teeth. Every moment the flame threatened to be extinct, but it fluttered and recovered itself as the black tottered down into the hall and then stepped quickly past Murray in the effort to shelter the candle behind the door.

"Dah, massa," he panted. "Now say when Caesar set fire to de powder."

"No, my man," panted Murray. "I must fire the powder myself. You tell me when."

"Caesar say when, massa?"

"Yes, and I will fire the train. Now then, you stand close behind me when I step out. You, Tom, stand behind the door, and as soon as I have fired the train Caesar and I will dash back into the house, and you clap to and fasten the door. Do you see?"

"No, sir, but I can feel," growled the man; "but won't the 'splasion bust it open?"

"Very likely, Tom."

"Ay, ay, sir; but right it is, sir."

"Now then, Caesar," whispered Murray, thrusting one hand behind the door to seize the candle and place it ready in shelter.

"Not yet, massa," said the black, who stood out a couple of yards from the door. "Dey come 'long close, but all 'top now."

"Ah, they have found the powder keg," ejaculated Murray.

"No, sah. Dey all close 'longside and wait for more Massa Huggin man."

"Then I will not fire yet."

"No, sah. Caesar fink dey watch see Murray Frank, want know what um do. All talkee palaver. No fire yet."

"I must fire soon," whispered the lad, in a strangely excited tone of voice, which sounded as if he were being suffocated.

"No; Murray Frank not fire yet," whispered the black, in eager tones. "Wait plenty more Huggins man come. Yes," he whispered, as a burst of voices as of many of the enemy hurrying up could be heard; and then above all came the strangely familiar tones of one who had been leading the newly-arrived party, and Murray started violently as there fell upon his ear in fierce adjuration—

"Wall, why are you waiting? In with you, curse you, and finish them off!"

The black started back to retreat into the house, but Murray extended his left hand and caught him by the shoulder.

"Where are you going?" he whispered.

"Run!" was the reply. "Massa Huggin."

"Not yet," whispered Murray. "Is it time now?"

The lad's calm words had the effect of steadying the trembling black as they listened, and his voice was no longer the same as he said firmly now—

"Yes, massa. Time now. Fire!"

Murray thrust the black from him as he snatched the light from behind the door, took a couple of steps towards the enemy, and stooped down with the candle burning blue and seeming to become extinct as the lad touched the path. Then there was a bright flash as the powder caught, sputtered and began to run, lighting up the figure of the midshipman in the act of dashing in through the doorway, a score of bullets rattling after him in answer to an order; and then the door closed with a heavy bang.

Darkness within and a blaze of light without, where the voice of the Yankee could be heard shouting orders which rose above the buzzing fluttering noise of the running train.

"Hurt, Mr Murray, sir?"

"No! Where's the black?"

Crash!

A fierce burst as of thunder, and the just-closed door was dashed in, while the hall and staircase were filled with light.

Chapter Fifty Two.

What the Powder did.

The horrible dank odour of exploded gunpowder; a blinding smoke; thick darkness; a strange singing in the ears, and then, in connection with a sensation as of having been struck down and stunned, an awful silence.

These were Murray's impressions as he slowly struggled to his feet. Then as his scattered senses began to return he cried hoarsely—

"Who's here?—Who's hurt?"

There was no reply for a few moments, and then from somewhere up-stairs as it seemed to Murray, Roberts shouted

"Do speak, somebody! Are you all killed?"

"No, no," panted Murray, who now began to cough and choke. "Speak, somebody! Who's hurt?"

"Here, avast there!" now burst forth the hearty tones of the big sailor. "Let's have it, messmates, only don't all speak at once. Arn't all on you killed, are you?"

"No, no," cried one.

"Knocked the wind out of us," said another, from the upper room.

"Here, steady there," cried Tom May now, in a voice full of excitement. "Avast there, what did you do with the rest of that there keg of powder?"

"Me?" cried Harry Lang, who had handled it. "You, yes! What did you do with it, messmate?"

"Took it up-stairs. I mean, brought it up here."

"Then 'ware sparks."

The dread of a fresh explosion in the presence of the faint sparks that could be seen lying here and there for some distance about the front of the planter's house set every one to work with bucket and water, and it was not until broad daylight that confidence began to reign, with the calmness which accompanied the knowledge that the door which had been blown in had been replaced by a strong barricade to act as a defence against a renewed attack.

Of this, however, there was no sign, the danger resting only in the imagination of the wearied-out and wounded men, several of whom had sunk into a stupor of exhaustion, while Murray, Tom May and the black were out exploring, and finding here and there at a distance from the front of the house traces of the havoc which could be produced by the explosion of a keg of gunpowder.

Not to dwell upon horrors, let it suffice to say that one of the discoveries made was by Tom May and the black, when the following words were uttered—

"Well, look ye here, darkie, you needn't shiver like that. Y'arn't afraid on him now?"

"No; not 'fraid; but he make niggah 'fraid all many years, and Caesar keep 'fraid still. But nebber any more. He dead now."

"But are you sure this was him?"

"Yes, Caesar quite suah. Only 'fraid now poor Massa Allen dead too."

"Ah, well, messmate—black messmate, I mean—we had nothing to do with that, and Master Huggins will never make an end of any more poor fellows; so don't shiver like jelly, for I says it's a blessing that the beggar's gone."

"Yes, Massa Tom. No 'fraid no more. All a blessing Massa Huggins gone."

"And all his men, darkie."

"Yes, sah, and all his men. They never come back no more."

"What is it?" said Murray, coming up. "Have you found out anything more?"

Tom May made an announcement which Murray communicated to the wounded lieutenant, and he had hardly finished when the sound of firing began again.

"What's that?" cried Mr Anderson, raising himself upon one arm. "There, you needn't tell me, Murray, lad; I know. It's the captain attacking, or being attacked by, some of the slaving scoundrels, and we are not there to help him."

"But surely, sir, we have been helping him by what we have done," said Murray; and the lieutenant stretched out his hand, wincing and groaning as he did so, and clutched the midshipman's arm.

"Thank you, my dear boy," he said; "that does me good. We have been helping him, haven't we?"

"Why, of course, sir. That explosion has ended in killing the chief slaver, the head of the gang, as well as a terrible number of his wretched followers."

"So it has, Mr Murray; so it has. Your doing too."

"Oh no, sir; I only played my part. We did," said Murray, smiling.

"We? Nonsense! You fired the train."

"Yes, sir, as your deputy, and with your instructions. It was done by us in following out duties that the captain would have wished carried out."

"Ha! Thank you, Mr Murray. I am weak and faint and troubled by the idea that I have not done my part."

"Oh, nonsense, sir. There, let me put this wet handkerchief to your head. You're feverish again."

"Thank you, Murray," sighed the lieutenant gratefully. "You are a good fellow. I wish Mr Roberts were as good an officer."

"Well, you have your wish, sir," said Murray laughingly. "He'd have done his share if he hadn't been wounded."

"Ah, yes; how is he?"

"Getting better, sir, certainly."

"That's good, Murray," said the lieutenant, with a sigh. "I want to make as good a show of the men as I can when I have to face the captain again. I'm afraid, though, that it will be a very bad one, eh?"

"Plenty of wounded, sir, but none very bad. The poor fellows have broken down a bit now that the work's done, but they'll soon mend."

"Then you don't think, Murray, that the captain will find much fault with me and my men?"

"He'd be very unreasonable if he did, sir."

"Hah! You think so, Murray? But he can be rather unreasonable sometimes, Murray, eh?"

"Terribly, sir."

"Hah! That's comforting, Murray, for I am very weak. I feel, you see, that I ought to be up and doing now, my lad, and I haven't the power to stir."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Murray, "but now you're *hors de combat* am I not leading officer?"

"Certainly, my dear boy, and I tell you that you have done wonders."

"Thank you, sir," said Murray, "but I was not fishing for compliments. What I wanted you to say was that I was to take the lead."

"I say so, then, certainly, my dear sir."

"Well, then, sir, I say that your duty is to lie still and get better, and that our lads are to do the same."

"Well, leaving me out, Murray, that's quite right."

"Yes, sir, and including you. The best thing is for me to give our lads a rest to recoup a bit. We can't do better than hold this place in case of a fresh attack."

"Quite right."

"And wait until the captain sends help."

"Excellent, Murray; but the captain may be waiting for help to come from us."

"Yes, sir, and if he is I am sorry to say that I could not lead four men to his aid."

"Oh dear, that's bad," groaned the lieutenant.

"You couldn't get up and lead us, sir."

"Get up? Lead you, Murray? My dear lad, I am as weak as an infant."

"Ray—ray—hooray!" came loudly.

"What's that?" cried the lieutenant excitedly. "Quick, lad! My sword. A fresh attack."

"No, sir," cried Murray, who had run to the window as the cheering was responded to loudly. "It's Mr Munday with over a dozen men coming up at the double. Do you hear, sir?—' *Seafowls* ahoy!"

"Ah!" sighed the lieutenant, sinking back upon the now stained pillow which had been taken from one of the planter's beds.

"Mr Murray, that you?" came from the front.

"Yes, sir," cried Murray, who was looking from the window.

"Well, I shouldn't have known you. You're as black as a sweep."

"Yes, sir," said the middy, clapping his hand to his face.

"Seen anything of Mr Anderson?"

"Yes, he's lying up here, wounded."

"What! Not badly?"

"Got a nasty wound, sir, but it will soon be better," replied the middy, glancing back at the half-fainting officer.

"Come up, Munday," cried the latter; and in a few minutes the second lieutenant had forced his way over the barricaded entrance and reached the rooms that now formed the temporary infirmary.

"Very, very glad to have found you at last," said Mr Munday, shaking hands warmly. "My word, sir, you have had a tremendous fight here!"

"You can report to the captain that I have done my best, Munday, and our lads have fought like heroes."

"That's good, sir. I'm sure they have. I wish, though, we had been here."

"And now you will either get us aboard or send for Mr Reston."

"I'm sorry to say that I can't do either," said the second lieutenant.

"What!" cried the chief officer.

"It has been like this; the captain sent me ashore with a boat's crew to find you and the rest, and as soon as we were out of sight he was attacked by a couple of schooners."

"How did you know that?" asked Murray, who had laid his hand upon the chief officer's lips to keep him from speaking.

"From the two boat-keepers; and one of these schooners our lads report as being commanded by that scoundrel who tricked us with his lugger. He was the real owner of the schooner that escaped."

"Ah! Go on," said Mr Anderson faintly. "Tell Murray, and let me lie and listen."

"Well, then," continued the officer, "these two schooners attacked the skipper just when he was shorthanded, and before I could get back to my cutter they had been there, driven the two boat-keepers ashore, and scuttled her. Of course my two men could do nothing but make for me. So there I was ashore, listening to the firing, while the skipper had to keep on a running fight, and that's been going on ever since, for they've been a bit too many for the *Seafowl*, it seems to me."

"How unfortunate!" said Murray.

"Horribly, sir," said the second lieutenant. "Here have I been hunting you ever since, though I've had a few skirmishes with the scoundrels, who have seemed to swarm."

"Yes," said Murray, nodding his head. "White, black and mongrel scum of the earth."

"Exactly, my lad. Well, to make a long story short, the place is such a maze that I'm sure I should never have found you if we hadn't seen the flash of this explosion. Of course we heard the roar far enough away, but that would not have guided us without we had seen the direction."

"No, sir, I suppose not. Well, sir, what's to be done now?" said Murray.

"Let's hear what Mr Anderson says."

"Hush! He has fallen asleep," whispered Murray. "Poor fellow! He is very weak."

"And ought to have Reston to him. We're in a nice hole, Murray, upon my word! Have you got a morsel of prog? My lads are starving."

"We've plenty, sir."

"Hah! Then feed us, dear lad, and then we shall be ready to fight or do anything you like. But hullo! What about Dick Roberts?"

"Wounded, but getting better. He's in the next room, doing nothing but sleep."

"Next room! Upon my word you middies are pretty sybarites! Well, let us have this prog."

"Come down to the dining-room," said Murray. "Mr Anderson cannot do better than sleep."

"Dining-room!" said the second lieutenant in a whisper, as they left the chamber. "What next? You haven't got such a thing as a cellar of wine on the premises, have you, my lad?"

"Yes, sir," said Murray, laughing; "but that's where we have our powder magazine."

"Give us something to eat, then, my dear fellow, and then let's see if we can't use the powder to blow up the two schooners which are pounding the *Seafowl*. Hark! They're at it still."

"No," said Murray, listening; "those must be the *Seafowl's* guns."

Chapter Fifty Three.

The Captain's last blow up.

Murray proved to be right, for the distant reports which came from somewhere on the far side of the island proved to be the last fired by the man-o'-war, which, shorthanded though she was, and desperately attacked by the powerful well-manned schooners, had kept up a continuous fight, so cleverly carried on that it had at last ended by the running ashore of one of the big slaving craft, and the pounding of the other till in desperation the skipper, who proved to be the cunning Yankee hero of the lugger trick,—the twin brother of the scoundrel Huggins who had met his fate in the explosion,—set his swift craft on fire before taking, with the remnants of the crew, to the woods.

It was not until a couple of days later that, after extinguishing the fire on board the second schooner and setting sail with her for the harbour, Captain Kingsberry commenced firing signal guns to recall his scattered crew, and communication was made by the help of Caesar.

"Yes, Massa Murray Frank," he said eagerly; "Caesar soon show um way to where big gun go off."

He, too, it was who gave signals which resulted in the collection of as many of the plantation slaves as were wanted to bear the wounded men in palanquins through the maze-like cane brakes and down to the shore, where a shady hospital was started in which Dr Reston could rule supreme, his patients chuckling to one another as they luxuriated in the plantation coffee, sugar, molasses, fruit and tobacco, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves—so they said—in the jolliest quarters that had ever fallen to their lot.

Caesar, too, in his actions was certainly one of the greatest of the Caesars, for in spite of a terribly scorched face, and burned and wounded arms and hands, he worked almost without ceasing. Scores of his fellow-slaves flocked to help, and under his guidance the captain and crew of the *Seafowl* were perfectly astounded by the extent of the plantation buildings, and the arrangements that existed for carrying on the horrible trade and keeping up the supply from the far-off African coast.

It was a busy time for the *Seafowls*, as they called themselves, but they had the prisoners to deal with, for those left alive of the crews of the two schooners had managed to reach the familiar shelter of the dense shores, from which they did not wait to be hunted out, but utilised some of the light boats of whose existence they were well aware, and sickened by the terrible lesson they had received, made sail for one of the neighbouring bays.

It was, as has been said, a busy time for the *Seafowls*, for there were the two captured schooners to get afloat and the fired rigging to restore before they were fit to take to a destined port as prizes. There were vile barracks to burn, and plenty of other arrangements to make as to the destination of certain newly-arrived prisoners who had to be saved from their terrible fate.

Briefly, although the sailors called it a good holiday, it was a period of the hardest work, but what with prize money and tasks that paid mentally every lad and man who thought, it was a time of pleasure; and it was not till towards the end of the *Seafowl's* stay that Caesar came on board the sloop of war one evening with his face flushing with excitement and showing all his teeth.

"Caesar find um at last, massa," he cried.

"Find? Find? Not Mr Allen?" said Murray.

"Yes, massa. Find good ole Massa Allen."

"Then he is not dead?"

"Yes, massa. No massa. Huggins no kill um. Shut um up. Tell um, massa, dat um poor crack looney."

"What! Lunatick!"

"Yes, massa, looney, mad. Shut um up."

"Where? And have you seen him?"

"Yes, massa. Tullus find um in niggah hut shut up, and take me dah."

"Then that Huggins has not killed him?"

"No, massa; shut um up. Say um mad man. Berry bad. Get more bad ebbery day till Tullus find um. Black slabe woman 'top wiv him. Massa Huggins say kill her if she let um go."

"Poor creature!" said Murray, wrinkling up his brow.

"Yes, sah; berry poor creature, sah. Caesar berry sorry. Massa Allen good massa, and Caesar lub um."

"But where is he now? Not dead?"

"Yes, massa been die berry much all um time. Couldn't quite go die till poor Caesar come, and den he shake hand. Say 'Good-bye, Caesar, lad. Tell Massa Murray Frank. Tell um t'ink de bes' ob a poor weak man.'"

"Mr Allen said that, Caesar?" said Murray.

"Yes, sah. Caesar cry bofe eyes. Tullus cry and slabe woman cry when we put um in de groun' fas' asleep. Everybody lub poor Massa Allen, sah. Gone dead. Say go to sleep happy now. No more slabe trade now. No more poor niggah leap overboard now Massa Murray Frank and Bri'sh sailor come."

"Well, Mr Murray," said the captain, about an hour later, "I hope you are ready to return to your duties."

"Yes, sir, certainly," said the lad, staring.

"I'm glad of it. And, by the way, this is a very favourable opportunity for saying a few words in season to you. Let me tell you that I am not at all satisfied with the way in which your duties have been carried out, any more, I may say, than I have been with the way in which I have been served by your brother officers. I look for something better in the future, sir, something decidedly better in the future, I may say;" and he stalked aft and went below.

"Did you hear what Captain Kingsberry said, sir?" said Murray to the chief officer, who just then came limping up with his spy-glass beneath his feeble arm.

"Yes, Murray, every word. My dear boy, it is a way he has. There, there, my lad, I think amongst us we've given the slave-trade its heaviest blow."

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUNTING THE SKIPPER: THE CRUISE OF THE "SEAFOWL" SLOOP ***

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