Fenn George Manville

Hunting the Skipper: The Cruise of the «Seafowl» Sloop

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Содержание

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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 reskying 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, hevn'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 injyrubby fields.'"

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

"Exackly 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 injyrubbery 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 injyrubber 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' dollars 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 projuice 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 buts? 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 injyrubber 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 with a terrible cargo and succeed in getting one-half of the wretched captives alive to their destination in one of the plantation islands, or on the mainland.

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 it 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 furder, 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 orficer?"

"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 petillation, 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 throwed 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 "Haiti" 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 heerd 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 theirselves. 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 I?"

"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."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.