

MIDSHIPMAN RAXWORTHY

PERCY F.
WESTERMAN

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THE SMOKE WAS INCREASING

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Frontispiece

Midshipman Raxworthy

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of

“The Amir’s Ruby”, “King for a Month”, “Andy-All-Alone”, &c.

Illustrated by E. S. Hodgson

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LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Percy F. Westerman

Haunted Harbour.
His Unfinished
Voyage.
Midshipman Webb's
Treasure.
Winged Might.
Captain Flick.
Tireless Wings.
His First Ship.
The Red Pirate.
The Call of the Sea.
Standish of the Air
Police.
Sleuths of the Air.
Andy-All-Alone.
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In Defiance of the
Ban.
The Senior Cadet.
The Amir's Ruby.
The Secret of the
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All Hands to the
Boats.
A Mystery of the

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Rivals of the Reef.	With the Last of the
Captain Starlight.	Buccaneers.
On the Wings of the	A Lively Bit of the
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Captain Blundell's	The Westerman
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PART I

PART I
RAXWORTHY'S LUCK

I

The way in which the commander summed up the situation was brief and to the point—very much so.

“Sheer carelessness; leave jammed!”

Midshipman Kenneth Raxworthy set his jaw firmly, looked the commander straight in the face and said nothing. He wanted to expostulate at the injustice of the sentence—which meant that long-looked-for Christmas leave would be denied him—but the strong sense of naval discipline prevailed. He must swallow the bitter pill unflinchingly. In the Royal Navy orders must be carried out smartly and unquestioningly. After they have been executed one may relieve one’s feelings by grouching about their futility or otherwise, provided the grumble does not reach the ears of the officer responsible for the order.

It certainly was hard lines on the young midshipman. In bringing the motor-picket-boat alongside her parent ship—the light cruiser *Kirkham*—the helm had jammed, with the result that, before way could be taken off her, the picket-boat had smashed her stem-head against the ship’s side.

To make matters worse, the accident had been witnessed both by the captain and the commander, who happened to be on the fore-bridge. The Owner, as the captain of a warship is commonly dubbed, requested the Bloke, otherwise the commander, to investigate the cause of the mishap and deal with the delinquent in a suitable manner should the midshipman be at fault.

Directly the motor-pinnace had been hoisted Kenneth formally reported the accident to the officer-of-the-watch, who was pacing the quarter-deck.

“Commander wishes to see you in his cabin, my lad,” observed the officer-of-the-watch.

Knowing full well that the Bloke’s wishes were a command, Kenneth went below “at the double”, and knocked at the sliding door bearing the intimation in raised brass letters that it gave access to the cabin of the immediate arbiter of his destinies.

“Of all the lubberly ways of coming alongside, yours is the worst exhibition I’ve seen since I’ve been in the Service,” began the commander without any preamble. “What have you to say?”

“I tried to put the wheel hard-a-starboard and it jammed, sir.”

Ever since he had gained the rank that gave him gilt oak leaves on his cap,

the commander had almost daily listened to excuses from lower-deck defaulters, and less frequently to explanations often highly exaggerated from junior officers. Long familiarity had bred contempt and invariably he looked upon an excuse as a feeble attempt to mitigate the penalty. He had become a past master in the art of bowling out a defaulter.

“Stand fast a minute,” he ordered, and left the cabin.

In point of fact the midshipman had to “stand fast” for a long five minutes before the Bloke returned with a cold triumphant look in his eyes.

“The steering-gear has been thoroughly tested,” he announced bluntly. “It operates quite easily.”

Since there was no question there could be no reply. It was considered worse than bad form for a junior to contradict a senior officer’s statement. Kenneth remained silent.

“Sheer carelessness!” declared the Bloke. “Leave jammed!”

Accepting the silent gesture of dismissal the midshipman saluted and, leaving the cabin, hurried along the half-deck to the gun-room.

The only occupants of the midshipmen’s den at the moment were two cheerful-looking youths, one of whom was disentombing articles of clothing from the depths of a sea-chest, while the other was poring over the pages of Bradshaw to reassure himself that a certain train did start at a certain time. At intervals for the last ten days he had looked up that train, making sure that asterisks and other mysterious signs did not affect its departure and subsequent arrival at its destination.

Already news had reached the gun-room that Kenneth Raxworthy had been “on the carpet” before the inexorable commander.

“What did he say?” inquired Whitwell, the midshipman struggling with the time-table.

“Leave jammed,” replied Kenneth laconically.

“Hard lines!” rejoined both snotties sympathetically.

“And he chucked my seamanship in my teeth,” continued Kenneth bitterly. “Said it was the most lubberly bit of work he’d ever seen. I told him that the steering-gear had jammed and he went for a look-see.”

“And then?” prompted Stamford, who was still heaving personal gear from the sea-chest.

“He said that the gear was all O.K.,” replied Raxworthy. “Mind you, I don’t say that it isn’t now, but I can swear it did jam as I came alongside. Well, that’s torn it, Jimmy, absolutely,” he continued, addressing Whitwell. “I’d better write to your people and tell them that I cannot accept their invitation.”

Kenneth's people were in India, and as the midshipman had no relations at home where he could spend Christmas, his chum Whitwell had asked his parents to invite him for the festive season.

The invitation had been sent to include Midshipman Welburn, and the three chums were looking forward to a topping time at Kindersley Manor. Whitwell's people's hospitality was well known to the gun-room of H.M.S. *Kirkham*, and even though the remaining members had their own homes in which to spend Christmas, most of them rather envied the good luck of Kenneth Raxworthy and Jimmy Whitwell.

The Whitwells did things on somewhat a lavish scale, but without ostentation. Usually, just before Christmas leave started, their car was sent to whatever home port in which *Kirkham* chanced to be, and Jimmy and his chums were conveyed to Kindersley Manor with the least trouble to themselves, and without any drain upon their limited exchequer. The Manor was Liberty Hall as far as the young guests were concerned. There were shooting-parties, plenty of outdoor sports and indoor amusements while—no small attraction this—Jimmy Whitwell had several decidedly pretty sisters who—to quote the verdict of those midshipmen who knew—were “sports without being sidey”.

And now, almost at the eleventh hour, the Bloke's decree had fallen almost as swiftly and effectually as the knife of a guillotine.

There was not the faintest hope of the commander relenting. He prided himself upon his cast-iron discipline, and had never been known to countermand an order.

“Hard lines, old son,” remarked Whitwell sympathetically, adding: “We'll think of you when you're standing middle watch on Christmas morn, my lad!”

“Don't rub it in,” rejoined Kenneth gloomily, as he sat down to write the letter announcing his regrets at being unable to spend Christmas at Kindersley Manor.

Contrary to usual custom the light cruiser *Kirkham* had not been ordered to return to her home port for the purpose of giving Christmas leave. The fishery protection cruiser *Gannet*, having developed engine defects, had been sent south for repairs and in consequence *Kirkham* was under orders to remain on the east coast pending the former's return to her station.

Junk Harbour is never a particularly inviting spot even in summer. During the winter, conditions are simply appalling. The outer roadstead, in which the light cruiser rode to her own anchors, was practically open to gales between nor'-east through east to sou'-east, and these are the prevailing ones between September and March. Slight protection is afforded by the Mutches, a cluster

of rocky islets, a few of which are inhabited by hardy fisherfolk whose daring in wresting a livelihood from the treacherous sea is equalled by their disregard for law and order as laid down by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries.

On the outermost rock comprising the Mutchies a lofty lighthouse serves as a guide to mariners making for Junk Harbour, but so exposed is this beacon that often the three light-keepers have to wait a week or more before their reliefs can come off from the little town of Mautby.

Of Mautby itself there is little to be said. It is the terminus of a branch line from which two trains depart and two arrive every weekday—unless the line is blocked by snow. On Sundays communication by rail ceases. There are two very indifferent inns, no cinema, and hardly any amusements for the men of His Majesty's ships who happen to be lying in Junk Harbour.

It was three miles from this back-of-beyond town and in the centre of Junk Harbour outer roadstead that Mr. Midshipman Raxworthy was to spend his Christmas!

II

“Fall in, liberty men!”

The hoarse order, followed by the shrill trill of the bo’sun’s mate’s pipes brought the hands of the watch detailed for leave tumbling up pell-mell through the hatchways. At the double they ran aft to form up in two ranks upon the quarter-deck, where they stood shivering in the chilly on-shore wind in spite of great-coats, jerseys, and mufflers.

“Liberty men—‘shun!”

The ranks stiffened, each man staring fixedly into space while the inspecting officer, accompanied by a midshipman and the master-at-arms, passed slowly up and down, keenly on the look-out for any glaring departure from regulations in the men’s “rig”.

“Carry on!”

The ranks broke, each man, holding his suitcase and making sure that his liberty ticket and travelling warrant were still in his possession, making for one of two pinnaces lying alongside.

In a few moments both boats were filled to their utmost capacity, while the duty steam-boat, with Midshipman Raxworthy in charge, backed and then went slowly ahead preparatory to taking the two liberty boats in tow.

The Owner had left the ship on the previous day, and in consequence the commander was virtually captain of the *Kirkham*. The Bloke evidently meant to give Raxworthy more than his fair share of duty, if the commander’s night-order book was any criterion. And the commander was pacing the starboard side of the quarter-deck, apparently oblivious to the biting wind and stinging sleet, with the evident intention of seeing how smartly the midshipman got away with his tow.

It was by no means a simple manœuvre. There was quite a nasty sea running, and since the light cruiser was lying head on to both wind and tide there was little lee to be obtained from her lofty hull. The steam-boat had not only to sheer off from the ship’s side, but she had to get the two heavily laden pinnaces clear. Too much way might result in the towing hawsers parting; too little and the steam-boat would probably foul the slack hawser with her propeller—and then all the fat would be in the fire, even if the liberty men didn’t find themselves in the ditch!

But Raxworthy’s luck was in this time. The steam-boat gathered way,

taking it green as her bows plunged into the short, steep seas. Then, once she and her double tow were well clear of the ship, the midshipman put his helm down and described a sixteen-point turn. Not until wind and sea were astern and the two pinnaces rolling sluggishly in her wake did Kenneth heave a sigh of relief.

“The Bloke can’t have me on that, anyway!” he soliloquized.

Just as the steam-boat was entering the inner harbour the motor-picket-boat—the reason for Midshipman Raxworthy’s present duty—came pelting seaward with a whaler in tow. In the stern sheets of the latter sat a petty officer coxswain, almost hidden by a mass of evergreens and holly.

As the whaler drew abeam the coxswain stood up and saluted the midshipman; then as the two pinnaces in tow glided past, the liberty men greeted the cargo of evergreens with ironical cheers. It mattered not to them that those evergreens were going to be used to decorate *Kirkham’s* mess-decks. They would not be there, but would be enjoying their Christmas leave ashore.

The midshipman gave a quick glance astern at the rapidly receding motor-picket-boat and her tow. How he loathed that motor-picket-boat, the cause of his present disappointment. She had let him down through no fault of his own, and in consequence he was fated to spend the “festive season”—which promised to be anything but that as far as he was concerned—in a half-empty ship. Most of the officers were already on leave; practically all his messmates of the gun-room would be “going on the beach” that afternoon. On Christmas Day he would have the doubtful pleasure of accompanying the commander and the few officers who remained on a semi-ceremonial tour of the evergreen-decorated mess-deck. That was all the Christmas spirit he was likely to enter upon. The odds were that even the Christmas mail would be late—trust the Mautby branch line for that!—and that there would be neither presents nor letters to cheer him up.

Without mishap the two pinnaces ranged up alongside the jetty and disgorged their human cargo. There were no water police in Mautby to harry the liberty men and for some reason the customs boatmen were absent.

“No bloomin’ water-rats about this time, Joe,” Kenneth overheard the coxswain of one of the liberty boats remark to his “opposite number”. “What’s the lay? Have they got the Christmas feeling?”

“Not they,” replied the other, “I heard as a Frenchie’s trying to run a cargo up-along and the water-rats are off to nab him—if they can.”

“Well, s’long as they don’t get us on that lay, I hopes the Frenchie’ll kipper their bloomin’ Christmas,” rejoined the first speaker, who, having been caught by the Customs while in possession of a couple of plugs of smuggled tobacco,

had no love for the members of His Majesty's Preventive Service.

"Well, mine's kipped any old way," thought Midshipman Raxworthy. "But, by Jove! it would be a bit of excitement if there's anything in the yarn, and I'm sent away to capture a French smuggler!"

III

There was very little respite for Midshipman Raxworthy. His next duty—for the commander meant to keep him busy—was to take ashore the junior officers and midshipmen who had been given leave.

“Bung-ho, Rax!” was Jimmy Whitwell’s final greeting as the boat with its load of exuberant snotties ran alongside the jetty. “I’ll write and tell you what you’ve missed if I have time!”

That seemed about the limit—to bear the brunt of a running fire of more or less sympathetic remarks from his fortunate messmates, and then to watch their disappearing forms as they scampered up the steps of the jetty and hurried to the railway station with hardly a backward glance or a farewell to the luckless victim of the commander’s ire.

Christmas Eve came round—as depressing a day as one could imagine. A biting nor’easterly wind accompanied by a flurry of snow had sprung up during the night. The glass was rising rapidly—a sure sign of a gale from some northerly point.

Almost as soon as Midshipman Raxworthy came on duty the officer-of-the-watch hailed him.

“Commander wishes that q.d. awnings and curtains be furled immediately,” he ordered. “Look lively, or something will carry away in a brace of shakes.”

The order was certainly necessary. Already the canvas was bellying upwards and flogging under the onslaught of the rising gale.

Turning out the duty sub-division of his watch the midshipman superintended the task, the while fearing the commander’s ire should the stubborn canvas “take charge and carry away”, through the careless handling of the men engaged upon the job.

At length the awnings were furled and the hands trooped for’ard, leaving the officer-of-the-watch and Midshipman Raxworthy in sole occupation of the wind-swept quarter-deck. Now that the curtains were removed there was nothing to shelter the two officers from the icy blast that swept unrestrainedly across the exposed deck.

Drifts of snow accumulated against hatchway coamings. Raxworthy was young enough to revel in a snowballing contest, but by virtue of the dignity of his minor authority such delights were denied him. Dejectedly he paced the

deck in company with the distinctly morose officer-of-the-watch who, upon his own admission, was “fed up to the back teeth”, because duty held him back from Christmas festivities ashore.

There was nothing to do, no signals to be given or received. Everything beyond a radius of about a hundred yards was hidden in swirling flakes of snow. As it was between half ebb and low water the entrance to Junk Harbour was impassable and in consequence no vessel would be entering or leaving. According to custom look-outs were posted both on the bridge and in the eyes of the ship, but in the circumstances their task, like that of the watch-keeping officer was a mere matter of form.

“And this is a Merry Christmas—I don’t think!” thought Raxworthy, as the morning wore on in freezing inactivity.

His trick over, the midshipman ate a sorry meal in solitary state in the deserted gun-room. To make matters worse, the stove was behaving abominably, giving out hardly any heat and sending out clouds of smoke.

Ringing the bell the midshipman summoned the gun-room messman.

“See that that cowl is trimmed properly, Jones,” he ordered. “I’m being smoked out!”

“Very good, sir,” replied the messman, at the same time placing a book upon the table.

Raxworthy glared banefully at the unwanted gift. He knew perfectly well what it was—the commander’s night-order book.

As soon as the door closed, the midshipman opened the book, eager to know the latest blow that fate had dealt him. He was not mistaken in his forebodings. In the commander’s small and clear handwriting appeared:

“Motor-picket-boat will proceed to Mautby at 23.30 to bring officers off to the ship.”

Raxworthy glanced at the clock on the bulkhead. It was now 11.30 a.m. In twelve hours—thirty minutes before midnight—he would have to make another hateful run into Mautby to fetch the surgeon-commander and the engineer-lieutenant who apparently had found sufficient attraction ashore to spend an evening either in or on the outskirts of that desolate town.

“I believe the Bloke persuaded them to go so that he’d get the chance of sending me to bring them off,” ruminated the midshipman. “If this isn’t a dog’s life, what is?”

By ten in the evening the gale had moderated somewhat, although the sea ran high. Ripped out in oilskins and sea-boots, Raxworthy came on deck and went to the side.

The picket-boat was straining at the lower boom, shipping it green as the bow-rope took the strain. In the sickly gleam of the starboard navigation lamp the sea looked particularly forbidding and the boat herself a mere cockleshell.

"All correct, sir," reported the coxswain.

"Plenty of fuel?"

"Paraffin tank full, sir, and a gallon of petrol for starting up."

"Good!" ejaculated Raxworthy. "Lead on, coxswain!"

With an agility born of long practice, the petty officer made his way out along the lower boom and, watching his opportunity, dropped upon the fore-deck of the heaving motor-picket-boat.

The midshipman followed. Encumbered as he was with board-stiff oilskins and heavy sea-boots his movements were slower. He knew perfectly well that a slip would mean almost certain death—with the choice of being crushed between the boat's and the ship's side or of being carried down by the weight of his boots. Even if he found himself in the ditch and were able to kick off his boots, he could not keep himself afloat for more than a few seconds in the piercingly cold water.

At the end of the boom Raxworthy groped for the jacob's ladder, descended three or four rungs and then hung on—waiting.

A dozen feet below him was a smooth triangular patch upon which the rays of the red, white and green navigation lamps blended in a weird colour scheme. That patch was the motor-picket-boat's fore-deck, and upon it he must drop or pay the penalty for failure.

The midshipman waited. Up came the boat's bows on the crest of a huge wave that threw showers of icy spray to right and left.

His feet were almost touching the slippery teak planks—yet he hesitated.

The opportunity was lost, for the next moment the bows dipped. Then with a jerk that shook the lower boom like a twanged bow-string the boat snubbed at her painter, shipped a few tons of water over her fore-deck and rose like a mastiff emerging from the sea, until once more the midshipman's feet were almost touching the heaving planks.

"Let go, sir, I'll steady you!" roared the coxswain, his voice barely audible above the noise of the elements.

Involuntarily shutting his eyes, Raxworthy relaxed his grip and dropped. Even as his rubber-shod soles slithered on the slippery deck he felt himself gripped by both arms.

"Right you are, sir!" exclaimed the petty officer reassuringly. "Hang on, sir, she's going to snub something cruel!"

Gripping the handrail of the raised cover over the motor-room, Raxworthy waited. With a jerk that shook the boat from stem to stern the painter took up the sudden strain. A shower of icy spray flew inboard, a generous quantity finding its way inside the storm flap of the midshipman's oilskins, and in spite of his thick muffler the icy liquid trickled down his chest, making him gasp for breath.

A moment later and Raxworthy gained his post at the wheel. The bowman crept for'ard ready to let go, while the coxswain stood behind his young officer to give advice and assistance should either be required.

But once at his post the midshipman's confidence returned. The discomfort—even the sense of injustice under which he had rankled—was forgotten. He was in command of the boat, captain of his immediate destiny and likewise responsible for the lives of his men and for the safety of his command.

Spinning the wheel first to port and then to starboard in order to reassure himself that on this occasion it was functioning properly, Raxworthy gave the order to cast off and to the leading stoker—who was in charge of the motor—for a “touch ahead”.

Rolling and plunging, the motor-picket-boat gathered way and drew clear of her parent ship. In a few seconds the *Kirkham* was swallowed up in the darkness of the snow-laden night.

Except for the motor-picket-boat navigation lamps, and the feeble glimmer of the binnacle lamp, not a light was visible. Even the powerful rays of the lighthouse on the extremity of the Mutches were blotted out, although in normal conditions the light was visible for twenty-five miles.

Kenneth Raxworthy entertained no doubts concerning his ability to find the entrance of the inner harbour. Allowing for the set of the tide and the strength and direction of the wind, he knew the correct compass course. All that was necessary was to hold on to that course until the pier-head lights became visible through the mirk. He had made that trip so many times that he knew the course by heart—“west a half south”.

But in less than five minutes from the time of getting clear of the ship Raxworthy's confidence received a shattering shock.

Almost without warning—for the noise of wind and sea drowned the expostulating splutter of the carburettor—the motor stopped.

The picket-boat, quickly losing way, hung head to wind for a brief space, then, pounded by a heavy wave, swung broadside on and helpless in the trough of the sea.

Less than a couple of miles and dead to lee'ard were the dreaded Mutches, the saw-like reefs of which were waiting for their prey!

IV

Kenneth fully realized the dire peril that beset him and those under his orders. He was directly responsible for the safety of his men. In spite of his youth his training at Dartmouth, followed by a few months in the light cruiser, had taught him self-reliance.

The impassive-featured coxswain was waiting for the first sign of indecision on the midshipman's features. The petty officer, who was old enough to be Raxworthy's father, knew perfectly well that the situation would either prove the midshipman to be a leader of men or the reverse. Had the latter shown any sign of cracking under the ordeal then the coxswain would issue what orders he thought fit to safeguard the lives of his comrades. Should this step become necessary and the crew survived the ordeal, Raxworthy's name would be Mud for the rest of his Service career.

But the coxswain was agreeably disappointed.

"Let go the anchor!" ordered the midshipman. "See that the forelock is properly secured," he added, as a precautionary measure.

The bowman crept along the slippery waterways to the plunging fore-deck. Working deftly in the darkness, he assured himself that the anchor-stock was efficiently secured, and then toppled the "killick"—weighing more than a hundredweight—over the bows.

With a rush and a roar the chain ran out until the picket-boat snubbed violently and, held by the anchor, swung head to wind and tide.

"Holding, sir!" reported the bowman.

Reassured on that point, Kenneth ordered the man aft. He wasn't going to run the risk of losing the seaman overboard as the picket-boat plunged her nose deeply into the hissing, surging seas.

Descending a short, vertical steel ladder, Kenneth gained the motor-room. For some seconds the temporary transition from the cold and darkness without to the heated and electrically lighted engine room virtually blinded him.

"What's wrong now?" he inquired anxiously.

"Water in the fuel tank, sir," replied the leading stoker, and to bear out his statement he extended a horny hand, in the palm of which he held a quantity of paraffin on which globules of water floated. "I'll swear, sir, I put the paraffin through the strainer, and there wasn't a drop of water showing on the gauge."

The man's anxiety to clear himself hardly interested Raxworthy at the

moment. What was more to the point was how to get the motor running again.

“Clean your carburettor and change over to petrol,” he ordered. “Look lively, or we’ll be on the rocks if the anchor starts to drag.”

With that Kenneth went on deck to await developments.

“We’ll get her going in a brace of shakes, Wilson,” he remarked to the coxswain.

“Hope so, sir,” rejoined the petty officer. “Only, sir, pardon me saying, it seems to me that the killick’s dragging. Ten fathoms and a hard bottom doesn’t give a decent holding ground.”

The coxswain’s statement that the anchor was failing to hold put a different complexion on the situation.

Raxworthy peered into the snow-laden darkness, striving to pick up some light that might give him a chance either to verify or disprove the petty officer’s statement.

There was none. In that blinding snowstorm visibility was limited to about fifty yards.

“What makes you think we’re dragging?” he asked.

“Well, sir, while you were below I took the liberty of going for’ard and feeling the cable. Unless I’m much mistaken the fluke of the anchor’s rasping over the bottom. She mayn’t be dragging fast, but there it is—she ain’t where she was when we dropped the killick.”

This was disconcerting news. Even supposing the pinnacle was drifting to lee’ard slowly, the danger of striking the reefs was none the less—it was merely a question of time, unless, in the meanwhile, the anchor obtained a firm hold.

That was supposing the leading stoker would be unable to restart the motor.

Raxworthy waited patiently for some minutes. The inaction gave him food for thought. He pictured the two officers pacing the pier head in the bitter snowstorm and uttering maledictions upon the picket-boat for not being there on time. Next morning the commander would want to know all about it, with the inevitable result that the already disgraced midshipman would be again hauled over the coals for neglecting to keep the boat in efficient working order.

“A merry Christmas for me—I don’t think!” muttered Kenneth for the umpteenth time.

At last the motor awoke into activity.

Kenneth sprang to the wheel. The bowman got to his feet and awaited the

order to go for'ard and heave short the cable.

The midshipman was on the point of ordering a "touch ahead" when the engine spluttered and relapsed into silence.

He went below to interview the perspiring leading stoker.

"Can't make nothing of it, sir," confessed that worthy. "She won't have it either on petrol or paraffin. I reckon the jet's choked."

"Then for goodness' sake unship the thing and clean it!" rejoined Kenneth, and waited to see the operation performed.

Whether it was the midshipman's presence that flurried the man or that his fingers were slippery with oil that was responsible for the mishap was immaterial. The fact remained that the jet fell from the leading stoker's grasp, glanced from the crank-case and disappeared underneath the tray. Without unbolting and removing the engine—a task that in the circumstances was out of the question—the jet was irrecoverably lost.

Kenneth returned on deck feeling anything but happy. The loss of the jet was a pure accident and no good purpose would be served by slanging the man.

Other steps must be taken to extricate the picket-boat from her hazardous position—and again Kenneth rose to the occasion.

"Motor's konked, Wilson," he announced laconically. "I'm letting off some Verey lights and then the steam pinnacle will be along to take us in tow."

The coxswain, behind the midshipman's back, shrugged his shoulders and thought it was about time that he kicked off his sea-boots.

Searching in one of the lockers, Kenneth found the Verey pistol. Inserting a cartridge he fired into the air.

Two hundred feet above the boat the rocket burst into a red glare, but so heavy was the fall of snow that only a faint glimmer was visible from the cockpit. Obviously, then, the signal of distress would be totally invisible from the *Kirkham*, which was now at least a mile and a half to wind'ard. Nor would the report be heard. Nothing short of wireless, which the picket-boat did not possess, would establish communication with the light cruiser on such a night.

Kenneth fired three more lights from the Verey pistol before giving up hope of aid by this means.

"Seems a bit of a wash-out, Wilson," he remarked.

"'Fraid so, sir," agreed the coxswain. "Might be a jolly sight worse, though. It strikes me that killick's got a firm hold now, so all we can do is to stand by till daylight or until this snowstorm blows over."

"The officers waiting on Mautby jetty will be feeling pretty sick of it," observed the midshipman.

Wilson snorted.

"If officers take it into their heads to go on the beach on a night like this—even though it's Christmas Eve—it's up to them to make the best of it. We've troubles of our own enough. Look here, sir, suppose you turn into the cabin for a spell. It's pretty parky out here."

It certainly was cold. Except for the fore-deck that was being continuously swept by the seas, the picket-boat was white with frozen snow. Even the side lights were blocked by a mixture of ice and snow. To go for'ard without hanging on tooth and nail was to risk slipping on the deck and pitching overboard.

Kenneth's sou'wester and the front of his oilskin coat were white with frozen snow. His face smarted painfully under the onslaught of the sleet, while by contrast his gloved hands were numbed by the cold.

Undoubtedly it was a great temptation to take his coxswain's advice and shelter in the little cabin immediately for'ard of the cockpit, but he resisted it. If the coxswain and bowman could stick it it was up to him to share the discomforts with his crew.

"I'm all right, really," he protested, although his chattering teeth belied the statement. "I'd better hang on here just in case. I say: is there any grub on board?"

"I don't think so, sir," replied the coxswain. "Are you hungry, sir?"

"No," replied Raxworthy. "But you fellows—you had supper at one bell and nothing since."

"That's a fact, sir," agreed his coxswain.

The last official meal in a ship is late in the afternoon and is called supper. If a man requires a meal later in the evening he has to buy it in the canteen. Apparently the crew of the picket-boat had not eaten anything since half-past four. The midshipman was better off in that respect. He had had dinner and by now he was feeling decidedly peckish. He wondered how hungry the hands were.

"Then it's a case of tightening our belts, Wilson," he remarked. "Carry on smoking: that'll take the edge off a bit."

The time dragged with leaden feet. The storm showed no sign of abating. If anything the wind was increasing in strength, and the snow squalls were heavier than earlier in the night. No doubt the commander, alarmed by the non-return of the motor-picket-boat would have sent away the steam pinnacle to

search for the absentee, but on such a night it would be a case of looking for a needle in a bottle of hay. The pinnacle might conceivably pass within half a cable's length of the disabled picket-boat without being aware of her presence.

Suddenly the picket-boat swung broadside on to a huge wave. The crest swept completely over the boat, almost filling the cockpit and throwing Kenneth violently against the lee coaming.

Even as he struggled to regain his breath—for the force of the blow and a mouthful of icy water had rendered him almost speechless—the midshipman heard Wilson exclaim:

“That’s done it, sir! She’s parted her cable!”

V

Without waiting for orders the bowman fought his way for'ard, hanging on like grim death as wave after wave swept over the violently rolling boat.

Then he fought his way back with the information that the chain had parted at the fairlead. That meant that the anchor and all the chain outside the boat were lying useless on the bed of Junk Harbour, and that the picket-boat, if she did not founder in the meantime in spite of watertight bulkheads, would sooner or later be hurled against the dreaded Mutches unless something hardly less than a miracle intervened.

The leading stoker, realizing by the different motion of the boat that something was amiss, thrust head and shoulders out of the engine-room hatch only to disappear hurriedly as a wave-top gave him an icy shower bath.

Catching sight of the man, Kenneth had an inspiration. Since the leading stoker was now useless in his official capacity he might just as well be out of the engine-room. In the event of the picket-boat striking he would be drowned like a rat in a trap if he remained at his post. On deck he stood the same chance as the rest, which was about as poor as that of a man attempting to swim Niagara rapids.

"Pass the word for Brown to come on deck and bring an ash bucket," shouted the midshipman.

In spite of the noise of wind and sea the bowman understood. He made his way to the engine-room hatch and communicated the midshipman's orders to the leading stoker.

The ash bucket was a substantial affair, far stronger, heavier and larger than those for ordinary domestic use. It might serve for a makeshift sea-anchor.

Under Raxworthy's directions the crew bent the sternfast—a stout rope used for making fast alongside a ship or a jetty—to the handle of the bucket and then threw the latter overboard. In order to obtain the best results and to allow the boat to ride head to wind, the improvised sea-anchor should have been led from the bows, but in the existing circumstances time was too precious and the risk of working on the fore-deck too great for that operation to be performed. The point was to bring the boat out of the trough of the sea, and since it was impracticable for her to lie bows on to the waves, the next best thing was to ride stern foremost to them.

For some minutes—a period of anxious suspense—nothing happened beyond a slight jerking strain upon the sternfast. Then slowly but surely the boat's bows paid off until she presented her stern to the direction of wind and waves.

Although the ash bucket was not so effective as a sea-anchor of the accepted type in that it was insufficient to check her drift to any considerable extent, it had a result that was even better. The picket-boat was driving steadily before the wind, and on that account was riding easier. Wave after wave, that otherwise would have poured over her transom, swept harmlessly by.

Apparently this was only hastening the seemingly inevitable end. Already above the whine of the wind could be heard the noise of the breakers as they hurled themselves with irresistible fury upon the Mutchies, the rocks of which were still invisible in the blackness of the night.

Moved by a common impulse the ratings began to throw off their oilskins and sea-boots. As they did so, the leading stoker promptly scrambled into the oilskin coat discarded by the coxswain.

"What's the idea, mate?" demanded the latter.

"May as well be warm and comfortable until I find myself in the blinkin' ditch!" was Brown's imperturbable explanation.

The roar of the breakers grew louder and louder. Surely, thought Kenneth, the end could not be long delayed. A thousand thoughts flashed across his mind. It seemed hard lines to have to be drowned at his age—just as he was enjoying life. . . . And on Christmas Eve, too. . . . No, by Jove! He was forgetting—it wasn't Christmas Eve but Christmas Day.

Then a sort of strange fatalism gripped him. He was not going to show the white feather before his men if he could help it. He was feeling funky; there was no denying that; but although he knew he was afraid he feared still more that his crew would detect it.

Almost mechanically, Kenneth grasped the wheel. Until the boat struck he would be at his post. Aimlessly he turned the spokes and, somewhat to his surprise, he found that up to a certain point the picket-boat responded to the alteration in helm. She was driving so rapidly through the water that she answered to her rudder.

Suddenly Kenneth caught sight of a column of spray showing ghost-like through the darkness. It was the breakers on one of the outlying ledges of the Mutchies.

Instinctively the midshipman put the wheel hard over. It was almost an involuntary act, like that of a man raising his arm to ward off a blow; but, almost providentially, the picket-boat turned decidedly to starboard.

Then, aided by the back-wash from the almost perpendicular rock for which she had been heading, the picket-boat was hurled almost broadside on through a gap in the line of cliffs—an entrance that was practically invisible.

A wall of storm-beaten rock disclosed itself to starboard. Again almost instinctively Kenneth attempted to put the wheel hard over—this time to starboard.

The wheel resisted his efforts to turn it. He wrenched at it, putting his whole weight into the attempt, but in vain.

Once more the wheel had jammed!

Even in the midst of peril Raxworthy found himself wishing that the commander were on board just to convince him that the gear was defective. It was solely owing to the Bloke's pig-headedness that the picket-boat was in this desperate plight and that, instead of enjoying his Christmas leave, the victim of the commander's undeserved displeasure was now face to face with death.

Again the boat was broadside-on. Apparently the strain had caused the sternfast to part, and the ash-bucket was no longer acting as a sort of brake. It was now keeping company with the lost anchor and cable on the bed of Junk Harbour.

In the circumstances the boat ought by this time to be pounding upon the rocks; but to the astonishment of the midshipman and crew, she was scudding rapidly through a sort of channel between lofty and almost perpendicular walls of rock.

Momentarily the crested breakers decreased in height until the picket-boat was rising and falling on a succession of sullen waves. The wind, too, had eased down owing to a bend in the channel bringing one side of the cliff wall to wind'ard.

Kenneth could hardly realize this huge slice of luck. It was a thousand to one chance, and the boat had happened upon the one and only hope of salvation.

She had been swept by wind and a strong flood tide through a passage—little wider than her own length—into a comparatively sheltered haven in one of the islands comprising the dreaded Mutchies.

VI

But the danger was by no means over even though it was not so formidable as before.

Kenneth was ignorant of the haven. As far as he could remember it was not shown on the Admiralty charts. In all probability—and the set of the tidal current pointed to this—it was merely a channel with a wider outlet on the seaward side of the Mutches. Unless the picket-boat could bring up—a difficult business since she had lost her anchor—or beach herself in a sheltered part of the haven, the odds were that she would be swept out to sea—unless she ended her career on the fringe of jagged rocks on the eastern side of the group of islands comprising the Mutches.

“See any light, Wilson?” inquired Kenneth anxiously, as he peered through the snow-laden darkness.

“No, sir. Maybe there are some cottages on the island, but people aren’t likely to be up at this time of morning—even though it’s Christmas Day. . . . I’ll nip for’ard now she’s riding easily an’ overrun the painters. Without a killick they ain’t much use for us to bring up, but one never knows.”

Raxworthy at the useless wheel watched the coxswain as he made his way to the fore-deck. Even at that distance the man’s form was barely distinguishable in the darkness.

Suddenly a tall shape loomed up across the path of the scudding picket-boat. For a moment Kenneth imagined that it was a rock rising sheer out of the water.

Then through the eddying sleet came a hail from the coxswain.

“Ship ahoy! Take our line, will you?”

Almost immediately the picket-boat drove across the bows of an anchored craft—a sailing vessel, judging by the bowsprit and foremast that were just discernible against the sky.

The impact, although it sounded severe, was fortunately a light one, the sailing craft’s tautened cable taking the force of the collision.

The picket-boat heeled until her starboard waterways were well awash; then recovering, hung irresolutely against the other craft’s stern.

As she held thus, the coxswain, with great presence of mind, passed a bight of one of the painters round the anchored vessel’s cable; and presently the picket-boat, grating astern over the heavy chain, brought up alongside the craft

with which she had collided.

Over the latter's low bulwark appeared the head and shoulders of one of the crew.

"Take our line!" reiterated Wilson.

The man remained staring open-mouthed at the boat alongside. He stood there for perhaps a quarter of a minute, then without attempting to make fast the second painter which Wilson had heaved on board, he disappeared from sight.

"Perishing blighter!" ejaculated the coxswain contemptuously as he coiled in the disregarded painter. "She's holding, sir. I'll just nip aboard and secure her properly. I reckon we're nicely out of this mess."

"Lay out a couple of fenders first," ordered the midshipman; for now that all immediate danger was over he was not going to risk a further reprimand from the commander for damaging the picket-boat's side. Although there was now little more than a heavy ground swell the two craft were rolling considerably to the detriment of the naval boat's paintwork.

"Ay, ay, sir!"

The hands fended the picket-boat off until the coir fenders were placed in position, with the result that instead of a disconcerting succession of grinding thuds as woodwork banged against woodwork, the fender took practically all the chafe.

"What's up with the fellow we saw on board?" inquired Kenneth.

Wilson, putting on his sea-boots once more, spat contemptuously over the side.

"Measly rat! He'd have let us drift past without raising a finger to bear a hand. Maybe he's scared stiff—thinks we're ghosts doing a little round o' visits at Christmas! Suppose I nip on board and see what's doing, sir?"

"Carry on, then," agreed the midshipman. "Mind you don't get a crack over the head from a scared-stiff ship-keeper."

"Trust me to look after myself, sir," rejoined Wilson confidently.

The other craft turned out to be a schooner with old-fashioned chain plates and projecting platforms fitted with dead eyes to which the shrouds were secured. Her bulwarks were from six to ten feet above the picket-boat's deck—according to the relative roll of both craft—but the chain plate was well within the coxswain's reach.

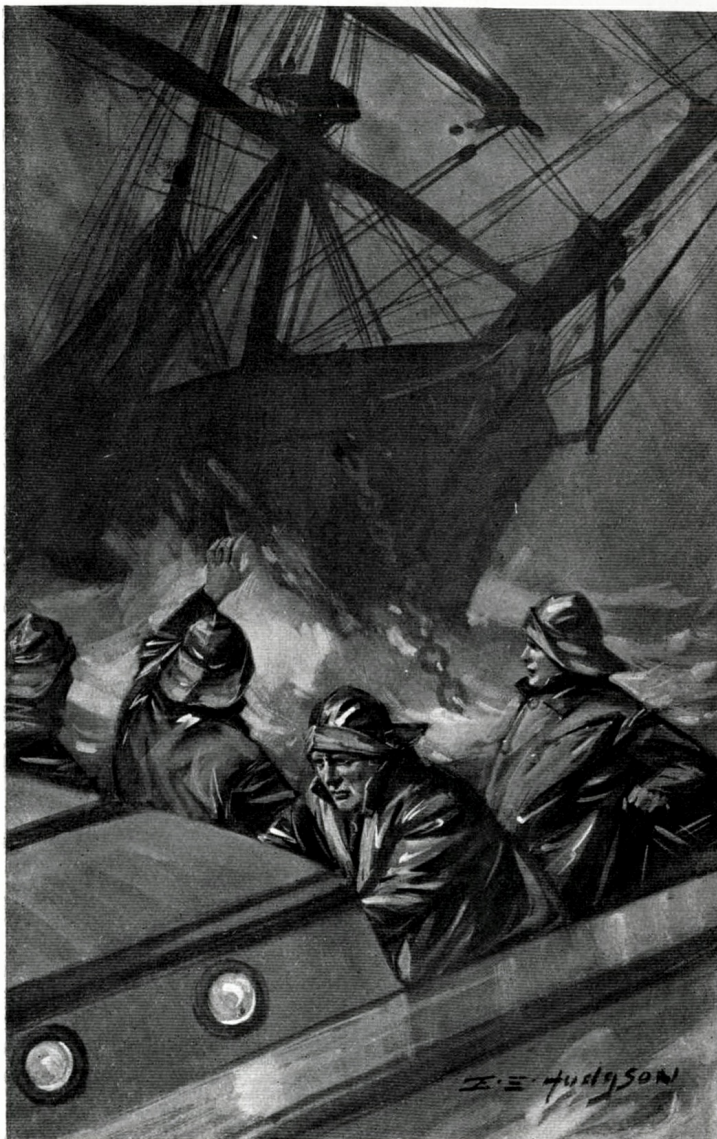
Waiting his opportunity, Wilson gripped the lanyards of one pair of dead-eyes and swung himself up. His feet slithered upon the accumulation of frozen snow that had lodged upon the chain plate, but his grasp was a powerful one.

Recovering his foothold he scrambled over the bulwarks and disappeared from the midshipman's sight.

In a few seconds he reappeared.

"Chuck me up the spare painter, Nobbie!" he hailed, addressing the bowman. "There ain't no one on deck, so I'll take the liberty of making all fast myself!"

As soon as the second painter was secured the coxswain picked up a coil of rope that was lying on the schooner's deck and dropped one end into the picket-boat's stern-sheets.



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A TALL SHAPE LOOMED UP

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“That’ll do for a sternfast, sir!” he explained. “With the helm as it is she’ll take a sheer and lie quietly. I’ll be back in a brace of shakes.”

But it was a long “brace of shakes”.

Kenneth shivering in the biting wind, for the hull of the schooner offered

little or no protection from the keen blast, began to grow anxious concerning the absent coxswain. There seemed something decidedly uncanny about the schooner—moored in a practically unknown anchorage and showing no riding lights. There was, of course, nothing unusual about having a man on deck. Apparently he was keeping anchor watch; but what was unusual was the fact that he had declined to secure the picket-boat's rope and after looking over the side for a short while had disappeared from sight. If he had gone to rouse the master and the rest of the crew they would have turned out long before this.

And what had happened to Wilson? Had he been attacked by the fellow they had just seen? It was quite possible that the man might have had a fright and have hit the coxswain over the head with a belaying pin the moment he gained the deck of the schooner. Or Wilson might have slipped on the snow-covered deck and pitched head foremost down an open hatchway.

Where was the ship-keeper? If he had deserted the ship, by what means had he left her? Hardly by swimming, since the low temperature was sufficient to benumb the strongest man in a few minutes.

And what was the schooner doing there, riding to a single anchor and without displaying a light of any description? The whole business looked decidedly fishy, but for the present Raxworthy was content to take what the gods offered. Here was a temporary shelter from the winter's gale. Even under the bleakest conditions it was preferable to lie alongside the mysterious vessel rather than to face death in the aimlessly drifting picket-boat.

Nevertheless, Kenneth's anxiety on the score of his absent coxswain increased as time wore on. He was debating with himself whether he should send someone in search of him when Wilson's sou'wester-crowned face appeared over the bulwark.

"Crickey, sir!" exclaimed the coxswain. "If this ain't a rum go! Can you come on board, sir, and see for yourself."

VII

For a moment Midshipman Raxworthy hesitated—not that he was afraid to board the sombre, mysterious craft, but because it meant leaving the picket-boat of which he was in command and consequently responsible for its safety.

Apparently Wilson noticed his superior officer's hesitation.

"She'll be all right, sir," he declared. "Both painters properly secured and the sternfast as well. Since we've to make a night of it maybe you'll order the hands on board too. It's a jolly sight more comfortable than being frozen stiff in our hooker!"

Kenneth looked at the coxswain in astonishment. What did he mean by declaring that the apparently abandoned schooner was better than the picket-boat?

"Right-o!" he rejoined, "I'll come aboard."

"Hang on a minute, sir!" cautioned Wilson. "The deck's as slippery as a skating-rink. Wait till I drop a Jacob's ladder over the side."

A moment later and a wire rope ladder with wooden rungs was lowered from the schooner's bulwarks.

Cautiously the midshipman made his way up and gained the deck.

"Here we are, sir!" was the coxswain's greeting. "A nice little home from home!"

At first glance there was nothing to bear out Wilson's statement.

The schooner was flush decked except for a cargo hatch extending between fore and mainmasts. Over the hatch was a tarpaulin, one end of which was turned back. Right for'ard was a large windlass; immediately abaft it the hatchway giving access to the fo'c'sle. This was secured by a padlock. Right aft was a raised structure giving protection to the helmsman. In front of it was the companion leading to the skipper's cabin, while between it and the mainmast was a small skylight which was also partly covered by a tarpaulin. Through the portion of the glass laid bare by the folded canvas came a glimmer of yellow light that played upon the main boom and the loosely furled mainsail.

Over everything lay a deep mantle of snow broken by footprints that were not all caused by the sea-boots of the picket-boat's coxswain. In fact there was a regular lane between the after companion hatchway and the port quarter, while the rail had been newly freed from snow in the vicinity of a pair of

empty davits, the lower blocks of the falls beating a hollow tattoo with each roll of the schooner.

“The crew did a bunk, sir, just before I got on board,” explained Wilson. “Must have lowered their boat and got away. Mighty quiet they were over it, too! I never heard a sound!”

“Guilty consciences, Wilson!” declared Kenneth. “Obviously the look-out spotted a naval craft bearing down. He gave the alarm and the crew took to the boat.”

“Don’t see why, sir.”

“Because it’s my belief that we have surprised a smuggling vessel!”

Wilson shook his head.

“It’s not for me to argue with an officer, sir; but respectful-like I beg to differ. Just cast your eye down the hold, sir!”

Kenneth did so.

To his amazement he found that almost the entire space was occupied by a long table covered with a white table-cloth. There were cups, saucers and plates sufficient for twenty or thirty people, a huge iced cake decorated with holly, and several shallow wicker baskets piled high with oranges and other fruits. Except for a solitary hurricane lamp the hold was unlighted, but there were about a dozen unlighted ones each festooned with evergreens. Signal flags covered the bulkheads, while traced in somewhat straggling letters was the greeting: A MERRY CHRISTMASS TO——

The artist’s handiwork had probably been interrupted by the arrival of the picket-boat.

The table was certainly of a temporary nature and laid without regard to the possibility of the schooner rolling in bad weather. There were no fiddles to keep the plates, cups and saucers from sliding to the deck, while no attempt had been made to secure the pyramids of fruit from a similar fate. A feast was apparently to be held there in the day—it was now four o’clock in the morning—but for whom? The schooner’s crew was not likely to exceed seven or eight; where were the remainder of the feasters coming from? Almost certainly from one of the inhabited islands comprising the Mutches. Why, then, did the schooner’s crew, making preparations for a Christmas Day treat to the fisherfolk of the island, suddenly desert their vessel with every indication of panic?

The coxswain, on being asked for his explanation, fell back upon his previous theory.

“They thought we were ghosts, sir; and cleared off as fast as they knew

how.”

“Perhaps they are still on board—or, at least, some of them,” suggested Kenneth.

“They can’t have made a bolt for the forepeak and put a padlock on outside after they were in,” said Wilson. “May be there is someone aft. I just glanced through the skylight but didn’t take particular notice.”

“We’ll see,” decided the midshipman.

He was the first to descend the steep wooden ladder aft. A waft of warm air mingled with the odour of roasting meat greeted him. Compared with the bitter wind without and the gnawing pangs of hunger of which he was beginning to be acutely conscious, this silent greeting from the skipper’s quarters was particularly welcome.

There was a bulkhead lamp burning in the lobby at the foot of the ladder. To starboard was the galley with an anthracite stove burning. On it were three saucepans simmering gently and prevented from sliding off by a low railing. In the oven was a large piece of beef which was showing indications of being overdone.

“That’ll be good grub wasted if it stops there,” remarked Wilson. He found a cloth and smartly removed the baking dish from the oven.

“Smells good, by Jove!” exclaimed Kenneth.

“And we’re hungry,” added the coxswain tentatively. “The whole crowd of us, sir!”

“Let’s examine the cabin first,” suggested the midshipman.

There were two cabins aft, one belonging to the skipper and the other to the mate.

In the former a swing table was laid ready for a meal. The captain was apparently more fastidious than the average master of a coasting vessel, for there was a clean linen cloth on the table and the knives and forks—set for two—were brightly polished. In a rack within hand’s reach were a number of uncorked wine bottles.

On either side of the cabin stove—which like that of the galley had recently been made up and was burning cheerfully—were bookcases. With one exception all the volumes were French. The charts in the rack, too, were mainly French, although there was a British “blue back” of Junk Harbour with hand-inserted additions.

Although he made a perfunctory search for the ship’s papers, Kenneth failed to find them; but he obtained sufficient evidence to show that the schooner was the *Marie Lescaut* of Fécamp.

The midshipman summed up the situation. He was aware that a French or a Belgian sailing craft was known to be engaged in smuggling in the vicinity of Mautby Harbour. The fishing protection cruiser *Gannet* had been on the look-out for her in vain, and now the *Kirkham* was temporarily taking over the *Gannet*'s duty. Had it not been for the foreign smuggling craft he, Kenneth, would not have had his Christmas leave jammed. Indirectly that vessel was the cause of the commander's displeasure.

But so far there was no evidence that the *Marie Lescaut* was a smuggler. True there was no reason why she should be sheltering in a remote and almost unknown haven in the Mutches. Having landed her contraband cargo—if she had brought one—she would probably have made for the open sea without delay. Why then did she remain and prepare a feast for a score or more? The guests were to be English, as the ill-spelt greeting on the bulkhead indicated. But why, unless they were possessed of guilty consciences, did the Frenchmen abandon their ship?

"Dashed if I'd clear off and leave my grub, sir," remarked the coxswain, reading the midshipman's thoughts. "I think I'd be tempted to plug a fellow who came between me and my victuals. Think they'll be coming back, sir?"

"How do I know?" rejoined Kenneth. "At any rate we're in possession of an abandoned ship. She's anchored: that may make a difference, but she wasn't showing a riding light, so we can take possession of her as a danger to navigation. Not that there's much chance of any vessel barging along where we are. Pass the word for all hands to come on board for a hot breakfast!"

"But one of us ought to be on deck, just in case," observed Wilson.

"Exactly," agreed Midshipman Raxworthy. "I'm keeping watch while the hands feed. After that I'll tuck in."

VIII

For the next three-quarters of an hour Kenneth kept his self-imposed vigil on the bleak deck of the *Marie Lescaut*. It was essential that a look-out should be kept. Although he was cold and hungry his crew were hungrier, and in the navy it is an unwritten code of honour that an officer should see that his men are fed before he has his meal.

The deck was almost too slippery to walk upon. Snow was still falling steadily, although the wind had piped down considerably. It was darker than ever. Although, according to a hasty examination of the chart, Kenneth knew that the schooner was within a cable's length of land, there was no indication by sight or sound of any other human beings besides the crew of the picket-boat.

Yet caution was essential. If the Frenchmen were smugglers and the inhabitants of the fishing hamlet were in sympathy with them—a probability since the latter derived considerable benefit by their share in dealing with contraband goods—there was the danger of an attempt to recapture the schooner. Provided the odds are in their favour, foreign smugglers often do not hesitate to resort to violence in order to avoid capture, since capture means a heavy fine, the chance of imprisonment and the certainty of having their vessel confiscated.

But nothing untoward happened to break the monotony of the midshipman's watch. Only the whining of the wind, the rasping of the chain as the *Marie Lescaut* overran her cable, and the dull grinding of the fenders between the schooner and the picket-boat could be heard from without, although from below decks came sounds of revelry from the latter's crew.

Presently the coxswain came on deck.

"We've cleared away and made all shipshape for you, sir," he reported. "Your grub's being hotted-up, sir. I'll take over now. Jimmy's going with Brown to see if they can lay their hands on that jet. If they're lucky, Brown reckons to get the motor running before very long."

Kenneth went below and made up for the delay by tucking in to an appetizing repast. Certainly the Frenchmen knew how to cook, and even if the unusual breakfast had suffered somewhat in the process of "hotting-up", it was none the less welcome.

What with the effect of a plentiful meal and the warmth of the cabin, the

midshipman dropped off into a comfortable sleep.

He awoke to find Wilson touching his shoulder.

“Daybreak, sir, and a Merry Christmas! Brown’s found the jet and strained off the juice. There wasn’t half a lot of water in that paraffin!”

“That’s good,” rejoined Kenneth. “But it’s not much use getting the motor to run if our steering-gear’s still jammed. What’s it like outside?”

“I’ll overhaul the steering-gear when it’s a bit lighter, sir,” replied Wilson. “It’s stopped snowing, sir, but there’s a thick fog. You can hardly see the schooner’s bowsprit-end from the eyes of her. I reckon we’d best hang on where we are until it lifts. We aren’t likely to die of starvation,” he added with a laugh.

The morning wore on. The fog held persistently, and although the wind had fallen considerably there was a confused sea running outside. This was evident by the terrific roar of the breakers which almost outvoiced the fog-signal from the lighthouse at the seaward end of the Mutches.

Debating as to whether it would be possible to get to the lighthouse and ask the keepers to communicate with the *Kirkham* by wireless, Kenneth came to the conclusion that such a step was impracticable unless the request was conveyed by a shore boat. So far no boat from the island had appeared.

The hands then set to work to brush the snow from the deck of the *Marie Lescaut* and also from the picket-boat. While they were thus engaged the fog lifted locally and for the first time the men noticed that bunches of holly had been fastened to the schooner’s mastheads.

“The Frenchies meant to have a proper Christmas beano,” remarked the bowman. “It doesn’t seem jonnick that we’ve done them out of a bust-out! I remember once in the old *Endymion*——”

The sailor’s reminiscences were interrupted by a hail of “Boat ahoy!”

Going to the side, Kenneth caught sight of the misty outline of an open fishing boat that was stealthily approaching the *Marie Lescaut*. There were two men in her, both standing up and facing for’ard, pushing at their oars instead of rowing in the usual fashion.

Hearing the hail from the schooner the men laid on their oars but made no attempt to reply to the midshipman’s request to take a letter to the lighthouse.

“I’ll take nowt from you, maister!” was the blunt rejoinder. “If you want to send message to lighthouse tak it yoursen!”

“Right-o, then, I will,” declared the midshipman, knowing perfectly well that he was quite unable to do so. “So you’ll take nothing from us? Not even our best wishes for a happy Christmas?”

Raxworthy meant this for mild sarcasm, but the way in which it was received by the fishermen was decidedly illuminating.

“You brass-bound gawks wish us a merry Christmas!” retorted one of the men wrathfully. “Dost call thysen a sportsman interfering wi’ a man’s livelihood on Christmas Day of all days. An’ what’s worse you be right spoilin’ the bairns’ feast! Go an’ boil your ‘ead. You’ll not be gettin’ me nor mine to fetch an’ carry for you!”

Then Kenneth began to tumble to it. The fishermen did not know that the picket-boat had been disabled and had been carried into the little harbour by the force of the gale. They were under the impression that the naval men had boarded the schooner knowing her to be a smuggler. Carrying out this duty on Christmas Day was regarded by the islanders as a particularly outstanding example of bad faith. To their minds it was as iniquitous as shooting rabbits on that day on which by custom as well as by law rabbits are protected.

The midshipman was not going to deceive the surly fishermen by explaining that the picket-boat was disabled and had been forced to seek shelter by running alongside the French schooner. But what puzzled him was the man’s reference to “spoiling the bairns’ feast”. That no doubt accounted for the preparations in the hold of the *Marie Lescaut*—the partly laid table for a score or more guests.

“Don’t shove off yet,” he called out as the men prepared to return to the still invisible beach. “I don’t want to spoil the kids’ party or whatever it is.”

“If boardin’ yon vessel ain’t spoilin’ the one chance the bairns have of a Christmas treat, what is?” rejoined the spokesman. “After the cap’n ‘ad gone to all that trouble, too.”

“Where is the captain?” inquired Kenneth.

“Whur he be an’ nowheres else,” replied the fisherman resentfully. “That’ll be his business and nobbut else!”

“I won’t press for further information on that point,” continued the midshipman. “I was merely trying to find out the motives that prompted the skipper of a French trading schooner to provide Christmas fare for the children of the village to which you belong. And I quite agree with you that it must be a terrible disappointment to the kids to have to miss their treat.”

“That’s what we think, sir,” remarked Petty Officer Wilson. “Couldn’t we take the place of the Frenchmen *pro tem*. It strikes me we aren’t going to get out of here for another eight or ten hours at least.”

“Capital idea!” agreed Kenneth.

He was feeling in high spirits. A most satisfying meal following an almost

miraculous escape from death had cheered him up considerably. There were other circumstances tending in the same direction—the jammed steering-gear, for instance. He would be able to vindicate himself before the commander; meanwhile, since the commander had stopped him participating in Christmas festivities with Whitwell at Kindersley Manor, he would give a Christmas party on his own account—although at someone else’s expense—and risk what the Bloke said about it afterwards!

Kenneth beckoned the fishermen to come alongside. Not without some hesitation they rowed a few strokes and then lay off at a distance of about ten yards.

“Look here, you men,” explained the midshipman. “As the schooner is suspected of carrying contraband I’ve put her under arrest. If she isn’t a smuggler then the captain and crew have nothing to fear. They’d better report at Mautby Custom House on the day after to-morrow. And I wouldn’t for one moment suggest that you are hand-in-glove with a crowd of foreign smugglers—so you’ve nothing to be afraid of.”

The two fishermen grinned. They knew perfectly well that the midshipman was pulling their legs.

“Now as regards the children,” continued Raxworthy, “I don’t propose to remove the *Marie Lescaut* until the fog lifts and the sea moderates, so there’s no reason why the kids and their fathers and mothers and aunts and uncles shouldn’t have their party on board.”

“Now you’re talkin’ right handsomely, sir!” interposed one of the fishermen. “I allus said navy officers were gen’lmen!”

“Except when you call them brass-bound gawks!” corrected Kenneth cheerfully.

“I tak that back, sir,” announced the spokesman. “Wot you’ve said about the bairns havin’ their feast makes all the difference.”

“Now we are falling in with the Christmas spirit,” continued Kenneth. “At what time was Captain What’s-his-Name giving his little party?”

“Twelve till four, maister.”

“Good! Bring the kiddies aboard just before noon and we’ll do our best to back up our absent friend, Captain—what is his name, by the bye?”

The fisherman smiled knowingly.

“Keep pleasure apart from business, sir!” he rejoined. “If you don’t mind we’ll leave the Cap’n out of this friendly little talk. Right yer are, sir; just afore twelve, then!”

“Splendid! We’ll be ready!”

IX

There were yet several hours before the time fixed for the arrival of the guests, but every moment of that interval was fully occupied.

Wilson and the bowman set to work to complete the decoration of the hold while the midshipman, with no small faith in his ability as a cook, boiled the Christmas puddings which the crew of the *Marie Lescaut* had left in readiness for the feast.

Then the picket-boat's crew had breakfast.

Strictly speaking, they had no right to help themselves; but in the circumstances necessity in the form of hunger knew no law. The captain and crew of the schooner had deserted their craft, and the most of the food they left would soon go bad if unused.

"If there's a stink about sneaking their grub I suppose they'll let me pay for it," was Kenneth's sop to his conscience. "As for the kids' treat, I don't suppose the Frenchmen will mind."

Meanwhile Leading Stoker Brown, having got the motor running satisfactorily, turned his attention to the jammed steering-gear.

Presently he came aboard the schooner, and went below to where his superior officer was tending the galley fire.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I've found out what's wrong with that there gear."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir; one of the links of the rudder chains has parted close to the quarter-block. You can turn the wheel a dozen times without anything going wrong; but when the link lies a certain way, the fractured part acts as a sort of pawl and jams hard against the shell of the block. I'll just cut out the defective link, and fit a shackle. Then, if the head of the pin's cut off the chain'll render perfectly."

"In that case there's no reason why we shouldn't take the schooner in tow and make for the ship," observed Raxworthy.

"Certainly, sir!" replied the leading stoker imperturbably. "Fog's lifting some, and we can see a good hundred yards ahead."

"I'm not going to shift before two bells in the second dog watch" (5 p.m.), decided the midshipman. "So you'd better knock off what you're doing and get cleaned. I want you to take the part of Father Christmas. Understand—repairs

cannot possibly be executed before the time I have mentioned.”

A knowing smile spread over the usually impassive features of the leading stoker. He even went to the extent of winking at his superior officer.

“Right, sir, I tumble to it,” he rejoined. “Replacing that defective link won’t be possible afore one bell!”

It was a neat little bit of deception, but Kenneth, in the knowledge that the commander would have to admit the injustice of the punishment he had awarded, was determined to carry out his programme and give the fisherfolks’ children their Christmas treat.

Brown went off to deck himself up in the rôle chosen by the midshipman. There was plenty of oakum in the picket-boat’s engine-room. Out of that he fashioned beard, moustache and eyebrows of a prodigious and fearsome character. Red bunting from some old signal flags he fashioned into a robe, with white collar and cuffs cut from the French captain’s table napery. His red, pointed cap was adorned with holly, while his feet were encased in sea-boots splattered with mica—shamelessly obtained from some spare sparking plugs—to give the effect of snow crystals.

“Gracious, Brown!” ejaculated Raxworthy, when he saw this scarlet apparition framed in the doorway of the lobby. “You mustn’t look so glum! You’ll frighten the kids.”

“Can’t ‘elp it, sir,” replied the leading stoker mournfully. “I was born glum—so me old mother says. I’m doing me best—actin’ under orders so to speak, but me face is me own.”

“Well, try and think it’s someone else’s—just for once,” suggested the midshipman.

“I’ll try, sir,” agreed the man lugubriously. “But don’t count too much on it, sir!”

In a locker in the captain’s cabin, Wilson discovered a gramophone and a number of records, while an examination of the mate’s quarters resulted in finding a somewhat battered accordion.

“We’ll have a bit o’ music, sir,” declared the coxswain, who was entering into the spirit of the thing with enormous enthusiasm. “Nothin’ like a spot o’ music to liven things up like. I was reckoned a bit of a specialist with the accordion once, sir,” he added modestly. “Maybe I can twiddle the ivories and make the old thing speak yet!”

With that he raised the instrument at arm’s length above his head and prepared to crash into melody—or discord.

But neither was forthcoming. Once extended the accordion refused to

close.

“‘Ere! this isn’t the First of April—it’s Christmas Day!” exclaimed the coxswain, addressing the soundless instrument. “Come now, don’t be narky. Let’s see what a little gentle persuasion will do!”

Using considerable force, Wilson attempted to compress the instrument. As he did so the bellows burst, emitting a white powder that gave him the appearance of a pierrot.

Kenneth exploded with laughter, but almost immediately he grew grave.

“Shove your head in a bucket of water as sharp as you can, Wilson!” he said.

The coxswain, alarmed by the midshipman’s insistence, promptly did so.

“What is the stuff, sir?” he inquired, as he dried his face, “corrosive powder?”

“Almost as bad,” replied Kenneth. “I believe it’s cocaine, although I’ve never seen the stuff before. If it is, then it’s enough to get those Frenchmen twelve months’ hard labour. We’ll keep the accordion and some of the stuff as evidence. Heave the rest overboard.”

Wilson carefully swept up the minute white crystals from the deck and consigned them to a watery grave. Barely had he completed this task when he sung out:

“Boat with the kiddies coming alongside, sir!”

X

Kenneth hurried on deck to find that there were two boats approaching from the still invisible shore.

Each had its quota of gleefully shouting children, while in addition—the midshipman’s invitation having been taken literally—there was a swarm of adults both men and women. Anxiously he scanned the boats to see if the French captain and his men were amongst the party. He was not at all keen to receive *them*, especially as they might attempt to recapture their schooner. It might be all very well to bluff them into thinking that the picket-boat’s crew were armed, and especially detailed to put the *Marie Lescaut* under arrest; but on the other hand the Frenchmen, who probably were quite capable of taking in any details concerning the disabled boat and her meagre crew, would be tempted to show fight.

But the midshipman’s fears were groundless. The adult male contingent consisted of six fishermen ranging in age between twenty and eighty who, in spite of the knowledge that the seizure of the schooner meant a severe blow to their livelihood, were determined to enjoy themselves for the sake of the “bairns”.

“‘Ere we are, sir!” announced the man to whom the invitation had been given. “We sure wishes you all a Merry Christmas!”

“Come aboard!” rejoined Kenneth.

Wilson and the bowman standing at the gang-way—a gap made by the removal of a small portable section of the bulwarks—hailed the children and women up. The men followed and, tongue-tied, leant awkwardly against the rail, shuffling their sea-booted feet in obvious shyness.

“Get the children below, Wilson,” suggested Kenneth. “It’s cold for them on deck. We may as well start grub straight away!”

The first child to descend the ladder was a pretty flaxen-haired girl of about five, who gave a shrill cry of delight as she caught sight of the decorated main hold.

But the next moment she emitted a shriek of terror, and threw her arms round Wilson’s neck in a paroxysm of sheer fright.

The effect upon the rest was almost disastrous. The kiddies on deck stampeded; the elders not knowing what was amiss, either tried to pacify them or turned angrily upon the midshipman as the author of some piece of

unwarranted treachery!

Above the tumult Leading Stoker Brown's deep bass voice:

"I told you, sir! I knew I wasn't cut out for the part. Now I've scared the kids properly!"

The midshipman, thanks to his training, knew how to act promptly in a tight corner.

"On deck, Father Christmas!" he ordered. Then, turning to his still agitated guests: "Here's Father Christmas! He's going to give you all a little present and to welcome you on board!"

Leading Stoker Brown obeyed the order almost too promptly. Like a jack-in-the-box he leapt up the steep ladder and stood—his crimson robes fluttering in the breeze—upon the deck. As one the crowd of children gave back, the young ones clinging tearfully to their parents.

"Sixpence to the first girl who shakes hands with Father Christmas!" announced Kenneth.

No one accepted the invitation.

Father Christmas, awkwardly shifting his well-laden bag from one shoulder to the other looked appealingly and reproachfully at his superior officer.

"Will I get sixpence if I shake hands with Father Christmas?" asked a red-haired freckled boy of about seven.

"Certainly," replied Kenneth, guessing that if the ice were broken the rest of the children would overcome their fears.

"Go shake 'ands wi' Fayther Christmas, Jimmy lad!" prompted his mother.

The youngster, with his arms behind his back and his feet planted sturdily apart, calmly scanned the burly figure of the disguised leading stoker.

"Eh, mither!" he exclaimed. "Didn't you tell me Fayther Christmas came down the chimney and put that engine in my stocking the morn? If that's Fayther Christmas, he be too girt to come down *our* chimney. There's a catch in it somewheres. All right, maister," he continued, turning to address the midshipman. "Gimme the sixpence an' I'll do it!"

Kenneth gave him the coin, which he promptly handed to his father with the warning to remember that it was "my sixpence not yourn!"

Then, fearlessly he went up to the discredited Father Christmas and extended his hand.

"Put it there, mate!" he invited, using an expression he had learned from his elders.

Emboldened by the boy's example, the other children, first singly and then in groups, made friends with the now perspiring Father Christmas, who was soon distributing oranges from his sack as fast as he could. They swarmed round him, tugging at his crimson robe in their eagerness, until an over-excited lad jerked the leading stoker's false beard from its insecure anchorage.

Amidst shouts of laughter from his messmates and the elder guests, Brown beat a hasty retreat to discard his transparent disguise.

After that things went with a go. The forehold was filled almost to overflowing, Wilson and the bowman carved, while Kenneth, who was thoroughly enjoying himself, handed round plates with the deftness of a conjurer. A tot of rum apiece loosened the tongues of the men, and soon the guests young and old were chattering—when they weren't eating and drinking—to their hearts' content.

After dinner games were organized, Leading Stoker Brown, now thoroughly and willingly resigned, taking the rôle of elephant and giving the children rides up and down the hold.

At one end of the hold the men foregathered, smoking tobacco that had never paid and would never pay excise duty, while the womenfolk sipped tea "mellowed" with something stronger.

The atmosphere grew so thick that it could almost be cut with a knife; but the youngsters, accustomed to playing in hovels heated by peat fires, continued their games with unabated zest. They insisted on their hosts joining in until sheer fatigue compelled the brawny seamen to desist.

When, at four o'clock, Kenneth announced that it was time for his guests to pack up, the children and the elders reluctantly took their departure, voting that the party was the most successful ever participated in by the inhabitants of the Mutchies.

"Thank 'ee kindly, sir!" exclaimed the man to whom the midshipman had originally given the invitation. "The kiddies have enjoyed themselves no end. Now, I suppose, you've got to take the schooner away. It'll hit us hard—there's no saying that it won't—but we knows that dooty is dooty, and we can't bear you no ill-will for carrying out orders."

And a few minutes later Kenneth and his crew were left alone amidst the chaos of piles of dirty crockery and the debris of the feast.

XI

An hour's hard work and the task of washing up and getting the hold into some semblance of order was completed.

Then Raxworthy gave orders for the picket-boat's motor to be started and preparations made to take the schooner in tow.

By this time night had fallen, but the storm had completely died away, and a full moon was approaching its zenith.

It was now seen that the *Marie Lescaut* was lying in a small harbour, the main or seaward entrance to which was entirely hidden by the high ground on either side. The subsidiary channel through which the picket-boat had been providentially driven by the gale was likewise hidden from Mautby outer harbour, and consequently the light cruiser *Kirkham* could neither be seen from the deck of the *Marie Lescaut* nor could the *Kirkham* see the schooner.

"Now I'll have to explain matters to the commander," thought Kenneth. "He'll probably raise Cain because I haven't got into touch with the ship before now, but there's one blessing—he can't spoil my Christmas Day now!"

The next question was how to get the schooner into Mautby inner harbour. It was too risky to attempt the short cut; so the midshipman decided to tow her seaward, skirt the extremity of the Mutches—the lighthouse would warn him off the outlying dangers—and gain the harbour by the buoyed channel.

Then the question arose: was the seaward entrance to the little haven free from shoals? Consulting the Frenchman's chart Kenneth came to the conclusion that the channel ought to be feasible, although great caution was necessary. If he piled the *Marie Lescaut* upon a rock the consequences to him would be very serious. On the other hand he dare not leave the schooner anchored where she was until a working crew could be obtained from the *Kirkham*, because the Frenchmen, if they were hiding on one of the islands, might regain possession of her in the interval and take her to sea. Once outside the three-mile limit she would be immune from arrest.

"I'll risk it!" decided Kenneth, and gave orders for the schooner's anchor to be hove short ready for the vessel to be taken in tow by the picket-boat.

The clank of the windlass had hardly started when a boat appeared upon the moonlit waters. For a moment Raxworthy thought that the crew of the *Marie Lescaut* were returning to take forcible possession of their vessel; but the now familiar voice of the fisherman boomed over the intervening space.

“Shall I pilot you out, sir?” he inquired. “One good turn deserves another, all the world over, and you’ve done our bairns proud!”

The midshipman gratefully accepted the offer. Even though it did not relieve him of the responsibility he realized that the risk of the schooner running aground was greatly reduced, since the man knew the channel thoroughly. *Unless he purposely set the Marie Lescaut ashore, in order to prevent her capture.*

Kenneth confided his doubts to the coxswain.

“That’ll be all right, sir,” rejoined Wilson. “You take him aboard you. I’ll remain in the schooner and we’ll tow his boat astern until we’re clear of here. He won’t dare try any tricks while he’s in the picket-boat. Mind you, sir, I don’t think he’s *that*. He’s proper jonnick—that’s my opinion.”

The fisherman made no objection when this plan was proposed to him. Directly the anchor was a-peak the *Marie Lescaut* was abandoned by all, with the exception of the coxswain, whose duty it was to steer the schooner in the picket-boat’s wake.

Slowly the latter gathered way, her motor running steadily and now showing no indications of “konking out”, while the schooner at the end of thirty fathoms of stout hawser followed sedately in the picket-boat’s wake.

At last, with a sigh of relief, the midshipman saw that his charges were well outside the Mutches and beyond the ten-fathom line. Here the tow was temporarily cast off in order to put the voluntary pilot back into his own boat.

Once more the towing hawser was secured and the long, circuitous journey to Mautby Harbour was resumed.

At seven-thirty the picket-boat and her tow passed under the *Kirkham*’s stern to be greeted with the customary hail of: “Boat ahoy!”

“Passing!” shouted the midshipman in reply.

They were so close that Kenneth could hear the look-out man reporting to the officer-of-the-watch.

Suddenly the moon appeared from under a cloud, revealing the fact that the towing craft was the light cruiser’s picket-boat that had been given up for lost.

“Schooner ahoy!” came a peremptory hail from the *Kirkham*. “What schooner is that?”

“*Marie Lescaut* of Fécamp, sir; placed under arrest by *Kirkham*’s picket-boat,” shouted Wilson in reply.

For some moments there was silence. Evidently the officer-of-the-watch was reporting the matter to the commander.

Then came another order:

“The schooner will anchor two cables off. Picket-boat to return to *Kirkham* immediately.”

“That’s torn it!” thought Kenneth, who had hoped to bring the *Marie Lescaut* into Mautby inner harbour and to report on board on the following morning. “That means I’m going to have a ticking-off on Christmas Day after all!”

The towing hawser was cut loose, and the picket-boat ran alongside the schooner in order that the hands could give assistance in bringing the prize to anchor. Then, having hoisted a riding light on the *Marie Lescaut* and taken Wilson off, Raxworthy brought his craft alongside her parent ship.

“Returned for duty, sir!” reported the midshipman to the officer-of-the-watch.

“And about time, too, my young festive,” rejoined the latter. “Commander wishes to see you at once.”

XII

Midshipman Kenneth Raxworthy's interview with the Bloke was of a very different nature to that of his previous one. *That* had lasted only a few minutes; this more than an hour.

In fact it was barely an interview. It was more like a narrative. The commander listened intently, occasionally drumming his finger tips upon the top of his pedestal desk—a favourable sign, as more than one midshipman had cause to know.

Then, as evidence, Kenneth produced the broken link of the steering chains.

The commander examined the fracture, and then placed the link on the table without comment.

“Carry on, please!”

Kenneth did so until the end of his narrative, omitting no essential detail.

“Well, Mr. Raxworthy,” said the Bloke at the conclusion of the story, “your capture of the schooner is a feather in our cap. Undoubtedly the *Marie Lescaut* is the smuggling vessel that has been giving so much trouble, and you have laid her by the heels very neatly. It will be at least a fortnight before the prize court will deal with her. I have a recollection that I jammed your Christmas leave. That was an error on my part. I'm sorry. How about ten days' leave from to-morrow?”

“Thank you, sir!”

“You'll be in time to join your chum Whitwell for Boxing Day,” continued the Bloke, with a twinkle in his eye. “Then you can apologize to his people for having to refuse their offer to spend Christmas Day at Kindersley Manor, and tell them from me that it was the fault of that old buffer of a commander!”

“Thank you, sir,” said Kenneth again, and as he hurried to the gun-room to enjoy a good night's rest before going on leave, he said to himself:

“My luck's in, this time, by Jove! Dashed if the old buffer of a commander isn't a thundering good sort after all!”

PART II

PART II

THE PIRATE JUNK

I

“Send Midshipman Raxworthy, sir!” suggested the commander hopefully.

“Why should I send my senior midshipman?” countered the captain plaintively, almost petulantly.

“It would give him a chance to let loose some of his high spirits,” replied the Bloke, who was only too glad of a possible opportunity to free himself from his thorn in the flesh, in the person of Mr. Midshipman Raxworthy.

Yes, the midshipman in question was a bit of a problem even for the fiery-tempered commander to manage. It was something like the task of trying to harpoon a floating cork with a blunt fork. He might succeed in “putting the midshipman under”, but Raxworthy invariably succeeded in bobbing up again “as fresh as paint”.

It wasn’t that he was insubordinate, or anything of that sort. Raxworthy had a great reverence for discipline, but, somehow, and often through circumstances beyond his control, he found himself up against the Bloke who, in turn, imagined that the midshipman was everlastingly trying to get to wind’ard of him.

“I suppose so,” agreed the Owner. “Apparently the job to which he is to be lent requires considerable initiative and discretion.”

“Raxworthy has plenty of initiative,” the commander hastened to assert.

“And discretion?”

“I know of no midshipman with a better sense of that, sir.”

“What about Timpson?” inquired the captain, who still showed a disinclination to fall in with his subordinate’s suggestion.

“He’s all right while he’s under my eye, sir,” replied the Bloke. “Outside the ship I don’t quite know how he would shape. In lending a snottie we have to be careful to see that the one we choose doesn’t reflect discredit upon the ship.”

“Exactly,” agreed the Owner warmly. “Very well, then; make it so!”

The nature of the request was a somewhat unusual one. It came—through the commander-in-chief of the China Squadron—from the lieutenant-commander of the shallow-draught river gunboat *Sandgrub*, asking for the loan of a midshipman as soon as possible, and for an indefinite period. The reason given was that *Sandgrub* was about to proceed up the Yang-tse on particular

service, details of which were already known to the admiral, since he had given orders for the gunboat to proceed up the river.

The admiral didn't want to spare any of the midshipmen in the flagship—midshipmen in the flagship are ornamental and also necessary satellites to the planetary omnipotence of the admiral—so he scribbled on the document, “Referred to you for immediate compliance”, and had it sent on to the captain of the light cruiser *Ripon*, in which Midshipman Raxworthy was “borne on the books”. And *Ripon* was the admiral's choice as she was not one of the China Squadron, having been temporarily detached from the East.

The commander, having gained the point, retired from the captain's cabin and made his way to his own.

“Ha, Pay! you're just the bright lad I want,” he exclaimed, as he encountered the paymaster-lieutenant outside the wardroom. “Do you know of any passenger steamers about to leave here for Shanghai. We're sending young Raxworthy to *Sandgrub*, and I don't suppose the admiral will dispatch a destroyer for the purpose of conveying a snottie from Hong Kong to Shanghai.”

The paymaster-lieutenant considered the question. He, like all officers of the Accountant Branch, was supposed to be a sort of perambulating encyclopædia. He usually was, especially on matters concerning the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions.

“No mail-boat until Monday next, sir. I think——”

“I said a passenger steamer.”

“There's the *Ah-Foo*, Chinese owned, but under British officers. She's leaving Hong Kong to-morrow.”

“That'll do. Make out the necessary warrant,” decided the commander, and he proceeded to his cabin, there to write instructions in the order book for Midshipman Raxworthy's temporary transference to H.M. Gunboat *Sandgrub*.

II

"Something that'll interest you, Rax!" exclaimed Morton, the sub of the gun-room. "Catch!"

He tossed the order book across to Raxworthy, who caught the book dexterously, though without enthusiasm. The commander's order book usually contained—when it mentioned him at all—some unpleasant reference to something also unpleasant that the midshipman was called upon to perform.

But soon Raxworthy's eyes sparkled.

"Crickey!" he ejaculated. "This is a slice of luck!"

"What's up, old son?" inquired Timpson. "Has the Bloke given you a double dose of duty steam-boat 'cause you carved off a chunk of the accommodation ladder when you brought him alongside yesterday?"

"No," replied Raxworthy. "I'm lent to *Sandgrub*. Up the Yang-tse!"

"Lucky dog!" commented Timpson. "Only, take my tip: don't try mixed bathing in the Yang-tse. 'Tisn't like the Mediterranean. One mouthful and you won't want another."

"Initial the blessed thing, and don't waste time kagging," announced the sub, who wasn't too pleased over the business. One midshipman short meant not only additional duties for those who remained, but increased work for him. "And don't leave any of your gear knocking about. I don't want the job of sending it after you. Anyway, what's the bright idea of sending a snottie to a gunboat? I've never heard of it being done."

It did not take Raxworthy long to make his preparations. Life in the Royal Navy teaches a man to be sharp off the mark even at short notice.

His sea chest was soon packed. It contained, amongst other articles, that ornamental but useless weapon, his dirk, and something that was not ornamental but certainly business like—his service revolver. Then, of course, he had to take his sextant. He wondered whether he would be called upon to "take sights" when miles up the Yang-tse. He hoped not. He didn't shine at mathematics and "working out his sights" was a task he detested. That fact had been the cause of several of the many unpleasant "incidents" between him and the Bloke, although he guessed shrewdly that the commander at his mature time of life wouldn't know how to use a sextant with any degree of accuracy.

At nine next morning Raxworthy, wearing plain clothes, boarded the S.S. *Ah-Foo*.

A Chinese steward, stealthy in movement and with almost expressionless features, showed him to his cabin.

“Velly nicee cabin. Me help navee officer unstow?”

“Thanks, no; I’ll do my own unpacking,” replied Raxworthy, and wondered how the Chinaman knew he was R.N.

It was a single berth cabin, with two large scuttles and a jalousied door. Above the bunk was an electric fan. Close to it was a switch controlling the electric light. The cabin was enamelled white, but showed considerable signs of iron mould in spite of the cork cement casing the deck-head beams.

The steward, bowing, backed out of the cabin. Raxworthy unlocked his chest, removed those articles he required for immediate use, and then re-locked it.

About a quarter of an hour later he went on deck.

The *Ah-Foo* was already under way.

From the boat-deck the midshipman looked down upon the well-deck, which was crowded with Chinese of the working-class. Men, women and children, most of them sitting upon bundles that contained the whole of their worldly goods, seemed to have “pegged out their claims” as if they intended remaining there for the duration of the voyage. Everyone, according to custom that had arisen from necessity, had been searched for hidden arms.

The third officer, elderly and rigged out in none-too-smart tropical uniform, came up and stood by Raxworthy’s side.

“Pretty measly crowd, aren’t they?” he remarked. “Thank goodness we aren’t carrying them far. We’re getting shut of most of them at Swatow.”

“Swatow! I thought the *Ah-Foo* was bound for Shanghai direct?”

“Never in your life, Mr. Raxworthy. This is an intermediate boat, and well I know it! Swatow, Amoy, Foochow, Wen Chow, Hangchow, Shanghai; like a porter yelling out the names of stations on the old North-Eastern. By smoke! What wouldn’t I give to be in Liverpool Street station now instead of in this old hooker.”

“Good heavens!” ejaculated the midshipman aghast. “How long does it take her to make Shanghai?”

“Depends,” replied the third officer guardedly. “Depends on what cargo’s offering. Say a week, and you’ll not be far wrong. But she’s a fairly comfortable ship and you won’t be crowded. You’re the only first-class passenger.”

That was little consolation. Here he was, under orders to report on board *Sandgrub* with the least possible delay, with the prospect of kicking his heels

for a week, perhaps ten days. Once these “intermediates” go into port there’s no knowing when they will leave.

Then, reflecting, he remembered that it was through no fault of his that he had been booked for a passage in the *Ah-Foo*. Probably the commander would think so and not forget to mention it when, at some future date, he rejoined his ship. Meanwhile he must make the best of things and trust to luck that *Sandgrub* hadn’t gone up the Yang-tse before he arrived at Shanghai.

He hoped she wouldn’t. He was looking forward to the experience tremendously. It was a most unusual procedure to send a midshipman for service in a river gunboat. What was the idea? He couldn’t think. Neither the Owner nor the Bloke had hinted about the nature of his duties. It might be that the *Sandgrub* was on special service—a chance of smelling powder, perhaps—and if that were so he would be an object of envy to his messmates who remained in the light cruiser.

Raxworthy remained on the boat-deck until the island of Hong Kong dipped behind the horizon and the rugged China coast showed up through the heat haze broad on the port beam.

About two miles off a large junk was on a course diagonal to the shore. Although she was at present dead ahead, she would draw clear long before the *Ah-Foo* cut her track.

The midshipman gave the junk a casual glance. Since he arrived on the China Station he had seen too many craft of this type to show any interest in her.

A Chinese steward announced that tiffin was ready. Raxworthy, having a healthy appetite, was reciprocally ready. He went down to his cabin, washed, brushed his hair, and then made his way to the saloon.

He was, as the third officer had remarked, the only first-class passenger. His seat at the table was therefore on the captain’s right. The ship’s officers present at the meal were the second officer, the purser and the doctor.

The repast started well. The soup was excellent, the fish, cunningly garnished by native cooks, was most appetising. Conversation, however, was desultory and by no means general. The doctor and the purser were discussing some matter that was completely outside their respective departments. The second exchanged a few words with the Old Man and then devoted his attention to his plate; while the captain, having passed a few commonplace remarks to Raxworthy, seemed to be lost in thought. Occasionally he would turn his head to one side and gaze up at the open skylight, like a terrier hearing strange noises. The Chinese servants, standing motionless yet keenly responsive to any sign on the part of the people at table, gazed woodenly at the

opposite bulkhead.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a pistol rang out, followed by another, and then a perfect fusillade.

The Old Man leapt from his seat, drew an automatic from his hip pocket, and without waiting for the others, dashed on deck. The doctor and the purser vanished. So did the Chinese servants.

“Got a revolver handy?” asked the second officer hurriedly. “Fetch it. I’m off to get mine.”

Raxworthy needed no second bidding. He followed the second officer along the alleyway until they separated outside their respective cabins. He didn’t even have to ask what the violent commotion was about. He knew.

It was an attempt on the part of pirates disguised as Chinese passengers to seize the ship.

This sort of thing had been done before. In fact, cases of piracy in the China Sea were far too frequent, notwithstanding the increasing vigilance of the European officers—for even ships flying the ensign of Republican China as well as those flying the Red Duster and manned by native crews, were almost invariably officered by British subjects.

Pulling out his bunch of keys, Raxworthy was about to unlock his sea chest when the lid opened under the movement of his hand. Even in his excitement the midshipman noticed it.

“Could have sworn I locked the jolly old thing,” he muttered. “Perhaps I didn’t, though.”

The revolver, fully loaded, was reposing in a holster and sandwiched between his great coat and one of his tropical uniforms. Somewhere in the chest he had stowed an unopened packet of service ammunition. At least, he thought he had, but it was not to be found.

Slamming the lid of the chest, Raxworthy left his cabin, breaking the revolver as he did so in order to reassure himself that the weapon was fully loaded. The heads of six brass cartridge cases showed themselves in the chambers. So far so good!

III

Raxworthy almost collided with the third officer who had come out of his cabin with a small American revolver in his right hand.

“Keep your weather eye lifting!” cautioned the latter. “Here! Get behind me!”

Without ceremony he pushed the midshipman on one side and continued his way along the otherwise deserted alleyway. Overhead pandemonium reigned.

The third officer’s bulky form obstructed the companion way. Raxworthy saw his shoulder moved as he raised his right arm. Through the gap between the third’s body and the jamb the midshipman caught a glimpse of a mob of Chinese, some armed with automatics, others brandishing broad-bladed knives and iron bars.

The third fired in rapid succession—six shots at about five yards’ range. Then he dropped on his hands and knees across the raised coaming of the companion-way.

That left Raxworthy’s outlook almost unimpeded. He was standing on the third step of the ladder from the top, and his waist was nearly level with the luckless Englishman.

The pirates rushed forward, probably not knowing that another armed man barred their passage. They were only a part of the crowd that had treacherously attacked the ship’s officers, and thinking that all resistance was now at an end they were making for the saloon and cabins with the object of looting.

Levelling his revolver, Raxworthy fired at the broad naked chest of the foremost pirate. At that distance it was almost impossible to miss, and the midshipman had won a trophy for pistol shooting, competed for by the junior officers of the fleet.

The pirate continued to advance, apparently uninjured. There certainly was no ugly wound in his chest that one would expect from a heavy bullet fired at a few yards’ distance.

Raxworthy fired again.

Even in the moment of extreme peril he tumbled to it. There was hardly any kick of his revolver as he fired.

“Surely I wasn’t such an idiot as to load with blank?” he thought.

He fired again.

The pirate was almost within hand's reach. The blast from the muzzle of his revolver pitted his chest. Raxworthy had a distinct recollection of that.

Then his ideas grew distinctly misty.

Something heavy descended upon his head.

A vivid white light spangled with countless stars flashed before his eyes. Then everything became a blank.

IV

The midshipman was not long in a state of unconsciousness; but a lot had happened during that time.

When he opened his eyes and his scattered senses were able to act more or less in consort, he found himself lying on the well-deck and without protection from the tropical sun.

The pirates were active and apparently moving in procession past the spot where he lay. What they were doing he could not make out.

On either side of him was a bound man. The one on his left turned his head and said something that the midshipman could not catch. It was the ship's doctor. There was a dark red stain above the elbow on the sleeve of his jacket. The wound was bleeding profusely. Neither the pirates nor their victim had taken any steps to staunch the flow; the former probably through complete indifference, the latter because he was bound hand and foot.

On trying to raise himself to tend to the wounded man, Raxworthy discovered that he himself was bound hand and foot—or rather, his ankles were bound and his arms secured behind his back by a short length of rope that allowed only a limited movement.

“Hello, young man!” exclaimed the doctor, speaking with difficulty. “What have they given you?”

“Crack over the head,” replied Raxworthy. “And you?”

“Bullet through the arm. My own pistol, most likely. It was missing when I went to my cabin.”

“And mine was tampered with. Either the bullets were broken out of the cartridges or else some blighter reloaded with blank and shoved the revolver back in my sea-chest.”

“Ten to one it was that oily rascal of a steward,” hazarded the doctor. “They shot the Old Man down like a dog. The third's on your right. I don't know what's happened to the other deck officers or the engineers.”

For some moments they remained silent. The midshipman altered his position slightly to obtain some shade from the shadow of the foremast. By that fact his seamanship told him that the *Ah-Foo* was now on approximately a south-easterly course—heading for the coast of the mainland.

Then he happened to look along the deck, which was only a few inches below the level of his eyes. To his horror he saw the decapitated head of a

child rolling between the coaming of the cargo hatch and the scuppers.

“Look, doctor!” he exclaimed.

The doctor gave a wry smile.

“Yes, the solution to the mystery how the pirates smuggled their arms on board,” he rejoined. “It’s only a doll’s head! Those women we took aboard are working with the pirates.”

So that was it! Most if not all of the children in arms were dolls that concealed the weapons that had enabled the pirates to rush the bridge and capture the ship. Although each male passenger had been rigorously searched as he came on board, no one had thought to disturb the “infants” that slumbered so soundly in the shawls that strapped them to their “mothers’ ” backs.

It was a new ruse on the part of the pirates. Hitherto they had concealed arms in baskets containing meal and rice; they had strapped automatics to their ankles; they had hidden them under their bowl-shaped hats. In every case they had been successful in surprising the officers of the various ships upon which they had designs. In most instances survivors—for the pirates rarely went to the extreme measure of murdering their prisoners—reported how the arms had been smuggled into the ship. This made the searchers at the port of embarkation wise. The pirates hardly ever repeated their ruses. It had developed into a continual war—the pitting of the brains of the authorities against those of these modern buccaneers of the China Sea.

Presently one of the pirates strolled past and caught sight of the decapitated doll’s head. He picked it up, looked at it thoughtfully and then called to another of the party—the broad-chested fellow at whom the midshipman had fired thrice in vain.

The two Chinamen discussed the find and glanced significantly at the bound captives. To Raxworthy it seemed as if they were proposing to cut the prisoners’ throats, on the principle that dead men tell no tales. To employ dolls as hiding-places for smuggled arms had proved so successful that the pirates felt inclined to repeat the process. It would almost certainly work, provided there were no hostile witnesses. Then the big fellow, who was either the chief of the gang or someone in high authority amongst them, stepped up to the place where the midshipman lay.

Smiling horribly, he tapped his bare chest.

“Leetle boy’s bullet no makee hurt!” he declared. “Now you speakee. You Engleesh officer from shippee that fight?”

“I am,” admitted Raxworthy.

“Little boy big officer-man?” asked the pirate.

The midshipman guessed what that meant: although he was a mere youth he might be someone of importance and therefore a likely subject for ransom.

Raxworthy shook his head and regretted that he had done so. It made his skull throb agonisingly.

“Your fliends payee fifty t’ousand dollar, may be?”

“They’ll more likely send a warship and make finish with you!” declared the midshipman boldly.

The pirate leered and made a deprecatory movement with his hand.

“English navee makee—finish,” he rejoined, and went on to enlarge upon his statement.

It gave the midshipman an insight into the Chinese opinion of foreign navies; for the pirate recalled the time when British, Russian and German fleets in the Far East had matters almost entirely their own way. He touched upon the rise of Japan’s navy, which owed its birth and development to Great Britain; how the Japanese fleet first destroyed that of his own country and next annihilated that of Russia in the Tsushima Strait; next, Japan’s action in clearing the Germans out of Chinese waters during the Great War.

Then Raxworthy was told how the short-sighted policy of certain British statesmen then in power had had its repercussions upon the teeming masses of China. Then he heard of the drastic reductions in the British Navy; how the powerful fleet that once sailed under the white ensign in Far Eastern waters diminished in both the size and numbers of its ships, while that of Japan increased by leaps and bounds.

“V’ly soon,” concluded the pirate, “no Englis’ shipee left. Before they makee go I takee you p’risoner. Fifty t’ousand dollar, p’laps hundred t’ousand dollar. We makee see!”

“You won’t,” said Raxworthy defiantly.

He was highly indignant, not merely because he had been ignominiously captured and was to be held to ransom, but chiefly because of the pirate’s scorn for that which he prized above all things—the honour of the British Navy.

“Then,” continued the Chinaman, as he passed his forefinger over the tip of his nose, “we makee cut one time. If no good, p’laps one ear; p’laps two. You makee see?”

Raxworthy understood. If the demanded ransom were not forthcoming his captors would deprive him first of the tip of his nose and then both ears, sending the severed portions to the midshipman’s superior officers just to show

that the maritime bandits meant business!

V

The pirate chief went off, letting the full significance of his cold-blooded threats sink in.

“He’s made a dead set at you, Raxworthy,” observed the doctor. “Evidently he thinks you’re no end of a swell! I suppose they’ll be content with a mere thousand dollars for me; but I don’t think they’ll get it. Hang it all! why can’t they free my wrists and let me attend to this bullet wound in my arm? It’s bleeding too much to be pleasant!”

As if in answer to his words, another Chinaman came up with a bowl of water and some linen. First he gave the three now conscious Englishmen a drink in turn; then, setting the bowl on the deck, he cast loose the doctor’s bonds that secured his wrists and proceeded with a certain degree of tenderness to wash and bind up the wound. The bullet had passed completely through the doctor’s arm, fortunately missing the bones and arteries. Having done this, the pirate refastened the doctor’s arms, but this time across his chest, so that the injured limb obtained some manner of support.

Then Raxworthy’s arms were freed and the pirate stood by while the midshipman bathed the ugly-looking bruise on his head. After that the third officer’s wounds were attended to.

All this time the captured *Ah-Foo* had been steaming dead slow on an easterly course. No doubt the pirates had compelled the engine-room staff to carry on.

She now stopped. Raxworthy caught sight of the towering stern of a large junk—probably the one he had seen some hours previously, before the surprise attack took place—as she came alongside.

The junk was secured fore and aft and her abnormally large crew assisted the other pirates to tranship the cargo to her from the *Ah-Foo*. And not only the cargo; they commenced to strip the ship of everything of value.

And how hard they worked! In spite of the broiling sun they toiled, heaving bulky goods from one deck to another, and only employing the ship’s derricks when the weight to be shifted was beyond human muscles.

This went on until about an hour before sunset, by which time the *Ah-Foo* was almost gutted. Her lightened freeboard rose above that of the now deeply laden junk.

Meanwhile, men on the steamship’s bridge kept a sharp look-out for any

strange sail. But none hove in sight, for a very good reason: by taking the *Ah-Foo* close inshore they had gone well to the east'ard of the regular steamship track for vessels bound to and from Chinese coastal ports.

The pirate captain then came up to where the prisoners were lying. Without a word to them he gave orders to some of the men.

Raxworthy and the doctor were then lifted and passed across to the junk. The pirate crew abandoned the *Ah-Foo*, leaving the wounded third officer to navigate her as best he might.

Then, in the short tropic twilight, the *Ah-Foo*, rolling heavily, with empty holds, stood away to the sou'-west, while the junk, deeply laden and crowded with men, hoisted her huge mat sails and, like a ghost, glided stealthily through the gathering darkness towards the pirates' lair.

VI

The pirates were jubilant over their success. Their usually impassive features betrayed their feelings. The capture of the *Ah-Foo* had been a most fortunate coup—the best they had ever made.

Altogether, the crowd on board the junk numbered about a hundred. All were well armed with revolvers or automatics. For the most part they were tall, powerfully built men from the northern provinces, although there were a few slight wiry Cantonese.

Except for the half-naked helmsman and a couple of fellows on the towering poop, the pirates had gathered in the waist, where they sat eating rice and sharks' fins and discussed the events of the day and the possible division of the spoil on the morrow.

"Where are they making for, do you know?" asked Raxworthy of his fellow-captive. "Bias Bay?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Not this time," he replied. "I know this coast fairly well. I've been up and down it regularly for the last three years. We're well to the nor'ard of that famous pirates' lair. I fancy this must be a rival gang with headquarters fifty or a hundred miles farther up the coast. Did you notice that the junk altered course when the *Ah-Foo* was out of sight?"

"Yes."

"She was making in the direction of Bias Bay. That was to throw our people off the scent. The pirates of Bias Bay will get blamed for this. Probably a couple of destroyers will be sent to inquire into the matter. Meanwhile the gang goes unsuspected."

"But will they ask for our ransom to be sent there?"

"No fear; they'll conduct negotiations through an agent who, perhaps, lives in Canton or Amoy. Hello!"

A Chinaman cast adrift their wrist lashings and handed each of them a wooden bowl containing a greasy substance looking like porridge.

The doctor sniffed at it.

"Rice and fish," he declared. "Might be worse: rotten eggs and seaweed for example."

"Dashed if I can eat the stuff," exclaimed the midshipman.

“You’d better,” advised his companion. “We may have to eat worse stuff than that before we’re set free.”

“Set free?” echoed Raxworthy. “I’m not going to wait for that, if I can possibly help it. I’m going to make a dash for it at the first chance that offers.”

The doctor smiled.

“You’ll have to wait a deuce of a long time, then,” he rejoined. “That is, if these fellows take the usual precautions with their prisoners. And if you do get a chance and have the misfortune to be recaptured, you’ll wish you’re dead long before you are!”

“Cheerful optimist, aren’t you, Doc?”

“It just happens that I know,” continued Raxworthy’s companion in misfortune. “Provided these fellows think there’s a chance of obtaining ransom, they won’t treat you so badly. But if they see no likelihood of the British Government paying up, or if you try to slip through their fingers, then _____”

He snapped his fingers impressively.

“Then you wouldn’t try to escape if you had a chance?”

“My dear fellow, maturity has given me discretion,” replied the doctor.

Raxworthy pondered for a few moments.

“Look here,” he exclaimed. “Supposing I made a dash for it. Would they make it the worse for you, out of spite?”

“Having lost one possible source of wealth, they proceed to destroy the other and lesser one, eh? Hardly, I think. While there’s money there’s hope, is an axiom among them.”

“Good enough,” declared the midshipman.

“Let’s hope it is,” added his companion drily. “Only just watch and see what sort of country you would have to find your way through.”

They finished their sorry repast in silence.

The midshipman was hungry—very—and that fact alone enabled him to overcome his repugnance at the fish-flavoured rice. And having finished it he still felt the pangs of hunger.

“Now,” thought Raxworthy, glancing at the night-enshrouded deck—for the junk displayed no light—“they’ve freed my arms. I can cast my ankle lashings adrift. What’s to prevent me going over the side? There are bound to be some fishing boats about. I heard oars splashing not so very long ago.”

He bent forward and commenced to tease the knots of the rope that secured his ankles.

Even in the darkness his companion realized what he was doing and sensed his intentions.

“Better not, Raxworthy!”

“Why not?”

“Sharks!”

VII

One of the pirates replaced the two prisoners' bonds. The opportunity had passed for the midshipman to carry out his intention.

A few minutes after the captives had been properly secured, one of the men on the poop shouted something. Instantly there was a commotion in the waist. A mob rushed aft and commenced to tail on to a rope. Raxworthy could see their outlines silhouetted against the starlit sky, and thought that they were hauling on to a sheet or a halliard.

"*Yay-hai . . . yah-hai . . . yah-hai*," the pirates sang in chorus, as they heaved and hauled.

Then there was a tremendous *thump* on the poop. The midshipman could not see what caused it, owing to his position almost under the break of the poop. Several of the pirates, still tailing on to the rope, descended the ladder. Others in the waist also assisted in the hauling process, while the monotonous *Yah-hai* continued.

Foot by foot the rope came in. More men descended the poop ladder.

Then Raxworthy saw the cause for the commotion.

At the end of the rope was an enormous shark. Its captors had hauled it up over the taffrail and were dragging it amidships to dispatch it. The brute was lashing out furiously with its tail.

Rather apprehensively the midshipman wondered what would happen to him when the shark toppled over the edge of the poop. He and the doctor were unpleasantly close to the foot of the ladder.

There was a crash of broken wood. The shark, with a terrific sweep of its tail, had partly demolished the railing and part of the handrail of the ladder. The next instant the brute, weighing perhaps a ton, landed in the waist, luckily well clear of the two prisoners.

Now half a dozen electric torches—part of the booty from the *Ah-Foo*—threw a strong light upon the scene. Armed with knives and axes the pirates swarmed round the struggling shark.

They hacked off its tail. It still floundered. They battered its head; plunged their knives deeply into its stomach until the deck planks were slippery with gore.

When the shark was dead the pirates cut off its fins, which they esteem a special delicacy. Then the captain, with an uncanny grin, showed his captives

two objects that had been removed from the creature's stomach. One was a boot, the other a silk sunshade, the handle and wires bent but still recognizable.

"No makee swim," he observed ominously. "Plenty big fish allee time!"

Having taken what portions they required, the men heaved the rest of the carcass overboard. There were splashes that were not accounted for by the impact of the pieces upon the water. Other sharks were fighting fiercely in their cannibalistic feast!

Raxworthy had to admit that the doctor's warning carried considerable weight.

Shortly afterwards he fell asleep, in spite of the sultry air and the foetid stench from the unwashed decks of the pirate junk.

At frequent intervals he awoke. It was difficult to sleep with his arms bound behind his back and nothing to support his head. Every time the junk heeled, his body swayed from hip and shoulder. Yet after a considerable time, fatigue sent him into a heavy slumber.

He was awakened by two of the pirates lifting him by his shoulders and feet.

It was now dawn. The sun had risen above the horizon, and the short twilight had given place to broad daylight.

Two others were carrying his fellow-captive aft. All the crew were in a state of commotion. Many of them had armed themselves with rifles. A machine-gun had been placed on the poop, and its crew were engaged in fitting the ammunition belt. Everyone seemed to be taking more than ordinary interest in something away on the starboard beam.

This much Raxworthy noticed before he was carried aft, and then down a short ladder to a flat below the water-line. The doctor had already been unceremoniously dumped there.

"What's the idea?" he inquired, as the midshipman flopped on the deck beside him.

Before Raxworthy could hazard an explanation a stuttering rifle-and machine-gun-fire opened from the junk.

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed. "One of our destroyers is butting in."

VIII

“Then I hope to goodness they don’t send the old tub to the bottom. I don’t mind running risks from rifle-fire in the open, but dashed if I like the idea of being cooped up here if the junk’s sunk. It’s worse than being in a submarine.”

Raxworthy felt inclined to agree with his companion on that point. If the junk were sunk—and a six-pounder shell accurately placed would do the trick neatly and easily—they wouldn’t stand a dog’s chance, bound hand and foot as they were. Not that that mattered compared with the greater issue. Even if their limbs were free they were imprisoned in a stuffy box-like compartment below the water-line.

“Look here,” exclaimed the midshipman, raising his voice to make himself heard above the terrific din on deck, “we may just as well get rid of these lashings—just in case.”

Working in pitch-black darkness the midshipman succeeded in freeing the doctor from his bonds. Then, with hands at liberty, the latter quickly performed a like service to his companion.

By this time Raxworthy began to have doubts concerning the appearance of a destroyer. By various ominous sounds he knew that the junk was being hit again and again by small-arms projectiles—probably rifle and machine-gun bullets. A destroyer would have kept beyond range of such weapons and settled the argument with a warning shell across the junk’s bows and then, if that failed to bring about the desired effect, she would send the junk’s masts by the board. If that didn’t make the pirate surrender, sterner measures would be taken.

But the craft engaging the junk did none of these things. She was within easy musketry range. Raxworthy was aware of this, because he could hear above the shouts of defiance the ever-increasing cries and groans of the wounded.

“They’re going it hot and strong,” observed the doctor.

“We’re safe enough here.”

“From bullets—yes; but how about it if the junk’s sent to the bottom?”

“She isn’t yet,” replied Raxworthy. “She doesn’t appear to be leaking. We’d hear the water pouring in if she were.”

“All the same, I’d rather be on deck. Never did like being shut up in the dark. Why, I don’t know. Probably I had a fright when I was a child. . . . What

are you doing?”

“Having a grope round just to get my bearings,” replied the midshipman. “Ough!”

“What is it?”

“Bumped my head on the same place as I got that whack.”

“One would,” rejoined the doctor. “It’s the perversity of things. If you bark your shin, for example, you’ll probably knock it half a dozen times in as many days. Go slow.”

“This seems to be a sort of bo’sun’s store,” declared Raxworthy. “There are coils of rope and—good!—here’s an axe.”

“You don’t propose to set about me with it, do you?”

“So far, the possibility hasn’t occurred to me.”

“I hope it won’t; but why this jubilation over a chopper?”

The midshipman made no reply. He hardly knew why, but grasping the helve of the axe seemed to give him renewed confidence. In the back of his mind he had an idea that the axe would come in useful.

The two prisoners listened in silence to the din of conflict without. Raxworthy felt convinced that the pirate junk was in action with a rival gang, and the two unwieldy vessels were closing. Probably the newcomers were getting the best of it, and were about to decide the day by carrying the junk by boarding.

If so, how would the change of fortune affect the two prisoners?

Suddenly Raxworthy’s thoughts were interrupted by a terrific roar accompanied by a deafening concussion. The for’ard bulkhead of the flat seemed to bulge inward. The deck heaved under them.

Then, amid the crash of shattering timber, the junk—or what was left of her, turned completely upside down.

The pirates, faced with massacre at the hands of their rivals, had blown up the magazine.

IX

Although the ammunition in the magazine had been greatly depleted during the fight, the explosion was sufficient to destroy every man on deck who had so far escaped death by the bullet. It was not, however, sufficiently powerful to blow the junk to smithereens. The force of the detonation was localized, with the result that the junk was rent asunder amidships.

The bow portion remained floating and only just awash, while twenty feet or so of the stern remained bottom upwards and was prevented from sinking by air trapped in what was once the “run aft” of the junk.

And in this confined space, partly stupefied by the concussion, were Raxworthy and his companion in misfortune.

The midshipman had been in more than one tight corner, but the stark horror and uncertainty of the situation froze the blood in his veins. He knew that the junk—or what remained of her—had capsized and that the doctor and he had survived the explosion. But whether their prison was still afloat or slowly sinking to the bed of the sea, he knew not. He imagined what would happen if it were sinking. Sooner or later the as yet watertight planks would collapse under the enormous pressure. Death would come swiftly when it did, but before it did there was that agonizing suspense, waiting in utter darkness for the end.

After a little while the midshipman grew calmer. He became aware of the “lift” of his prison. Obviously the upturned portion of the junk still remained afloat.

Then his sense of hearing reasserted itself; the concussion had temporarily deafened him.

He heard voices. He strained his ears to listen.

Some craft nearby were being propelled by oars. Boats from the victorious junk were looking for survivors, not with the object of saving life, but that of making assurance doubly sure, according to piratical standards. The men in the boats were talking loudly in Chinese. That dispelled Raxworthy’s faint hopes that the destroyer of the pirate junk was a British or a Japanese warship.

“Good heavens! What’s happened?” ejaculated his companion.

“Ssh!” cautioned the midshipman. “We’re all serene so far. Don’t make a noise, or we’ll be out of the frying-pan into the fire.”

“What do you mean?”

“The rival gang’s rowing round to see what’s worth saving,” explained Raxworthy. “If they don’t trouble to break a hole in this chunk of wreckage it’ll keep afloat. They’ll push off soon, I expect; and then we can cut our way out. It’s lucky I found that axe.”

The two conversed in low tones, occasionally pausing to listen to noises from without.

Once one of the victorious pirates prodded the keel with an oar. The noise sounded almost deafening in the confined space. Then, after an animated discussion amongst her crew, the boat rowed away.

Raxworthy had lost all count of time; but at the end of what he judged to be two hours, hearing no ominous sounds outside, he decided that the time for action was at hand.

He realized that they would have to proceed cautiously. If the wreckage were kept afloat by the air trapped in the compartment in which they were imprisoned, the moment the planking was cut through the remains of the junk would sink—and sink before they had time to enlarge the hole sufficiently for them to make their way through.

He hadn’t the faintest idea where the new water-line was. If the wreckage were almost awash the position would be pretty hopeless, since it would be a superhuman task to hack through the massive keelson and keel of the junk, which was now the highest part left of her.

Another disturbing thought flashed across the midshipman’s mind. Supposing the liberated *Ah-Foo* had got into touch with a British destroyer—and the latter had steamed hard in pursuit of the pirate junk? She’d probably sight the large piece of floating wreckage and would shell it as a danger to navigation. The risks of enemy action Raxworthy was prepared to face. It was part of his profession; but he drew the line at being blown to pieces by a unit of the Royal Navy!

“Make a trial hole first,” suggested the doctor. “Try boring through the bulkhead.”

“What with?”

“This,” replied his companion. “Feel for it. It’s an auger. It’s sharp.”

“Good business!”

Raxworthy didn’t waste words by asking how the doctor had come by it.

“There’s a tool chest,” volunteered the latter, by way of explanation. “When we turned turtle it nearly smashed my leg. If only we had a light.”

They hadn’t, so perforce had to work in the dark, and the midshipman had only a vague idea of the lay-out of the junk.

He set to work with the auger, boring through the bulkhead at a point a few inches from which was the deck, now the roof of their prison.

The woodwork was of teak, as sound as a bell. In about five minutes the auger was through. Gingerly Raxworthy withdrew it. To his unbounded relief no gush of water followed.

“Keep clear!” he cautioned. “I’m going to swing the axe!”

Klip, klop; klip, klop!

The midshipman knew how to use an axe. It was one of the many useful things he had been made to learn in the workshops at Dartmouth. Even in the darkness he struck hard and true, bringing each stroke of the blade obliquely to the preceding one. Splinters flew, and the hitherto noxious air now reeked of the oily and pleasant scent of freshly cut teak.

“Through!” he exclaimed, breathless but triumphant.

A gleam of pale green light streamed through the jagged gap.

Looking through the aperture Raxworthy saw a strange sight. It was akin to being in a cave and looking towards the entrance, with water instead of solid rock for a floor.

Actually the roof consisted of about twenty feet of deck that terminated in a jumble of rent and riven planks. Between this edge and the level of the water was a height of from two to four feet—it was constantly varying as the wreckage rose and fell on the long sullen swell of the sea.

Owing to the dip of the wreckage the depth of water nearest the bulkhead was only a few inches, but increased for’ard until it was over six feet.

“We’ve ample margin,” declared the midshipman, preparing to renew the attack.

“Let me give you a spell,” suggested his companion.

“Can you?”

The doctor laughed—the first time he had laughed since the capture of the *Ah-Foo*. It was a good sign, anyway.

“I spent two years in a lumber camp,” he explained. “My muscles may be a bit flabby, but I’ll make a show, I think.”

He did; using the axe with his uninjured arm in a workmanlike manner, until by the time Raxworthy called “spell-ho!” the hole had been enlarged almost sufficiently for them to squeeze through.

Then Raxworthy resumed the task and in a few minutes more the way to escape lay open; but would escape mean freedom?

“A wetting for each of us, it seems,” remarked his companion.

"If that's all it means I'm not grouching," replied the midshipman. "Will you lead on?"

The doctor squeezed through the gap and dropped into the water. A few strokes and his feet touched the underside of the deck. There he had to duck to avoid hitting his head, for there was only a mean distance of six inches between the water level and the extremities of the jagged, blackened planks.

"All O.K.!" he shouted.

"Right! I'll be with you," rejoined Raxworthy.

They clambered upon the curved, teredobored planks until they were astride the keel. It was the highest point of vantage. Seaward there was nothing in sight, but the land looked too near to be pleasant. It was perhaps four miles away, and in all probability inhabited by Chinese depending chiefly upon piracy.

Now that they were free, for the time being at least, the pangs of thirst and hunger assailed them. Raxworthy would cheerfully have eaten of the mess of fish and rice similar to the dish of which he had partaken so reluctantly on the previous day. Quite likely there were provisions and water stowed under the poop; but these were almost as remote as the poles, as far as the two survivors were concerned, since the poop was ten or fifteen feet under water.

The fragment of the junk, which somewhat resembled the roof of a house that had been tilted, showed no sign of sinking. There was precious little freeboard—about nine feet from the water's edge to the heel of the keel. It was a precarious refuge even in calm weather. Should the breeze pipe up and a sea develop, the two men would stand very little chance. And if sleep overcame them, what then? It was only by holding on to the wide keel that they were able to prevent themselves from slipping into the shark-infested sea.

It was now high noon and the sun's rays were oppressively powerful. The hitherto saturated planking emitted clouds of vapour, the noxious fumes of which added to the survivors' distress. Overhead, large sea-birds wheeled and soared as if waiting until their intended prey was in no condition to resist the vicious pecks of those formidable beaks.

The doctor's arm was giving trouble. The wound had reopened and was bleeding freely. He made light of it, however; but Raxworthy noticed that he was looking pretty ghastly.

"You'd better have a caulk, Doc," he suggested.

"Young man, you're as much in want of sleep as I am."

The midshipman caught sight of a rope trailing overboard. It gave him an idea.

“Look here,” he declared. “We’ll get hold of that rope and bend it round our waists. There’s nowhere else we can make fast to. Then you get one side of the keel and have a doss, and I’ll do the same on the other side.”

Clambering down the jagged planking, the midshipman secured the rope. Most of it was sound, although one end had been charred by the explosion. Deftly he made a couple of bowlines at a distance of three or four feet apart, and the two survivors took up their positions as Raxworthy had suggested.

Although they were reclining on a slope, the intervening keel prevented them from slipping and soon they were dozing in spite of the heat.

Some time later, Raxworthy opened his eyes and sat up. Everything seemed to have taken a reddish hue, but through the blur he thought he saw smoke some distance away.

The mist cleared before his eyes and he realized that he had not been mistaken. Coming towards the wreckage was a destroyer.

X

“Wake up, Doc!” exclaimed the midshipman. “We’re saved!”

“Sure?” asked his companion, rubbing his eyes; for he, too, was suffering from blurred vision, caused by the terrific glare.

“Sure.”

They waited in silence.

The oncoming vessel was travelling at high speed, and throwing up a huge bow wave. Then, when within a cable’s length, she reversed engines and lost way. A boat was lowered and brought alongside the remains of the junk.

A sub-lieutenant in the stern sheets shouted to the two survivors to jump for it.

Raxworthy was able to do so, but his companion was not. He had fainted through exhaustion and loss of blood.

The midshipman recognized the young officer in the boat.

“Hello, Cartwright!”

“Who in the name of fortune are you?” demanded the sub, staring at the ragged, sun-baked youth who had addressed him. “Why, it’s young Raxworthy!”

“What’s left of him. Bear a hand to get the doctor into the boat. He’s from the *Ah-Foo*.”

Two bluejackets scrambled upon the side of the wreckage. By means of the rope the unconscious man was lowered into the boat, and then, without assistance, the midshipman followed.

But when he gained the stern-sheets he promptly collapsed. He’d gone beyond the limit of human endurance.

An hour later Raxworthy recovered consciousness. He was safe on board the destroyer *Buster*, and lying on one of her officers’ bunks.

“Didn’t expect to pull you out of the ditch, young man,” observed the destroyer’s lieutenant-commander. “We picked up a wireless signal ordering us to search for a junk that had taken part in the capture of *Ah-Foo*, but we had no idea you were mixed up in the business.”

“It’s no use searching for that junk,” announced the midshipman. “She blew up. The *Ah-Foo*’s doc and I are the only survivors—and that was a bit of luck! But, sir, where are you making for—Hong Kong?”

“Perhaps, in ten days’ time.”

“I say, sir! I’m under orders to join *Sandgrub* at Shanghai!”

The lieutenant-commander smiled.

“You’ve missed the bus!”

Raxworthy’s face fell. This was a catastrophe! Through no fault of his own he would be unable to report for duty in *Sandgrub*, and his chance of “smelling powder” up the Yang-tse had vanished. It might never recur.

Buster’s owner heard his story sympathetically.

“Sorry, Raxworthy,” he said kindly. “You’ll have to remain aboard us till we rejoin the Flag. I’ll wireless the admiral and report that you’re safe. And, unless I’m much mistaken, you won’t regret it, ‘cause we, like *Sandgrub*, have a little job of work in hand. There’s a nice little nest of pirates over yonder, and we’re under orders to make things hot for them.”

Midshipman Raxworthy positively beamed.

He wasn’t altogether sure that *Sandgrub* would be in action up the Yang-tse; but from the lieutenant-commander of the *Buster’s* words there was every prospect of the destroyer being in the thick of it before very long.

“Good egg, sir!” he exclaimed joyfully.



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"WAKE UP, DOC! WE'RE SAVED!"

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PART III

PART III
DEFERRED PROMOTION

I

"Feeling merry and bright, and all that sort of thing, Raxworthy?" inquired Lieutenant-commander Maynebrace. "You don't look the same fellow as the scarecrow we pulled out of the ditch yesterday."

"Fresh as paint, sir," replied the midshipman.

"Paint put over a wet substance causes blisters," continued *Buster's* Owner. "So perhaps that accounts for the bump on your figure-head being still in evidence."

"It's not painful, really," Raxworthy hastened to assure his host and superior officer.

"That's just as well, since I'm thinking of putting you on to a spot of work," rejoined Maynebrace. "Hello, Cotterdell—let me introduce our new snottie, Raxworthy."

The new arrival—one of *Buster's* two lieutenants—nodded cheerfully across the table.

"My watch below when they picked you up yesterday," observed Cotterdell. "You've had a pretty sticky time, I understand."

It was breakfast-time in *Buster's* wardroom. Raxworthy had been "kitted out" as far as the resources of the ship and the generosity of her officers permitted. He was wearing one of Sub-lieutenant Cartwright's tropical uniforms, which bore badges of rank that the midshipman was not entitled to wear.

Somewhat diffidently he mentioned the fact to the lieutenant-commander. Maynebrace pooh-poohed the objection.

"You can't expect that Cartwright will let you carve his suit about," he remarked. "Besides, all ratings know your rank. You aren't in a crack light cruiser now, young fellow, but in one of the handmaidens of the fleet. I suppose you'll soon pass for sub-lieutenant?"

"Another twelvemonth, I expect."

"Probably. By the bye, I wirelessed the admiral last night, requesting that you may be temporarily borne on the books of *Buster*. He'll no doubt reply giving permission. It doesn't much matter; you're here, and here you'll jolly well stop for at least another nine days. I suppose you are absolutely sure that there's another pirate junk knocking around?"

"I couldn't be absolutely sure, sir, but it *sounded* like it. We didn't catch sight of her, from start to finish."

"I hope to goodness there is another pirate at large," confessed Maynebrace. "It will be frightfully disappointing if we're burning oil fuel for nine days for nothing. But so far, except for your evidence, there's nothing to prove that recent incidents of piracy in these waters are the work of more than one gang. In addition to the capture and looting of the *Ah-Foo*, two British steamers were stopped by a junk hoisting signals of distress, and at least three Chinese-owned tramps have been seized and pillaged. Unfortunately, the case of the *Ah-Foo* is the most recent, so if only one pirate junk is concerned, it looks as if our independent cruise is a wash-out."

"The junk that captured us was in action, sir."

"Yes; but who with? It might have been a Chinese government gunboat."

"She'd be armed with a quick-firer. I'm quite certain there was only an exchange of rifle and machine-gun fire," countered Raxworthy.

"By Jove! I hope you're right," rejoined the lieutenant-commander. "What do you think, Cotterdell?"

The officer addressed shook his head.

"Don't know what to think. We know where these cut-throat gentry hang out when they are at home. Why doesn't the admiral give orders for us to shell their base to blazes?"

"'Cause China's a recognized republic having a seat on the League of Nations, and consequently empowered to sit in judgment upon other countries that are infinitely better governed than she is. That's the irony of it," continued Maynebrace. "She's taking no steps to repress piracy, and we can't violate her territory even to exterminate the blighters who take to it. All we can do is to try and catch 'em napping outside territorial waters, and they're as artful as a wagon-load of monkeys!"

It was Raxworthy's first morning in a destroyer, and already he had come to the conclusion that it was a pleasant change from service in a light cruiser. There was less irksome and often unnecessary routine and no short-tempered commander to harry him at sundry times, simply because the Bloke *had* to jump on somebody—it was his idea of discipline—and midshipmen fall an easy prey.

In *Buster* there was no gun-room. The officers—eight all told—were a sociable, brotherly crowd in their off-duty moments in the wardroom, but terribly efficient when on watch. In spite of Maynebrace's remark that *Buster* was one of the handmaidens of the fleet—a term applied to destroyers, armed drifters and other small craft—it was his aim and ambition to keep his

command in such a state of high efficiency that even the most critical admiral could find no fault with her.

“I suppose I’d better let you have the customary twenty-four hours in which to sling your hammock, Raxworthy?” remarked the lieutenant-commander at the conclusion of the morning meal.

“I’d just as soon carry on, sir!”

“Very well, then; see how you like standing middle watch!”

The midshipman smiled. It was just the thing he wanted—to spend from midnight to four in the morning on the bridge of a destroyer at sea.

Just then a messenger entered the wardroom.

“Officer-of-the-watch reports a vessel in sight on our port bow, sir, steering nor’-west.”

“Very good,” replied the lieutenant-commander. “I’ll be on deck in a brace of shakes!”

II

Raxworthy followed the Owner to the upper deck and thence to the bridge, where Lieutenant Yardley and Sub-lieutenant Cartwright were levelling telescopes in the direction of a steamship about three miles off.

There was reasonable cause for their curiosity.

The vessel was steering diagonally towards the shore, where no harbour of commercial importance existed within fifty miles. She had not been challenged, yet she had hoisted the International Code signal "All's well"—and without displaying her "number" beforehand.

She was flying the Chinese Republican ensign. On her stern was the legend *Su-me*—London. That, in itself, would not occasion suspicion. Ships originally British owned have frequently been sold abroad, and although their names might be altered, their port of registry remains unchanged.

"What d'ye make of her, Yardley?" demanded *Buster's* lieutenant-commander.

"She's not jonnick," replied the second in command.

"I'm of that opinion," agreed Maynebrace.

He then ordered the guns' crews to close up and prepare to open fire. In addition to the quick-firers, Lewis guns were brought up and stationed at the wings of the bridge. Speed was then increased to thirty knots, which was at least double that of the craft under suspicion.

The *Su-me* then hoisted a three-flag signal: "Unless your communication is of great importance I beg to be excused," and altered her course more to the west'ard.

"It's important enough, John Chinaman," said Maynebrace, with a cheerful grin. "Wheel fifteen degrees to port, quartermaster!"

The change of helm resulted in bringing *Buster* on a parallel course, and inside that of the suspect. It was Maynebrace's intention to cut in between her and the shore and then, if she refused to stop, to fire a plugged shell across her bows.

"Look, sir!" exclaimed Raxworthy, lowering his binoculars and pointing at the fugitive. "They're throwing someone into the ditch!"

Quickly the lieutenant-commander brought his glasses to bear in the direction the midshipman had pointed out.

He was just in time to see a man in white uniform striking the creamy foam in the *Su-me*'s wake.

The unfortunate individual hit the water heavily, throwing up a considerable shower of spray. He must have fallen flat, and would in consequence be badly winded.

Then, to the surprise of *Buster*'s officers and men, who had witnessed what seemed to have been a tragedy, a life-buoy was thrown over the *Su-me*'s stern by one of a group of Chinese clustered right aft. This done, they dispersed with alacrity, possibly fearing a burst of Lewis-gun and rifle fire from the "foreign devils" in pursuit.

By this time *Buster* was only about half a mile astern.

Through their powerful telescopes and binoculars, the observers on her bridge watched the efforts of the jettisoned man to make the buoy. He was swimming strongly, so no attempt had been made to secure his arms and legs. And why, having thrown the man overboard, did his assailants go to the length of heaving a life-buoy after him?

Obviously the Chinese didn't want him to drown. Their object was to make the destroyer stop and pick him up and thus lose valuable time.

Equally obvious was it that *Buster* would have to pick the man up, whether he were a European or an Asiatic.

He had gained the buoy and was now facing the oncoming destroyer. In spite of his tanned complexion he was certainly a white man.

Maynebrace had already made up his mind what to do. Only as a last resource would he stop and lower a boat. That would waste much valuable time. Nevertheless, the whaler was manned and swung out ready to be lowered and slipped.

"Stand by there with bowlines!" he ordered, and then rang down for quarter speed ahead.

His aim was to pick the swimmer up by means of one of those looped ropes. It was a manœuvre that required skill and an iron nerve. Even at quarter speed the destroyer would be going too fast for the swimmer to retain a hold, and if one of the bowlines chanced to fall over his head the sudden jerk would break his neck. And if they missed the man he would almost certainly be caught by the suction of the starboard propeller and cut to pieces. Yet way must not be entirely taken off the ship. If it were, she would become unmanageable and drift to lee'ard of her objective.

For the present Maynebrace didn't worry about the *Su-me*. His whole attention was centred upon the man in the ditch.

One thing in his favour was the fact that the sea was calm. On the other hand a calm sea is favourable to sharks. The surface might be unruffled for hours by the sinister dorsal fin of one of these ravenous brutes; but within a few minutes after they have been provided with a likely victim, the water all around would be ruffled by feathers of spray as the black triangular objects converged upon their prey.

Maynebrace realized this danger, and ordered half a dozen bluejackets possessing first-class marksmen's badges to stand by, ready to fire should any shark appear.

Three hundred yards . . . two hundred . . . one hundred.

Clang, clang!

The engine-room telegraphs were jerked back to *stop*. The destroyer quivered. Her bows dropped appreciably.

"Starboard five, quartermaster!"

"Aye, aye, sir; starboard five!"

"Meet her at that, quartermaster!"

"Helm's amidships, sir!"

"Port! . . . Steady!"

The swimmer's head was no longer visible from the bridge, owing to the flare of the destroyer's bows. The hands stationed along the side leant outboard, ready to heave.

"Too much way, sir!" shouted the gunner.

Again the telegraphs clanged: "*Quarter speed astern both!*" Then "*Stop!*"

A few seconds later three bluejackets hauling on a bowline, brought the rescued man inboard like a hooked salmon.

III

Reassured on that score, Maynebrace brought his attention back to the *Su-me*. That nasty little trick on the part of the gang who had seized her had resulted in a gain of about a mile. It didn't want a masthead angle with a sextant to tell Maynebrace that.

Again in response to orders from the bridge the destroyer leapt forward, lifting her bows and throwing up a huge bow wave.

At all costs *Buster* must head off her quarry before she gained the safety of territorial waters; although her lieutenant-commander vowed he'd get her even if she piled herself up on the beach, even if he were "smashed" for it!

Then another white-uniformed man was hurled from the *Su-me's* poop; while to act as a human screen against the destroyer's fire, four more were dragged aft by their yellow captors and lashed to the taffrail.

Maynebrace muttered something under his breath. Here was a disturbing factor in the situation. He'd have to slow down to pick up the second man; he couldn't cripple the fugitive ship, and she was more than holding her own in the chase.

"Why not lower the whaler, sir," suggested Cotterdell. "We can pick him up when we've scuppered those johnnies."

The lieutenant-commander was used to making quick decisions and his judgment was rarely at fault. He couldn't very well send away any of his officers. Each had his duties to perform should the destroyer be in action; but there was the supernumerary, Midshipman Kenneth Raxworthy.

Giving crisp helm orders to the quartermaster, Maynebrace again rang down for reduced speed.

"Mr. Raxworthy!"

"Sir!"

"You will take away the whaler and pick up survivors from yonder vessel. Follow in our wake as well as you can and we'll return and pick you up as soon as possible."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The midshipman skipped down the bridge ladder and ran aft where, in obedience to the trill of the bo'sun's mate's pipe, the whaler's crew had fallen in.

The boat had already been swung out. The crew took their places, Raxworthy by virtue of his rank being the last to step aboard.

The ropes ran through the blocks as the lowerers paid out the falls. Three feet from the surface the lowerers belayed, waiting for the destroyer to slow down.

“Slip!” ordered the midshipman.

The whaler struck the water with a hearty slap. A touch of the helm threw her clear of the destroyer’s quarter. *Buster* immediately increased speed, leaving her boat bobbing and pitching in her wake.

“Oars, lads! . . . Give way!”

He had to stand up in the stern-sheets and shade his eyes in order to keep the ditched men under observation.

The destroyer raced past him, and for some moments the man was hidden in the turmoil of her bow wave.

The men gave way with a will, pulling with long, swinging strokes that sent the lean whaler through the water in fine style.

“Way ‘nough! In bow!”

In a trice willing hands hauled the second victim from the sea.

He was a young man in the twenties. His face was partly hidden by several days’ growth of beard; his saturated drill uniform was rent in many places. The knuckles of his left hand were raw.

He was passed aft and deposited upon the grating in the stern-sheets.

Raxworthy ordered the men to resume their oars and steered in the direction *Buster* and her quarry had taken.

“Been in a rough house, haven’t you?” he inquired of the man coiled up at his feet.

“Rather!”

“I can sympathize with you,” continued Raxworthy. “I’ve had some. How did they get you?”

“I’m the third officer of the S.S. *Supreme*.”

“*Supreme*? Artful swine! They cut out the three middle letters and left a Chink name: *Su-me*. Well, go on.”

“We were bound from London to Yokohama,” continued the third officer. “Native crew, but I don’t think they are in league with the pirates. It wasn’t in my watch, but the second afterwards told me that a junk sent out distress signals. Our Old Man slowed down. The junk had an engine, and directly we’d lost way she ran alongside and poured a hundred or so of armed Chinamen on

our deck——”

“Hang on a bit,” interrupted Raxworthy, who during the recital had been watching the pseudo *Su-me* through his binoculars. “They’ve slung someone else into the ditch. . . . By Jove! He’s splashing like blue blazes! Must be a shark about. Make a good spurt, my lads!”

They had to pull the best part of a mile before they got to the third man. Raxworthy’s surmise was correct. There were sharks in close proximity, swimming in gradually closing spirals around the spot, for the man’s splashings were becoming less active.

“Keep it up!” shouted the midshipman.

He caught a glimpse of the swimmer’s wide open eyes and the horrified expression on his face.

Raxworthy drew his revolver. It was a tricky business firing the weapon. The jerky motion of the whaler and the fact that he had to stand up and fire well over the heads of the men made it even hazardous. He purposely fired wide, the bullet ricochetting a good twenty feet clear of the man.

It saved the situation—or rather the loud report did—for it checked the onrush of the enormous shark that had turned on its back in order to seize its prey.

Then, carrying way up to the last moment, the boat ran close to the swimmer. Again willing hands hauled the third would-be victim into safety—but with what a narrow margin!

Even as the rescued man flopped across the gunwale, a shark rasped under the keel and lifted one of the oars out of the rowlock.

“Hello, Greig!” exclaimed the *Supreme*’s third officer.

But Greig, the tramp’s wireless operator, made no reply. He had fainted.

“How many of you are left on board?” asked Raxworthy.

“Seven Britishers—at least there were ten of us when the ship was taken,” replied the third officer. “They’ve kept the engineers below; promised all sorts of nasty things if they didn’t keep the old hooker going. But, if I know anything of Old McKie—he’s the chief—he’ll scupper the engines directly he knows that there’s a warship on their track.”

The whaler held on, following the rapidly receding destroyer and the *Supreme*. Although Raxworthy kept a sharp look out for signals from the latter announcing that yet another captive had been thrown overboard, *Buster* made no announcement. Nevertheless the midshipman repeatedly swept the intervening stretch of water with his binoculars in case the pirates had jettisoned another of their prisoners, who in the excitement of the chase might

have escaped the notice of the destroyer's crew.

Both vessels were almost hull-down when Raxworthy heard the muffled *boom* of a gun, quickly followed by another.

Gone were his chances of smelling powder. *Buster* was in action and he was miles astern in the whaler. It was disappointing, but there was no small measure of compensation in the fact that he was engaged in saving life.

All that could be done for the present was to jog on—there wasn't the slightest chance of the whaler being upon the scene before the scrap ended—and wait for the destroyer to return to pick her up.

IV

Meanwhile *Buster* was hard at it, and not having things all her own way.

Opening out—for Maynebrace did not want to expose his crew to unnecessary risks from rifle fire—*Buster* drew level with the captured tramp. She was between the *Supreme* and the shore, two thousand yards separating the two craft.

Finding that their savage ruse of dropping the British prisoners overboard was not now deterring the destroyer, the pirates removed the survivors and ranged them along the side nearest their attacker, lashing the captives to the rail at sufficient intervals, so that wherever a shell took effect on the upper deck the helpless men would suffer.

All this Lieutenant-commander Maynebrace saw through his binoculars. There was his chance. He took it.

“Range two, double o, o. Hull her fore and aft!” he ordered through the voice-tube communicating with the bow four-inch quick-firer.

The gun-layer of this particular weapon was an artist at his job; and so was the sight-setter. It was mainly on that account that *Buster* headed the list in the quarterly gunnery returns.

The pirates had opened an ineffectual rifle fire. The destroyer was out of range, although ricochets occasionally mushroomed themselves harmlessly against her side.

The four-inch barked once—twice.

The first shell burst under the tramp’s counter. The second blew part of her stem away.

Again Maynebrace signalled, calling upon the pirates to surrender. It was a mere waste of time. They hadn’t the faintest intention of giving in. If they couldn’t escape they’d fight until the ship sank under them.

The tramp was slowing down. Her engines had stopped—probably the British engineers had a lot to do with that—and she was slowly swinging round to starboard. Her steering-gear had been shattered by the shell that had exploded under her counter. She was like a crippled wild cat, harmless at a short distance yet dangerous to close with.

But for the prisoners, Maynebrace would have soon settled the business. A few rounds of gas shells and the pirates would quickly be rendered harmless. He could neither use gas nor sweep the decks with machine-gun fire. The only

solution appeared to be that of laying the destroyer alongside and carrying the ship by boarding, but that would entail heavy loss of life on the part of the ship's company.

"We've winged her, Yardley," observed the skipper. "What now?"

The lieutenant shook his head.

"I hardly know, sir."

"Neither do I," confessed Maynebrace.

"We could put her down."

"With most of her former officers and crew either triced up on the upper deck or under hatches—that won't do," objected the lieutenant-commander. Then, a thought striking him, he inquired: "Is the whaler in sight?"

"Dead astern, sir; about two miles off."

"H'm. Look here, Yardley, I'm going to put the wind up these Chinks badly."

"Good egg, sir! How, might I ask?"

"Ask Cotterdell and the sub to come here; then I'll explain. It's going to be a ticklish business and if I, or any of us, get knocked out, the others must carry on as long as there's a man left on the upper deck. There must be no bungling. I'm going straight for the *Supreme* at full speed. So will you ask the others to come this way?"

Lieutenant Yardley positively gaped.

His superior officer's declaration left him speechless. Maynebrace was going to ram! But with what results? *Buster* would probably cut the tramp completely in two and concertina her own bows in the process. As likely as not, she'd strip the blades from her propellers, through fouling wreckage. The *Supreme* would sink like a stone and then the British captives tied to her rails would go down with her.

"The Owner must be as mad as a March hare," thought Yardley. "If he carries this stunt out and doesn't have the luck to stop a bullet, he'll be court-martialled and sent on the beach!"

V

"*Buster's* made our number, sir!" reported the coxswain of the whaler.

"Our recall?" asked Raxworthy.

"They're semaphoring us, sir."

The petty officer, balancing himself on the stern bench, held a pair of hand-flags in the "acknowledgment" position.

From the destroyer's bridge a signalman was sending out a message:

"Captain to whaler. Lay off and wait till we close with you. Keep outside range of rifle fire."

"Acknowledge!" ordered the midshipman briefly; then, "Lay on your oars, lads!"

The whaler was now about a mile dead astern of the destroyer, and half as much again from the *Supreme*—near enough for the midshipman to see what was taking place by means of his binoculars, and yet beyond the range of a rifle.

He felt rather squashed over the signalled order. Why couldn't Captain Maynebrace recall the whaler and give her a chance of taking an active part in the scrap? It seemed to him, too, that the sooner he got the two rescued Mercantile Marine officers on board, the better, for both were showing obvious signs of distress after the harrowing time through which they had passed.

All hands were now watching *Buster* and the tramp. The former was moving slowly on a course at right angles to the *Supreme*, which was now at a standstill and blowing off steam. Except for a few rounds from her quick-firers at the beginning of the scrap, the destroyer had remained silent, ignoring the furious and ineffectual rifle fire from the captured British tramp.

Raxworthy, too, realized that so far the position was a stalemate. The pirates would not surrender; and although *Buster* could have sunk the ship either by torpedo or gun-fire, the reason for his restraint was obvious. It was his duty to recapture the *Supreme*, so that she could be handed back to her lawful owners, and it was certainly not her commanding officer's intention to sacrifice deliberately the lives of the prisoners in an attempt to regain possession of the pirates' prize.

Even as Raxworthy looked, the destroyer turned fifteen points to starboard, and, rapidly increasing speed, bore down upon the stationary tramp.

The “bone in her teeth” assumed great proportions as *Buster’s* speed increased. Through his glasses, Raxworthy saw that except for the Owner and two seamen on the bridge, no one was visible on the destroyer’s deck. The guns’ crews were lying in a prone position, and probably everyone else on board was doing the same.

“By Jove! It’s ‘prepare to ram!’ ” he exclaimed.

“Seems like it, sir,” added the coxswain. “Gosh! There’ll be a most unholy smash. The old girl’ll cut through the tramp like going through a bit of cardboard.”

The rifle fire from *Supreme* increased. It was now at almost point-blank range; but curiously enough most of the bullets flew high over the bridge, cutting chips from the mast and signal yards.

That could only be accounted for by the fact that the pirates had been firing with sights raised to extreme elevation, and that in the excitement they had forgotten to put them down.

Excitement gave place to panic when the Chinese realized that *Buster* was about to ram. They had been quite prepared to die fighting to the last, but not to be crushed to a pulp by the terrific impact.

Almost with one accord the terror-stricken pirates threw down their arms and jumped overboard, without even waiting to carry out their amiable intention of cutting the throats of the “foreign devils”, who were still lashed to the staunchion rail.

Many of the pirates were unable to swim. None of their comrades offered to help them. Their fate came swiftly and comparatively mercifully. Those who could swim struck out as hard as they could, to put as great a distance as possible between them and the tramp, which they expected to see go down in a few seconds. Not that the Chinese who kept themselves afloat entertained any hopes of saving themselves or expected the British bluejackets to save them. The distance to the nearest land was too far for any but the strongest and most determined swimmers. Besides, there were sharks about.

Raxworthy, too, waited for what he thought was to be the inevitable and appalling impact. The destroyer had now worked up to at least thirty-five knots.

Then suddenly she swung round hard to port, listing outwards until the midshipman had a clear view of her upper deck. He could see some incautious bluejackets, who had been lying motionless, slither down the inclined deck until they brought up against some friendly projection.

At the same time *Buster’s* engines stopped and then commenced to go full astern.

Still turning, she came almost to a standstill within an oar's length of the *Supreme*. Grappling irons were thrown, and the two craft brought alongside each other, and in a trice thirty armed bluejackets, led by Cotterdell and Sub-lieutenant Cartwright, swarmed across to the tramp's upper deck.

Not a shot was fired. There was no need. Not a single pirate remained.

Quickly the British prisoners were cut adrift. The Chinese flag was struck and the Red Duster rehoisted in its place.

Then Maynebrace, who had received a bullet through the fleshy part of his left arm—he considered it a light price to pay for a most successful operation—went aboard the *Supreme* and received the thanks and congratulations of her skipper.

“That's all right,” rejoined Maynebrace modestly. “Part of our job, you know. I suppose you'll be able to carry on without further assistance?”

“I expect so,” replied the Old Man. “We're one officer and the wireless operator short. The swine threw them overboard——”

“They're in our whaler,” interrupted the Lieutenant-commander, pointing to the boat, now only a quarter of a mile away, for her recall had been hoisted and Raxworthy was urging his crew to “give way and pull like blue blazes”.

The skipper of the *Supreme* was overjoyed.

“We'll be all shipshape and Bristol-fashion in a brace of shakes,” he declared; “and if you fall in with a yellow junk with a broad green band and her eyes ringed with red, just please give her my compliments and anything you like to make the blighters sit up. I reckon she carries eighty well-armed cut-throats, and they are as artful as a wagon-load of monkeys.”

“Thanks, a nod is as good as a wink,” rejoined Maynebrace. “A most useful tip of yours, Captain. We're going to look for her at once.”

VI

The whaler returned to the destroyer and was hoisted in. Raxworthy made his report and handed over the two men he had saved. They were taken below to the wardroom, given a glass of sherry apiece, and then returned to their ship.

A quarter of an hour later, sufficient steam having again been raised to get the engines going, the *Supreme* stood off on a nor'-nor'-easterly course and *Buster* nosed off in the opposite direction to see if her luck was again in.

"I shouldn't be surprised if that junk is the one that sunk the one that captured the *Ah-Foo*, sir," observed Raxworthy.

"You don't know; you told me you never had a glimpse of her," rejoined Maynebrace. "All the same, I hope you're right."

They cruised inshore, but just outside territorial waters for the rest of the day and through the ensuing night. When the brief tropic dawn broke, a sail was sighted away to the east'ard—or rather the three mat square sails of a large junk.

Buster closed to within a mile. She was certainly a yellow-hulled craft, but without the broad green stripe. Sure enough, however, the "eyes", without which no Chinese junk would venture out to sea, were surrounded by vermilion rings.

"I've been out Chinaside for two commissions and have never before seen a red-eyed junk," commented Maynebrace. "She may have painted out the green band. Eighty cut-throats and machine-guns aboard. Regular floating hornets' nest!"

The junk sailed serenely on. A few men were on deck, and they appeared to evince no interest in the inquisitive destroyer.

Buster fired a blank charge and hoisted an International signal ordering her to heave-to.

The junk was in no hurry to reply. Maynebrace gave them time, and visualized the crafty pirates poring over the signal book.

When she did reply she hoisted a yellow flag over one with two yellow and two black squares.

"QL, sir," reported the yeoman of signals. "Reports she's infected."

"Does she?" remarked Maynebrace drily. "We'll prescribe for her; give her something to rid her of plague! She'll have to show her tongue first, though!"

Buster altered course and closed her distance. When still a good half mile away the pirates could no longer resist the inclination to display their war-like character.

A fierce burst of machine-gun fire was directed against the destroyer. It plastered the gun-shields of the for'ard quick-firer, and would have struck down any of the crew who had incautiously remained in view. A few feet higher, and the traversing hail of bullets would have swept the bridge.

Maynebrace was no longer in doubt. He was loath to employ high explosive shells; not that he had any wish to spare the pirates, but because he wanted the junk badly!

He ordered the Lewis-guns to open fire in order to beat down the hail of hostile bullets, and then shouted through the voice-tube for the bow gun to try two rounds of gas shells.

Both projectiles got home, the actual impact making two jagged holes in the junk's upper-works; but the liberation of the gas did the trick very neatly.

The gas used in the British Navy, differs considerably from that employed by the enemy with such hideous results during the Great War. Even the shells do not explode and send fragments of metal hurtling in all directions with terrific force. Unless a man is in the direct path of the projectile he is unharmed by it. The gas, when liberated on this occasion, expanded, but rose only a few feet above the source of liberation. Being heavier than air it found its way down 'tween decks, its effect upon living creatures being to render them unconscious within a few seconds. The period of insensibility varies from about five minutes to three hours, and on recovery the victim feels no ill-effect, beyond a headache.

The machine-gun fire from the junk wavered and then ceased.

The destroyer's officers, who had providentially escaped the hail of bullets, waited developments, scanning the junk through their binoculars.

Raxworthy tried to follow their example, but found his hands shaking so much that he could not steady his glasses. He had had his wish and had been under fire. He was hardly conscious of it at the time, but now that the ordeal was over it left him shaking and trying his level best to hide the fact.

Lieutenant Yardley, however, noticed the midshipman's knees shaking.

"Pull yourself together, Raxworthy," he said quietly. "Most of us are like that for the first time under fire. It's soon over."

"I'm not a funk, sir," protested the midshipman.

"'Course not; only the excitement gets into your limbs. Nip aft and see if any of the boats have been hit. We'll be wanting them very soon."

Raxworthy descended the bridge-ladder. By the time he reached the upper deck his knees were no longer shaking.

There were several neatly drilled bullet holes in the two whalers, but the hands were already busy at plugging them. The lieutenant had dispatched Raxworthy on an unnecessary errand, but that had not been his intention. It had given the latter the chance to obtain a grip on himself. It had worked. Raxworthy was now calm and self-possessed. His baptism of fire was over.

VII

“Away boats’ crews! Man and out boats!”

The order brought Raxworthy up all standing. He wanted to be one of the boarding party, and wondered whether he ought. The lieutenant-commander had sent him in charge of the whaler during the pursuit of the *Supreme*. Did that order still hold good?

Sub-lieutenant Cartwright hurried past him.

“You’re taking the second whaler, Rax!” sung out the sub over his shoulder. “Better bring a broom with you to sweep the flies into the dust-pan.”

The significance of Cartwright’s remark was lost for the present. It would be plain later. Raxworthy, his doubts removed by Cartwright’s implied order, soon found himself in the stern-sheets of the whaler and urging his crew to “give way”.

It was a procession of boats. Lieutenant Cotterdell, being in command of the boarding parties, led the way, followed by Cartwright in the first whaler, and Raxworthy in the tail of the procession.

Had the boats been under fire they would have suffered heavily through being in line ahead, but the pirates were no longer in a position to offer resistance, so Cotterdell could afford to let his men row easily and thus leave them comparatively fresh when it came to swarming up the lofty sides of the yellow junk.

They boarded—Cotterdell and Cartwright’s boats running alongside to port, while Raxworthy made fast amidships on the starboard side.

A strange sight met the midshipman’s gaze as he clambered over the wide bulwark. He understood now the sub’s reference to flies. The pirates were lying about on deck in all sorts of curious attitudes. One man, for instance, was holding his rifle with the butt against his shoulder and his wide open right eye glancing along the sights. He had toppled sideways, his hands rigidly gripping the still loaded weapon.

Most of the Chinese had been instantaneously affected by the gas. A few, however, had attempted either to run below or to dive overboard.

“Why didn’t we use the gas shells to recapture the *Supreme*?” asked Cartwright.

“Because, although it’s supposed to be safe as regards the after effects, we aren’t sure about it,” replied the lieutenant. “It would be a fine thing if we had

used it and then knocked out or permanently disabled her officers. It's given us the opportunity to observe the effects upon these blighters. If they'd fallen into the hands of their own government they'd soon lose their heads. As it is, I suppose they'll be tried in the Consular Court, if they do recover. . . . Raxworthy!"

"Sir?"

"Take some hands with you and have a look round the hold. See it's all clear. We'll have to lower these blighters and keep them under hatches, but I don't want any of them to break their necks down there."

Followed by his coxswain and an A.B., the midshipman descended a ladder to the main deck, whence another ladder gave access to the main hold.

He proceeded cautiously, revolver in hand, and sniffed suspiciously in case any gas was lurking below.

"Something burning, coxswain?" he asked.

"Smells like it, sir."

Raxworthy went a few steps farther for'ard. In the half light he nearly stumbled across the body of a Chinaman. The pirate's cotton clothing had been smouldering, but as he fell he had stifled the fire.

Curious to know what had caused the man's clothes to catch fire, Raxworthy turned him over. Tightly grasped in the pirate's right hand was a tinder-box.

"He'd gone below to have three draws and a spit on the quiet, the skulking lubber, when the gas got him, sir," opined the coxswain.

The midshipman was not satisfied with the explanation. The pirate didn't appear to have an opium pipe in his possession. Besides, the smoke was increasing.

Raxworthy continued his investigations. On the other side of a bulkhead he saw something that made his heart miss a beat.

He was in the junk's ammunition room. There were several barrels, one with its head knocked off. Along the floor was a fuse—a primitive affair of teased rope soaked in saltpetre and then dried. It was spluttering. The feeble sparks were within six inches of a suspicious-looking heap of black dust that had been piled up against the opened barrel.

The Chinaman he had just examined must have had time to light the fuse before being overcome by the gas. This could be explained by the fact that the fumes took several seconds to sink through the open hatchways to the space 'tween decks.

Deliberately the midshipman knelt down and gripped the burning fuse

between his finger and thumb. The spluttering sparks burnt his hands, yet he dare not relax his grasp. Nor could he risk jerking the fuse clear, since the heap of powder would be scattered and some of the grains come in contact with the burning end.

Not until he had backed for a distance of two or three yards did he drop the fuse and stamp upon it.

“Well done, sir, if I may say so,” exclaimed the petty officer. “You’ve saved us from being blown sky-high.”

“We shouldn’t have known much about it,” rejoined the midshipman grimly. “Carry on.”

They carried on, making a thorough examination of the hold, which contained a fair amount of stuff that had obviously been looted from merchant ships.

Then Raxworthy returned on deck and reported the attempt on the part of the pirate to blow up the junk rather than surrender.

“Nice-mannered gentlemen, aren’t they?” commented Lieutenant Cotterdell. “I’ve been told that they generally keep one or two barrels of black gunpowder against such emergencies. All right, Raxworthy; we’ll have the stuff ditched in case of accidents.”

Not until the barrels of powder were carefully whipped on deck and thrown overboard did the work of lowering the unconscious pirates into the hold begin. Each Chinaman was searched and deprived of his arms before being placed in his temporary prison below the water-line.

Meanwhile others of the boarding party had lowered the cumbersome mat sails and were making preparations for being taken in tow.

The destroyer then ran alongside, since the sea was calm.

Cotterdell made his report, laying stress upon Raxworthy’s gallantry and resource in preventing the destruction of the junk and the loss of a large proportion of *Buster’s* ship’s company.

“Did he, by Jove?” exclaimed Maynebrace. “It’s lucky for some of us that we hiked him out of the ditch. Where is he?”

“Securing hatches, sir.”

“Ask him to come on deck, please.”

When Raxworthy, blinking in the strong sunlight, came up from below his temporary commanding officer shook him by the hand.

“Well done!” declared Maynebrace heartily. “Look here; have you any experience in sail other than in Service boats?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the midshipman.

“Of course,” continued the lieutenant-commander. “Didn’t you navigate a felucca across the Levant with only a long-haired chum to assist you?”

Raxworthy assented. He would have liked to point out that the lower-deck term hardly applied, since his companion on that occasion had bobbed hair.

“Very well, then,” continued Maynebrace. “I’m putting you in command of the prize, with six ratings to assist you. We’ll tow you within fifty miles or so of Hong Kong, and then you can take her into harbour. How will that suit?”

The midshipman’s eyes glistened.

“It’s awfully decent of you, sir,” was all that he could say. But it meant a lot more.

VIII

The destroyer sheered off, rehoisted her boats, and proceeded to take the captured junk in tow.

Raxworthy was in his element—in charge of the prize. It was a responsible task. Under hatches were between eighty and a hundred lawless ruffians who would soon be recovering from the effects of the gas. Although they had been deprived of their arms they were desperate men and likely to cause trouble.

The midshipman decided to take no unnecessary risks. He stationed a couple of armed bluejackets at the battened-down hatchway and placed a gas cylinder handy, ready to release another charge into the hold in case of trouble. The two sentries were equipped with gas-masks, as were the rest of the crew—just in case the vapour spread in the wrong direction.

Maynebrace was as good as his word—and better. He towed the junk to within thirty miles of Hong Kong, wirelessly advised the admiral that the prize was on her way and requested that a tug—or a destroyer—should be detailed to assist her into port, and then cast off the towing hawser and proceeded northward “in execution of previous orders”.

On board the junk sail was made, and before a steady northerly breeze she slipped along at a good five knots.

Hourly the sentries were relieved. They had nothing to report concerning the prisoners.

“Long time coming round, aren’t they?” remarked Raxworthy to the coxswain.

“Seems like it, sir,” replied the petty officer. “So much the better; saves us a lot of trouble.”

At length the prize reached Hong Kong. A strong guard composed of police and marines arrived to remove the pirates and take them to prison.

The hatches were removed, revealing the captives lying motionless.

“Take care!” cautioned Raxworthy. “They’re lying doggo!”

A police inspector, taking his life in his hands, descended into the hold.

“Dead as mutton!” he announced.

The midshipman was aghast. It seemed as if the gas was far more effective than had been claimed, or the hold had proved another Black Hole of Calcutta! If so, he was “for it”. There would be a tremendous outcry in certain sections

of the press, especially the native journals, concerning the inhumanity of the British to Chinese prisoners—even though the prisoners were pirates of the deepest dye!

But a further examination of the bodies revealed the fact that the pirates, rather than stand their trial, had strangled themselves with strips of their clothing.

“Saved us a lot of trouble,” commented the police inspector. “There’ll be an inquest, of course, but you’ve nothing to fear, Mr. Raxworthy.”

Shortly afterwards, having handed over his prize, Raxworthy returned on board the light cruiser *Kirkham* and reported for duty.

“Back again, then, Mr. Raxworthy,” commented the commander, who was in high good humour, for had not the midshipman brought no small amount of honour to the ship by his bravery and resource.

“Yes, sir.”

“The admiral has sent a signal asking you to dinner with him to-night. By the bye, I didn’t know that you were promoted to sub-lieutenant.”

“I’m not, sir,” explained the midshipman. “This is a borrowed uniform—the only one available.”

“H’m! I suppose after this you’ll get your promotion. You deserve it. How about your temporary appointment to *Sandgrub*?”

“She’s well up the Yang-tse by this time, isn’t she, sir?”

The Bloke shook his head and smiled.

“She’s not, it happens. She’s detained at Shanghai through engine defects. Still keen?”

“Rather, sir.”

“Yes; but it was a midshipman they wanted, not a sub-lieutenant. The admiral emphasized that fact.”

Raxworthy thought for a while. There was something about that trip up the Yang-tse in *Sandgrub* that appealed to him. Another chance of gaining distinction, he felt sure. He was bound to be promoted to sub-lieutenant sooner or later, but there mightn’t be a second chance of serving in a river gunboat.

“Couldn’t I have my promotion deferred a bit, sir?” he asked earnestly.

The commander smiled again.

“Don’t see why not,” he replied. “I can appreciate your motives. Why not ask the admiral when you’re dining with him?”

And Raxworthy did. His luck was in. For a little while longer he would be Midshipman Kenneth Raxworthy, R.N.

PART IV

PART IV
RAXWORTHY'S RUSE

I

"Sorry I was unable to report for duty earlier, sir," said Midshipman Kenneth Raxworthy apologetically.

"Don't worry about that," rejoined Lieutenant-commander Wilverley of H.M. river gunboat *Sandgrub*. "The admiral wirelessly explained the delay. No matter; you're in time. Do you know what for?"

"No, sir."

"A rough house, Raxworthy; a rough house. Do you tumble to it?"

"A scrap up the Yang-tse, sir?" asked the midshipman eagerly.

"Every jolly old indication of it, my lad! This old hooker has only six weeks to do before her two years' commission is up. We're due to pay off on the 25th of next month. During the whole time I've been in her we haven't fired a single round except in the quarterly-gunnery exercises; and now, almost at the last lap comes the chance for *Sandgrub* to have a look in. You've heard nothing, I suppose?"

"Of what, sir?"

"Of the plan of operations."

"No, sir."

"Good! One doesn't want them to be known until the show's over. Now you're one of us, it's only right that you should know what you've been let in for when I requested the commander-in-chief for the loan of a midshipman. Sit you down. You'll have an iced drink?"

The lieutenant-commander touched a bell and gave an order to a Chinese messman.

Raxworthy sat down in one of the cane lounge chairs in the captain's cabin, which was in the superstructure amidships. Owing to her shallow draught—she drew only two feet six inches aft—*Sandgrub's* internal arrangements were very differently planned from those of sea-going units of the navy. The cabin extended the whole width of the superstructure. The bulkheads, to a height of four feet, were of steel and thick enough to stop a rifle bullet. The windows were of plate glass—square and not of the scuttle type—and were fitted with jalousies, or sliding louvres, to admit air, but to exclude the glaring sunlight. At the present time they were lowered, giving Raxworthy a wide view of the animated river scene.

"It's a complicated business," continued Wilverley. "Six hundred miles up the Yang-tse a cheerful old gentleman, who is known to the Chinese as Fu-so-li, has been raising Cain. He's not a pukka Chinaman—far from it. I understand that his father was a Russian who had married a Korean woman, and that he had been brought up in a Buddhist monastery until he kicked over the traces.

"At the present time Fu-so-li is at the head of a few thousand bandits. The Chinese Government either cannot flatten him out or doesn't want to, and they've requested the British to do it for them. Strictly speaking the whole business is irregular. We have no right to interfere with the internal affairs of China, even at its government's request."

"The Japs would take the job on quick enough," observed Raxworthy.

"Undoubtedly," agreed the lieutenant-commander drily; "but, unfortunately, the Chinese—quite rightly in my opinion—have an idea that if the Japs get a hold in any Chinese territory it takes a deuce of a lot to shift 'em—if ever! Luckily for us there is an excuse. Fu-so-li has taken it into his head to loot and burn a trading station managed by an Englishman—a Mr. Blakeborough. Blakeborough is missing—probably he will be held to ransom—but Fu declares that he was carried off by a smaller and rival gang who, apparently, are in the peculiar position of being outlawed by the Chinese Government and at the same time in conflict with Fu-so-li's crowd. That may be all eye-wash on Fu's part; the fact remains we're off up the Yang-tse to square things up, put Fu in irons and release Blakeborough. Now you'd better sling your hammock and make yourself acquainted with the internal arrangements of the ship."

Raxworthy saluted and withdrew. "Slinging his hammock" he knew to be a mere term of formality. Actually his servant would make up his bed in a bunk. That left the midshipman free to go over the ship and make the acquaintance of his brother officers.

Lieutenant Poundall, the officer-of-the-watch, he had already seen officially. Viner, the other lieutenant, however, took him in hand and showed him round.

Sandgrub was by no means a modern vessel. She had been on the China Station for more than twenty years, and was likely to remain there until it became absolutely necessary to replace her. She was armed with two six-inch guns and recently—as a sign of the times—had been given a pair of three-inch anti-aircraft guns. She was driven by two propellers each working in a tunnel in order to protect the blades from hitting the bottom of the river, since her cruising radius was almost entirely in shallow waters where sandbanks and

shoals are many. Most of these are uncharted—not that that made much difference, since the bed of the Yang-tse is constantly shifting both in height and direction.

Raxworthy had completed his tour of the river gunboat and was talking with Poundall on the quarter-deck when he broke off in the middle of a sentence and asked:

“When did you ship that Chink, sir?”

II

The lieutenant followed the direction of the midshipman's gaze.

"That chap? He's the second messman. Don't know when he was taken on. One Chinaman's face is much like another's. At least it seems so to me. Why did you ask?"

"Because he's the living image of the steward of the *Ah-Foo*."

"The boat you were in when she was captured by Ton-quen pirates?"

"Yes; and the strange part about it was that before the attack some blighter extracted the ball cartridges from my revolver and substituted blank."

"I can understand a fellow in league with the pirates removing the live cartridges; but what was the object in reloading with blank? Seems to me his object would be achieved if he left the chambers empty."

"Because he thought I might snap open the breach and make sure the revolver was loaded," explained Raxworthy. "As a matter of fact, I did."

"And the cartridges; were they blank ammunition or had someone merely broken out the bullets?"

"That I can't say, sir. Never had a chance to look. After I'd emptied the pistol without effect and had got a crack across the head, I was knocked out properly. I never set eyes on my revolver again."

"But what has that to do with our messman?"

"I may be wrong, but he's exactly like the *Ah-Foo*'s steward who, I feel certain, tampered with the revolver. As far as I know no one else entered my cabin——"

"Want to question the fellow?"

"I'd like to, sir."

Beckoning to a seaman, Poundall told him to bring the second messman to him; for the Chinaman, without giving a glance at the midshipman, had gone forward.

In a minute or so the Chinaman, his face as impassive as if hewn from granite, shuffled to the quarter-deck—which, like every member of the ship's company, he saluted—and silently awaited Raxworthy to speak.

The midshipman came straight to the point.

"How did you get away when the *Ah-Foo* was sunk?"

"No can do," replied the Chinaman.

"You were the steward of the *Ah-Foo*," declared the midshipman challengingly.

"No can do," reiterated the bland Celestial.

"You'll jolly well have to," continued Raxworthy. "How long have you been in *Sandgrub*? How many days have you been here?"

"Two moons."

The answer took the wind out of Raxworthy's sails. Two moons—equivalent to two months—meant that if the Chinaman were speaking the truth, he couldn't possibly have been in the *Ah-Foo*, eight hundred miles away.

"All right; you can go," he ordered.

"Didn't get much change out of that Chink, my lad," observed Poundall.

"I'm not satisfied, sir."

"Snotties rarely are," rejoined the lieutenant, with a cheerful smile. "Better luck next time! Did you think we had a cut-throat pirate on board? I tell you what: I'll get hold of the Owner's messman. He's straight enough. Been in the ship ever since we commissioned, nearly two years ago."

The head messman was sent for. Raxworthy had seen him when he brought drinks to the captain's cabin.

"Tell me, Ming," began the lieutenant, when the Chinaman appeared, "what's the name of your assistant?"

"He is called Ti-so, sir," replied the messman in good English.

"And how long has he been in the ship?"

"Two moons, p'laps little more."

"Know anything about him? Has he a clean run an' all that sort of thing?"

"Sir, I no understand."

"Well, would you lend him five dollars and know you'd get the money back?"

"Ti-so he vally good Chinaman, sir."

"That's hardly an answer to my question, Ming. He might be a good Chinaman but a rascal to his masters. Is he to be trusted?"

"I trust Ti-so with silver to makee clean. Not one piecee go adrift, sir."

"All right, Ming; carry on," concluded the lieutenant.

Raxworthy waited until the messman was out of sight.

"It seems as if I've made a mistake, sir," he confessed.

“Thought so from the first, Raxworthy,” rejoined Poundall. “Well, I’m going ashore; care to come along to the club?”

III

At daybreak next morning, *Sandgrub* slipped her moorings and stood down the Wu-sung to the estuary of the mighty Yang-tse-kiang, which at its mouth is fifty miles in width.

And Midshipman Raxworthy positively disgraced himself by being seasick! Only once before in his naval career had he fallen a victim to this malady and that was in one of the Naval College cutters just outside the Dart. Since then he had been in picket-boats, sailing cutters, destroyers and light cruisers; but the motion of the shallow draught river gunboat as she pounded over the short steep seas of the Yang-tse estuary compelled him to "muster his bag".

The only slight compensation he received lay in the fact that Lieutenant Viner—Poundall's junior—Ridge, the surgeon-lieutenant and nearly a dozen of the crew were similarly affected.

Viner tried to attribute his indisposition to the sickly reek of the mangroves, until the Owner pointed out that the wind was westerly and consequently an on-shore breeze; but he added that these waters were notoriously wicked, often upsetting the hardiest seaman.

Before nightfall *Sandgrub* was well up the river and in sheltered water. Owing to the difficulties of navigation she dropped anchor at sunset rather than risk running aground on one of the many mudbanks. Double look-outs were posted and the watch on deck were armed. What with civil war in China and the presence of pirates who belonged to neither of the rival parties, it was essential that *Sandgrub* should be prepared for all eventualities since the Chinese are apt to make mistakes and then offer bland though tardy apologies.

Three days later, struggling constantly with the strong adverse current, *Sandgrub* found herself about twenty miles above Hang-kow.

Here her troubles commenced.

Raxworthy was standing morning watch with Viner in charge of the deck. The gunboat was making good about eight knots against a five-knot current. The leadsmen were in the chains and had been monotonously singing out: "By the mark three" for the last twenty minutes.

It was out of the question to detect the shallows owing to the muddy nature of the water, except where the mudbanks were almost awash. Then the ripples over them gave an indication of what *Sandgrub* was likely to expect if she

didn't alter helm smartly.

"Plenty of water hereabouts," declared the lieutenant. "It's a hundred miles farther up that we'll find shoals. Last June we got aground and stopped there for a week. Gruelling job, I give you my word! Where's that blighter Ti-so? I told him to bring iced drinks at six bells."

The lieutenant turned and looked towards the companion.

As he did so there was a sudden jar accompanied by a disconcerting crunching sound.

Viner staggered backwards, knocked Raxworthy off his feet and both fell upon the deck, the lieutenant uppermost. Just at that moment the Chinese messman was arriving with a tray and two glasses of iced lemonades, each with a dash of gin and bitters.

He, too, staggered and unable to recover himself tripped over the two writhing officers.

Raxworthy, although underneath, contrived to wriggle clear and was the first to regain his feet. Then Viner stood up, seemingly regardless of a gash in the back of his hand which was bleeding freely.

"We've hit the putty this time, by Jove!" he ejaculated. "Chains, there! What have you got?"

"Hardly enough to float a duck, sir!" replied one of the men. "The lead's showing."

Somewhat to Raxworthy's surprise no orders were given to stop engines. The twin screws continued to revolve apparently driving the gunboat farther on the shoal. But for the fact that they were protected by their respective tunnels the propeller blades would have been torn from their bosses, for *Sandgrub* had grounded not upon mud, but on hard gravel.

Beyond the first effects of the stranding no one on board seemed to mind. The lieutenant-commander came on the bridge and grinned to his subordinate.

"So you've smelt it, Viner?" he observed. "What are we doing?"

"Both engines half speed ahead, sir."

"Good! Keep this going. She's a couple of feet below her water-line for'ard. Send a dozen hands over the side and stir things up."

The order was passed for'ard and presently a dozen seamen, who were wearing tropical uniforms including shorts, dropped overboard into about six inches of muddy water. They were equipped with shovels and crowbars, and at once set to work to loosen the hard gravel against the ship's bows.

Then Raxworthy tumbled to it why the engines were still going ahead. The

pulling astern of the propellers increased the flow of current past the ship's sides into a miniature mill-race, and as fast as the men loosened the gravel the debris was swept away. Slowly but surely *Sandgrub* was sinking into a trench she was making by the aid of some of her crew and the propellers.

Then, *ping!*

A greyish splash against the ship's side just abaft the bridge showed the spot where a rifle bullet had mushroomed itself.

Somewhere on the mangrove-clad bank about two hundred yards to starboard a sniper was taking pot-shots at the "foreign devils".

"Get round to the port side and carry on, men!" ordered Wilverley. "Gunner's mate! Fetch up a Lewis-gun and stand by! . . . I wonder where the chap is?"

The officer on the bridge levelled the binoculars, scanning the shore in an attempt to locate the rifleman.

For some minutes there was no more firing. Apparently the native was reluctant to waste more ammunition and was satisfied at having cleared out the bluejackets working in the water.

Presently there was another report and the whine of a bullet overhead.

"Smokeless powder and high velocity bullet," declared Viner. "Shall we traverse the bank with a burst of Lewis-gun fire?"

"Yes, do," replied the lieutenant-commander.

The weapon barked, sending out a wide-flung sheaf of bullets. After that there was no more sniping from that part of the river bank.

"Think she'll take it going astern, Viner?" inquired the Owner.

"She's scooped out quite a lot of gravel," replied the lieutenant. "There's no harm in trying."

The engines were run first at half and then full speed astern. *Sandgrub* quivered but otherwise remained immovable.

"It seems as if the level of the river's falling," declared Poundall. "By Jupiter! It is! Look at that patch on our starboard bow. It wasn't dry four minutes ago."

The unpleasant fact was apparent. It meant that if the gunboat had been unable to free herself some hours ago she certainly could not now, since the river had fallen quite eighteen inches.

"We'll be here till we've grown whiskers," said the lieutenant-commander moodily as he rang down "finished with engines". "Get the party over the side to lay out an anchor, Mr. Viner; then pipe all hands to 'make and mend'."

The stream anchor, weighing over three hundredweights, was lowered and a quantity of cable ranged out.

“Where do you want the killick laid out, sir?” inquired the leading seaman with the party over the side.

“Beyond that hump,” replied the captain, pointing to the shoal that had recently been uncovered. “Mr. Raxworthy, you’d better superintend operations; see that the flukes are well bedded.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered the midshipman.

Taking off his shoes and socks, Raxworthy lowered himself over the side into about fifteen inches of water. It was so muddy that he was not able to see his toes.

The bluejackets bent a rope to the crown of the anchor and commenced to drag it towards the spot that the Owner had indicated. When the drag of the cable became too great they ran out the slack by means of long-handled steel hooks until they were able to shift the anchor another twenty feet or so.

“Last flight, lads!” exclaimed Raxworthy, who felt compelled to take an active part in the operations, and was tailing on to the rope. “Walk away with her!”

The next instant his legs were knocked away, and he sat down in the swiftly running water. The splash nearly blinded him, while water in his ears had temporarily dulled his hearing.

Yet he was aware of the men shouting both ashore and on deck and of the sharp cracks of a rifle.

He tried to rise, but there seemed no power in his legs.

“It’s that confounded sniper!” he thought. “The blighter’s got me through both ankles!”

IV

There were more shots. Raxworthy made another unsuccessful effort to rise. Then a pair of strong hands gripped him round the chest and partly dragged and partly lifted him to his feet.

"Thought the brute had got you, sir!" declared the bluejacket who, with others, had gone to the midshipman's assistance.

"He has, I think," rejoined Raxworthy. "He's plugged me through both ankles!"

"What d'ye mean, sir?" inquired the leading hand. "Those bullets went well wide of the lot of us. They got the mugger all right."

The midshipman, bewildered, but conscious of returning strength to his legs, knew that the term "mugger" is frequently applied to crocodiles frequenting Asiatic waters.

Then one of the men pointed to a dark object lying half awash and about fifty yards off. It was an enormous crocodile that had been lying doggo on the shoal, and had been mistaken for an exposed portion of the bank upon which the gunboat had grounded.

The brute's back harmonized so well with the muddy water that the men laying out the anchor had got close to it before it took action. This it had done in customary fashion by making a terrific sweep with its tail and capsizing its victim. The latter happened to be Raxworthy, who was at the end of the line of men tailing on the anchor rope.

In another instant the crocodile would have seized its victim but for the prompt action of one of the seamen on board *Sandgrub*, who, with admirable coolness had snatched up a rifle and taken careful aim at the saurian.

The bullet struck the crocodile in his eye. In its death agonies it wriggled several yards, being assisted downstream by the current, until three more shots finished it off.

The party carried Raxworthy back to the ship, where Dr. Ridge made an examination. The curious part of the midshipman's injuries was that although the whip of the crocodile's tail had laid the skin open on both shins, the deepest gashes were on the soles of his feet.

"That's easily accounted for," declared the surgeon-lieutenant. "The force of the blow swept your feet over the gravel, and the gashes were caused by sharp stones. You'll be on the sick-list for a day or two, my lad!"

The midshipman protested, ineffectually, that there wasn't much to worry about, and that he was frightfully keen upon carrying out his duties; but the word of a surgeon-lieutenant carries more weight than that of a captain in such cases.

And Dr. Ridge was fully aware of the poisonous germs that infest the Yang-tse. Very thoroughly he applied sterilizing lotion to Raxworthy's wounds, but as a concession he allowed his patient to lie on a mattress under the quarter-deck awning.

"And if you shift your moorings without my permission, young fellah, I'll have you bastinadoed!" concluded the doctor with mock severity.

Night fell, but *Sandgrub* was still in her ignominious position. If anything the river was still falling. It was the dry season, and there was a chance of the gunboat being left almost high and dry for weeks.

The circumstances made it imperative for *Sandgrub* to wireless the senior naval officer at Shanghai reporting the stranding. It would not have been necessary had she run aground for only a few hours. Such incidents were of common occurrence in the Yang-tse-Kiang; but the prospect of being high and dry indefinitely rendered a wireless report necessary, and with it the disquieting probability that *Sanddigger* would be sent up-river to take over *Sandgrub*'s task of dealing with the bandits.

At sunset colours were lowered, armed look-outs posted and regulation lights hoisted to signify that the ship was aground near the fairway. The crews of the six-inch quick-firers slept at their guns, while the men detailed to run the searchlights were told to get what rest they could beside the projectors.

Raxworthy, under a mosquito curtain, dozed fitfully. With the fall of night his lacerated feet began to throb painfully. Mosquitoes pinged and fireflies darted to and fro. From the nearby paddy-fields bull-frogs croaked incessantly. Frequently sampans drifted down stream, their crews, which chiefly consisted of whole families, greeting the "foreign devils" with sarcastic though generally unintelligible remarks concerning their plight.

About four in the morning, Raxworthy was aroused by a peculiar grinding noise, followed by shouts from the look-out that the ship was on the move.

She was. Owing to a heavy thunderstorm, its centre perhaps a hundred miles or more up stream, the level had risen three feet and was still rising.

Sandgrub, waterborne, was swinging almost broadside on, her keel-plates rasping over the shingle.

Then as the strain on the anchor was taken up, she swung round through eight points, and snubbed heavily at her cable.

“Holding?” shouted Poundall, who was the officer-of-the-watch.

“No, sir; she’s dragging!” replied a voice from the fo’c’sle.

“Then pay out another shackle.”

The additional cable roared through the hawsepipe. The compressor was applied, and again the gunboat brought up with a jerk.

“Holding now?”

One of the hands prodded the ground with a boathook.

“Steady now, sir!”

There was no need for Poundall to send a messenger to inform the captain that they were afloat once more. Wilverley, awakened by the noise, was on the bridge wearing pyjamas *plus* his badge of authority, namely, his gilt oak-leaved cap.

“Current’s running hard, sir,” reported the officer-of-the-watch.

“Yes, send the quartermaster to the wheel and warn the look-outs to keep a sharp look-out for drifting sampans and wreckage.”

This precaution was necessary. Throughout the night the steam steering gear was frequently clanking as the man at the wheel gave the anchored gunboat a sheer to avoid various large objects that came down upon the now swirling stream.

A wireless message was sent off announcing that the gunboat was again afloat, and then conditions became quieter until dawn.

By this time the river had risen to such an extent that *Sandgrub* could heave short her cable without the risk of running aground again.

“Good old Excelsior!” exclaimed Viner. “Here we are in the same benighted spot that we were twelve hours ago.”

“Up and down, sir!” announced the petty officer, superintending the weighing operations.

The lieutenant gave order for half-speed ahead, and gradually gathering way, the gunboat resumed her cautious progress.

V

Three days later *Sandgrub* anchored for the night within ten miles of the site of Blakeborough's factory, which, although the ship's company did not know of it, was now a heap of smoking ruins.

Greatly against his inclinations, Lieutenant-commander Wilverley had decided against covering the last lap during the hours of darkness. It was reputed to be a particularly tricky stretch of the river, and it would be unlucky for the gunboat if she ran hard aground within range of the bandit Fu-so-li's guns.

Raxworthy was still on the sick list, and reclining on a mattress on the quarter-deck. The doctor had promised to return him to duty on the morrow, when serious work might be expected.

His servant brought him his dinner.

"Soup, sir? Mock Turtle?"

The midshipman looked at the greasy liquid and shook his head.

"Take it away, Saunderson," he exclaimed.

"You're losing your appetite, sir," observed the man. "Ti-so's put some good stuff into it, so he says."

"Away with it," decided Raxworthy firmly.

He turned down the fish, but managed to eat a little quail. Somehow he felt off colour.

At eight bells the relieved officer-of-the-watch went below to a belated dinner. Soon afterwards Raxworthy dozed.

He was awakened by someone touching his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked drowsily.

"Queer goings on, sir," replied the chief petty officer. "Mr. Viner's fallen asleep outside the chartroom, and three officers below are blind to the world!"

"What! three sheets in the wind?"

"No, sir; sort of in a trance. Even the surgeon-lieutenant. We've been trying to rouse them, but it's no good."

Raxworthy sat bolt upright.

"Officer-of-the-watch too!" he exclaimed. "All right, I'll come along."

He made his way to the bridge. The leading signalman and the

quartermaster of the watch had carried Viner into the chartroom and laid him on the settee. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing stertorously.

His breath did not smell of spirits. The midshipman raised the unconscious officer's arm and let it drop. It fell as if it were as heavy as lead.

"Drugged!" decided Raxworthy.

"And the rest of the officers are in the same boat, sir!" declared the chief petty officer.

"How about the ratings; are any of them affected?" asked the midshipman.

"They've their own cooks—not a galley run by a crowd of Chinks, sir," rejoined the C.P.O. darkly.

"So that's what you think? Good; pass the word for Ming and Ti-so."

Quickly the captain's steward appeared with his characteristic bland expression.

Ti-so was nowhere to be found. It was afterwards discovered that the lookout had seen a sampan pass just before midnight. They had also heard a splash, but paid no particular attention to it, thinking that it was caused by a fish.

"Where's Ti-so, Ming?" demanded Raxworthy.

"Honourable sir, I know not," replied the head messman. "P'laps he in his bunk."

"He ain't," declared the chief petty officer.

"Who served the officers' dinner, Ming?" pursued the midshipman.

"Ti-so, honourable sir. I say to captain, 'Me no well; no can do'. He say, 'Velly good, lay off', so I lay off till you send for me."

"Jolly fortunate for me I didn't have that confounded soup," thought Raxworthy. "Well, I'm taking no chances. I'll put Ming under arrest."

The Chinaman was taken for'ard and placed behind the screen under the charge of an armed seaman.

Raxworthy then went below to the wardroom, where he found that Poundall and the doctor had been lifted upon the settees. On the deck cards lay scattered. Obviously the effect of the drug had a delayed action, since it was after dinner, and the two officers were playing cards, when unconsciousness suddenly overtook them.

Wilverley, too, had gone to his cabin, and was writing a letter before he, too, collapsed. He hadn't even a chance to ring the bell for assistance.

"Get strong coffee ready," ordered Raxworthy. "Make them drink plenty when they show signs of regaining consciousness; but no stimulants, mind!"

He did not remain long below. He sensed danger. His place was on deck,

since he was the sole remaining officer on board fit for duty.

He went the rounds, visiting the guns' crews and those in charge of the searchlights, impressing upon them the utmost need for vigilance. Small arms and ball ammunition were served out, and the watch below warned that they might be required in double quick time.

The hours of darkness passed slowly, and with intense anxiety. All was quiet. Not a single craft of any description passed either up-stream or down. Not a light flickered on the reed-fringed banks. The silence and solitude were ominous.

At eight bells (4 a.m.) the middle watch was relieved, but Raxworthy still carried on. Indefinitely he must be commanding officer of the watch, since there was no one of executive rank to take over his responsibilities.

With the first streaks of dawn came a shout from one of the look-outs:

"Flotilla coming down stream, sir!"

Soon it was light enough for Raxworthy to discern the composition of the "flotilla".

It was headed by a motor-launch, probably looted from Blakeborough's factory. She was towing about half a dozen large sampans each crowded with armed men—some in the uniform of the Chinese army, but mostly in native civilian garb.

They were heading straight for the anchored gunboat as if anticipating an easy prey.

Realizing the great disadvantage of *Sandgrub* being brought up, though fortunately steam had been maintained to full working pressure, Raxworthy gave orders for the cable to be buoyed and made ready to be slipped. There was no time to heave up the anchor; it could be recovered later—after the present little episode ended.

The boats were still about a mile off when *Sandgrub* fired a blank round as a gentle reminder for the bandits to keep off—for the midshipman had no doubt on that score.

The effect of the gun was to make the motor-launch cast off her tow. The sampan took to the oars and sheered across the stream to the left-hand bank. Presently the motor-launch hoisted a large white flag.

"What's the bright idea?" asked Raxworthy.

"Want a chin-wag, I expect, sir," replied the C.P.O., "the blighters thought to catch us napping, and now they're pretending it's just a friendly call!"

Since a white flag is not included in the contents of a signal flag locker in his Majesty's ships, one of the wardroom table-cloths had to be brought on

deck and hoisted to the masthead.

A Chinese bandit is generally a treacherous brute, but he has complete faith in a flag of truce when hoisted by a British man-of-war.

The motor-launch, drawing ahead of the rest of the flotilla ran downstream, swung round and approached the still anchored gunboat. In her stern sheets was a tall, powerfully built man in the uniform of a colonel of the Government forces. His features did not resemble those of a Chinaman. Raxworthy rightly came to the conclusion that there was the notorious bandit who had assumed the name of Fu-so-li.

Raxworthy turned to the chief petty officer who was with him on the bridge:

“Nip below and take Andrews with you. Put on Mr. Viner’s patrol jacket and cap, and tell Andrews to wear Mr. Poundall’s. And bring me the Captain’s cap.”

These instructions were smartly carried out, and by the time Fu-so-li was alongside he was considerably astonished to find three officers—one of them the captain, although he appeared to be rather youthful—awaiting him. Not only that, they were supported by a full ship’s company armed, and the gunboat cleared for action.

“I have come to discuss the affair of the Englishman Blakeborough,” began the bandit chief in fair English.

“That is also our reason for being here,” replied Raxworthy. “In fact, we demand his immediate release, and compensation for his treatment.”

“Mr. Captain, it is no fault of mine,” declared Fu-so-li. “An enemy of mine has done this hurt. He has burnt the house of the Englishman Blakeborough and carried him off to hold to ransom.”

“That’s your affair. We have it on excellent authority that Mr. Blakeborough’s factory was raided by your orders. Now, listen; I give you six hours in which to find Mr. Blakeborough and hand him over to us. As compensation you will pay eight hundred ounces of gold.”

“It cannot be done!”

“Then my instructions, which have the approval of the Nankin Government, are to open fire and also to make use of the aircraft we carry on board. I’m not here to argue. The flag of truce will be hauled down in half an hour.”

Fu-so-li smiled, but it was a sickly smile. Like all bullies, he was a coward at heart.

“I see what can do,” he rejoined, and signed to the mechanic in the motor-

launch to restart the engine.

Watching the bandit chief out of sight, Raxworthy actually winked to the two ratings, who for the first and probably last time in their service careers were wearing gold rings with curls on their sleeves.

“It’s going to work,” declared the midshipman. “The only thing I was doubtful about was whether that blighter had brought Ti-so with him!”

VI

But Fu-so-li had not brought the treacherous second steward of the gunboat with him. Actually, Ti-so had been reaping a profitable income from his double-dealings. As the steward of the luckless coasting steamer *Ah-Foo*, he had been instrumental in giving the pirates a chance to seize her. That done, he had hurried hot-foot to Shanghai, where he heard that *Sandgrub* was going up the Yang-tse to conduct operations against the notorious Fu-so-li. By offering a sum of money, he had bribed Ming, the captain's messman, to allow him to impersonate the second steward, and none of *Sandgrub*'s officers and crew had noticed his deception. The one possible set-back was Ti-so's recognition by Midshipman Raxworthy, and in that case his doubts were removed by Ming's affirmation that the suspect had been several months in the ship.

It was a simple matter for Ti-so to drug the food intended for the officers' mess; equally simple for him to signal to a passing sampan—which was there by previous arrangement—to get her to pick him up when he dived overboard.

Thence he went to the bandit chief's headquarters, and reported that he had drugged the officers *and* men in the foreign devils' ship, and all that Fu-so-li had to do was to go alongside and seize her. What a valuable haul of arms and ammunition it would bring!

The bandit chief would be a hero amongst the coolie population. He could bargain with the Chinese government, obtaining pardon, more riches, and a high command in the army. He'd be a marshal, even as other bandits had become before him! Then, no doubt, he would remember Ti-so, who had helped him to power and fame.

Fu-so-li, however, was cautious even as he listened to Ti-so's blandishments. There was such a thing as double-crossing, although the bandit chief had not heard it thus named.

He left Ti-so under an armed guard, while he collected his flotilla and went down stream to see for himself the state of the crew of the British gunboat.

And then he had a nasty shock.

But not such a nasty one as Ti-so received on the angry chief's return.

Fu-so-li sent for the man.

"You told me that the foreign devils would be in a sleep near to death," began the bandit chief, without any preamble. "They are very much awake, both officers and men."

“Honourable Excellency, by the spirits of my unworthy ancestors,”—Ti-so began to expostulate, falling upon his knees.

Fu-so-li made an almost imperceptible sign to a huge Mongolian, who was resting his hands on the hilt of a double-handled, broad-bladed sword.

VII

Feeling as limp as a rag, Lieutenant-commander Wilverley managed to drag himself up the bridge ladder. He was the first of the drugged victims to recover consciousness, and even then his mind was in a confused state.

“What are we doing, Mr. Viner—? Hello! Where’s the officer-of-the-watch . . . That you, Raxworthy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What in the name of goodness has happened?”

The midshipman explained.

The Owner’s mind became clearer as Raxworthy continued his narrative.

“And I put it about the blighter, sir,” declared the midshipman. “Gave him six hours to surrender his prisoners, and told him we’d open fire if he didn’t. And use aeroplanes; that bluffed him all right. He must have thought we’d some stowed below. It rattled him badly.”

“Where’s that rogue, Ti-so?”

“Don’t know, sir; probably having a good ticking-off from Fu-so-li.”

“And Ming?”

“I placed him under arrest, sir, so as to be on the safe side.”

“I see; well, I hope, Mr. Raxworthy, that your ultimatum—which is highly irregular, let me inform you—will turn up trumps. If it doesn’t, you’ve landed me in a nasty mess. This was to be a sort of diplomatic errand, not a blow-you-to-Hades stunt.”

“It seems to me the only way, sir,” replied the midshipman. “Force is the only argument these fellows understand.”

“Between ourselves, I agree,” said the Owner. “Only I shouldn’t care to proclaim those sentiments at Geneva! Well, we must wait and see what turns up. By Jove! How my head’s aching.”

“Care to turn in, sir?” asked Raxworthy solicitously.

“No fear, not till I’ve seen this through. Another hour to wait.”

“Motor-launch coming down stream, sir!” murmured the yeoman of signals.

Telescopes and binoculars were brought to bear upon the approaching craft. It was the one that had been looted from Blakeborough’s factory. Fu-so-

li was not on board, but there were three Chinese and, aft under the canopy, four Europeans.

The launch ran alongside and was made fast.

“Mr. Blakeborough?” asked the Owner, addressing the eldest of the four.

“What’s left of me, sir,” was the reply. “I never expected to be released so soon. It’s almost a miracle.”

He introduced his companion-assistants of the now demolished factory.

The Chinese in the launch began handing up heavy boxes.

“Better start ’em, sir,” suggested Raxworthy. “Just in case they contain lead instead of gold!”

But the bandit chief had realized that it wouldn’t pay to deceive the “foreign devils”. The boxes contained the precious metal right enough.

“Your compensation will be paid out of that, Mr. Blakeborough,” explained Wilverley. “Of course, we can’t do it on the spot. It’s a case for the courts at Shanghai. . . . Hello, what’s this?”

A wicker basket he had handed out of the launch. None of the Chinese could speak English, but when Mr. Blakeborough interpreted the Owner’s question, they replied that it was a present to the Honourable Captain from Fu-so-li.

“Don’t know what I’ve done to warrant a present from the blighters,” commented Wilverley. “If it’s grub we’ll ditch it in case it’s poisoned! Open the thing, Richards!”

The bluejacket addressed pulled out his lanyard-knife and cut the bamboo lashings securing the wicker lid. It revealed a covering of large green leaves, but under the leaves was the green head of Ti-so.

In a third of the time she had taken to stem the current, *Sandgrub* made the passage down stream, and thence to Shanghai. Owing to the height of the river, she now ran no risk of getting aground on the shoals.

The drugged officers had recovered their normal state; the expedition had been successful beyond all expectation, but for obvious reasons the manner in which it was carried out had to be veiled with a discreet silence up to a certain point.

The Admiral, of course, had to be informed, but there would be no decorations “dished out” for this particular Yang-tse expedition.

In due course Kenneth Raxworthy was “returned” to the light cruiser *Kirkham*, but not as a midshipman.

He is now Sub-lieutenant Raxworthy, and amongst other advantages accruing from his new rank is one that he highly appreciates—and that is that he is no longer harried by that awe-inspiring despot as far as midshipmen are concerned, the Commander!

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Midshipman Raxworthy* by Percy F. Westerman]