

THE DIS-
APPEARING
DHOW

Percy F.
Westerman



BLACKIE

THE
DISAPPEARING
DHOW

Percy F. Westerman

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Title: The Disappearing Dhow

Date of first publication: 1933

Author: Percy F. Westerman (1876-1959)

Date first posted: Sep. 20, 2019

Date last updated: Sep. 20, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190952

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Disappearing Dhow

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Captain Sang"
"Clipped Wings" &c.

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Percy F. Westerman

The White Arab.

The Buccaneers of
Boya.

Rounding up the
Raider.

Captain Fosdyke's
Gold.

In Defiance of the
Ban.

Captain Sang.

The Senior Cadet.

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Hunters.

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at Zeebrugge.

A Sub and a

Captain Blundell's Treasure.	A SUB and a Submarine.
The Third Officer.	Under the White Ensign.
Unconquered Wings.	The Fight for Constantinople.
The Riddle of the Air.	
Chums of the "Golden Vanity".	With Beatty off Jutland.
Clipped Wings.	The Dispatch Riders.

Printed in Great Britain by Blackie & Son, Ltd., Glasgow

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THE DISAPPEARING DHOW

CHAPTER I

The Eve of a Great Adventure

“You quite realize that this is virtually your first independent command, Mr. Burton?”

Mr. Midshipman Trevor Burton, commonly known to his messmates of the gun-room as Crash Burton, looked his captain fairly and squarely in the face.

“Yes, sir!”

“Good! Now cast your eye over this,” continued the Owner, indicating a canvas-backed chart embracing a portion of the Red Sea. “Here’s your cruising ground—inside this line of reefs. You will be away from the ship for six days, unless with a piece of glorious good luck you manage to capture or destroy this elusive dhow. I want to see her captured, but if that is not practicable then send her to the bottom. In the event of bad weather you are not to hesitate to seek shelter in any of these inlets marked by a red circle on the chart; but if you do, hold no communication with the shore, and above all allow none of the picket-boat’s crew to leave her. At noon on the sixth day you are to rendezvous at the position I have indicated with a cross. There you will find *Myosotis*, unless anything unforeseen and of a very urgent character crops up. But understand that until that time arrives you can hope for no assistance from us. You are on a strictly independent cruise, the success of which depends solely upon your good judgment and initiative.”

“Very good, sir,” rejoined the Senior Midshipman, his spirits rising high at the unique opportunity offered him.

For a unique opportunity it was. The light-cruiser *Myosotis* was engaged upon the task of hunting down Arab gun-runners on the east coast of the Red

Sea. Slave-dhows were practically a thing of the past; but gun-running offered both excitement and profit to the wily Arabs, who had latterly employed modern scientific inventions to aid them in their nefarious enterprises.

So far ill-luck had followed the British light-cruiser. Several of her officers and men were down with a mild type of malaria, sufficient to render them unfit for duty. Most of them, fearing that in consequence of the malady the ship would be withdrawn from the scene of operations, had “carried on” in spite of attempts on the part of the medical staff to induce them to go into the “sick bay”. But the fact remained that there was no junior officer above the rank of sub-lieutenant available to take charge of the picket-boat; so that important duty fell to the lot of Midshipman “Crash” Burton.

The snotty was nineteen years of age, tall, lean, muscular. His nickname was not due to the fact that he had been involved in a flying accident, but because he had achieved no small measure of fame amongst his fellows by smashing up three motor-cycles in less than a month. Fortunately for him his “governor” was in a position to stand the expense—and still more fortunate he himself had escaped injury, otherwise his recklessness would have brought down the wrath of the powers-that-be upon his unrepentant head.

“Have you any request to make?” inquired Captain Dacres.

The Owner in the privacy of his cabin was apparently a very different individual from the captain on the quarter-deck. He had the reputation of being a strict and impartial disciplinarian, as was necessary to the efficiency of a modern warship; but underlying his austerity of manner was a kindly disposition that endeared him to every member of the ship’s company. In lower-deck parlance the Owner was “proper jonnick”, which is the highest term of appreciation that a bluejacket can bestow upon anyone.

“Yes, sir,” replied Burton; “can I have Kelby with me?”

Only for a moment did Captain Dacres hesitate before giving his decision. In that moment he reviewed both sides of the case. Midshipman Kelby was, he knew, Burton’s special chum. Both were high-spirited youths, and when in one another’s company might let themselves go, to the prejudice of discipline. On the other hand the skipper vividly remembered his early days in the Service, and how in times of peril and adventure—and many such had fallen to his lot—he had been loyally backed up by his boon companion of the gun-room.

“Certainly,” he replied, and wisely refrained from adding the injunction, “but mind the pair of you don’t get into mischief”. “Certainly; well, that’s all, I think. See that the picket-boat’s fuelled, watered and provisioned and report to the officer of the watch. I want her well clear of the ship before sunset.”

Saluting smartly, Burton turned and left the captain's cabin. Then, somewhat to the astonishment of the marine sentry, the snotty raced along the half-deck, and unceremoniously burst into the darkened gun-room, where side-curtains drawn outside wide-open scuttles and whirring electric fans vainly attempted to battle with the stifling heat.

The one occupant of the gun-room was a freckled, red-haired youth of eighteen, who was wearing only a singlet, a pair of shorts and canvas shoes. On the table, close at hand, was a tall glass of iced drink; in front of him a writing-pad, smeared with ink and moist with perspiration from the youth's hand.

"Hello, Badger!" exclaimed Burton. "Get a move on!"

"Can't," replied Midshipman Kelby laconically. "Too jolly hot; 'sides I'm making that report to the commander. He's got an idea into his head that I know who poured beer into the back of the ward-room piano, and I've got to convince him that I jolly well don't know. It's a hard life!"

"That report can wait for a week, old son."

"Wish it could," groaned the victim of the commander's suspicion and displeasure.

"Well, it can," declared Burton. "Skipper's orders. You're coming away with me in the picket-boat. The Bloke will have forgotten all about the beer-sodden ivories when you return."

"Honest?" asked Kelby.

"Honest. I asked the Owner and he said it was O.K. We've to get away by one bell in the second dog watch. There's a big dhow reported inside the reefs and the Owner thinks it's the one that gave the *Penguin's* boats the slip. My orders are to capture or destroy. So get a move on."

Badger Kelby needed no further inducement. His lassitude vanished. To him the prospect of six gruelling days in the picket-boat suggested something of the nature of a picnic. At any rate it meant a welcome change from the routine and discipline of the light-cruiser.

To the accompaniment of disjointed scraps of conversation the two midshipmen made their hurried preparations, collecting kit and navigating instruments and arms. Their dirks, mere emblems of rank, were discarded in favour of cutlasses, while in addition each had a service revolver in a holster and secured by means of a lanyard round his neck.

Another midshipman entered the gun-room.

“Picket-boat’s swung out and alongside, Burton,” he reported. “Lucky dog!” he added enviously.

“Two of us,” corrected Kelby.

“Then I bet Crash Burton wangled it for you,” rejoined the snotty. “I’ll bet you a month’s pay.”

“Thanks, I’m not taking you on,” replied the favoured one cheerfully. “Ready, old son?”

The two chums gained the upper deck, duly reported themselves to the officer of the watch, and descended to the lower boom, at the end of which the picket-boat was made fast.

In the Service there is a saying that a ship is known by her boats, and certainly the picket-boat of the *Myosotis* was a credit to her. She was painted the lightest shade of grey that the regulations permitted. Her brass-work shone like gold, her teak planking was scrubbed to a state of perfection. The “hands”, wearing white tropical uniform with sun helmets, were already on board. Only the six-pounder Q.F. mounted on a pedestal for’ard and the weapons worn by the two midshipmen were evidence of the grim nature of the task that lay before her.

Most of the remaining ship’s company manned the side to give the picket-boat a good send-off. At the extremity of the bridge the captain stood to bid the adventurers God-speed, while most of the officers were on the quarter-deck to bid the picket-boat’s crew good luck.

“Cast off for’ard!” ordered Midshipman Burton. “Let go aft!”

He spun the wheel to port, and gave the engine-room gong a ring as a sign for the engine-room artificer to set the machinery in motion.

A smother of froth leapt from under the picket-boat’s quarter. She forged ahead, steadied on her helm.

The Great Adventure had begun!

CHAPTER II

Sunk without a Trace

Midshipman Burton did not look back. For one reason, it was considered unlucky to do so when putting off from a ship; for another, he was at the wheel—a duty he preferred to carry out himself rather than hand it over to one of the ratings—and the picket-boat, being lively on her helm, required careful handling to avoid leaving the zig-zag wake which is the trade-mark of a lubberly or careless steersman.

Kelby, in the stern-sheets, could not help looking at the light-cruiser. He was half afraid that for some reason the *Myosotis* would hoist the picket-boat's number as a signal for recall. He had known such a thing to happen before, and in such cases there was no "turning the blind eye" to a peremptory order of that nature.

Then:

"She's gathering way, Crash!" he announced to his chum. "Doesn't she look topping?"

"Good!" rejoined Burton, and for the first time he permitted his gaze to bear astern.

The *Myosotis*, that during the hoisting-out operation had stopped her engines, was now steaming ahead. Then under full port helm she swung through sixteen points and settled down on a course that ostensibly would take her to either of the fuelling stations of Perim or Aden. And as she went she was sending out a wireless message *en clair*—or not in code—announcing her intention of returning to her base to replenish her oil-bunkers—an operation which she had not the faintest intention of carrying out; at least, not for the next ten days or so.

Half an hour later the *Myosotis* was hull down, and in another ten minutes only a faint blur of smoke on the horizon gave an indication of her position to the crew of the picket-boat.

"We're away with it, Badger!" exclaimed Burton cheerfully. "Pass the word for Wilson to take over and for the hands to carry on smoking."

Wilson, the torpedo coxswain, relieved the Senior Midshipman at the wheel, and as a result of the second order—a welcome one as far as the crew were concerned—pipes and cigarettes were produced and the aroma of tobacco smoke floated aft. Smoking, when once away from the ship, was a concession that was highly appreciated.

Well before sunset the picket-boat had felt her way through the ill-charted channel between the reefs. Although the sea was calm, the coral barrier was marked by a line of creamy foam, broken only by a narrow belt of relatively quiet water that marked the narrow passage.

Burton gave a sigh of relief when this bit of navigation was safely accomplished. He was too good a seaman to attempt it after dark, but, once through, he knew that there was enough searoom for the picket-boat during the hours of darkness. It was in the wide stretch of water inside the far-flung line of reefs that the gun-running dhows were supposed to be active.

In eleven fathoms the anchor was dropped, fires banked and the picket-boat prepared for the night. No anchor light was shown. The cabin windows and engine-room and fo’c’sle scuttle were screened lest a stray beam of light should betray the little craft’s whereabouts. A look-out was posted with strict injunctions to keep his weather-eye lifting—not that there was anything to be seen in a pitch-black night. Dhows, whether on legitimate business or otherwise, hardly ever showed navigation lights. Their presence could be detected only by sound—the *cheeping* of blocks, the thudding of their enormous lateen yards, the slatting of their canvas and the almost constant jabbering of their coffee-coloured crews—or by their powerful smell. On a calm night a dhow has been known to throw her scent to leeward to a distance of more than a mile.

The long night—ten hours of intense darkness—passed uneventfully. By contrast with the tropical heat of the day the air was piercingly cold, for the picket-boat was close enough to land to feel the effect of the rapidly radiating sands of the Arabian desert.

Burton and his chum kept “watch and watch”, the midshipmen sleeping fitfully in their intervals of off-duty. It was their first night of the picket-boat’s cruise, and they were far too excited to rest.

Dawn found both lads on the cabin-top, eagerly scanning the expanse of sea directly the sun leapt, like a ball of flaming fire, above the distant mountain ranges of the Arabian tableland.

“Sail on the port bow, sir!” exclaimed the look-out man.

Hastily the two midshipmen turned their binoculars in the direction indicated. It was one where they least expected to see a vessel, namely between them and the reef. A dhow, especially if engaged in gun-running, was hardly likely to be hugging that dangerous barrier during the hours of darkness. If anything, she would be nosing her way, aided by her crew's expert local knowledge, along the coast, from one secret haven to another.

But there was no mistake on the part of the look-out man. She was a dhow, and a large one at that, creeping slowly, with her canvas just drawing, in a northerly direction inside and almost parallel to the dangerous line of foaming breakers.

"She's asking for it!" exclaimed Kelby. "She has 'suspicious character' written all over her!"

"That she has!" agreed his chum. "Well, we'll soon settle that point!"

In response to an order the hands tumbled up from below; the chief stoker raised steam while the anchor was being weighed and directly the picket-boat forged ahead; the gun's crew cast loose the quick-firer, loaded, and stood by to await the command to open fire.

When first sighted the dhow was about three miles away. The distance had closed to less than a couple of miles before the Arab crew gave any indication of having perceived that they were being chased.

The wind was light but steady. Under her enormous spread of canvas the dhow, ungainly-looking yet actually with splendid lines below water, was doing perhaps five knots to the picket-boat's twelve.

Then suddenly she increased speed to one equal to or even exceeding that of her pursuer. A thin haze of bluish smoke astern explained her clean pair of heels. Like some other up-to-date native craft she was fitted with a powerful motor.

For a quarter of an hour the pursuit continued. Then Kelby, who had brought his sextant from the cabin, announced the disconcerting fact that the dhow's masthead angle was decreasing—in other words that she was gaining on the picket-boat.

In the circumstances there was only one thing to be done—to fire a shot as close to her as possible without actually hitting her, in the hope of persuading her to heave-to.

"Put a shot close alongside her, Giles!" ordered the Senior Midshipman, addressing the seaman-gunner.

“Ay, ay, sir!” came the prompt response, as the trained seaman bent over the sights of the six-pounder.

The projectile was not a live shell and consequently would not explode on impact. It would, however, throw up a column of water sufficiently high to terrify an average dhow’s crew into surrender.

For a brief instant Giles lingered over the sights, then pressed the firing-trigger. There was a flash, accompanied by a sharp detonation.

The projectile sped on its way. Owing to the relative positions of the picket-boat and her quarry it was out of the question to give the time-honoured warning of “putting a shot across the enemy’s bows”. All that the seaman-gunner could hope to do in that respect was to let the shell make its first ricochet within a few yards of the dhow’s starboard beam.

Through their binoculars the two midshipmen watched the flight of the projectile. Apparently, judging by the smother of foam it threw up, the shell pitched within twenty feet of the still swiftly-moving dhow. Much of the spray flew inboard, wetting both lateen sails almost to their peaks. Then, with a succession of “duck and drake”-like ricochets the projectile finally disappeared beneath the surface a good mile ahead of the spot where it had first struck.

“That’s put the wind up the blighters, Crash!” exclaimed Kelby.

Burton grinned.

“Seems so, Badger, old son,” he rejoined.

The two white-robed Arabs who had been observed to be standing on the dhow’s lofty poop disappeared from view.

A moment or so later both lateen yards came down with a run, and the lithe, brown-skinned crew began gathering in and furling the two sails.

“Hurrah, she’s heaving-to,” declared Kelby, as he unbuttoned the flap of his revolver holster in anticipation of his duties as boarding officer and possible prize-master.

Even as he spoke the two raking masts of the dhow were lowered. The bluish smoke from her exhaust ceased—an indication that her petrol motor had been switched off.

Then to the utter astonishment of the crew of the picket-boat the dhow kicked up her heels and disappeared, bows first, beneath the surface.

The whole thing was over in less than thirty seconds from the time of lowering the masts.

The two midshipmen glanced at each other but never spoke a word. Each had the same thought in his mind—that Giles had inadvertently hit the dhow with the warning shot, and the projectile had ripped a fatal gash in her hull before resuming its series of ricochets.

In a few minutes the picket-boat was over the spot where the dhow had disappeared. Already the turmoil of agitated water had subsided, but beyond a steadily widening patch of iridescent oil upon the surface there was no sign of the sunken craft—not even as much as a jagged splinter from the vessel’s shell-torn planking.

Nor were there any of the dhow’s crew to be seen swimming about. Most Arab seamen are excellent swimmers, and since the crew were on deck just before the dhow made her plunge it was strange that none had taken to the water.

“Gone, every man jack of ’em!” exclaimed the torpedo coxswain in sepulchral tones. “That was a mighty fine shot of yours, Giles,” he added, unable to resist the temptation of twitting the seaman-gunner on his boasted prowess.

“Garn!” retorted Giles contemptuously. “If I wanted to hit her I’d hit her; if I wanted to miss her by inches I’d miss her with anything from a fifteen-inch down to a morris tube! I reckon she scuttled herself, the dirty dog, to avoid the consequences!”

Overhearing this exchange of words, Burton took courage. He had been feeling very much down in the mouth at the unexpected trend of events. His orders had been to capture or destroy only after he had satisfied himself that the dhow was actually a gun-runner. Before he had left the *Myosotis* Captain Dacres had warned him against making a blunder that might lead up to “international complications”. Not so many years ago a British officer in India had nipped a mutiny in the bud by drastic but certainly necessary measures. His reward at the hands of a spineless government at home was to be recalled and deprived of his command. Ever since then British officers when faced with a grave problem of this nature have been handicapped and even crippled by the knowledge that their action, however justifiable, might be condemned by the home authorities and their active career brought to an inglorious end.

And Burton had been filled with these misgivings. What if the dhow were an honest trader and her Arab crew, terrified by being fired upon, had frantically scuttled their craft? Visions of a court-martial condemning not only him but Captain Dacres as well—since he was acting under his commanding officer’s orders—had filled the midshipman’s mind until he overheard the

conversation between the two petty officers.

“You’re sure you didn’t hit her, Seaman-Gunner Giles?” he asked.

“Sure as I’m standing here, sir,” declared the man emphatically. “Why, sir, when I was at Whale Island——”

“I was watching through my glasses,” interrupted Midshipman Burton, not wishing to be regaled with a record of Seaman-Gunner Giles’s prowess at the principal Naval Gunnery School. “I was pretty certain that the projectile passed well wide of her.”

“Then you needn’t worry yourself over a dozen or so Arabs, sir,” rejoined the petty officer with characteristic disdain for all coloured natives. “She’s sunk without a trace, and if we say nothing no one will be any the wiser!”

“That won’t do,” replied Burton, resolutely putting the temptation aside. “I’ll have to log the incident, and if there’s a row about it I’ll have to stand the racket, I suppose! Ever seen a dhow high and dry, Wilson? I haven’t.”

The torpedo coxswain thus appealed to, tilted his sun-helmet and scratched his closely cropped head.

“Can’t say as I have, sir,” he replied, “but I remember once seeing one being built when we were lying at anchor at some port on the west coast the name of which slips my memory.”

“Strongly built, eh?”

“Rather, sir. Timbers on her like baulks in the pickling ponds at Pompey Hard.”

Burton could not help smiling at the petty officer’s simile.

“Then, if all dhows are built in similar fashion, it’s hardly likely that this one could scuttle herself so rapidly unless she employed explosives,” he continued. “And we heard no sound of an internal detonation, did we?”

Wilson shook his head.

“If she’d blown herself up we’d have seen the wreckage and heard the noise,” he declared, with a triumphant look at Giles, as if to imply that the latter’s explanation of the affair was one that would not bear investigation. “I reckon the projectile struck her a glancing blow and ripped a plank out of her.”

“That it did not,” declared the seaman-gunner fiercely.

“That’ll do!” cautioned the midshipman.

“Sorry, sir!” exclaimed Giles, conscious that his pride as a gunner had

temporarily overcome his sense of discipline.

Burton dismissed them and went into the cabin to write his report. He did so briefly and to the point, omitting nothing, but giving no unnecessary conjectures.

“You agree to that, Badger?”

Kelby nodded.

“Course I do,” he replied, as he affixed his signature to the Senior Midshipman’s report. “Well, that’s that. You’ve got it off your chest, old bird; but now what’s to be done?”

“Just carry on,” rejoined Burton.

CHAPTER III

“Johnny Shark!”

For the rest of the forenoon they “just carried on”. That is to say the picket-boat proceeded under easy steam on a course laid down in the Senior Midshipman’s instructions.

Nothing was in sight except the barren, hilly coast-line, partly hidden in a sweltering mist on the one hand and the line of creamy foam indicating the low-lying reefs on the other.

At noon, having arrived over the El Arush Shoals, the picket-boat dropped anchor, and during the heat of the day her crew bore their discomforts under the unsatisfactory shelter provided by the double sun-awning.

It was too hot even to maintain a conversation. The two midshipmen seated in the stern-sheets tried to concentrate their thoughts upon the *Manual of Swahili* and *Hindustani without a Master* respectively.

“Dashed if I can stick this swotting!” declared Kelby after a while. “I say, how about hands to bathe?”

“Good idea,” agreed Burton. “There’s no current to speak of. Righto; pass the word for’ard.”

But even this inducement had little effect upon the lethargic hands. Rather reluctantly a couple of bluejackets stripped off their scanty uniforms and prepared to dive overboard, while the torpedo coxswain slipped a round into the breech of his rifle and crouched on the fore-deck—a precaution rendered necessary by the ever-present probability of the presence of sharks.

“You go in first, Badger,” suggested Burton. “Both officers aren’t allowed in at the same time, you know.”

Kelby was about to dive overboard when Wilson shouted:

“Hold on, sir! Look astern!”

The warning came just in time, for less than twenty yards from the picket-boat two large black dorsal fins were leisurely cutting through the water. A couple of enormous sharks of a particularly ferocious type were waiting in

anticipation of a satisfying meal.

“Hand me a rifle, Wilson!” exclaimed the Senior Midshipman. “I’ll settle the brutes’ hash!”

“Not worth the trouble of cleaning the barrel, sir,” protested the torpedo coxswain. “Leave it to me, sir, and I’ll make Johnny Shark sit up and take notice!”

“Carry on, then,” agreed Burton.

Wilson went below and presently reappeared with what seemed to be an empty tobacco tin. This he wrapped in a piece of red bunting.

Hanging on to the engine-room casing, the torpedo coxswain hurled the tin far astern.

Instantly both sharks disappeared, but before the ripples had died away the dorsal fin of one of the brutes showed above the surface.

In a few moments its companion also made its reappearance, and both commenced to swim in wide but gradually decreasing spirals round the floating tin.

At length one of the sharks made a dash for the bait. Its “opposite number”, unwilling to be deprived of what it took to be a dainty morsel, also swam hurriedly to the spot. They collided and once more vanished in a smother of foam, leaving the bunting-covered tin bobbing on the surface.

Before long their shadowy forms were discerned at a depth of about two fathoms as they “jockeyed for position”. Each appeared to have a wholesome respect for the other, yet was loath to let its rival carry off what seemed to be a tasty prize.

Suddenly the larger of the two sharks turned on its back and made a vicious snap at the bait. The tin disappeared within the triple line of serrated teeth in the brute’s mouth.

Beyond that, apparently nothing happened.

“What’s the idea, Wilson?” asked Kelby. “Some stunt of yours hung fire, eh?”

The torpedo coxswain’s weather-tanned face crinkled into innumerable wrinkles.

“I’ll chance my killick on what I do in that line, sir!” he replied. “Another ten seconds maybe and then——”

He broke off and pointed at the still agitated water. A cloud of white smoke was breaking surface. Then, with a frantic succession of lashes from its tail, the shark that had swallowed the bait came into view looking like a marine dragon. Vivid white flames and ever increasing volumes of smoke were pouring from its widely distended jaws.

Both midshipmen tumbled to the petty officer's ruse. Wilson had placed a small quantity of calcium in the tin. The chemical had ignited on contact with water directly the shark's teeth penetrated the air-tight tin.

"You'll be for it, Wilson," declared Burton with mock severity. "You've been tampering with the calcium light-buoys. There'll be a dust up when we return to the ship!"

"Never fear, sir! It was some stuff left over from condemned stores. I thought it might come in handy, just for a little sport."

"Sport!" echoed the Senior Midshipman, still trying to get to wind'ard of the torpedo coxswain. "Sport! you jolly well deserve to be reported to the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals!"

"Sharks ain't animals within the meaning of the act," declared Wilson, who had the reputation of being a regular sea lawyer. "They're classed with vermin. Look at the other brute, sir! Making a meal of its chum!"

Not only that, but other tigers of the deep, attracted by the smell of blood as the second shark began to tear huge pieces from its now deceased rival, were joining in the cannibalistic feast.

Apparently the torpedo coxswain was anxious to continue the discussion.

"Talking of vermin, sir," he remarked, "I knew an old bloke in Pompey^[1] who was so set against taking life that he wouldn't kill a blackbeetle or a flea."

"And what happened to him, Wilson?" asked Kelby. "Was he eaten up by the creature he refused to slay?"

"Dunno, sir!" replied Wilson. "All I knows is he got six months for knocking his own kid about something cruel!"

"Carry on, Wilson!" ordered the Senior Midshipman laughingly. Then, as the petty officer went for'ard, Burton glanced at the still fiercely squabbling sharks.

"I don't fancy I'll have a swim just yet," he remarked to his chum.

[1] Naval slang name for Portsmouth.

CHAPTER IV

“On their Lawful Occasions or—”

A few minutes later Seaman-Gunner Giles came aft and asked permission to tauten the lashing of the sun-awning over the cockpit.

He had overheard the midshipman's facetious accusation concerning Wilson's method of waging warfare upon sharks and, although Wilson's criticism of his shooting in the sunken dhow incident still rankled, he was anxious to put in a good word for his shipmate.

“Rummy way of Wilson putting that shark out of action, sir,” he remarked.

“He's like a red-hot anarchist in his methods,” rejoined Burton.

“Still Wilson is a most humane man,” continued Giles. “He's got the Humane Society's silver medal for going overboard after a little girl in Portsmouth Harbour, and some other medal for going into a burning house out Chatham way and rescuing a cat and her kittens. But you see, sir, Wilson has a special down on sharks, more'n most of us who don't give those blighters any quarter. His brother, an A.B. in the old *Gamecock*, jumped into the ditch to rescue a chum who'd been washed off the fo'c'sle and a shark bit off his leg just above the knee. Ever since then Wilson has——”

“Sail-ho!” shouted the look-out man perched upon the picket-boat's narrow fore-deck.

“Belay there, Giles!” interrupted the midshipman-in-command. “Up anchor! Look lively there! Stand by to whack her up!” he added for the benefit of the now alert leading stoker.

In a few minutes the picket-boat was again under way, steering in the direction of two dhows whose sails were drawing in a stiff northerly wind that so far had not even ruffled the water in the vicinity of the British naval craft.

“Hope they won't carry the breeze long,” remarked Kelby, who had been keeping the dhows under observation by means of his binoculars. “They seem to have a clean pair of heels, judging by the bone in their teeth.”

Both craft were certainly moving at a smart rate, as indicated by the smother of white foam at their bows. They were almost abreast of each other

and about half a mile apart, and if they maintained their present course they would pass one on either side of the picket-boat. This they would do if they were honest trading craft. If on the other hand they were engaged upon any unlawful errand they would be sure to put about and attempt to escape directly they sighted the relatively small and low-lying steamboat.

Yet there was a third alternative. The Arab masters of gun-running dhows were known to be both bold and wily. These craft, then, might hold on their course in the hope that the picket-boat would think that they were harmless traders and not worth stopping. Or, if they were stopped, they would not hesitate to resort to treachery in dealing with the *Kafir* interrupters of their illegal though profitable activities.

“They must have sighted us!” declared Burton, after a while.

Still the dhows gave no sign. The breeze had by now reached the picket-boat, but it was decidedly easing. The two on-coming craft, now barely a mile off, were visibly going slower through the water.

“Hard a-port,” ordered Burton. “Through sixteen points. Meet her at that. Ready, then, Seaman-Gunner?”

“Ay, ay, sir!” replied Giles. “I’ll take good care to put a shot across their bows this time,” he added under his breath, as the picket-boat, turning rapidly to starboard, settled down on a course parallel to that of the approaching dhows.

The engines were then eased to allow the two craft to overtake the picket-boat.

By this time it was evident that the latter had been spotted. Several white-robed Arabs could be seen on the deck of each dhow, gazing in the picket-boat’s direction and exchanging signals with their compatriots; but neither of the two vessels attempted to alter course.

“Try that craft on your starboard hand first, Giles!” shouted the Senior Midshipman.

The quick-firer barked. The projectile, whining through the air, threw up a column of spray at about twenty yards ahead of the dhow indicated.

She understood the grim warning.

Promptly her two lateen yards were lowered and stowed fore and aft. Quickly losing way, she rolled sullenly in the slight swell.

A second shot, placed neatly across the bows of the other Arab craft, had

the desired effect. She, too, downed canvas.

Obviously one picket-boat could not examine two dhows, lying a mile apart, at the same time. If she went to one and sent an examining party on board, the second might rehoist sail and run for it. The steamboat could not very well stand in pursuit of her and leave a midshipman and a couple of seamen on board the first dhow. The risk of the search-party being treacherously attacked and overcome was too great; and knowing that the picket-boat's complement was seriously depleted, the Arab crew of the second dhow would not hesitate to lure them to disaster.

Steaming slowly towards the shoremost dhow, the picket-boat ran within hailing distance.

In somewhat halting Swahili—for it was the first time that he had aired his knowledge of that language in public—Burton demanded to know the dhow's name, port of departure, destination and nature of cargo.

To his surprise and to the amusement of her crew he received her answer in a quaint but expressive jargon of broken English, punctuated by many far from polite expressions that had undoubtedly been picked up in the purlieus of Limehouse, Cardiff, and Liverpool.

All the same the Arab, who had been a fireman in a British steamship line, gave the required information. The dhow was bound from Mocha to Port Sudan, her owner being Dost Andullah of the former place. Her cargo consisted entirely of coffee.

"Very good!" continued Burton. "I must examine your papers and have a look at your cargo. Tell your captain I'm going to tow your dhow across to the other one. There he must take the other dhow in tow under foresail only while I examine both craft."

The Arab turned away and conferred with the master of the dhow—a tall, dignified black-bearded individual wearing a spotlessly white robe and a green turban.

For several minutes they talked slowly and deliberately. Then the English-speaking native came to the side and gave Burton the Arab captain's reply.

"'E ain't particular, look you, sah," declared the Arab. "'E don't mind being taken in tow, but e's dashed to jolly well know why 'e should be stopped—dis dhow be all 'bove board an' honest-to-goodness. 'E don't know tinker's cuss 'bout other dhow so 'e be blowed if he want to take 'er in tow!"

"Tell him to stop arguing and pass us a hawser," said the Senior

Midshipman sternly.

Another discussion ensued between the master and the Arab interpreter; then the latter came to the side again.

“You go search other dhow, sir,” he suggested. “P’raps she gun-runner. Me tink so, an’ Old Man here ’e tinks so. You jolly well look slippy an’ make see.”

“Confound your impudence!” exclaimed Burton. “Tell your captain that if he doesn’t pass us his hawser I’ll put him under arrest and let the consular court deal with him.”

At this threat the Arab master changed his tune. He gave orders to some of his crew and presently a half-naked native appeared with a heaving-line.

Burton ordered the picket-boat to forge ahead while one of the hands stood by to catch the line.

Three times the Arab heaved the coiled rope and each time it fell short. Between each attempt the Arab recoiled the line with exasperating slowness. He was deliberately playing for time.

At length the end of the hawser was brought on board the picket-boat and secured to the towing-bollards. Burton rang for “easy ahead”. Directly the boat forged ahead the rope parted like pack-thread!

“The nigger’s playing with us, sir,” declared Wilson. “Keep her going, sir, until we heave in the slack or it’ll foul our propeller!”

The warning was a timely one, for Burton in his eagerness to close the dhow was on the point of ordering “full astern”.

Another passage of words was exchanged between Burton and the Arab captain through the medium of an interpreter, the midshipman taunting the dhow’s crew on their lubberliness while the native master threatened to sue the British admiral for the cost of a new hawser.

“Look out, Crash, old son!” interrupted Kelby, pointing towards the second dhow. “She’s trying to give us the slip!”

Burton looked and saw that the warning was justifiable. The second dhow, noting that the picket-boat’s attention was held by the first one, had rehoisted canvas.

“Wing her, Giles!” ordered Burton, his better judgment overridden by his anxiety to teach the would-be escaping dhow a sharp lesson.

The seaman-gunner wanted no second bidding. The quick-firer barked

viciously. The projectile, admirably aimed, screeched on its way until it struck the dhow's fore-masthead. The halliards were cut completely through and the unwieldy yard and sail came down with a run.

At this stern warning the Arab crew promptly lowered the main lateen sail, and waved white cloths in token of surrender.

This drastic action had also its effect upon the first dhow, for her crew promptly passed a fairly sound hawser to the picket-boat.

"Now you know what you have to do!" shouted Burton to the interpreter, as the dhow gathered way in tow of the steamboat. "We'll cast off when you're ahead of that craft. Take her hawser and then hoist your foresail. Keep her in tow until you're told to cast off. Is that clear?"

Evidently it was, for the required manœuvre was carried out, although not without apparently deliberate tardiness on the part of the crews of both dhows.

"I'll bet there's something fishy about those two craft, Badger," remarked Burton to his chum. "They're up to some game! But we've got 'em cold! Directly I board this gentleman you'll lay off. I'll station Davis on her poop, and if he disappears from your sight you'll know there's foul play! If so, shell the dhow at the water-line and send her to the bottom!"

"But what about you?" objected Kelby.

Burton smiled.

"Oh! I'll try and take care of myself, never you fear—now, Wilson, lay me alongside. Boarding-party ready!"

The picket-boat, which had already cast off the hawser, ran alongside to wind'ard of the towing dhow. Burton clambered up the latter's side followed by three armed able seamen. One of the latter, Davis, was ordered to stand on guard on the poop, while the remaining two fell in behind the Senior Midshipman, who proceeded to interview the Arab master.

The dhow's papers were forthcoming after considerable delay, the master explaining through his interpreter that, worried by having been ordered to lie-to, he had forgotten where the documents had been stowed.

Burton studied the dhow's papers carefully. They were made out both in English and Arabic, and bore the seal of the consular agent at Mocha. Apparently they were quite in order, but the midshipman was by no means satisfied. In his own mind he felt convinced that he had justified his action in stopping both dhows, and that one if not both was a gun-runner. The prevaricating action of the Arab master had strengthened his suspicions.

“You’re steering a strange course from Mocha to Port Sudan,” he observed to the Arab interpreter.

The latter, after consulting the captain, explained in slangy nautical terms that there was both a favourable breeze and current inside the reef that would enable the dhow to pick up a “slant” across the broad expanse of the Red Sea.

“S’pose he’s right there,” thought Burton. “These chaps do make the best of local knowledge. Right!” he added aloud. “Now, I’ll just have a look at your cargo.”

Again there was delay on the part of the Arab master. He protested that since the papers were in order there was no necessity to open hatches.

“All the same I’m going to have a look at the stuff,” declared Burton. “Look alive! I’ve wasted far too much time over you already!”

The Arab master, looking very dignified, placed one hand to his forehead, inclined his head, and retired to his quarters under the towering poop.

“The old sinner knows he’s bowled out,” thought Burton, as he watched the native crew slowly removing the hatch-covers.

“Sah!” whispered the interpreter. “It no use you hang on slack. I tell you dis honest-to-goodness hooker! Dash if I say same of dat dhow”—indicating the craft astern. “Dare say she ain’t jonnick! You well go look-see an’ I bet bottom dollar you find plenty rifle!”

The midshipman could hardly conceal his elation. Without doubt he was in possession of one gun-running dhow—if not two.

“We’ll see about that all in good time,” he rejoined. “But I’m going to examine this craft first!”

“Get on wid it then, sah!” exclaimed the interpreter with a broad grin. “Fat lot you’ll find dere!”

The hatches were removed. An almost overpowering reek of raw coffee rose from the unventilated hold.

The native crew refused point-blank to touch a single bag. Burton had no power to compel them, so the only thing to do was to set his two A.B.s to work. There was no gear available to “break bulk”; the coffee bags were tightly stowed. Anything like a systematic search conducted by two men only would take a week.

To make matters worse as far as Burton was concerned, there was nothing in evidence to justify him sending the dhow into the nearest British port for

examination. In view of the dhow's papers being in order the risk was too great, as the owners would certainly press for heavy damages, and what was more, would get them, from the British Government.

So Burton had to be content with ordering his two A.B.s to lever out a few of the bags. Underneath only the floor of the hold was to be seen. So far he had drawn blank.

In the circumstances the next best thing to be done was for the boarding-party to remove themselves with as much dignity as they could muster, in the face of obvious failure.

"Beg pardon, sir," began Davis, the A.B. who had been stationed on the dhow's deck, "but there's some rummy goings on while you were below. Seems to me as if those Arab johnnies have been signalling."

"Oh! To whom?" asked Burton. "To their pals in the dhow astern?"

"No, sir, away on the starboard beam."

"You could see nothing?"

"Not without moving from my post, sir; and I didn't want the picket-boat to let rip with a live shell just 'cause they couldn't see me!"

"Of course not," agreed the Senior Midshipman heartily.

Burton stepped to the starboard side of the dhow and scanned the horizon. Except for the line of surf there was nothing visible except an expanse of sea and cloudless sky.

As he swung round on his heel he fancied that several of the Arab crew were looking a trifle abashed. It might have been fancy, but Burton knew it was useless to question them upon the matter. They, one and all, would profess utter ignorance on that point.

The midshipman then hailed the picket-boat to come alongside, and the boarding-party left the dhow.

"I'm jolly well certain that that hooker is a gun-runner, Badger," he confided to his chum. "But how I'm expected to rummage under a tightly-packed cargo of coffee passes my understanding! And since her papers are in order I daren't seize her and send her into Aden, even if we had hands to spare for the job. So that's that. . . . Easy ahead, coxswain! We'll try our luck with the second dhow."

CHAPTER V

The Bluejacket's Stratagem

The next object of the picket-boat's attention was a considerably larger dhow than the one previously boarded. Her sails were still lowered and the long lateen yards stowed fore and aft. She was being towed by the first dhow by means of a stout coir hawser, a distance of about a hundred feet separating the two craft.

"Which side, sir?" inquired Wilson, as the picket-boat swung hard over under full starboard helm and steadied on her course dead in the wake of her quarry.

"Starboard side," ordered Burton.

Actually it was immaterial, since the dhow had no sail set. Had she had her yards aloft the midshipman would have boarded her on her wind'ard side. There had been instances of British boats boarding suspicious dhows on the lee'ard side and paying dearly for their lack of caution; for the Arab crew had an unpleasant habit of letting their sails down with a run and enveloping the bluejackets under the heavy canvas. Taken at a disadvantage, the boarding-party would then be shot down by the dhow's crew as fast as the former emerged from under the improvised but none the less effective net.

Both dhows were moving at a bare two knots through the water. The picket-boat ran alongside the towed craft. The bowman engaged his boathook and held on while Burton hailed the dhow in Swahili to throw a line. He got that sentence off briskly and without hesitation: it was one in the *Swahili Phrase Book* that he had taken particular pains to remember. He felt certain that it would come in very handy one day, and his forethought was now justified.

Even amidships the dhow possessed a high freeboard. Without the aid of a rope it would be a difficult matter for a man, even if not encumbered with his side-arms, to scale the side. To render any attempt still more difficult most of the Arab crew crowded, shoulder to shoulder, along the high bulwarks—a form of passive resistance—while the dhow's master expostulated volubly in a torrent of broken English and fluent Swahili.

The captain of the first dhow was benign and dignified in his bearing; this one was the reverse. He was almost in a frenzy.

“Like the fellow who’s in the wrong in a motor smash,” thought Burton. “He almost invariably gets into a rage and tries to bluff and shove the blame on the other man.”

“Look sharp there!” he added aloud. “Heave us a line and don’t keep me waiting! I’m going to come aboard you, whether you like it or no! You tried to give me the slip, you know!”

The Arab master flared out. From his lengthy remarks, Burton gathered that he was very much annoyed at having his fore-masthead gear shot away. Until he received ample monetary compensation he was not going to allow any *Kafir* to tread the planks of his craft. Why should he and other peaceable traders be interfered with because one or two dhows broke the *Kafir*’s insolent orders. Yes. He would produce his papers under protest and hand them to the English *emir*; but, by the beard of the Prophet, he would allow no infidel to come on board.

“I’ll have to teach you a lesson, my festive!” exclaimed Burton. “You’ve asked for it, and you’re going to get it!”

He then ordered a small grapnel and a length of rope to be brought on deck.

“I’m forging ahead, Giles!” he explained. “Heave the grapnel into the dhow’s fore-chains, and then we’ll drop back our own length or so. Stand by with a rifle, and if any of the Arabs attempt to cast the grapnel clear, let them have it! One warning shot and then, if they don’t pay attention, wing the blighters! Now, then, four of you! Stand by to follow me. Use the flat of your cutlasses and bear in mind that an Arab, like a negro, is remarkably tender about the shins!”

The grapnel was thrown and engaged in one of the dhow’s shroud lanyards. Then the picket-boat was allowed to drop back until her cabin-top was abreast and almost level with the native craft’s main chains—a narrow platform projecting from below her bulwarks and serving to support the shrouds of the steeply raking mainmast.

Burton and his four men had taken up their stand upon the cabin-top, whence it was a matter of a few feet between them and the dhow’s rail.

Waiting until the dhow rolled slightly to starboard the midshipman made a spring. For a few seconds he hung precariously with one leg over the dhow’s bulwarks and fully expecting to be pushed backwards by the native crew. One

Arab actually attempted to throw him off, but was promptly floored by a blow from one of the bluejackets, all four of whom had succeeded in achieving their immediate objective.

Tumbling inboard with more haste than dignity, Burton regained his feet.

Then the comic side of the business took him completely aback.

The Arab captain was still foaming and raging, but with that exception the dhow's crew remained absolutely passive. They showed no sign either of submission or defiance. In the circumstances it was out of the question for the bluejackets to make use of the flat of their cutlasses or even to lay hands upon the apparently docile natives.

The four bluejackets looked at their officer for orders. Burton was in a quandary. Although the Arabs appeared harmless he knew that there was ever present the risk of treachery. Possibly each of the crew had a knife or a revolver secreted in his voluminous clothing. They were now standing in groups of two or three in the waist. Unless they were driven either for'ard or aft it was unwise to attempt to make an examination of the hold. The midshipman and the four bluejackets would be surrounded and cut off before the rest of the picket-boat's complement could come to their assistance—if they were able to do so at all.

Burton found himself wishing that the Arabs would give trouble. Then he would have excuse to use force; but otherwise he could not bring himself to order his men to clear the dhow's waist.

The situation, were it not for possible serious consequences, might have been regarded as an unrehearsed comedy. In any case it looked like being a deadlock; but Burton and his men could not give up the examination and return to the picket-boat without loss of prestige—for the story of the affair would spread from one end of the Red Sea to the other in an incredibly short time—and, what was also important, without carrying out their instructions; in brief, disobedience of orders.

"Give me permission, sir," said Able Seaman Davis. "I'll shift the blighters without laying a hand on 'em."

"What do you propose to do, then?" asked the midshipman, who, although knowing Davis to be an ingenious and resourceful seaman, was rather dubious concerning the latter's confident assertion.

Davis told him.

"Carry on, then," rejoined Burton.

The bluejacket made a flying leap into the picket-boat, went down into the forepeak, and presently reappeared with a large lump of salt meat spitted on the end of a knife.

Regaining the dhow's deck he approached the nearest Arab and presented the meat to him.

"Come on, Abdul!" he exclaimed coaxingly. "Try a nice piece of pork!"

The Arab did not understand the spoken words, but he evidently knew what Davis meant. Like the rest of the dhow's crew the native was a strict Mussulman. To touch pork meant defilement. It ruined his chances of ever entering the paradise the Prophet promised to all true believers. He would have risked his life to be able to strike the *Kafir* dead; but he realized that he could not do so without being touched by the lump of "unclean" meat.

Shaking with apprehension the Arab retreated before the ingenious bluejacket, who, thwarting every attempt on the part of the native to sidestep him, adroitly shepherded him for'ard, until with a yell of fright the native dived under the dhow's fore-deck.

Davis repeated his tactics until the Arab crew, either singly or in groups, were compelled to go below.

There remained the master. Burton told the bluejacket to stand aside, and then, with the best Swahili at his command, demanded the dhow's papers.

These were submitted. Apparently they were quite in order. Then, with Davis and his unique weapon guarding the Arabs for'ard, and with another bluejacket stationed on deck to keep in touch with the picket-boat, the stage was cleared for the examination of the hold.

The dhow was practically "light". That is to say she carried very little cargo. What there was consisted mainly of a consignment of salt. In the hold were a number of large stones, which served as ballast. Although Burton and two of his men made a long and careful search they failed to find anything of a contraband nature—and that in spite of the Arab interpreter in the first dhow, who had deliberately put them on a false scent.

There was nothing to be done but to release the craft. Burton called the Arab captain and attempted to tender a sort of formal apology. The master replied by calling down maledictions upon the *Kafirs* for bringing unclean meat upon her deck. He threatened to bring an action against Burton in the consular court, adding with particular emphasis that the British Government is always ready to punish its subjects who insult the religious scruples of persons of the Mahommetan faith.

“All right, my lad, get on with it!” retorted Burton in English. “Now you can tell your friend in the other dhow to cast off the hawser, and you can both go your respective ways.”

The boarding-party returned to the picket-boat. In silence Burton watched the second dhow hoist sail and follow her consort on a westerly course.

“Three hours wasted, by Jove!” he remarked to his chum. “I believe those blighters did it on purpose!”

“Did what?” inquired Kelby.

“Did the ca’ canny business to make us waste our time,” continued the Senior Midshipman. “Perhaps they are in league with the gun-running dhow we’re after. And to make matters worse that old rascal of an Arab skipper threatens to have me in the *consommé* for rounding up his rascally crew with a lump of pork.”

“Let him, Crash,” rejoined Kelby. “Let him! That’s nothing.”

“Don’t know so much about that, Badger,” said Burton. “You know what pork means to a Muslim!”

“Quite,” agreed Kelby with a grin. “Only it happens it wasn’t pork. I made Davis take a chunk of salt beef!”

CHAPTER VI

Catching a Tartar

Nothing of outstanding interest occurred during the next few days. No dhows were sighted. The weather remained fine and oppressively hot. The picket-boat's crew simply grilled and endured, "grousing", as is the wont of a British bluejacket, at the tedious inaction.

Forty-eight hours before the time fixed for the picket-boat to return to her rendezvous with her parent ship a "khamsin" or sandstorm piped up almost without warning. A strong easterly wind from the Arabian desert swept seawards, carrying with it huge clouds of sand that darkened the face of the tropical sun.

There was no drop of the barometer to herald its approach. It was only by the vigilance of the look-out man, who noticed strange whirling masses of clouds above the barren hills, that Burton had time to make for shelter.

It required a certain amount of courage to order the picket-boat to dash towards the approaching storm, but the Senior Midshipman knew that it was the only way. To attempt to run before it meant finding a death-trap of a lee-shore on the inner edge of the outlying reefs; but by steaming hard towards the Arabian shore the boat might find shelter in one of the numerous badly-charted harbours on that part of the coast. In many cases their position was uncertain, and their depth unknown, but with the picket-boat's light draught there was a chance of her being able to find her way in where a large craft would inevitably run hard aground.

And, as luck would have it, the picket-boat did succeed in gaining the little-known harbour of El Kerish just as the first of the khamsin burst.

El Kerish is what is known as an open harbour. That is, its mouth is open to onshore winds, but when the wind comes from other directions it affords tolerably secure anchorage. On either side of the entrance, which is roughly two cables in width, are sandstone bluffs rising to a height of about two hundred feet. Inside the harbour there are also cliffs of considerably less altitude, pierced in several places by "khors" or ravines. Until the British navy practically suppressed the slave traffic in the Red Sea the place was a favourite port for slave-dhows. The remains of the slave pens are still to be seen,

together with the ruins of an Arab village. At one gap in the cliffs is a fairly drinkable rivulet, and on that account trading dhows occasionally put into El Kerish to replenish their supplies of fresh water. Otherwise sandstone, sand, and a few date palms comprise the sum total of the landscape.

Into this unprepossessing harbour Burton navigated the picket-boat, groping his way in by means of lead-line and compass-bearings in conjunction with a far from accurate chart.

Barely had the anchor been let go when the storm burst. Through the gaps in the cliff the wind howled and shrieked, bringing with it clouds of hot, stinging dust. There was no rain in the accepted sense of the word; but it literally rained sand. In a few minutes the fore-deck waterways were covered to an average depth of three inches with the hot particles; while the cockpit—for Burton had taken the precaution of ordering the awnings to be unshipped and stowed away—was more than knee-deep in sand, until some of the crew set to work to heave the stuff overboard.

The sand also found its way everywhere—down the ventilating cowls, down the funnel, and into the engine-room, to the intense disgust of the leading stoker. It penetrated into the after-cabin, where the two midshipmen spent their brief hour of rest, lodging on the cushions and kit, clogging the mechanism of the midshipmen's revolvers, and going to the extent of rendering their meals uneatable!

It was too dark, even at high noon, to see to read without artificial light, while the "shade" temperature registered something in the neighbourhood of 120 degrees.

While the sandstorm lasted Burton and his chum remained in the open, exposed to the blinding dust and the flying spindrift. Even in the harbour there were short steep seas, their crests whipped into scudding foam by the eddying gusts. In the circumstances the two midshipmen could not take shelter, as did most of the hands. They had to remain in the cockpit, peering through the whirling clouds of sand and spray in an endeavour to satisfy themselves that the ground tackle was holding, and that the picket-boat had not materially shifted her position.

Then night fell. Still the storm raged, but fortunately it was not of a cyclonic nature, and the general direction of the wind remained unchanged. Owing to that fact it was out of the question for any dhow to make the harbour in the face of that terrific off-shore wind, and since there were no other craft in El Kerish—at least none had been seen—there was no risk of the anchored picket-boat being run down during the night by an unwieldy Arab craft.

Provided the anchor and cable held, and the wind did not veer more than sou'-west, then there was little to worry about beyond the discomfort of the heat and dust.

The storm continued for nearly twenty-four hours and died down as suddenly as it had arisen, leaving in its wake a dense mist. The air was like that of an over-heated conservatory; visibility at its best was limited to about fifty yards.

"What about it, Crash?" inquired Kelby. "Going to get under way in this muck?"

"Must," replied Burton laconically. Then after a pause, he added: "This time to-morrow we're due at the rendezvous, and it'll take eight hours' hard steaming to get there! And a precious fine report I'll have to make!"

"We've got twenty-four hours to play about in," rejoined Kelby. "There's no hurry to get out of here. The sea's bound to be running fairly high outside."

"All the same I'm off," decided the Senior Midshipman. "We'll be under the lee of the land, and we may fall in with the gun-runner. There's precious little chance of our doing so here."

Accordingly, the anchor was weighed and stowed, and under easy steam the picket-boat nosed her way towards the open sea.

As Kelby had said, there was still a lot of broken water outside, and although the picket-boat kept within a mile of the land she made heavy weather of it, seas breaking completely over her fore-deck. As a result the fo'c'sle hatch had to be battened down, and since the crew's quarters was rendered uninhabitable by reason of the stifling heat, the men had to come aft and crowd in the well until conditions improved.

When Kelby came out of the cabin to "take over", his chum gave him a prolonged stare.

"What's up, old son?" questioned the Senior Midshipman. "You look white about the gills. Surely, at your time of life, you aren't about to pay tribute to Neptune?"

Kelby tried to force a smile but failed miserably.

"I'm not about to muster my bag," he explained, "but I do feel a bit queer. Sort of hot and cold shivers. Touch of the sun, perhaps."

"Then go and turn in for a spell," suggested Burton. "I'll carry on, so don't worry about that. No, it's no use protesting. You've got to obey orders!"

As a matter of fact Kelby was beyond the protesting stage. He was in for a bout of malaria. Although he did not know that, Burton did.

Leaving the torpedo coxswain at the wheel, the Senior Midshipman assisted the invalid into the little cabin and placed him in one of the settees, using the cushions of the other bunk to prevent Kelby sliding on to the deck as the picket-boat rolled. Then, in spite of the heat, he piled blankets upon the shivering form of his chum and made up a strong dose of quinine.

In about twenty minutes Kelby was asleep. His chum went out into the well.

“How goes it, Wilson?” he inquired.

“Making better weather of it now, sir,” replied the torpedo coxswain. “Wind’s piping down and the mist is lifting a bit. What gets over me is why the wind hasn’t blown away this haze before now.”

Burton glanced at the compass.

“Ease her off a point,” he ordered. “We don’t want to close the land too much. What water have you got?” he added, addressing the leadsman.

The bluejacket addressed made another cast.

“By the mark ten!” he sang out.

“Good enough!” commented the midshipman. “We’ve plenty of water. Keep her at——”

“Starboard your wheel, sir!” exclaimed Wilson warningly. “There’s a dismayed dhow dead ahead.”

The picket-boat’s bows swung sharply to starboard under full helm. At the same time Burton rang down for the engines to be stopped.

Before way could be taken off the boat the dhow was lost to sight in the steamy mist.

“Easy ahead!”

The propeller churned the water once more, and the picket-boat, making almost a complete circle, cautiously forged ahead on the compass bearing of the disabled dhow when she was last seen.

Five minutes elapsed and there were no signs of the craft of which they were in search. Either there had been an error in the bearing or the dhow was carrying way, or else she might have foundered with unexpected suddenness.

“Shall I give a blast, sir?” asked the torpedo coxswain, grasping the

lanyard controlling the picket-boat's steam whistle.

"Not yet," replied Burton. "We'll try——"

"There she bears, sir!" announced one of the bluejackets. "Broad on our port beam!"

The coxswain swung the picket-boat round until her bows pointed in the direction of the dhow, and at half-speed the naval boat closed with the apparently disabled native craft.

Judging by appearances she was in a bad way. Her masts had carried away, the mainmast projecting a good ten feet beyond her lofty stern. Evidently her sails had been blown away, for there were no signs of her lateen yards and canvas. 'Midships there was a big gap in her bulwarks, through which water was pouring in copious streams.

For her size she carried a large crew, for twenty or thirty Arabs, most of them stripped to the waist, were busily engaged on deck under the orders of a tall, bearded master.

So intent were they that the picket-boat's presence was unnoticed until she was within half a cable's length of the dhow's stern.

Then there was consternation amongst the Arabs. Most of them began to run below until restrained by their leader—a circumstance that gave Burton "furiously to think". If the dhow was a *bona fide* trader there was no reason why there should be a panic on board, for the crews of these craft when in distress never hesitate to ask for assistance from any British warship that comes within sight.

"Lumme, sir!" exclaimed Wilson, pointing towards the dhow. "If that ain't the bloke who was skipper of the dhow we overhauled a couple of days back I'm a perishin' Dutchman!"

That was confirmation of Burton's thoughts.

The Arab, although he was not wearing his green turban, was either the captain of the first of the two dhows which Burton had boarded, or his twin brother!

Now if he were the man Burton thought him to be, how was it that he was on board this dhow? Obviously she was not the same craft as the one that had been ordered to heave-to. Nor could the Arab captain have taken his vessel into Port Sudan and there exchanged into another dhow in the time. The inference was, then, that he had transhipped himself and most of his crew into this dhow. Consequently his story about taking a cargo of coffee to a port in the Sudan

was utterly false.

“Lay alongside, Wilson!” ordered the midshipman. “We’ll see what’s what this time. I think we’ve got a gun-runner red-handed!”

Four bluejackets, having armed themselves, prepared to follow Burton up the dhow’s side.

Just then Kelby, awakened by the commotion, came out of the cabin. In the preparations for going alongside his chum failed to notice him.

Although the sea was now by no means rough there was a fairly heavy swell. Watching his chance as the dhow rolled towards the picket-boat Burton made a leap.

The midshipman had left Dartmouth with a good reputation for athletics. Running and leaping he excelled in; but after being “cooped up” in a picket-boat for several days his limbs had lost much of their suppleness.

He slipped and would have fallen back into the boat had not a couple of stalwart Arabs grasped his wrists. It was an undignified position for a British midshipman to be assisted by members of a crew of a presumed gun-running dhow. Even as he was being helped inboard Burton wondered how he could thank them without loss of dignity.

Then his feelings underwent a rude shock; for with a powerful heave the Arabs threw him face downwards on the deck. One of his captors sat on his back while the other clapped his hand tightly over the midshipman’s mouth and nose.

Midshipman Burton had caught a tartar this time!

CHAPTER VII

Kelby takes Command

In ignorance of the swift and silent capture of their young officer, the four bluejackets comprising the rest of the boarding-party attempted to scramble inboard. They got no farther than level with the dhow's rail. Two were hurled violently backwards upon the metal engine-casing of the picket-boat. Two more were struck over the head by clubs and dropped into the sea between the side of the dhow and the picket-boat's quarter.

Simultaneously an immensely heavy stone lifted by four or five Arabs toppled from the dhow upon the fore-deck of the picket-boat. It landed fairly and squarely upon the chase of the quick-firer, wrenching it from its mounting, and crashed through the stout teak planking into the forepeak.

Fortunately the bowman, the only member of the picket-boat's crew who happened to be for'ard, managed to jump clear, but his boathook was wrenched from his grasp.

Before Kelby and the remaining ratings could realize what had happened the dhow forged ahead under the action of a powerful motor-actuated propeller. The picket-boat's bows swung outwards. The men holding on aft were unable to withstand the pressure and were obliged to let go.

In less than thirty seconds the dhow was her own length away, leaving the picket-boat in a badly leaking condition, and with two of her crew struggling in the water.

Midshipman Kelby had emerged from the cabin shaking with ague. He was now ready and able to take command. It was a triumph of mind over matter. In the crisis his illness was forgotten.

"Wing her, Giles!" he ordered, although he knew that one shell from the quick-firer would probably kill his chum even if Burton were not already murdered by the treacherous Arabs.

"Sorry, sir," replied the seaman-gunner. "Gun's out of action."

Nevertheless Giles snatched up a rifle and opened rapid magazine fire upon the fast receding dhow. Others of the crew joined in the fusillade, perforating

the dhow's lofty stern with nickel bullets. They had no visible human targets, the Arabs being hidden by the steeply raking transom.

It was a futile effort, and soon the dhow was lost in the mist.

The two men in the water had to be rescued. One was obviously injured, for his companion was supporting him and swimming slowly on his back.

"Tread water, Jones!" shouted Kelby. "Don't tire yourself out! We'll pick you up sure enough. Easy ahead! Port your wheel!"

It was out of the question for the picket-boat to go astern and steer with any degree of accuracy. The orthodox method of picking up a man is to go ahead, then turn and approach him bows on, losing way when the boat's stem is within a few feet of the person to be rescued.

In this case, however, it was no easy matter. The picket-boat was leaking badly for'ard. Already her forepeak was almost flooded, although the space between her bows and the collision bulkhead was undamaged. The watertight bulkhead between the crew-space and the engine-room was also intact.

But the weight of water for'ard had brought the picket-boat well down by the head and her stern was correspondingly raised. Consequently she was hard to steer, veering madly owing to her difficult trim; and when at length she came up head to wind she thrust her bows under the surface and showed very little tendency to lift.

"It looks as if we're all booked for Davy Jones's locker," thought the midshipman. "We'll all be in the ditch in a brace of shakes!"

Nevertheless, he kept his forebodings to himself. It was up to him to encourage his depleted crew in the face of danger.

"Unship the Q.F. if you can, Giles!" he ordered. "Dump it overboard. It's only useless weight!"

The seaman-gunner and an A.B. scrambled for'ard and, after a strenuous effort, for they were at times working waist-deep in water, succeeded in detaching the gun and its mounting and toppling it into the sea.

Relieved of the weight the picket-boat recovered a little of her normal trim, and answered more readily to her helm.

"Ease her! Stop her!" ordered Kelby. "Stand by there! For heaven's sake don't miss them."

Plunging violently, the partly water-logged boat lost way within twenty feet of the two men. A bowline, accurately thrown, fell within Able Seaman

Jones's reach. He grasped it and slipped the loop under the arms of his now unconscious messmate. Then, merely hanging on to the rope, he allowed himself and his companion to be hauled within arm's reach of their comrade in the stern-sheets of the picket-boat.

In a few seconds Jones and his helpless messmate were hauled inboard; not safe and sound, since there seemed every prospect of their being left struggling in the ditch with the rest of the picket-boat's complement if and when the badly damaged craft made her last plunge.

"Get him in there," ordered Kelby, indicating the after-cabin. "See what you can do for him, Smith. You'll find a first-aid case against the bulkhead."

And A.B. Ford, still unconscious, was soon in blankets on the bunk where the midshipman had been lying in the throes of malaria only ten minutes or so ago.

Kelby was now able to devote all his attention to the safety of the picket-boat.

An inquiry, per voice-tube, obtained the reassuring reply from the leading stoker that the engine-room bulkhead was standing, and that there was no water in the engine-room itself.

"I've coupled up the for'ard bilge pump, sir," he added, "and it's chucking out water fine!"

"Carry on then," rejoined the midshipman, although he knew that the pump was absolutely inadequate to deal with the inrush for'ard—a four-inch suction pipe attempting to cope with water pouring in through shattered planking, to say nothing of a gaping hole on the fore-deck big enough for a man to pass through!

"I daren't push her head on to the seas, Wilson," declared the midshipman to his torpedo coxswain. "The bulkhead might start, then there would be a proper lash-up. And with this sea running we'll be swamped if we attempt to steam astern."

"And if we stop engines she'll broach-to in the trough of the sea, sir," rejoined the petty officer.

"I don't intend to do that," said Kelby. "Get the hands to work to rig up a sea-anchor. The awnings will do for that, with a couple of stanchions as spreaders and a pair of lifebuoys to keep the sea-anchor from sinking too deeply. And while you're about it, get a canvas bag filled with oil and run it out ahead. That will help matters. It's a good thing for us that the sea's

moderating.”

Working rapidly yet methodically under the direction of the experienced petty officer, the men soon had the sea-anchor—a form of floating breakwater—prepared. This was paid out from the bows until it was secured at the end of thirty fathoms of three-inch rope, which in turn was “bent” to a few fathoms of chain cable so as to avoid being chafed in the fairlead by the plunging stem-head.

The canvas bag was filled with oil and the fabric pierced by a sail-needle. It was then run out to the sea-anchor by means of an endless-line. The oil escaping through the minute holes quickly spread on the surface of the water, quelling the breaking seas to such an extent that all immediate danger of the picket-boat being swept fore and aft and swamped was over.

Nevertheless, the situation was a perilous one. At any moment the engine-room bulkhead might give, owing to the pressure of water in the forepeak; if that happened the end would come quickly.

Men had been set to work to shore up the bulkhead, but little could be done in that direction, since most of the gear that could be utilized to that end was in the flooded forepeak.

Meanwhile the picket-boat was sending out wireless calls, not only for assistance but to inform the *Myosotis*, or any other warship of any nationality that might be within range, of the presence of the gun-running dhow.

Midshipman Burton had been given orders not to make use of wireless unless absolutely necessary. Although the picket-boat was equipped with a small set capable of sending out messages over a radius of a hundred miles by day—and thrice that distance by night—it was realized that the mere use of radio telegraphy might undo its purpose by warning the gun-runners of the proximity of the light-cruiser and her picket-boat.

Within the last few years these dhows have made great strides in their equipment. Formerly they were merely sailing craft possessed of a remarkably clean pair of heels. Nowadays they enlist petrol engines and wireless in their aid, and have been known to employ aircraft to give the warning of danger in the shape of warships.

It was not very long before the alert wireless telegraphist in the *Myosotis* picked up her boat’s coded message. The reply, also in code, was “Am steaming at thirty knots to your assistance”, which meant that, according to their relative positions, at least seven hours would elapse before the light-cruiser would arrive upon the scene. If on the way she went off in pursuit of

the gun-running dhow she would be considerably longer.

“We’ll have to stick it for another twelve hours, lads!” declared Kelby. “There’s nothing much to worry about now. We’re riding comfortably and the sea’s moderating. I’m afraid we’ll have to tighten our belts, though!”

The men, who, owing to the turn of the boat, had been obliged to crowd aft, grinned at the midshipman’s last remark. They knew that the provisions were out of their reach, submerged in seven feet of water under the fore-deck; but as most of them had had a meal just before the dhow had been sighted they would not feel the pangs of hunger yet awhile.

“We can do that, sir,” rejoined one of the men. “But what’s happened to Mr. Burton, sir? Do you think the blighters have done him in?”

Kelby had been pondering over that question for some time.

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “They are ready to run risks, but would hesitate to kill a white man unless they felt certain that they wouldn’t be discovered. That’s why they didn’t open fire on us. If they had, every man jack of us would have lost the number of his mess before we had a chance to defend ourselves.”

“Then why didn’t they, sir?” asked the torpedo coxswain. “We could have been wiped out without a trace.”

“Because they didn’t know whether there was another steamboat working in company,” replied Kelby. “You two men who each got a crack on the head weren’t seriously injured. They might easily have laid you out, you know.”

One of the two bluejackets addressed carefully felt a beautiful bump on his head.

“S’pose not, sir,” he agreed grudgingly. “All the same I’d like to meet the nigger who gave me this souvenir. But what do you think they’re going to do with Mr. Burton, sir, supposing as you say he’s alive?”

Kelby had not the foggiest notion; but since a superior officer is supposed to give a satisfactory answer to a subordinate’s question—provided the question is a sensible one—he had to reply. It was useless to say “I don’t know”. A confession of ignorance would lower his reputation in the eyes of the men who looked to him for advice—and he was still in his teens, while his boat’s crew averaged close on thirty years of age.

“They mean to hold him to ransom, of course,” he replied.

But, as events proved, Midshipman Kelby was very much adrift

concerning the reasons for his chum's capture!

CHAPTER VIII

All Adrift

An hour later the surface of the sea was almost as calm as a mill-pond, except for a long, hardly perceptible swell. The haze, too, had lifted, and once more the surf-beaten reefs on the one hand and the barren Arabian hills on the other were distinctly visible.

The picket-boat, although her bows were almost awash, was no longer in immediate danger of being swamped. Even the teak deck planking for'ard was drying in the now terrific heat of the sun, although the water in the flooded forepeak gurgled sullenly, and occasionally welled up through the jagged hole in the deck.

In the flat calm the sea-anchor was doing no good. It merely floated idly and almost alongside the practically motionless boat, until Kelby gave orders for the engine to give a few revolutions astern so that she might draw clear of the sea-anchor's hawser, since it threatened to foul the propeller.

"Call up *Myosotis*, Sparks!" directed the midshipman. "Tell her we're O.K. so far, and ask when we might expect to sight her."

The wireless telegraphist did so.

Promptly came the light-cruiser's signal:

"Do not use W.T. unless absolutely necessary!"

"That's a nasty ticking off!" thought the midshipman. "That's the result of a mere snotty trying to have a friendly chin-wag with his skipper!"

But in his heart Kelby knew the reason for this apparent official snub. The *Myosotis*, although steaming hard to the assistance of her picket-boat, was reluctant to use radio communication, since the message would almost certainly be picked up by the elusive gun-running dhow. It was most unlikely that the Arab could decipher the coded messages, but the mere fact that the light-cruiser was employing radio would give her a clue to the British warship's position. Actually Captain Dacres had taken the bold step of coming inside the reefs in the hope that he might be able to sight and capture the troublesome gun-runner.

During the duration of the calm the boat's crew suffered from the intense heat. Except for their sun-helmets they had no protection from the almost vertical rays. The awnings had been employed to construct the sea-anchor; and, knowing how suddenly violent squalls are apt to spring up in the Red Sea, Kelby prudently decided not to unrig the contraption that had saved the picket-boat from foundering. In the circumstances it was better to endure the heat of the sun rather than to do away with the temporarily idle sea-anchor.

Fortunately the boat's crew were not short of fresh water. There was a small tank aft, sufficient to supply all hands for at least two days; while, if necessary, water fit for drinking purposes could be obtained from the condensers.

At noon Kelby took his sights and fixed the position on the chart. Since the time when the picket-boat was disabled she had drifted about twelve miles to the south'ard, owing to a current setting in that direction and almost parallel with the shore. That, in a way, was reassuring. It had lessened the distance between her and the *Myosotis* by that much, and at the same time the picket-boat had not drifted far from the course the light-cruiser was expected to shape.

As the midshipman was replacing his sextant he overheard a conversation between two of the bluejackets. One was A.B. Jones, who had been knocked on the head and thrown into the sea by the crew of the dhow; the other, Clark, had not been one of the men told off as the boarding-party, and consequently had escaped injury.

"Don't see as 'ow you can call them treacherous blighters, Nobbie," protested Jones. "Even though they pitched me into a perishin' ditch I reckons as 'ow I asked for it properly."

"What do you mean?" asked Clark. "They didn't show fight until we were alongside."

"Mebbe not," rejoined Able Seaman Jones. "But wot I says is they were quite within their rights in pitchin' us overboard. They weren't going to take it quietly if they had a chance to scupper the picket-boat and hook it. We didn't hail the dhow and call upon her to surrender, you recollect."

"All the same they collared Mr. Burton. If that ain't rank treachery, what is? Tell me that?" demanded Clark.

"I see eye to eye with you there, Nobbie," conceded the other. "Dragging him in over the side instead of pitching him into the ditch, same as us. All the same we oughter hail 'em first and call on 'em to surrender."

Kelby could not help dwelling upon the conversation. The two bluejackets

had taught him something. Now he remembered, Jones was perfectly right. Burton had not demanded the dhow to surrender, and although the Arabs were undoubtedly law-breakers—judging by British standards—they were to a certain extent justified in resisting a forcible entry into their dhow without previous warning. But that seemed no reason why they should have captured Burton. What, then, was their motive in making him a prisoner?

“Sail-ho! Dead astern, sir!”

The hail roused Kelby from his train of thought. He sprang upon the cabin-top and gazed aft.

About two miles off was a large dhow approaching not under sail but under power. Her masts were up but her lateen yards were on deck, since in the flat calm still prevailing her canvas was useless.

“Lumme!” ejaculated Seaman-Gunner Giles. “If that ain’t the hooker that caught us napping I’m a flat-footed landlubber! And we’ve ditched our Q.F. too!”

“The gun wouldn’t have been any use,” remarked Wilson.

Giles shot a withering glance at the torpedo coxswain. The affair with the dhow that had subsequently sunk still rankled.

“How the blazing Harry were those niggers to know the gun was out of action?” he demanded. “We could have trained it on the blighters and put fear into ’em. Now the perishers have got a glass on us, I wouldn’t mind betting a month’s pay that they know we haven’t a gun. I reckon they’ve come back to do us all in, so as to leave no trace, so to speak.”

To Kelby’s mind, too, a similar thought had presented itself.

“Stand to your arms, my lads!” he ordered, as he broke open a packet of ammunition and reloaded his revolver. “No man is to open fire until I give the word. Then five rounds rapid and give the Arabs more than they bargained for!”

The dhow was approaching steadily and at a speed of about five knots. Watching her through his binoculars Kelby noticed that several of the crew were standing for’ard and were apparently unarmed.

Presently he lowered his glasses.

“She’s not the dhow we tried to capture,” he declared. “And there’s a white man standing under the break of the poop. Not that that signifies much. There are good whites and bad ones. This one may be jonnick or he may not. It’s

dashed strange seeing a European in a dhow in this part of the Red Sea.”

When the dhow was about a quarter of a mile off she hoisted a small flag in her rigging. Through his binoculars Kelby saw that it was an Italian ensign.

“That’s a bit weird!” commented the midshipman audibly. “The nearest Italian territory is on the other side of the Red Sea. If that fellow is an Italian what is he doing in that galley?”

The dhow stopped her engine. Nevertheless she continued to carry a considerable amount of way until she brought up within hailing distance.

“Aoi!” shouted the Italian, who wore a white uniform and black leather leggings and boots. “Are we to be of assistance to you?”

“Thanks, no,” replied Kelby. “We’ve been in collision, but we are not seriously damaged. Who are you, might I ask?”

“I, signor, am alas! an unfortunate Italian aviator,” explained the man. “I was making a flight of reconnoitre from Massowah when the motor failed to work. As a result, a forced descent. The Kaid of El Zamish, a true friend in need, placed this vessel at my disposal, subject naturally to a payment by the Italian Government, to return me to Massowah. So if you assistance require we will afford it.”

Kelby thought before replying. Perhaps it was strange that an Italian airman should be flying over the eastern seaboard of the Red Sea, in which Italy has no direct interest. But that was not the British midshipman’s concern nor his business to inquire.

It seemed churlish to refuse the offer of assistance, but it was not desirable to mention that the *Myosotis* was proceeding to the picket-boat’s aid. The El Zamish dhow might be genuinely hired by the Italian aviator, but that was not to say that she was not in a position to warn the gun-runner of the approach of the British light-cruiser.

Had even a British merchant vessel appeared upon the scene, Kelby would have hesitated to accept assistance, taking into consideration the present weather conditions and the knowledge that the *Myosotis* was dashing to the rescue. The picket-boat was Kelby’s first independent command, even as it had been the luckless Burton’s, and Kelby was determined to stick to her at all costs until she was safely hoisted on the deck of her parent craft.

Nevertheless Kelby did not wish to appear ungrateful. To decline with thanks was hardly enough.

“If you could supply us with a few provisions, signore, we should be

thankful.”

The airman spoke to some of the Arabs. The distance was too great for Kelby to hear whether he spoke in Italian or Arabic, but whichever language he spoke he used rapidly and without hesitation, the natives understanding with equal ease.

Two of the latter went aft under the poop-deck, and presently returned with a couple of wicker baskets.

Then, as soon as the dhow was cautiously brought within a few yards of the picket-boat, the baskets were thrown to the crew of the latter.

“Is it your final decision not to seek refuge with us?” inquired the Italian.

“It is, thanks all the same,” replied the midshipman.

Very slowly the dhow drew ahead, until, catching the first of a northerly breeze, she slipped rapidly through the water and was soon hull down.

An examination of the contents of the two baskets showed that one was filled with a sort of bread made from mealies. The other contained dried dates, a form of food that, however unappetizing it might look, was certainly sustaining. Since there were now enough provisions to last at least for forty-eight hours, Kelby felt no apprehension on the score of hunger.

Nevertheless the breeze that had succeeded the flat calm caused him a certain amount of anxiety. He knew from experience that a wind springing up from a direction opposed to that of the recent storm was liable to blow with almost equal force before very long.

There was also the possibility of the *Myosotis* passing at too great a distance to spot the disabled steamboat; or she might have altered her course in order to examine a suspicious craft. Nor was it unlikely that the picket-boat was in the grip of a strong, unknown current—for the Red Sea, especially inside the reefs, is beset with perils of this description—and might be swept far from the position she had reported to her parent ship.

So, altogether, Badger Kelby began to think that he had been unwise to decline assistance from the Italian-chartered dhow.

Once more the picket-boat was riding almost to the full scope of her sea-anchor. The seas, however, were by no means “ugly”, although they were beginning to show their white crests.

In another hour or so darkness would set in. To a great extent that was in the picket-boat’s favour as far as being found by the *Myosotis* was concerned.

The light-cruiser would be displaying her steaming lights, which on a clear night would be visible for several miles. Directly these were picked up, Kelby would fire Very lights and attract the attention of the *Myosotis*. She would then train her searchlights upon the picket-boat and the work of rescue would be speedily effected—at least it appeared so in theory!

“Sea-anchor hawser’s parted, sir!” sung out one of the bluejackets.

The report was only too true. The hawser, which was almost a new one, had been severed, and the picket-boat had parted company with the floating breakwater. The sea-anchor was no longer to be seen. It was lost in the waste of white-topped waves.

“Haul in the slack!” ordered Kelby.

Two of the crew, knee-deep in water, heaved away at the part of the hawser that still remained. Ten fathoms they brought inboard before they came to the end.

Although the extremity of the rope was already “unlaid” by the action of the water, it was seen, on inspection, that the hawser had been cut through almost as cleanly as if it had been severed by an axe or a knife.

“Mebbe a shark’s took a fancy to it,” suggested Giles.

“Don’t look like a fish’s bite to me,” objected Davis, who seized every opportunity to contradict the seaman-gunner. “I’ll allow ’twas a swordfish.”

“Swordfish my grandmother!” snorted the torpedo coxswain. “I reckon as ’ow——”

“Stop kagging there!” ordered the midshipman.

The two petty officers, prompt to respond to the call of discipline, relapsed into silence.

“See if you can find something to pay out as a sea-anchor,” continued Kelby. “If it pipes up much more we’ll have to ride to something or we’ll find ourselves in the ditch.”

With the awnings carried away and the spare gear in an inaccessible position in the flooded forepeak there was little or nothing suitable to the purpose. Even a hammock might have served had one been available.

“We might rig up the stern-sheet grating, sir,” suggested Giles. “ ’Tain’t much but it may make some sort of a lash-up.”

“We can try,” agreed Kelby, casting a dubious glance at the heavy teak fitting in the floor of the well. “All right, carry on!”

Before the grating could be unshipped one of the hands shouted:

“Wreckage astern of us, sir! Looks like a couple of spars with canvas bent to them!”

The midshipman looked in the direction pointed out. There, silhouetted against the slanting rays of the setting sun was a long, low-lying object showing only a few feet above water.

Seizing his binoculars, Kelby focused them on the object.

“You’re right, Clark,” he agreed. “It’s a spar with a sail bent to it. From a wrecked dhow, I suppose. We’ll drop astern and then edge to lee’ard of it. With luck we’ll get a span fixed to it and ride to that.”

He bent to the voice-tube and ordered the long-silent engines to be put at half-speed astern. Slowly the partly water-logged picket-boat gathered sternway, her propeller throwing up showers of spray owing to its insufficient grip.

The picket-boat had barely covered a quarter of the distance between her and the wreckage, when there was a simultaneous shout from three of the crew:

“It’s dipped, sir!”

There was no doubt about it. The spar or spars which a few seconds earlier had been floating on the surface had disappeared.

“So much for our latest sea-anchor!” remarked Kelby. “But why it should have dived just as we were bearing down on it——! By Jove! Things seem to have a habit of dipping beneath the surface in this part of the Red Sea. Keep sternway on her, coxswain. We’ll see if we can find any trace of the gear.”

Allowing for her erratic steering when going astern, the picket-boat passed certainly within forty yards of the spot. But there was no trace. The flotsam had become jetsam and was now most likely on its way to the sea-bed.

Kelby rang down for the engines to be stopped.

“Get busy with the grating, my lads!” he ordered. “We’ll be groping about in the dark in a brace of shakes!”

“Look, sir!” exclaimed Giles, pointing into the eyes of the setting sun. “If that ain’t the *Myosotis* I’m a wall-eyed ‘longshoreman’!”

CHAPTER IX

Kelby's Return

Soon there was no mistaking the light-cruiser. She was pelting along with a terrific "bone in her teeth", making for her luckless picket-boat.

For some reason, at present unknown to the steamboat's crew, she was steering a course approximately due east, although, according to her position as last announced by wireless, she ought to have been heading almost due north. It was the fact that she was on an easterly course and consequently full against the rays of the setting sun that enabled her to approach to within a mile or so without being spotted by the picket-boat crew.

"Restow that grating!" ordered Kelby.

Then, realizing that he would shortly be under the eagle eye of his skipper, he added: "Out pipes, there!"

Those of the crew who had been smoking hurriedly put out their pipes or nipped off the glowing ends of their cigarettes. It would never do, even under exceptional circumstances, for a man-of-war's boat's crew to run alongside the ship except in a smart and seaman-like manner—even though the picket-boat was well down by the head and looking like a half-tide rock.

The *Myosotis* eased down, reversed engines and swung round to make a lee for her picket-boat. Her main derrick was topped up and slewed outboard ready to hoist her disabled "chicken".

"Slings ready?" sung out the first lieutenant, who was in charge of the hoisting-party.

"After-sling is, sir," replied Kelby. "For'ard ones are carried away."

The navy makes light of such trifles.

A stout wire span was lowered from the derrick and worked under the picket-boat's bows. The after-slings were then secured, and on an almost even keel the boat was whipped upwards, shedding tons of water from her flooded forepeak.

Then, as lightly and smoothly as if she were a bundle of faggots, the

picket-boat was swung inboard and lowered gently upon the chocks on the boat-deck.

Although the whole operation had taken but a few minutes it was now night.

By the long-established traditions of the Senior Service, Kelby, as officer in command, was the first to leave the boat. He did so with mixed feelings. On the one hand he was unfeignedly glad to find himself again on board his ship, since it was extremely doubtful whether the damaged picket-boat could have survived the night. Already the waves, even when viewed from the lofty elevation of the *Myosotis's* boat-deck, looked horribly menacing.

On the other hand he was feeling decidedly down in the mouth. On him devolved the duty of having to report not only failure, but the loss of his chum who had been midshipman in charge, and was now either dead or a prisoner.

“What’s happened to old Crash, Badger?” inquired one of the midshipmen as Kelby made his way aft.

Kelby ignored the question. Until he had made his report it was advisable to keep silent.

“Picket-boat returned, sir!” he reported stiffly to the officer of the watch.

“Very good,” rejoined that worthy, using the customary rejoinder, although he knew perfectly well that it was anything but “very good”. “The captain’s in his sea-cabin. He wishes to see you!”

“Have I permission to dismiss the boat’s crew, sir?” asked Kelby. “They’ve had a rough time, and some of them are injured.”

The officer of the watch gave the required permission. Kelby dismissed his men and sent them for’ard, cautioning the two bluejackets who had had their heads cut open during the foiled boarding operations to report to the medical officer.

Having performed this service to the men who had shared in the peril of the picket-boat’s unlucky cruise, Kelby made his way to Captain Dacres’ sea-cabin.

The Owner eyed his youthful subordinate for a brief instant. In that time he had summed up the situation pretty thoroughly. He saw before him a lad trying bravely to keep a stiff upper lip and yet on the verge of breaking down as the result of the reaction from his perilous and disastrous cruise.

“Sit down, Mr. Kelby,” he ordered, and for the first time in his career,

though not without slight hesitation, the midshipman while on duty took a seat in the presence of his commanding officer. “Good! Now before you say a word you’d better have something to eat.”

The captain touched a bell. Almost at once his steward appeared with a tray containing a plate of sandwiches and a glass of sherry. Evidently Captain Dacres had taken the precaution of ordering food to be got ready for the hungry midshipman, whose sole nourishment during the last eighteen hours had consisted of dates and mealies washed down with water from the condensers.

While Kelby was wolfing the appetizing sandwiches, Captain Dacres tactfully applied himself to the perusal of a chart. It was as well that he did so, otherwise the midshipman would have hesitated to do full justice to the repast under the eye of his commanding officer.

Presently the skipper glanced up and saw that the midshipman’s plate and glass were empty.

“Had enough?” he inquired.

“Yes, thank you, sir,” replied Kelby, although he could have eaten twice the quantity of sandwiches. Having fed, he felt a little more cheerful, though oppressed by the knowledge that his ordeal was yet to come. He fully expected a “regular ticking off” for having made a “proper lash-up” of the duty that had fallen upon his shoulders.

“Then let me know exactly what happened,” continued Captain Dacres. “Refer to your rough log if you wish. Now, fire away!”

The Owner listened in silence to Kelby’s narrative, until the midshipman related the episode of the sinking dhow. Then:

“You’re absolutely certain in your own mind that the projectile did not hit her?” he asked.

“Quite, sir,” declared Kelby. “I marked the spot where the shell pitched and the line of ricochets.”

“And you found no trace? No wreckage?”

“None, sir!”

“Thank you: now carry on.”

The midshipman saluted and left the cabin. Then, making his way to the gun-room, he had to relate his adventures to a small mob of messmates before they allowed him to tumble into his hammock. Although dog-tired he could

not sleep, pondering over the circumstances under which his chum had fallen into Arab hands.

Meanwhile Captain Dacres had been thinking deeply on the same subject. Finally he summoned the commander.

“There’s something decidedly fishy about all these reports concerning a disappearing dhow, Blunt,” he observed. “To a certain extent we are working blindfold.”

“What we want is a flying-boat, sir,” suggested the commander. “Or even a seaplane.”

“We’ve asked for one on several occasions,” rejoined the skipper, “but for some reason the admiral has not seen fit to concur.”

“He will when he receives your latest report, sir,” declared the Bloke—as the commander of a warship is irreverently dubbed.

The outcome of the conversation was the dispatch of an urgent communication in code to the senior naval officer on the station, and within three hours of its receipt one of the latest available type of flying-boats was on its way to co-operate with the light-cruiser *Myosotis*.

CHAPTER X

The Disappearing Dhow

It was with considerable surprise and indignation that Midshipman Burton found himself assisted over the dhow's side in a manner that had been outside his calculations.

Still more surprised was he when four lithe and muscular Arabs, who ostensibly had given him a helping hand, grasped him by the wrists and ankles and threw him face downwards upon the dhow's deck. One of the natives deftly rammed a ball of rag into the midshipman's mouth, while the others with considerable celerity bound him hand and foot.

Vainly he writhed and struggled. A bare foot planted between his shoulder-blades rendered him as helpless as a beetle transfixed by a pin. His revolver had been wrested from his grasp, otherwise he might have been able to get some of his own back upon his captors, even though with dire results to himself.

He felt no fear. Realization that brings fear had yet to come. He was choking with anger, humiliated by his ignominious position, yet he could do nothing.

Then he heard the sounds of scuffling and the hurtling of bodies overboard. For aught he knew his devoted boat's crew were being massacred even as they vainly attempted to board the mysterious dhow.

Other sounds were drowned by the loud pulsations of an oil-engine and the quivering of the deck planks with the revolutions of a propeller shaft.

Obviously the dhow was sheering off from the scene of her encounter with the picket-boat.

Presently Burton began to collect his thoughts. He was aware that the dhow's deck was not composed of wooden planks but of metal plates. It was wet not only with the humid moisture of the sea mist, but with salt water. This in itself was a remarkable discovery, since the native crews of dhows rarely wash down decks. There was not much sea, certainly not enough to break inboard, consequently the salt water on deck was not there owing to this cause.

Burton then began to look at his captors. To his surprise he recognized several of them. There were the two masters of the dhows he had previously boarded and examined. He remembered each had declared that he was a stranger to the other. Also there was the Arab who had acted as an interpreter, together with several, if not all, of the two crews.

He was still making unpleasant discoveries of this nature when he heard the first of a succession of rifle-shots.

“That’s the stuff to give them!” he muttered. “So they haven’t scuppered the picket-boat yet. Now, why doesn’t Giles get busy with the quick-firer?”

The knowledge that had the gun been in action the dhow would have been shelled out of existence in a very few rounds, and he, Burton, with it, hardly troubled the captive midshipman. He would have willingly run that risk in order that the gun-runner’s illegal activities should be nipped in the bud. Burton, though young, had been steeped in the traditions of the Senior Service. He was ready to put duty before everything, to regard himself as a mere pawn in the game, to be sacrificed, if necessary, in order that the operation on which the picket-boat was engaged could be carried to a successful conclusion.

Curiously, the Arabs seemed to pay scant heed to the *plonking* bullets. Listening to the peculiar sound of the nickel missiles, Burton made the discovery that although they were tearing through wood they were mushrooming themselves against a metal bulkhead that apparently extended across and under the lofty poop.

“Armoured bulkhead, by Jove!” thought the helpless midshipman. “Now why, for goodness’ sake, doesn’t the quick-firer get on with the job?”

Then the disconcerting thought flashed across his mind—a thought that was not very wide of the mark—that the gun was out of action, and that the picket-boat—his first command—was virtually out of action.

After a while the sound of the firing died away, and the pulsating of the motor and the rapid chatter of the Arab crew alone broke the silence.

Burton now lay perfectly still. He had given up all attempt to rid himself of the loathsome gag. He could breathe almost unrestrainedly through his nostrils. He tried to look dignified, but had to admit to himself that it was a difficult thing to do, lying gagged and bound as he was, and the object of derision on the part of a score or more of the dhow’s crew.

The midshipman had lost all count of time. It seemed as if he had been lying on deck for hours—actually it was only a matter of about twenty minutes—when the Arab master—the one wearing a green turban—came up and stood

over him.

“Son of an unbelieving dog!” he exclaimed in broken English. “I teach you to offer flesh of pig to true believers. Your boat it gone. Your mans drown. You I keep for ver’ worse punish! Dat I swear by the beard of the Prophet!”

The fellow delivered this threat in such a cold-blooded tone that it sent shivers down the midshipman’s spine. For the first time since his capture he realized his peril. He had heard how Arabs torture their prisoners before putting them to death, and apparently the master—or chief, or whatever he was—meant what he said.

Burton could make no reply because he was gagged. Even if he were able to do so he was not going to show the white feather. Dashed if he’d try to explain to the fellow that the meat wasn’t pork but beef, flesh that Arabs can touch without being defiled.

The master gave an order. Promptly two of the crew turned the midshipman over on his face and tore off his shoes.

Out of the corner of his eye Burton saw one of the men holding a thin pliant rod. Then the nature of his impending “punishment” dawned upon him. He was about to be bastinadoed or beaten on the bare soles of his feet.

Suddenly one of the crew shouted an alarm. Burton’s limited knowledge of Arabic and Swahili told him that a strange sail had been reported.

“Hope to goodness it’s the *Myosotis*,” he thought, but dismissed that hope from his mind. The light-cruiser must be a couple of hundred miles away, unless by something approaching a miracle she had departed from the route laid down by the senior naval officer.

Instantly all was bustle, without undue confusion. The men who had thrown the midshipman on his face raised him by his shoulders and feet and carried him to a small hatchway. Down this he was lowered without ceremony and with an utter disregard for his anatomy. In fact he landed all of a heap at the foot of a steel ladder and in a sort of alley-way lighted by electric lamps.

Several of the crew followed. The rest apparently were making for other hatchways. Then came the dull thud of india-rubber shod metal covers being lowered upon the hatchways. Simultaneously the pulsations of the heavy-oil engine ceased, to give place to the rhythmic purr of an electrically-driven motor.

The dhow was dipping by the bow.

Then, and only then, did Burton realize the situation. He was a prisoner in

a submarine, cleverly camouflaged to represent a dhow.

And it was not the first time that he had seen the mysterious craft. That accounted for the hitherto inexplicable disappearance of the dhow when the picket-boat had encountered her at the commencement of her independent cruise. It explained why the dhow had her masts down and her lateen yards trimmed fore and aft, with the canvas furled.

The whole of the above-water superstructure was made to represent a genuine native dhow, but provided with scuppers sufficiently large to admit the free entry of water when the craft was submerging. Also the trim was so arranged that the relative buoyancy of the woodwork was compensated by a corresponding weight of ballast.

Naturally the submarine, hampered with a lot of dummy superstructure, would be very slow while submerged. But speed in these conditions was of quite minor importance. It was on her ability to dive and remain below the surface, until her would-be captors concluded that she had foundered, that the gun-runner depended.

No British officer had even credited the Arabs with the idea, although they knew that the gun-runners had made marvellous strides in enlisting modern inventions to aid them in their daring efforts to break the blockade. Quite possibly they had obtained the assistance of an unscrupulous European nation to provide them with a submersible craft. The fact remained that here was a submarine disguised as a dhow, and Midshipman Crash Burton had probed the secret at the cost of his liberty and possibly his life.

Rather grimly he told himself that his knowledge was hardly likely to be of any use to his fellow-countrymen. It seemed utterly impossible in either present or future circumstances to communicate the knowledge to anyone likely to make good use of it in the breaking up of the gun-running trade.

At any rate the submarine dhow was submerged, having been compelled to go below the surface because of the presence of another craft that obviously was a vessel that had to be avoided. Supposing she were the *Myosotis*? Was the submarine provided with torpedoes? If so would she let fly with a "tinfish" at the unsuspecting British light-cruiser?

Actually the submarine did not possess an offensive and defensive armament of this description, but Burton was not to know that. The mere thought of his ship's peril numbed his senses.

The midshipman's thoughts were again interrupted by two of the crew, who without undue violence hoisted him on to his feet. One of these men,

Burton noticed, was the one who had raised the Arabic equivalent of the hail, "Sail on the port bow!"

He was a tall, lean individual with cruel-looking eyes and thin lips, the latter almost hidden by a black beard and moustache. Like that of most of the crew, his clothing consisted solely of a loose garment resembling a pair of shorts, a belt or sash in which was thrust a long sheath knife, and the orthodox turban. Round his neck was a cord supporting an amulet on which was engraved a text from the Koran.

The two Arabs carried their prisoner for'ard. During the passage Burton kept his eyes open. He discovered amongst other things that amidships was a compartment extending across the whole beam of the craft. In it, and stacked in small bundles on either side—in order to facilitate easy and rapid shipment and unloading—were hundreds of rifles of an up-to-date type. They were not of the British military pattern, but on the other hand they were not the usual sort of weapon sold to native African and Asiatic tribes by unscrupulous European agents. And, unless he were greatly mistaken, Burton was sure that those corded cases contained machine-guns.

This much the midshipman noticed on his way for'ard. Finally he was carried into a compartment which was for'ard of the crew-space, and which, in a belligerent submarine, was the bow torpedo-room. Actually it contained no offensive weapons, but there were traces of where the tubes had been, the apertures having been covered with sheets of metal.

His captors placed him in a sitting position on a sort of locker. The bearded Arab, glaring malevolently at the midshipman, deliberately pulled his nose. It was not a savage tug but it smarted!

However, it had its compensation, for the Arab's fingers caught in the strip of linen that held the prisoner's gag. They loosened it sufficiently to enable Burton to get rid of the ball of rag in his mouth almost as soon as his gaolers had taken their departure.

For the next hour Burton suffered in silence. His bonds numbed his limbs. He was unable to use either his arms or his legs. The heat, too, was terrific—not the torrid heat of the open air, but the almost suffocating, faintly chlorine-charged atmosphere of a submerged submarine.

The vessel was now motionless. Her electric motors had been switched off, and she was lying on the bed of the Red Sea, waiting her time to break surface and resume her voyage.

By and by in response to the blowing of her ballast tanks the submarine

dhow very slowly rose from her resting-place. A cautious survey by means of a periscope, cunningly placed by the mainmast tabernacle, gave the reassuring information that the coast—or, rather, the surface of the sea within a radius of a couple of miles—was clear.

Directly she was awash the heavy-oil engine was brought into action, and the gun-runner, wallowing sluggishly in the still heavy sea, resumed her voyage to her secret destination.

Beyond being aware of the fact that the vessel was again on the surface, Burton knew nothing of what was going on.

It seemed hours before someone fumbled with the lock of the door of his prison.

“Now, I suppose they’re going to make a fresh start with the bastinado business,” thought the midshipman, setting his jaw tightly. “I hope to goodness they won’t have a chance to see how funky I feel!”

CHAPTER XI

Sentenced!

The sliding door was pushed open and the two Arabs who had previously carried Burton to his cell entered the compartment.

For a while they stood conversing so rapidly in Arabic that the midshipman was unable to understand what they were saying, except that he gathered that the name of the saturnine individual—the man who had raised the alarm that a vessel was in sight—was Selim.

Then Selim replaced the gag in Burton's mouth and retied the securing strip of linen. He did so with an unnecessary display of force, although actually the midshipman felt little except the discomfort and repugnance of having his mouth filled with a decidedly dirty piece of rag.

It was of no use resisting. Burton guessed that the less trouble he gave to his captors the less they were likely to maltreat him. They might even "go slow" with the bastinado business, although the midshipman was rather dubious on that score as the punishment would no doubt be carried out under the eye of the Arab captain.

His captors then unfastened the bonds round his ankles, and lifted him on to his feet. For some moments Burton had the greatest difficulty to keep his balance. His legs were so benumbed that his ankles bent under his own weight.

Losing patience, the second Arab gave him a violent push. The midshipman would have tripped over the raised coaming of the compartment had not Selim grasped him and restored his balance.

With tottering steps the captive accompanied his guards along the alleyway. By the time he reached the almost vertical steel ladder, circulation was practically restored to his legs, for which he was thankful. He had been afraid that his bodily weakness might be regarded by the Arab crew as a sign of fear; and although he was afraid, his dread of displaying fear was greater than that of his impending torture.

Obviously a man with his arms bound behind his back cannot mount a vertical ladder. At first it looked as if his guards meant him to attempt the impossible and derive amusement from their captive's efforts. In fact the two

Arabs argued about it until Selim pointed out that if the unbeliever fell and broke his neck Seyd Mahmud—whom Burton subsequently discovered to be the master of the vessel—would be angry.

Finally Selim shouted to someone on deck, and a noosed rope was dropped through the hatchway. This was then adjusted round the midshipman's arms and body just below the shoulders, and he was unceremoniously hauled on deck.

There he stood for some moments absolutely blinded by the transition from the dimly lighted interior of the submarine to the dazzling rays of the sun which now shone from an unclouded sky.

Gradually Burton realized that he was surrounded by at least half the crew. The captain, Seyd Mahmud, was standing under the break of the poop. By him was the helmsman, hanging on to a long curved tiller that was connected by means of a yoke and hide ropes to the rudder-head. Obviously this steering arrangement was chiefly for the benefit of any native craft that happened to be in the vicinity, since when the submarine was submerged her helm was controlled in the orthodox manner pertaining to under-surface craft.

Burton was also aware that the masts had been set up and that the dhow was under sail as well as making use of her engine. Astride of the main lateen yard was a gigantic Nubian, stationed on his lofty perch as a look-out man.

The midshipman glanced over the side. A few miles away, broad on the starboard beam, was the Arabian coast. He recognized a peculiar range of hills, purple in the torrid haze. So the gun-runner was abreast of El Kerish, the harbour in which the luckless picket-boat had sheltered just previous to her encounter with the disappearing dhow.

Suddenly the midshipman gave an undignified hop. He had been standing barefoot upon the hot metal deck. His partly numbed feet had been insensible to the heat until that moment.

The natives yelled with merriment at their captive's discomfiture. Even they, accustomed as they were to walking barefooted on the desert sands, had to protect their feet by means of sandals when treading the deck during the heat of the day.

There was no shade for Burton. Once he tried to shift his position to the shadow of the bellying mainsail, but the Arabs barred his way, yelling and gesticulating whenever the midshipman raised his feet from the unpleasantly hot metal deck.

For the first time in his life Crash Burton realized the full significance of

the expression, "Like a cat on hot bricks".

Then one of the Arabs produced a pannikin of water and held it to the tortured youth. It was not compassion that had prompted the man, but calculated cruelty; all he wanted to do was to tantalize the prisoner. With the gag in his mouth Burton was unable to drink even if the vessel had been put to his lips.

Goaded beyond endurance, the midshipman made a sudden leap and butted the Arab with his shoulder. The native staggered. The pannikin clattered to the deck.

Burton promptly stood in the puddle of water as the liquid slowly evaporated in a cloud of moisture.

After that things began to get hazy as far as Burton was concerned. He fancied that the crowd of Arabs were dancing in eccentric whirls around him. Then everything went white. He fell senseless to the deck, remaining there until he was brought back to consciousness by being liberally doused with sea water.

One effect of the water was to shrink the already tightly-bound thongs that secured his arms. The hide bit deeply into his limbs, causing excruciating pain.

While this was going on Selim was talking with the captain.

"It is not well to go farther with the matter, O Kaid Seyd Mahmud!" he declared.

"Verily I mean to torture the dog to death," retorted Mahmud genially.

"But not before he signs a paper demanding a ransom from his unbelieving countrymen," urged Selim. "Consider, O Kaid! If the *Kafir's* arms are crippled how can he make his usual sign? And if he cannot do that how are his countrymen to recognize his written name?"

"Of a truth there is wisdom in your words, Selim," conceded the Arab captain. "Cast off the bonds from his arms and secure him only by his thumbs. Then bring him to me that I may question the dog!"

So Burton's arms were freed, and a piece of thin line was fastened to his thumbs. He was then led before the Arab captain.

The conversation was conducted by means of Arabic and broken English on the latter's part. He demanded the midshipman's name.

This Burton gave. There was no harm in that; but when he was asked the name of his ship he flatly declined to do so.

Somewhat to the midshipman's surprise Seyd Mahmud gave no sign of anger.

"I must take steps to restore you to your friends," he observed suavely. "It is usual to demand payment for your entertainment at our hands. Therefore I propose that they be asked to pay a ransom of five thousand pounds, and that you sign the document demanding the money as a mark of good faith, and to let your friends know that you are alive and in our hands."

A glimmer of hope flashed through Burton's mind at these words. For one thing it meant freedom and life. For another the knowledge he had gained concerning the gun-runner would be of enormous importance to Captain Dacres.

But would the Arab keep faith?

"Will you swear on the Koran that you will hand me over to my people directly the ransom is paid?" asked the midshipman.

Seyd Mahmud knitted his swarthy brows.

"Dog!" he exclaimed fiercely, "who are you to dictate to me what I should do? No true believer will swear on the Koran to a dog of a *Kafir*."

"I've known men of your faith to do so," rejoined Burton. "Until you make that oath I will not sign!"

"Think again!" urged Seyd Mahmud ominously.

Burton did think. He realized that the Arab was playing with him. Once he got the ransom demanded he would not carry out his promise, since it was not bound by an oath that any Moslem would give if he meant to keep his word.

"I refuse," he declared stoutly. "You can do your worst, but you won't get a single piastre out of the British Government. But I don't mind betting that you'll be laid by the heels before very long."

"When Allah wills it and not before," rejoined the Arab imperturbably. "But since you refuse to take steps to pay for your entertainment your presence here is no longer desirable. Behold! There are many sharks in our wake!"

Outwardly Burton received the threat without a sign. It was pretty ghastly to be tossed overboard, but there was some slight consolation. He would not suffer long.

Then the saturnine Selim put his oar in again. He inquired of the captain what his threat was. Seyd Mahmud gave him the information in Arabic.

"Too quick a death, O Kaid!" expostulated Selim. "Remember you vowed

vengeance for the insult this *Kafir* gave when he made his servant offer true believers the flesh of swine!”

“I have not forgotten it,” remarked the Arab captain. “Speak your mind, Selim. What do you propose as a fitting punishment.”

“Far be it from my mind that my ingenuity is equal to yours, O Kaid!” replied Selim. “Nevertheless since you put the question I would suggest that the *Kafir* be repaid with interest. I would have asked that he be eaten by swine, only it is not fitting that our slumbers should be disturbed by these accursed beasts. Therefore I would suggest that the *Kafir* be led without the walls of the village and buried up to his neck in the sand. Then, when the sun be set, the jackals—verily they are half-brothers to swine!—will execute your vengeance, although their work is not so swift as that of a shark!”

Seyd Mahmud nodded in approval.

Crash Burton, understanding most of Seyd’s remarks, felt a very peculiar sensation in the region of his spine.

He had heard his death-warrant: to be buried up to his neck in sand and left to be devoured by jackals.

CHAPTER XII

The Explosion

For the best part of two days and two nights the dhow proceeded on her way. Burton, kept below, knew nothing of the erratic voyage, for sometimes the gun-runner doubled on her tracks. She had to keep the sea until the time arrived for her to land her contraband cargo according to plan. It was out of the question for her to go into her secret port unless the Arabs who were to take the arms inland were on the spot.

Three times during those forty-eight hours the submarine dhow dived—once she did so so hurriedly that there was not time to lower and furl her sails. That was when she sighted the light-cruiser *Myosotis* steaming hard to the rescue of her crippled picket-boat.

Burton knew that the dhow had dived. There was no concealing that fact from him; but why she submerged and why she dallied and retraced her course was something that he did not know.

Except for a few minutes on deck, the midshipman was kept a close prisoner in his cell. He was fed on mealies, dates and water, the latter being warm and brackish. He suffered considerably from the heat, for when the submarine was awash during the day the sun's rays beat with terrific force upon the metal deck. When she submerged the temperature between decks was oppressive. Apart from these discomforts the midshipman was not subject to any injury or indignity, except when his guards arrived with his daily ration. Then they would grin knowingly and make a pantomimic display of their idea of their prisoner's ultimate fate.

Burton had an intense dislike of Selim. The fellow's sardonic look irritated him beyond measure. Whenever the Arab appeared in company with a second native he seemed to take a delight in discussing Burton's plight with his companion. On the other hand, whenever, as sometimes happened, Selim entered the compartment alone, leaving the second guard without, his deportment was as sedate as that of a thoroughly trained English butler.

"The blighter's got the wind up when he's alone," thought the midshipman. "He thinks I'm going to plug him. By Jove! It would be some slight satisfaction to be able to give him a straight left to the point!"

To do so was out of the question. The prisoner's arms were bound in such a manner that, although he could feed himself, he was unable to lift his elbows higher than his shoulders. To that fact Selim had to thank his lucky stars that—to quote the midshipman's words—his deadlights had not been stove in!

At length the dhow, with her masts and sails lowered, glided into her secret port under power. She did so without hesitation, having received a wireless signal from her base that the coast was clear. Here, again, the British navy had underestimated the ingenuity of the modern Arab, for not only was radio communication possible, but it was conducted in a native code that, even if it had been picked up by a British vessel, would have been beyond the skill of the operators to decipher.

It was high noon when she arrived, berthing at a rough jetty that was entirely hidden from seaward by two projecting bluffs. But that was not a sufficient protection or precaution. She was swung until her bows pointed towards deep water; so that in the event of danger she could submerge and lie doggo at a depth of twenty-five fathoms within a few minutes of the alarm being raised.

Had this step been necessary a genuine dhow, whose cargo was beyond reproach, would have been warped into the gun-runner's berth and been open to any examination that a man-of-war's boats were likely to make.

The village was small and compact, consisting chiefly of mud-and-stone huts, almost surrounded by a low wall except where it abutted on the harbour. Outside the wall was a wide belt of sand, dotted here and there with a few date palms, that extended for about three or four miles to the foothills of the great Arabian plateau.

It was across the sandy waste that the smuggled arms were to be conveyed—not by the slow, time-honoured camel convoy, but by means of petrol-driven vehicles equipped with broad, solid tyres to avoid sinking in the sand. Eventually those arms ought to find their way into the hands of fierce nomad tribesmen—incidentally at a thousand per cent profit to the original venders. And every tribesman armed with a modern rifle and provided with a plentiful supply of ammunition was a source of potential danger to the British and French mandated territories of Iraq and Syria.

Directly Seyd Mahmud stepped ashore he was greeted by the leader of the convoy, who with deep apologies reported that, although he was on the spot to take delivery of the arms, his cars had not yet arrived. A severe sandstorm had delayed their progress, but they should be on the spot before dawn.

“That is your affair, O Ben Susra!” remarked Seyd Mahmud. “Once the weapons are out of my vessel my responsibility ends. More, I wish the holds to be cleared without delay. The rifles can be placed in the secret storehouse until your convoy arrives.”

To this suggestion Ben Susra demurred. He pointed out that this would entail double work, and that, since most of his men had not yet arrived, it would be an arduous business.

The two Arab chiefs argued for nearly half an hour until Seyd Mahmud, much against his inclinations, agreed to Ben Susra’s suggestion that the crew of the submarine dhow should assist in the work.

“It is not fit that sailors should do the work of slaves,” he observed. “Nevertheless it shall be done and that quickly, for to-night we are to have a spectacle that will give pleasure to all true sons of the Prophet here present and extreme discomfort to a *Kafir* whom I have captured.”

Curious to know the circumstances, Ben Susra asked his compatriot what form this entertainment would take.

“He is a young Inglis,” explained Seyd Mahmud, “who cannot keep out of other people’s business. Many times his steamboat intercepted my decoy dhows. Once he, the unbelieving dog! offered Abdullah and his men the flesh of swine!”

Ben Susra shuddered at the thought.

“And then?”

“And then he tried to board us,” continued Seyd Mahmud. “It was *Kismet*. A sea-fog and the accursed boat was alongside us before we had time to dive. Something had to be done. We captured the young officer as he came on board and sunk his boat. At least she will have sunk by this time, for Ali Bax crippled her gun and smashed her bows beyond repair.”

“And the entertainment you spoke of?”

Seyd Mahmud gave an elaborate statement of the fate he had in store for Midshipman Burton.

“*Bishmilla!*” exclaimed the convoy leader. “Allah be praised I am here to witness the fitting punishment to the dog of a *Kafir!*”

All available hands, augmented by the handful of Ben Susra’s men and most of the male villagers, set to work to unship the cargo and transfer it to the secret storehouse, which consisted of a large vault excavated from the solid

rock. The entrance was narrow and, when not required, was sealed by a slab of stone over which sand was spread to conceal it from outsiders. Although every man, woman, and child in the village knew of the existence of this hiding-place, they were bound by solemn oaths to keep the closely-guarded secret. Apart from that they knew that in former days, when piracy was rife in the Red Sea, captives had been slaughtered in this dungeon when they had been either unable or unwilling to pay ransom. On that account no Arab would venture into the vault after sunset.

This circumstance, combined with the prospect of seeing the captive midshipman buried upright in the sand, made the Arabs work with unwonted energy, and in less than four hours the whole of the arms and ammunition was safely stored within the secret cavern.

“Hasten, brothers!” shouted Seyd Mahmud. “Bring out the *Kafir*! Before the muezzin calls the sunset hour of prayer the infidel must be in his grave!”

With his arms still pinioned behind his back, and his legs hobbled sufficiently to allow him to take only short, jerky steps, Burton was urged down the gangplank to the jetty.

Two of the gun-runner’s crew acted as guards. They were not the same pair that had previously acted in that capacity, and that fact gave the prisoner some slight satisfaction. The less he saw of the sardonic Selim the better, and for some reason that individual did not appear to be present. Almost all the dhow’s crew were there, while the villagers, including women and children, crowded round, jeering and reviling the *Kafir* who, if he had had his way, would have been the means of depriving them of their livelihood.

Through the narrow, garbage-infested street of the village Burton was led, until, passing through a gateway in the wall, he found himself on a wide expanse of sand. It was now within an hour of sunset, and already the forms of the captive and his executioners cast long shadows in front of them.

They had not far to go—a matter of about four hundred yards. It was, as Seyd Mahmud had stated, a sufficient distance to enable him to sleep undisturbed by the yelping of the jackals and the shrieks of their victim.

At a sign from the captain of the submarine dhow four hefty Arabs set to work to dig a hole. The sand was soft and yielding. It required a wide excavation in order to get down to the required depth. More than once the sides caved in, burying the diggers to their waists. Meanwhile Seyd Mahmud, with an eye on the setting sun, called to them to hasten in their task.

At length the living grave was finished—a funnel-shaped cavity five feet in

depth. A stout stake was then placed behind Burton's back and his ankles and arms lashed to it. Then, like a trussed fowl he was lowered into the pit in an upright position and sand was rapidly thrown into it.

The midshipman offered no resistance. It would have been futile had he done so. He tried his hardest to maintain a calm, dignified attitude—to show the Arabs that since he had to die he would do so as bravely as he could.

As the soil was heaped in the pressure began to be felt. He had expected to find that the sand was hot, but already the sun's rays had lost their strength and rapid radiation was taking place.

The mob redoubled their shouts as the diggers completed their work. Yelling and dancing, the natives crowded round the spot where the midshipman's head alone showed above the freshly-placed circle of sand.

Suddenly there was a hush broken by the wailing call of the muezzin.

With one accord the Arabs, turning themselves in the direction of the holy city of Mecca, knelt in prayer.

The blood-red orb of day disappeared beneath the horizon formed by the waters of the Red Sea.

Burton, watching, thought he had seen the sun set for the last time. In a few minutes darkness would fall; but before it did he took a long look at the sea, where, had fate willed it otherwise, his destiny would have been set. Instead he was dying like a dog. . . .

Then, intense darkness. Not a star shone in the black vault overhead.

The Arabs had finished their evening devotions. They had also finished mocking the *Kafir* who, according to their ideas, had been justly punished. Led by a man bearing a horn lantern, they returned almost silently towards the village, their footsteps muffled by the soft sand.

The foremost of the natives could not have gone more than fifty yards when a terrific burst of lurid flame leaped skywards, followed by an ear-splitting detonation.

For a brief instant Burton could see the forms of the Arabs silhouetted against the dazzling glare; saw many of them topple to the ground as a blast of violently displaced air swept across the sandy waste.

Then yells and shrieks of anger and terror as the natives ran towards the place where a few seconds ago their homes had been and now were not.

"Someone's been careless to make that lot go up!" thought Midshipman

Burton.

CHAPTER XIII

Snatched from a Living Tomb

Curiously enough the midshipman forgot his desperate position. He had been buried with his face turned to the west, and was consequently looking towards the scene of the terrific explosion.

The blast of hot air had swept well above his head, although a cloud of dust and sand had been driven against his face. He found himself wanting to wipe the grit from his eyes, and until involuntary tears cleared the dust away he could see nothing.

Presently he was able to discern the dull red glare of several fires following the explosion. Some huts on the outskirts of the village that had escaped total and sudden demolition were burning briskly.

“If that were one of our seaplanes——” thought the lad, then he knew that such was not the case. He would have heard the unmistakable drone before the explosion as the aircraft approached her objective. Even if it had been an aerial torpedo that had done the mischief, Burton’s plight would not have been any better. There would be no hope of rescue from that direction—nor from any other, it seemed!

A quarter of a mile away the Arabs were watching the final destruction of their village. They seemed too dazed, too apathetic to do anything to save the remnants of their homes from destruction. It was *Kismet*.

Quite possibly Seyd Mahmud and his crew were on the wharf, regarding the wreckage of the submarine dhow. Burton hoped that she had shared the fate of the village. If so, it was poetic justice. He was sufficiently vindictive to regret that Seyd, Selim and Co. had not fallen victims to the disaster and been hoist with their own petard!

Presently Burton began to think of his own present position. The explosion had but delayed his fate. It must have frightened away any jackals and other wild animals that would otherwise be prowling around; but it was almost certain that they would return before daybreak.

At length the last flicker from the burning village died away. The Arabs were still making a din, but their voices seemed a long distance off. A sense of

dread solitude gripped the helpless midshipman; yet with it a presentiment that something was drawing near.

His eyes, only a few inches above ground level, were growing accustomed to the darkness.

He looked and looked again. Surely he was not mistaken?

A dark form was ambling slowly on all-fours towards him. It was hardly the gait of an animal searching for prey, yet the flashing eyes, clearly discernible in the darkness, gave Burton the impression that it was a wild beast.

Then one of the forepaws seemed to make a sweeping movement. The creature's eyes appeared to lower themselves until they were no higher than those of the almost buried youth.

"Crouching for a spring!" thought the midshipman, and a shudder, in spite of the pressure of sand, passed down his body.

Surely the end was not far off.

But to Burton's surprise the approaching figure gave a sort of gasp of satisfaction. Then a voice whispered in Arabic:

"Peace! I am here to help you!"

It took some seconds for the words to sink into the midshipman's brain. He knew a little Arabic and that was self-taught. It was easier for him to speak than be spoken to in that language, and somehow, the accent seemed different.

"Who are you?" asked the midshipman, his parched lips hardly able to frame the words.

"A friend!" replied the newcomer. "Do not speak yet but do what I tell you. When I have freed you obey me without question, and then—if Allah the Merciful wills it—you will soon be restored to your friends."

Burton was content to let it go at that. Happen what might his plight could hardly be a worse one. Words of hope, even though coming from an unknown Arab, were welcome when the immediate prospects of a cruel death were removed.

The Arab lost no time. He had come prepared to cope with his task, for he had been dragging a large wooden spade behind him.

Still kneeling, lest his form might be silhouetted against the dark sky, he attacked the sand vigorously yet almost silently. Occasionally he paused to gaze in the direction of the village. Apparently there was no suspicion of his

presence from that direction. The natives were still bemoaning the blow fate had dealt them.

After about a quarter of an hour's digging, the midshipman's rescuer tossed aside his spade; then, gripping Burton under the shoulders, he heaved him clear of his living grave. Next, whipping out a knife, the Arab severed the captive's bonds and tossed the stake into the hole. He then placed the spade with the stake and covered both over with sand.

He listened. There was a faint rustle in the air. A breeze was springing up. Usually, about midnight, owing to the land giving out heat quicker than the sea, an off-shore wind was to be expected anywhere on the borders of the Red Sea. Before morning all traces of the rescuer's handiwork would be obliterated.

"Follow me," commanded the Arab. "Crawl. Until you see me stand, keep with your face to the sand!"

Although the man set off at a slow pace, Burton in his weakened condition had a hard struggle to keep going. More than once he toppled over sideways; again and again his arms gave way under the weight of his body.

After a while circulation improved in his hitherto cramped limbs. It was the torture of thirst that was now his difficulty.

Disobeying his instructions, Burton hurried in his crawl and touched the Arab's ankle.

"Give me water!" he begged.

The man stopped, fumbled under the black blanket-like garment he wore and produced a stone bottle. Eagerly Burton drank. The liquid almost made him cough. It was water with a dash of spirit.

Even as he swallowed the drink the midshipman found himself wondering about it. Evidently the Arab was not a strict Moslem, otherwise in accordance with his faith he would be obliged to abstain from strong drink. As it was, after Burton had returned the bottle, his rescuer drank also. And no true son of Islam would deign to drink from the same vessel as a *Kafir*.

They then resumed their tedious crawl until they had covered perhaps four hundred yards and had gained the shelter of a shallow nullah or dry watercourse.

"Allah did not create man to walk as a dog!" quoth the Arab. "Stand and follow in my footsteps. We have far to go before the rising of the sun."

For the next hour not a word was spoken. Through his knowledge of astronomy Burton discovered that he was being led in a south-easterly direction or obliquely away from the general trend of the coast-line. Had he been left to his own resources instinct would have compelled him to make for the shore.

Again the Arab spoke.

“If we fall in with any men—which may Allah forbid—you must be deaf and dumb,” he ordered. “Do you understand?”

“I do,” agreed Burton. Then, curiosity overcoming discretion, he asked: “And who are you? Why do you seek to rescue me?”

“Be content,” replied the Arab reprovingly. “In all good time your questions will be answered. Meanwhile be silent.”

“I suppose I must consider myself being ticked-off!” thought the midshipman. “Reticent fellow this! I wonder if he thinks he’s going to make a bit out of this business? It’s strange that he hasn’t begun to drive a bargain already.”

Altogether they had covered the best part of three miles when the Arab called a halt at a group of palm trees. Here was a small pool of decidedly muddy water at which animals had been drinking at no distant date. Nevertheless the Arab knelt and scooped up the liquid in the palm of his hand and drank eagerly. Burton followed his example. They then ate a frugal meal of dates and mealies which the Arab provided from a leather bag. The water-bottle was then refilled, and after a brief rest the journey was resumed.

The direction was now changed to almost due east. Another hour’s steady march and the midshipman found himself on the edge of a low cliff overlooking the sea.

Here his guide paused, as if uncertain of his bearings, and finally pointed to his left.

A few hundred yards and the cliff began to decrease in height until it gave place to a small creek. Beyond it were a few mud huts. On its banks were three or four native open boats such as are used by Arab fishermen for inshore fishing.

The first and second were without oars or paddles, but the third, which had evidently only been ashore a short time, was provided not only with paddles but with a mast and sail, the latter being of dark camel-hair.

“This we will steal,” declared Burton’s rescuer coolly. “Help me to move

the boat into the water, but take heed and make no sound.”

The boat was launched though not without considerable difficulty. The Arab did most of the work, Burton’s efforts being feeble compared with that of his sinewy, muscular companion.

Just as they were embarking a dog commenced to yelp. This aroused a number of fowls who began to make a noise. Then a donkey started to bray.

With admirable presence of mind the Arab started to yelp like a jackal.

From one of the huts a flash of red flame stabbed the darkness, and a bullet whizzed high above the heads of Burton and his guide.

The Arab stopped his hideous yelps, and in a few minutes the pandemonium around the hovels died down. The native who had let off his gun had evidently concluded that the jackal that had disturbed his slumbers had been frightened away, and having ordered the dog to stop barking, had retired to his hut.

At length Burton and his rescuer silently poled the boat into deep water. This time they raised no alarm, and soon the boat was a good half-mile from the beach.

The Arab ceased paddling, and motioned to Burton to use his paddle as a rudder. Then he stepped the raking mast and set the sail, carrying out the operation with a dexterity that showed he was no stranger to the art of sailing. Therefore the midshipman concluded that his rescuer was originally one of the crew of the gun-runner, or, failing that, of one of the dhows that acted in conjunction with her.

Having set the sail the Arab came aft and took the steering paddle.

“Go and sleep,” he commanded. “If by daybreak we are not outside the reefs we are as good as dead men. Meanwhile take your rest while you can!”

It was a command that Burton was only too glad to obey. He was tired both in mind and body in spite of the exhilarating lift of the boat—a motion that he never expected to experience again. So he stretched himself upon the bottom-boards on the weather side of the mast, and was soon in a deep dreamless slumber.

When he awoke it was broad daylight. For some moments he lay wondering where he was. The warmth of the sun felt very comforting, yet he could not understand why he had not been turned out of his hammock to join in the frenzied rush to the midshipmen’s bathroom. Then it dawned upon him that he was not in the light-cruiser, but in some smaller craft—in the picket-

boat, of course. But, no! It was not the picket-boat but a very rough sort of a craft and one under sail and not under power. There was no engine vibration, but only the well-known *plash* of wavelets against the bows.

Even then he could not locate himself until, raising himself on one elbow, he looked aft.

Then, to his utter surprise, he found himself confronted by the sardonic features of Selim, his erstwhile gaoler on board the submarine dhow!

CHAPTER XIV

Revelation

“Hello! What are you doing here?” exclaimed the midshipman in English.

Not a muscle of Selim’s face moved.

“Of course the blighter doesn’t understand,” thought Burton. “Now, what possessed him to get me out of a nasty hole? Is he out for a reward, or does he think he’ll turn King’s Evidence when Seyd Mahmud and his rascally gang are laid by the heels? Or, perhaps, he’s had a row with the fellow and is trying to get his own back.”

Burton sat up and flexed his cramped limbs.

“Good morning!” he exclaimed in his faulty Arabic. “Where are we?”

“Still inside the reefs,” replied Selim gloomily. “The wind had fallen away before the rising of the sun. Now it blows, but against us.”

This was disconcerting news. The stolen boat had not made so much as the Arab had expected her to do, and now, in broad daylight, she was between the reefs and the Arabian shore, and by this time the rightful owner had missed her and would be going in pursuit. More than likely, too, Seyd Mahmud would have been informed of Selim’s absence, and coupling his disappearance with that of the native boat, would put to sea in the submarine dhow.

Judging by the position of the sun, Burton knew that the boat was steering a southerly course and as close to the wind as she possibly could. At any rate, even if she were not making eastward in the direction of Suakin she was increasing the distance between her and Seyd Mahmud’s demolished base.

Selim and the midshipman then shared another sorry meal of corn, dates, and lukewarm water. Then Burton took the helm, while the Arab coiled himself up on the bottom-boards and slept.

Four hours passed. Selim still slumbered undisturbed by the rapidly increasing heat of the sun’s rays. The breeze fell lighter and lighter until there was bare steerage-way. More than once Burton felt himself nodding over his almost useless task with the idle tiller.

Presently a faint drone came to his ears. The noise grew louder. There could be no mistaking that sound. It was that of some sort of aircraft.

The midshipman looked up almost in the eye of the sun. Almost overhead was a British naval flying-boat.

Relinquishing the tiller, the midshipman commenced waving his arms. Bare to the waist and deeply tanned by the sea, he might well be mistaken for a native. Apparently the flying-boat's crew were of the same opinion, for the craft held on her course.

Then Selim, awakened by the din, hurriedly lowered the sail and joined Burton in waving for assistance.

The flying-boat swung round, dipped her nose, and presently alighted upon the surface of the sea with a resounding smack. Then, taxi-ing, she approached to within easy hailing distance.

"Take us on board!" shouted Burton.

"Who are you?" demanded the flight-lieutenant, surprised at being hailed in English by a supposed native.

"Burton of the light-cruiser *Myosotis*," replied the midshipman.

"Are you, by Jove!" was the rejoinder. "Just the man we're looking for. Stand by to take a line."

A rope was thrown and caught. The boat was brought alongside the aircraft.

"What about the nigger with you?" queried the flight-lieutenant.

"He'd better come too," replied Burton. "He won't stand much chance in that packet. Besides, he's saved my life. . . . You want to come with me?" he added, addressing Selim in Arabic.

"It is *Kismet*" declared Selim gravely. "I go with you, O *Kafir*."

The native boat was then abandoned, and Burton and his companion boarded the flying-boat.

Briefly, before the flying-boat rose in the air, the midshipman told his story.

"Where is the old gun-runner's base?" inquired the flight-lieutenant eagerly.

Burton was not sure, even when he was shown a chart.

“There it is,” announced Selim in Arabic, pointing to a small inlet shown on the chart.

“Now, how the deuce did that fellow learn how to read a chart?” thought the commander of the flying-boat. “Well, we’ll just have a look at the place,” he added aloud.

“And bomb the submarine if she’s still there?” asked the midshipman.

The flight-lieutenant shook his head.

“Can’t be done, my man,” he decided. “Seyd Mahmud may be a murderous rascal and a much-wanted specimen of the gun-runner, but Arabia is a friendly state and we can’t go dropping ‘eggs’ just to wipe out a pest! If the submarine gun-runner was without the three-mile limit then that would be a different story!”

Forty minutes’ flight brought the flying-boat over the ruined and still smoking village. The inhabitants could be seen scurrying for dear life in terror of the menace from the air.

But of the gun-runner not a sign. Seyd Mahmud had put to sea, and the submarine was probably lying snugly on the bottom until the coast was again clear.

“We’ll have her before very long,” declared the flight-lieutenant. “Now I’ll return you to your ship. I’ve already wirelessly that you are safe.”

Early that afternoon Midshipman Burton again trod the quarter-deck of the *Myosotis*, which he had never expected to see again.

Even while he was being congratulated by his messmates, he was ordered to report to Captain Dacres.

“Send the Arab for’ard,” ordered the officer of the watch. “See that he gets a good square meal—he looks as if he could do with one.”

“I wish to see the captain also,” expostulated Selim.

“What does he say?” asked the O.W.

Burton translated.

“He may be able to give important information,” he added. “He’s a reticent fellow, and if he doesn’t get his way he may shut up like an oyster. He’s not a beauty, is he? All right, take him with you, Burton. Perhaps we’d better see if he is carrying any concealed weapon. He might try to do the Owner in!”

Selim readily consented to be searched. No weapon of any sort was found

on him.

“This is Selim, sir,” was Burton’s introduction of the Arab to Captain Dacres. “He was one of the crew of the submarine gun-runner, and he saved my life.”

Then the midshipman had another shock.

“And as my reward for so doing, I’d like a whisky and soda,” declared Selim in perfect English. “And, by Jove, Dacres, I could do with it!”

The midshipman stared in astonishment at a half-naked Arab coolly addressing the captain of the *Myosotis* by his surname.

For a moment Captain Dacres also looked surprised. Then:

“Good gracious, Brough! So you’ve turned up again? Any luck this time? When I last saw you you were off on a shooting expedition in Thibet.”

“So it was stated in the Press,” replied Reginald Brough. “But officially I was on a Secret Service stunt. Your job, I take it, is to try and stop gun-running. Mine was to discover, if possible, where the arms came from, how they were handled, and where they went when they were landed. So, after knocking about amongst the Arab dhow-owners for twelve months (it was some business that. I had not only to talk Arabic but to think in Arabic. One slip would have kipped the contract), I was asked by Seyd Mahmud to ship aboard his submarine gun-runner. That was a slice of luck, if you like.

“Then this young gentleman here boarded the decoy dhow in which I happened to be. I thought he was going to spoil my little game on the very eve of success. However, Seyd Mahmud bluffed our young friend Burton that time.

“Then soon afterwards Burton’s picket-boat surprised the submarine dhow and, as you are probably aware, Burton was captured. I had to stand by and do nothing, because it would have been futile to interfere, and, in addition, the all-important task I had been set to do was not yet accomplished. But soon after the gun-runner made his secret base I learned all I wanted to know concerning the intended destination of the contraband cargo. Then, and only then, was I free to attempt Burton’s liberation.

“They’d buried him up to the neck in sand. It was nearly sunset, and while the Arabs were all busy with that little entertainment I touched off a charge of gun-cotton and blew the arms and ammunition to smithereens. In the confusion that resulted I dug Burton out and we got away.”

Reginald Brough pushed aside his empty glass.

“And now Selim ceases to exist,” he continued. “Before the end of the month I want to be in London in a perfect deluge of rain! Sounds silly, but when you’ve been grilling in a blazing sun for a twelvemonth, living like an Arab, you’ll know what I mean.”

Midshipman Burton looked admiringly at his rescuer.

“You ran a terrific risk, sir,” he remarked.

“Perhaps,” admitted Reginald Brough. “But the greatest risk I took was when you were about to be bastinadoed!”

Burton, although that incident was very vividly impressed upon his mind, failed to see why.

“You reported a sail in sight, sir!” he remarked. “How was that a risk?”

“It would have been if the Arab crew weren’t so thoroughly jumpy,” explained the Secret Service agent. “There wasn’t a sail! But if I hadn’t taken the chance of pretending there was you wouldn’t be standing where you are, my young friend!”

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Disappearing Dhow* by Percy F. Westerman]