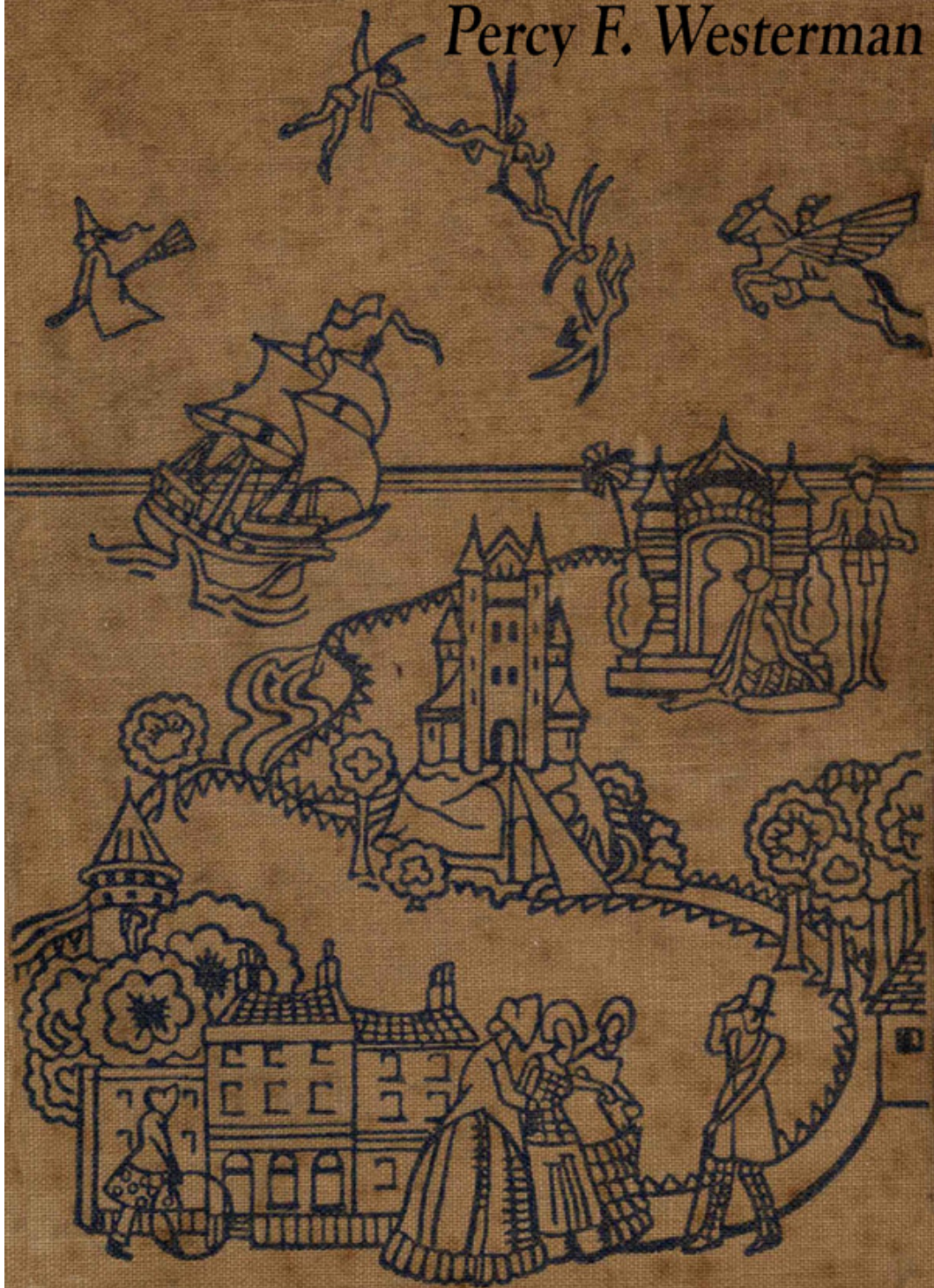


Sea Scouts of the Kestrel

Percy F. Westerman



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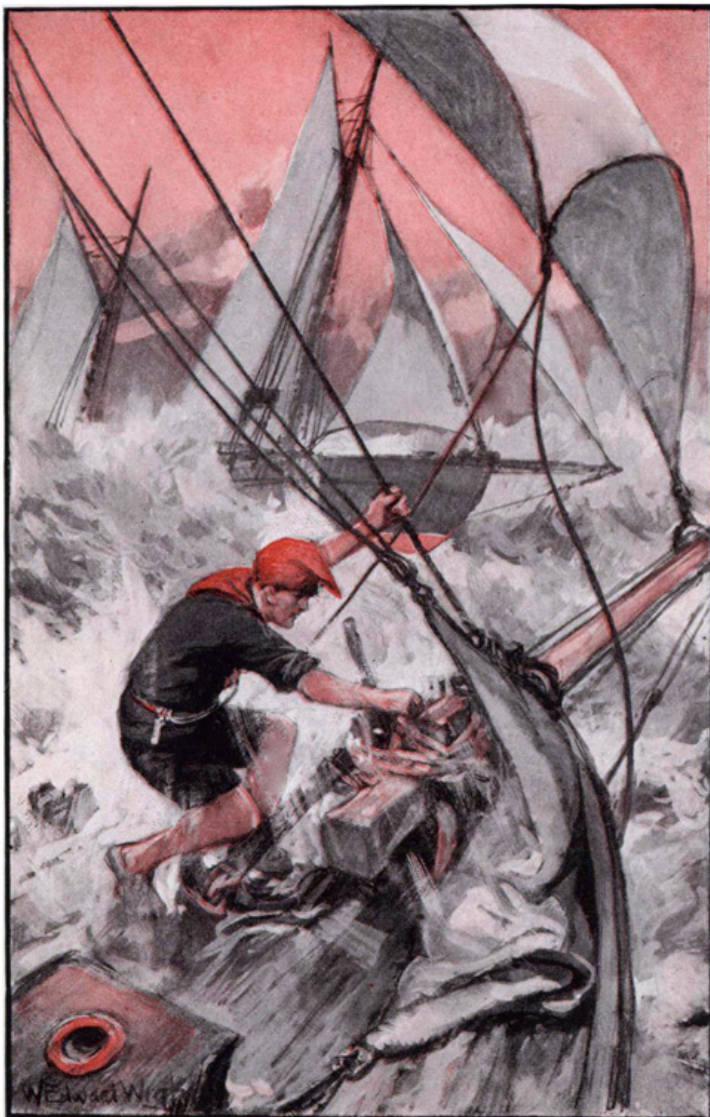
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In the Toils of the Dreaded Race

At the imminent risk of being either jerked or washed overboard Brandon fought his way for'ard hanging on desperately as he battled towards his goal. Then hanging on with his left hand he succeeded in casting off the rope that held the "Kestrel" to the "Merlin."

THE SEA SCOUTS
OF
THE *KESTREL*

The Story of a Cruise of Adventure & Pluck in

a Small Yacht on the English

Channel

By
PERCY F. WESTERMAN
Author of

“Clipped Wings,” “Sea Scouts Abroad,” “The

Sea Monarch,” “Under the White

Ensign,” &c. &c.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

PAGE

KNOCKED OUT [17](#)

CHAPTER II

THE MASCOT [28](#)

CHAPTER III

AN ALL-NIGHT WATCH [36](#)

CHAPTER IV

INVESTIGATIONS [44](#)

CHAPTER V

ADRIFT [51](#)

CHAPTER VI

IN THE FOG [57](#)

CHAPTER VII

THE DERELICT [70](#)

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN THEY RESCUED [79](#)

CHAPTER IX

WHAT MARNER REVEALED [87](#)

CHAPTER X	
BLUESKIN'S PLOT	<u>96</u>
CHAPTER XI	
HOW IT FAILED	<u>101</u>
CHAPTER XII	
OUT OF ACTION	<u>111</u>
CHAPTER XIII	
THE STOWAWAY	<u>117</u>
CHAPTER XIV	
THE PERIL OF THE RACE	<u>130</u>
CHAPTER XV	
"TO BE RETURNED IN DUE COURSE"	<u>142</u>
CHAPTER XVI	
THE "KESTREL" TO THE RESCUE	<u>150</u>
CHAPTER XVII	
BECALMED	<u>159</u>
CHAPTER XVIII	
THE ADMIRAL	<u>168</u>
CHAPTER XIX	
THE CONVICT	<u>177</u>

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST LAP [191](#)

CHAPTER XXI

THE EVE OF THE JAMBOREE [204](#)

CHAPTER XXII

THE RACE FOR THE CUP [211](#)

CHAPTER XXIII

A DEAD HEAT [223](#)

CHAPTER XXIV

SNATCHED FROM THE DEEP [232](#)

CHAPTER XXV

HOME AGAIN [245](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

IN THE TOILS OF THE DREADED RACE

Frontispiece

PAGE

A COWARDLY DEED AND A PLUCKY RESCUE

24

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

184

RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL

240

THE
SEA SCOUTS OF THE “KESTREL”

The Sea Scouts of the “Kestrel”

CHAPTER I

Knocked Out

“**W**HAT’S happened to Mr. Grant, I wonder?” remarked Sea Scout Peter Craddock, as he gazed anxiously through the gathering twilight. “He’s late.”

“So will we be, if we keep hanging-on to the slack,” rejoined Patrol Leader Frank Brandon. “There are only eighteen more days to the Sea Scouts’ Jamboree, and if we’re to be in it, there’s not a minute to waste. Mr. Grant’s all right, never you fear.”

Craddock straightened his aching back, wiped the perspiration from his eyes, and resumed his voluntary though tedious task. He, too, realised that time was precious if the “Otters” were to be represented at the forthcoming and eagerly anticipated nautical festivities of the Sea Scouts’ Jamboree.

The “Otters” were a long way from their native Aberstour. Force of circumstances had hit them pretty hard of late, but, like corks, they bobbed up again under adversity as all scouts should do.

For one thing, their staunch little yacht *Puffin* was no more. She had foundered at her moorings in a terrific autumn gale that had sprung up with such suddenness that the official weather forecast had failed to give any warning whatsoever. Then, Mr. Grant, their Scoutmaster, had a serious illness that put him out of the running for three months. Patrol Leader Frank Brandon was away on a five months’ involuntary voyage on a tramp steamer, and had only just returned.

In the absence of Scoutmaster and Patrol Leader, Peter Craddock did his level best to keep the troop running, and by dint of sheer enthusiasm he had

succeeded.

Mr. Grant had recovered his health when the Sea Scouts' Jamboree was announced. It was to be a gathering of every troop in the United Kingdom, and was to be held in the spacious land-locked waters of Chichester harbour. There were to be sailing and motor-boat races, rowing and sculling matches, swimming and diving contests, and numerous competitions in which the Sea Scouts were to display their prowess. For those lads who were unable to come round in their own craft a splendid camping site was provided; but, as Peter Craddock remarked, a lot of the fun would be missed if the "Otters" had to hike it by road, and then be compelled to see others display their seamanship, they themselves being unable to compete in friendly rivalry. Without the *Puffin*, the outlook seemed a bit disappointing.

Then, quite unexpectedly, a chance presented itself. The Scoutmaster heard of a suitable craft offered for sale at a very reasonable figure owing to the present owner finding himself unable to carry out his original intentions.

She was an ex-naval "launch"—a boat propelled either by sail or oars—of very substantial construction and only a few years old. She was forty-two feet in length and diagonal built. That is to say, she had her planks doubled, those forming the outer skin running diagonally on those of the inner skin. This system resulted in great strength of hull, while in addition the edges of the planking were "flush," otherwise a smooth surface.

Her present owner had intended to convert the launch into a ketch yacht, and had already given her a fairly deep iron keel and had commenced to deck her in and build a cabin. Then he "stuck" owing to lack of funds; and to make the best of his bargain offered the craft as she stood.

"As she stood," meant that she was lying afloat at Polkebo Creek, a remote inlet of the spacious Cornish harbour of Falmouth, which was a long way from Aberstour.

The Sea Scouts held a council of ways and means. Fortunately they had seven weeks' holiday. The proposal of a trip to Falmouth to bring back the boat seemed alluring. As for the completion of the conversion job, the lads were all handy with carpenters' tools: their Troop funds were enough to justify the expenses.

The deal was completed, and the "Otters" lost no time in proceeding to Falmouth and taking over the new craft.

Compared with the *Puffin* she was a lump of a boat. With her newly fitted iron keel she was "as stiff as a house." Her original masts, sails,

anchor, chain and other gear were stored in a shed adjoining the creek. Timber and other necessary material were readily procurable at Falmouth. Most of these were brought by water in a serviceable 14-foot dinghy that had been included in the bargain.

Work progressed apace. The Sea Scouts stuck it gamely, cheerfully working long hours in the assurance that theirs was a labour of love for that fickle taskmistress the sea. The kindly fisherfolk of Polkebo took great interest in “them young furriners,” giving the amateur shipwrights many useful hints and, what was more, helpful assistance.

There was one exception, however. That was Carlo Bone, generally known as Blueskin, a hulking lout of about thirty and the despair of the district. He was tall, heavily built and, with proper exercise and clean living, ought to have been a formidable figure in the old Cornish pastime of wrestling. Unfortunately he showed no inclination either to work or to play decently. When sheer necessity compelled him to work, he sometimes shipped on board a coaster. The local fisherfolk knew him only too well, and there was never a berth for him in the pilchard fleet. During his many spells of idleness “on the beach,” he spent all the time the Law allows in lounging in public-houses. He was a cunning poacher, but he had never been caught in the act. Rumour had it that he combined the undesirable occupations of thief and smuggler. Already his evil life had left its mark. His face was flabby, and his features were of a purplish hue. Hence his name Blueskin.

Blueskin had a grievance against the Sea Scouts. He had hoped to obtain possession of the ex-Service launch by fair means or, preferably, by foul; but the late owner had refused to part with the boat merely on vague promises to pay, coming as they did from Carlo Bone. From morning to night, except when the “Dog and Gun” was open, Blueskin would lounge about on the quayside and bombard the lads with sarcastic and offensive remarks, attempting in vain to make them abandon their task.

On the afternoon on which this story opens, Mr. Grant and Sea Scout Carline had rowed to the Prince of Wales’s pier at Falmouth to bring off provisions and sundry stores. It was now nearly ten o’clock, and they had not returned. The long Cornish twilight was setting in. In another twenty minutes, night would have fallen. For a wonder, Blueskin’s now familiar and unwelcome figure had not put in an appearance that evening.

“Knock off now, lads!” ordered Brandon. “It’s been a long day, but we simply had to finish that bulkhead. Start the stove, Wilson, my lad. I don’t suppose Mr. Grant will be much longer. He’s got a fair tide up.”

Wilson went below, leaving the Patrol Leader, Craddock, Talbot, and Heavitree to put away the tools and to spread a tarpaulin over the as yet unpainted cabin-top.

At that moment the Sea Scouts noticed Carlo Bone slouching towards the quay. At every few steps he stopped and tugged savagely at a length of rope, the while cursing loudly. At the other end of the rope was a dog, or rather a puppy of about two months.

With the instinctiveness of its kind, the little animal realised that something more unpleasant than its usual treatment at the hands of its brutal owner was in store for it. Vainly it tried to break away, only to be jerked remorselessly onwards.

“The cad!” muttered Craddock. “He’s doing that just to make us lose our tempers. He knows Mr. Grant isn’t here, and there isn’t a policeman to be seen anywhere about.”

Peter Craddock was perfectly right in his surmise. Blueskin was doing his best to pick a quarrel at the expense of the little animal’s life. Deliberately, as far as his unsteady gait permitted, he dragged the puppy to the edge of the quay, where in full view of the Sea Scouts he bent the free end of the rope round a heavy stone.

For a wonder he said nothing; but the ugly leer on his flabby face was enough. He was going to drown the dog before the eyes of the practically helpless Sea Scouts. Nothing short of a display of concerted brute force could stop him. He knew that. There is no law in the country to prevent a man drowning his own dog, provided he does it with reasonable celerity.

The Sea Scouts scrambled on to the quay.

“What are you going to do?” demanded Brandon.

“Gwine ter du? Seems you’ve no eyes, like,” retorted Blueskin thickly. “You’m not th’ ones tu stop I.”

“Will you sell us the dog?” asked the Patrol Leader.

“Noa, I won’t,” was the ungracious reply. “Thet pup ain’t no gude tu noabody. Teared my boots tu pieces, ’e did; so in t’water ’e goes. Get out o’ my way, I tell ye.”

The other Sea Scouts looked helplessly at the Patrol Leader. Brandon gave no sign. In the circumstances things looked hopeless. Blueskin had the whip-hand; or at least he thought he had.

He lifted both the puppy and the stone from the ground. . . . Grinned tauntingly at the lads. . . . Prepared to hurl the terrified animal to its doom.

Stepping behind his chums, Peter Craddock felt for his keen-edged knife. He had the ready knack of opening it with one hand. He did so, and as unostentatiously released it from the swivel.

“Let the brute throw the dog in,” he whispered in Brandon’s ear. “Don’t attempt to stop him.”

The Patrol Leader turned in amazement. One look at his chum’s determined features told him that Peter Craddock had something up his sleeve. Peter had: in a double sense. The keen blade, edge outwards, was nestling against his wrist.

There was a splash. The puppy, weighted by the heavy stone, struck the water six feet below the quay. A second later and Peter Craddock took a magnificent header close to the spot where the little animal had disappeared.

Craddock was a splendid diver. Three years in succession he had won a prize in the plate-diving competition at the Aberstour Regatta, and now he was putting his skill to a practical test.



A Cowardly Deed and a Plucky Rescue

The bully hurled the trembling puppy into the water below the quay, and immediately Peter Craddock took a magnificent header, his open knife in his hand ready to sever the rope which fastened the stone to the little animal's neck.

It was a difficult matter to see under the water in the failing daylight, but before the stone touched bottom, Peter's left hand caught the fiercely struggling puppy. One quick movement of the keen knife and the deed was

done. Still retaining his hold of the released animal, Craddock shot to the surface, and amidst the ringing cheers of his now thoroughly excited chums struck out for the stone steps at the end of the quay.

But Blueskin had yet to be reckoned with.

“That’s my pup,” he declared angrily, planting himself in front of the dripping Sea Scout. “’And ’im ower tu me. In ’e goes intu the ditch agen, I tells yu.”

“Excuse me,” protested Peter coolly. “It was yours. When you threw the dog in you threw away all rights to it. It’s ours now. . . . Take charge of it, please, Brandon.”

The Patrol Leader took the shivering pup. The animal, fearing further punishment, struggled frantically to gain the shelter of its rescuer’s protecting arms.

Carlo Bone was flabbergasted. His slowly acting brain was trying to think out the problem. No doubt that interfering “furriner” was right. He was a fool not to stop him from diving to the rescue. There yet remained the question of brute force. He would be more than a match for the whole crowd of “they Sea Scouts.”

“Gimme that dawg!” he shouted, striding towards the Patrol Leader.

Peter barred his way. Blueskin aimed a vicious blow at Craddock’s chest. The Sea Scout, in successfully evading the massive fist, stepped backwards. As he did so his rubber-soled shoes slithered on the stones, for no footgear is proof against the slippery quays of the West Country where fish have just been landed. He fell. The bully promptly dealt him a kick with his heavy sea-boot.

There is a limit to human endurance, even to that of a well-disciplined patrol of Scouts. In an instant Fred Heavitree planted himself between Blueskin and the prostrate Craddock.

Heavitree was the latest recruit to the “Otters.” He was a tall, slim youth of a somewhat retiring disposition, keen at his work and yet never before displaying any signs of unusual strength and activity. His chums were about to get one of life’s surprises; so was Blueskin.

“Keep back, you fellows,” cautioned Heavitree in a low yet compelling tone.

The bully, thinking he had an easy task, let out a terrific left. Had it reached its objective, Heavitree would have been lifted clean off his feet.

The Sea Scout was unable to spring back out of harm's way, because Craddock was still on the ground. Instead, without moving his feet, he inclined his body from the waist.

Blueskin's fist met nothing more resisting than air. Before he could recover his balance, the Sea Scout had him properly. A tremendous thud as Heavitree's left caught the bully fairly between the eyes was almost simultaneously followed by a heavy right straight to the *solar plexus*.

Heavitree stood his ground, guarding to meet a counter-attack. It was a judicious but unnecessary precaution, for Carlo Bone, his arms whirling like windmills, staggered backwards for three or four yards, and collapsed in a heap upon the rough pavement.

CHAPTER II

The Mascot

FOR some moments the Sea Scouts remained dumbfounded at their chum's prowess. Heavitree, by far the least perturbed, stood silently regarding the prostrate form of his late antagonist.

"You've killed him, Fred," exclaimed Wilson.

"Not I," replied Heavitree. "He'll be all right in ten minutes or so, 'cept perhaps for a bad headache. Did he give you much of a hack, Peter?"

"He tried to," said Craddock, as he examined his shin. The skin had been slightly lacerated and was bleeding a little. The moisture draining from the Sea Scout's saturated shorts and mingling with the crimson fluid made the abrasion look far worse than it actually was. "He tried to; but his feet sort of side-slipped. My word, Fred! That was a knock-out blow. Where did you learn that?"

Before the specialist in the art of "knocking out" could reply, a number of fisherfolk and villagers came hurrying to the quay. One of the number had seen Blueskin floored, and had communicated the news to the frequenters of the "Dog and Gun," with the result that "closing time" was anticipated for the first time in the annals of that ancient inn to the extent of nearly three minutes.

"Sakes, if 't isn't Blueskin!" exclaimed a bearded fisherman. "Laid out prapper-like, tu. 'Ave ye been hittin' he ower head with a hammer?"

"No," replied Brandon. "He went for one of us: kicked him. So Heavitree knocked him down."

"What with?" asked the astonished Cornishman.

"His fist. It was a fair blow," declared the Patrol Leader.

"Did he now? Us 'ud think 'twould take more'n a fist tu settle the loikes of 'e. We'm right glad, we'm is; but harkee—Blueskin's a twi'ble dangerous

man to fall foul wi'. He'll get his own back, loike, e'en if he's tu wait ten year. Isn't that so, friends?"

The other villagers nodded their heads.

"We'll look out, then," rejoined Brandon. "Well, there's nothing more to be done, I take it. Come on, Peter, and change your gear."

With the rescued puppy nestling in the Patrol Leader's arms the Sea Scouts returned on board, leaving the Polkebo folk to carry the still unconscious form of their unpopular fellow-villager to the ramshackle and sordid cottage which he called his home.

The Sea Scouts crowded into their partly finished cabin. The lamp had been lighted; a large iron kettle was on the stove. Compared with the comfortable cabin of the little *Puffin*, the place looked barn-like and cheerless. It had yet to be made into a really habitable cabin, but even now it was rain-proof and afforded the lads a shelter even if it were a case of "sleeping rough."

"Rummy looking little beast, what?" commented Brandon, pausing in the act of drying the puppy's coat to study the general appearance of the rescued animal. Even for a puppy its hair was long, its ears drooping. Neck, chest and forefeet were white, as was a blaze extending almost to the tip of its jet-black nose. The rest of the fur was of a dark grey hue.

"It's our mascot, anyway," declared Wilson. "My word, Peter; you were pretty smart in diving after it."

"Was I?" rejoined Craddock in a muffled tone as he struggled into a dry jersey. "I hadn't any idea how long I was under. It was just luck grabbing the pup as I did."

"What shall we call it?" enquired Symington.

"That's for Peter to say," replied Brandon. "He saved the pup. . . . Hello! Here's the dinghy alongside."

"Sorry I'm late, lads!" exclaimed Mr. Grant, as he stepped into the cabin, blinking as he did so at the strong light compared to the darkness without. "We've had rather an interesting yarn with Scoutmaster Pendennis, haven't we, Carline? His Sea Scouts are going to the Jamboree, too; so we'll—Hello! What's that?"

"Our mascot, sir," replied Brandon, holding out the pup for inspection.

"Where did you get it from?" asked Mr. Grant.

“It was that chap Carlo Bone’s, sir,” was the somewhat vague reply.

The Scoutmaster showed no great enthusiasm over the announcement. He did not like the idea of the lads accepting any favours from a surly good-for-nothing rascal of that type.

“Did he give it you?” he asked.

“No, sir,” replied the Patrol Leader. “He threw the pup into the creek, and Peter fetched it out. Then——”

“Suppose you tell the yarn from the beginning, Brandon,” said Mr. Grant quietly. “This sounds rather interesting.”

Frank Brandon did so. The Scoutmaster listened without making any comment until the story was completed.

“It served Blueskin right,” he remarked. “I’m sorry we’ve had a row, but he evidently asked for it. We’ll have to be careful when he’s about. I didn’t know, you were a budding pugilist, Heavitree. Where did you learn to use your fists?”

“At school, sir. We were taught boxing. I was supposed to be rather good at it; only one day I hit a fellow rather hard. It was a sparring match. I really didn’t mean to hurt him, but I did. After that I felt afraid of myself and dropped boxing.”

“We’ve won our mascot, haven’t we, sir?” enquired Brandon.

Mr. Grant assented.

“We were going to give it a name when you came back, sir,” said Peter.

“Carry on, then,” prompted the Scoutmaster. “What do you suggest?”

“Bruin, sir; it’s like a teddy bear.”

“H’m!” exclaimed Mr. Grant dubiously. “It’s hardly the correct thing to call a female dog by a masculine name. You’d better start on another tack. Well, that’s a matter for you fellows to discuss. How have you been getting on?”

“We’ve finished the bulkhead to your cabin,” announced Peter. “The cabin-top has had the first coat of paint ready for the canvas to be stretched. Wilson and Talbot have been fitting the bunks in the main cabin, so we won’t have to sleep on the floor in future.”

“That’s good!” said Mr. Grant encouragingly. “To-morrow if it’s fine we’ll polish off that cabin-top. We ought to have the masts stepped, and the

standing rigging set up by the end of the week. That reminds me: Scoutmaster Pendennis is taking a patrol to the Jamboree in the *Merlin*. We'll be cruising in company unless the *Merlin* is too smart for us. I hope our craft will prove to be fairly fast—enough to keep up with her. Talking about names: we haven't given our boat a name yet."

"How would *Kestrel* do, sir?" suggested Brandon. "A merlin is a sort of hawk, and so is a kestrel."

"Good idea!" agreed Mr. Grant. "Now, you fellows: supper and bed. We've another long day's work in front of us to-morrow. I don't fancy Mr. Carlo Bone will favour us with his undesirable attendance to-night."

In ordinary circumstances the Sea Scouts slept like logs. Already they were quite hardened to lying on bare boards. To-night for the first time since their arrival at Polkebo Creek, they were sleeping either on bunks extending the whole length and both sides of the main saloon or in hammocks slung from the beams. Yet, in spite of the great improvement in comfort, they showed no inclination for repose. They chattered, discussing a suitable name for their mascot and going over the events of that memorable evening until Mr. Grant's voice, coming from the adjoining cabin, bade them keep quiet.

After that the silence was broken only by the whimpering of the puppy. She, too, was doubtless going through the terrifying time when she was struggling under water weighted down by a stone.

It was not until Peter Craddock put his arm over the side of his bunk and stroked the now soft, silky hair that the little animal quieted down. Licking the hand of her rescuer, she gave a little sigh of gratification and confidence and dropped into a sound slumber.

Bodily tired though he was, Peter simply could not sleep. He lay thinking and thinking—which is a jolly bad symptom in a healthy youth. He was puzzling his brains to decide upon a suitable name for the *Kestrel's* mascot.

Presently he realised that fine rain was falling on the tarpaulin placed over the uncompleted cabin-top. It was a strange sort of rain—falling intermittently. It smelt strange, too.

"Petrol!" thought the lad.

He sniffed suspiciously. This surmise was confirmed. The interior of the cabin was reeking with the fumes of that highly inflammable spirit.

In a flash the Sea Scout's mind was alert.

There could be but one solution to the mystery. Blueskin, utterly reckless in his mad desire to revenge himself, was spraying petrol on the yacht's deck. At any moment a lighted match thrown by the miscreant on the quayside would make the *Kestrel* a mass of flaming woodwork.

CHAPTER III

An All-Night Watch

PETER CRADDOCK had to decide promptly upon his plan of action. Two courses suggested themselves: either to arouse Mr. Grant and give the alarm, or else to scare the miscreant away.

He decided upon the latter plan. Too much valuable time would be wasted in waking the Scoutmaster. More than likely the other Sea Scouts would be roused; and then, if one of them struck a match, the highly explosive mixture of air and petrol in the cabin would go up with terrific force. No; his best plan would be to frighten away the cowardly rogue, who was certainly counting upon the supposition that the crew of the *Kestrel* were sleeping soundly, in order to carry out his diabolical plan.

Grasping an electric torch that he always kept within hand's reach during the night watches, Peter slipped out of his bunk, glided noiselessly out of the cabin, and gained the cockpit. Then, directing the torch towards the quay, he released a dazzling ray.

He was too late to spot the miscreant. In spite of the Sea Scout's cautious movements, the man had heard the disturbing sounds. Afraid to complete his dastardly work, the fellow had taken to his heels. Peter could hear his boots clattering upon the stone paving.

It was now almost dead low water. The *Kestrel* was high and dry, supported by legs and lying parallel to and at a distance of a couple of yards from the quay, the edge of which rose quite eight feet above the deck. Consequently the quay served as a ridge to prevent the rays of Peter's torch sweeping the whole extent of the open expanse between the line of cottages and the creek.

By the time Craddock had gained the cabin-top, whence he could command a view of the adjoining ground, the fellow had disappeared. Although this escape of the miscreant was a disappointment, Peter realised that his hideous plans had been frustrated.

“Who’s there?” enquired Mr. Grant’s voice from the cabin. Aroused by Craddock’s movements—and it is remarkable how plainly the faintest sound can be heard on deck when only three-quarters of an inch of matchboarding intervenes—the Scoutmaster sat up, listening intently. Evidently the fumes of the petrol had not as yet penetrated the bulkhead separating his cabin from the one in which the seven Sea Scouts slept.

Before replying Peter re-entered the saloon. As he did so the puppy gave an aggressive growl. Brandon woke up.

“Phew!” he ejaculated. “What a whiff!”

“It is,” agreed Peter. “Turn out, old son, and rouse the others. Don’t let any of them strike a light. The place is chock full of petrol fumes.”

“What’s that—petrol fumes?” demanded Mr. Grant from the partitioned-off cabin.

“Yes, sir,” replied Craddock. “Can you come on deck? I’ve a torch handy.”

By this time the other Sea Scouts with one exception were “beginning to sit up and take notice.” During the process, Talbot, who was sleeping in a hammock, bumped his head against a deck beam. His swaying resting-place swayed still more, slinging him out and depositing him on one of the bunks where Wilson was sleeping soundly. Mutual protests arose only to be checked by the Patrol Leader, who bade the pair, “Stow that row and get your things on.”

Meanwhile Mr. Grant had hurriedly dressed. Making sure that every lad realised the supreme importance of refraining from striking a match, he told Brandon, Craddock, Heavitree, and Carline to follow him while the others dispersed the dangerous fumes from the interior of the saloon.

“Which way did the fellow go, Peter?” asked Mr. Grant.

Craddock told him.

“Away from his cottage, then,” continued the Scoutmaster. “Good! We’ll picket the place. A scoundrel like that deserves all he gets; but it’s just possible that he didn’t realise what might have happened. His idea might have been to set the yacht on fire and give us a scare. He may not know the properties of air and petrol as an explosive mixture. Although he only squirted the petrol on the tarpaulin on the cabin-top, the fumes, being heavier than the atmosphere, settled inside the boat.”

Accompanied by the four Sea Scouts, Mr. Grant made his way to Carlo Bone's cottage, a ramshackle stone structure of two storeys situated about a hundred yards from the furthest row of houses that formed the hamlet of Polkebo. At the back was a neglected garden of about a quarter of an acre in extent and enclosed by a low wall of ashlar masonry. There were two doors to the cottage, one opening directly upon the street, and gained by a flight of eight stone steps; the other led into the garden and was also reached by steps. The windows were small, heavily barred, and so high from the ground that it was impossible for anyone to see in without the aid of a ladder.

"It wants an hour and a half to sunrise," remarked Mr. Grant, after he had consulted the luminous dial of his wristlet watch. "Possibly Mr. Bone will return before then. I doubt whether he has had time to do so already. In any case, we'll investigate."

Posting Brandon and Heavitree at the front of the cottage, Mr. Grant followed by Craddock and Carline, scaled the low wall and crept up to the back door. The Scoutmaster flashed his torch upon the latch. A spider had built a web across the door. The air was warm and saturated with dew, and glistening particles of moisture hung from the undisturbed web. In fact, webs abounded. Almost every tree and shrub was festooned with them.

Obviously Blueskin had not re-entered his cottage by that door. Satisfied on that ground, Mr. Grant withdrew with his companions. The garden was, after all, private property. Legally the would-be victims were trespassing. In addition, they were laying themselves open to an act of violence should Carlo Bone return and find them there. The poacher, according to report, would not hesitate to use a gun or a knife should he find himself cornered.

Mr. Grant, however, had no wish to corner the fellow. For the present he wanted to be in a position to prove that Blueskin was the perpetrator of the outrage and a step in that direction was to be able to make certain that the man was away from his cottage. If so, on his return he would be almost sure to bring with him the reek of petrol, even if he had got rid of the implements by which he had sprayed the fluid.

"Now, you fellows," he said in a low voice, addressing Craddock and Carline, "I want you to keep a sharp look-out on the back of the cottage. Take cover, and keep your eyes and ears on the alert."

"And if he shows up, sir, do we tackle him?" asked Peter.

"Rather not; that's a job for the police. I'll look you up occasionally. I'll see what Brandon and Heavitree are doing."

Before rejoining the Sea Scouts posted in concealment in the front of the building, Mr. Grant examined the front door. Here, as in the case of the back entrance, the presence of an undisturbed spider's web gave conclusive proof that Blueskin had not entered the cottage by that means. Since he could not do so through the barred windows, the inference was that he was still away.

For the rest of the hours of darkness, the Scoutmaster divided his time between the *Kestrel* and the two observation posts. Everything seemed quiet. No sound came from either within or without the darkened cottage. If Carlo Bone were to return, it seemed probable that he would do so before dawn in order to avoid recognition from any of the early risers of the hamlet.

At length grey dawn paled in the north-eastern sky. The birds began singing, cocks crowed. The mist over the creek drifted slowly in the faint air-currents. In one of the cottages smoke began to issue from the squat stone chimney.

At sunrise the Scoutmaster withdrew his observers, replacing Craddock and Heavitree by Symington and Talbot. Wilson took Carline's place, but Craddock asked to be allowed to remain.

From the cottages men went forth unto their work and to their labour. On the rising tide the fishing boats put out. By five o'clock the whole place was astir.

Mr. Grant was frankly disappointed. The only result of the Sea Scouts' vigil was, in his opinion, that they had proved that Carlo Bone had not returned to his cottage.

"It's no use waiting any longer, lads," he said. "We'll get breakfast—you must all be ravenous—and then I'll see the police."

Even as he spoke, the front door of the cottage opened and Blueskin appeared. He was fully dressed, even to his cap and leather thigh-boots, while across one shoulder he carried a painted canvas sack. Both eyes were badly discoloured, and the scowling look he gave to the Sea Scouts added still further to the repulsiveness of his features. Once he paused as if he were about to utter a jibe, but thinking better of it, he trudged stolidly up the lane leading to the high road between Truro and Falmouth.

"We've been on the wrong tack this time, lads," declared the Scoutmaster. "He's been in his cottage all the time. Of course, he may have a confederate in this business: that we'll have to find out or get the police to see to. Meanwhile, breakfast, and then all hands turn in. It's spoilt our working day, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER IV

Investigations

THE SCOUTMASTER was perfectly correct in his surmise. Progress as far as the work on the *Kestrel* was concerned was virtually at a standstill for that day. There were limits to the Sea Scouts' powers of endurance. The loss of a night's rest following upon an exciting day was not to be made up by a few hours' sleep during the forenoon.

There was little rest for Mr. Grant. After breakfast his first visit was to the police station to report the case of attempted arson. The inspector listened with ill-concealed incredulity until somewhat reluctantly the Scoutmaster mentioned the name of Carlo Bone.

"I wish to goodness you were certain that was the fellow!" exclaimed the inspector. "We've been wanting to lay him by the heels for months past, but we can never fix him. He's as slippery as an eel. You say he assaulted one of your lads and got knocked down in the process. Knowing the man, I've no doubt but what he will try to score off you."

"Possibly," agreed Mr. Grant. "We felt so sure that he was the fellow that we kept watch on his cottage all night. He didn't go into the place. There were indisputable signs to show that neither of the doors had been open for some hours. At daybreak, or just after, he emerged from the cottage and went off."

"H'm!" ejaculated the inspector. "On the face of it, Carlo Bone could easily establish an alibi. I know the cottage. The windows are as heavily barred as a prison. Yet, knowing Bone as I do, it wouldn't surprise me to — By the by, have you missed any gear? No? Well, that's rather unfortunate in a way. Had you done so, we would examine the cottage inside and out on the strength of a search warrant."

"Do you think he has had an accomplice?" asked the Scoutmaster.

The inspector shook his head.

"I don't think so," he replied. "At least, not at Polkebo and district. He's not popular with his neighbours, and they'd welcome the news that he's doing a stretch. You are quite sure that it was petrol that was squirted over your yacht? Did you test the stuff?"

"If you mean did we set light to it to see if it would burn—no," answered Mr. Grant. "Apart from that the indications were unmistakable."

"I'll send a constable down to keep an eye on things," decided the inspector. "I don't think you'll have any trouble when he's about."

Mr. Grant thanked the police official and set off back to the boat. He was not at all easy in his mind. The situation in a nutshell was this: Some person or persons unknown had been guilty of a dastardly attempt to injure the lads under his care. Blueskin might be, and probably was, innocent of any knowledge of the matter. The miscreant might be a homicidal lunatic or a person harbouring an imaginary grudge against the crew of the *Kestrel*.

The Scoutmaster was within fifty yards of Carlo Bone's cottage when the toe of his boot kicked against a metallic object hidden in the long grass by the side of the path. He stopped and pulled aside the shoots. There, with one end overhanging a shallow dry ditch, was a garden syringe. The brasswork was dull, but not tarnished. The rim of the jet-nozzle was fairly bright, showing that at no distant date someone had had to use considerable force to remove it from the threaded end of the barrel.

Cautiously Mr. Grant removed the plunger and smelt the inside of the barrel. There were no fumes of petrol, but—significant fact—the leather washer, which usually is well saturated with oil, was bone dry. Had the syringe been used for squirting water the leather would have retained its dampness.

Mr. Grant's next step was to go to the "Dog and Gun," and ask for Silas Pescold, the landlord. Silas was a respected man in the little village, and one who would be likely to identify the syringe.

He did without hesitation.

"Sure, zur," he exclaimed. "Yes, Dick Marner's. Many's the time I've borried et of him."

"Marner? That's the man who walks lame, doesn't he?"

"Yes, zur; 'e broke 'is thigh come twenty year agoine aboard the old *Sarah*. Sin' then, seeing as 'e's no good in the boats, 'e's been doin' odd

gardenin' jobs for the quality hereabouts. Like as not you'll find him up-along. 'E lives in t'end cottage past the quay."

The end cottage past the quay! It was in this direction that the miscreant had made off when Peter Craddock interrupted his operations.

Marner was at home. It was one of his bad days. The easterly wind generally affected his damaged hip.

"Is this your property?" asked Mr. Grant, holding up the syringe for inspection.

"Sure, 'tes, zur," assented the old chap without hesitation. "If you'm wishful tu borrer ut you'm kindly welcome."

"I haven't come to borrow it, Mr. Marner," rejoined Mr. Grant. "I'm here to return it to you. I found it up the lane. Silas Pescold told me it was yours."

The old man puckered up his eye in astonishment.

"Found 'ut up-along, did 'e, zur?" he exclaimed. "That be tur'ble queer, seein' as I locked ut in the shed las' night."

"At about what time?"

"Afore it wur dark, zur."

"Evidently someone has broken into the shed," remarked Mr. Grant. "Have you been there to-day? Perhaps it would be as well if you did. I'll come with you, if I may?"

The old man led the way up a steeply sloping garden. In a corner formed by the junction of two hedges was a tumble-down structure composed of boats' planking, weatherboards, corrugated iron, and tarred felt. The lock was in position, but it was one of those cheap varieties which could easily be picked by means of a piece of bent wire.

Marner threw open the door. Within were a number of gardening tools, a pile of old sacks, a motor bicycle, and two tins of petrol.

"That's where I kept un," declared Marner. "It be gone, as ye see, zur. Nothin' else be touched as far as I can see."

"Evidently someone borrowed it and lost it," said the Scoutmaster. "That's a nice motor bike: you don't ride it, do you, Mr. Marner?"

The old man chuckled wheezily.

“Not wi’ this leg, zur. Yes, tes my boy Richard’s; same name as mine ’e be called. ’E wur a Scout same as your lads.”

“Well, I hope Master Richard isn’t mixed up in this business,” thought the Scoutmaster; then, aloud: “He’s not a Scout now, is he?”

Marner chuckled again.

“’E’s mate aboard th’ tawps’l schooner *Huterp* o’ Fowey,” he announced proudly. “She’s gone foreign wi’ a cargo o’ clay. Where eggsackly I can’t remember like. Reckon she’s about due back come a week or so; an’ if so happen you’m still hereabouts ye might see ’im.”

Mr. Grant gave a sigh of relief. It was with no slight degree of satisfaction that he realised the impossibility of Dick Marner, ex-Scout and the apple of the father’s eye, being implicated in this unpleasant business.

The while he was conversing with the old man, Mr. Grant kept his eyes wide open. There was nothing of the nature of a clue as far as the shed was concerned. The floor was of hard trodden clay. No tell-tale footprints had left their mark. Both petrol cans, judging by the undisturbed dust on them, had not been touched since Richard Marner, junior, had shipped on board the topsail schooner *Euterpe* of Fowey. But obviously the fellow who had broken into the shed knew his bearings. He was aware that there was a syringe; he wanted it, so he went to work to take it without disturbing anything else.

“Do you know of any of your neighbours who would borrow the syringe without asking you if they might?” enquired the Scoutmaster.

“No, zur,” replied Marner. “But why’m you so askifyng? You’m questionin’ me same as if I wur a pickpocket at Bodmin Fair.”

It was a perfectly reasonable request. In the circumstances, Mr. Grant realised that it was only fair to old Marner to explain the facts that led up to his visit.

“An’ you’m come here thinkin’ as ’ow my son Dick had a-set fire to your boat?” demanded old Marner angrily.

Mr. Grant hastened to pour unflammable oil upon troubled waters. In this he ultimately succeeded, and, taking leave of the old man, he returned to the *Kestrel*. So far his investigation had drawn blank; but, he reflected, his task was to prevent a repetition of the dastardly attempt. The detection of the offender might well be left in the hands of the police.

CHAPTER V

Adrift

FOR the next six or seven days the work of getting the *Kestrel* ready for sea proceeded apace. The final coat of paint had been applied and was now dry. Sails had been bent; running rigging overhauled and rove; extra ballast in the form of iron pigs had been stowed under the floor. Fresh water and provisions had been brought on board, and although there remained a considerable amount of “finishing off” work to be done, the *Kestrel* was in a fit and seaworthy condition to attempt her voyage up Channel.

No other disquieting incident had occurred during the period, while to add to the serenity of the situation definite information had been received that Blueskin Bone had shipped on board a tramp steamer at Falmouth and was now on his way to Rotterdam.

Meanwhile the *Kestrel's* mascot had been making steady progress. After much deliberation the Sea Scouts had decided to bestow the name of Molly upon the little animal. She was no longer the terrified, half-drowned puppy that Peter had rescued from the dark waters of the creek. Her coat, carefully combed and brushed, had acquired a gloss; her ribs were no longer painfully in evidence. Already she realised that a human hand could be something else than a means of imparting pain, although it was some time before she ceased to cringe in fear of a possible unwarranted thrashing.

“I wish Molly would be a little bit livelier,” remarked Peter. “I’ve never seen such a sedate pup.”

“Don’t you worry, old son,” rejoined Brandon. “She’s all right. P’raps before long she’ll be too lively, even for you. How about a collar for her?”

“Later on,” decided Craddock. “If she had one now she’d grow out of it in a week or so. I’ll make one when we’re under way. As it is, we haven’t a minute to spare.”

That was a fact. Time was getting on, and there was still much to be done if the *Kestrel* were to sail in company with the *Merlin*.

At length the eve of the eventful day arrived. To-morrow at the hour of ten in the morning the voyage up Channel was timed to commence, that hour being fixed to enable both yachts to take advantage of the first of the east-going tide.

The *Kestrel*, glistening in her new coat of paint, looked very different from the half-completed craft the Sea Scouts had taken over only a short while ago. She was now a ketch-rigged yacht with a spacious cockpit and ample accommodation under her cabin-top. Her original sails had been altered to form a serviceable and yet moderate spread of canvas. The only thing wanting was a motor; but, as Craddock observed, “Drake hadn’t a motor when he sailed round the world; so we ought to manage to find our way up Channel without one.”

“All the same I wish we had an engine,” said Carline. “The *Kestrel* is a whopping lump of a craft to move in a dead calm.”

“We may get a motor some day,” added Mr. Grant. “When we’ve been shipmates with one the lack of an engine seems a serious matter. We must cut our coat according to our cloth, you know. Now, lads, the tide’s making well. We’re nearly afloat, so get busy.”

The *Kestrel* was to be taken from Polkebo Creek that evening and sailed down to a berth off Greenbank at Falmouth, where the *Merlin* was lying, in order that both craft might start together.

Almost everyone in Polkebo turned out to see the *Kestrel* start, for with one exception (and he, it was to be hoped, was far away) the inhabitants of the hamlet were on excellent terms with the Aberstour Sea Scouts. There was also much speculation on the part of the professional seafaring folk as to how the amateur-altered ex-Service launch, manned chiefly by lads in their teens, would be handled.

Although there was a steady leading wind the houses and trees blanketed most of it; so without difficulty canvas was set, sheets overrun, and all preparation made before the rising tide floated the yacht off.

“She’ll do it now, lads,” exclaimed Mr. Grant. “Head-sheet to wind’ard, then! Cast off for’ard!”

The *Kestrel* held only by the stern-warp, swung slowly on her heel. She was afloat all right.

“Let go aft!” ordered the Scoutmaster. “Trim your fore and jib sheets.”

Almost imperceptibly the *Kestrel*, steady as a rock, gathered way. The crowd ashore cheered. The Sea Scouts responded lustily. The gap between the yacht and the quay widened. The water began to ripple under the yacht's forefoot. She heeled to the strengthening breeze.

"Take her, Brandon," said Mr. Grant, relinquishing the tiller. "She'll do."

Against the still flowing tide the *Kestrel* made steady progress. She was "as stiff as a house," and showed a decided tendency to carry weather-helm—a qualification that all craft under sail must possess if they are to be accounted seaworthy.

In less than half an hour the *Kestrel* hove-to within fifty yards of the *Merlin*, on which Scoutmaster Pendennis and his crew of hefty Cornish Sea Scouts were awaiting their approach.

"Sorry there are no moorings for you!" hailed Mr. Pendennis. "Let go your anchor. Tide's slackening. She'll ride head to wind all right."

The anchor was dropped, sails stowed, riding light trimmed ready to be hoisted at sunset. For the rest of the evening the crews "palled up," some of the *Kestrel's* going aboard the *Merlin*, while a part of the latter's complement came over to the *Kestrel*.

At sunset the Sea Scouts returned to their respective craft, had supper, and turned in. Giving a final look round and satisfying himself that the riding-light was burning clearly, Mr. Grant followed the example of his crew.

"No need to turn out before seven," he announced. "Get in a good night's rest while you've the chance. You never know when you'll get another when we're under way."

Peter Craddock was the first to awake. A pale grey light was filtering through the skylight. The *Kestrel* was rolling slightly, and the dinghy had just commenced to bump alongside.

"Turn of the tide, I expect," thought the lad drowsily. "It can't be much more than five o'clock. Too soon to turn out."

Casually he glanced at his watch; looked again and then held it to his ear. It was ticking merrily. The hands pointed to twenty minutes past seven. By that time it ought to be broad daylight. It wasn't.

Somewhat mystified, Peter rolled out of his bunk and went on deck. To his surprise a thick fog enveloped everything. From the companion ladder it was only just possible to discern the lower part of the mizzen-mast looking

grotesquely distorted in the watery haze. An uncanny silence prevailed. No sounds came from the near-by town. Then the distant wail of a syren came through the mist.

According to the state of the tide, the *Kestrel* should be riding to the last of the ebb. How came it then that the dinghy, instead of straining at her painter, was rubbing alongside the yacht's quarter?

"Something wrong," muttered Peter, and making his way for'ard along the damp and clammy waterway, he gained the bows. Then he felt the cable. The chain came up easily, and no wonder; for instead of there being ten fathoms of it, terminating in a seventy-pound anchor, only a dozen links or so were trailing uselessly through the hawse-pipe.

The *Kestrel* was adrift in a thick sea fog, and at the mercy of the swirling tide.

CHAPTER VI

In the Fog

“TURN out, you fellows!” shouted Craddock. “All hands on deck! We’ve parted our cable, and there’s a heavy fog on.”

The rest of the crew tumbled out of their bunks and hammocks and hurried into their clothes. They accepted Peter’s statement without any hesitation, for it was one of the few hard-and-fast rules on board that on no account was a false alarm to be knowingly raised. Skylarking in its proper place was encouraged and harmless practical joking permitted; but each Sea Scout had been impressed with the seriousness of the harm that might occur by raising the nautical equivalent to the shout of “’Ware Wolf!” when there was not one.

In various stages of “undress uniform,” Scoutmaster and Sea Scouts gained the deck. The lads remained silent, waiting for Mr. Grant’s orders. He was frankly puzzled. The *Kestrel* had been anchored surrounded by yachts and boats in the crowded anchorage of Greenbank. It seemed incredible that she should have drifted any distance without fouling some of the craft in the tideway.

Craddock had reported that the cable had parted. Mr. Grant hoped that such was not the case. He had known of anchors being dropped with one of the flukes caught in the bobstay and with only the bight of the chain resting on the bottom. He rather wished such was the case now.

“Get the fog-horn, Wilson,” he ordered. “Two blasts about every minute, please. And, Craddock, you might heave the lead. The others prepare to make sail.”

Groping his way for’ard, for the fog was so thick that even the still burning riding-lamp ten feet above the deck was invisible, Mr. Grant grasped the cable and hauled in the slack. One look was sufficient. The last of the remaining links had been deliberately cut through with a hack-saw. The rest of the chain, together with the anchor, was lying on the bed of Falmouth Harbour—miles away, probably.

It was no time for feelings of resentment and anger. The Scoutmaster came aft.

“What water have we?” he asked.

“No bottom, sir,” reported Peter.

Mr. Grant gave an involuntary gasp of astonishment. The lead-line, 25 fathoms, or 150 feet, in length, was insufficient to touch the bed of the sea.

“Bend another line to it,” he continued.

“I’m doing it already, sir,” announced Craddock.

“Good! . . . Now, how much?”

“Another four fathoms, sir,” reported the leadsman.

The Scoutmaster was on the point of going below, when Wilson stopped him.

“Why are we to give two blasts, sir?” he enquired. “Oughtn’t we to sound a bell or something like that? We’re supposed to be at anchor.”

Even in his worried state of mind, Mr. Grant did not hesitate to reply.

“It puzzled me what signal to make at first,” he answered. “Although we were anchored—that is to say, I thought we were—the *Kestrel* had obviously moved. In that case we are under way, and although we haven’t yet made sail, what wind there is is on our port beam. Consequently it is assumed that we are on the port tack; therefore, two blasts.”

“Where are we, sir?” asked Carline.

“That’s what I want to find out,” replied Mr. Grant. “I’m going below to look at the chart.”

Within the saloon the light was so dim that the lamp had to be lighted before it was possible to read the minute figures on the chart. Very soon the Scoutmaster’s worst fears were confirmed. Nowhere within Falmouth Harbour is a depth of twenty-nine fathoms to be obtained, even at the top of high-water springs. Obviously, then, the *Kestrel* had drifted with the tide right out of the harbour without colliding with any other craft and fortunately clearing the dangerous Black Rock that lies in the mouth of the harbour and approximately midway between the projecting arms of Pendennis and St. Anthony. According to the soundings, the *Kestrel* was somewhere on a line extending from the dreaded Manacles to the Dodman,

and might be anywhere between those points, a distance of approximately fifteen sea-miles.

It was not an envious position for the *Kestrel* to be in. There was no wind, but a very heavy fog. She might or might not be in the way of vessels making for or leaving Falmouth Harbour. If she drifted northwards she would sooner or later pile herself up upon the iron-bound coast. The same condition would apply if she drifted west'ard. Provided a breeze sprung up, the best course was to make for the open Channel, but even then there was a risk of being run down in the busy steamer track that passed a few miles to the south'ard of the Lizard. To attempt to grope their way back to Falmouth, starting from an absolutely unknown position, was out of the question.

Effectually concealing his anxiety, Mr. Grant returned on deck. By this time the Sea Scouts, under Patrol Leader Brandon's direction, had set all plain sail. Fortunately Frank had remembered the invisible riding-light on the forestay.

In the flat calm, although there was a light swell on, the canvas hung idly. From the cockpit only a part of the mainsail as far as the upper line of reef-points and a small portion of the mizzen were visible. The rest was swallowed up in the fog.

"This is the worst fog we've struck," remarked Craddock, as he coiled up the lead-line for another cast.

"It is," agreed the Scoutmaster. "Luckily we've plenty of sea-room."

"Plenty of sea-room, sir?" echoed Peter. "Where are we?"

"That, exactly, I don't know," confessed Mr. Grant frankly. "What I do know is that we've drifted right out of Falmouth Harbour and are in the English Channel. As a rule fogs don't last very long at this time of year. When the sun is well up there'll be a breeze and the mist will disperse. Meanwhile we must take things as we find them and be thankful they are no worse."

"I wonder what the *Merlin* is doing," remarked Brandon.

"Still on her moorings, I expect," hazarded Heavitree. "They'll think we've given them the slip."

"If the fog's anything like it is here they won't know we've gone," rejoined the Patrol Leader. "Unless they hail us," he added as an afterthought. "Wonder why the cable parted? We tested it carefully when we stowed it aboard the first time."

“This is the reason,” announced Mr. Grant, producing the cut link from his pocket. “Someone has been monkeying about with the chain. It has been deliberately cut through with a hack-saw. When and by whom remains a question.”

“Blueskin?” enquired Symington and Talbot simultaneously.

“Perhaps, but unlikely,” replied the Scoutmaster. “I’m basing my idea upon the assumption that Carlo Bone has had a sea training. Some miscreant, probably the fellow who squirted petrol over the *Kestrel*, has an imaginary grievance against us. He’s been trying to destroy the yacht by the most underhanded methods imaginable. Failing to set her on fire, he cut through this link, knowing that it would still bear any ordinary strain, but not a heavy one. He was counting upon the cable parting while we were riding at anchor in some harbour during a stiff gale. Now, a seaman wouldn’t cut a link in that fashion—with the cut away from the yacht’s bows. He would saw through the other end of the link so that when it did part it would go with the outboard portion of the cable, and thus cover up all trace of his underhand work.”

“But it might have been Blueskin,” remarked Wilson.

“Yes, it might,” agreed Mr. Grant, “but having misjudged him once I don’t feel justified in laying the blame upon him. Not that we are likely to discover the culprit. Now I think we might see about a somewhat belated breakfast.”

While Talbot and Wilson, “the cooks of the day,” went below to prepare the meal, the others set about various tasks on deck. Craddock continued to heave the lead at about five minutes’ intervals, the soundings remaining fairly regular. Carline took over the manipulation of the fog-horn, standing by the now useless tiller in case a puff of wind should bear down through the barrier of fog.

Brandon and Heavitree assisted the Scoutmaster to bend the cable to the kedge. Fortunately there still remained between fifteen and twenty fathoms of the former, but in the absence of a long link there was no means of shackling it direct to the kedge—a small anchor of about twenty-five pounds in weight. Consequently the chain had to be made fast to the ring in the kedge by a “fisherman’s bend,” the end being stopped with wire to guard against any possibility of the knot slipping.

“Brekker nearly ready?” enquired Brandon, calling through the open skylight.

"It is," replied Talbot, "but you won't get any till you've cleared up below."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Patrol Leader, "I'd forgotten that! Come on, lads; let's square up and make all ship-shape below."

The saloon was in a bit of an untidy state. The Sea Scouts on their hurried exit for the deck had tumbled out of bunks and hammocks, leaving the former littered with blankets and the latter swaying to and fro from the deck-beams. The bedding was passed out, shaken, and folded; the hammocks unshipped and stowed in their accustomed places when not in use. Quickly the disordered saloon assumed a semblance of tidiness.

"Where's Molly?" enquired Brandon.

No one knew. She had been last seen asleep in a box under Craddock's bunk.

All hands below joined in the search. They called the pup by name, hunted high and low, but without success.

"S'pose she wasn't in one of the blankets when we shook them overboard?" suggested Heavitree.

"Now you mention it, I think I did hear a sort of splash," said Symington. "It was too thick to see."

"Let's hope not," continued Heavitree. "She's not big enough to climb the companion ladder."

"What's the matter, lads?" enquired Mr. Grant, entering the cabin and removing his dripping cap.

"We've lost Molly, sir," announced Brandon dolefully.

The Scoutmaster sat down on one of the settees. As he did so a growl of protest came from the neighbourhood of his back. Turning, he raised one of the side-cushions. There, in a small recess formed between the two cushions, was the missing pup together with about nine-tenths of a shoe.

"Peter, old man!" sang out the Patrol Leader, "Molly's been lost. We've found her making a meal of your shoe. Jolly careless of you to leave your gear all over the place."

Craddock, from whom the news of his special pet's disappearance had been hitherto kept, temporarily abandoned his sounding operations and came below.

“Naughty pup!” he said reprovingly.

Molly, no wise daunted, looked fearlessly up into her master’s face and struggled to give him a lick of devotion and affection.

“She wouldn’t be so brave a week ago,” remarked Brandon. “Don’t hit her, Peter.”

“No fear,” replied his chum. Then he critically examined the damaged footgear.

“Strikes me, old son, you’ve made a slight mistake,” he continued, addressing Brandon. “It’s not my shoe; it’s yours.”

The others roared at the Patrol Leader’s discomfiture, but Brandon took it in good part.

“That shows Molly’s sense of discrimination,” he retorted, taking the shoe from Peter’s hand. “It’s one of my second best. Where’s the other one, I wonder?”

He searched and discovered it in his kit-bag, together with one of his best shore-going pair. A further hunt failed to find the other. Molly, with her sense of discrimination, had taken two odd ones from the Patrol Leader’s kit-bag, and of these one had been thrown overboard by Symington when he had shaken out his blankets. To make matters worse the odd shoes were both lefts.

Breakfast was dispatched in grand style. The Sea Scouts were in high spirits. The fact that they were surrounded by fog hardly troubled them. They were afloat in one of the soundest craft imaginable for her size, and, what was more, they were bound for the Jamboree. If necessary they had sufficient provisions and fresh water for a week.

Nor was Mr. Grant perturbed. Now that he realised the *Kestrel* had plenty of sea-room, he had little to worry about. On a still day such as this, sounds could be heard for quite a long distance, and since the continual roar of the Channel swell against the iron-bound coast was inaudible he knew that any danger of the yacht being cast ashore by the strong and intricate currents of the district was a remote one.

Noon came, bringing with it no breeze to disperse the dense pall of mist. At times the fog lifted sufficiently to enable the bowsprit-end to be seen; at others it was a matter of difficulty to distinguish objects six feet away.

The while the *Kestrel* was underlying in the game of “chasing her own tail.” Absolutely drifting in a dead calm, she was powerless to answer to her

helm. Her bows swung round very slowly through every point of the compass and continued to do so. Yet the while, judging by the drag of the lead-line when allowed to remain in the bottom, she was being swept in an easterly direction by the two-knot tide. Well away to the south'ard came an almost continual braying of many sirens. The steamer track was as yet a safe distance off.

By two in the afternoon the crew began to find time hang heavily on their hands. The reaction of having nothing definite to do following upon days of strenuous activity from morn to night was telling. They could see nothing beyond the limits of their floating home, and hardly that. There was plenty to be done by way of "finishing off" various jobs below, but the light was too dim to enable anything in that line to be attempted. They coiled down or "flemished" every rope on deck, spun yarns, tried to teach their overfed and decidedly sleepy mascot various tricks—all without success.

"Wish the fog would lift," remarked Carline.

"And a breeze spring up," added Heavitree, looking wistfully at the idle canvas.

The Scoutmaster, too, was puzzled, not only by the persistency of the fog, but by the absence of sound from any of the shore signal stations. In vain he kept listening for the fog signals from the Lizard. That dangerous headland might be only a few miles away and yet the sound be inaudible. Fog, he knew, plays strange tricks with sound. Frequently there are zones of silence over which sounds leap to be distinctly audible at a long distance beyond the source of emission. All he knew concerning the *Kestrel's* position was that she was drifting slowly in a south-easterly direction, but that on the turn of the Channel tide—which by no means coincided with the time of high and low water on the shore—the yacht would be swept in the reverse direction and possibly be driven aground on the dangerous coast between the Lizard and the Manacles.

No wonder he wished fervently for the fog to lift.

The hours passed slowly. It was not until nearly eight o'clock that a faint breeze ruffled the water and the wall of vapour began to disperse.

"Hurrah! a breeze!" exclaimed Brandon, as the hitherto idly-playing main boom swung out and tugged gently at the mainsheet.

"What course, sir?" asked the Patrol Leader, as the *Kestrel* gathered way.

"Sou'-sou'-east," replied Mr. Grant. "It'll mean a night afloat, lads."

“Good egg!” ejaculated Heavitree.

The Scoutmaster wasn’t so sure about it. Possibly there would be half a gale of wind when the fog did disperse; and until it did the *Kestrel* must have plenty of sea-room. To attempt to make a strange harbour in a mist and with only a few remaining hours of daylight was asking for trouble.

The breeze held; but the mist, although diminishing in density, continued to hang about in irregular patches.

“Keep your eyes skinned, lads!” continued Mr. Grant. “We ought to be seeing land on our port quarter.”

“Sail ahead!” sang out Craddock.

CHAPTER VII

The Derelict

“**D**OWN helm!” ordered Brandon, in his capacity of officer of the starboard watch. “At that! Keep her so!”

The *Kestrel*, answering readily to a slight pressure on the tiller, changed her course to bring the other craft on her port bow.

“If we pass within hailing distance they might be able to give us our position,” remarked the Patrol Leader.

Quickly the stranger loomed up in the dispersing mist, for by this time visibility extended to nearly a quarter of a mile. She turned out to be a schooner. Her topsails were furled, but her fore and aft canvas was set, the head-sails being to wind’ard. Under these conditions she was “hove-to” with a decided list to port.

As a precautionary measure the *Kestrel* announced her approach by three blasts of her fog-horn, for the wind was well abaft the beam. No reply came from the schooner.

“Careless look-out, what?” observed Peter.

“I fancy there’s something amiss,” replied Brandon. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone on board. What shall we do, sir?”

Mr. Grant, thus appealed to, shook his head.

“You’re standing your trick, Brandon,” he replied. “Officially I’m not on duty. Use your own discretion.”

The Patrol Leader warmed at the implied compliment. He knew the Scoutmaster’s views. As far as prudence dictated, Mr. Grant left the seamanship entirely to his youthful crew. It was the best way to enable them to gain confidence in themselves. He was merely a sort of referee, ready to assist by advice and deed should the Sea Scouts commit any serious error. Not that they often did. He had great confidence in the skill and resourcefulness of his crew.

“Stand by to go about!” ordered Brandon. “We’ll run under her lee and see if anything is wrong with her.”

Full and by, the *Kestrel* passed a full hundred yards to lee’ard of the schooner, and then the mystery was in part solved. The vessel had been in collision. Most of her counter had been carried away, the damage extending almost, if not quite, to the water line. She was well down by the stern—possibly not far short of foundering. There was no sign of a boat. Apparently the crew had abandoned her and had either made for the shore or else had been picked up by the craft that had run the schooner down. Owing to the severe damage to the stern, her name and port of registry were not to be seen, but by the yellow letters on her bow the derelict proclaimed herself to be the *Euterpe*.

“That name seems familiar,” thought Mr. Grant. “Where have I heard that? I remember. Old Richard Marnier told me his son was on her—*Huterp*, he pronounced the name.”

“Lee-o!” ordered Brandon. “Head sheets to wind’ard! Gather in your mainsheet roundly!”

The *Kestrel* went about slowly yet unhesitatingly and hove-to on the starboard tack within fifty yards of the *Euterpe*’s starboard quarter.

“I’ll send the dinghy off to her, sir,” said the Patrol Leader. “There might be someone on board.”

“Do so,” agreed Mr. Grant. “I’ll take charge of the dinghy. We must be very careful how we go alongside. She won’t last very much longer, I fancy.”

The boat was hauled up alongside the *Kestrel*. Into her jumped the Scoutmaster and Craddock and Heavitree.

A few strokes brought the dinghy to the abandoned schooner. She was so low aft that it was quite an easy matter to board her by the main chains. The Scoutmaster did so, bidding the two lads hang on, but to be ready to push off should the vessel show a tendency to hasten her departure to Davy Jones’ locker.

Almost as soon as he gained the deck, Mr. Grant caught sight of a black cat sitting close to the companion leading to the cabin.

“There’s a cat aboard, lads!” he announced, going to the rail and addressing the crew of the dinghy. “I’ll hand it down to you.”

“At this rate we’ll have a regular menagerie on the *Kestrel* before we reach Chichester Harbour,” remarked Peter to his companion. “Hope the animal will make friends with Molly.”

The Scoutmaster walked slowly towards the cat, calling “Puss, puss!” in a coaxing tone. The animal, however, showed no enthusiasm at the prospect of being rescued. In fact, it evinced a decided reluctance to do so; and, waiting until Mr. Grant was within a couple of yards or so, it turned and bolted down the ladder.

Mr. Grant followed. It was a risky business going below, with the schooner in danger of making a sudden plunge.

At the foot of the companion ladder was a small lobby with two doors. The starboard door was shut; the other one ajar. Obviously the cat had taken refuge in the cabin on the port side.

Before pursuing the animal, the Scoutmaster opened the door of the starboard or captain’s cabin. Everything was in order. The skipper must have been on deck when the collision occurred and had not waited to save his personal belongings before taking to the boat.

Closing the door, Mr. Grant stepped into the other cabin. At the after end pale daylight showed through the jagged gap in the counter. Water gurgled sullenly under the floor, a portion of which had been violently up-heaved by the compact, causing the swing table to be capsized together with a quantity of splintered woodwork.

“Puss! puss!” he called again. “Bother the animal! Where’s it got to?”

Suddenly the Scoutmaster caught sight of a man’s legs protruding from the pile of debris. The occupant of the cabin had been caught and pinned down—crushed more than likely—by the sudden and unexpected blow of the colliding vessel’s bows.

A few minutes’ desperate work enabled Mr. Grant to remove most of the tightly wedged woodwork and disentangle the motionless form of the luckless man. Then, without waiting to see whether he were alive or dead, the Scoutmaster dragged him out of the cabin, up the steep and narrow ladder, and across the deck.

“Stand by, Peter!” he exclaimed breathlessly, and passing a bowline round the unconscious form, he unceremoniously lowered him into the dinghy.

“I’ll have a look into the forepeak in case there’s anyone else!” he announced.

“Where’s the cat, sir?” shouted Craddock, after the retreating form of his Scoutmaster.

The question was answered by the animal itself. Springing on the bulwarks, the cat leapt fearlessly into the boat and proceeded to curl itself upon the chest of the motionless figure in the stern-sheets.

Presently Mr. Grant returned.

“No one else is aboard,” he reported. “Hello! You’ve got the cat, I see!”

Cautiously he lowered himself into the dinghy and crouched in the bows. There was no room aft.

“Push off, and give way, lads!” he exclaimed.

By this time the *Kestrel* had forged ahead and had increased her distance to about a cable’s length. The dinghy had not covered more than two-thirds of the distance when the stricken *Euterpe* disappeared beneath the surface.

She went with very little fuss. There was a slight explosion of compressed air, followed by a swirling movement of the water. There appeared to be very little suction and hardly any commotion in the form of breaking waves; but—and Mr. Grant gave an inward prayer of thanks—the schooner had heeled to starboard as she disappeared. Had the dinghy been close alongside she would have been crushed by the vessel’s mainmast or else entangled in the still set canvas as the schooner capsized.

The rowers rested on their oars and watched the vessel’s disappearance with awestruck faces.

“That was a close shave for us,” said Heavitree, breaking the silence.

“It was,” agreed Mr. Grant. “Give way; another dozen strokes will do the trick.”

The dinghy ranged up alongside the *Kestrel*. Craddock and Heavitree held on while the Scoutmaster handed the heavy burden of the motionless man to the ready arms of Brandon and his companions.

The dinghy was made fast by the painter, but the *Kestrel* was still kept hove-to while the crew attended to the rescued man.

“He’s still alive,” declared Mr. Grant. “That’s what stunned him.”

He pointed to a nasty gash in the man's temple from which the blood was flowing slowly. In fact, it had almost ceased to do so, indicating that the injury had been done at least two hours ago. In addition, his right foot was badly nipped, with a superficial but nasty graze extending the whole length of the shin-bone.

"No fracture," pronounced Mr. Grant after a careful examination of the limbs. "First aid dressings, please, Brandon. We'll leave him in the cockpit till he recovers consciousness, but keep his body and limbs warm with blankets. He'd better have my bunk to-night."

"Why, your hand's bleeding, sir," exclaimed Carline.

The Scoutmaster glanced at his right hand. There was a small scratch extending from the base of the middle finger almost to the centre of the palm.

"Nothing much," he remarked. "I expect I caught the business end of a piece of splintered wood. I didn't even feel it. . . . Get way on her, Peter! Same course, please; we can't do better than that."

Presently, judging by sounds emanating from the saloon, Molly and the cat were "having a few words." The pup was barking shrilly, while the other animal, with arched back, was replying in no uncertain voice.

"Let them alone, and they'll make friends," remarked Peter to Talbot, who had expressed his intention of going below and separating the "menagerie." "The more you jolly well interfere the worse they'll be—sort of showing off."

"I wonder if the sea superstition will hold good in our case," asked Carline. "They say a black cat on board a ship always brings a gale of wind."

Craddock glanced astern. Twilight was stealing over the misty sea. Through the gathering gloom came a dismal whine—the sound that often heralds the approach of a squall.

"We haven't long to wait for it, lads!" he exclaimed, making a spring for the cleated mainsheet. "It's here now!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Man they Rescued

THE *Kestrel* was in an unfavourable position to withstand the first of the squall. She was running almost dead before the present breeze. Should the blast come from even a slightly different direction there was the great risk of an involuntary gybe. The main and mizzen booms would swing over with terrific force and either carry away the runners or else spring one or both masts.

Fortunately, Craddock kept his head. Shouting to Talbot to ease the head-sheets, he put the helm down gently.

The squall came. In spite of the canvas shaking as the wind “spilled” it, the ketch heeled till her lee rail was awash; then, recovering, she leapt forward like a racehorse as Peter cautiously took a strain on the mainsheet.

At a warning shout, Mr. Grant hurried up from below, saw what Craddock had done, and nodded approval.

“She’s as stiff as a house,” he exclaimed reassuringly. “All the same, we’ll have the mizzen sail off of her while it’s still light . . . and the big jib as well. Bear a hand, Brandon, to get our patient below. He may get knocked about if he remains here.”

The injured man was showing signs of returning consciousness. He moaned as he was being lifted, opened his eyes, and gazed blankly into the Scoutmaster’s face.

“You’re all right,” said Mr. Grant consolingly.

The patient closed his eyes and gave no further sign of movement. With difficulty, owing to the erratic motion of the yacht, they carried him down the narrow companion way and into the Scoutmaster’s cabin.

While this was being done Craddock put the *Kestrel* into the wind and hove-to, while canvas was being reduced. Stowing and furling the mizzen sail was accomplished with little difficulty; but the task of taking in the No.

1 jib and substituting the No. 3 took some doing. The yacht pitched so violently in the rapidly rising sea that Heavitree and Symington, on whom this task devolved, were frequently waist-deep in water as they knelt on the fore-deck and struggled with out-haul and jib-halliards and sought to muzzle the fiercely flapping canvas.

At last the business of reducing sail was accomplished, and the *Kestrel* put on her former course. With whole mainsail, staysail, and baby-jib she made splendid weather of it. In fact, she could have stood more canvas; but in view of night approaching it was prudent to keep her well under control, especially as the now hard wind might increase in force.

Meanwhile the side-lights had been placed in position. Both had been tested during the process of fitting out, but now for some unaccountable reason the starboard lamp refused to keep alight.

“This is no light matter on a dark night,” said Heavitree. “No joke intended, Peter! Any good trying a handkerchief round the ventilation holes?”

“Might do it,” replied Craddock. “It seems as if the thing isn’t getting enough air as it is. However, see what you can do.”

Cautiously making his way for’ard, Heavitree grasped the shrouds with one hand and with the other removed the lamp from the screen. He had to take it into the saloon to relight it, and at the same time he wound his handkerchief loosely round the lower part of the lamp. Almost as soon as he regained the cockpit the light went out.

“You’re whacked, old son!” exclaimed Craddock.

“Am I—you see!” retorted Heavitree as he went below again with the extinguished lamp.

In a few minutes he returned with the green light gleaming exceptionally brightly. Curiously Peter watched his chum go for’ard, expecting every second to see the light vanish. It didn’t.

Heavitree refixed the lamp and came aft. It gave no further trouble. The resourceful Sea Scout had removed the oil reservoir and had substituted his small electric flash lamp.

The *Kestrel* was now maintaining quite a good speed. Peter took it to be at least eight knots, but perhaps like most amateurs he was apt to overestimate the vessel’s rate. In spite of the curling, crested waves, she came through with hardly any water on her decks, and although at times the

following seas appeared high and menacing, she rode them in a manner that gave everyone the greatest confidence in her seagoing qualities.

“Light on the port bow, sir!” reported Wilson.

“Your eyes are sharper than mine, then,” rejoined the Scoutmaster, after a prolonged look in the direction indicated.

“There it is again, sir,” declared the lad. “Two quick flashes!”

“I see them, too,” added Talbot.

“So do I,” agreed Mr. Grant. “Well, now we know where we are, more or less. That’s the Eddystone.”

He took a rough compass bearing and went below to apply the reading to the chart. The result rather surprised him. According to the calculation, the *Kestrel* ought to have been farther to the south’ard. Either there was considerable deviation of the compass, or else the yacht had been carried northwards by a tidal current. Leeway did not enter into the problem, as the *Kestrel* had been running free—except for two brief intervals—from the time she picked up the breeze.

It was something to be able to pick up the Eddystone light, but the knowledge alone could not determine the *Kestrel’s* position. A second bearing cutting the first as near as possible at right angles would fix that.

By the aid of his night glasses, the Scoutmaster swept the horizon away to the nor’ard, hoping to pick up St. Catherine’s light at the entrance to Fowey Harbour. But the night was still hazy, and the light was invisible.

A tramp steamer passed at about a cable’s length to port. The moon emerging from a bank of scudding clouds showed her plunging heavily into the head seas. Frequently showers of glistening spray completely hid her bows and flew high over her bridge. Yet the *Kestrel*, flying before the wind, was making easy weather of it.

Mr. Grant was now confronted with a difficult problem: whether to carry on or to bear up and run for shelter into Plymouth Sound. On first thoughts he favoured the latter alternative. With an injured man on board, and having several hours before dawn to make for shelter, this seemed the obvious thing to do. Then he considered the difficulties. He had never been into Plymouth before. He was a stranger to the intricate currents inside the breakwater. The Sound and Hamoaze were generally crowded with shipping. The numerous navigation and riding-lamps were apt to be particularly perplexing to a

stranger, and there was no small risk of disaster should an error of judgment occur.

On the other hand, the *Kestrel* was proving herself to be a capital sea-boat. Better then to hold on, keeping plenty of sea-room, and gain the sheltered waters of Start Bay at daybreak.

Mr. Grant chose the latter alternative and stuck to it. Indecision he held to be worse than incompetence. A person in charge of a vessel and unable to make up his mind was a menace to his crew; an incompetent skipper, although a despicable character, could be superseded in a critical situation by a better man.

Keeping Craddock and Heavitree on deck, the Scoutmaster took the helm and told the rest of the crew to turn in. The two hefty Sea Scouts were sufficient to assist him in the management of the yacht in a stiff blow at night. The others would only be in the way. In addition they would be as limp as rags in the morning.

At 1 a.m. the Eddystone was abeam at a distance of about two miles. It was still too hazy to pick up the powerful Start light, and there was no object in “cracking on” and arriving off that dangerous headland before dawn.

Accordingly a couple of reefs were taken in the mainsail, and the staysail was lowered and “bonneted” to the bowsprit. Even then the *Kestrel* maintained a fair speed and rode the waves like a cork, with the dinghy’s bows high in the air as she strained at the end of a double length of stout 50-foot rope.

“Isn’t this top-hole, sir?” exclaimed Peter enthusiastically. “I’d rather be in the *Kestrel* than in that tramp which passed us some time ago.”

Before the Scoutmaster could offer any remark Brandon came out of the cabin.

“The man has come to,” he announced oracularly.

“How does he feel? Did he say?” asked Mr. Grant.

“Said he was thirsty, sir.”

Telling Craddock to take the helm, Mr. Grant went below.

He found the rescued man quite rational in spite of the serious injury to his head. Reiterating the fact that he was thirsty, he continued by asking where he was.

The Scoutmaster explained.

“You’re quite safe,” he continued. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with the limited accommodation on board until we can put you ashore. I’ll give you something to drink; after that you must try all you can to get to sleep.”

“It du seem queer loike tu wake up an’ find myself here,” said the man, as he watched the preparation of the beverage. “Last I remember wur I wur sittin’ in——”

“Don’t worry about that now,” interrupted Mr. Grant. “After you’ve slept a few hours it will be interesting to hear your story. What’s your name, by the by?”

“Marner—Dick Marner,” was the not altogether unexpected reply.

CHAPTER IX

What Marner Revealed

“LIGHT on our port bow, sir!” reported Craddock.
“How far off?” asked Mr. Grant, through the open skylight.

“Miles, sir,” replied Peter. “Another lighthouse, I fancy.”

“Good! I’ll be on deck in a minute,” rejoined the Scoutmaster.

Having reassured himself that Marner was comfortable and almost on the point of falling asleep, Mr. Grant left the cabin and entered the saloon. Here he paused and held his hand close to the swinging lamp.

“H’m!” he remarked in an undertone, as he examined the somewhat jagged cut. “It’s a case of the cobbler being the worst shod, I suppose. I’m always impressing upon the boys the absolute necessity of guarding against blood-poisoning, and in my case it’s precept without practice. Better late than never: I’ll smother the gash with iodine.”

He opened the medicine-chest, found and uncorked the iodine bottle.

“Finger’s throbbing already, I fancy,” he continued.

“How’s your hand, sir?” asked Brandon. “Let me bind it up for you.”

“Thought you were sound asleep, Frank,” remarked the Scoutmaster.
“Thanks awfully, if you will.”

The Patrol Leader slipped out of his bunk and, taking the bottle, poured a few drops into the jagged wound. The sting of the iodine made Mr. Grant wince.

“That ought to do the trick, sir,” continued Brandon. “I’ll put a bandage round your hand. I wouldn’t use it if I were you; but there, you know all about that sort of thing, sir.”

“I’m supposed to,” admitted the Scoutmaster. “Unfortunately, when it comes to a personal matter one is apt to let such things slide. That’s quite

comfortable. Now I'll see what the watch on deck are doing."

"Do you want me, sir?" asked Brandon. "I'll turn out, if you like. I'd be only too pleased to."

"No need," replied Mr. Grant. "Sleep while you can. I may want you when we enter harbour, but that may be hours yet."

Going on deck, Mr. Grant found that the light Peter had reported was two points on the port bow. By the nature of the flashes—one every second—he recognised it as The Start.

"We're timing things very nicely," he observed. "By the time that light's abeam, it will be dawn. Then we'll have to close haul in the first tack and get under the lee of the line. We'll make for Dartmouth and land our passenger. He's just told me his name is Marner, son of old Dick Marner."

"The pal of Blueskin Bone, sir?"

"Hope not," replied Mr. Grant, laughing. "The old man denied the acquaintanceship. However, that's done with; Blueskin fades out of the picture like a bad dream."

Almost before the fact could be realised dawn broke. A rosy flush spread over the north-eastern sky, revealing a turmoil of angry, grey-crested waves, for the *Kestrel* was only a mile or so to the south'ard of The Start, and was feeling the effect of the weather-going tide surging over the ledge of submerged rocks, extending from that bold and dangerous headland.

The yacht was rolling heavily as she ran, but her seaworthiness was now fully established. She was making better weather of it than a vessel of three or four times her tonnage.

"Nor'east a quarter north, now," ordered the Scoutmaster. "A pull on the mainsheet, Heavitree. I'll see to the head-sheets."

Craddock put the helm down. Round came the *Kestrel* until the youthful helmsman "met her" on the required course. She was now almost, but not quite, close-hauled. The rolling motion gave place to a fairly steady heel. Showers of spray flew inboard over her weather bow, while her lee-bow wave creamed and frothed in a way that gave a fairly true indication of the speed she was making. After running for hours the sense of being close-hauled was unmistakably thrilling.

"Isn't she hopping it, eh?" exclaimed Heavitree, as he coiled down the flake of the mainsheet. "Hello, sir! Look what you've done."

The Scoutmaster followed the direction of the Sea Scout's glance. The bandage on his hand was dyed red.

"Must have opened the cut when I handled the jib-sheet," he thought. "Well, it's a good thing it was covered up; no dirt can get to it."

"It's nothing much," he remarked casually. "Now, you fellows, let's see who has the keenest eyesight. There should be a conical buoy on our port bow about a couple of miles off."

"I see it, sir!" exclaimed Heavitree almost at once. "It's dead on with our bowsprit-end."

"Is it, by Jove!" ejaculated Mr. Grant. "Up helm, Peter! At that! We're closer in than I thought. We might have piled the *Kestrel* on The Skerries. See those houses just under The Start? That's Beesands, or what's left of it. Most of the village was washed away in a gale. The fishermen there train dogs to swim out to the returning boats and swim back with a line. It takes some doing in a rough sea. We're in smoother water now. Do you see that high point of land ahead, Peter? Steer for that; never mind the compass."

Pointing out various places of interest ashore, Mr. Grant chatted briskly in order to arouse the obviously flagging spirits of the two lads. They had stuck it well during the night watches, and now they kicked against the suggestion that they should go below to be relieved by Brandon and Talbot.

"Why not bother about the compass, sir?" asked Peter.

"Because for the present it isn't absolutely necessary," explained Mr. Grant. "When you've a fixed object to steer by, it saves the strain of peering into the binnacle-hood. You fellows have had quite enough of that to-night, or rather last night. Now, Heavitree, nip below and get the stove going. Nothing like a cup of hot cocoa in the early morning after a long trick. When it's ready, tell Brandon to turn out. We'll want an extra hand if we have to beat in. This wind will head us, I fancy, when we're abreast the Homestone."

The *Kestrel* was now so steady that Heavitree had no difficulty in lighting the stove. In about ten minutes his tousled head appeared, framed in the companion.

"Cocoa's ready, sir," he announced, "and all the others are awake and want cocoa too."

"You want me, sir?" asked Brandon, as he edged past Heavitree in the companion.

“Yes, please,” replied Mr. Grant. “Have your cocoa and a biscuit first, then tell the others to get their breakfasts when they’re dressed. We don’t want too many on deck, if we’ve to tack in. And, while you are about it, you might hand me the chart of Dartmouth Harbour.”

Six o’clock was striking as the *Kestrel*, at one moment heeling to the fierce blasts that swept down from the lofty ground and at another gliding with canvas hanging idly in a flat calm, made her way between the twin castles of St. Petrox and Kingswear, and gained the land-locked harbour of Dartmouth. Fortunately the first of the flood tide was setting in, and without much difficulty the yacht gained its anchorage.

“There’s a vacant buoy,” observed Mr. Grant, pointing to one a short distance astern of a small tramp steamer. “We’ll pick it up. It will be much safer than riding to a kedge. We’ll have to get another anchor some time to-day, and the sooner the better. Now, Brandon, let’s see how you come up to moorings.”

Considering the Patrol Leader was as yet almost a stranger to the *Kestrel*’s capabilities he managed remarkably well. Judging the distance to a nicety, he put the helm down and shot the yacht up into the wind. Heavitree running for’ard picked up the buoy with a boat-hook, and hauling in the buoy rope passed the mooring chain round the bitts before the yacht had time to “fall off.”

“Well done!” exclaimed Mr. Grant approvingly. “Down canvas! Then breakfast and a jolly good sound sleep!”

“Could do with both, sir,” agreed Craddock feelingly.

But the Scoutmaster had much to do before he could enjoy an already well-earned rest. As soon as the post-office opened he went ashore in the dinghy and telegraphed to old Marner the news of his son’s safety. Also he had to report the matter to the Registrar of Shipping. He then took the opportunity of communicating with Scoutmaster Pendennis at Falmouth, acquainting him of the fact that the *Kestrel* had arrived at Dartmouth under somewhat unusual conditions and expressing a hope that even yet the *Merlin* and the *Kestrel* would be able to cruise in company.

His next business was to make arrangements with the local representative of the Shipwrecked Mariners Aid Society, to have Dick Marner taken ashore and sent home by train.

Finally, he bought another anchor to replace the one lying on the bed of Falmouth Harbour.

He returned on board to find all the crew asleep with the exception of Carline, who had been told off to keep anchor watch.

“You’d better turn in, too, Carline,” said Mr. Grant. “We aren’t getting under way to-day, and perhaps not to-morrow either. We want fair weather for the run past Portland Bill, and, judging by this morning’s sunrise, we aren’t going to get it just at present.”

Going to his own cabin, Mr. Grant saw that Marner was awake.

“Feelin’ fine, sir,” replied the man in answer to the Scoutmaster’s enquiry. “But I’m fair hungry. That beef tea was all very well, but it don’t fill a man’s innards, in a manner o’ speakin’, sir. Can’t I have somethin’ as ’as got summat to bite at?”

“I think so, now,” said Mr. Grant, smiling at the Cornishman’s quaintly phrased request. “And a boat’s coming for you some time before noon. You’ll be given your fare to Falmouth, and with luck you’ll be home to-night. But you’ll have to be careful with that head of yours, and not shake yourself up too much on your motor bike.”

A look of bewilderment spread over the bronzed features of Dick Marner, junior.

“Moty bike, sir?” he rejoined. “Can’t say as I follers what you’m meaning.”

It was Mr. Grant’s turn to look surprised. Could it be that Marner was suffering from partial loss of memory owing to the injury to his head?

“Surely you remember your motor bicycle at your father’s place at Polkebo?”

“Never ’ad a moty bicycle in my life, sir,” was the astounding reply. “Couldn’t ride un if I ’ad.”

The Scoutmaster made no comment, but thought the more. Apparently the situation required careful handling, but before he could frame a suitable question, Dick Marner continued:

“Now I comes to think on it, the moty cycle you seed was Blueskin Bone’s. ’E an’ fayther are neighbours like; an’ Blueskin ain’t got no shed in ’is garden, and ’aving trouble to get moty cycle up the girt steps to ’is door, ’e keeps un in fayther’s shed.”

“So that’s it,” thought Mr. Grant. “I wish I’d known that when I interviewed Mr. Marner, senior, the sly old rascal! However, Blueskin’s a

back number as far as we are concerned. That's something to be thankful for."

CHAPTER X

Blueskin's Plot

THE presence of the Aberstour Sea Scouts' yacht *Kestrel* in Dartmouth Harbour attracted a fair amount of interest, but none more than that shown by a tall, heavily built, and loose-jowled deck-hand on board the S.S. *Lumberjack*.

Leaning over the bulwark of the tramp and shading his face with his hands, the man gazed so intently at the newly arrived yacht that one of his shipmates was struck by his studied interest.

"Lor', Blueskin!" he exclaimed. "Wot's strikin' your fancy now? Ain't you never seen a crowd o' Sea Scoutses afore?"

Carlo Bone spat contemptuously into the scuppers.

"Axin' for trouble, them is," he remarked.

"An' so'll you be if the Old Man sees you hangin' on to the slack," rejoined the other. "Bear a hand an' help shift this 'ere dunnage."

The S.S. *Lumberjack* was lying within a hundred yards of the mooring which the *Kestrel* had picked up. She had arrived a few days before, having developed engine trouble in that antiquated box which required all the skill and patience of a dour Scots engineer to take the old tramp along at even a modest five knots.

The sight of the *Kestrel* acted like a red rag to a mad bull as far as Blueskin Bone was concerned. The mere knowledge that had it not been for "them Sea Scoutses" he might have become the owner of the craft never ceased to anger him. Even when, acting upon the idea that Polkebo was getting too hot for him, he had shipped aboard the S.S. *Lumberjack* his resentment did not die down; it merely smouldered, to be revived to white heat when, quite unexpectedly, the *Kestrel* came in with the flood tide from the boisterous waters of the English Channel.

“If she ain’t mine,” he muttered, “she won’t be nobody’s—not if I can ’elp it. Too mighty cute those chaps wur last time—when they thought as I wur about. If they don’t see I, maybe they won’t be so plaguey wideawake.”

For the rest of his watch Blueskin spent most of the time taking furtive glances at the *Kestrel* and cudgelling his brains to devise some cunning plan to gain his ends. In order to conceal himself from observation from the *Kestrel*, he even declined to go ashore that evening, much to his shipmates’ surprise.

Long after the hands had turned in that night Blueskin lay awake. When at length silence reigned in the stuffy fo’c’sle of the S.S. *Lumberjack*, Carlo Bone slipped out of his bunk, barefooted and wearing only a pair of canvas trousers.

It was a pitch dark night. Heavy clouds overspread the sky. A hard blow was raging out in the Channel, and even the land-locked waters of Dartmouth Harbour were foam-flecked. The flood tide was on the point of turning. In fact, all the shipping at anchor on the Kingswear side were riding head to wind. Eighty yards or so away, the riding-light of the *Kestrel* sea-sawed as the yacht rolled and strained at her borrowed moorings.

Groping about in the darkness, Blueskin soon found what he wanted: an iron bucket to which he had previously attached a short length of flexible steel wire. The bucket he lowered over the ship’s side by means of a piece of spun yarn until it hung just above the surface.

Giving a final look round to reassure himself that no one was on deck, Blueskin lowered himself into the water. Then, casting off the lashing that held the bucket, he struck out for the *Kestrel*, pushing the bucket in front of him.

Like most Cornishmen, Blueskin Bone was a powerful swimmer, and an expert diver. It was mere child’s-play to him to swim to the yacht’s stern, partly fill the bucket to make it float upright, and then to dive with the free end of the flexible wire in his grasp.

Blueskin had seen the *Kestrel* high and dry so often that he was well acquainted with the way in which her rudder fastenings were fixed. In the darkness the task he had in hand presented no difficulty. Quickly he passed the end of the wire between the rudder and the stern-post just above the lower pintle, and came to the surface with the steel rope still in his hand.

His next act was to bend the end of the wire to the handle of the bucket, so that both extremities were secured close together. The bucket was now

firmly attached to the *Kestrel's* rudder by the doubled parts of the wire.

“That’ll ’old till the crows come ’ome,” he muttered, as he tugged at the last hitch of the rope.

Tilting the bucket, Blueskin allowed it to fill and sink. It was now suspended at the end of a few feet of steel wire immediately under the yacht’s stern-post.

Having accomplished what he had set out to do, Carlo Bone swam back to the *Lumberjack*, swarmed up her side, removed and wrung out his trousers, and crept back to his bunk.

“Reckon I ain’t cried quits wi’ ’em yet,” he muttered, recalling with mingled feelings of humiliation and anger the incident when he was knocked out by a mere youth. “’Tany rate, I’ve done summat t’wards gettin’ my own back. Like as not them’ll have a leadin’ wind outer ’ere when them starts. An’ a fair tide. But when it comes tu goin’ about like in the Range, that there bucket’ll make ’em miss stays. They’ll be fair on the rocks afore they knows where they be.”

There was deep cunning in Carlo Bone’s plan. He counted upon the *Kestrel* getting under way with a fair wind and a fair tide. The crew would not be likely to notice that they were towing a bucket under the stern, although the drag would be considerable. But in the Narrows, at the entrance to the harbour, the baffling wind and the set of the tidal current would compel the *Kestrel* to attempt at least one tack. Then the impediment caused by the bucket would be more than sufficient to make her “miss stays,” and in that hopeless state she would be driven upon the saw-edged rocks to lee’ard almost before her crew realised their danger.

Chuckling sardonically, Blueskin lay awake in his bunk until nearly dawn—the dawn of a day on which, if his plans went aright, the *Kestrel* would ignominiously end her career upon the rock-strewn coast of Devon.

CHAPTER XI

How it Failed

“ALL clear for’ard?” shouted Patrol Leader Brandon. “Stand by to let go!”

Fifty hours had elapsed since the *Kestrel* found her way into Dartmouth Harbour. The summer storm had blown itself out. The Sea Scouts, having made up arrears of sleep, were in the best of spirits and keenly looking forward to the long run across West Bay and round the famous Bill of Portland.

It was almost a flat calm. The tide was still ebbing. The S.S. *Lumberjack* remained at anchor, repairs to her machinery being still in progress.

According to his rule of letting the Sea Scouts work their craft as far as possible entirely on their own responsibility, Mr. Grant was acting in the rôle of passenger, Patrol Leader Frank Brandon being for the present skipper of the *Kestrel*.

“Get an oar out, Heavitree,” continued the Patrol Leader. “We’ll have to sweep her round in this light breeze, and probably tow her clear of the harbour. She’ll shift easily enough when once we get way on her.”

Brandon was on the point of calling to Carline to cast off the mooring when he noticed a small motor boat approaching, apparently with the intention of crossing the *Kestrel*’s bows. Instead, the owner of the power-craft reversed, put her helm over, and ran alongside.

“Good morning!” he exclaimed. “I see you fellows are off. Perhaps you’d like a tow? I’m off to the East Blockstone to try a bit of fishing, so if you like I’ll take a line.”

“Thanks awfully, sir,” replied Brandon. “It’s jolly good of you.”

“Not at all,” rejoined the owner of the motor boat. “Matter of fact, I used to be a Scoutmaster. Had to give it up, unfortunately. However, I still stick to the practice of ‘One Good Turn a Day’—more if I have a chance. . . . Sorry,

I didn't see you," he added, addressing Mr. Grant, who had just come out of the saloon. "Why! Surely your name's Grant?"

"Quite right," was the reply, "but somehow I can't recall you."

"Possibly not," continued the other, with a laugh. "Do you remember coming alongside a tramp on Christmas Day '17? You were in a M.L. and you got some bully beef and bread out of our old hooker. At the same time you warned us that there were two U-boats off Bolt Head, and said we'd better leg it back to Plymouth?"

Mr. Grant remembered the circumstance. It was during the war, when he was in command of a M.L.

"But I can't recall your features," he reiterated.

"'Cause I am beautifully disguised with a beard," explained the other. "Matter of fact, we didn't take your advice. We held on our course, and bagged a Fritz a couple of hours later. We were a 'Q' ship, and you didn't spot us."

"Heard about it later on," said Mr. Grant. "Then your name's Carter?"

"Just so; late Scoutmaster of the 9th Gosport Sea Scouts. Unfortunately, 'owing to the War,' I had to give up, much to my regret, and settle down here at Kingswear. Come aboard, and we can yarn while I'm towing your craft out of the harbour."

Mr. Grant accepted the invitation, leaving Brandon actually in command of the *Kestrel*.

The tow-rope was made fast, the moorings slipped. Very gently, by skilful use of the reverse gear, Mr. Carter allowed the yacht to gather way in the wake of the 4-h.p. motor boat.

During the run down the harbour, Brandon kept all hands busily employed in casting loose mainsail and mizzen and hoisting the jib in stops ready to be broken out directly the *Kestrel* was cast off. Thus engaged they failed to notice the relatively slow progress or the somewhat unusual swirl under the yacht's stern. Nor were they aware of the presence of a highly exasperated deck-hand on board the S.S. *Lumberjack*, who consoled himself for the preliminary failure of his plans by the thought that perhaps the motor boat would not tow the *Kestrel* right out to sea, but only just clear of St. Petrox. In that case there was still some hope that the yacht would pile herself up upon the tide-swept Verticals or perhaps the rugged Mewstone.

“You’ve a lump of a craft there, Grant,” remarked Mr. Carter. “She’s heavier to tow than I thought; although this packet is only a four-horse motor boat.”

“Yet she’s moving her all right,” added Mr. Grant.

“Yes, with the tide. I doubt whether we are doing three knots. Has the *Kestrel*’s compo. been scrubbed recently?”

“Fresh on a week ago,” declared the Scoutmaster.

“H’m,” commented Mr. Carter, “strange we aren’t doing better. A few days ago I gave a forty tonner a pluck in, and made quite easy work of it once I got her going. There’s the East Blackstone”—pointing to an isolated rock about half a mile away. “I’ll tow you inside the rock. There’s plenty of water and less tide running. You’re early yet for the up-Channel stream, but with the breeze you’ll stem the tide all right.”

At the East Blackstone the tow-rope was cast off. Mr. Grant regained the *Kestrel*, and the crew gave a hearty cheer for the benefit of the ex-Scoutmaster. Sail was quickly made, and under all plain canvas the *Kestrel* was steadied on her course for Portland Bill.

Half an hour passed. The anchored motor boat was still unaccountably near. The *Kestrel*, in spite of the steady favourable breeze, was not going anything like as fast as she had done in a lighter wind.

The Sea Scouts began to realise the fact and reluctantly they admitted that it was so. Even the dinghy’s painter was slack, whereas in this breeze the water ought to be foaming at her bows.

“We are going slowly, sir,” remarked Craddock.

“That’s what Mr. Carter said,” replied the Scoutmaster. “There’s no reason why we should as far as I can see, unless we’ve fouled a few lobster pots. Look over the bows and see.”

Peter went for’ard and “laid out” along the bowsprit. He could see the yacht’s forefoot showing clearly through the pale green water.

“All clear there, sir,” he reported.

“I don’t see how anything could foul her rudder,” observed Mr. Grant. “The keel band projects sufficiently to prevent that; however, just look to make sure.”

Craddock did so.

“Why!” he exclaimed. “There’s something dragging astern. I can’t make out what it is, ’cause the wake is bubbling so much. Pass me the boat-hook, Talbot.”

Lying at full length on the stern deck, Peter probed with the iron-shod boat-hook. Metal rasped on metal, and on attempting to withdraw the boat-hook the Sea Scout found that it was hitched in a line of some sort.

“Bear a hand, some of you fellows!” he called out breathlessly.

Talbot and Symington came to his assistance. All three hauled and levered at the stout ash boat-hook stave.

“Can’t get in another inch,” declared Talbot.

“Sure you’re not foul of the rudder?” asked Mr. Grant.

“No, sir, it’s astern of the rudder, whatever it is.”

“Now, Brandon, you’re in charge,” said the Scoutmaster. “Carry on and see what you can do.”

The Patrol Leader began throwing off his scanty clothing.

“Down helm!” he ordered. “Jib and staysail sheets a-weather!”

It took three attempts to get the *Kestrel* to come up into the wind so that she might be hove-to. As sluggish as a mule, she absolutely refused to go about until Carline and Wilson got her round by means of a sweep. Then Craddock prodded with the boat-hook, and this time found nothing more resisting than water.

“Whatever it is it has slipped off,” he announced.

“I’ll make sure, in any case,” declared Brandon.

The Patrol Leader made a clean dive, broke surface, and swam to the yacht’s stern. Then, taking a deep breath, he grasped the edge of the rudder and lowered himself towards the *Kestrel*’s heel.

He was under for nearly half a minute; then he reappeared, puffing and blowing like a grampus.

“There’s a large iron bucket hanging from the lower pintle,” he reported. “I tried to shake it clear, but it’s made fast by about a couple of yards of wire rope.”

“See if you can work the free end of the wire past the stern-post,” suggested Craddock. “I’ll put the helm hard over and see if that frees it.”

“There is no free end,” was the astonishing reply. “Both ends are tightly knotted round the handle of the bucket.”

All hands realised that the obstruction had not been placed there by accident or natural causes. Human agency had been deliberately at work.

“No use arguing about it, lads!” called out Brandon. “Pass me the hack-saw.”

“One minute, I’ll be with you, Frank,” said Craddock, proceeding to strip. “It’s not much use sawing at a slack wire. Get a line, Talbot. That’s right. Now, Frank, can you pass this under the handle of the bucket? You can? Good. Now, you fellows, take a strain; put plenty of beef into it and keep the rope taut.”

Craddock then went overboard and swam to give his chum a hand. They found that the strain on the rope had brought the bucket within five or six inches of the surface, and that the wire was as taut as a bar of iron.

“Wouldn’t it be easier and quicker to saw through the handle?” asked Craddock.

“Yes, but we won’t,” decided the Patrol Leader. “Why spoil what seems to be a jolly decent bucket?”

“Well, I’ve kicked the bucket,” declared Peter feelingly.

A roar of laughter greeted this apparently innocent remark. Craddock, failing to grasp the grim significance of the words, couldn’t imagine why his chums should roar because he had stubbed his toe against the submerged article.

Taking turns to use the hack-saw, the two lads set to work energetically. True they broke a couple of blades—mishaps that, owing to the erratic motion of the yacht and their unstable position, were not to be wondered at—but at length the tautened wire parted. The bucket was hauled in deck while Brandon, who believed in doing a good job thoroughly, extricated the stranded wire rope from the narrow gap between the rudder and the stern-post.

“Dirty dogs, whoever they are,” commented the Patrol Leader, after he had hauled himself clear of the water.

“Here’s a clue, anyway,” exclaimed Heavittree.

He pointed to the somewhat dented side of the bucket. On it could be traced the partly obliterated letters in black paint. . . . UM . . . R.J. . . .K.

“Lumberjack!” announced Craddock. “That’s the name of the tramp lying next to us at Dartmouth.”

“Why should any of her crew want to play a joke on us, I wonder?” enquired Carline. “Couldn’t you write to the owners and find out the names of the crew, sir? That might explain matters.”

“I am thinking seriously of doing so,” replied Mr. Grant. “There may be more in this business than we know. It’s not merely a practical joke; had we been compelled to tack out of harbour the result might easily have been disastrous. Now, Brandon! Get way on her again. She ought to slip along in a nice breeze like this; and Portland’s still a long way off.”

With that the Scoutmaster went below.

CHAPTER XII

Out of Action

MR. GRANT went to his cabin for a very serious reason. His hand was rapidly swelling. The slight cut he had received when he rescued young Marner from the sinking schooner had resulted in an undoubted case of blood-poisoning. He, who was prone to boast of his immunity from that sort of thing, had at last fallen a victim to the dangerous malady.

For some time he had suspected it. He ought to have gone ashore at Dartmouth and seen a doctor. He would have done but for the fear that he might be ordered to lay up. In that case, the voyage of the *Kestrel* would have been indefinitely prolonged—long after the forthcoming Jamboree was over. Although Brandon was quite a capable fellow, he held no warrant, without which Sea Scouts are not permitted to go afloat; and it was doubtful whether a fully qualified man could be found to undertake the duties of temporary Scoutmaster.

So, rather than spoil the lads' chance of taking part in the Chichester Harbour Jamboree, Mr. Grant risked his own.

He had had a restless night. Almost hourly he had crept softly from his bunk lest he should disturb the rest of the crew, and had held the injured hand in very warm water. But all to no seeming purpose. The middle finger was swelling badly, and, what was ominous, sharp, stabbing pains were running up his arm. Curiously, the cut at the base of the fingers appeared to be healing, while the swelling was most pronounced on the knuckle of the same digit.

As he kept his hand in the hot water, Mr. Grant's thoughts turned to the incident of the bucket. It seemed strange indeed that already the maiden cruise of the *Kestrel* should be marked by three distinct—or apparently distinct—attempts to bring her to disaster. But were they distinct? Could it be that Blueskin Bone was the instigator of all three? Dick Marner's innocent admission that his father and Carlo Bone were more than neighbours, coupled with the discovery that Marner senior's story of the

motor bicycle was a deliberate falsehood, tended to shake Mr. Grant's previous belief in Blueskin's innocence in the attempt at arson. Carlo Bone had gone to sea. Was it beyond the bounds of coincidence that he was one of the crew of the S.S. *Lumberjack*?

He went on thinking and thinking. Presently, in a hazy sort of way, he became aware that his thoughts were ridiculously disjointed and absurd. The pain in his arm seemed to be subsiding, but in its stead he felt uncomfortably hot. His head was buzzing. Grey lights danced in front of his eyes.

Then Mr. Grant did something he had never done before in his life. He fainted.

A few minutes later Peter Craddock, who was making his way to the fo'c'sle, found his Scoutmaster lying inertly across the raised coaming of his cabin doorway.

Checking his first impulse to alarm the rest of the crew, Peter lifted the unconscious form and carried it into the saloon. Here, with very little effort, the Sea Scout lifted Mr. Grant on the lee'ard settee; then, going to the companion way, asked Heavitree in a matter-of-fact voice to step below.

"Don't say anything to the other chaps," cautioned Peter, when his chum came below. "Mr. Grant's fainted. I found him lying in the doorway. Get some sal volatile and a basin of cold water while I loosen his collar."

"What made him faint?" asked Heavitree, as he carried out Craddock's instructions.

"Don't know," replied Peter. "It's not concussion."

"His finger, perhaps?"

"Rot!" ejaculated the lad contemptuously. Then he caught sight of the badly swollen hand. "By Jove! Believe you're right, old son. I knew he had a nasty gash, but I never knew it was as bad as this. Skylight's open: you might open all the scuttles. The more fresh air the better."

Presently Mr. Grant opened his eyes and looked dazedly at his youthful attendants.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"You're all right, sir," replied Peter reassuringly. "Heavitree and I are looking after you. Lie still a little longer."

The Scoutmaster did so. The ghastly greyish hue on his features was giving place to the glow of returning vitality. His thoughts were again

becoming coherent, yet he felt a curious sense of resentment at being ordered to remain quiet.

With returning consciousness came the agonising throb of his swollen arm. His hand was trailing over the side of the settee. It felt like lead. He was hardly able to raise it.

“Silly of me to have gone off like that,” he soliloquised. “Well, that’s put me out of the running for a bit. Hang it all—no! What am I thinking about?”

A vision of the *Kestrel* with her youthful crew flashed across his mind. So far all was going well. The sea was calm, the weather fine. Brandon knew the course, but would he be able to take the yacht into port?

“I’ll go on deck now,” he declared.

“No, you won’t, sir,” countered Craddock firmly. “You aren’t fit to go. Wait till we’ve done something to that hand of yours. You’ll only make it worse if you bang it against something. I’ll dress it for you. Does it hurt much?”

“A little,” admitted Mr. Grant deprecatingly, for the pain was now intense. Possibly in his fall he had jarred the already badly swollen limb.

Peter went for’ard to boil some water and make a bread poultice. While the water was being heated he went on deck to tell Brandon and the others of what had occurred.

He found Talbot at the helm. Symington and Wilson were trying with varying success to induce Molly to sit up and beg. The pup was willing enough, but the gentle motion of the yacht was too much for her. Also she had a not unfounded suspicion that the cat rescued from the *Euterpe*—young Marner had emphatically declined to take it with him—was secretly helping herself to the pup’s bowl of milk.

“Where’s Brandon?” asked Peter.

“Up aloft,” replied Talbot, glancing at the cross-trees.

“I’ll be down in half a shake, old son!” called out the Patrol Leader. “I’ve been trying to sight Portland Bill. It’s too far off yet.”

Craddock swept the horizon. Right astern and on the port quarter the red hills of Devon were merging into the mist of a hot summer’s day. Broad on the port beam, where the chalk cliffs make their first appearance on the south shores of England, land was no longer visible. Neither was it ahead. To starboard, Peter knew, was the broad expanse of the English Channel. For

the first time in his life, Craddock was about to find himself out of sight of land. With the exception of Brandon, the other Sea Scouts were to have a similar experience: afloat with an unbroken horizon of sea and sky forming a complete circle of which the little *Kestrel* formed the exact centre. It was true that they had been out of sight of land during the fog, but that wasn't the same thing. Had there been no fog they would have seen the rugged Cornish coast the whole time. Now, even in the clearest weather, they would probably be an hour or more out of sight of land until the wedge-shaped promontory of Portland showed up on the port bow.

Even as Craddock looked, a strange, muffled voice exclaimed:

“Isn't it quite about time you fellows liberated me from this uncomfortable apartment?”

CHAPTER XIII

The Stowaway

FOR a few moments, Peter Craddock could hardly believe his sense of hearing. Wilson and Symington were also too astonished for words. They could only abandon their efforts to teach the pup tricks and gaze blankly at Craddock's face. The first conclusion they arrived at was that Peter was indulging in a little ventriloquism at their expense.

Craddock, too, tried to "fix" the owner of the voice. With the exception of Heavitree the others were on deck. Carline was for'ard, lying in luxurious ease and basking in the sunshine on the fore-deck. Brandon was still aloft; Talbot at the helm; Symington and Wilson in the cockpit.

"Kindly open the door!" exclaimed the voice again. This time there was a violent rapping on the panel of one of the side lockers in the cockpit.

The locker was a fairly spacious one, extending from the after bulkhead of the cabin on the starboard side to the bulkhead supporting the decked-in part of the stern. Usually it contained spare sails, canvas awnings, and warps not likely to be frequently required. It was secured by means of a detachable panel held in place by two projecting battens at one end and a stout wooden button at the other.

"Brandon!" sang out Peter.

"Coming," replied the Patrol Leader. "What's wrong?"

Swinging himself down by the throat halliards, Brandon gained the deck and came aft.

"Someone's in there," declared Craddock.

"Then hike him out," rejoined Brandon in matter-of-fact tones. "This isn't the First of April, me lad!"

"I quite agree," boomed the voice from the locker.

Brandon gave a start, but quickly recovering himself, threw open the panel. Lying full length on the assortment of canvas gear and blinking in the strong sunlight was a boy of about twelve or fourteen.

“Come out!” ordered Brandon sternly.

“Precisely what I’ve been wanting to do for the last five minutes,” replied the youth, with astonishing coolness. “Just wait until I have collected my scanty belongings and your request will be complied with.”

“Well, I never——” ejaculated the Patrol Leader.

“Don’t distress yourself,” continued the boy. “Wait until I am in a position to offer an explanation. My limbs, I find, are somewhat cramped.”

With the utmost deliberation the stowaway emerged and stood upright in the cockpit with the Sea Scouts still too astonished to say much, hemming him in on three sides.

He was a pale-faced, sharp-featured lad of medium height and sparely built. The most noticeable feature about him was a high and prominent forehead. He was dressed in a tightly fitting suit of grey tweed and an Eton collar, his thin, bony wrists projecting quite three inches beyond his coat sleeves. Under one arm he held a schoolboy’s satchel, from which protruded a glass-stoppered bottle.

“You hid yourself on board?” began Brandon.

“Your surmise is a perfectly correct one,” agreed this remarkable youth, with a grave smile. “In the circumstances I had no option. Had I asked to be allowed to accompany you, my request would have been refused. As it is, I’m here.”

“A stowaway!” exclaimed the Patrol Leader. “You deserve a booting.”

The boy made a deprecatory movement with his hand.

“Believe me, it isn’t done,” he rejoined. “Personal violence to stowaways is, I take it, an obsolete practice that has shared the same fate as walking the plank and keel-hauling. At least, I hope I am not misinformed. . . . I say, what a jolly little pup!”

“Never mind the pup,” protested Brandon. “Tell me what you are doing on board.”

“Enjoying—or expecting to enjoy—a free journey to Chichester. The chances are I shall. You can’t very well go back to Dartmouth; you can’t put

me overboard. So it seems as if I remain here a while, and I've brought my provisions!"

"I'll see what Mr. Grant has to say," decided Brandon, who had never before come in contact with such a self-possessed and precocious youngster.

"One minute," interrupted Peter, drawing his chum aside. "Come for'ard."

Craddock and Brandon made their way to the fore-deck, where Carline was slumbering in ignorance of what had occurred.

"Mr. Grant fainted just now," reported Peter. "Heavitree's with him. I fancy it's his hand that made him go off. It's a case of blood-poisoning, I'm afraid. I was boiling some water to make a poultice when this happened. I vote we say nothing to Mr. Grant until he's had a good rest, but I leave it to you. You're skipper."

"Right-o!" agreed Brandon. "Where is he? In his cabin?"

"No, on one of the settees in the saloon."

"Then carry on, old son. I'll tell the others to keep clear a bit and not to disturb him. You can manage all right?"

Peter went below. He found that the Scoutmaster was nearly asleep and that the water was boiling. It seemed an unpleasant duty to have to rouse the patient, but it had to be done.

The poultice was made and applied. It was a very hot one, and Mr. Grant winced; but in a few minutes the warmth began to act soothingly upon the fiercely throbbing finger.

"That's ever so much better, Peter," remarked Mr. Grant gratefully.

"Good business, sir," rejoined the Sea Scout. "Now, try and go to sleep."

"Not much doubt about that," said the patient. "I'll try a couple of hours' sleep. Tell Brandon to inform me when Portland Bill is in sight. It ought to show up one point on our port bow."

"Very good, sir."

As he was leaving the cabin, Peter signed to Heavitree.

"I'll send Wilson down to relieve you," he said. "There'll have to be someone in the saloon in case Mr. Grant wants anything. Give an eye to the kettle before you come on deck, and bring some grub with you. We'll have dinner on deck, then we won't disturb him."

Peter found the stowaway still hemmed in by the justifiably inquisitive Sea Scouts. The boy had dropped much of his stiffness of manner and seemed more at ease, although he retained his quaint method of speech. Possibly he had been nervous and had concealed his anxiety under a mask of forced self-assurance. Now, finding that the youthful crew of the *Kestrel* were not in any way antagonistic, he was becoming quite communicative.

His name, he told them, was Eric Little. He made the statement somewhat doubtfully, fearing, perhaps, that his audience would “pull his leg” over that once well-known book: “Eric, or Little by Little.” He had had quite enough of that already. Fortunately his fears in that respect were ill-founded, for the work in question had mercifully not been brought to the notice of the Aberstour Sea Scouts.

Eric’s parents were dead. He had been “brought up” by his grandparents who lived on the outskirts of Dartmouth. Apparently they had weird and misguided notions as to how their grandchild should be brought up. They had a strange antipathy to schoolmasters. They absolutely declined to let Eric go to school or to associate with other children. His education, if such it could be called, was imparted by a half-baked governess of uncertain age and of a frigid and ultra-prim manner. The natural result was that Eric, invariably in the company of grown-ups, had developed the pedantic manner of speech that had so greatly astonished Brandon and his companions. He was well versed in several serious subjects, but his knowledge of the ways of boys of his own age was lamentably weak. In spite of himself, he was fast developing into a little prig, and if compelled to run in the same rut he would be an object of derision and scorn when the time came for him to go out into the world.

Luckily for him, although he did not know it, his uninvited presence on board the *Kestrel* was to be the making of him.

He had no idea of running away from his overkind and misguided grandparents. He merely wanted a change. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of Chichester he had an aunt and uncle. He had never seen them, and beyond receiving presents from them at Christmas and on his birthday he was hardly aware of their existence. Yet he felt a vague longing to visit them, and although he had hinted of his wish in that direction, his grandparents had for some unexplained reason declined to allow him to do so.

Eric had exercised considerable intelligence in making a bid for a free journey to Chichester. Quite by chance he had been standing under the

Butterwalk when Craddock and Talbot were talking with some members of a Dartmouth troop of Scouts. He gathered that the two former were going to Chichester Harbour in a yacht for the Jamboree. What the word “Jamboree” meant he knew not. It sounded like something jolly. At any rate, opportunity was knocking at the door of his warped little mind, and there and then he made up his mind to stow himself away on board the *Kestrel*.

Acting upon his grandfather’s oft-repeated precept that “There is no time like the present,” Eric got busy. He had a few shillings with him. This he invested in a supply of food and a couple of bottles of ginger-beer. He knew that all the crew of the *Kestrel* were ashore; Craddock had mentioned that there were eight including a Scoutmaster, and eight had certainly landed at the steps close to the boat pond. For the sum of one shilling a weedy youth minding a yacht’s dinghy agreed to row him off to the *Kestrel*, and there he hid himself in the locker, hoping that the yacht would put to sea that evening—which she did not.

“What did you do with yourself all night?” asked Brandon.

“Oh, when you were all asleep I emerged from my place of concealment for fresh air and in order to stretch my cramped limbs,” explained the stowaway. “Once that pup of yours growled, but I don’t think it was on my account. That was when a certain person swam off to the yacht from the large ship at anchor.”

“Someone swam off!” exclaimed Craddock. “What did he do? Why didn’t you raise the alarm?”

Eric turned reproachful eyes upon his questioner.

“My dear sir,” he replied. “It couldn’t be done! It couldn’t really. Consider my position. I really had no right to be on board. Neither, presumably, had the swimmer to climb up over the side. After all’s said and done, it wasn’t my affair, was it?”

“That was the chap who lashed the bucket to the rudder,” declared the Patrol Leader. “What sort of fellow was he?”

“I gathered that he did so from subsequent happenings,” rejoined Eric. “Regarding your question, I’m sorry to inform you that I had no opportunity of studying his features. Nocturnal conditions and a natural desire to efface myself combined to keep me in ignorance of the man’s appearance. But here I am,” he added briskly, “willing to acquire as much nautical knowledge as my mental appetite will digest. Which, by the by, is the main brace?”

He cocked his eye aloft at the expanse of tautened canvas, and then looked at Brandon enquiringly.

“No use, my lad,” replied the Patrol Leader. “You won’t find a brace aboard this craft. Sea Scouts favour belts, you know. Now, lads! Dinner! We’re behind time.”

The meal was duly relished and dispatched, the stowaway receiving a share as a matter of course. “Washing-up,” a distasteful yet necessary operation, was completed, the plates and other utensils being temporarily stowed in one of the cockpit lockers in order that Mr. Grant would not be disturbed had the gear been returned to its usual place.

By this time the wind had fallen light and was almost dead aft. Land was still visible; only an expanse of smooth sea rippled by erratic catspaws greeted the sight of the crew.

“Can’t we hoist the topsail?” asked Heavitree.

“No,” replied Brandon decidedly, “we can’t. Scoutmaster’s orders are that the topsail is not to be set without his permission. But we can hoist the spinnaker,” he added. “That’ll help us along.”

The spinnaker, a large triangular sail of light canvas, was spread by being hoisted by a halliard to the mainmast head, the tack being secured to the mast below the gooseneck, while the third corner of the sail was hauled out to the extremity of a horizontal spar known as the spinnaker boom. The latter was held by means of a sheet, but in order to prevent any tendency on the part of the boom to swing back, it was secured on the free side of the sail by means of a rope called a “guy.” The duty of “manning the guy” was deputed to Fred Heavitree.

“All ready, there?” sung out Brandon.

“Ay, ay, sir!” replied Craddock.

“Up with her, then! Out out-haul! Check your sheet!” ordered the Patrol Leader.

Craddock and Talbot at the halliard whipped the head of the canvas aloft. Simultaneously, Wilson tailed on to the out-haul. The spinnaker, distended by the light breeze, strained at the sheet; then, without warning, dropped from aloft in shivering folds. Unaccountably the halliard had parted, letting the spinnaker down with a run.

There was a heavy splash. Heavitree, enveloped by the canvas, had been jerked into the sea.

“Man overboard!” shouted Craddock. “Down helm, Carline!”

The helmsman put the tiller hard over. Peter, snatching up a life-buoy, prepared to throw it within easy reach of the Sea Scout in the ditch. The others, abandoning the spinnaker, rushed aft to bring the dinghy alongside to pick up their chum.

Alertly, Craddock watched the curving line of ripples astern as the *Kestrel* came up into the line. There was no sign of Heavitree. The lad was an excellent swimmer, but there was the likelihood that he had hit the rail as he fell and had been rendered insensible.

Full thirty long-drawn-out seconds passed, but still no sign of Heavitree. Peter looked at Brandon. The Patrol Leader shook his head.

He was outwardly cool and collected; yet the disappearance of Heavitree without a trace filled him with apprehension. Even a stunned man under water would be expelling air from his lungs and the bubbles would show on the surface. The difficulty was that already the yacht had covered fifty or more yards since the time the accident had occurred, and in consequence it was futile to attempt to dive after the lad. And yet it was agonising having to stand and watch and yet do nothing.

The *Kestrel* was now hove-to on to the port tack, her head-sheets, which had not been eased, being taut to wind’ard. The folds of the spinnaker hung idly over the starboard side between the shrouds and the forestay.

With one exception everyone was looking astern. The exception was Eric Little. Unnoticed by the others he crept cautiously for’ard and began to gather in the trailing canvas. Hanging on to the rail was the missing Heavitree, breathless but otherwise none the worse for his immersion. He had managed to grasp the coaming as he fell, although he was immersed up to his waist. The spinnaker, completely enveloping him, had effectually hidden him from view.

Willing hands assisted Heavitree on deck. The Sea Scouts relieved their pent-up feelings with a rousing cheer, the noise of which brought Mr. Grant hurriedly on deck.

“What’s the matter, lads?” he demanded anxiously, as he blinked in the strong sunlight. Coming straight from the darkened saloon he could see little or nothing. “Why are we hove-to?”

“I fell into the ditch, sir,” replied Heavitree. “Or, nearly. How’s your hand, sir? Mind you don’t hit it against anything.”

“Better go below, sir,” suggested Brandon. “We haven’t sighted Portland Bill yet. I’ll report to you when we do.”

There was a decided streak of obstinacy in Mr. Grant’s nature and occasionally it asserted itself. It did now.

He sat down, still blinking. By this time his eyes were becoming more accustomed to the sunlight. He noticed the untidily stowed spinnaker, then he spotted Eric Little.

“Who’s that, Brandon?” he asked. “What is that lad doing here? How did he come aboard?”

“Our prize stowaway,” replied the Patrol Leader.

CHAPTER XIV

The Peril of the Race

LATE in the afternoon the long-looked-for Portland Bill was sighted—not on the port bow, but dead ahead. Apparently in the light air the *Kestrel* had been carried by an indraught slightly to the nor'ard of her proper course. Progress had been slow, and in consequence she had lost her tide and was now making very little against the west-going stream.

"It will mean another night at sea, lads," remarked Mr. Grant, when the Patrol Leader had reported land in sight. "It will be quite five hours before we pick up a fair tide, and then, unless the wind holds, we'll have to be jolly careful we aren't swept into Portland Race."

"Let me know the course, sir, and I'll see she keeps to it," declared Brandon. "There's no need for you to do anything. How's your hand now, sir?"

"Better," replied the Scoutmaster, although he knew perfectly well that it was far from being right. "I'll turn out at sunset."

"You oughtn't to, really, sir," protested Brandon. "Take it easy to-night. If anything unusual occurs we'll give you a call."

Mr. Grant capitulated. He was still feeling "a bit shaky." The finger, thanks to action of numerous poultices, had swollen still more, but there were no indications of the poison discharging itself. In these circumstances, an accidental knock or blow might easily undo all the good that had been done by fomentation. In addition, the Scoutmaster "had a temperature," although he kept this knowledge to himself, hoping that in a few hours' time it would return to normal.

"What are we going to do with our stowaway, sir?" asked Brandon.

"Send him home from the first place we touch at," replied Mr. Grant. "It's unfortunate we cannot signal. His grandparents must be very anxious about him; but we can send a wire from Swanage."

“He’s a queer sort of fellow, isn’t he?” remarked Brandon.

“Yes, but it’s hardly his fault. It’s the way he’s been brought up,” replied the Scoutmaster. “He uses those somewhat high-brow expressions quite naturally, because he’s lived in an atmosphere in which they are spoken. After all, it’s the same with everyone. A stable boy unconsciously uses racing slang because he hears it all around him. A sailor’s expressions are often unintelligible to landsmen, although his messmates haven’t the slightest difficulty in understanding what he says. Often we were at a loss to know what the Cornish fisherfolk were saying. Eric Little’s case is much the same, only in a very much smaller environment. Well, right-o, Brandon. Carry on, if you will. See that all hands get a decent meal, then pick your watch and let the rest turn in.”

Alive to his responsibilities, Brandon went on deck, ordered the spinnaker to be taken in, and set the *Kestrel* on her new course. He, too, realised the dangers of being becalmed at night in the vicinity of that dangerous expanse of turbulent water known as Portland Race.

Night came on. The yacht, moving slowly through the calm water, was steadily losing ground. Although she was pointing seawards, the strong tide was sweeping her back. The Bill appeared to be receding, but there was no likelihood of losing sight of the powerful high light on that famous promontory. With the turn of the tide the leeway would be quickly made up, but there was the risk of the *Kestrel* being carried through the Race before she could gain a sufficient offing to pass it to the south’ard.

At ten o’clock Mr. Grant came on deck to look round. It was a perfectly calm night and the shoreward lights showed up distinctly.

“We’re still rather close in,” he remarked. “Those are the lights of Lyme Regis, and more to the east’ard are those of Bridport. I wish we had had time to visit Bridport. It’s a picturesque little place. There used to be a quaint expression: ‘Struck with a Bridport dagger.’ Does anyone know what that means?”

There was silence for a few moments; but before Mr. Grant could explain, Eric Little replied:

“I believe I know: it is a colloquial expression signifying that a person has been hanged.”

“Quite right!” exclaimed Mr. Grant approvingly. “Bridport was noted for rope-making, and also for sailcloth. Now I’ll tell you something more, and I wonder if you can explain the reason for it. Years ago when the rope and

sailcloth industry was at its height most of the flax was brought to Bridport in Russian vessels. They used to send the stuff up to the town in boats. On Saturday nights the Russians made a point of going into the town, which is some distance from the harbour. The road between the two places was lighted with oil lamps. Every time the Russians returned to their ships these lamps were afterwards found to be extinguished. Why?"

Several suggestions were forthcoming, but at each of them Mr. Grant shook his head.

"The Russian sailors drank the oil," he explained. "In those days the lamps were filled with whale-oil, and that was evidently a liquid appreciated by the Muscovites. . . . Now, Brandon, send the watch below down. I'll turn in, since the skipper insists; but call me at once, if necessary. Good night!"

Retaining Heavitree as a deck-hand, Brandon prepared for his long vigil. The wind showed no indication of appearing. The sea was as smooth as glass, save for the occasional ripples caused by a fish "breaking surface." For the next two hours the *Kestrel* was left to her own devices, drifting idly, with the dinghy frequently ranging up alongside as she swung through all the points of the compass.

At midnight a faint haze obscured the bright light of Portland, which was now about twelve miles away. Before the light disappeared, Brandon took a compass-bearing and noted it in the log. Then he resumed his tedious watch.

"Four bells!" he announced at length, stirring the torpid Heavitree with his foot. "You turn in, now, old son, and tell Peter to come on watch."

"Where are we?" asked Craddock, as he gained the cockpit.

Brandon told him, adding the information that the flood tide had now set in.

"Haven't touched the tiller for the last four hours," he remarked. "We're just drifting. This is where a motor would come in handy. Well, thank goodness, this isn't the Doldrums, and we ought to get a breeze soon."

At length came that "darkest hour before the dawn," when human vitality is supposed to be at its lowest ebb. Through the stillness of the night came a low rumble.

"What's that?" asked Peter. "Thunder?"

"Don't think so," replied his chum. "It's too prolonged."

They listened. The sound continued and seemed to increase in volume until it reached a distinct rumbling roar.

“It must be the Race,” declared Brandon. “Of course it’s still a long way off, but we’re being carried into it.”

“What’s to be done?” asked Peter. “Anchor?”

“No use attempting to anchor in over twenty fathoms,” replied the Patrol Leader. “Let’s get the sweeps to work. It will be something to do, and we may get her well clear with an hour’s steady work. Gently with them; don’t disturb the other fellows.”

Carefully the long ash sweeps were placed in the rowlocks, and by means of steady strokes the *Kestrel* was brought round until the yacht’s bows pointed sou’-sou’-east. The dinghy’s painter no longer trailed in the water as the little boat followed sedately in the wake of her parent.

Again the beams of the high light of Portland pierced the darkness, this time broad on the port beam. The roar of the Race steadily increased.

“Don’t think we’ll clear it,” muttered Brandon breathlessly, for sweeping the yacht was heavy and tiring work.

“I wish it were day,” rejoined Peter. “Then we could see where we are. How far are we from the Race, do you think?”

“Quite near enough,” admitted the Patrol Leader. “You’d better inform Mr. Grant and turn out a couple of hands to man the dinghy. We might be able to tow the yacht as well as sweep her.”

Craddock found the Scoutmaster awake. In fact, Mr. Grant had hardly slept at all. Apart from the still painful state of his arm his anxiety as to what might happen on the turn of the tide had kept him awake. He realised the danger. All along that dangerous coast there is no harbour for which a vessel can make for shelter except at or about the time of high water. True, there is a smooth passage between the Race and the Bill, but even then a stranger is apt to get into difficulties and be swept into the dangerous overfalls unless he times the attempt at a favourable state of the tide.

Mr. Grant came on deck.

“You’ve done all you can, Brandon,” he remarked. “We may be able to tow her clear. Get the other fellows out and see that the forehatch and skylights are well secured. We’ll be having plenty of green water over our decks before very long, I fancy.”

Craddock was about to haul the dinghy alongside, when he caught sight of the steaming-lights of a vessel on the starboard quarter. She was, he judged, about a quarter of a mile away and heading straight for the *Kestrel*. Above the distant roar of the Race could be distinguished the steady pulsations of a marine motor.

“Show a stern light,” ordered Brandon. “She won’t be able to see our starboard light.”

Talbot produced a torch and held it pointing in the direction of the oncoming vessel. Suddenly a succession of “E’s” in Morse flashed from the stranger; then, after a brief pause, came the question, “What ship is that?”

“*Kestrel!*” signalled Talbot in reply.

“I hope they’ll be the wiser for that,” remarked Carline.

Then, to the astonishment of all on board, the approaching craft announced her identity as the *Merlin*, and followed up by asking whether the *Kestrel* wanted a tow.

“Yes, badly,” was the reply.

In a few minutes the Falmouth Sea Scouts’ yacht was alongside.

“So we’ve overhauled you,” remarked Scoutmaster Pendennis. “We wondered what had happened. What made you put to sea in a fog?”

“Didn’t you get our wire?” countered Mr. Grant. “But explanations can come later. You’ve arrived at a very opportune moment.”

“And how’s that?” asked Mr. Pendennis.

“We’re in danger of being swept through Portland Race, and it looks as if you are heading straight for it.”

“Are we, by Jove!” ejaculated the Cornishman. “Yes, I can hear the roar now. Our engine muffled the sound. Right-o! pass your line. Course, sou’east?”

“Sou’-sou’-east would be better,” remarked Mr. Grant. “’Tany rate, day’s breaking, and we’ll soon see if we’re giving the Race sufficient berth.”

“Right-o!” rejoined Scoutmaster Pendennis. “We’ll do our best, but we’ve only an eight horsepower engine.”

The *Merlin* forged slowly ahead until she took up the strain of the tow; then, increasing power, she whisked the *Kestrel* along at a steady five knots.

“You fellows can turn in again,” said Brandon, addressing the Sea Scouts who had been routed out of their bunks.

But the lads showed no desire to go below. In the pale grey dawn they remained on deck, dividing their interest between the *Merlin* and a broad belt of white-foamed water barely a couple of miles on the port hand. Although the sea everywhere else was calm, the Race was one chaotic mass of broken water, roaring like a wild beast baulked of its prey.

“Good old *Merlin*!” exclaimed Talbot. “She’s done the trick!”

Mr. Grant did not join in the chorus of appreciation. It was yet too soon to shout. He had his doubts on the ability of the little motor to carry out its heavy task; for, although both yachts were moving in a southerly direction at about five knots, the now strong flood tide was setting in a nor’-easterly direction at a good seven miles an hour. The question that arose was whether the *Merlin* and her tow could draw clear of the Race in time; although there was some consolation in the fact that the yachts were no longer in danger of being carried into the centre of that tempestuous waste of water.

Almost imperceptibly the *Kestrel* began to feel the influence of the broken waves. Soon she began to pitch and roll. So did the *Merlin*, to the accompaniment of a series of heavy jerks on the towing hawser.

“Why, the Race is coming towards us!” remarked Symington.

“No, it isn’t,” rejoined Brandon drily. “We’re going towards it. Hang on to something solid, you fellows. We’ll be getting wet shirts in a brace of shakes. . . . You all right, sir? Mind that arm!”

The fellows on the *Merlin* had by this time noticed the danger that threatened them. Two of her crew hurriedly paid out more hawser, an act that at first looked as if the *Merlin* was about to cast off her well-nigh helpless consort. Some of the former’s crew who had been sitting comfortably on the fore-deck came aft hurriedly when they saw the wall of breaking water approaching.

A minute later and both yachts were in the thick of it. True, it was but the tail end of the dreaded Race, but the sight of the agitated mass of water was none the less awesome. At one moment the *Merlin* was towing the *Kestrel* through a calm sea; at the next both craft, pitching, heeling, and staggering, were being assailed by the furious waves.

Again and again the *Kestrel* dipped her bowsprit, flung her bows high as her stern dropped into the trough of the sea. Spars and solid gear rattled, canvas shook and flapped furiously as boom and gaff, bringing up with

disconcerting jerks, threatened to shake the mast out of her, the while the *Merlin*, similarly assailed, was doing her best to win through. Suddenly a particularly vicious breaker surged over her quarter. The motor stopped. Both yachts were now helpless in the grip of the dreaded overfalls.

CHAPTER XV

“To be Returned in Due Course”

THE situation was desperate. The *Merlin* was now a source of peril to the yacht she had done her best to aid. There was no wind. The fiercely flapping canvas was useless; equally out of the question was it to attempt to make use of the oars, for at one moment the blades would be high in the air, at another buried by the rush of the irregular and foaming waves. Held by the towing hawser, the two yachts were in momentary danger of colliding as they swung round almost parallel to each other and with less than five yards of chaotic water between them.

In a trice, Brandon realised the danger, made up his mind, and acted. At the imminent risk of being either jerked or washed overboard he fought his way for'ard, hanging on desperately as he battled towards his goal. One moment thigh deep in water; at another sprawling on the ridge formed by the steeply heeling cabin-top, he progressed foot by foot. With bleeding knees and broken finger-nails, well-nigh breathless with his struggle, the Patrol Leader contrived to throw himself flat upon the heaving fore-deck. Then, hanging on with his left hand, he succeeded in casting off the rope that held the *Kestrel* to the *Merlin*.

Then, obtaining a grip with both hands, Brandon waited to witness the fruits of his hazardous task. At first it seemed as if the act were in vain. The two craft showed no tendency to drift apart; on the contrary, it looked as if they would close. Had they done so, the fate of each would have been sealed, for the strongest yacht ever built would not be proof against the terrific hammering of the two hulls in that tumultuous sea.

After a few minutes of anxious suspense, the distance between the two vessels began to increase. The *Merlin* swung round until her bows pointed in the opposite direction to her previous course. As she rolled, the crew of the *Kestrel* could see the Cornish Sea Scouts struggling desperately in a futile attempt to restart the motor.

For another five minutes the ordeal continued; then, almost as suddenly as she had entered the Race, the *Kestrel* found herself in comparatively calm water, with the final unwelcome gift of about fifty gallons of the English Channel being thrown in her cockpit.

The *Merlin* was not long in following her consort's example, and, with the roar of the turbulent overfalls still dinning in their ears, the crews of both yachts set about repairing the damage done during their exciting quarter of an hour.

Owing to the fact that they had missed the most dangerous part of Portland Race both craft had come off comparatively lightly. Twenty minutes' hard work at the pump freed the *Kestrel* of the water that had found its way on board. Her mizzen-boom had been sprung close to the gooseneck; one of the panes of the skylight had been broken; while—worst of all—her dinghy's top-strake had been badly smashed owing to the boat being thrown violently against the *Kestrel's* quarter.

Three of the Sea Scouts had received minor injuries owing to the severe and erratic motion of the yacht; Eric Little was "down and out" with seasickness; while Molly, the pup, who had been locked in the saloon, was nearly frantic with joy when Peter went below to see how she had fared.

"What's wrong with your engine?" enquired Mr. Grant, hailing the *Merlin*.

"Water on plug and in the carburetter," replied Scoutmaster Pendennis. "We'll get her going soon, I hope. I've heard a lot about Portland Race, but I never expected it to be like that on a calm day. Hello! what's the matter with your hand?"

"Poisoned it," explained Mr. Grant. "It's getting better now. I say: what do you propose to do?"

"We're carrying on," replied Pendennis. "We want to make Yarmouth or Lymington to-day. We'll tow you until a breeze springs up."

"We'll have to put into Swanage," announced Mr. Grant. "We've a stowaway on board and we want to land him."

"How interesting," rejoined the Cornishman. "All right, Swanage it is for both of us. We want more petrol, although we may have enough to carry us on if the breeze does show up."

Both yachts, now being propelled by sweeps, were now standing up Channel at a distance of about ten yards between them, so that the crews

could keep up a running fire of conversation. The while the Cornish Sea Scouts were tackling the still refractory motor.

It was not until the two craft had practically drifted two miles to the east'ard of the Shambles Lightship that the long-hoped-for breeze sprang up—a steady sou'westerly one.

In grand style the two yachts cut through the water, heading for the still distant St. Alban's Head. In point of speed there was little to choose, for although the *Merlin* had a slightly greater displacement and carried more canvas, this advantage was countered by the drag of her now inactive propeller.

"We've got to go through another race, lads," observed Mr. Grant at breakfast. "That's the one off St. Alban's, but it won't be anything like the one off Portland."

"What causes them, sir?" asked Carline.

"It's a sort of submarine steeplechase," explained the Scoutmaster. "A strong tidal water sweeping over a fairly deep and level bed of the sea suddenly encounters a submerged ledge of rocks. The whole of that mass of water has to find its way across in less than half the previous depth, and since the level of the water cannot be materially increased, the result is that the rate of the flow of water has to be greatly increased and causes a succession of overfalls. . . . Well, Eric: feeling better? Good! Make a decent meal, my lad, 'cause you've a long journey in front of you."

"Is it very much further to Chichester?" asked the youth.

"We're sending you home to Dartmouth."

"I think you are labouring under a misapprehension, sir," rejoined the precocious youth. "I'm on my way to visit my aunt and uncle at Chichester—and I won't go back to Dartmouth! If you won't take me, I'll walk the rest of the way."

"We'll see," remarked the Scoutmaster oracularly, and changed the topic of conversation.

An hour later the *Kestrel* and the *Merlin* rounded St. Alban's Head, where, with the exception of a sullen swell, there was little to indicate the locality of the oft-times dangerous Race. Followed a run along the rocky coast in full view of the famous caves where smugglers and wreckers once plied their infamous trade. Durlstone Head was left astern and a course

shaped to clear the dangerous Peveril Ledge. Then the whole expanse of Swanage Bay opened into view.

Both yachts anchored in less than seven feet of water just inside the shelter of Swanage Pier. The Cornish lads went ashore in their quest for petrol and provisions, and with them went the Sea Scouts of the *Kestrel* with the exception of Craddock, who, with Mr. Grant and the stowaway, remained on board.

Brandon was the bearer of a telegraph form on which Mr. Grant had written: "Have found a stray grandson; please wire instructions."

Having dispatched the wire, the Patrol Leader and Heavitree made their way towards Peveril Point in order to give Molly a run on a closely cropped turf.

Waiting until a reply might be forthcoming, Brandon called at the post-office. There was no answer. After another half-hour had elapsed he called again, still without success. From the beach he semaphored the news to Mr. Grant.

The delay was getting serious. The *Merlin* was ready to resume her voyage. There was a fair wind and tide, but if the start were delayed much longer a strong adverse tide would be encountered in the Needles channel, which meant that perhaps the Sea Scouts would be compelled to spend another anxious night afloat.

"You'd better push on, Pendennis," suggested Mr. Grant. "We'll follow and pick you up at Lymington."

The Cornishman fell in with the idea. As a matter of fact, he particularly wanted to give his crew a good night's rest in some sheltered harbour within The Wight; and, having the West of England yachtsman's typical respect for the mudbanks and erratic tides of the Solent, he did not relish the possibility of having to navigate that intricate waterway in the hours of darkness.

So the *Merlin* "carried on."

Craddock then semaphored a message to his chum telling him to remain ashore until one o'clock, but to keep the other Sea Scouts together in case they had to re-embark in a hurry.

It was not until five minutes to the hour that the expected telegram arrived. It read:

"Administer suitable chastisement. Return delinquent at your convenience."

The Scoutmaster made a wry face when the telegram was handed him.

“That merely confirms my opinion, Brandon,” he remarked in a low voice. “The lad’s grandfather is not only very precise in his mannerisms; he is evidently a bit of a martinet. I’ll say this for Eric: he might be a queer little chap, but he’s not a sneak. It was only by quite an accident that I found out that he has been frequently thrashed for minor offences. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ might be all very well if carried out with fairness and moderation—although I very much doubt the wisdom of personal chastisement, except under very special circumstances. However, since Mr. Little gives me a tolerably free hand, I’ll return the delinquent at my convenience. That is: we’ll take him along with us, and hand him over to his uncle at Chichester.”

“That’s a topping idea, sir!” exclaimed the Patrol Leader. “We’ll do our best to give the lad a good time.”

“Then tell Eric the news,” continued Mr. Grant. “Or, better, send him down to me. Get under way as sharp as you can, Brandon. The *Merlin* has a good start, but with luck we ought to rejoin her before sunset.”

CHAPTER XVI

The *Kestrel* to the Rescue

THE SEA SCOUTS needed no second bidding to get under way. The remote possibility of being able to overhaul the *Merlin* acted as a spur. By this time each lad knew his particular duty, and in very quick time main and mizzen sails were set, head-sails hoisted in stops, and the cable hove short.

Then, at the Patrol Leader's word of command, the anchor was weighed and stowed in its customary place, the jib and staysail were broken out and trimmed to catch the favouring breeze, and within five minutes from the order to get under way the *Kestrel* was heading for the distant Solent.

Already the *Merlin* was hull-down, only her canvas showing above the skyline. She was roughly eight miles ahead.

Outside Swanage Bay the wind freshened, coming offshore in irregular gusts that swept over the lofty chalk cliffs of Ballard Down. The tide was still running to the east'ard with considerable strength, but there was very little sea to speak of. Even a sailing dinghy could be out without any danger of shipping water.

Presently a craft under sail and motor overtook the *Kestrel*. It was a flat-bottomed contraption measuring, perhaps, twenty feet in length, and was propelled by an outboard motor.

Brandon regarded the boat critically. It certainly looked a freak. Apparently the designer had originally intended to give her plenty of beam and a broad transom; but, changing his mind, had tapered the stern until it was about nine inches in width. Consequently, and owing to the weight of the heavy engine clamped on the stern, the boat had very little bearing surface aft and a small amount of freeboard.

In the stern-sheets sat a fat-faced, smug-looking individual rigged out in a peaked cap and blue reefer coat with brass buttons. His profile reminded Brandon of a parrot, for his nose was inclined to be hooked, while from

underneath a pair of full lips an insignificant receding chin heightened the resemblance to a bird. The rest of the “crew” consisted of three women and two children. The sheet of the lugsail, Brandon noticed, was made fast.

As this freakish craft overhauled the *Kestrel*, passing her at a distance of about twenty yards to wind’ard, the brass-buttoned helmsman favoured the Sea Scouts with a superior sort of smile.

“What a comic outfit!” exclaimed Craddock to his chum. “That chap evidently thinks he’s the goods.”

“He’s certainly pleased with himself at having overhauled us,” rejoined the Patrol Leader. “But wait a bit. There’s a patch of broken water ahead. Let’s see how that old orange-box will take it.”

Just then Mr. Grant came on deck. He had been writing in the cabin, and on hearing the noise of the motor had glanced through the scuttle. He, too, had not failed to notice the supercilious grin on the fellow’s flabby features.

“That man’s looking for trouble,” he observed. “There ought to be a ‘Society for the Protection of Guests of Half-Baked Amateur Marine Motorists.’ Up helm a little Peter; keep in his wake. Unless I’m much mistaken, that freak craft will be in difficulties before very long.”

The *Kestrel* was now about four hundred yards to the sou’west of Old Harry, that well-known chalk pinnacle forming the eastern extremity of the Isle of Purbeck. The motor boat was by this time a couple of hundred yards ahead and making straight for a well-defined tide-rip caused by the tidal current flowing over a ledge of submerged rock running out from Standfast Point.

The greenhorn at the helm of the motor boat failed to notice the popple of disturbed water. His attention seemed to be centred upon the *Kestrel*, as if he were still gloating over his superior speed.

Soon the boat began to pound heavily. Her narrow stern dipped. Spray flew over the engine, putting it out of action. The metal rudder was totally inadequate to keep the flat-bottomed craft on its course. A puff of wind filled the sail, causing the boat to pay off and heel.

Too late the brass-buttoned novice realised the danger. When he did, he could do nothing beyond attempting to restart the engine. His weight as he leant over the narrow stern made matters worse. A sea poured completely over the weather quarter. The boat still lived although half full of water.

Panic seized the man. He had lost his yachting cap—it was floating on the water that swirled over the bottom-boards—and abject fear was plainly written on his face, while his long hair streamed in the breeze.

The while the sail was taking the full force of the wind, for no attempt had been made to free the sheet.

Suddenly, as the boat shipped more water, the mast became unshipped and disappeared over the side, taking the sail with it. The boat, no longer making way, fell into the trough of the sea and took in water on both sides.

“Cut away your gear and ride to it!” shouted Brandon, for the *Kestrel* was now within hailing distance.

The advice, intelligible to anyone acquainted with even an elementary knowledge of seamanship, was lost as far as the bewildered and panic-stricken owner of the motor boat was concerned. He could only wave his arms wildly and shout for help. The women, although obviously badly scared, at least had the sense to keep still.

The Scoutmaster glanced at Brandon and nodded. The Patrol Leader understood. It was a silent intimation that he was to exercise his discretion in the operation of bringing the *Kestrel* alongside the fast-foundering boat.

“Stand by to go about!” ordered Brandon.

Two of the Sea Scouts jumped to tend the head-sheets. Heavitree, boat-hook in hand, took up his station at the main-shrouds. Craddock was at the tiller. The others stood by ready to help the “crew” of the motor boat into safety.

“Up helm a bit . . . at that!” exclaimed Brandon.

The *Kestrel*, with the wind well abaft the beam, flew past the now almost waterlogged boat. Mistaking the nature of the manœuvre, the brass-buttoned man waved his arms in redoubled frenzy and literally howled when he thought the ketch was leaving him to his fate.

Brandon knew quite well what he was doing. To attempt to bring the *Kestrel* alongside with a quartering wind would result in the boat being crushed, or at least it would have been impossible to get a hold and retain it. There was only one course practicable, and that was to run to lee’ard, go about, and shoot up into the wind, losing way within a few feet of the object for succour.

“Lee-o!” exclaimed Brandon, loudly and clearly.

Peter put the helm down. Talbot and Symington let fly the jib and foresail sheets; while Wilson hauled away at the slack of the mainsheet. Still keeping the tiller hard over, Craddock attended to the mizzen-sheet.

The *Kestrel* came about as gracefully as her namesake, turning slowly and unfalteringly. Then, kept down in the eye of the wind, she forged ahead with gradually diminishing way until Heavitree could grip the gunwale of the motor boat with the boat-hook.

By this time the boat had been swamped. Her stern, weighted down by the outboard engine, was six feet beneath the surface, while the bows, kept afloat by the air under the fore-deck, were about a couple of feet above water. To the still floating portion the “crew” clung, while the owner, his face green with terror, abandoned his waterlogged craft and made a jump for the *Kestrel*’s shrouds. Forgetting the difficulties of “taking off” from a submerged platform, he leapt short but continued to grip the rail. There he hung, submerged to his shoulders, puffing like a grampus as he struggled in vain to haul himself on board the yacht.

The sight of the selfish, cowardly man made Mr. Grant lose his temper—a thing he rarely did. He realised that with the fellow’s bulk between the yacht’s side and the sinking motor boat the difficulty of getting the rest of the party on board was enormously increased. Time, too, was precious, for the *Kestrel* would soon “pay off” and gather way, in which case the manoeuvre of getting alongside the waterlogged craft would have to be repeated.

“Let go, you idiot!” roared the Scoutmaster. “Haven’t you heard of ‘women and children first’?”

The man refused to do so.

“Stamp on his fingers, Heavitree!” exclaimed Mr. Grant, realising that if a calamity likely to become a fatality were to be avoided, drastic measures were absolutely imperative.

Heavitree was unable to carry out these instructions. All his efforts were concentrated upon an attempt to retain a hold on the boat and to prevent it sinking still further as the women strove to raise themselves out of the water.

Just then the partly submerged boat surged against the *Kestrel*’s side. The craven owner’s generous proportions acted as an animated fender, but the shock well-nigh winded him and caused him to relax his grip.

In a trice Talbot grasped him by his long hair and dragged him aft, where Craddock assisted in hauling the man on deck.

Meanwhile Brandon and Symington set to work like Trojans to tranship the badly scared women and children. They were not a moment too soon. The *Kestrel* was forging ahead.

“I can’t hold her much longer, sir!” exclaimed Heavitree.

“Let her go,” replied Mr. Grant briefly.

Heavitree disengaged the boat-hook. The swamped motor boat drifted astern. Bubbles of air were escaping from the uptilted fore-deck.

“Shall we have a shot at salving her?” asked Brandon.

The Scoutmaster shook his head.

“Let her go,” he replied. “She won’t have another chance to drown anyone. . . . There she goes! Bon voyage!”

The freak craft disappeared from view. Mr. Grant glanced dispassionately at the late owner, who was still in an abject state.

“The yellow streak has shown itself, I notice,” remarked the Scoutmaster. “Well, it’s no use asking *him* questions. We’ll have to land the crew somewhere. I wonder where they came from?”

“Where shall we make for, sir?” asked Brandon.

“Studland,” replied Mr. Grant. “It’s just round the corner. Give that point a wide berth.”

With a fair tide and beam wind, the *Kestrel* opened into the wide expanse of Studland Bay. It would have meant a tedious beat shorewards owing to the cliffs blanketing the wind, but fortunately a motor passenger-boat happened to be leaving the shore, and in response to a semaphored message she ran alongside the yacht.

Five minutes later the still considerably scared survivors of the sunken boat were transhipped to the passenger craft, and the *Kestrel*, running before the wind, resumed her attempt to overhaul the far-distant *Merlin*.

By this time Mr. Grant had recovered his customary even temper.

“After all, perhaps the silly ass couldn’t help being in a fearful funk,” he remarked. “When all’s said and done, bravery largely consists of being afraid of being afraid. . . . What’s that, Wilson? They’ve made the saloon slopping wet? Well, mop it up. That’ll be another Good Turn to your credit.”

CHAPTER XVII

Becalmed

WITH all sail set, even the topsail and spinnaker, the *Kestrel* tore through the water, shaping a course to pass one mile to the south'ard of Hengistbury Head, a bold promontory situated roughly midway between Old Harry and the Needles.

The *Merlin* was no longer in sight. In vain Brandon, with a pair of binoculars, swung round his neck, went aloft, where, perched on the cross-trees, he brought his glasses to bear upon a limited expanse of horizon that showed between the straining canvas. He could see the brown sails of half a dozen fishing boats and the smoke of a steamer, but of the Cornish Sea Scouts' craft not a sign.

"They've too good a pair of heels for us," he remarked, when he regained the deck.

"What's that?" asked Heavitree, pointing slightly on the starboard bow. "There's something white. Isn't that the *Merlin's* sails?"

"I believe you're right," said Carline. "Only she's a long way out. Let me have the glasses, Brandon."

The Patrol Leader handed over the binoculars. Carline levelled them at the supposed cloud of canvas.

"Why, it's a white cliff rising out of the sea," he exclaimed.

"Yes, the Isle of Wight," explained Brandon. "It puzzled me at first. From the cross-trees I could make out the Needles. If——"

A dull thud that shook the yacht from truck to keel interrupted the Patrol Leader's words. For a brief instant the *Kestrel* seemed to stop dead. It might have been only an illusion, but everyone on deck thought so.

"We're aground!" exclaimed Talbot.

Brandon glanced over the side. The yacht was still carrying way and lifting easily to the waves.

“There’s plenty of water everywhere,” he replied. “We must have struck something, though.”

The jar brought Mr. Grant on deck to see what was amiss.

“We struck something pretty heavy,” he remarked. “Nip below, Peter, and look under the floorboards in the fo’c’sle. She may have strained a plank.”

Craddock did so. He had not been gone more than a few seconds when the reason of the alarm became evident. About a hundred yards on the starboard quarter an enormous porpoise broke surface, followed by another. Both animals were badly scared, for they promptly dived and were not seen again.

Presently Peter returned with the information that the yacht was as tight as a bottle. Thanks to her heavy build she had escaped damage, although a vessel with slighter scantlings might easily have had her bow planking stove in.

At length Hengistbury Head was brought abeam, and for ten minutes the *Kestrel* had a pretty stiff hammering over Christchurch Ledge. By this time the Needles and the multi-coloured cliffs of Alum Bay were clearly discernible, while right ahead rose the slender tower of Hurst Castle lighthouse.

“Look!” exclaimed Talbot. “Isn’t that the *Merlin*?”

He pointed to a yacht about three miles dead ahead. Brandon brought the binoculars into action.

“Yes, you’re right, Talbot,” he replied. “It is the *Merlin*. She’s becalmed.”

“Then, we may overhaul her yet,” said Wilson.

“She’ll use her motor,” declared Craddock.

“If they can get the thing to go,” added Brandon. “But it’s rather strange. Here we are busting along with every stitch of canvas drawing, and they haven’t a breath of wind. The sea’s as smooth as glass a mile ahead.”

As far as the *Kestrel* was concerned the breeze held strong and true until she drew within a hundred yards of the Cornish Sea Scouts’ craft. Then the wind failed utterly. In the grip of the now adverse tide both yachts began to

lose ground. Ahead and only three miles away lay the Solent—looking alluring and peaceful in the rays of the late afternoon sun. Without the aid of a steady and favourable breeze or that of a powerful motor the two yachts were not likely to gain their desired harbour during the next six hours.

Keeping her now useless canvas set, the *Kestrel* dropped anchor. The *Merlin* continued to drift until she came abreast of the Aberstour Sea Scouts' craft; then she, too, let go her anchor.

"You were lucky to carry a breeze so long," shouted the Patrol Leader of the *Merlin*. "We've been becalmed for quite two hours. We got within a quarter of a mile of the lighthouse when the tide changed. Look where we are now!"

"Why didn't you use your motor?" asked Craddock.

"We haven't been able to get the thing going," was the reply. "We've been trying all day, and we haven't given up hope yet, although we do feel a bit fed up."

"Can I give you a hand?" asked Peter, who possessed a sound knowledge of internal combustion engines.

"If you will," replied the Cornish Patrol Leader.

Craddock jumped into the dinghy, cast off the painter, and rowed to the *Merlin*. It required a considerable amount of hard rowing, for the tide was now swirling past and the dinghy was large and heavy.

"What have you done?" he enquired, as he gained the *Merlin's* deck.

"Tried everything," was the reply. "The mag.'s all right; there's quite a healthy spark, but she won't even fire her dope."

Peter made the usual preliminary tests. Pouring a few drops of petrol into the plug and placing the latter on the cylinder, he found that the spirit ignited readily enough; but, as the Patrol Leader had said, the "dope" would not fire when the plug was in position.

"Tried a spare plug?" asked Craddock.

"Four—no good," was the terse and emphatic reply.

Carefully overhauling the high-tension wire, Peter called attention to the fact that the insulation was rather worn at a spot where the wire crossed one of the bearers of the cockpit floor.

“Yes,” agreed the Cornish lad, “I noticed that; but if there is a short there’d be no spark at all. As it is, the plug has quite a healthy spark.”

“Well, try now,” suggested Craddock. “No; don’t replace the floorboards. Stand astride of the gap.”

At the first swing of the starting handle the motor fired and continued to do so, “ticking over” with the throttle only just open.

“Well, I’m dashed!” ejaculated the *Merlin’s* engineer. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” replied Peter. “Now replace the floorboards.”

As soon as the rectangular-shaped woodwork was placed in position the motor stopped.

“That beats me!” remarked the Patrol Leader.

“There’s your trouble,” declared Craddock, removing and overturning the floorboard. “See that steel plate?”

He pointed to the double strip of metal forming the edge of a slot to take the reversing lever.

“It’s bearing directly upon the high-tension wire, and the continual vibration has damaged the insulation. The motor fired when the floorboard was up, but when it was in position the metal touched the wire and caused a short circuit. Wrap some insulating tape round the wire—it would be as well to cut a notch in that beam to let the wire bed itself better—and you won’t have any more bother.”

“My word! You’re a smart fellow!” exclaimed the other, with frank admiration.

“Not at all,” protested Craddock. “You see, I had exactly the same trouble once on board our old boat, the *Puffin*, and I had to get another fellow to put it right.”

“’Tany rate, you’ve done a very Good Turn,” declared Mr. Pendennis. “We’ll try and return it by giving the *Kestrel* a tow. I don’t say that we’ll succeed against this tide, but we’ll have a good shot at it.”

The Falmouth Scoutmaster hailed the *Kestrel*.

“I say, Grant!” he exclaimed. “We’re going to give you a tow. Do you know your way in? I don’t, except for the directions in the ‘Channel Pilot’;

but which is Fort Victoria? Look here, do you mind coming on board and piloting us?"

Mr. Grant accepted the invitation. Craddock returned to the *Kestrel*, and preparations were made to pass a hawser from the *Merlin* to the other yacht. Both anchors were weighed simultaneously and the strenuous effort began.

Slowly yet surely the two vessels approached Hurst Channel. Ahead could be seen a confused turmoil of broken sea as the pent-up water of the Solent forced its way through the narrow passage between Hurst Castle and the Isle of Wight.

It was now that local knowledge came in most usefully. Except for one point ominously named "The Trap," the beach at Hurst Castle is steep-to, the depth increasing to fifteen fathoms within a few yards of the shore. By keeping close in, Mr. Grant knew that the full force of the tide would not only be avoided, but that there would also be found a tidal eddy in their favour.

"You can rely upon the motor, I hope?" he enquired. "If it should go wrong, we'll find ourselves in a very dangerous situation."

Receiving an assurance on that point, Mr. Grant ordered the helm to be starboarded a little.

Gradually the slow progress increased until, aided by the counter-current, the *Merlin* and the *Kestrel* seemed to jump ahead. They were now within their own length of the beach. Ahead lay "The Trap," and off it a broiling tide which, if it caught the *Merlin* on her port bow, would swing her out into the full strength of the ebb.

Edging cautiously, the *Merlin* approached the crucial spot. She appeared to stop dead. The strain on the towing hawser eased. The *Kestrel* continued to decrease her distance, making straight for the dangerous ledge. To Brandon at the helm it seemed as if a titanic hand was gripping the keel and shaking the whole boat. He could do nothing. The rudder seemed useless, and yet the yacht was heading for destruction.

Suddenly the *Merlin* forged ahead. She had crawled past the dangerous point and was now aided by a favourable eddy. With a staggering jerk the hawser took up the strain. The *Kestrel* leapt ahead, her keel missing the steeply shelving ledge by inches.

In another five minutes both craft were stemming the relatively weak tide off the mud-flats of the Hampshire shore.

“Near thing that,” remarked Heavitree. “I thought we should have had to have jumped for it that time.”

“If we had, we should have stood as much chance as a mouse in a pail of water,” rejoined Brandon, glancing at the maelstrom astern. “Next time I think I’d rather wait till the tide turns.”

CHAPTER XVIII

The Admiral

“WHAT’S that fellow staring at us for?” asked Talbot.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Symington carelessly, as he stooped to put a final polish on his shore-going boots. “It’s the thing to do afloat. Everyone does, and it’s taken as a sort of compliment to the craft you happen to be aboard.”

“But, just you look at him,” persisted Talbot.

It was the morning following the arrival of the *Kestrel* and the *Merlin* in Lymington River. Both craft were brought up on Long Reach and just above the second beacon. As the east-going tide would not run before the afternoon, and as it was almost a hopeless proposition to attempt to stem the adverse tide, the crews of both boats had arranged to go ashore in the forenoon, and were consequently “smartening themselves up” for the occasion.

Symington gave a casual glance. Then he looked a second time. Evidently Talbot’s wonder was justifiable, for breasting the ebb-tide was an open, centre-board sailing boat in the stern-sheets of which sat the only occupant.

He was a bronzed-complexioned man of about forty, with iron-grey hair and a white “torpedo” beard. His beetling brows were conspicuous by their long, white hairs, overhanging dark and deep-set eyes. He wore a blue reefer suit and a peaked cap cocked at a rakish angle over one eye. As Talbot had remarked, he was staring—although it looked more like a glare—straight at the *Kestrel*.

The *Kestrel* had anchored about fifty yards lower down the stream than the *Merlin*, and was in consequence nearer to the approaching boat.

Even as Symington looked the bearded man put his helm down with the evident intention of coming alongside.

“Someone to see you, sir!” he announced, addressing Mr. Grant, who had just finished shaving.

The rest of the crew of the *Kestrel* came on deck. Talbot and Carline stood by with fenders; Symington prepared to take the stranger’s painter; while the others lined up behind Mr. Grant, standing smartly at “alert.”

But instead of running alongside the man let his sheets fly, with the result that the boat lost way and, only just stemming the tide, remained practically level with the *Kestrel*.

Then he stood up, almost bursting blood-vessels in his unaccountable anger.

“Confound you, sir!” he roared. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“’Fraid I don’t,” replied Mr. Grant mildly. “Unless,” he added cheerfully, “unless you are the harbour master.”

“Insolence, sir! Rank insolence!” blared the man. “Why don’t you salute? Why haven’t you dipped your ensign? I’m the Admiral commanding the Atlantic Fleet!”

For a moment the Scoutmaster was nonplussed. Obviously the enraged individual was a lunatic and possibly a dangerous one. The situation had to be handled delicately. The best thing to do, he decided, was to humour the man. Fortunately the crew had taken their cue from their Scoutmaster and had refrained from roaring with laughter.

“I am sorry, sir,” said Mr. Grant. “I failed to recognise you.”

“That’s no excuse,” stormed the man. “You’ve failed to pay proper respect to your commanding officer, sir! Consider yourself under arrest!”

“Very good, sir,” replied the Scoutmaster.

The while he was working out a very difficult problem. If the intruder were as fierce as he looked—and in spite of his age he was active and muscular—he was a positive danger. Perhaps before the united efforts of the Sea Scouts could place him under restraint he might inflict severe injuries on some of them. Handicapped by his injured hand, Mr. Grant realised that he could do little from a physical point of view.

On the other hand, he could not continue to temporise indefinitely. If Mr. Pendennis could be communicated with, without exciting the man’s suspicions, something might be done, for the Cornish Scoutmaster was a

huge, hefty fellow with no small reputation as a wrestler in a county where wrestling as a sport holds a high position.

Just then the madman noticed that his boat was adrift. He had neglected to make fast the painter, and owing to his strange behaviour the Sea Scouts had not given the boat a thought. Already the little sailing craft, with her sails still out, was drifting to lee'ard.

“Quartermaster of the Watch!” shouted the intruder. “Who gave you orders to take my barge from the——”

He paused abruptly. In his disordered brain was a faint realisation that there was no accommodation ladder to this craft. Its absence puzzled him.

Suddenly he grasped Carline by the shoulder and hurled him overboard. It was done so swiftly and unexpectedly that no one had time to raise even a finger to attempt to prevent it; but the next instant Brandon and Craddock threw themselves upon the madman.

There was little room on the waterway for a struggle—merely a space of about thirty inches between the raised cabin-top and the side of the yacht; but in spite of limited surroundings the affray was a strenuous one.

To the credit of the two Sea Scouts it must be recorded that neither lost his temper, in spite of the fact that they had seen Carline tossed into the ditch.

The madman fought desperately, using his fists successfully. It was evident that he had been a trained boxer; yet there was wanting the necessary co-operation between the brain and his fists.

Contenting himself with parrying the man's deliberate blows, the Patrol Leader kept his opponent busy while Craddock contrived to get behind the infuriated intruder. Then, gripping the man round his waist, Peter threw him on his back upon the cabin-top.

The struggle was not yet over. Again and again the maniac sought to regain his feet. Wrenching one arm free, he struck out. Brandon gripped him by the wrist and held on. Still the man resisted; yet notwithstanding his fury he made no effort to use his feet against his youthful antagonists.

He was visibly tiring. So were Brandon and Craddock, but not to such an extent. It was then that Heavitree joined in the fray. Deftly passing a rope round the madman's ankle and taking a turn with the end to one of the runners, he soon had the man reduced to a state of helplessness; while

Brandon completed the business by securing the fellow's arms behind his back with his scarf.

Meanwhile one of the crew of the *Merlin* who happened to be on deck had raised the alarm, and the yacht's dinghy, manned by four Sea Scouts, with Mr. Pendennis in the stern-sheets, came at top speed towards the *Kestrel*.

At the same time Carline was returning with the maniac's boat. Finding himself overboard, the Sea Scout thought that since he was in the water he might just as well secure the drifting boat. This he did. Then, lowering the centre-board and trimming the sheets, he sailed the little craft alongside the *Kestrel* just as the *Merlin's* dinghy arrived upon the scene.

"Hello! What's the trouble?" enquired Scoutmaster Pendennis.

Mr. Grant tapped his forehead significantly.

"Is that so?" continued the Cornishman. "Poor fellow! I wonder where he came from. As a matter of fact, I thought you'd had a visit from the escaped convict. Haven't you heard? It's in this morning's paper. A prisoner got away from Parkhurst yesterday afternoon. It is supposed that he stole a boat and crossed to the mainland. There's a boat missing at Yarmouth. Any damage done?"

Brandon and Craddock, breathing heavily, shook their heads. Heavitree had barked his knuckles in the struggle, but decided that "it was nothing to write home about." The madman, exhausted by his efforts, was lying comparatively still, but apparently uninjured.

The rapid beats of a steamer's paddles caused a general rush to fend off the boats lying alongside the *Kestrel*. One of the passenger boats plying between Yarmouth and Lymington was coming up the river and throwing out a tremendous wash. Further down stream anchored yachts were rolling heavily in the breaking swell, while tons of water were receding from the mud-flats in advance of the quickly moving vessel.

As she passed, one of the passengers standing aft noticed the bound figure on the *Kestrel's* deck and called his companions' attention to it. Then, raising his hands trumpet-wise to his mouth, he shouted:

"We'll come for him as soon as we can."

The steamer continued on her way to the pier, leaving the *Kestrel* rolling so heavily in her swell that Heavitree had to steady the helpless captive lest he should be jerked overboard.

Half an hour later a large rowing boat with a boatman and the two passengers from the steamer came alongside.

“So you’ve got him, sir,” said one of the latter. “I hope he didn’t give you much trouble.”

“Not much,” replied Mr. Grant. “Who is he?”

The attendant, for such he was, explained. The madman was an inmate of a private mental hospital a few miles from Yarmouth. Usually he was quite docile, but there were occasions when he became violent. More than once by a display of considerable cunning he had broken out of the establishment, and invariably he had made his way to the little seaport and had taken possession of an unattended boat.

“We guessed he’d be making for Lymington,” continued the man. “When I heard Mr. Lucas’s boat was missing, I said to my mate, ‘The Admiral’s up to his old trick again.’ We call him The Admiral, because he’s always under the delusion that he is one. Of course, the police must come to the conclusion that the boat was taken by the fellow who got away from Parkhurst yesterday, though I told them they were wrong. A desperate chap, six foot one such as he is, wouldn’t risk showing himself in Yarmouth, if he wanted to steal a boat. Glad we didn’t come across him when we were looking for The Admiral last night. He’s serving a long term for house-breaking with violence, and I don’t envy the policeman who has to tackle him. Well, sir, we’ll take charge of The Admiral, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind in the least,” replied Mr. Grant. “I suppose he won’t give trouble?”

“Bless you, no, sir!” declared the attendant. “He’ll be as quiet as a lamb. Come on, Admiral!” he continued, addressing the subject of his search. “There’s a rehearsal this afternoon, and what will happen if the first violin isn’t there?”

So saying, he removed the madman’s bonds and helped him to his feet. The unfortunate man stepped into the waiting boat as quietly as any ordinary individual.

“How about this?” enquired the Scoutmaster, pointing to the sailing boat.

“I’ll be along to take charge of her, sir,” said the boatman. “You won’t be getting under way afore the flood tide, I’ll allow?”

With the departure of the attendants and their charge, Mr. Pendennis prepared to return to his own craft.

“We won’t be starting before two o’clock, I suppose,” he remarked. “We’ll carry our tide right through to Chichester. Ought to get there by eight with the breeze. By the way, how’s that hand of yours, Grant? Oughtn’t you to see a doctor and get it lanced?”

“No need,” replied Mr. Grant. “The poison’s out and the wound is healing nicely. It will be all right in a day or so. Now, lads! Who’s for the shore?”

CHAPTER XIX

The Convict

IF, on leaving Lymington River, the *Kestrel* hadn't run on the mud; if the tide had not changed and the wind fallen light; and if the *Merlin* had not run out of petrol: then the Sea Scouts might have found themselves at the rendezvous for the Jamboree at eight o'clock that evening.

It was a combination of adverse circumstances. Running the *Kestrel* aground was excusable but hardly avoidable. Many a yachtsman with local knowledge has done much the same, for the beacons, instead of marking the edge of the channel, are some distance away from it and well up on the mud. The *Kestrel* "took the putty" badly and, in spite of the *Merlin's* efforts to tow her off, she remained there for nearly two hours.

The change of the direction of the tidal stream and the dropping of the wind, which finally backed to due east, were conditions for which the Sea Scouts could not be held responsible; but the same could not be said in excuse for the *Merlin* running out of petrol.

As a matter of fact, the Sea Scout in charge of the motor had examined the gauge of the petrol tank, which registered eight gallons. Unfortunately the indicator had stuck, and the actual amount when the *Merlin* went to her consort's assistance was only one gallon. It was now *nil*.

This discovery was made when the two yachts were abreast of Egypt Point and within a mile or so of Cowes Harbour. In vain they attempted to beat up for that anchorage. Gripped by the steadily increasing foul tide they were rapidly swept down the Solent until, realising that any further efforts would only result in their being carried more to the west'ard, they dropped anchor off Newtown River.

"There's a hamlet called Newtown and another place called Shalfleet," observed Mr. Pendennis, after consulting the chart. "We may be able to get petrol at one of them. Are any of your fellows coming ashore with us?"

“We may as well go if we leave a couple of hands to look after the yachts,” replied Mr. Grant. “The glass is steady and the tide won’t change for another five hours. It’s good holding ground, and there’s no fear of either craft dragging her anchor. Right-o! Who’ll volunteer to remain?”

Craddock and Heavitree offered to act as ship-keepers. Two Cornish Sea Scouts also elected to stay on board the *Merlin*. The others manned the two dinghies and prepared to make for the mouth of the river.

“How about Molly?” asked Brandon. “Shall we take her?”

The pup showed such a disinclination to go in the boat that she was left behind. Usually she was quite excited at the sight of the dinghy being manned, and was one of the first to scramble over the gunwale. But that was only when Craddock was to form one of the party. She was fond of everyone on board, even Eric Little; but she was devoted to Peter. Where he went she would go, but if he remained on board it required forcible abduction to get the pup into the boat.

Left to themselves, Craddock and Heavitree had quite an enjoyable afternoon. They fished, exchanged semaphore and Morse messages with the *Merlin*’s ship-keepers, wrote letters, and watched passing shipping.

Six o’clock came, but there were no signs of the two dinghies. The Sea Scouts had tea, washed up and stowed away the things, and came on deck again. Still the absent members of the two crews failed to put in an appearance.

“What’s happened to the others?” asked Peter, hailing the *Merlin*.

“Perhaps they can’t find a garage or a place where they sell petrol,” replied one of the Falmouth lads. “I’ve been aloft to look, but there’s only a small part of the harbour to be seen. It runs away behind that hill to the right of the entrance.”

“More likely they are high and dry on the mud,” added Heavitree. “Ah, well! We aren’t lonely, and we aren’t idle. I’ve caught enough fish for supper for all hands.”

“If they are aground they can hardly be blamed for that,” continued the Cornish Sea Scout. “These tides are fair puzzlers. Down our way we’re satisfied with two tides a day; here people get four.”

Craddock agreed. It was his first experience of the coast between Cowes and Weymouth, where a second high water follows the first at anything from

two to four hours later. He had also been used to a rise and fall of about eighteen feet. Here the range of tide seemed to be about six feet.

At sunset the main ebb was almost done. The *Kestrel*, anchored nearer in shore than the *Merlin*, was within fifty yards of the now exposed gravel banks. Taking soundings, Peter found that the depth was a fathom and a half.

“So we won’t ground at low tide,” he remarked to his chum. “There’s nothing to worry about. Let’s go below and make ourselves snug. It’s pretty nippy this evening.”

Having lighted the riding-lamp and hoisted it on the forestay the two lads retired to the saloon. Soon they were making a literary feast, devouring the pages of their favourite weekly paper. Breathlessly they followed the fearfully exciting adventures. The flight of time passed unheeded. They had almost forgotten their immediate surroundings in visualising a stalwart sergeant riding hot-foot across the boundless prairie in close pursuit of a much-wanted desperado.

Suddenly, Molly gave a low growl.

“Quiet, little girl!” exclaimed Peter.

But the pup refused to keep still. Clambering up the three broad steps leading from the saloon to the cockpit, she changed her growl to a succession of shrill barks of defiance.

“What’s up, I wonder?” remarked Heavitree, coming back to earth, or rather to his floating home. “Are the others returning?”

“Don’t think so,” replied Peter, preparing to go on deck. “Molly’s welcome is very different from that.”

On gaining the cockpit Craddock stared in bewilderment. It was some moments before he grew accustomed to the change from the well lighted cabin to the faint moonlight. When he did he was all the more puzzled, for, instead of land showing a few hundred yards to starboard, there was nothing but an expanse of sea dotted with the flashing light of numerous buoys. Then he looked to port. There was the land—the low-lying ground to the east of the entrance of Newtown River. He had completely ignored the fact that the *Kestrel* had swung to the young flood tide.

“What is it, Molly?” he asked.

The pup, crouching with her forepaws planted against the low rail, was barking furiously at a dark object floating in the water at less than ten yards

from the yacht's bows. In the faint moonlight Craddock saw that it was a basket drifting bottom upwards.

"That's nothing, pup," declared the lad. "Haven't you seen a drifting basket before?"

But Molly would not be silenced. She seemed to be fascinated by the derelict wickerwork.

Then Craddock began to be interested, too. And for a very good reason: the basket was not drifting with the tide. It was moving decidedly against it and slowly yet surely approaching the *Kestrel's* bows.

"Come on deck, old man," said Peter to his chum, in a low voice; but Heavitree, who had resumed his absorbing pastime, either did not hear or did not want to.

Presently the basket disappeared from Peter's range of vision. From where he was standing in the cockpit he could not see the surface of the water in the vicinity of the yacht's bows. He heard the rasping of the wickerwork against the *Kestrel's* side, and once more the basket appeared in view, bobbing astern and now drifting naturally with the tide.

Molly's bark grew louder and shriller. She had lost all interest in the basket and was directing her attention to something under the bows.

Before Craddock could go for'ard to investigate, the dripping head and shoulders of a man appeared above the rail. Then, obtaining a foothold on the bobstay, the intruder swung himself on the fore-deck, stood up, and steadied himself by means of the forestay.

"Get that there dawg of yourn out of it afore I 'as to 'urt it," he growled.

In the semi-darkness the stranger seemed to tower to a great height. Actually he was well over six feet, though narrow across the chest. He was clean-shaven, and wore an overcoat that was many inches too short for him. He was bare-legged, and it looked as if he were wearing shorts. Water drained steadily from his meagre and saturated garments.

"Come here, Molly!" exclaimed Peter, fearful lest the intruder should carry out the alternative he had mentioned.

The pup still refused.

The man, stooping suddenly, grasped the animal by the scruff of the neck and stepped aft as far as the mainmast.

"Ketch!" he said laconically. "Don't want to 'urt no dawg, I don't."

With that he tossed the pup into Craddock's hands, throwing her so gently that, beyond being frightened, no harm was done to her.

"Naw," continued the intruder, "me an' you are goin' for a nice little cruise-like. 'Tain't no use kickin'. I've been a-watchin' yer, an' I knows there's only two of you. Ask for no trouble an' you'll get none. Got me?"

Just then Heavitree, hearing voices, was about to come on deck. To him Peter handed the pup.

"Lock her up and get back here as soon as you can," he whispered.

Then he addressed the intruder. Already he had no doubt as to the fellow's identity. The ill-fitting overcoat failed to conceal a rough suit of grey cloth liberally bedecked with broad arrows. Obviously this was the convict under sentence for robbery with violence, and in all probability he would not hesitate to take desperate measures to prolong his spell of liberty. Yet, Peter recalled, he had been gentle with a dumb animal even though Molly had attempted to snap at his gnarled fingers.

"What do you want?" demanded the Sea Scout. "It's no use coming here."

"Isn't it, my young pal?" replied the convict. "That's for me to say. Now look 'ere: all I want is a bite o' food an' summat to drink. Then I'll trouble you to 'and over any clothes belongin' to that tall bloke I seed go ashore this artemnoon. Then you'll put me across t'other side an' you'll get my best thanks. If you don't——'Ere, you, get down out of it. You won't be wanted this trip."



An Unwelcome Visitor

The convict hesitated. He did not like the look of the business end of the boat-hook, nor did he relish the probability of a crack across the head from the serviceable lump of iron which Heavitree gripped in readiness.

The latter remarks were addressed to Heavitree, who having placed Molly out of harm's way had come out of the saloon to "join in the argument," as he expressed it. Far from complying with the convict's demands he went to stand beside Craddock and unobtrusively unshipped a heavy belaying-pin. "Get out of it!" repeated the convict. Heavitree raising his arm resolutely remained where he was. Craddock gave one glance in the direction of the *Merlin*. No one was to be seen on her deck. More than likely

her two ship-keepers were amusing themselves below. In any case, there was not much likelihood of help in that direction. The two Sea Scouts on the Cornish yacht were without a dinghy, and being further out in the tideway, they would run a serious risk of being carried away if they attempted to swim to the aid of their brother-Scouts on the *Kestrel*. If Peter and Heavitree were to “win through,” they would evidently have to do so on their own merits.

Realising this, Craddock picked up the boat-hook which was lying on the waterways by the side of the cockpit coaming. It was a formidable weapon, consisting of about eight feet of stout ash pole terminating in a combined point and hook of galvanised iron.

Armed resistance was one of the last things the miscreant had counted upon. He had staked his chances upon the likelihood of being able to overawe a couple of lads, but he had failed to estimate correctly the physical and moral fibre of the average Sea Scout. As a general rule, the burglar who employs brute force when dealing with a weak and terrified householder is an arrant coward, easily terrified when threatened with corporal punishment. When he finds that “the game is up,” he will refrain from violence because he knows that on conviction his sentence will be far heavier than if he had contented himself solely with ordinary house-breaking. On the other hand, if he thinks he can get clear he will not hesitate to stun or wound the person who attempts his capture.

The convict hesitated. He did not like the look of the business end of the boat-hook, the staff of which was held in a pair of firm, steady hands. Nor did he relish the probability of a crack across the head from the serviceable lump of iron which Heavitree gripped in readiness.

“Be reasonable, chums!” he whined. “’Ere’s a pore bloke wrongfully convicted who’s got a chance to get clear. Be sports an’ give him a ’elping ’and.”

“We will,” agreed Peter grimly. “We’ll give the police a helping hand, so you’d better surrender and give no further trouble.”

“S’pose I’d better,” rejoined the convict sullenly. “I sees myself back in quod, ’cause ’ere come your pals in their boat.”

Instinctively the two Sea Scouts turned their heads to follow the direction of the crafty rogue’s glance. It was exactly what the convict hoped they would do.

In a trice he leapt across the cabin-top. Before Peter could recover his guard the fellow was within the wavering point of the boat-hook. The next instant he grasped Heavitree's right wrist, rendering the belaying-pin useless as a weapon either of defence or offence.

But there was one thing he forgot. Accustomed to having a dry and comparatively unyielding solid ground, he was quite unused to the motion of a vessel. Even a forty-foot yacht responds perceptibly to the weight of a person moving on deck. In his wild onslaught he lost his balance. His bare feet slipped on the wet painted canvas of the cabin-top. He fell heavily, bringing Heavitree down with him.

In vain Heavitree tried to get in his terrible upper cut to the point. The convict's face seemed as if it were made of metal. He gave a grunt as the Sea Scout's fist jolted his chin, then with a quick movement his fingers closed upon the lad's throat.

For a moment Craddock was unable to distinguish friend from foe in the deep shadows of the cockpit. Then he heard his chum's choking cry as he gasped for breath. Snatching another belaying-pin from the rack, Peter brought the iron bar down with considerable force upon the back of the convict's closely cropped head.

The man seemed to crumple up. He subsided inertly across the body of the Sea Scout he had tried to choke into insensibility.

Extricating Heavitree from his decidedly unpleasant situation, Peter set his chum down upon one of the seats in the cockpit. For several minutes, Heavitree could do nothing but gasp, swallowing mouthfuls of the pure ozone-laden air, until his companion grew alarmed.

"It's all right, I think," spluttered Heavitree. "I don't think I'm hurt much, but I feel like a jelly. What's happened to the chap? You haven't killed him?"

"Hardly," replied Peter. "His skull is too thick for that. I gave him a tap to quiet him. Hello! more of them?"

A pair of hands appeared over the side of the yacht, followed by a head. It was one of the crew of the *Merlin*. Alarmed by the commotion on board the *Kestrel*, he had boldly dived overboard and swum to the aid of his brother-Scouts. It was a risky thing to do, and by the time he had battled against the strong flood tide he was nearly exhausted. Peter assisted the lad on board and explained matters.

“My word!” exclaimed the Cornish lad. “This is some trip! We can’t say the voyage has been dull, can we? Cheerful looking fellow, isn’t he? Hadn’t we better secure him before he comes round?”

“He looks as if he is about to recover consciousness,” said Peter.

“In that case we’ll get busy,” rejoined the *Merlin’s* representative. “There’s no need to lash him up. Let me show you how we do things down our way.”

So saying, the Cornish Sea Scout picked up the mop which was lying on deck.

“Got another stick like this?” he asked.

Craddock produced a spare handle from one of the lockers.

“Capital!” exclaimed the other approvingly, and set to work to secure the still insensible man. This he did by inserting one handle in one leg of the convict’s shorts and passing lashings round both the knee and the ankle. The other leg was dealt with similarly, with the result that one end of each mop handle projected about six inches beyond the man’s feet, while, since he would be unable to bend his lower limbs, he would be unable to rise.

“We’ll secure his wrists later,” remarked the Cornish lad. “We must give the fellow a chance to recover.”

“Hello!” exclaimed Heavitree. “Oars!”

The others listened intently. Above the gentle sighing of the wind in the yacht’s rigging came the sound of the regular beats of oars. The long-absent Sea Scouts with their respective Scoutmasters were returning.

“Got any grub ready, Peter?” shouted Brandon, when within hailing distance. “We’re famishing.”

“Sorry, old son,” replied Craddock, “but we’ve been too busy entertaining. Matter of fact, sir,” he continued, addressing Mr. Grant, “we’ve a convict on board. What shall we do with him?”

CHAPTER XX

The Last Lap

“WE don’t want him,” declared Mr. Grant. “Why didn’t you signal to the shore? The place is stiff with warders and other people searching for him. Well, what happened?”

While Craddock was relating the somewhat alarming incident Brandon got busy with his electric torch. It was not long before his “general call” was acknowledged, and a message to the effect that the convict had been recaptured and was on board was flashed for the information of the search party.

Back came the reply: “Thanks. Will send boat to fetch him at once.”

“And what happened to you chaps?” asked Heavitree.

“We got stuck in the mud—properly,” admitted Brandon ruefully. “I never saw such a place for mud. We tried to land at one place and couldn’t. Then we went on and found an old wharf. Talbot remained as boat-keeper for both dinghies while the rest of us tramped into Shalfleet. By the time we had looked round and Mr. Pendennis had bought the petrol we found both boats high and dry. Talbot did his best to keep them afloat, but it was of no use. In fact, he stuck twenty yards from shore, and the mud was so soft that he couldn’t get back. He’s been sitting in the dinghy for hours. We had had some grub, and now we’re frightfully hungry. Talbot hasn’t had anything to eat since we pushed off from the *Kestrel*.”

Already the stove was lighted and preparations under way for a belated meal. Presently, following a hail of “Yacht ahoy!” a large rowing boat with two boatmen and four armed warders came alongside.

The convict, who was now conscious, was transhipped. The head warder asked for particulars.

“Smart bit of work,” he declared admiringly, when Craddock had told his plain, unvarnished tale. “He’s a desperate character with a black record.

Well, young man, you've jolly well earned the reward offered for his apprehension."

Peter shook his head.

"We don't want it, do we, Heavitree?" he replied. "It's too much like blood-money."

"Nonsense," declared the warder. "You're entitled to it. You've rendered a public service."

"S'pose that's one way of looking at it," admitted the lad. "All the same, I don't like the idea of touching the money. As a matter of fact, Molly earned it as much as we did. Couldn't we give the reward to that Society for—you know what I mean, sir?"

"'Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.' Yes, that's rather a good wheeze, Peter," agreed the Scoutmaster. "Well, now, it's quite about time this party broke up."

Taking the hint, the warders removed their prisoner, who accepted the situation philosophically, especially as Craddock and Heavitree had made no mention to the authorities of the fact that he had used violence.

"He didn't hurt our pup, so we simply felt we had to let him down lightly," explained Peter.

Very soon the crew of the *Kestrel* were deep in slumber. They did not turn out till late in the forenoon for two reasons. They wanted to arrive at Chichester Harbour "as fresh as paint"; it was practically useless to attempt to set sail until the west-going tide eased considerably. By this time the Aberstour Sea Scouts had learnt to respect the fierce tides of the Solent.

When the lads did turn out, Brandon went on deck to haul down the riding-light. Then, to his surprise, he discovered that the *Merlin* was nowhere to be seen.

"She's stolen a march on us on the last lap," declared Heavitree when the Patrol Leader announced the astonishing news.

"Well, she hasn't got far," added Carline. "Unless, of course, she's made use of her motor."

"We would have heard it," remarked Craddock. "Her exhaust is a very noisy affair."

"Perhaps they thought that we gave them the slip at Falmouth," suggested Talbot. "One or two of the fellows looked a bit doubtful, as if we

were pulling their legs, when we explained how it happened. So they're taking a rise out of us."

"Stop arguing!" exclaimed Brandon. "Don't go hanging on to the slack, but get your breakfasts. The sooner we get under way the better."

By the time the meal had been dispatched and everything below made ship-shape the tide had slackened. There was a light southerly breeze which would enable the *Kestrel* to romp full and bye up the Solent, and, unless the wind changed in direction, would take her to Chichester Bar without having to tack. It was now nine o'clock. High water at Spithead would occur at four, and if the *Kestrel* were to make the rendezvous that day, she must arrive off the bar not later than five.

All plain sail was set, the anchor was weighed, and then main and mizzen topsails were sent aloft. Finally, the spinnaker was set with the tack at the bowsprit-end. In fact, every stitch of canvas that could be set was brought into use.

It was a delightful sail. On the starboard hand the crew could enjoy a close view of the well-wooded Isle of Wight, while to port they could discern an expanse of the New Forest and the entrance to Southampton Water.

Through Cowes Roads the *Kestrel* tore with wind and tide. Here they saw for the first time the Mecca of the yachting world with its swarm of pleasure craft of all sizes and types either anchored or under way. Sailing yachts, motor craft, pleasure steamers thronged the Roads; while further out liners, tramps, and warships added to this picture of merchant activity. There were aeroplanes and flying boats manœuvring, the latter "taking off" from the surface of the water with surprising ease.

Just abreast of the Old Castle Point buoy, Brandon called attention to a couple of cutters, both of which flew the burgee with the *fleur de lys*. They were on a converging course to that of the *Kestrel*, and in all probability they would soon come within hailing distance.

But Brandon did not wait for that. Producing a pair of hand flags, he proceeded to semaphore the approaching craft.

"They are Sea Scouts making for the Jamboree, sir," he announced. "One is from Poole, the other from Weymouth. I'll ask them if they've seen the *Merlin* pass, since they brought up in Cowes Harbour last night."

The reply was in the negative; but, the Poole cutter's signaller added, a large motor yacht passed making for the east'ard with two Sea Scouts'

galleys in tow.

“It looks as if we’re going to be a merry party,” observed Symington. “All roads lead to Chichester Harbour. . . . What’s that place, sir?”

He pointed to a large building flanked by two towers and standing on a hill covered with grass of a remarkably vivid hue.

“That’s Osborne House,” replied the Scoutmaster. “It used to be a royal residence. Queen Victoria died there. See that long pier ahead, Talbot? That’s Ryde Pier. Steer to pass about a quarter of a mile from its head. We’re moving, by Jove! At this rate we’ll soon make Chichester Harbour.”

The three yachts were now almost in line, the *Kestrel* being to wind’ard. They were keeping practically level. If anything, the *Kestrel* was gaining slightly.

“We’re showing them a clean pair of heels, sir!” remarked Talbot, with no uncertain display of satisfaction.

“Yes, because this wind suits us,” replied Mr. Grant. “If it headed us, and we had to beat to wind’ard, they’d whack us hollow. A ketch is no match for a cutter at that game, so I wouldn’t chip those fellows if I were you. They might have the laugh of us before very long.”

“There’s a rowing boat with a Scout flag over there, sir,” reported Craddock.

Mr. Grant levelled his glasses. A double-sculler manned by three lads in Sea Scouts’ rig was coming out of Wootton Creek. She had just drawn clear of the outer beacon and was pointing towards Ryde.

“Surely those chaps aren’t going to the Jamboree,” remarked Peter. “Not in that cockleshell.”

“They’ve a lot of gear in the boat,” declared Mr. Grant. “I shouldn’t be at all surprised if they are making for Chichester Harbour.”

“It’s a long way to row,” added Brandon tentatively.

“Down helm a bit,” ordered Mr. Grant. “We’ll see if they are bound there. If so, we’ll offer them a tow.”

Rapidly the *Kestrel* overhauled the boat. The crew of the latter continued to pull steadily.

“Where are you bound?” hailed the Patrol Leader, as the ketch drew near.

“Chichester.”

“Want a tow?”

“Yes, rather.”

The oarsmen boated their oars, the bowman coiling up the painter ready to make a cast.

Brandon was too experienced to attempt to pick up the boat with the *Kestrel* going at such a speed. Making a wide sweep, he brought the ketch head to wind within an oar's length of the frail double-sculler.

“Hadn't we better get them all on board, sir?” enquired the Patrol Leader. “The skiff will tow lighter and easier if we do.”

In double quick time the three Sea Scouts boarded the *Kestrel*. Their boat, with a double painter rove as a matter of precaution, was dropped astern of the *Kestrel's* dinghy and the ketch was again put on her former course. By this time the Weymouth and Pool cutters had drawn ahead to a distance of nearly a quarter of a mile; but, sportsman-like, they had backed their head-sails to enable the *Kestrel* to recover her lead.

“You fellows looked like having a long pull,” remarked Craddock to the three youths whose jerseys bore the inscription, “Third Wootton Bridge Sea Scouts.” “Bit risky, isn't it?”

“We weren't going to be out of it,” explained the Second. “Our Troop left yesterday in the *Pixie*. We couldn't get away. I work at a garage. Jim, here, is at a baker's; and Tim has a job at the yacht-yard. At the last lap, so to speak, we got the time off, and Tim's boss lent us this double-sculler.”

“You might have found yourselves in difficulties off Chichester Bar,” observed Mr. Grant. “There's often a nasty sea running there, I believe.”

“Yes, sir,” admitted the Second. “But we weren't going to risk that in that sort of boat. We were going to row as far as Ryde, where the skipper of a motor tug promised to tow us across to Portsmouth.”

“I don't see how that would help you very much,” commented the Scoutmaster. “You would still have to get into Chichester Harbour.”

“Inland water all the way, sir,” declared the lad. “There's a channel between Portsmouth and Langston Harbour, and another between Langston and Chichester. It's all right for small boats, but you couldn't do it because of the bridges, unless you unship your masts.”

Past a couple of “scrapped” monitors, the unwieldy appearance and huge guns of which afforded considerable interest to the *Kestrel*’s crew, the ketch tore through the water. Off Ryde they sighted two other craft—a yawl and a converted lifeboat—both of which bore the distinguishing flag of the Sea Scout brotherhood.

“Now, where do we make for, sir?” asked Brandon.

“Steer for that fort,” replied Mr. Grant, indicating a circular structure painted in black and yellow squares and rising sheer out of the sea.

“Is that a fort?” enquired Talbot. “It looks more like a gigantic cheese. Why, there are two more!”

“Yes, and we have to pass between the pair,” continued the Scoutmaster. “See that low-lying belt of trees? That’s Hayling. The entrance to Chichester Harbour is just beyond.”

Presently half a dozen sailing craft were noticed on the port quarter. These comprised the Portsmouth and Gosport contingent of Sea Scouts, while astern a couple of motor launches each towing two whalers announced their identity as part of Southampton’s representation at the forthcoming Jamboree.

By this time there were nearly twenty yachts and boats within a radius of half a mile all making for a common point—the entrance to Chichester Harbour. Many Sea Scout craft had already arrived. Others were on the way, not only from the West, but from the East Coast. Provided the weather held, the success of the Jamboree seemed assured.

“Well, thank goodness we’re not leading the procession,” exclaimed Mr. Grant. “I’ll gladly allow someone else to show us the way in. From all accounts it’s a very tricky and badly marked entrance, so we must be thankful we haven’t to grope and scrape over the Bar.”

“I can’t see any entrance,” said Craddock.

Viewed from seaward the coast-line appeared to consist of an unbroken line of low-lying, sandy shore with a few houses and trees, extending eastward as far as the eye could reach until only the tree-tops showed above the horizon in the neighbourhood of Selsea Bill. Ahead, as the *Kestrel* was now pounding, were masses of white foam as the rollers broke on the flat shoals of the dangerous Winners. Yet the leading craft held unswervingly on their course, as if they meant to hurl themselves to destruction upon those formidable surf-swept sandbanks.

Presently a small white motor boat was sighted ahead and quite a mile from the beach. She, too, displayed the Scout burgee, and as each approaching craft drew level with her a uniformed official shouted directions to the newcomers.

“What yacht is that?” demanded the Commissioner as the *Kestrel* drew near. “Where are you from? Good. What’s your draught? Four feet; then you’ve plenty of water. Keep close to the west shore inside the entrance until you sight a buoy on your starboard hand. Then port helm and carry on up the boomed channel.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” replied Mr. Grant, and the motor boat forged ahead to interview the next arrival and to tell her to heave-to until the tide made sufficiently for her draught to cross the bar.

“What a topping place!” exclaimed Craddock enthusiastically.

His appreciation was justifiable; for, although the approach to Chichester Harbour presents a dreary aspect, the view when once within its shelter is superb; while the spacious land-locked expanse with its three principal arms afforded miles of safe yet entrancing sailing.

After following a well-marked channel for about three miles and making a gentle bend to starboard, the leading craft began to reduce canvas.

The *Kestrel* followed suit; then a regular forest of masts appeared to occupy the whole width of the waterway, while ashore a small village of tents accommodated those Sea Scouts whom circumstances had prevented from living and sleeping afloat. Conspicuous amongst the floating community was a large yacht flying the characteristic burgee of the Chief Sea Scout, and displaying the International Code Signal: KY—“Anchor as convenient.”

Five minutes later, the *Kestrel* brought up on the fringe of the fleet and well sheltered by the curving arms of a sandy bay. Eighty yards or so away was a little pier fronting the lines of tents and affording means of landing at any state of the tide. Canvas was then stowed and ropes coiled away. Then for the first time the crew of the *Kestrel* were at leisure to take in the animated scene.

Suddenly Heavitree turned and smacked Craddock on the shoulder.

“Peter, old son!” he exclaimed joyously, “aren’t you thunderingly glad you’re a Sea Scout?”

CHAPTER XXI

The Eve of the Jamboree

“I CAN’T see any sign of the *Merlin*,” declared Brandon, after scanning the numerous craft at anchor. Already, during the last half-hour new arrivals had taken up their berths, so that the *Kestrel* was by no means on the fringe of the fleet.

“That’s strange,” rejoined Peter. “I wonder where she is?”

“I’ll make enquiries,” said Mr. Grant, overhearing the conversation. “I must go aboard the Chief Sea Scout’s yacht to report our arrival and will find out whether the *Merlin* has arrived. Bring the dinghy alongside, please, Brandon.”

The three Wootton Sea Scouts had taken their departure and were alongside their parent craft when their arrival was greeted with acclamation by their chums.

Spic-and-span in their best jerseys, Brandon and Craddock manned the dinghy and rowed their Scoutmaster to the flagship, which was surrounded by a swarm of small boats and invaded by dozens of Scoutmasters attending a conference on the programme for the next ten days.

Having put Mr. Grant on board, Brandon and his chum “laid off,” keeping their dinghy clear of the yacht’s accommodation ladder. Then they got busy, “easing their jaw tackle,” to use a nautical expression, for the crews of the various dinghies were holding an informal jamboree on their own account and exchanging reminiscences.

There could be little doubt that the great gathering of Sea Scouts would turn out to be a huge success. Not only were the neighbouring Troops well represented; some came from Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Grimsby, and Hull, and even from far-off Aberdeen. From the West Coast, the Clyde was well represented, as well as Troops from the Mersey, Pembroke, Swansea, Cardiff, and Bristol. All these Troops were fortunate in possessing fairly large and seaworthy craft, many of them “drifters” with auxiliary motors.

Other Sea Scouts living in inland districts—it may sound strange to have to relate, but most efficient Troops have been formed at places on various rivers—had not been deterred from appearing at the Jamboree. Some of them—those from Nottingham, for example—had made the voyage by canal as far as Godalming, completing the journey by having their whalers placed on rail. Others, unable to make use of the inland waterways, had come the whole way by rail; while one enterprising Troop from Worcester had demonstrated how grit and ingenuity could surmount almost any obstacle.

Their craft was a 27-foot ex-naval whaler and was too long to be accommodated on an ordinary railway goods truck. Besides, they were not well off and could ill afford the expense. But they were determined to be present at the Jamboree, and they were. They had constructed a special carriage mounted on a pair of heavy motor-lorry wheels. This they attached to the Scoutmaster's car, placing the whaler on the "cradle." Some of the crew travelled in the boat; others by cycle, since the lumbering vehicle could not go more than eight or ten miles an hour. At night they slept in the boat, which was covered with a waterproof awning.

Others, possessing smaller boats, had trekked to the rendezvous; while in many cases Troops had arrived without craft of any description and were accommodated in tents.

Not only was Great Britain well represented. There were contingents from France, Belgium and Holland, and quite a strong Troop of hefty, flaxen-haired, fair-complexioned Sea Scouts from Denmark, most of whom spoke English and had already made the acquaintance of British Scouts at the recent Copenhagen meeting.

The organisation, too, was as perfect as human experience could devise. One of the chief considerations, an ample supply of good drinking water, was provided. There was an efficient transport service between the landing-place and the city of Chichester, from whence provisions and stores were obtained. Special precautions had been taken to provide a safe bathing-place under strict supervision; while a proper postal service had been instituted.

This much and more Brandon and Craddock learnt from their new-found chums, and apparently there was much forthcoming about which the lads were as yet metaphorically "at sea."

In about half an hour, Mr. Grant appeared on deck and was rowed back to the *Kestrel*.

“The *Merlin* hasn’t reported, lads,” he announced. “Perhaps she’s had to put in somewhere. It’s no use expecting her this evening. There’s not enough water on the Bar until to-morrow morning. Now, Eric, my lad, I suppose the next thing to be done is to hand you over to your relations.”

“Surely, sir, there is no immediate hurry,” protested the stowaway. “If you have no objection, perhaps I might be permitted to remain for part of the impending entertainment? It occurred to me, sir, that I should like very much to become a Sea Scout.”

Mr. Grant turned to his crew.

“What shall we say, lads?” he asked.

There was a unanimous response in favour of Eric being allowed to stop on board. In spite of his old-fashioned ways, the boy had made himself well liked.

“Very well, then,” agreed the Scoutmaster. “I’ll run into Chichester to-morrow morning and see your uncle. But I’m afraid we can’t make you a Sea Scout. You’re not old enough, Eric; but there’s no reason why you shouldn’t become a Cub, and then when you are old enough you can become a Scout. Now, lads, who’s for the shore? A good sharp tramp is the thing. One of you must remain on board. Who’ll volunteer?”

Talbot said he would.

“Good man!” exclaimed Mr. Grant. “Keep a smart look-out for signals from the Chief Sea Scout’s yacht. That’s about all, I think. By the by, we’ll have to patch up the dinghy’s gunwale to-morrow. It looks a bit of a wreck.”

With the exception of the volunteer ship-keeper, all hands went ashore, leaving the dinghy on the hard. Proceeding between the avenue of tents where swarms of Sea Scouts were in various stages of “getting all ship-shape,” they gained the open country—a flat but rather pleasing bit of Sussex lying between the harbour and the open sea.

“How firm the sand is!” exclaimed Carline when the lads gained the seashore. “Look! There are fellows riding bicycles on it.”

“And isn’t the tide out?” added Wilson. “When we came in there weren’t any shoals showing.”

“That’s why we had to choose high-water,” remarked Mr. Grant. “Those shoals, although consisting of sand, are quite as dangerous as rocks. A vessel might be pounded to bits in a few minutes if she chanced to get ashore in heavy weather. There’s hardly any wind this evening—it’s almost

a flat calm—but you can see the rollers breaking on the exposed edge of the shoals. This harbour happens to be the worst beaconned on the south coast, and in some respects one of the most dangerous ones. If it comes on to blow for any length of time, we might be kept here for a month.”

“How jolly that would be!” exclaimed Wilson.

“I’m afraid you’d feel rather fed-up before the month had passed,” observed the Scoutmaster. “Any place, however much it appeals to you at first, becomes positively irksome if you’re kept there against your inclinations. Well, there’s no sign of the *Merlin* in the offing. It’s a pity, because it looks as if she won’t be able to take part in the opening sailing race to-morrow afternoon for the Silver Cup.”

“Are we racing, sir?” asked Craddock eagerly.

“Rather.”

“Good egg, sir!” exclaimed Peter.

“Time to be on our return journey,” observed Mr. Grant, consulting his wristlet watch. “We must be on board before sunset.”

His listeners wondered why. They soon found out; for on returning to the *Kestrel* they noticed the Sea Scouts on the various craft mustered on deck. A bugle sounded. Everyone stood at the Alert, while a forest of burgees and ensigns fluttered to their respective decks. Then in the gathering gloom innumerable riding-lights were hoisted in position.

It was the eve of the Jamboree.

CHAPTER XXII

The Race for the Cup

PUNCTUALLY at 1.45 on the following afternoon the eventful race for the Silver Cup started. Nine yachts, each measuring thirty feet or more on the water-line, were towed into position and anchored. There they swung to the weak flood tide with canvas stowed just as if they had “brought-up” for the rest of the day.

On board the *Kestrel*, the third from the starboard end of the line, four very serious Sea Scouts, with Mr. Grant in command, sat breathlessly waiting for the starting gun. Although the conditions governing the race were new to them—in the old *Puffin* they had always had a flying start following a five-minute gun—they realised they had a fighting chance provided they did their very best and did not bungle; for not until after the races were completed would the name of the winning yacht be known. That was one of the surprises of racing under a sealed handicap.

“Fifty seconds!” announced Mr. Grant calmly. “Stand by! Fifty-five . . . fifty-six . . . fifty-seven . . . fifty-eight . . . fifty-nine. . . .”

“BANG!”

Simultaneously with the flash of the starting gun the hitherto practically motionless crews of the competing craft were figuratively galvanised into activity. In as short a time as possible, the bare poles would be hidden by the towering canvas, anchors would be weighed, and the vessels would leap forward on the determined contest.

On board the *Kestrel*, although her crew had had plenty of practice in getting under way, they had not had to take into consideration the fact that at a few yards’ distance on either side other crews were doing the same thing. Besides, they were short-handed, five being the maximum number allowed. The rest of the *Kestrel*’s complement were ashore, where, in common with several hundred Sea Scouts and other spectators, they were yelling themselves hoarse with excitement.

Brandon and Craddock, casting off the tyers, hauled away at main and peak halliards. Heavitree and Carline ran for'ard to attach the foresail to the forestay by means of the hanks, and to run the jib out on the bowsprit ready to hoist. By the time the mainsail was set Heavitree, who was chosen for this particular work by reason of his strength, broke out the anchor and got it inboard.

Simultaneously with the racing of the anchor, Mr. Grant put the helm hard-a-starboard, Brandon tended the mainsheet, while the two hands for'ard set both jib and staysail.

As soon as the *Kestrel* forged ahead, Peter and the Patrol Leader set and trimmed the mizzen. This done, all hands went quietly to their racing station and awaited orders.

Now for the first time since the starting gun Peter was able to take notice of what the other competing yachts were doing. Smart though the *Kestrel's* crew had been in getting under way, there were two craft which had executed the manœuvre in quicker time and already had established a useful lead. One was a centre-board cutter from the Humber, a wholesome looking craft; the other, also a cutter, belonging to a Plymouth Troop. Slightly to lee'ard, and with her hands still engaged in sheeting home their canvas, was a Poole ex-fishing boat rather noted for her speed and weatherly qualities. A few yards astern was a deep-draughted Bristol pilot cutter. Apparently she had trouble with her peak-halliard blocks, and a couple of Sea Scouts were swarming aloft to set things right.

All these craft were close-hauled on the starboard tack. The rest of the competitors, including two who had collided at the start, were heading towards the Bosham side of the channel.

So far so well. Peter had never known the *Kestrel* to move so fast in such a light wind. For one thing, she was no longer hampered by her dinghy. That impediment was for the present unnecessary and had been left ashore.

But clean-heeled though the *Kestrel* was, there were others who were faster. Although Mr. Grant, by keeping her "full," got the very best out of the yacht, she could neither point so high nor travel as fast as two of the cutters.

On the fore-deck of the *Kestrel*, Heavitree lay motionless, keeping well down to minimise wind-resistance. The rest of the crew stationed aft were as silent and immobile as statues. They realised that the race was not a game. It was something that required every effort of mind and body on the part of

each member of the crew. Even to move about unnecessarily might mean the loss of the race, for even in a craft of the size of the *Kestrel* it would be adversely sensitive to the alteration of “trim” should any of the crew begin “jumping about.”

Now the leading yacht on the starboard tack was nearing the edge of the deep-water channel. She drew more than the *Kestrel*, and the problem that confronted Mr. Grant was whether to put the helm down at once, or, taking advantage of the *Kestrel's* smaller draught, carry on and pass astern and consequently to wind'ard of his antagonist. He had to make up his mind quickly. He realised, too, that against the flood tide he might find slack water, or even a counter-eddy close to the hidden mud-flat.

He chose the latter alternative.

“Stand by to go about!” he ordered; then “Lee-o!”

Quickly yet deliberately Brandon let the head-sheets fly. Round came the *Kestrel* slowly yet surely, shooting ahead in the slack water and actually overlapping the leading cutter. But the advantage was only temporary, although it counted in the long run. Unable to point as high as his rival, the *Kestrel's* speed diminished. The only possible course was to up-helm slightly and to romp under the Humber yacht's lee.

Meanwhile the Plymouth vessel had gone about and was making short but useful tacks; while the Bristol yacht, holding on too long, was aground with her crew feverishly working in an attempt to get her off.

Half-way across the Channel, the *Kestrel*, now on the port tack, met the competing craft, which had made for the northern side of the fairway. By the “rules of the road” she had to give way. Now came the test of the helmsman's skill and sound judgment. The slightest error might result in disaster, for which the *Kestrel* would be blamed. Even the faintest contact between her and one of the yachts on the starboard tack would disqualify her. In addition there were two boats abeam of her and two more astern. No need to worry about the last two. They had to avoid those ahead as well as those converging on the opposite tack.

The *Kestrel* passed the first of the starboard-tack boats at less than a couple of yards to lee'ard. For a brief instant, as the lowering canvas of the latter blanketed the wind, the *Kestrel* recovered from her heel; her sails shivered, the mainsheet sagged. Then at the next moment she staggered as she felt the full force of the breeze, and, luffing, shot magnificently across the bows of the next competitor.

It was exhilarating work. Even in that land-locked harbour, the dead beat to wind'ard with a weather-going tide sent the spindrift flying over the bows. Yet the disconcerting fact was now apparent. The *Kestrel*, owing to her rig and generous amount of deadwood fore and aft, was hopelessly out of it against the performance of most of her competitors in the thrash to wind'ard. She could only hold on gamely. Even the Bristol boat was afloat once more and was tearing along in grand style. Astern a Dover yacht was in difficulties with a torn jib; while a Newhaven yawl and a Grimsby cutter, both under-canvassed, were indulging in a ding-dong race on their own account.

At twenty minutes from the start the two leading competitors were rounding the mark buoy. The *Kestrel* was still a good two hundred yards from it. Four other boats, bunched together, were bearing down on the port tack for the turning-point.

As luck would have it the second boat's bowsprit was almost level with the leader's counter as they prepared to go about at the mark buoy. This is what is termed "establishing an overlap," and the second craft has the right to hail the other to give her more room. If, however, there is no overlap the leading craft can carry on, leaving the other to get out of her way and pass outside her.

At this critical moment a collision occurred. The leading yacht, with her mainsail ripped, fell away, leaving the second with her bowsprit smashed off close to the stem-head and her jib trailing in the water.

"Rough luck!" commented the sportsman-like Craddock. "They're out of it."

But Peter was wrong. The yacht with the damaged bowsprit was automatically disqualified; but the other, in spite of the sorry condition of her mainsail, bore away and continued to race.

Presently it was the *Kestrel's* turn to round the mark buoy. She had it all to herself, for the bunch of four were already on the homeward run, while the remaining two competitors were well astern.

"Stand by!" cautioned Mr. Grant. "Ready with the spinnaker!"

Moving as softly as cats, Carline and Heavitree prepared the halliards and out-haul of the spinnaker. Round swept the *Kestrel*, making the mark buoy curtsy in her wash. Over flew the boom in a deliberate gybe.

"Up spinnaker!" ordered the Scoutmaster.

In double quick time the huge but light triangular sail was set and sheeted home. Now the *Kestrel* was at her best. Running was her strong point. The foam frothed at her cut-water and trailed astern in an ever-diverging double wake. In five minutes she had overtaken the partly crippled Plymouth cutter, the crew of which, far from being dismayed, had also set spinnaker. She was making a gallant fight against long odds, and the *Kestrel's* crew broke a prolonged silence by giving the West Country Sea Scouts a rousing cheer.

A stern chase is proverbially a long one, but slowly yet surely the *Kestrel* was decreasing the distance between the now straggling procession of leading boats. The task entailed ceaseless vigilance on the part of the Scoutmaster. An accidental gybe at this state of the proceedings would be disastrous. In all probability the *Kestrel's* mainmast would be carried away, but in any case the mainsail would mask the spinnaker and deprive it of its pulling power.

At the last bend, which was so gentle that there was no necessity to gybe and reset the spinnaker, the *Kestrel* was fourth. A Poole boat, staggering under a press of bellying sail, was leading. Following her came the centre-keeled Humber cutter, the crew of which had set a large square sail in addition to their working canvas. Next the Bristol boat, which, having made good following her temporary grounding, had failed to maintain her advantage while running.

Less than a quarter of a mile ahead could be seen the anchored boat that marked one end of the finishing line. The distance was too short to enable the *Kestrel* to overhaul the remaining three ahead. True, she drew level with the Bristol cutter; but, impeded by the far-flung bow wave of the latter, she was unable to continue her advantage. Yet the pace was terrific. Peter found himself wondering what would happen when the competing yacht crossed the line. There seemed no room to turn owing to the crowd of anchored yachts and boats beyond.

“Stand by!” cautioned Mr. Grant crisply.

BANG! went the gun for the foremost yacht. Five seconds later another report greeted the arrival of the second. Then, almost simultaneously, the gun fired twice.

“Down spinnaker!”

No need for cautious movements now. Down came the clouds of light canvas. The spinnaker boom was topped up in double quick time. Over went

the helm. Brandon and Craddock hauled away on the mainsheet. Heeling, the *Kestrel* turned into the wind, shot clear of the course, and dropped anchor almost in her former berth.

“It’s been a thundering good race,” declared Mr. Grant, moistening his parched lips; for now that the ordeal was over his tongue felt unpleasantly dry. “Signal to Talbot and the others and tell them to come aboard. We’ll get tea. Hello! There’s the *Merlin*. When did she arrive, I wonder?”

The Falmouth Sea Scouts had brought up about a hundred yards from the *Kestrel*, and several other craft lay at anchor between them. Without a dinghy, Mr. Grant could not pay her a visit, although all on board the *Kestrel* were naturally curious to know what had happened to her.

Presently Symington, Talbot and Wilson, and Eric Little, together with the pup, came alongside.

“I say, sir!” exclaimed Talbot eagerly. “Can we enter for the ex-service boats’ rowing match? We’ve been talking to some Portsmouth Sea Scouts. They say they’ll lend us a gig, if we like to have a shot.”

“Certainly,” replied Mr. Grant, although he knew that his lads, unaccustomed to pulling a heavy four-oared boat and a strange one at that, stood a poor chance of securing a win. “Row ashore and accept the offer, and then hurry back for tea. What time does the race start? Six? Good!”

Talbot had been gone only a few minutes when Craddock reported that the flagship was making a general signal.

“They’re about to announce the result of the race,” he added. “I’ve hoisted our answering pennant, sir.”

Already a number of red and white pennants hoisted “at the dip”—that is, half-way up—indicated that the various craft concerned were ready to receive the impending signal.

“Code flag over M, sir,” reported Craddock. “They going to give the winning numbers.”

The first number—represented by the code letter G—indicated that No. 7 was the winner of the cup. That showed that the coveted trophy had been carried off by the Poole Sea Scouts, who had not only actually come in first, but were first also on handicap.

When the second number went up, Craddock gave a whoop of delight, while the rest of the crew almost fell over themselves with excitement.

The *Kestrel* had won the second prize, but only by the narrow margin of five seconds.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Dead Heat

THE *Kestrel's* crew had only just finished their much-appreciated tea when the *Merlin's* dinghy came alongside.

"Hello, Pendennis!" exclaimed Mr. Grant, going on deck to receive his visitor. "What happened to you?"

"A slice of bad luck," replied the Cornishman. "Our anchor tripped during the night when we lay off Newtown. When we turned out we found ourselves bumping on Warden Ledge. We must have drifted nearly seven miles without knowing it. Then, in trying to get off, we strained one of our propeller blades and had to put into Yarmouth to get it straightened. After that we came on here."

"And when did you arrive?"

"Early this morning," replied Mr. Pendennis. "In fact, so early that you lazy fellows were fast asleep. We felt tempted to give you a hail. Heartiest congratulations, Grant, in getting second in that race."

"Thanks. Sorry you didn't compete."

The Cornishman smiled.

"My lads were a bit fagged out," he replied. "We've stood some long tricks this trip. 'Sides, they're keen on the ex-Service boats' pulling race and are conserving their strength for that event."

"We're entering, too, sir," announced Talbot.

"The more the merrier," rejoined Mr. Pendennis.

While the two Scoutmasters were chatting upon various subjects relating to the Jamboree the rest of the *Kestrel's* crew went ashore to complete their preparations.

The Portsmouth Sea Scouts were as good as their word, for quite a serviceable gig was hauled up on the hard for the *Kestrel* lads' use. More

than a dozen other ex-Service boats were also out of the water, their respective crews busily engaged in making ready for the fray or, rather, contest.

“What’s that stuff you’re putting on?” enquired Craddock of a lad who hailed from Pembroke.

“Black lead, look you,” replied the young Welshman. “Want some? We have plenty, look you.”

Seeing that several of the competing boats were being treated in a similar fashion, Peter accepted the generous offer and soon the bottom of the borrowed gig was shining in a coat of black lead thinned down with stale beer—a preparation which, although filthy to handle, is in high favour amongst rowers of racing craft.

As soon as the *Kestrel’s* crew had applied the “dope,” the gig was uprighted and a thorough examination made of her oars and stretchers. Craddock, as coxswain of the boat, meant to leave little to chance, although he was quite aware of the disadvantage of racing in a strange craft without even the opportunity of having a preliminary practice. But, he reflected sagely, there were other crews similarly handicapped.

Just before six o’clock fourteen boats faced the starter. By this time the ebb-tide was running strongly against a steady sou’westerly breeze, with the result that farther down the main channel there was quite a sea running.

“Back there, No. 5!” shouted the somewhat harassed starter through a megaphone.

No. 5’s crew dropped their oars and obediently “toed the line.” They were hefty, bronzed-featured lads from Margate. It was their first race, and in consequence they were a bit excited.

“Tough lot, aren’t they?” remarked Heavitree, stroke of the *Kestrel’s* gig, as he moistened the loom of his oar with salt water.

“Eyes on the boat,” cautioned Peter. “Stand by!”

The starting gun crashed. Fifty-six backs bent to the first stroke; fifty-six oars dipped almost as one, and the fourteen competing boats leapt forward, the coxswains shouting encouragement to their men.

For the first hundred yards the line retained its comparative straightness, but already some of the rowers were splashing unnecessarily, and they lost their “first wind,” and hadn’t begun to find their second.

Then five of the boats shot ahead, amongst them the *Kestrel's* borrowed gig. Her crew were working with a will and getting every ounce of power out of their backs and legs. They had a style about them, and Peter, as he watched their long, steady, and regular strokes, felt proud of his chums.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye, Craddock noticed that the Nottingham Sea Scouts' boat was level on her starboard beam. Her crew, admirably trained, were rowing with the regularity of clockwork. Instinctively, Peter felt that here was a rival to be treated with respect.

To port, No. 7—the Pembroke crowd—was forging ahead. The crew were rowing a quicker stroke, but would they last? On the extreme left, No. 14, the Whitby boat, had already established a useful lead. Although losing the advantage of the ebb-tide she was in smoother water close to the bank, but at the first bend that advantage would be lost.

Yet, Peter knew, there was little to be judged by position at this stage. It was the stayer, not the spurter, who seemed most likely to lead the procession over the finishing line.

He looked at his crew. They were bearing up bravely. Talbot looked a little flustered, but was still rowing strongly. None of them had reached the gasping stage yet, although rivulets of perspiration trickled unhindered down their faces.

At the first bend the competitors met the full force of the wind 'gainst tide. The lean bows of the boat threw apart showers of spray, as the knife-like stem cleft the curling waves.

It was here that the Nottingham lads found themselves handicapped. Used to pulling in a river, they had never had the opportunity of rowing in a fairly high seaway. Their style, admirable in smooth water, was at a decided disadvantage in this "popple." More than once "bow" missed his stroke, his blade encountering nothing more resistant than air as the boat rose on the crest of a short, steep wave.

"We're overhauling her all right," thought Peter.

Five lengths ahead the Portsmouth Sea Scouts were leading. Pulling splendidly, they were steadily increasing their lead, when misfortune descended upon them. "Stroke's" oar broke just above the blade. The lad, falling backwards, temporarily put No. 3 out of action. By the time the latter had recovered and resumed his oar, the boat had dropped to the seventh place. Nevertheless under extremely adverse conditions the lads continued

their gallant struggle, the oarless “stroke” sitting up and moving with the rest to preserve the rhythm of the swing.

The mark buoy at last!

“Back, port! Pull, starboard!” ordered Peter. Round swung the gig, rolling as she swung broadside to the weather-going tide.

“Together!”

Now came the strenuous part of the whole race—the last lap. The *Kestrels* were visibly tiring. Even Heavitree’s Adam’s apple was working convulsively, while the veins in his bared arms stood out like whipcord. Talbot, looking utterly blown, was pulling almost mechanically, gasping through his wide open mouth in his efforts to fill his painfully stifled lungs.

There was but one boat ahead. That was the Pembroke one. The Welshmen were in a far worse plight than Craddock’s crew. They had let themselves go at the start, and were reaping the consequences; yet they, too, were “sticking it” with the fervid tenacity of their race.

For the present Peter dare not call upon his loyal crew for an extra spurt. They were gaining all the time, yet without the final and spectacular burst they would not be able to overlap their rivals. And, of course, the Welshmen would almost certainly respond.

Three hundred yards from home the *Kestrel’s* gig’s bows were level with the Pembroke boat’s stern. The coxswain of the latter could be heard calling to his men for the final effort. It was now Peter’s chance, provided his jaded crew could respond to it.

“Whack her up, lads!” he shouted. “Last lap!”

Both boats were now in calmer waters. Nobly the *Kestrels* responded to their coxswain’s call. Blinded with perspiration, with bursting lungs and violently throbbing hearts, aching muscles and blistered palms, they were unconscious of everything but the desire to make that extra spurt.

Now they were dead level with the Welshmen.

“Keep it up, lads!” yelled Peter.

That was as much as they could do. To increase the number of strokes was out of the question. They were perilously close to the breaking-point. Could they stay the course?

The *Kestrel’s* gig drew ahead. The Pembroke coxswain in a shrill falsetto called upon his men for a final effort. They tried. There was a sharp crack.

One of their stretchers had broken.

“Hard lines on them,” thought Peter. “But we were winning, anyway.”

Then for the first time on the homeward run Craddock glanced over his shoulder. He had a shock. The nearest of the remaining competitors was quite five lengths astern. Nothing short of a disaster to the *Kestrel's* gig would give any of the boats astern a chance to overtake her now, for the finishing line was less than eighty yards ahead.

But—and that it was that gave Peter a most disconcerting jar—close to the edge of the channel and out of the full force of the adverse tide was the Nottingham boat.

By dint of sheer doggedness she had fought her way through the choppy sea. Then, edging over towards the mud-flats, she found herself under conditions very similar to that of her native Trent. The Nottingham Sea Scouts, admirably trained and in the pink of condition, were not slow to take advantage of the change of fortune. They were now almost level with Craddock's crew, although separated by about fifty yards of water.

“Pull, lads, pull!” shouted Peter. “For all you're worth!”

The spirit was willing, but exhausted flesh was unable to respond to the dictates of the brain. Gallantly the crew bent their aching backs, tugging ferociously at the tough ash oars. Then Talbot missed a stroke, the badly trimmed blade slithering ineffectually on the surface.

Before the lad could recover his stroke the gun went.

“Way 'nough!” gulped Peter, and the thoroughly exhausted rowers collapsed, sobbing in their efforts to recharge their bursting lungs.

Completely bewildered, Peter looked in the direction of the Nottingham boat. She was over the line, her crew paddling easily towards the flagship. The *Kestrel's* gig was also across the line—but there had been only one gun. What did it mean?

Everyone in the anchored yachts seemed to be cheering. So were the crowd on the beach. Then another competing boat crossed the line with her crew on the verge of utter exhaustion. They received a gun.

Still puzzled, Craddock was dimly aware of the *Kestrel's* dinghy coming alongside and of Mr. Grant leaning over the gunwale and patting him on the back.

“Well rowed!” exclaimed the Scoutmaster. “Well rowed! Dead heat with the *Avalon*. Let’s have your painter; we’ll tow you to the beach. Yes, by Jove! you’ve tied with that crack Nottingham crew, and honestly I never expected you to have a look-in. Well done!”

CHAPTER XXIV

Snatched from the Deep

FOR three consecutive days the weather remained bright and with very little wind. It was ideal conditions for almost every event except sailing. The Sea Scouts held greasy pole competitions, swimming races, diving contests, and a great water tournament.

The latter event was great fun and turned out to be a huge success. There were forty competitors a side, most of them in fancy dress. Each member of the opposing teams was “mounted” on a barrel to which was affixed a rough representation of a horse’s head, the cask being ballasted sufficiently to enable the rider to keep his balance if he used the utmost caution. The offensive weapons consisted of poles ten feet in length terminating in a well-padded ball of rags or oakum, and also of short sticks to which were attached blown-up bladders.

Every evening almost every member of the numerous crews went ashore for a camp-fire sing-song, while at various times there were competitions in making bends and splices and other nautical accomplishments.

At the close of the fourth day’s sing-song and after most of the audience had dispersed, Mr. Grant sent Craddock to the wireless tent with a message for the Scoutmaster in charge.

Arriving at the tent, which was merely for the purpose of keeping the four-valve receiving set in the dry—for when a broadcast concert was on, the sides of the tent were rolled up and the loud speaker brought into the open—Peter found that the Scoutmaster he sought had gone across to the electrician’s quarter in order to arrange about recharging some batteries.

“He won’t be long,” added his informant, a King’s Scout belonging to a Berwick Troop. “Try one of these phones while you’re waiting and see what you can pick up. It will only be Morse on the lower wave-lengths, I fancy. Can you read Morse?”

“Rather,” replied Peter.

“Guess you won’t make head or tail of this lot unless you’ve been trained to it,” continued the Berwick lad. “We had a skilled postal telegraphist in last night, and he was whacked. But you can try.”

Craddock put on the head-phones, listened for about twenty seconds, and then turned to his companion.

“There’s an S.O.S.,” he declared.

“Nonsense!” retorted the other incredulously. “It will be Niton calling CQ. You’re not the first to imagine an S.O.S.”

Nevertheless the Berwick Sea Scout took up another pair of phones. He listened and his smile of incredulity vanished. Snatching up a pencil, he wrote rapidly.

Peter, too, tried to follow the bewildering succession of perplexing sounds and could not make head or tail of it. He had to wait until his companion had taken down the message and a reply to it.

The S.O.S. was to the effect that the S.S. *Lumberjack* was badly grounded in a thick fog, position approximately six miles north-west of Selsea Bill, and that she was rapidly breaking up in the heavy ground swell.

The reply was: “Hayling Island and Bembridge lifeboats proceeding to your assistance. Have requested Government tugs to be sent from Portsmouth.”

The *Lumberjack* then wirelessly: “Must take to boats.” Followed by a warning from the shore station: “Do not attempt to land in your boats.”

Then came the distressed vessel’s final and uncompleted appeal: “Send help quickly. We are——”

Craddock did not wait for the Scoutmaster’s return. In fact, he rather surprised the Berwick lad by his abrupt and hasty departure. He took to his heels and ran as fast as he could to Mr. Grant and told him the news.

“The *Lumberjack* is the tramp we were lying close to at Dartmouth,” he added.

“Yes,” replied Mr. Grant. “And judging by her reported position she’s aground not far from the mouth of this harbour. I don’t suppose we’ll be of much use, but we’ll see what’s to be done. Get the patrol together, Brandon. See that we’ve first aid outfits, and bring a coil of two-inch rope along. Warn any Scoutmasters you pass on your way to the store, but I think most of them will have heard of it already.”

It was now nearly half-past ten. The heavy sea fog had held all the evening and was now spreading inland, promising to get thicker before very long. Overhead the stars were rapidly disappearing from view. The air was perfectly still, yet even at that distance the muffled roar of the surf on Chichester Bar and the adjoining Pole Sand could be distinctly heard.

In remarkably quick time the *Kestrel's* crew assembled. Most of them had electric torches. Heavitree had brought a lifebelt, while Brandon had got hold of not only a long length of two-inch rope, but also a useful coil of heaving line.

"Couldn't we run the dinghy over on a trek-cart, sir?" asked Talbot.

Mr. Grant shook his head.

"It would be useless," he decided. "You've seen the breakers on that flat, sandy shore. No boat could possibly be launched in that turmoil. All ready?"

The crew set out. They were not alone, for already various Scoutmasters had called out their Troops in order to patrol the beach in case any of the *Lumberjack's* people were cast ashore.

By this time the fog over the land had thickened considerably. It was hardly possible to see the outlines of the hedges on either side of the narrow lanes, and in the darkness the only way to find the right road was for a Sea Scout to swarm up the various sign-posts and flash his torch upon the painted directions. Unfortunately all the would-be rescuers took the same route, with the result that when they arrived on the beach they were all bunched together, instead of being spread out over a wide front.

They could see-nothing; hear nothing but the thunder of the breakers in the still air. Mr. Grant realised the difficulty. Each Scoutmaster had control over his own Troop, but there was no one to exercise authority over the whole.

"Isn't there any District Commissioner here?" he enquired of another Scoutmaster. "If so, he ought to take charge. We're doing little good huddled together. Survivors might be thrown ashore anywhere between the mouth of the harbour and Selsea Bill."

"That's a fact," agreed the other Scoutmaster. "Hello! Here's a car. Perhaps——"

The rays of the headlights seemed to stop short within a few yards of the car, which had stopped almost at the extreme edge of the hard ground.

Another four or five feet and the wheels would have sunk in the soft sand above high-water mark.

Mr. Grant went to the side of the car. He saw with feelings of satisfaction that one of the occupants wore the distinctive rig of a District Commissioner.

“Glad you’ve come, sir,” he began. “We want someone to straighten things out.”

He explained. The Commissioner, a retired Army officer, grasped the situation at once. His powerful voice pierced the fog. In five minutes, discipline had remedied the defect of individual initiative, and from a fixed point patrols were extending right and left with an interval of ten paces between each Sea Scout. Even at that short distance each watcher was invisible to his nearest neighbour, but they were within easy hailing distance, so that communication throughout the whole line—there were about 250 Sea Scouts spread over a front of nearly one and a half miles—could be maintained without difficulty.

The crew of the *Kestrel* found themselves in patrol formation stepping out briskly over the board-hard sand just above low-water mark. There were Troops ahead of them and behind them. At every half-minute came crisp orders from the Scoutmasters of the rearmost parties; until, glancing over his shoulder, Mr. Grant discovered that the patrol immediately behind the *Kestrel’s* crew had extended and halted.

It was now the turn of the Aberstour Sea Scouts. Talbot halted and faced seawards; the rest continued their march, Symington halting at the tenth pace and so on, until the Patrol Leader found himself on the right of his section of the line.

It was an awesome business standing still and peering through the fog at the misty white surf as it broke and receded almost within a couple of yards of the watchers. All of them were already drenched with the flying spray, and although the salt water felt quite warm at first, a succession of shower baths soon became not only monotonous but extremely unpleasant. What was happening out to sea they knew not. They could only conjure up mental pictures of the struggle for life on the part of the shipwrecked crew as their crazy, ill-conditioned craft was being rapidly battered into scrap-iron somewhere within a mile of one section of that far-flung line of would-be lifesavers.

Presently Brandon hailed his chum.

“Have you got Molly?” he enquired.

“Yes,” replied Peter, who was holding the pup in his arms. “She’s with me, but she’s got the wind up frightfully.”

“We ought to have left her on board,” continued the Patrol Leader.

“There wasn’t time,” rejoined Craddock.

“’Sides, she’d be far more terrified if she’d been left by herself.”

Another ten minutes passed. Then the Scoutmaster of the Troop on the *Kestrel’s* right came up to Mr. Grant.

“There’s a boat come ashore,” he reported. “She was full of water and capsized as she was thrown on the beach. The Weymouth Troop have found eight of the crew. Two of them are dead. There are a lot more to be accounted for. Pass the information along, please.”

Presently from the left came the order, “Increase interval by four paces.”

This was to fill up the gap left by the Weymouth Sea Scouts, who, being engaged in the task of restoring to life the apparently drowned members of the *Lumberjack’s* crew, had left their section of the shore unwatched. Already they were carrying some of the survivors away in hastily constructed stretchers to the shelter of an isolated farm-house.

“Well, that looks like business, lads,” commented Mr. Grant, as he passed behind the line. “There are others still to come ashore. Keep a smart look-out.”

It was easier said than done, so thick was the fog, although the stars were beginning to show overhead through the low-lying bank of salt-laden vapour.

Suddenly, Molly began to bark furiously and struggled so fiercely that Peter placed him on the sand. Instantly she darted towards the water’s edge, and although she retreated when the next breaker swept forward, she followed up the receding wave and continued to bark.

Simultaneously Brandon and Craddock rushed forward. They were within ten feet of each other before they discovered each other’s presence.

“What is it?” asked the Patrol Leader.

“Molly’s spotted something,” replied Peter. “Look! It’s a life-buoy.”

The next wave brought the buoy almost to Craddock’s feet, although he had to go knee-deep into the retiring “undertow” before he could secure it.

The canvas of the life-buoy was ripped in several places, and most of the rope that ought to be attached to it was missing; but painted on it in black letters was the name “S.S. *Lumberjack*.”

Hurling the life-buoy out of the way of the breaking waves, Brandon was about to resume his post when Craddock shouted to him.



Returning Good for Evil

Masses of milk-white foam were swirling round his legs; he could see that the succeeding wave would be upon him before he could get into deeper water. If it caught him squarely it would hurl him like a stone upon the beach, and probably batter the breath from his body.

“Where’s the line?” he asked. “There’s a man out there. Look out for Molly.”

At that moment Mr. Grant and Carline appeared through the fog. Already Peter was securing one end of the rope round his waist.

“Look after Molly,” he reiterated. “She’ll be after me if you don’t.” And, handing the coiled portion of the rope to Mr. Grant and Brandon, Craddock rushed into the water.

For the first ten yards his progress was hastened by the undertow. Masses of milk-white foam mingled with moving sand were swirling round his legs and urging him on. He could see that the succeeding breaker would be upon him before he could get into deeper water. If it caught him squarely it would hurl him like a stone upon the beach, and probably batter the breath from his body.

The crest towered high above his head. It was almost upon him. But Peter kept a cool head. As the wave broke, he dived into it, felt himself being borne backwards, was conscious of his feet coming in contact with the ground. He wanted to kick, to leap until his head appeared above the surging torrent. He felt he could keep his breath no longer.

At last he broke surface and found himself beyond the breaker. He struck out vigorously. Found himself impeded.

“Pay out more line, you fellows!” he shouted.

He might well have saved his breath, for his voice was inaudible in the roar of the surf. It wasn’t that Brandon had neglected to give more scope to the line; it was the drag of the water against it.

There was no sign of the man he was risking his life to save. Another wave came up, foaming ready to break. Peter surmounted it just before the angry crest toppled over. As he did so something was thrown against his side—something that felt like a sack of saturated sawdust.

Instantly Peter gripped the object. It was the senseless body of a man.

Now came the supreme effort—to regain the beach without being pounded by the breakers. It was easy enough to come ashore—the waves would see to that—but it was far from a simple task to protect himself and his senseless burden from the terrible onslaught of the hammering surf. And such a lot depended upon the life-line being hauled in at exactly the right moment.

The life-line, hitherto a hindrance, was now apparently uselessly slack. Vaguely, Peter found himself wondering what possessed the fellows on the beach: why on earth weren’t they hauling away for all they were worth?

Then it occurred to him that even at that short distance the shore was hidden in the fog. A mild panic seized him. What if the rope had parted and he was being carried out to sea?

Not for one moment did he relax his grip upon his unconscious, perhaps lifeless, burden. Another roller was on the point of breaking. Would it batter him into a state of insensibility?

It overtook him, fortunately without toppling over. Right on the crest he found himself, being urged towards the shore at a tremendous pace. Then with a loud roar the unstable mass broke. Peter felt his feet touch the yielding sand. He was surrounded by a swirling torrent of foam and hurled sideways like a sack of flour.

Then he was conscious of the life-line tautening. He was being swept back by the undertow. In desperation he threw arms and legs round the form of the helpless seaman in an endeavour to prevent him being torn from his grasp.

The rope held. Half a dozen lusty men and youths were tailing on to it. The pressure was terrific. The sand, washed down by the undertow, rasped Craddock's face, hands, and knees. His lungs seemed on the point of bursting.

Another wave was rearing its formidable crest. Peter eyed it with apprehension. Magnified in the fog, it looked higher than it actually was, but the power behind it was none the less. He wondered whether he could survive the threatened hammering of the tremendous thunderous mass.

He was dimly conscious of vague forms surrounding him, grasping arms and legs. Still he held on to his helpless burden, and, since they could not be separated, the pair were literally dragged beyond the reach of the breaker.

It fell harmlessly, and, like a monster baulked of its prey, retired growling and muttering to merge into the turmoil of tumbling breakers.

CHAPTER XXV

Home Again

WHEN PETER came to himself he was lying on the wet sand with his head pillowed on a greatcoat. Something warm was licking his face. It was Molly. Overjoyed at her master's return, she could not be restrained from showing her joy and relief in true doggie fashion, and her delight redoubled when the Sea Scout opened his eyes and attempted to sit up.

"Good old Peter!" exclaimed Brandon. "How do you feel?"

"As if I'd been sand-papered," replied Craddock, with perfect truthfulness. Then, recalling the reason for his present plight, he asked, "Where's the fellow we rescued? Is he dead?"

"He's alive," declared the Patrol Leader, and, turning to Mr. Grant, he asked in a low voice, "Can I tell him?"

"Yes, do," answered the Scoutmaster.

"Do you know who the fellow is?" continued Brandon. "It's Carlo Bone—Blueskin."

Peter sat up.

"Really?" he rejoined. "Where is he?"

"In a farm-house with the others," replied the Patrol Leader. "All the crew of the vessel have been accounted for. The patrols are being withdrawn. I say, old man, can you walk or have we to carry you?"

"I'll walk," declared Craddock stoutly.

They assisted him to his feet. He felt rather groggy, for he had swallowed a fair quantity of salt water and had been considerably bruised in his struggle with the waves. Walking required a great effort, and he was glad to take his chum Brandon's arm.

"I reckon this night's work means a Silver Cross for you, my lad," declared Heavitree.

“Think so?” rejoined Peter. “I say; now I tumble to it. That bucket lashed to our rudder. Blueskin must have done that. Won’t he look bluer than he is when he finds out we know.”

And Craddock went off into fits of hysterical laughter and sat down inertly in a muddy lane.

The Sea Scouts carried him after that.

They did not take him on board that night. Instead, he was put to bed in the shore hospital tent, where Mr. Grant remained watching by his side.

Next morning Peter awoke feeling quite his normal self except for the fact that his limbs were a bit stiff.

That afternoon Peter, accompanied by Mr. Grant, Brandon, and Heavitree, went over to see the man he had rescued. The visit was paid at Blueskin’s request, for the man was really grateful. Nevertheless the expression on his face was one of comical dismay when he recognised the members of the *Kestrel’s* crew.

“I’m right down sorry I played the dirty on yer,” he declared.

“That’s all right,” replied Mr. Grant. “We’ll call the account square. But why did you?”

“It’s like this ’ere,” explained Blueskin. “I war fair upset when I found you’d bought that there boat. I wanted ’er, and seein’ as I didn’t get ’er, I sort o’ made up my mind no one else shouldn’t. I oughtn’t tu ’ave tried to set she afire, but I reckoned as you’d get out afore any ’arm was done yer.”

“Neither was there, fortunately,” added the Scoutmaster. “But we didn’t know you were the fellow. We thought you might be, so we kept watch on your house all night.”

“I knows you did,” agreed Blueskin. “You were outside my house when I got ’ome.”

“And how did you manage that?” asked Peter.

Blueskin gave the suspicion of a wink.

“That’s tellin’,” he answered oracularly. “But I’m a-goin’ straight arter this, I am,” he declared.

“Good!” exclaimed Craddock. “We hope you will. But I think you can answer my question: isn’t there an underground passage between old Dick Marner’s shed and your cottage?”

For a moment Blueskin looked thunderstruck.

“Yes,” he admitted. “Sure there is. ’Ow did you twig it? Sakes alive! A chap like me must get up very early in t’ mornin’ tu get to wind’ard of a Sea Scout, I’m thinkin’.”

“How did you find out about the secret tunnel?” asked Brandon of his chum after the interview with Carlo Bone.

“I didn’t,” replied Peter. “It was a guess on my part. I’d been thinking things over, and, like Mr. Grant got it out of young Marner that he hadn’t a motor bike, that rather confirmed my theory, although, of course, I might have been wide of the mark.”

Little more remains to be told.

The Jamboree ran its course in perfect weather and with unabated enthusiasm. At its termination, Eric Little was sent to his uncle’s house at Chichester, where life for him was considerably brightened by his being able to have friends of his own age. He lost no time in becoming a Cub.

After the termination of the Sea Scouts’ marine festival, the assembly of yachts and boats dispersed. The *Kestrel* got away in company with nearly a dozen craft bound for the eastern part of the English Channel and the East Coast. Three days later she entered Aberstour Harbour and made fast alongside the quay in the berth the old *Puffin* had so long occupied.

“We’ve had a topping time,” declared Heavitree, as the crew prepared to disperse to their respective homes. “Course we’ve had sticky times, too; but what’s the use of being Sea Scouts if we don’t know how to tackle them?”

“We haven’t done so badly,” admitted Craddock cautiously. “We’re here, safe and sound, that’s the main point. And I don’t think it’s entirely owing to good luck. I rather fancy there’s another reason, and a jolly good one.”

“What’s that?” enquired his chum.

“We’ve kept to the good old Scout’s motto: ‘BE PREPARED.’ ”

THE END

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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 title and author's name has been added to the original cover.

[The end of *The Sea Scouts of the Kestrel* by Percy F. Westerman]