

UNDER SEALED ORDERS

A Naval Adventure

by

“BARTIMEUS”

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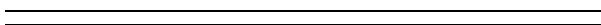
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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

A Naval Adventure

by

“BARTIMEUS”

THE CHILDREN’S PRESS
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PRINTED AND MADE IN GREAT BRITAIN

WRITTEN FOR A PERSON
I HAVE OFTEN HEARD ABOUT
BUT NEVER MET,

THE AVERAGE BOY

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CHAPTER ONE

NICK AINSWORTH and his father arrived at Weymouth in time for tea.

They had travelled from Cheshire, where they lived, and for a long time Nick had been thinking about that tea. At one time in the afternoon he thought he'd just have tea and toast and jam. Strawberry jam. And perhaps one slice of cake. Later he added a boiled egg. Nearing Dorchester, he decided that two boiled eggs would be better, and substituted scones for toast because they were more filling. He couldn't decide about the cake. A good dark rich plum cake: that would be one kind. And another—he didn't know what it was called—but it had sugar outside, and when you cut it, it was coloured in squares. That was a good cake to finish off with. Of course there were other things: shrimps, dripping, brown sugar on bread, treacle.... He sat staring out of the window, thinking about these things.

Major Ainsworth watched his son's profile. He thought Nick looked awfully young to be a midshipman. He was going to join his first ship at Portland next morning, and his father wondered what he was thinking about, staring out of the window as if trying to catch a glimpse of all that lay ahead of him in the unknown.

He wished, the way fathers do, that he could go with his son—sailing, as it were, under sealed orders, into the strange new life awaiting him. Not to fuss round and interfere, but just to be within hail when Nick wanted him. But that was impossible, he knew, and Nick would have to fend for himself and take his chance the way everybody does.

“What are you thinking about, old boy?” he asked.

Nick turned from the contemplation of the flying landscape.

“There’s a cake, made in squares——” Nick sketched vaguely in the air with his forefinger. “Chocolate and pink and yellow and—I think—green. D’you know what it’s called?”

Nick’s father hadn’t an idea. He was awfully vague about cakes. They didn’t interest him.

“Why?” he asked. The train was slowing down. “Are you hungry?”

They had lunched off sandwiches hours before. What a question! Nick nodded.

In the lounge of the hotel Nick saw two familiar faces. One was a sunburnt, rather untidy face, and the other long and solemn, like a sheep’s. These faces belonged to two young gentlemen named respectively Usher and Wainwright. They had been in the same term as Nick in the *Britannia* and they had also been appointed to the same ship as Nick and were joining her at nine o’clock next morning. They were sitting side by side on a sofa, pretending to read magazines and looking, Nick thought, pretty doleful.

For a moment he couldn’t think why they looked unfamiliar, and then he realised that, like him, they were wearing the white patches of a midshipman on the collars of their very new monkey-jackets; and Usher, who had been a Cadet Captain, no longer wore the triangular gold braid on his sleeve that was his badge of office in the training-ship.

They brightened considerably when they saw Nick, and he introduced them to his father.

“That’s jolly,” said Major Ainsworth; “now we can all have tea together,” and they brightened still more. He beckoned a waiter, and told Nick to do the ordering. So Nick ordered all the things he had thought of in the train, and when he got to the end Major Ainsworth said, “Snooks! You boys must have hollow legs.”

But the waiter took it quite calmly, and even went one better. “Honey?” he asked; “what about honey?” Nick hadn’t thought of that.

They went for a walk after tea, and Wainwright said it was queer, but whenever he thought of honey it was always in a square comb; the honey they had had for tea was in a jar. Major Ainsworth said life was rather like that. Nothing was quite what you expected it to be, but it all came to pretty much the same in the end.

They walked along the front towards the cliffs, and talked about the things they had done during the leave. At the back of their minds they were wondering about the ship that they were going to join in the morning, but none of them liked to talk about her in front of Major Ainsworth, because they knew awfully little about a man-of-war, and they hadn’t the faintest idea what was going to happen to them. Occasionally they passed bluejackets who saluted them; this made them feel rather self-conscious as they returned the salutes. Some of the bluejackets were accompanied by young ladies with very pink cheeks and feathers in their hats, who slapped their escorts and screamed with laughter at every remark. When these happy couples saw the three midshipmen approaching, they turned seaward and admired the view till they had gone by, after which the slapping and giggling broke out again.

Perhaps Major Ainsworth felt that his companions could talk more freely without him, because presently he turned back, with a reminder that dinner was at seven-thirty, and the three boys went on and climbed past the coastguard cottages on to the cliff.

From there they could see the Fleet at anchor in Portland Harbour. The ships were too far off to be seen very distinctly; they could just make out the masts and fighting-tops and funnels above the lines of hulls. They stood and stared in silence for a little while. Then Usher said, "I wonder which is the *Vengeance*."

They were all wondering that: wondering what the senior midshipman was like, and if the Sub would expect them to know all the etiquette of a gunroom, and what boats they would be told off for, and where they would sleep, and a lot of things that were a blur of half-remembered details they had been told by their Term Lieutenant in the *Britannia*.

By common consent they sat down on the headland, and chewed grass stalks. The white Dorset cliffs undulated away to their left, and beneath them stretched the sea, blue and darkened here and there by cats'-paws of wind. A little boat with a brown sail, tacking inshore, held the eyes of all three.

"Mandy said that if you draw your dirk in the mess you have to stand drinks all round," observed Usher presently in a rather gloomy voice. "D'you remember his telling us that, Sheep?" Sheep remembered. "They bet you your dirk has a round point, and you swear it hasn't, and when you pull it out of the sheath——"

"Scabbard," amended Nick. "You get six with a dirk scabbard for practically anything."

“Scabbard, I mean. You pull the dirk out to show them the point, and you’re had. You stand drinks all round.”

“What sort of drinks, d’you suppose?” inquired Nick.

“Port,” conjectured Usher. “It’s awfully expensive stuff.”

“Mandy said you get twenty-four hours to sling your hammock,” observed Sheep. Mandy was their nickname for their Term Lieutenant. “That means you don’t have any duties to do. You just pick up the hang of things. After that, you are expected to know everything and do anything.”

“Twenty-four hours!” echoed Usher. “I shan’t get the hang of anything under twenty-four weeks.”

“Supposing you *don’t* get the hang of things?” Nick’s voice was a bit faint and far away. “Eh, Sheep?”

“Sheath—I mean scabbard. I wish Mandy was going to be on board the *Vengeance*.” They suddenly discovered they were fonder of Lieutenant Mandville than almost anybody they knew. He had nursed them from their infancy, that is to say from the day they joined the *Britannia*. He knew everything, and he had done his best, especially during the last term, to describe life afloat in the Fleet, and to make them feel it was all going to be huge fun. But that night, as they sat watching the hulls of the Fleet darken against the sunset light, it seemed a formidable and rather frightening leap into the unknown. Their teas were evaporating, and they were beginning to feel hungry again.

“Well, anyway, we shall all be together,” observed Usher forlornly. “I mean, it isn’t like going into the middle of a lot of strangers by yourself.”

“We all know each other jolly well,” agreed Sheep, and would have liked to add, “and are jolly fond of each other,”

but he thought that sounded a bit feeble. He would have been surprised if he had been told how much better they would all know each other and how much fonder they would grow of one another before the time came for them to part company. But just then Nick felt that it didn't really help much. Joining a strange gunroom for the first time wasn't made pleasanter because he knew that Sheep had a mole on his left shoulder-blade, and that Usher fainted when he was vaccinated because he couldn't stand the sight of blood, although in other ways he was as brave as anything. It would be he, Nick Ainsworth, who would be saluting the Commander at nine o'clock next morning and saying, "Come aboard to join, sir." Or was it, "Come *on* board ...?" Anyhow, when it came to facing things, you ultimately faced them alone even if you were in a crowd. However, he didn't try to put these reflections into words. Instead, he said, "Time we started back, or we shall be late for dinner." The thought of dinner cheered everybody.

On the way back they passed a Naval patrol escorting a bluejacket to the patrol-room. He had lost his cap, and was struggling with his escort, and his uniform was soiled with dust. They glanced at the poor chap's flushed, distorted face as they went past, and Usher said, "A drunk liberty man." The passers-by paid very little attention, and seemed to take the sight as a matter of course.

Nick wondered a bit apprehensively whether it would fall to his lot to have to deal with drunk liberty men some day, and inwardly quailed at the prospect; but they soon reached the hotel where Major Ainsworth was waiting for them, and a comforting smell which hinted that dinner was somewhere in the offing.

Nick's father insisted that the other two should be his guests, and after dinner they sat on the verandah and drank coffee while he smoked a cigar. They were joined by a gentleman with a large white moustache, whom Major Ainsworth had known in India, and had met before dinner. He had a rather purple face and a wheezy laugh, and he talked to Nick's father about the Frontier and what sounded like an endless war that went on among the hill tribes.

"We've got to stop their getting rifles," he said, gulping down brandy and water, and looking fiercely at Usher and Sheep. "That's where you fellows come in. Stop the gun-running in the Persian Gulf. Eh? That's what you've got to do. Put a stop to it. The Navy's job."

Usher and Sheep tried to look as if they intended to start putting a stop to it the very first thing next morning.

Colonel Bearbrace—that was the name of Major Ainsworth's acquaintance—puffed out his expensive-looking cheeks, and drank some more brandy and water. "Dhows do the gun-running. Then camels. But you can't catch the camels, can you?" He frowned sternly at Usher who promptly shook his head. He had never tried to catch a camel, but he was sure it would be hopeless.

"Then catch the dhows," said the Colonel. "That's what I kept telling them at Simla—all the staff-wallahs there. I said, 'Tell the Navy to catch the dhows.' "

Major Ainsworth thought the three boys looked a bit bewildered, and he explained that both slaves and rifles were brought into the Persian Gulf by Arab dhows, and that the rifles were carried by camel caravans to the North-West Frontier of India, where they fetched high prices among the tribesmen.

The Colonel nodded. “High prices. That’s right. But we pay higher. Well, I must be getting along to the Club.”

He finished his brandy and water, shook hands with everybody, and marched off, his hat at a gallant angle and his cigar glowing red in the night. Then Major Ainsworth told them that the Colonel’s son, a youngster of nineteen, had been shot on the North-West Frontier in an ambush, and that was why he talked so much about gun-running. He had retired now, and lived in Weymouth because it suited his wife’s health.

Sheep said thoughtfully, that perhaps he drank brandy and water to help him forget, and Nick’s father said perhaps he did, although it wasn’t a good way to forget things.

But when presently they went to bed, Nick had a curious dream. He dreamed that he was sitting at a table, munching a piece of very stale bread, and while he munched some one crept up behind him. He was aware of this threatening presence, but was powerless to move. The next moment a sack descended over his head, almost suffocating him; he struggled wildly, expecting at any moment to be stabbed. He awoke, sweating with terror, to find that the bed-clothes had got enveloped round his head. They had had roast pork for dinner, which perhaps accounted for his nightmare, but it was not long before he went off to sleep again; and the next time he awoke, the chambermaid came in with his hot water, and it was time to get up and go off to join H.M.S. *Vengeance*.

CHAPTER TWO

THE three midshipmen had been told that a boat would fetch them off from the landing-place at 7.30 a.m., and to the landing-place they repaired at that hour, wearing their “bum-freezers,” as the short round jacket was called, and their very new and shiny dirks. The hotel porter wheeled their bags down on a barrow, and, wishing them good luck, left them standing at the head of the steps, waiting for the boat. Nick had said goodbye to his father at the hotel, and the big adventure lay before them.

It was a crisp September morning with a fresh breeze blowing. The Fleet was hidden from them by a headland and an arm of the distant breakwater. Where they stood they could see the entrance to the camber and the sea beyond, sparkling in the early-morning sunlight.

“I suppose they’ll give us some breakfast,” said Sheep gloomily, “when we get on board.”

They were all speculating what sort of a breakfast it would be, when a two-masted cutter suddenly appeared in the entrance. She was heeling over to the breeze, and the crew were all sitting in the bottom of the boat with only their heads showing above the gunwale. Suddenly she went about, dipped her foresail smartly, and came bowling towards the steps. They saw the midshipman at the tiller then, leaning back nonchalantly with his foot braced against the thwart. They heard him shout an order: there was a flapping of sails, sheets and blocks thrashed noisily to and fro, and as the sails came down she glided neatly alongside. It was a smart bit of boat-handling, and the young gentleman responsible for it seemed aware of the fact as he came up the steps blowing his

nose on a coloured bandana handkerchief, his dirk swinging at his thigh.

He had a red, weather-beaten face and frosty blue eyes, and he looked what he was, hard as nails and as fit as a fighting cock.

“Hallo!” he said, and grinned at them. “You’re for the *Vengeance*, ain’t you?”

They murmured an affirmative, still rather overwhelmed by the spectacular efficiency with which the boat had been brought alongside.

“God help you!” said the stranger. “Grab your bags and tumble in.”

They obeyed with clumsy alacrity, and settled themselves in the stern of the cutter. Her midshipman rattled out a string of orders, and before the newcomers realised what was happening they were spinning out through the entrance, heading towards the breakwater.

The midshipman of the boat, who had introduced himself as Carver and ascertained their names, entered into a conversation with his coxswain, a little ferrety man with a scraggy beard. It was highly technical, and concerned the lacing of the mainsail on to the yard, and Nick felt free to study the boat’s crew; he realised for the first time that each of the twelve men crouched in the bottom of the boat, with their eyes on the newcomers, wore a beard. He wondered if Usher and Sheep had noticed this phenomenon.

Carver intercepted his glance.

“Ever seen a boatful of sets before?” he asked. They shook their heads, assuming that “sets” meant beards.

“We got special permission,” continued Carver, “after the Fleet obstacle race. The crew all put in to grow a set, and the First Lieutenant granted it, and this is the crack cutter of the Channel Fleet. Ain’t it, Larkins?”

The bearded giant, crouched aft with the main sheet in his fist, grinned, showing stumps of teeth stained with tobacco juice. His eyes rested on Carver’s face with trust and affection: they were like a dog’s eyes. Carver surveyed the crew as a sovereign might contemplate his loyal subjects. “Cradock trained ’em really. He used to have this boat. Cradock and Casey. Cradock’s our senior snottie,” he added by way of explanation, and as he spoke they cleared the arm of the breakwater and the Fleet came in sight.

They lay in irregular lines of black hulls, white upperworks, and yellow funnels, the sun shining on their bright work and enamel; boats under sail were spinning across the surface of the harbour, hoists of gay-coloured flags were climbing to the mastheads, fluttering in the breeze and descending again.

Carver looked at it all with a rather proprietary air. “All those cutters under sail are the beef-boats racing back to their ships with beef and stewards,” he explained. “You’ll know all about beef and stewards before long.”

Usher said something about the busy strings of signals.

“That’s the snotties doing signal exercise. Racing hoists of flags to the masthead, ship against ship——” He interrupted himself to shout an order. They realised that the cutter was approaching the *Vengeance*.

She seemed to rush towards them; they could see groups of men polishing the guns, others drying the upper deck. Carver shouted orders: down came the foresail, the mainsail was

brailed up, and the boat was brought deftly alongside the gangway.

Carver looked at his passengers. "Hop out!" he said. The moment had come.

In single file they ascended the ladder to the quarter-deck, to be greeted by a midshipman with a telescope under his arm. He was a very small midshipman, but he had very large ears and a look of great wisdom. He grinned at the newcomers, and indicated the officer of the watch who was walking up and down the other side of the quarter-deck.

"Go and report," he murmured.

They made their way across the deck to where the Lieutenant was pacing. He walked at a great speed, with his chin jutting out in front of him and his hands behind his back, as if he were walking for a wager. Nick thought it would be silly to walk after him, so he waited till the Lieutenant turned and began retracing his hurried steps. As he came abreast of them they all three saluted and said, "Come aboard to join, sir!"

The Lieutenant halted, returned their salute most punctiliously, and replied:

"Carry on."

He then resumed his hurried pacing, as if he had forgotten their existence.

The midshipman of the watch rescued them. "Come below," he said, and led the way forward till they came to a hatchway. Down this he clattered into the semi-gloom of an alleyway; Nick, following at his heels, was aware of a faint not unpleasant odour. It was a mixture of tar, paint, cordage, hot oil, serge clothing, soap, brass polish, tea ... an

indescribable medley of smells all combining to make the curiously distinctive atmosphere of a man-of-war in an age when there was not much ventilation. Nick met it then for the first time, but it was to grow so familiar that it became part of his life, and welcomed him like a friend every time he returned on board from the shore.

They followed their guide down another ladder to an open space amidships. Cabins opened off both sides of it, and in a hollow square in the centre stood about a dozen sea-chests. What light there was came from electric lights burning behind thick glass, screened by brass wire, ranged at intervals along the bulkhead where rifles and bayonets stood in racks. There were hooks for hammocks at intervals overhead, and an assortment of cutlasses in between the beams.

“There’s your chests,” said the midshipman with big ears. “I’ve got to get back on watch. Wonky Willie is inventing something, but he may come to at any moment.” They concluded Wonky Willie was the officer of the watch who paced the deck in a trance of abstraction. “Breakfast’s at eight,” shouted their guide, who turned and ran back towards the ladder.

At that moment Nick saw his sea-chest. It had a small brass plate inscribed:

NICHOLAS AINSWORTH

R.N.

He felt rather like an explorer who has been lost in the jungle and comes unexpectedly upon his camp. For this sea-chest had been his in the *Britannia*, and besides containing all his earthly belongings it had, pinned inside its lid, photographs of his father and mother and sister, one of his favourite dog, and one of his home: the latter had been taken

by an uncle, a retired Naval officer with a craze for photography; it had faded to the tint of a biscuit, and very little of the house was discernible. But Nick treasured it because it was his home, even though a stranger would not have realised what it depicted. He drew out his key, unlocked and flung open the lid. The chest contained a wash-basin, a mirror, and a brass bracket designed to hold a candle. There was also a new and shiny telescope clamped to the lid. Sheep and Usher had also unlocked their chests and were gazing at the photographs in their lids with much the same emotions as Nick's. Sheep, thus engaged, looked more like one of his namesakes than ever. They removed their dirks and sat down, each on the edge of his chest.

“Well,” said Usher, without much enthusiasm in his voice, “here we are!”

At this moment an avalanche of midshipmen poured down the hatchway. They were all talking at once, and they rushed each to his chest, flung it open, and began to undress with prodigious haste. The one nearest to Nick kept shouting, “Bags first bath, bags first bath!” as he tore off his garments. Finally, naked, he snatched up a towel and rushed towards a steel door on the foremost side of the flat. It opened into a small compartment which in a few minutes was filled with a crowd of nude figures, splashing, singing, arguing. Clouds of steam poured out of the door into the flat and escaped as best it might up the hatchway.

So far nobody had taken the slightest notice of the newcomers, but presently Nick's neighbour returned, dripping wet and rubbing his hair with a doubtful-looking towel. He smelt of carbolic toothpowder and yellow soap.

“Hallo!” he said to Nick, and grinned affably. “Are you Ainsworth?” Nick said he was. “Have you such a thing as a clean shirt?” inquired the other. He had a round bullet head, and one of his front teeth was broken in half.

“I expect so,” said Nick doubtfully.

“It’s funny,” pursued the other, stirring the contents of his chest interrogatively, “but I’ve lost the run of all my shirts. Give me one of yours, will you?”

Nick realised that this was barefaced piracy, but there seemed no alternative but to comply. He extracted a shirt, in all its immaculate newness, starched and folded and marked with his name, and handed it over. It was small consolation to observe that another brigand, crudely tattooed about his arms, was levying toll on Sheep’s socks, and yet a third demanding a clean collar from Usher.

All round them the noisy gabble continued, some dressing, some hurriedly shaving, some scrapping, when a voice shouted:

“Who’s dressed?”

“I am,” said Nick’s neighbour.

“Take those warts up to the gunroom.”

It was the voice of the senior midshipman, the voice of authority. In the midst of all the turmoil of the chest-flat he was unconcernedly shaving with a large black-handled service razor. Above the latter he smiled at them.

“I’ll come along in a minute,” he shouted. “You go with Giles. You’ll get some breakfast soon.”

They followed their guide along dim alleyways starred with rivets and painted white, with hammocks lashed up like

sausages and stowed on end in troughs along the bulkheads. Finally Giles jerked back a curtain.

“There you are!” he said, not without a note of pride in his voice, and ushered them into the gunroom. It was lit by scuttles in the ship’s side. A table ran the length of the mess, with a row of lockers above it. A beer barrel occupied one corner and a battered piano another. There were some forms and a couple of arm-chairs and a dirk-rack. There was a picture of Queen Victoria on the bulkhead, and a questionable cloth on the table. A Maltese domestic with a severe squint was laying the table for breakfast, dealing out plates as if they were a pack of cards.

“José—what’s for breakfast?” demanded Mr. Giles ferociously.

“ ’Ash,” retorted the Maltese. “ ’Ash—fri’ potatoes.” He continued to deal out the plates. A marine with a bald head and a drooping moustache appeared and began to clatter cups and saucers through a trap-hatch connecting with a dark, evil-smelling pantry.

Mr. Giles sniffed appreciatively. “Well, smack it about,” he said in tones of authority.

“Breakfast, eight bells,” said the Maltese. He picked up one of the plates, examined a smear of egg doubtfully, gave it a rub with a corner of the tablecloth, and replaced it.

Suddenly the senior midshipman appeared. He was tall, smiling, and nice to look at.

“Which is which?” he asked. The three newcomers introduced themselves.

“I’m Cradock. I’m the senior snottie. Awful time to join a ship, isn’t it? Empty belly, and all that. You’ll see the

Commander at nine o'clock, and then you'll get twenty-four hours to sling your hammocks and shake down. You've come to the best ship in the Channel Fleet. But you'll have time to learn a lot before we pay off!" He surveyed their faces with a friendly grin. "This is the worst moment in all your lives. Cheer up!"

They had a feeling, brief, transitory, emotional, that they would cheerfully have died for Cradock. Somewhere on deck a bell rang eight times. He turned to the trap-hatch. "Breakfast!" he roared.

Within the next few minutes the mess filled with hungry midshipmen. They came tumbling in by twos and threes and sat down at the table, loudly demanding food. The Maltese rushed from one to the other, ladling portions of hashed mutton and potatoes on to their plates. The marine with drooping moustaches poured out cups of black bitter tea from a vast metal teapot and handed them round. Loaves of bread occupied the centre of the table at intervals, and everybody carved off slices for himself. For a while there was a lull in the conversation while the mountainous helpings of hash and potatoes disappeared. Most of the midshipmen produced pots of jam or marmalade from their lockers. One had a jar of pickled cabbage which he ate on his bread as if it were a preserve.

"How's Wonky Willie?" he shouted across the table at the small midshipman with the big ears.

"He's been inventing a submarine all the morning watch."

There was a roar of laughter. "Does he think we are going to start submarines in the British Navy?" inquired another.

"Why not? The Americans are experimenting with one."

"Not sporting!"

“Well,” said Giles, “Wonky says that they are going to revolutionise war. He has designed one that will carry a crew of ten men, and fire a torpedo when it’s submerged.”

“How can it see what it’s firing at?”

“Well, Wonky explained that, but it was a bit difficult to understand. He’s designing a sort of tube to stick out of the water with lenses and a mirror.”

“He’s as wet as a scrubber,” observed another, licking the jam off his spoon and returning the pot to his locker. “I kept the middle watch with him one night, and he told me he had invented a net, to be towed between trawlers, to catch an enemy’s submarines. It had bombs at intervals that burst on impact——”

In the midst of the amusement occasioned by this flight of imaginative fancy, the Sub-lieutenant entered the mess and sat down at the head of the table. He was lean and cadaverous, with a lock of hair hanging over one temple.

“No gentleman speaks at breakfast,” he announced, a remark of which no one took the slightest notice. The Maltese placed two eggs in front of him. He removed the top of one and smelt it. Then, turning in his seat in the direction of the trap-hatch, he shouted:

“Messman!”

“Sair?” A face like a grizzled monkey’s, with gold rings in its ears, appeared in the opening. As quick as a flash the Sub snatched the egg and flung it; but the messman was quicker. He dodged and the egg burst somewhere in the dark interior of the pantry.

There was a roar of laughter round the table.

“Bring me another,” commanded the cadaverous gentleman.

Nick, who was rather shocked, wondered whether the Sub-lieutenant threw eggs about when he was in the privacy of his own home. He noticed that Cradock did not appear to be amused. He had finished his breakfast and was filling a fascinating-looking pipe. It had a clay bowl fashioned to resemble the head of an Indian, with a cherrywood stem.

“You three had better get up on deck,” he said. “Take your dirks. I’ll take you to report to the Commander presently.”

They obeyed with alacrity, rather glad to escape from the atmosphere of hash, and bewildering talk about submarines, and a Sub-lieutenant who threw eggs. They reached the upper deck and saw the Fleet lying round them in the sunlight against the green heights of Portland. Along the battery men were standing about and smoking, all within range of spit-kids. Along the superstructure, facing the paintwork with their hands behind their backs, were half a dozen defaulters undergoing the punishment known as 10a. No one took the slightest notice of these unfortunates, but Nick felt it would be embarrassing to stand in their vicinity. He indicated a ladder that led up on to the booms. “Let’s go and wait up there,” he whispered. The others followed him, and they reached a quiet place occupied by hawser reels, hen-coops, and a searchlight. They clustered silently together, looking down at the battery and the throng of brawny, bearded, bare-footed men grouped round the spit-kids. The air was pungent with the smell of plug-tobacco.

A small figure walked towards them from the other side of the booms. Instead of a midshipman’s patches he wore a thin

line of white cloth round his sleeve. He had a pale freckled face and a wide smile. They all liked the look of him.

“My name is Freyer. I’m an Assistant Clerk. I’ve been in the Navy three weeks. Do you like being in the Navy?” He addressed the question to Wainwright.

“Pretty well,” admitted Sheep cautiously. “Do you?”

“No. I am the lowest form of animal life.”

“Who said you were?” demanded Nick, who for some reason felt he wanted to champion this small creature against the buffets of fate.

“Lascells. He’s the Sub-lieutenant. I’ve got to make up a song about it and sing it on guest night.”

“How far have you got?” asked Usher, interested.

“Not very far, I’m afraid. I come up here after breakfast and try to compose the words. But I’m no poet, I’m afraid.”

“We’ll help you,” said Sheep reassuringly. He stared up at the muzzle of a quick-firing gun projecting from the after fighting top. The others stood and looked at him hopefully. “How would this do?” suggested the self-appointed poet after some minutes’ communion with the muzzle of the quick-firer:

“I’m the lowest form of animal life,
And I’ve no children or even a wife.”

“Of course he hasn’t,” expostulated Usher. “Don’t be an ass, Sheep. Think of something better than that. Perhaps you have a better second line in your head already?” he asked Freyer politely.

“Actually I have,” admitted the little Clerk. “It goes like this:

“I’m the lowest form of animal life—
I’d cut my throat if I’d got a knife.”

He eyed them gravely.

Nick nodded. “Well, go on.”

“There isn’t any more, so far. But I expect I shall think of something presently. Guest night is not till next Thursday.”

“Rather morbid,” said Usher. “What about the tune?”

“I know.” The little Clerk looked gloomy. “I thought perhaps I could work it into a hymn tune. Or perhaps make up a tune as I went along. On the night.”

“Awfully difficult to do that. Better choose a good hymn tune, like Onward Christian Soldiers.”

“Let’s try that,” suggested Sheep. He cleared his throat and hummed a few bars. “No, that won’t do.”

“Abide with me,” proposed Nick. “That’s more the kind of tune you want. It’s a sad sort of song really, isn’t it, Freyer?”

Freyer said he thought it would turn out to be a saddish song when it was finished. Everything pointed that way.

“Well, we’ll see what we can do between us,” said Nick. “It’s a long way to Thursday. It *needn’t* be a sad song, need it?”

Freyer agreed that there was no absolute necessity for it to be sad; “but,” he pointed out, “if it isn’t a good song Lascells said he’d beat me, and that makes me feel sad.” He produced a piece of bread from his pocket. “There’s a turkey in one of the coops. I generally come and feed it after meals. Would

you like to come and see it?” He led them to a coop on the far side of the shelter-deck.

“Are you fond of turkeys?” asked Usher.

“Not particularly, but no one talks to me much and I find it rather lonely, so I got into the way of doing this.” The turkey, huddled disconsolately in a small coop, brightened at the sight of Freyer. He handed his companions each a small piece of the bread. “But it’ll be better now you’ve joined.”

“We’ll do things together,” said Nick. “You can come ashore with us.” They fed the turkey in turns with crumbs of bread.

“Thanks awfully,” said Freyer. He brushed the crumbs from his hands. “Now I don’t mind so much about poor old Gregory.” He nodded at the turkey. “I was rather dreading his being killed to tell you the truth.”

The others were touched. “Why do you call him Gregory?” asked Nick.

Freyer looked at the turkey and the turkey looked at Freyer. Its flabby wattle hung over one eye, giving it a rather disreputable appearance.

“I don’t know. It just came to me.”

“I expect the song will, too,” said Nick. He meant to be encouraging, but in his heart he felt that it was one thing to christen a turkey and quite another to compose a song. At that moment Cradock appeared.

“Come along,” he said to the three midshipmen, “I’ll take you to see the Commander.”

They followed their guide down the ladder to a door in the superstructure where they could see a thin, angular man with a pink face, grey hair, and very blue eyes. The combination of

these things was reassuring. He was sitting in an arm-chair, throwing dog biscuits to a red setter.

He looked up as Cradock knocked. "Come in," he said, "all of you."

They complied, and stood in a row stiffly at attention. The owner of the cabin sat with a bit of biscuit in his hand, and scanned them in turn with a penetrating but not unkindly gaze.

"Come aboard to join, sir," said Nick, who was the senior of the three newcomers. He thought he had better deliver himself of this announcement, which Mandy had rubbed into him as the correct way to introduce himself to the Commander although actually it seemed half a lifetime since he had stepped on board.

"Had any breakfast?" asked the Commander.

"Yes, thank you, sir," they replied in chorus.

"Which is going to be my doggie?" he asked Cradock.

Cradock indicated Nick.

"Ainsworth, sir. I thought he'd be all right. He's the senior of the three."

The blue eyes were again turned on Nick. "Heaven help you," said their owner. "I'm a beast till I've had my breakfast—aren't I, Cradock?"

"Sometimes, sir," replied Cradock after a moment's pause, and they all laughed, but they could see that Cradock didn't really think the Commander was anything but the most marvellous human being in the world.

"Which of you is Usher?"

Usher indicated that such was his name.

"Had you a father in the service?"

“No, sir—uncle.”

“Well, he taught me more seamanship than any Commander I ever had, and with the luck of the fat priest I’ll do the same by you.”

Usher thanked him rather nervously, wondering how his Uncle Ronald had ever managed to teach anything to anybody. He had been retired for many years and spent most of his time in his club, telling his friends about the state of his internal organs, which interested him to an incredible and most boring extent.

Then it was Sheep’s turn.

“Wainwright?” asked the Commander.

Sheep had a stupid habit of blushing when he was nervous. He blushed now.

“Good swimmer, aren’t you?”

Sheep blushed still more. The other two felt a bit ashamed of him. “Not as good as Ainsworth, sir.”

“Mandeville said you both were,” pursued the Commander. “He used to be one of my snotties. He wrote to me before you joined, and said he hoped you’d do him credit.” He tossed the biscuit to the dog which caught it with a snap, and then he nodded dismissal to Cradock. “Don’t wait, boy,” he said; Cradock slipped through the door and disappeared. The Commander began to fill a briar pipe, black and charred with age. He appeared to be reflecting about something and to have forgotten the three midshipmen before him. The dog wagged its tail as if to attract his attention.

“You’ve got to do him credit,” he said suddenly. “You’ve got to do the old *Britannia* credit. In a while other things will take its place: bigger responsibilities. You’ll have to be a

credit to the ship and to the Navy; men will look to you for example, for orders, for the safety of their lives. How you act then—in emergencies—depends on the sum of all the little things you learn, every minute, every day. Never slack up, never dodge responsibilities. I'll lay 'em on you bit by bit, never more than you should reasonably be able to tackle.”

He broke off and lit his pipe, sucking at it in the same reflective way as he had spoken; and suddenly he turned his eyes towards them and smiled. His rather stern face was lit by that smile, so that all three midshipmen never forgot his next words.

“You must trust me—but even more you must trust yourselves. Now, off you go. I'll send for you after Divisions and take you to see the Captain. Wait in the gunroom. Carry on.”

They returned to the gunroom. It was empty, except for José, the Maltese domestic, who was folding up the tablecloth.

“Well!” gasped Usher. “That wasn't so bad, was it? I was in a blue funk when we went in. He's a ripper, although I can't say I understood all he was jawing about.”

“I did,” said Sheep.

“Then why did you blush like a silly ass?” inquired Nick.

“I didn't,” protested Sheep.

“You did, Sheep. Like a beetroot,” confirmed Usher.

“Da Commander, 'e's all right. You taka dat from me,” José suddenly announced. He thrust the tablecloth into a drawer in the sideboard, and a cockroach fell out. José pounced on it and caught it with the agility of a monkey. “I 'ave a glass of beer to-night to drink to your 'ealth. Dat all

right? Put it down on your wine bill. T'ree glass of beer. Dat bring you good luck. José drinka your 'ealth."

They looked at each other. Usher nodded.

"Certainly," said Nick with dignity.

José walked to the scuttle and dropped the cockroach over the side. "Dat's all right," he said, and shuffled out of the mess.

"I think everything's going to be all right," said Sheep suddenly, "with a Commander like this one."

The other two agreed. But as they spoke Nick thought of little Freyer and his song and the egg bursting in the pantry. So far everything was all right. But the future might reveal another side to the picture.

CHAPTER THREE

THE twenty-four hours spent in what was technically known as “slinging his hammock” seemed to Nick an interminable period of time. It would not be possible to chronicle those hours in detail, nor to record Nick’s emotions, reflections, and apprehensions, and those of his companions, which were pretty much the same as his. They made the acquaintance of the Captain, and thought him the most alarming individual they had ever seen. He was tremendously dignified. His uniform was very smart and his cuffs very starched, his collar very high and his trousers very creased. He walked with a strut that somehow reminded Nick, frightened as he was, of a pouter pigeon.

He was strutting up and down the quarter-deck with a telescope under his arm when the Commander led them aft to be introduced. He halted, ignoring their salutes, and stood with his feet apart, apparently admiring the exquisite polish of his boots. Then he looked up and barked:

“Come to join my ship, have you? Had your bottoms beaten yet, what?”

Their dry lips shaped a negative.

“Oversight somewhere, Commander, what?”

“They’ve not been on board very long, sir.”

“Long enough. I got a dozen five minutes after I joined my first ship. Mast-and-yards Navy that was, young gentlemen. What?”

Ignorant that this slight mannerism of their Captain required no reply, they chorused a timid, “Yes, sir.”

“What d’you mean—yes, sir?”

Sheep turned crimson, and the other two grew pale.

“You, sir——” He addressed poor blushing Sheep. “How would you like to be in a mast-and-yards Navy?”

“Very much, sir,” hazarded Sheep desperately.

“No, you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t be able to sit down by now. The boy’s a fool, Commander. Take them away.”

The Commander motioned them forward. Captain Marmaduke Fitzhopkins resumed his promenade.

They were glad to escape to the chest flat where they changed their “bum-freezers” for monkey-jackets, shed their dirks, and made the acquaintance of the Marine Artilleryman who was to be their servant. His name was Capper, and if all three of them had been melted down and poured into Capper’s enormous tunic and trousers the combined resultant would have reached to Capper’s



He was tremendously dignified.

belt or thereabouts. He talked in an undertone impeded by some nasal obstruction, possibly adenoids. In all the years of their acquaintance Nick never grasped more than about one word in three of Capper's confidences. When not talking,

Capper snored audibly. They understood that in return for the sum of ten shillings per month Gunner Capper was prepared to keep their clothes tidy and their chests locked, to send their soiled linen to the laundry, and, what was even more important, he guaranteed to see that it came back. In practice he did much more: he adopted them. He sewed on their buttons and darned their socks. He defended their possessions against the marauding raids of other midshipmen, and his enormous hands revealed a curious, almost feminine, aptitude for folding away clothes neatly. He was a sorrowful man, with troubles at home. They were to learn about these in time, especially Sheep, who developed a fondness for retreating to the chest flat in the dog watches, opening the lid of his chest and subsiding into the interior with his legs dangling over the edge. At such times Capper would usually be seated on an adjoining chest, darning a sock or polishing a pair of boots, snoring to himself with gentle melancholy.

Cradock detailed them for their duties in the course of the forenoon. Nick was to be the Commander's aide de camp.

"That means," he explained, "that you turn out with the hands, the same as he does. You are with him whenever anything is going on. You run messages and all that sort of thing. If you keep your eyes open you'll learn a lot."

Nick found that he was also midshipman of the main-top division, and of the sailing pinnace. For a while he would understudy Giles, whose boat it was, but Cradock explained that he himself would shortly be taking his exams for Acting Sub-lieutenant, and that if he passed Giles would become senior midshipman and assume command of the steam pinnace. In consideration of his other duties Nick was excused watch-keeping in harbour.

Usher was detailed to understudy Carver in the first cutter, to be midshipman of the forecandle division, and to keep watch under a Lieutenant, whom they had not yet seen, referred to by Cradock as Peerless Percy.

Sheep found himself destined for the quarter-deck division, in sole charge of the whaler—"That means all the dirty work," interposed Cradock—and when not otherwise occupied he would assist the Navigating officer; as such his official designation was "Tankie."

When not actively employed in these duties, attendance at school would be required of them. The Naval Instructor was a small, dried-up officer with a rather sharp tongue and a sarcastic manner. The lobes of his ears were unusually long and he had a curious habit, when working out a problem in mathematics, of stuffing one or other of them into the hole of his ear. It did not remain there long, but gradually oozed out and resumed its normal position with a little flick. The name of this worthy was Mr. Poole, and under his tuition the midshipmen studied navigation, spherical trigonometry, and the less exalted approaches to higher mathematics.

Apart from these studies there would be, of course, systematic instruction in gunnery and torpedo, rifle and cutlass drill, seamanship, electricity, and a course of engine-room watch-keeping.

Nick, when Cradock had finished an outline of all these activities that would ultimately fit him for a commission in the Royal Navy, wondered when they went ashore. He made a tentative inquiry.

"On make-and-mend afternoons and Saturday afternoons in harbour when you aren't watch-keeping," was the reply.

“Actually, you don’t get ashore an awful lot, but there’s leave home of course. A month in the year—more if you’re lucky.”

Nick had a feeling that he would like to start his leave immediately. His home, the old grey house in a Cheshire valley that he had left the previous morning, seemed as remote as Timbuctoo and his life there to belong to some previous existence.

When Cradock had finished detailing them for their future duties he took them for a tour of the ship. With the exception of the midshipman of the watch the others were at school. The hands were variously employed, the majority polishing bright-work till it winked in the sunlight and shone like burnished gold. Some armourers had spread a tarpaulin on the deck and were dismantling and greasing the breech-mechanism of one of the guns. From the blacksmith’s forge came the clang of a hammer on metal. On the forecastle a party of young seamen were being instructed in cutlass drill by a gunner’s mate, lunging and parrying imaginary blows and looking rather hot and bored.

“Are they sharp?” asked Sheep, indicating the unwieldy weapons with their curved steel hilts.

“Not in peace time,” replied Cradock. “But on some stations like the East Indies, where there’s gun-running and slave-raiding, they are sharpened, of course.”

They followed him on to the bridge where the signalmen were pacing up and down in pairs, their telescopes under their arms and their eyes roving about the harbour. A couple were squatting cross-legged in the lee of the chart-house, mending flags, which billowed in folds of red, yellow, and blue bunting all round them; a short, thick-set man in the

uniform of a chief petty officer stood with his hands on his hips, watching them with a glum face.

“There you are, Mr. Cradock,” he said when he saw the senior midshipman, “that’s the damage you young gentlemen did to my flags at signal exercise this morning. If I had my way I’d have the lot of you up here helping to mend them, ’stead of going ashore on a make-and-mend afternoon.”

“It was blowing a bit,” protested Cradock, “and they kept fouling the stays. And, after all, we were first ship—first ship in the whole Fleet, Morrissy.”

“So you did ought to be, Mr. Cradock. So you——” The Chief Yeoman, for this was the rank of the speaker, suddenly broke off and bawled, “Up answer! Where’s your eyes, you pack of crawling lubbers? D’you want our pennants at every masthead in the fleet? Home for the blind, that’s where you ought to be, not signalmen of the forenoon watch aboard of the *Vengeance*.”

At his shout “Up answer!” Nick observed a curl of bunting appear above the bridge of the flagship. Long before the flags had bellied out in the wind a signalman had jumped at the halliards—almost at the first sound of the Chief Yeoman’s voice—and hoisted the answering pennant. The rest of the Chief Yeoman’s remarks were delivered to the backs of the two individuals, one of whom had his glass to his eye and the other a slate and pencil in his hand. A black and white semaphore on the Flagship’s bridge began to wave its arms. “Flag to *Vengeance*,” the man with the telescope read aloud, “Commander-in-Chief requests——” But they never heard the rest of the message because Cradock led them into the chart-house where they found the Navigating Officer

correcting charts. Cradock introduced them to him, and indicated Sheep as his future “Tankie.”

“Can you make cocoa?” he asked earnestly. He had a long black beard and twinkling grey eyes. “Cocoa, sir?” echoed Sheep.

“Yes, cocoa. Stuff you drink. It’s a great art. Go away and study it.”

Cradock subsequently explained that one of the “Tankie’s” duties at sea consisted in brewing cocoa during the night watches for the Navigator’s consumption. “I don’t know why Navigators are so fussy about cocoa,” he said, “but they’re all the same. I’ll show you how to make it. Ogilvie likes it frothy.”

They were sorry to leave the upper deck and the sunlit panorama of the Fleet and harbour, to explore between decks. Cradock explained that it was most important for Nick to learn the geography of the ship in the shortest possible time, in order that he might take messages for the Commander at a flying rush by the quickest route. He led them through the mess-decks, where the mess tables and stools were ranged in rows along the ship’s side, with the men’s ditty boxes and sennet hats in racks overhead. The basins out of which they ate their food and drank their tea and their grog, the tin mess-kettles in which their food was fetched from the galley, and served as wash-tubs for the mess gear and the men themselves, were all scrubbed and polished and burnished to a pitch of spotless perfection. In each mess a hand was peeling potatoes for dinner, which would presently be taken to the galley and cooked.

They dived down into dim store-rooms beneath the lowest mess-deck, each in charge of a seaman who looked much

older and more knowing than any of the men on deck. They were the Yeomen of the Boatswain and the Carpenter, the Gunner and the Engineer, and Nick thought their store-rooms more fascinating than anything he had seen. They all had burnished steel decks and little mats inside the doors, and were ornamented according to the individual tastes of the custodian. The Gunner's Yeoman had arranged a trophy of armourer's tools on a shield, and hung it on the bulkhead. The Carpenter's Yeoman had burnished all his axes and arranged them in a pattern. The Boatswain's Yeoman, whose store was full of cordage and blocks and shackles, things difficult to arrange in a pattern, had photographs of his wife and children standing on bins of tallow, holystone, and caustic soda. Best of all they liked the victualling store-rooms, full of chests of tea, sacks of peas and beans, casks of salt beef and pickled pork, cases of biscuit, and bags of flour, and impregnated with a rich, spicy, and rather heady smell that had something to do with rum.

They worked aft gradually, visiting the submerged torpedo flat on the way, till they came to the officers' cabins, the ship's office, and the wardroom. Inside the ship's office they caught a glimpse of Freyer, writing in a ledger beside a Chief Writer, who was calling out a succession of numbers in a monotonous voice.

They returned to the gunroom in time for dinner, feeling very hungry and rather bewildered with all they had seen. Lascells, the Sub, was there consuming a glass of Marsala with the Assistant Engineer, and for the first time he deigned to acknowledge the existence of the newly joined midshipmen.

Cradock introduced them in turn, and Mr. Lascells held out a limp hand. He was a tall young man with hock-bottle shoulders, and a very long neck.

“You are uncommonly lucky,” he said to them. “You are three uncommonly lucky warts, ain’t they, Daunton?”

The Assistant Engineer, who looked a good deal older than Lascells and had a grumpy manner, said in a very deep gruff voice that it all depended.

“And why are you lucky—eh?” demanded Mr. Lascells. He eyed them in turn. Sheep began to blush.

“Hang it, Daunton, they don’t know. They haven’t realized yet.”

“They will,” said Mr. Daunton in non-committal tones.

“Don’t you know,” hectored Lascells in his rather high voice, “that you have come to the smartest cruiser in the Navy, commanded by the finest Captain who ever flew his pennant? If you don’t know this, I shall have to take steps—ha!—steps to bring it to your notice. Shan’t I, Daunton?”

“They’ll tumble to it,” grumbled Daunton in a bored voice. “Any of you like to sell me five shillings of your wine bills?”

“Certainly,” said Usher politely, not very sure what this meant, but anxious to propitiate the grumpy individual.

“All right. Pay you at the end of the month. José!” he bawled.

The Maltese appeared.

“Bring two glasses of Marsala and put them down to——” He eyed Usher gloomily. “What’s your tally?”

“Usher.”

“Down to Mr. Usher.”

Cradock reappeared and asked Daunton if he would conduct the new midshipmen round the engine-room after lunch. Daunton said he was blowed if he would, but having consumed a second glass of Marsala he changed his mind and said he would take them down and souse them in the bilge, which remark caused Lascells immense diversion.

Further pleasantries of this sort were cut short by the invasion of the mess by the other midshipmen, and the appearance on the sideboard of a huge smoking cottage pie. Little Freyer crept in with a smear of ink over his left eyebrow, and they all sat down to dinner. The cottage pie was followed by a jam roll, and when that was finished Mr. Daunton intimated that he proposed to sleep for an hour, after which he would personally conduct the three warts round the engine-room, the stokehold, the bunkers, and the bilge. He then extended himself at length on the settee, Lascells followed suit on what remained of the settee space, and the midshipmen were free to dispose themselves where and how they liked for the remainder of the dinner hour.

Nick, Sheep, and Usher joined Freyer on the booms and fed Gregory. Freyer told them about the Paymaster, who sounded a trifle eccentric. He was for ever counting his money, but it never came to the same total twice. There was either too much or too little. When there was too much he was delighted, and used to come into the office where Freyer and the Chief Writer worked, rubbing his hands and cracking jokes. When there was too little he used to get very depressed, and Freyer and the Chief Writer had to go along to his cabin and help him to count it all over again. "It's really awfully silly," said Freyer, "because there can't be either too much or too little. It must be the same amount as he shows in

his cash account.” When Freyer and the Chief Writer between them had got the money counted so cleverly that it was exactly right, the Paymaster shut himself up in his cabin and played the penny whistle to himself, lying flat on his bunk.

“Sounds a bit mad,” commented Usher. Freyer said he thought everybody in the Navy that he had come across was a bit mad. He added doubtfully that he hadn’t had a very large experience, and perhaps should not form hasty judgments.

“The Commander isn’t mad,” objected Nick promptly. “He’s a ripper.”

Freyer agreed. “There are, of course, exceptions,” he said in his grave old-fashioned manner.

Mr. Daunton awoke from his siesta even more grumpy in manner than before. He led them in silence down a steel ladder to the port engine-room, and indicated the cylinders, piston rods, and crossheads. “Triple expansion,” he grumbled, “see?”

“No,” said Sheep boldly, and blushed.

Daunton eyed him doubtfully. “Means steam exerts its power in three stages before exhausting to the condenser. You’ll learn all about that when you do your engine-room watch-keeping.”

He led the way to a stokehold. One of the furnaces was alight to provide steam for the dynamo. The others were black and cold. Two bearded stokers with ragged vests and fearnought trousers leaned on their shovels watching them. Opposite the furnaces yawned the opening to the coal bunkers.

“You can take a spell here when we get to sea,” said Mr. Daunton, “stoking one of the furnaces. Make you glad to get

back to mother.” At a nod from the speaker one of the stokers threw open the door of the furnace, and they caught a glimpse of the white-hot hell of the interior. The heat seared their faces. “You try a four-hour trick in front of that,” said their guide grimly. The two stokers grinned reassuringly. They had hardly any teeth, but were big brawny men with muscles like prize-fighters. “We’ll send ’em down here during a full-power trial, eh, Murphy?”

“That’ll larn ’em, sor,” said the bigger of the two men.

“I’m going to do a job of work now that I am here,” said Daunton when they returned to the engine-room. “The engineers are the only people who ever do any work in the Navy, don’t forget that, see?”

His manner was so morose and gloomy that they decided he was speaking seriously, and all three promised earnestly not to forget his words.

“Well, hop off out of it,” said Mr. Daunton, and they retreated hastily to the gunroom.

After tea Nick wrote to his mother. He said:

“Darling Mother,

“We had cottage pie and jam roly-poly pudding for lunch. Could you please send me a pot of jam. All the others have pots of jam. One eats pickled cabbage on his bread. Everything is all right so far and I think——”

Here Nick paused and stared into vacancy for some time.

“I am going to like it all very much. The Commander is a ripper and so is the senior midshipman. We have been slinging our hammocks all day but to-morrow we start work.

I am Commander's doggie. He is a ripper. Don't forget the jam, and give my love to Father and Ethel.

"Your loving son,

"Nick.

"P.S.—Black currant jam."

Again Nick stared into vacancy for a long time. Then he sighed deeply, crossed out "black currant" and substituted "strawberry."

And that was all his sorrowing family had to satisfy the yearning of maternal, paternal, and sisterly hearts, when in due course the letter reached Cheshire.

Lascells was dining with the Captain that evening, so Daunton presided morosely over the gunroom dinner, and as soon after the meal as they could decently slip away, they retired to the chest flat. The midshipmen's hammocks were slung in rows from the beams overhead. There was very little light and less ventilation, but they were glad to undress and turn in. Nick went to sleep almost at once, but a couple of hours later was awakened by somebody bumping against his hammock and a voice he recognised as Lascells's talking very loudly.

"He's mashed on my sister—ha! ha! ha! Fancy anybody wanting to marry Clara. Fancy having your Captain for a brother-in-law. I say, what a joke——"

"Shut up, don't make so much noise," said a voice Nick did not recognise. "Sit down and I'll pull your boots off."

"Don't want my boots off. Going to turn-in in my boots. All the Lascells turn-in in their boots. Old family custom. He doesn't know what he's letting himself in for. Ha! ha! Clara!"

“Shut up, you fool!” There was more laughter and noisy argument, and the voices grew confused and far away. Nick sighed and went to sleep again.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHEEP awoke to the sound of a bugle. He was accustomed to that, because in the *Britannia* the cadets were roused from sleep every morning by the notes of the “Reveille.” But this was a different tune. It was “Guard and Steerage,” played by a bugler who stood about a yard from Sheep’s hammock. Deafened and bewildered, Sheep sat up, wondering for a moment where he was. He had been dreaming about his home in Derbyshire. He and two of his sisters (he had four of them) were sliding down a hillside on a toboggan and were heading straight towards Captain Fitzhopkins, who was admiring the polish on his boots and apparently quite unconscious of the Wainwright family—the two other sisters had a large tea-tray to slide on—bearing down on him.

“Masts-and-yards, what?” he said, addressing his boots. “Masts-and——” In another instant the toboggan and the tea-tray, Sheep and his four sisters, would have obliterated him. The bugle saved him.

Some one jerked the lanyard of Sheep’s hammock. “Guard and Steerage, sir.” A ship’s corporal was moving from hammock to hammock jerking the occupants into wakefulness.

“Show a leg, sir, show a leg. Sun’s scorching your eyes out.”

There were yawns and grunts and flops in all directions as the midshipmen tumbled out of their hammocks. Sheep found when he got to his chest that his clothes were neatly folded ready for him to put on—white flannel trousers, shirt, sweater, and monkey-jacket.

Sheep was aware of a red-headed midshipman peering over the open lid of his chest. "I wonder," said the owner of the red head, "if your trousers would fit me. I expect you've got lots to spare."

A snoring sound came out of the shadows, and Gunner Capper contrived to insinuate his enormous bulk beneath the hammocks. "No, Bister Borgad. That's where you bakes your error. We aid't got no trousers to spare."

"Rot, Capper! He can easily lend me a pair. The outfitter always provides six pairs when they fit out anybody. And look at mine—split across the backside."

"We aid't got dode to spare," repeated Mr. Capper inflexibly.

"Supposing if I jolly well take them?" threatened Master Morgan.

"Thed I takes 'eb back," was the gloomy retort.

Morgan retreated, and Sheep, who had been dressing hurriedly with Nick and Usher on either side of him, too sleepy to exchange a word, joined the helter skelter to the gunroom. There was a jug of steaming ship's cocoa on the sideboard, and a tray of ship's biscuits; each midshipman poured himself out a cup of cocoa and began to gnaw a biscuit. Sheep sipped his cocoa cautiously. It was scalding hot, very sweet, and had a thick layer of grease on the surface; it was also slightly gritty, but it bore a faint resemblance to cocoa as he knew it. The biscuit had no taste. It was as hard as sandstone and also slightly gritty, but it gave his stomach something to think about. The hot cocoa revived the sleepy midshipmen: they sat on the table and began gabbling like starlings. Sheep found little Freyer next to him, nibbling a biscuit like a mouse.

“How’s the song getting on?” he whispered.

“Not very well, I’m afraid. I thought of starting:

“ ‘Hark, hark, I’m an Assistant Clerk.’ ”

“That’s good,” said Sheep. “Could you fit it into the tune of ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing’?”

Freyer shook his head doubtfully. “Don’t let’s think about it now. Do you like ship’s cocoa? It has a high percentage of cocoa butter.” He stared into his cup. “It makes me feel rather sick, but it is said to be very nourishing.”

“What are we going to do when we’ve finished this?” asked Sheep. He had a feeling that however many ship’s biscuits he ate he would still go on feeling hungry.

“Signal exercise. We race hoists of flags, ship against ship. I take part because the exercise is said to be good for me. But I am really a non-combatant officer.”

“What does that mean?”

“I haven’t found out yet, but the Paymaster is always telling me that.”

“Couldn’t you work it into your song——?”

A messenger boy thrust his head inside the door.

“Away first cutter, sir,” he shouted.

Sheep saw Carver spring to the dirk-rack by the door. “Come on,” he shouted. “Usher! Beef and stewards. Man the boat over the boom”—and vanished through the door. Usher, struggling with the buckle of his dirk-belt, followed him.

“Up on the bridge!” shouted Cradock. “Smack it about! You’re all adrift.” They rushed like one man for the door.

It seemed to Sheep, as he fled up ladders, that everything in the Navy was left till the last minute, so that when the time came to do it you had to hurry like anything. Nothing was leisurely and peaceful, nobody ever walked to carry out an order but ran as if the devil were behind him. Everybody was always being warned that they were on the brink of being adrift, or not keeping their eyes skinned, or not moving fast enough, or hauling hard enough. It was usually conveyed by superior to subordinate in a blustering, friendly, half-laughing, half-bullying way, and it seemed to blow through the ship's life ceaselessly, to the accompaniment of bugle, pipe, and bell, like a great wind passing through the branches of forest trees, imparting movement, health, and vigour, snapping off and casting aside diseased and weakly growth.

They arrived on the bridge breathless, and, following the example of the others, Sheep removed his coat and cap and rolled up his sleeves. The Chief Yeoman, who was master of ceremonies, detailed them for the different halliards. Cradock and the red-headed midshipman, whose shirt-tail obtruded coyly through the rent in his trousers' seat, stood by the flag lockers. The halliards were rove through blocks at the masthead and each yard-arm. At each end of the halliards was a brass clip. The flags, rolled up in separate marked compartments, had clips, top and bottom, dangling from the mouth of each pigeonhole in the lockers.

The Chief Yeoman walked to the end of the bridge and focused his glass on the flagship.

“Stand by, all!” he shouted in a stentorian voice. Sheep had one end of the masthead halliards in his hand, the other was held by Giles. Freyer stood by to help stow the flags away after each hoist.

Sheep had time to observe that Nick shared the topsail-yard halliards with a fat, smiling individual called Beevers; the foresail-yard halliards were in the hands of the two smallest midshipmen: one he recognised as having been on watch when they joined the previous morning. He knew him by his ears; his name was Lawley, and he was called Bat for short. The other had a face like an angel in a stained-glass window. Its expression of guileless innocence never varied. His proper name was Hepburn: to be more proper it was Sir John Hepburn, and he happened to be a baronet; he answered, however, to the name of Snipe.

Sheep tried to remember how many more there were. Carver, with his weather-beaten face and gentian-blue eyes, was away in the cutter, fetching provisions with Usher. That left one more, the midshipman of the watch: Aberboyne, tall and lusty, who had gone ashore at Devonport one fine day and had himself tattooed in a sailors' booth with dragons and

“Masthead!” roared the Chief Yeoman. “Interrogative Mutton Katie. Topsail yard-arm: Percy Ida....” He paused, waiting for the hoist to clear the flagship’s bridge screens. “Percy Ida Bertie. Up she goes then. Fore yard-arm pendants three one E for Edward.” He snapped his telescope under his arm and faced the turmoil on the bridge. Giles had flung himself at the flag locker and was clipping on the flags as Cradock jerked them out of the locker. “Interrogative—right! M—quick! Oh, snakes, where’s K? K—K for Katie, man! Come on—here you are, Wainwright, snap it on! All right? Up she goes!”

The bridge was a pandemonium of rushing forms and whirling bunting.

“Hoist away! Come on, put some weight into it!”

In pairs they hauled at the halliards, hand over hand. The fresh morning breeze dragged at the flags like kites, bellying the halliards in great arcs. By the time “Interrogative M K” had reached the masthead, Sheep’s arms were aching and he panted for breath. Giles stared up at the hoist. “That means ‘Request permission to proceed in execution of previous orders,’ ” he observed.

Sheep was impressed. “Do you know all the signals?” he asked.

“Not all—but everybody knows the important ones.”

“First ship,” announced the Chief Yeoman nonchalantly. “As it should be,” he added, in case any of them got carried away by vanity and pride. Cradock was looking down the line and laughing. The next ship but one had started to hoist before the bottom clip was secured. Percy, Ida, and Bertie were streaming in a tangle of rats’ tails from the yard-arm.

“That’s the *Pandora*. They’re always making a pot mess. A bunch of ullages,” muttered Giles.

“Down!” roared the Chief Yeoman, and, hand over hand, one hauling and the other paying out, they brought the flags, snapping and undulating in the wind, to the clutch of their arms. “Quick—disconnect!”

They flung the flags back to Freyer, who stuffed them hastily back into their holes in the lockers as the Chief Yeoman shouted, “Stand by! Masthead: Blue pendant eight, topsail yard-arm: Frankie Mutton Nuts——”

And so it went on. The perspiration ran down Sheep’s face, his arms and back ached excruciatingly, and the palms of his hands were a mass of blisters. The Chief Yeoman exhorted

and abused them. The universe was a whirl of coloured bunting that flung itself about his head, was trampled underfoot, climbed skyward and descended again. His brain reeled with blue pendants and red ones, with letters and numbers, with Mutton and Percy and Ida and Nuts. He wished he had drunk twice as much cocoa and eaten four times as many ship's biscuits: he felt empty and giddy.... And suddenly it was over. The last flag down and stowed away, a grudging congratulation on being again first ship from Morrissy, and they were dismissed.

“Bags first bath!” yelled Giles, and he stampeded down the ladder from the bridge. The others followed like a cataract of humanity, scampering down half the ladders and jumping the rest of the way.

They reached the chest flat in the same avalanche of bodies, legs and arms as Sheep remembered the previous morning, and began tearing off their clothes, racing for the baths. Sheep sat down on his chest and gazed ruefully at his blistered hands. So much, he reflected, for the Navy's idea of fresh air and exercise! He ached as if he had been beaten all over.

And they hadn't even had breakfast yet.

CHAPTER FIVE

TIME, which passed so slowly for the first twenty-four hours, seemed after that to sweep Usher, Nick, and Sheep along in a bewildering whirl, as a wave engulfs a swimmer.

They came to the surface at meal times; after their meals they used to forgather on the booms with Freyer, and exchange notes on their experiences; these lulls gave them a chance to get their breath before plunging into fresh duties and experiences, which at the end of the day cast them up on the shores of sleep too tired to talk or think about anything. They lost count of the days of the week until Sunday dawned. Then the whole ship plunged into an orgy of cleanliness. Directly after breakfast they were told to polish the brass aims of the gunroom scuttles. There were four scuttles in the mess, so they each fell to work on one and rubbed and burnished for all they were worth, while Messrs. Lascells and Daunton occupied the two arm-chairs and exchanged comments on the world's news.

Towards nine o'clock they all went on deck, and as the bell struck twice the bugles blared out "Divisions." Nick hurried off to find the Commander, while Usher fled to where his division was falling in on the forecastle, and Sheep joined his on the quarter-deck. At the first sound of the bugle the ship's company, who wore their best suits, with cloth trousers ornamented by little bows of silk ribbon behind, and wide-brimmed sennet hats, fell in, in two ranks, according to their respective divisions.

The officer of Usher's division was a Lieutenant Adams, invariably known as Peerless Percy. He was tall and slim and elegant, and wore an eyeglass and a beautifully fitting frock-

coat. His face was thin and expressionless, his voice rather jaded.

Usher mustered the division from a little book in which he had written their names, and reported the division correct. Peerless Percy, who wore a new pair of white kid gloves and a very shiny sword, inspected the ranks of motionless men. Usher was impressed by the fact that he knew the name of every man in the division, and subjected every item of their uniform to a merciless scrutiny. The men were all wearing boots for the occasion and, judging by some of their expressions of martyr-like resignation, Usher concluded that footwear was unpopular. They all stood bare-headed during the inspection, and displayed a remarkable diversity of “quiffs,” locks of hair pomaded with soft soap and curled to the wearer’s taste over their foreheads. Finally Peerless Percy strode aft and reported his division correct to the Commander, awaiting reports on the quarter-deck. Nick, who stood at attention behind him, checked the divisions off in his head as each Lieutenant reported. Peerless Percy was the last.

“All divisions reported, sir,” he announced with some importance.

The Commander clanked off to the Captain’s cabin, and presently Captain Fitzhopkins came on deck. His cap-peak was larger than ever, his frock-coat more perfect in cut, his patent-leather boots outshone all other boots. He looked as if he might burst with importance at any moment. He was followed by the angelic-looking Hepburn, who was his “doggie,” and whose mind at that moment was engaged with the problem of how he could dip into a large box of chocolates he had seen in the Captain’s cabin, without being observed.

Then began an interminable tour of the divisions, a procession headed by the Captain, and including the Commander, the Staff Surgeon, Hepburn and Nick, the Captain's Coxswain, a bearded mariner called Honey, and the Commander's boy messenger.

Captain Fitzhopkins liked to describe himself as a disciplinarian. This involved a good deal of hectoring and fault-finding, of ordering men to muster their bags in the dinner hour, jerking the ends of the tapes of their jumpers so that they had to refasten them, and snatching at their lanyards to see if they had knives attached; but the men accepted it patiently, merely sucking their teeth when the Captain had passed on and staring into vacancy.

"He's having a tea-party this afternoon," murmured Hepburn. "Lascells's sister. He's mashed on her. There's a chocolate cake and éclairs, sugar biscuits, meringues, a bunch of grapes, and he's got a whacking great box of chocolates in his cabin tied up with pink ribbon. What?" He so far forgot himself as to mimic Captain Fitzhopkins's mannerism.

"Has he asked you?" inquired Nick.

"No blooming fear. But I rather think I shall go all the same."

Nick glanced at the cherubic countenance of his companion.

"How can you go if he doesn't ask you?"

"I shall be there," was the enigmatic answer. "Look out for me about four o'clock."

The Captain had completed his inspection of the divisions and descended to the mess-decks, where the same minute scrutiny took place. He peered into bread barges, passed his

white-gloved hand over hat-racks and under mess tables in search of dust, and passed aft to the cabin flats, where he visited the gunroom, and stood sniffing delicately.

“A disgusting smell, what? Commander, I say a disgusting smell. Beer, what? Beer and——”

Captain Fitzhoptkins jerked open a drawer on the sideboard; a cockroach fell out and scurried across the deck. With scandalised white-gloved fingers, the Captain pulled out a collection of cleaning rags, some ship’s biscuit, a comic paper, and a discarded collar of José’s. He dropped them on the deck in a shower of cockroaches. “Insanitary and verminous. Evil-smelling. Not fit for gentlemen—what? I say not fit for gentlemen.” He eyed the beer barrel in the corner distastefully. “Beer and cockroaches. Repulsive.”

He eyed his aide-de-camp, who was watching the stampede of the cockroaches as if he were an angel brooding over the tumult of humanity. “I say repulsive, what?”

“Yes, sir,” agreed Hepburn.

“Then see to it,” ordered Captain Fitzhoptkins, and he strutted out of the mess.

The procession returned to the upper deck, and the bugle sounded the “Disperse.” Captain Fitzhoptkins repaired to his cabin, where Freyer, who was his clerk, awaited him with the wine-books and the midshipmen’s logs. The wine-books contained a record of the amount of intoxicating refreshment consumed by each officer from day to day. The regulations ordained that a gunroom commissioned officer might not consume more than two pounds’ worth each month, a senior midshipman fifteen shillings’ worth, and a junior midshipman ten shillings’ worth.

The log-books kept by each midshipman, and written up as a rule on Saturday forenoon, contained a record of the direction and force of the wind, the temperature, and the readings of the barometer every four hours. They also copied down from the ship's log the details of employment of the hands. In addition to recording all these particulars, each midshipman was expected to draw or paint a sketch of some portion of the ship or her machinery, which was pasted in the pages of his log.

Freyer had arranged all these books on a table in the centre of the Captain's cabin, and while the hands were rigging church on the quarter-deck Captain Fitzhobkins examined the log-books and initialed each entry. Freyer, who stood beside him with a piece of blotting-paper, wondered what conceivable value these tasks could represent. The Captain was looking at Sheep's, written in a large round unformed hand.

“6.0 Hands employed cleaning ship. 1. Carpenter's Mate joined ship. 9.5 Divisions and prayers. Hands employed as resquisite. 4 p.m. Evening quarters.”

Captain Fitzhobkins snorted, and scored his pen under the word “resquisite.”

“Can't spell, what? I say the boy can't spell.”

Freyer agreed that appearances were against Sheep.

“And where's his sketch?”

Freyer indicated what looked like a side view of a corned beef sandwich. Above it Sheep had laboriously printed:

H.M.S. VENGEANCE
SECTION OF ARMOUR PLATE

and to show he was not ashamed of his handiwork, had written underneath the bold inscription:

Drawn by
George Wainwright,
Midshipman, R.N.

“What is it?” demanded the Captain. “I say, what is it, what?”

Freyer indicated the title.

“Did you ever see a section of armour-plating look like that?”

Freyer had to admit that his experience of armour-plating was small. In fact, it was practically nil.

“A crude effort,” wrote Captain Fitzhoptkins across Sheep’s masterpiece, and he turned to examine the gunroom wine-books.

He spent some time scrutinising them, and came presently to the column headed:

MID. USHER.

He ran his finger down the entries.

“What is this?” he exclaimed. “Four glasses of marsala, three pints of beer, and two glasses of port?—in one day! Fetch Mr. Usher.”

Freyer fled in search of Usher, and found him in the gunroom cleaning out the drawers of the sideboard under the direction of Lascells, and chasing cockroaches in all directions.

“The Captain wants you,” Freyer panted.

“Wants *me!*” echoed Usher incredulously, holding a struggling cockroach between finger and thumb.

“Yes. Come quick.”

Usher threw his victim out of the scuttle and followed Freyer to the Captain’s cabin.

“Mr. Usher,” said the Captain in a tone of great severity, indicating the wine-book, “what is the meaning of this debauchery? I say this debauchery, what?”

Usher stared blankly at him.

“You appear to have consumed, on the day you joined my ship, no less than”—Captain Fitzhoptkins refreshed his memory from the book—“no less than four glasses of marsala, three pints of beer, and two glasses of port. What?”

“No, sir,” said Usher firmly, never having tasted anything stronger than ginger-beer in his life.

“The boy’s an inebriate,” said the Captain to an invisible audience. “I say the boy’s a dipsomaniac. What?”

“It’s a mistake, sir,” insisted Usher.

“Don’t argue. It’s recorded in the wine-books. They are kept by Sub-Lieutenant Lascells, a most punctilious officer in whom I have every confidence.”

Light began to dawn on poor Usher. “I sold five shillings’ worth of my wine bill to Mr. Daunton, sir. He——”

“Did traffic in liquor,” groaned Captain Fitzhoptkins. “What? I say did traffic in liquor. Are you not aware, sir, that you have committed a very serious offence? If you were a seaman I would put you in a cell.” Here Usher turned white. “I say I would put you in a cell for fourteen days. As it is ——” Captain Fitzhoptkins admired the polish on his boots for a moment. “What? I say as it is I shall stop your wine bill for three months.” He made a gesture with his hand to

indicate that the interview was over. Usher, feeling as if his stomach had turned over inside him, retired from the cabin.

When he reached the quarter-deck he found that side-screens had been rigged; mess stools, supported by buckets, were ranged in rows on both sides of the deck, and in the centre a reading-desk stood in close proximity to a harmonium.

The wardroom officers occupied chairs on the starboard side, the gunroom and warrant officers on the port side. Usher sought a chair between Nick and Sheep, and sank into it. The bell was tolling, and the ship's company began to fill the rows of mess stools. The Master-at-Arms and the Sergeant-Major shepherded them into their places. When the last man was present the Commander went down to the Captain's cabin and reported officers and men present. The bell stopped tolling, and a signalman hoisted the church pendant at the peak to indicate that Divine Service was about to begin.

Captain Fitzhokins was, however, in no hurry to begin. He was still scrutinising the wine-books.

"I have had occasion to stop Mr. Usher's wine bill, Commander. He appears to have been selling his wine bill to the Assistant Engineer. In other words, trafficking in liquor. I say trafficking in liquor. What?"

"Ignorance, probably, sir. I expect Daunton took advantage of his lack of experience."

"The boy must be a fool. In the old days he'd have been flogged for it. Masts-and-yards. I say in the old masts-and-yards Navy."

"I'll investigate the matter, sir. It's near the end of the month; Daunton has probably run his own wine bill to the

limit, and is trying to scrounge a bit more from one of the newcomers. I'll see it doesn't occur again. We are all ready for church, sir."

"One other matter, Commander. I have a lady coming off to tea this afternoon. Send the galley in for her at a quarter to four. She will be waiting on the pier."

"Aye, aye, sir. How shall I describe her to the Coxswain, in case there is more than one lady there?"

A fond smile spread over Captain Fitzhoppins's face. He pulled at his starched cuffs and admired the gold links.

"She is—ah!—exceedingly personable, Commander, what? I would go further. She is a devilish pretty girl. I say she is remarkably prepossessing, what?"

"Aye, aye, sir. I'll warn the Coxswain."

"I shall meet her at the gangway. I thought of going in the boat, but I have decided that it is more dignified for a Captain to receive a young lady on his own quarter-deck. I shall receive her there."

"Aye, aye, sir. We are all ready for church, sir."

"So am I," and, picking up his hat and gloves, Captain Fitzhoppins led the way to the quarter-deck, where he proceeded to conduct Divine Service.

The Chief Writer played the harmonium, which wheezed a good deal, and the ship's company sang vociferously "Onward Christian Soldiers" under the stern eye of their Captain. The Commander read a lesson from the Book of Joshua. "Only be strong," it ended, "and of a good courage."

Poor Usher, thinking about Daunton and what would be the outcome of trafficking in liquor with him, considered it a very appropriate lesson. So did little Freyer, who had been

trying unsuccessfully to sing the last hymn under his breath to the words:

“I am the lowest form of animal life;
When the hatches are shut it makes a stife
So thick you could cut it with a knife
By nine o’clock in the evening.”

After nearly a week’s hard thinking, that was as far as he had got. He felt sure there was a better last line if he could think of it, and he was certain there was a better tune, and if he couldn’t think of them he was still more certain to be beaten. So he prayed hard for a good courage, ignoring the official prayer Captain Fitzhopskins was reading. He read briskly:

“...Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious sovereign lady Queen Victoria and her dominions, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions....”

Nick was listening, wondering who wrote the beautiful sonorous words, whether Queen Victoria knew that in every ship in the Navy, all over the world, bearded sailors were sitting with their elbows on their knees and their cheeks resting on their fists, praying that they might be her safeguard. He wondered whether God minded Captain Fitzhopskins addressing Him in that take-it-or-leave-it tone, and whether Daunton, who had gone to sleep, would slip off his chair and make a noise. He wondered what they would have for lunch, and how Hepburn imagined he would get asked to tea by the Captain, and what the Captain could see

in Lascells's sister (assuming she looked like Lascells), and what she could see in Captain Fitzhopkins; and then the prayers came to an end. The Captain gave out another hymn, and the Chief Writer played the opening bars of "Oft in danger, oft in woe." Freyer's lips moved soundlessly.

"Hopeless!" he whispered to Usher.

"What is?"

"The tune."

The ship's company had burst into song.

"What's wrong with it?"

"It won't fit."

Usher, full of preoccupation about Daunton and his wine bill, had forgotten Freyer's troubles.

"Won't fit what?"

"My song."

"Try it again."

"I have."

"What were the words?"

Freyer tried to sing them, unsuccessfully, and was poked in the back by the Carpenter, who thought he was just being profane.

"Amen!" sang the ship's company devoutly.

Then they sang "God Save the Queen," and the service was over.

The midshipmen all repaired to the gunroom, where Cradock produced the leave-book.

"Who wants to go ashore this afternoon?" he shouted.

"Smack it about and sing out your tallies. I've got to get it

initialed by Puddle (the nickname of the Naval Instructor, whose real name was Poole) before the Commander sees it.”

“Put me down, please,” said Hepburn promptly.

“What are you going to do ashore, Snipe?” inquired the small midshipman known as Bat.

“Go and see my cousins.” It was known that Hepburn had relations in the vicinity. An uncle and aunt and a cluster of exceedingly lively girl cousins.

“Can I come too?” inquired Bat, while those who wished to land were putting their names in the book.

“No, you can’t,” retorted Hepburn. “They got bored with you last time. They saw you picking cherries out of the cake at tea when you thought no one was looking.”

“I didn’t—I swear I didn’t,” protested Bat, shaking his head till his ears waggled. “And they weren’t bored with me. They liked me and your aunt said she hoped I’d come again whenever I liked.”

“I know. But she was just being polite. You can’t come this afternoon, Bat. Don’t look so sick. I—I was only rotting you about the cherries. They like you all right. But this afternoon ——” Hepburn turned on him a face so sweetly innocent, so transparently truthful and without guile, that an artist, seeing it, would have rushed for his brushes and canvas and instantly painted a masterpiece of religious inspiration like “The Soul’s Awakening.” “This afternoon,” continued Hepburn, “there are important family matters I have to discuss. It would be jolly embarrassing if a stranger were there. You understand, don’t you, Bat? It is one of these skeletons in the cupboard that I am going to be consulted about and its——”

“That’s all right,” said Bat hastily, feeling as if he had rather put his foot in it. “I quite understand, Snipe.”

“I’ll take you out there next make-and-mend,” said Hepburn, and Bat consoled himself by arranging a picnic party in the whaler; a select party, consisting of himself and Morgan, Carver, Giles, and Aberboyne. After a good deal of noisy discussion they decided to sail to Lulworth, and the harassed José, who was laying the table for lunch, was bidden to prepare suitable provisions for the voyage, consisting mainly of sloe gin, sausages and sardines.

In the end, the only ones whose names appeared in the leave-book were Hepburn, Sheep and Usher. Nick wanted leisure to write up his watch bill, and Freyer, whom they invited to accompany them, said that he was going to devote the afternoon to poetic composition, whereupon Nick offered to help him when he had finished his watch bill.

When lunch was over and the members of the gunroom mess were stuffed “to capacity,” as the theatre managers say, with soup, roast beef, cabbage, baked potatoes, and apple tart, the picnic party set about rigging the whaler at the boom. They had previously changed into flannels and were bare-footed. The rent in the seat of Morgan’s trousers had grown no smaller with the passage of time, and his shirt-tail, as he busied himself about the boat, flapped merrily in the breeze. José, who was in a bad temper, had dumped a hamper of provisions at the gangway, and retired to the wine store for an afternoon nap.

Sheep and Usher descended to the chest flat to change into plain clothes, preparatory to going ashore. Hepburn presently appeared and, opening his chest, gazed long and carefully at

the reflection of his face in the mirror. Finally he approached Sheep.

“Would you say I wanted a shave?” he inquired earnestly.

Sheep scanned the faint traces of down on Hepburn’s short upper lip, and said he didn’t think it necessary.

“But supposing—” began Hepburn (whom we may as well call Snipe, because all the others did)—“supposing I was a girl. Would you say I wanted a shave? Well, I don’t mean that exactly, but I’ve got a very important family conference on this afternoon, and if I rolled up with a whacking great moustache——”

“I wouldn’t say it was that exactly,” conceded Usher, joining the conclave. “There certainly are some hairs there—pale ones—and there’s one—no, two on your chin. Longish, one of them is. You could snip them off with scissors.”

Snipe shook his head. “No. That won’t do. I must have a razor and do the thing properly. The only trouble is that I’ve never shaved before, and I don’t want to cut myself. It would be awful to go to a family conference—you know, skeleton in the cupboard and all that—covered with gashes.”

“Pumice stone,” suggested Sheep brightly. “I’ve got an aunt who’s got no end of a moustache. Well, I mean, it comes and it goes. And when it goes—that’s pumice.”

“But I haven’t got any pumice,” protested Snipe.

“Freyer’s got a bit in his washing-till. He gets ink stains off his fingers with it,” said Sheep. “I’ll fetch him.”

So Freyer was fetched, and the pumice produced.

Snipe eyed it doubtfully. “How does it work?”

“Wet the part affected and rub,” said the owner. “Is it ink you want to get off?”

“No,” retorted Snipe. “These infernal whiskers.” He retired to the bathroom, and presently returned rather pink about the upper lip and chin. The others examined his countenance critically.

“Smooth as an egg,” proclaimed Usher.

“*That’s* all right,” said Snipe.

In the meanwhile the picnic party, having rigged the whaler and embarked their hamper of provisions, hoisted their sails and were soon bowling along on a “soldier’s wind” towards the entrance to the harbour. Captain Fitzhoptkins, taking an after-luncheon constitutional on his quarter-deck, happened to notice the whaler scudding away on the port quarter. He raised his telescope to his eye, and studied her to satisfy himself that, as she was nearing the Flagship, his midshipmen were comporting themselves properly and that the boat was in proper seaman-like trim. Unfortunately at that moment Morgan elected to stand up in the stern of the boat and, bending down, readjusted the stow of the hamper. His errant shirt-tail, protruding from the seat of his trousers, flapped in the breeze; Carver, who was sailing the boat, reached out and plucked out another six inches of it. All this was as clear to Captain Fitzhoptkins in the disc of his telescope lense as if it were happening a few yards away.

“Officer of the watch!” he roared.

The Lieutenant known as Wonky Willie, lost in a fathomless abstraction on the far side of the gun-shield, appeared at his Captain’s summons. “Sir?”

“Look at that whaler.” Captain Fitzhoptkins pointed his telescope at the offending boat, now in the act of passing the Flagship and nearing the breakwater rapidly.

Lieutenant Headly blinked vaguely in the direction indicated.

“The midshipmen have taken her for a picnic, sir.”

“Picnic! I say look at her. There’s a midshipman improperly dressed. I say there’s a midshipman in the sternsheets with his shirt hanging out of the seat of his pants. It’s indecent. What? Passing the Flagship. It’s an insult to the Commander-in-Chief. Hoist her recall. I say hoist her recall instantly!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Lieutenant Headly, not quite clear what all the excitement was about, ordered the whaler’s recall to be hoisted, but by the time the flags had reached the masthead the whaler had vanished round the breakwater. No one glanced back. Beevers uncorked the sloe gin and passed round the bottle, clay pipes were lit; Aberboyne began to sing a ballad about a jolly foretopman. H.M.S. *Vengeance* disappeared, not only from their sight, but from their minds.

Captain Fitzhopkins summoned his second-in-command.

“Commander, find out the names of the midshipmen in the whaler when she returns. Stop their leave—for ignoring their recall. One of them is improperly dressed. Stop his leave and masthead him. I say masthead him till midnight. Went past the Flagship practically naked. Disgusting exhibition. What?”

Captain Fitzhopkins retired to his cabin.

In the meanwhile Snipe, Sheep and Usher had proceeded ashore in the cutter; Snipe was met at the landing-place by a dog-cart driven by a rather roguish-looking young lady.

“Where’s Bat?” she demanded.

“He can’t come. At least, he’s gone away for a picnic.” He climbed up beside his cousin. The damsel eyed Sheep and

Usher.

“What about them? It’s as dull as ditch-water at home, and Mother and Father are both away.”

Sheep began to blush.

“They’ve got an engagement, I’m afraid,” said Snipe hastily. “Come on, let’s get home. I’ve got something very important to discuss with you.”

The maiden looked again at Usher and said, “Oh, very well,” rather disappointedly. The groom jumped up behind, Sheep and Usher raised their hats politely, and the dog-cart went rattling off from the landing-place in a cloud of dust.

“I wonder what he’s up to,” speculated Usher. “Why did he say we had an engagement when he jolly well knew we hadn’t?”

“And how could he discuss family matters about skeletons when his uncle and aunt are away?”

They speculated awhile about Snipe’s mysterious behaviour and finally gave it up.

“I thought she was a jolly pretty girl,” said Usher after a pause.

Sheep said he hadn’t noticed, and they set off to walk to the headland beyond the coastguard station where they had sat the evening before they joined.

In the meanwhile Nick and Freyer had retired to a corner of the booms. They settled down in a sunny spot out of the wind within reach of Gregory, who showed keen pleasure at the sight of Freyer.

Nick had borrowed the Master-at-Arms’ watch bill, which showed the allocation of every man on board for the various duties he had to perform, and was copying it into his own

watch bill as far as his division was affected. Freyer produced a piece of pencil and a notebook and began to scribble; what with feeding Gregory and stopping work to chat about their respective homes, the afternoon passed very pleasantly. They only realised the passage of time when they saw the galley returning under oars with the Captain's guest.

"That's Lascells's sister coming off," said Freyer. "The Captain has asked her to tea. The Captain's Steward tells me that Captain Fitzhobkins is going to ask her to marry him this afternoon. Lascells is going to be there as a chaperone, but I suppose he will make himself scarce."

The boat was still too far off to make out the face of the girl in a white frock and a big straw hat trimmed with roses, who sat beside the Coxswain.

"I wonder if she's anything like Lascells?" whispered Nick.

"She must be a bit of all right if she is," ventured Freyer. They continued to watch, and presently saw Captain Fitzhobkins emerge from his cabin on to the quarter-deck. He levelled his glass at the approaching galley and for a long time remained motionless, apparently entranced by the vision of his intended bride. Finally, he lowered the glass and walked to the gangway, his face registering nothing but bewilderment.

The galley, steered by the Coxswain, came alongside the gangway and the girl looked up. In the shadow of her wide-brimmed hat her face was of an angelic sweetness. She smiled a little timidly at Captain Fitzhobkins, who looked completely dumbfounded as she jumped out of the boat and came tripping daintily up the accommodation ladder on to the quarter-deck.

She stood at the gangway, clasping her hands in the prettiest appeal imaginable, and, looking at Captain Fitzhoptkins with a mixture of admiration and timidity, inquired, "Have I done wrong?"

"Upon my word, young lady," retorted Captain Fitzhoptkins, "upon my word, I don't know, what?"

"Well, you see," continued the lovely stranger in a sweet, slightly husky voice, "I was on the pier looking at the ships, and I thought this one was the most beautiful of them all. And then this little boat came alongside the steps and a sailor got out. He had such a nice kind face that I smiled at him. So he smiled back and said, 'Please to step into the boat, Miss,' so I stepped in and—and here I am!"

"Ha!" ejaculated Captain Fitzhoptkins, flashing his cuffs. "That was my Coxswain. He's a fool. So here you are, what? I say so here you are." He eyed his unknown guest with obvious admiration. "And unless I am mistaken, we have met before. Somewhere. At the moment I cannot recall——"

"Oh, Captain Fitzhoptkins," cried the maiden, "I wouldn't expect you to remember me." She looked very small and appealing. "But we have met before."

He led the way towards his cabin. "I knew it. What? I say I recognised you at once. But tell me where it was."

"At the Duchess's," proclaimed the visitor. "We were both staying with the Duke and Duchess, surely."

For an instant Captain Fitzhoptkins hesitated, but only for an instant. "Of course!" he cried. "Of course it was. Well, now, come along to my cabin. I was about to have tea——"

At this juncture Headly approached. "Any further orders for the galley, sir?"

“What? Oh, the galley. Yes, send her in again. There is another young lady waiting to be brought off—Miss Lascells. Tell the Coxswain to bring her off at once.” They had reached the hatchway that led down to the Captain’s cabin. Captain Fitzhopkins motioned the girl to descend, but she stood with her hands again clasped impulsively.

“Not *the* Miss Lascells? Not the lovely Clara Lascells, sister of that charming Sub-Lieutenant Lascells?”

“Ha!” ejaculated her host delightedly. “You know her, what? I say——”

“I don’t actually *know* her,” the fair visitor said, beginning to descend the ladder, “but I have seen her and admired her often. She is....”

Her head disappeared below the hatchway and her host followed, exclaiming his pleasure and wonderment at this coincidence.

Freyer and Nick, who had heard every word of the dialogue from the shelter-deck, gazed at each other.

“Wasn’t she a peach!” commented Nick with admiration.

Freyer said nothing for a moment. He continued to stare at the hatchway. “The funny thing is,” he said thoughtfully, “that I have a feeling I’ve seen that girl’s face before somewhere.”

“Now you come to mention it,” agreed Nick in a puzzled tone, “I believe I have too.”

CHAPTER SIX

CAPTAIN FITZHOPKINS led the charming stranger into his after-cabin, where the feast destined for Miss Lascells had been prepared. In her impulsive way she clapped her hands and exclaimed aloud at the lavish display of hospitality heaped upon a small table drawn up beside the sofa. There were wafers of bread-and-butter, brown and white, rolled up like sausages, and cucumber sandwiches; there were meringues and éclairs, oozing with rich cream, scones and honey, a walnut cake and a bunch of hothouse grapes; but the *pièce de résistance* of the scene was an enormous box of chocolates tied up with pink ribbon, laid carelessly upon the Captain's writing-desk. The fair visitor could not refrain from giving a girlish squeak of admiration at the sight of it.

“What a *lovely* tea, and *what* a gorgeous box of—are they chocolates, Captain Fitzhobkins?” She fingered the pink ribbons with naïve appreciation. “And aren't those meringues? And tell me, how *do* you manage to get the bread-and-butter rolled into little sausages like that. Can I taste one?”

Without further ado she popped one into her mouth and munched it.

Captain Fitzhobkins was delighted at all these expressions of approval. He thought, moreover, that the unknown girl, with her mixture of tomboy enthusiasm, her shy glances of admiration, and her impulsive gestures, was one of the most attractive young women he had met for a long time.

“A snack—just an afternoon snack, what? I trust you will remain and partake—and so that I can introduce you to Miss

Lascells, you must—I say you positively must—tell me your name. It has—the truth is it has momentarily escaped me.”

The damsel who had helped herself to a cucumber sandwich with a murmur of incredulity that cucumber could be cut so thin, looked at him reproachfully.

“I knew you had forgotten. But after all, why should you remember, Captain Fitzhopkins? I am Cynthia Melrose.”

“Of course, of course. My dear Miss Melrose——”

“Lady Cynthia Melrose,” murmured the lady, dreamily contemplating the box of chocolates.

“Ha! My dear Lady Cynthia—how remiss of me. I say, how absurd that I did not for the moment recall you. I insist, I say I insist on your staying to tea—what?”

“I couldn’t,” protested the Lady Cynthia. “But if I might have a chocolate—just a tiny chocolate out of that lovely box—I adore them so. And then I must go. I should be *de trop*.” She looked archly at Captain Fitzhopkins, who seized the box of chocolates and pressed it into her hands.

“A memento of this charming and unexpected visit, dear Lady Cynthia. I insist. I say I will take no refusal. You positively must accept them.”

With many shy disclaimers and murmurs of gratitude, Lady Cynthia was at last persuaded to accept the box, and then, as she persisted in her determination to land as soon as the galley returned with Miss Lascells, Captain Fitzhopkins seated her on the sofa, despite her protestations, and rang the bell for a pot of tea.

“Just a snack before you leave, Lady Cynthia. I cannot let you go without tasting a meringue, and a crumb of this walnut cake——”

Lady Cynthia admitted she was hungry—and, indeed, the manner in which she attacked the array of dainties suggested that she might be on the verge of actual starvation.

The meringues and the éclairs melted away, the cucumber sandwiches vanished and there was a serious gap in the walnut cake when the door opened and Sub-Lieutenant Lascells entered, ushering in his sister.

Lady Cynthia, daintily consuming her third cup of tea, gazed at Miss Lascells as if spellbound at the sight of such human perfection. Miss Lascells was a lady of about twenty-eight, tall and slightly angular. She had a long neck, a sharp nose, and a slightly imperious manner. Captain Fitzhopkins sprang from the sofa to greet the new arrival; she looked in some surprise from the debris of the tea-table to Lady Cynthia, who, clasping her box of chocolates under one arm, was still gazing at her like a timid fawn.

“My dear Miss Clara,” exclaimed the host, “permit me to introduce Lady Cynthia Melrose. She has long wished to meet you, but unfortunately she cannot stay, what? I say _____”

“The boat was late,” interrupted Miss Lascells, acknowledging the introduction with a rather cold bow. “And I perceive I am late for tea.”

“Not at all,” Captain Fitzhopkins assured her. He went on to explain rather lamely that Lady Cynthia was refreshing herself before she left and that fresh tea would be ordered in a moment. Lascells was sent off to order the galley alongside again and his sister sank exhaustedly on to the sofa beside Lady Cynthia, who was toying in her graceful way with the cluster of grapes.

“Men are such muddlers, aren’t they?” murmured the latter in a sympathetic undertone, while their host was giving fussy directions to the steward. “I wonder which of us he had forgotten when he asked the other one!” She gave a girlish giggle and began to untie the ribbons that bound the box. “Do have one of my chocolates. I must say it was terribly sweet of Captain Fitzhoptkins to remember just the kind of chocolates I like best. You must taste one.”

Miss Lascells thanked Lady Cynthia, but confessed that she had not at that moment any particular desire for chocolates. The steward began to relay the table which, thanks to the healthy schoolgirl appetite of the younger visitor, looked rather like the wreck of the schooner *Hesperus*. Captain Fitzhoptkins returned to his guests and assured Miss Lascells that fresh tea would be along in a moment, which Miss Lascells said would be nice, and then her brother appeared and announced the galley alongside. Lady Cynthia, still absent-mindedly making inroads on the grapes, rose to take her leave.

“Lascells, perhaps you will accompany Lady Cynthia in the galley to the landing-place,” said Captain Fitzhoptkins as he bowed over his fair guest’s hand.

Lascells expressed his warm pleasure at such a prospect.

“Perhaps Captain Fitzhoptkins would like to go, too,” suggested Miss Lascells in a rather shrill voice. “I don’t mind being left here all by myself. I assure you I don’t mind in the very least.”

Lady Cynthia protested that she wouldn’t hear of such a thing. She was sure, she added, that she would be quite safe in Mr. Lascells’ care, and she gave him such a melting, confiding glance under the brim of her hat that Captain

Fitzhoptkins could not refrain from a flash of his cuffs and a loud exclamatory “What?” supplemented by, “You will excuse me a moment, my dear Miss Clara, while I accompany Lady Cynthia to the gangway to see her off.”

Miss Clara merely bowed, but her feelings were considerably confused a moment later when Lady Cynthia turned in the doorway and, with her face masked by the broad brim of her hat from the two men, winked at Miss Clara. It was a vulgar wink, not at all in keeping with her surroundings, and after she had tripped out of the cabin, clasping her box of chocolates and attended by her escort, it called forth from Miss Lascells’ pursed-up lips the single exclamation, “Minx!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHEEP and Usher, having exhausted the pleasures of Weymouth on a Sunday afternoon, wandered rather disconsolately down to the landing-place about five o'clock. They were surprised to see the dog-cart, in which Snipe had driven off with his fair cousin some hours earlier, waiting in charge of the groom. While they were speculating about Snipe's whereabouts, Usher saw the *Vengeance's* galley approaching the landing-place under oars. She drew nearer and they recognised Lascells, who was steering. A girl in a white dress and a broad-brimmed hat trimmed with roses sat beside him.

"There's Snipe's cousin!" exclaimed Usher. "The girl who drove off with him in the dog-cart. I recognise her hat and her dress. How did she get on board, I wonder?"

The galley came alongside the steps, and Lascells handed his fair charge out of the boat and escorted her to the dog-cart. She clasped a large box of chocolates under her arm and was talking animatedly, gazing up into the face of her escort with an admiration that almost amounted to hero-worship. They saw that it was not Snipe's cousin but a stranger. She scrambled nimbly into the seat, waved farewell, the groom flicked his whip, and off went the dog-cart.

"Hallo!" observed Lascells, seeing the two midshipmen for the first time as the dog-cart disappeared. "I suppose you two want a passage back to the ship?" He led the way to the galley and it was apparent that he was in high good-humour. "I have just brought Lady Cynthia Melrose ashore. She has been having tea with the Captain."

The crew started pulling back to the ship, and Mr. Lascells leaned back expansively with the yoke lines under his arm and stretched out his legs.

“Is she Hepburn’s cousin?” asked Sheep. “I thought I saw a likeness.”

“Hepburn? Good Lord, no! She’s staying with the Duke and Duchess.” Lascells waved his hand vaguely towards the white cliffs of Dorset.

“Which Duke?” asked Usher thoughtfully.

“Oh, the Duke of—er—well, I forget for the moment. Awfully impressionable little thing—I—ah, well, I suppose one must make allowances for these young girls—but it seems she has seen me before somewhere and she, well, she admitted she could hardly get my face out of her mind ever since.” With these and sundry confidences of a similar nature, Mr. Lascells beguiled the tedium of the trip back to the ship, which, as it was the third the galley’s crew had had that afternoon, and they were all exceedingly interested in the conversation, was not as rapid as it might have been.

In the meanwhile the picnic party in the whaler were also heading back to the ship. They had anchored the boat off Lulworth Cove, bathed, made a fire ashore and boiled a kettle, fried sausages, and finally disposed of the eatables, which included the remains of Morgan’s jar of pickled cabbage. Then, observing that the wind was dropping, they embarked again in the whaler and began to sail back. Half-way the wind failed altogether, so they took to the oars and, after some hours of strenuous toil, arrived alongside the *Vengeance*.

Peerless Percy was on watch and bade them make the boat fast and fall in on the quarter-deck. Considerably mystified, they obeyed; then the Commander emerged from his cabin and looked at them severely while they all assumed expressions of slightly injured innocence.

“Shortly after you left the ship this afternoon,” said the Commander, “your recall was hoisted. You ignored it. Your leave is stopped for a fortnight. Mr. Morgan—turn about.”

Mr. Morgan turned about. It was evident that the long pull back to the ship had been so to speak, the last straw that broke the remnant of the seat of Morgan’s trousers.

“Go down and shift into uniform, and then go to the masthead. While you are shifting you might glance at the seat of your trousers in case you are wondering why I am mastheading you. This is a man-of-war, not a travelling circus. Carry on.”

Morgan, who had grown used to the gradual disintegration of his trousers, climbed to the masthead in an aggrieved frame of mind. Moreover, since the Commander had remained on deck, in view of the foremast, Morgan deemed it expedient to change and get there as quickly as possible; he therefore had not time to conceal about his person a supply of food to stave off the pangs of hunger and help while away the time until the Commander should relent and order him down.

It was not until after supper that his fellow-picnickers remembered his plight. Actually it was Bat who thought about him; the others were too busy grumbling about their leave being stopped to give him a thought.

“He must be getting jolly hungry,” said Bat, who had supped generously off cold salt pork and treacle tart. “He’s had nothing to eat since tea and it’s nine o’clock. I heard the

Captain tell the Commander to keep him there till midnight. The skipper's in a shocking bad temper about something."

"It was his tea-party," ventured Freyer. "Miss Lascells was furious because she found him entertaining another girl. His steward came into the office and told the Chief Writer about it."

"Who was the girl?" asked Hepburn, who had come off in the 7 p.m. boat in high spirits, carrying a mysterious parcel which he at once locked away in his chest.

"A peach," said Nick. "Freyer and I saw her. She just bounced on board, and the Captain was so struck of a heap that he gave her tea."

"And Miss Lascells stuck her nose in the air and went off in a huff," Freyer took up the tale. "And the Captain's steward said it's somebody's eyeballs for a necktie and blood for breakfast, whatever that means."

"Means the Captain's vexed," translated Giles. "In the meanwhile what about some scran for poor old Ginger in the foretop?"

They summoned José and bade him cut sandwiches—salt pork sandwiches, and a slab of cold treacle tart.

"Poor old Ginger!" said Hepburn, his smooth brow wrinkled with pity. "I'd like to send him something. As a matter of fact I've got a few chocolates. He can have half a dozen."

"Chocolates?" demanded Aberboyne hungrily. "Where did you get them?"

"They were given to me this afternoon," replied Snipe with a reminiscent smile. "I've eaten nearly all of them, but there

are a few left.” He went off to his sea-chest and returned presently with five large chocolates.

“There!” he said, and added them to Morgan’s subsistence. They were wrapped up in a piece of newspaper with the sandwiches and the treacle tart, and at the last minute José said he might be dying of thirst, so they added a bottle of ginger beer. Beevers ate one of the sandwiches to see if José had made them properly, and Snipe said he thought perhaps four chocolates would be enough with all that treacle tart, so he ate one of the chocolates, and finally the parcel was tied up in a bit of spun yarn and, under cover of darkness, taken up to the bridge by Bat and Aberboyne.

There was a voice-pipe connecting the foretop with the upper bridge, so Bat blew up it, and presently Morgan’s voice answered.

“How are you, Ginger?” inquired Bat. “This is me—Bat.”

“Hallo, Bat!” said the voice-pipe mournfully. “You don’t happen to have anything to eat there, do you? I’m jolly hungry.”

“Yes. Masses of scran. Pork sandwiches and I don’t know what-all. We’ll make the parcel fast to one of the masthead halliards and hoist it up to you.”

“Thanks awfully,” said the voice-pipe in a more cheerful tone. “And could you raise me a pair of white flannel bags by to-morrow morning? Try one of the warts.”

“We’ll do what we can,” said Bat.

Aberboyne was holding the parcel. He and Bat eyed each other. “You didn’t mention the chocolates, did you, Bat?”

Bat replied that somehow he had omitted to do that. Aberboyne fumbled with the package. “What the eye doesn’t

see the heart doesn't grieve over," he observed in a low voice.

Bat said that was true enough, and added that two into four went just twice. They fumbled in the darkness with the wrappings of the parcel. "Fair do's," said Aberboyne, munching appreciatively. "Just like Snipe, hiding chocolates in his chest. Good ones, too. I wonder where he got them."

"His cousins, I expect," conjectured Bat. "I say, there's an awful lot of stuff here. Ginger couldn't possibly eat all this treacle tart."

"Nor all that pork. Make him bilious...."

They munched furtively in the darkness.

"I say——!" exclaimed the voice-pipe plaintively.

Bat applied his mouth to it. "Hallo?" he inquired.

"What about it?"

"What about what?"

"That scan."

"It's coming now, Ginger. Stand by the halliards."

Hastily they wrapped up the remnants, secured them to the halliards, and hoisted the packet, slightly diminished in size, into the darkness.

"Poor old Ginger!" said Bat as they repaired to the gunroom. "It's bad luck on him."

"Getting mastheaded, d'you mean?"

"Yes."

"Yes, it is," agreed Aberboyne.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON turning out the following morning Nick found Gunner Capper of the Royal Marine Artillery hovering round his sea-chest like an enormous snoring guardian angel.

“Bister Lawley,” confided Capper in a hoarse whisper, “cobe up to be last dight, an’ offer be——” Capper shielded his mouth behind an enormous hand and snored in Nick’s ear: “offered be a pidt of beer, he did, for a pair of our fladdel trousers. Said Bister Borgan wadded a pair bad. ‘Bister Lawley,’ I said, ‘Bister Borgad cad’t have our trousers, dot for a pidt, dor yet for a quart, dot,’ I said, ‘if you was to offer be a barrel, ad what’s bore, Bister Lawley,’ I said, ‘you did order be ashabled of yourself.’ ”

What with Capper’s whispers and his adenoids, and the necessity for keeping the conversation from the ears of the other midshipmen, Nick only succeeded in grasping the gist of the foregoing. However, he remembered that Morgan’s wardrobe was at a low ebb and that if he didn’t offer him a pair of flannel trousers they would probably be requisitioned; accordingly he decided to make a virtue of necessity, and, selecting a pair, he took them to Morgan, who had stolen an extra five minutes in his hammock, as he was turning out. They were about the same height and build.

“Jolly rough luck getting mastheaded for the sake of a pair of trousers. Take these—I’ve got lots of pairs.”

Morgan looked surprised and gratified. “That’s very decent of you, Ainsworth. Thanks awfully.”

“You didn’t order done that,” muttered Gunner Capper reprovingly when Nick, glowing with conscious virtue,

returned to his chest. “Whad’ll your pore ba say?”

Monday morning in the Channel Fleet of that far-away yesterday, was always momentous. Ships carried out General Drill after divisions and prayers, performing evolutions in a spirit of almost ferocious competition, drilling ship against ship. The practice was a survival of the old masts-and-yards Navy Captain Fitzhoptkins was fond of alluding to, when the ships of that era, every Monday morning in harbour, struck topmasts, shifted yards from one mast to the other, and carried out similar competitive exercises that taxed the agility and efficiency of ships companies to the utmost. Now that sails had disappeared from men-of-war, less picturesque but equally arduous evolutions were employed to test the stamina and discipline of the men, and the powers of command and organisation of the officers. Monday mornings in the old Navy of sail and the new one of steel and steam had this in common: they fostered rivalry, which meant keenness and efficiency, and they were usually somebody’s last day on earth.

At nine o’clock the hands were marched aft to prayers. It is to be feared, however, that nobody paid much attention to the Captain’s words. There was the usual prayer about being a safeguard to Queen Victoria, but her safeguards were thinking less about the Queen’s majesty than what evolution the Admiral was going to spring on them in a few minutes’ time. When prayers were over, instead of beginning the normal duties of the ship, the lower deck was cleared and all hands mustered according to their parts of the ship. The upper deck was thronged with ranks of silent men, those who

were in a position to do so, keeping their eyes glued to the flagship's bridge.

The Captain, with Hepburn in attendance, withdrew to the after bridge, where he remained in majestic isolation. The Commander repaired to the fore bridge, accompanied by the Chief Boatswain's Mate, bugler, messenger, and Nick, his aide-de-camp. From the vantage of the upper bridge Nick could see, not only the panorama of the Fleet anchored round them, but the whole of the *Vengeance's* forecastle and upper deck, and the rows of faces, bronzed and mostly bearded, upturned in expectancy towards the bridge. It was a still, sunny morning, and complete tranquility brooded over the Fleet. All boats were hoisted, awnings furled. At one end of the bridge the Chief Yeoman and a little cluster of signalmen crouched with their telescopes levelled on the bridge of the Flagship. A breathless tension settled down on the waiting ships. Not a man moved.

"Clear ship for action, sir." The Chief Yeoman's shout cut through the stillness like the slash of a knife. A hoist of flags had just appeared above the flagship's bridge screens and climbed swiftly to the masthead.

The Chief Boatswain's Mate sent all the strength of his lungs into his pipe. It shrilled and trembled, and the boatswains' mates on the booms took it up. "Cle-e-ar ship for action!" From the fleet around them the flute-like notes of the pipes and the roar of "Clear ship for action!" blended faintly and rolled across the water.

It seemed to Nick, looking down on the upper deck from the bridge, as if every officer and man had been stung by ten wasps simultaneously. The divisions disintegrated and became a seething medley of men rushing in all directions.

They flung themselves at the guard-rails, and a moment later the guard-rails lay flat on the deck. Parties attacked the boats at the davits like terriers worrying a badger. The heavy boats were swung inboard and lowered into crutches; stanchions and davits melted away, hatchways and skylights clanged, from one end of the ship to the other the upper deck and side were cleared as if they had been swept by a typhoon.

The Commander hurled himself down the ladder, had one glance round, and shouted to the Captain, "Ship cleared for action, sir."

Captain Fitzhoptkins nodded to the Yeoman at the rail who stood with the mainmast halliards in his hand. "Break!"

The Yeoman jerked the halliard, and a ball of bunting at the yard-arm broke and unfolded into a tri-coloured pendant.

"First ship, sir; time three minutes eighteen seconds."

"Ha!" ejaculated Captain Fitzhoptkins, and he flashed his cuffs in the sunlight. "Beaten the Flagship, what? I say we've beaten the Flagship, ha!"

One by one the ships round them were breaking their one-pendants in token that they had completed the evolution. Hepburn, with a stop-watch in his hand, was jotting down the times.

The ship's company had fallen in again, and were awaiting the next order.

"Out-pulling boats by hand," bellowed the Chief Yeoman from the fore bridge, and again the pipes burst into their thin urgent music, and the decks re-echoed to the shouts of the Boatswains' Mates.

The Commander was shouting the stations for the various duties. All the boats were on the booms, and to hoist them out

and deposit them in the water was a gruelling test of physical strength. The fore-derrick topping-lift was manned, and the heavy spar rose slowly into the air. The crews of launch and pinnace were hooking on wire slings, and the great wooden block of the derrick purchase was lowered over the ring of the pinnace's sling and hooked on. Then the seething, sweating mass of men in the battery flung themselves on the hemp rope and hauled with every ounce of strength in their bodies.

“Stamp and go, with her, lads!” roared the Boatswain with his pipe between his teeth, and stamp and go they did. The heavy boat rose slowly into the air, the derrick swung round until the pinnace was suspended over the water and then lowered into the sea. The launch, inside which the pinnace was stowed, followed. While this was going on, the crews of both cutters and jolly boat, whaler and gig, were hoisting up the davits, lifting the boats from the crutches where they rested, and lowering them into the water.

To Nick, seeing the evolution performed for the first time, the upper deck presented a scene of extraordinary confusion. Parties of men were hauling on purchases, rushing here and rushing there. Ropes thrashed about in all directions; boats large enough to crush fifty men if they dropped on them, hung poised on tackles overhead, pipes twittered, officers and petty officers were shouting orders and encouragement. It was like a medieval battlefield in which hundreds of sweating men strove against an invisible enemy with all the beef and brawn in their bodies. The Commander, with Nick at his heels, was here, there and everywhere. Wherever there was a delay, where a pin had jammed or a tackle twisted he was on the scene, helping and encouraging. Nick's bewilderment

changed to excitement. He began to detect that in all the apparent confusion there was an elaborate organisation at work. Watches and parts of watches, boats' crews and individuals, were flung from task to task, from one part of the ship to the other at the Commander's bidding. He shouted an order and the Chief Boatswain's Mate, at his elbow, hurled it through all the hubbub in a stentorian roar prefaced by the shrill screech of his pipe. Nick saw him glance quickly round the Fleet to see if any ship had broken the finishing pendant. The boom boats, the launch and pinnace were secured to the boom, one cutter, whaler, and gig were in the water and their crews were rowing up to secure them. The first cutter, with Usher in the stern, was being lowered, when suddenly something caught the Commander's eye.

“Avast lowering!” he shouted through the tumult. “Look out, that man——”

But he was too late. The bowman of the boat, watching the ship in the next line had steadied himself by the cutter's fall. The rope, travelling slowly as the boat descended towards the water, was carrying his hand into the sheaf of the block. Only the Commander had noticed, and his warning shout was interrupted by the man's sudden scream of pain as the hemp rope and sheaf of the block crunched through flesh and bone.

“Sound the ‘Still!’ ”

The bugler threw up his bugle and sent the brazen notes blaring along the decks. At the sound every man stood motionless. A complete silence fell on the ship, broken only by the sound of the injured man's whimper. A stream of blood ran down his forearm and dripped into the bottom of the boat.

Then Usher, white as a ghost, who was stumbling across the thwarts towards him, saw it, and pitched into the Coxwain's arms in a dead faint. The Commander ejaculated something under his breath. The injured man's hand had been released from the block. Pushing aside offers of assistance he began to climb unaided out of the boat.

"Usher has only fainted, sir," explained Nick, who knew his friend's peculiarity. "He can't stand the sight of blood."

The bowman went past them in the direction of the sick bay, nursing the stump of a severed finger in his uninjured hand. The unconscious Usher was being handed over the gunwale of the cutter on to the upper deck.

"What's the matter, Commander?" shouted Captain Fitzhopkins from the after bridge. "Why have you sounded the 'Still' without my orders? What? We've lost the evolution. I say, we're the last ship!"

"Man hurt, sir," replied the Commander rather abruptly.

"What's the matter with that midshipman?"

"Fainted, sir."

"Fainted? The boy's a fool. Sound the 'Carry on.' "

The bugle blared again, and the ship's company, who were still standing as if turned into stone, resumed their activities.

The morning wore on in a turmoil of pipes and bugles and shouting of orders, in panting, struggling, sweating endeavour. The Commander-in-Chief, standing upon the bridge of his flagship, like Jove upon Olympus, piled agony upon agony. Nick saw the sheet anchor, weighing three and a half tons, lowered under the launch suspended by a wire from the boat. Men wrestled with an enormous 6½" steel cable, and wound it in coils round the launch which rowed ahead of

the ship, and dropped the anchor on the bottom of the harbour. In the midst of all the uproar on board, they heard the bugle of the ship ahead of them sound the "Still!" A few minutes later her ensign and jack were lowered to half-mast.

"*Pandora's* killed a man," grunted the Commander. "Got caught in the 6½" wire, I expect, when they dropped their anchor. Darned sight too dangerous, this evolution. Ought to be done in slow time."

They weighed the anchor by hand, capstan-bars and manpower taking the place of steam on the capstan. And while this was in progress the marines fell in, armed and equipped for landing on hostile soil, with packs and rifles and bayonets; a cutter with a fire-engine and a party equipped for fighting a fire were despatched to the Flagship where they manned the pump and played their hoses on an imaginary conflagration, and, to crown all, the Chief Yeoman turned and roared:

"Away all boats, sir. Pull round the Fleet."

It was always this evolution that brought Monday morning drill to a close. Boats' crews and their midshipmen flung themselves anyhow into their boats and began a headlong race round the lines of anchored ships. Launches and pinnaces were manned by two men to each heavy oar, and away they went, crowded like slave galleys, with the shouts of their midshipmen and coxswains, the thud of the oars in the rowlocks, racing boat against boat, ship against ship, in a medley of thrashing oar-blades.

Only the *Pandora*, strangely silent, her ensign half-masted, took no part in it. The Commander-in-Chief stood alone on his bridge and watched the race, his grim old face set like an iron mask. He had put them through it that morning. He

believed this to be the finest training for war. He believed that on this great fleet under his command depended the security of England. His eye rested on the *Pandora*, silently replacing gear, mourning her dead. All things had to be bought at a price. What was one man's life against the safety of the realm of England?

The Flag Lieutenant, his telescope under his arm and his aiguillettes glinting in the sun, approached and saluted.

“We are the first ship, sir.”

The Commander-in-Chief nodded. The medal ribbons of half a dozen wars, frayed and faded, were on his monkey-jacket. He had fought Zulu impis and Arab slavers, Chinese pirates and Sepoy mutineers. He had known war on the decks of gunboats and sloops, behind stockades and in jungle swamps. He had been bred to kill vermin. He was a hard old man, survivor of a hard age.

“Who was the last ship?”

“The *Industrious*, sir.”

“Tell her to pull round again after dinner.”

He took one more look round the dishevelled ships.

“Make ‘Evolutions satisfactorily performed. Replace gear.’ ” Then he went below.

At the pipe “Away all boats, pull round the Fleet!” the Commander turned to Nick and snapped, “Man your boat! Away with you.”

Nick remembered that he was Giles' understudy in the launch lying at the boom. Men were rushing in all directions to reach their boats, the midshipmen heading the rush like leaves blown before a gale. Usher, who had been given a tot of brandy in the sick-bay, had recovered from his temporary

collapse and was already in his boat. Hepburn, forsaking his Captain, went past him helter-skelter, shouting something Nick could not catch. Men were running out along the lower boom and, dropping into their boats, began to pull off their jumpers. The marines, who had discarded their packs and rifles, were piling into the pinnace, with the sergeant-major at the tiller, purple in the face with excitement.

The galley was the first boat away, steered by Hepburn; Carter's cutter was next; off they went at racing-stroke to overtake the boats of their rivals, the *Melpomone* ahead of them in the line. Then the unwieldy launch got under weigh, four men to a thwart, Giles shouting exhortations in a voice hoarse and cracked with shouting. Nick observed that he had contrived to acquire a black eye in the course of the morning's work, but decided that this was neither the time nor the place to inquire about it. Every boat in the Fleet was away now, an endless procession of toiling oarsmen in launches and pinnaces, cutters, gigs, and whalers. At the end of the line, when they turned for home, the real excitement began. Every one raced for the ram of the end ship and tried to cut the corner as fine as possible. There were collisions and shouts, oars splintered like match-stalks, the sweating crews exchanged lower-deck repartee with rivals, and spray flew in all directions as the oar-blades dug the water from under their labouring strokes. They emerged from the mêlée at last and struggled back with three oars broken, racing their own pinnace with Capper, snoring stentorously, pulling starboard stroke of the marines' crew.

"Place spit-kids," sang the Chief Boatswain's Mate as they secured the boats and climbed inboard. "Stand easy! Hands carry on smoking."

The game was over, a game that gods and giants might have played upon Olympus. The ship looked as if she had survived an action or a typhoon. Ropes, tackles, and wires lay in all directions, capstan bars and fire-engines were mixed up with hawsers and handy billies. Men stood about in little groups, wiping the sweat off their faces, and the smoke of their pipes hung in blue wreaths above the scene of their labours like incense above the altars to a heathen god.

The Commander's messenger approached Nick as he climbed inboard, and told him that the Commander wanted him in the wardroom.

Nick found most of the gunroom and all the wardroom officers congregated there. They were discussing the morning's work, and drinking shandy gaff out of long glasses. The Commander handed one to Nick.

"Strike that down," he said.

Nick obeyed gratefully, and thought it was the best drink he had ever tasted.

There was a great deal of talk and laughter, and a smell of Turkish cigarettes. Usher was ragged because he had fainted, and Giles because a swinging block had blacked his eye. Hepburn and his galley had been first boat back, and poor Sheep, in the whaler, last. He blushed furiously when he was chaffed about that, but Nick felt somehow that they were no longer strangers and onlookers. They were part of the life of the ship and of the Fleet. They had passed through an initiation and emerged, having tasted authority, to quaff shandy gaff with men in a world of men.

On deck the bugles sounded "Out pipes." The Commander put down his empty glass, knocked out his pipe, and smiled at Nick.

“Come on, son, let’s clear up the mess,” he said and made for the upper deck where the boatswain’s mate was bawling, “Both watches for exercise! Both watches for exercise replace gear!”

CHAPTER NINE

GUEST NIGHT was on Thursday. The first reminder of this was the discovery, made by Freyer after breakfast on Tuesday, that Gregory's coop was empty.

Nick, Sheep, and Usher, as was their wont, had gone up to the booms after breakfast, and were met by Freyer with a mournful face. He had saved some kedgeriee from breakfast, as he thought Gregory might fancy it, and taken it up in an envelope.

"He's gone," he announced dolefully. "That means we are going to have him for dinner. I shan't be able to eat a mouthful. Poor Gregory!" He eyed his envelope, which had recently conveyed a letter from his mother, full of kedgeriee.

"You could eat that yourself now," suggested Nick, who had a practical turn of mind.

So Freyer ate it, and they speculated rather sadly on the manner of Gregory's end.

"How's the song getting on?" asked Usher. "I thought of a second line in my bath this morning, but I've forgotten it, I'm afraid."

"I'm sick of the thing. It doesn't really matter what I sing because I expect I'll be beaten anyway. I hate guest nights. Lascells is always shouting 'Bread crumbs' and sticking a fork in the beam and chivying——"

Nick interrupted to ask what happened when Lascells shouted "Bread crumbs."

"We all have to put our fingers in our ears, and keep them there till he says we can carry on. And when he sticks a fork in the beam overhead we have to rush out of the mess, and

the last one out gets beaten. He does it to amuse his guests,” added Freyer dolefully. Nick, Sheep, and Usher looked apprehensively at each other.

“Lascells is a beast,” murmured Freyer. “This’ll be a specially beastly guest night, because his sister got engaged to the Captain yesterday evening, and he says he is going to celebrate it after dinner, and we shall all have to sing songs and be made fools of. I wish I hadn’t joined the Navy.”

“There’ll be Cradock,” said Nick. “He’s been passing his exams all last week. He and Giles and Morgan. They’ll be Sub-lieutenants themselves by Thursday. That means they’ll be the same rank as Lascells. I don’t think Cradock will let him beat us once he’s a Sub-lieutenant.”

“Perhaps not,” agreed Freyer. “It may be all right for you, but nobody seems to care much whether I am beaten or not.” He finished the last crumbs of the kedgerree, and went sadly down to the ship’s office and his ledger.

On Thursday morning parcels from the outfitter arrived addressed to Cradock, Giles, and Morgan. They took them down to the chest-flat and reappeared at divisions in all the glory of Sub-lieutenants’ uniforms, with the golden ring of commissioned rank adorning each sleeve. Nick was torn between reassurance and regret that they would soon be leaving to do courses at Greenwich.

The midshipmen wore their mess dress for dinner, which meant waistcoats edged with gold braid, starched shirts and bow ties, and the “bum freezer.” Guest nights were solemnised by clean shirts, and as usual Morgan’s wardrobe was unequal to the strain. He approached Nick after tea.

“I’ll be leaving the ship soon,” he said with his piratical grin, “I expect you’ll be jolly glad.”

“No,” replied Nick, “I’ll be sorry.”

The pirate looked rather gratified and a little surprised.
“Why?”

“Well, because you and Giles and Cradock are all Subs now, and—and——” he broke off, uncertain how to continue.

“And what?”

“Well, as long as you are in the gunroom everything—everything will be all right,” concluded Nick lamely.

“Is that how you feel about it?”

“Yes. We all do. Freyer and Wainwright and Usher and I.”

“It’ll be all right to-night. You can take that from me.” The pirate swung an imaginary weapon through the air with such vehemence that he swung round like a top. “A rag is one thing and bullying’s another. It isn’t only you and Freyer and the rest. There have been other warts in this gunroom. I’ve seen enough of it. It’s going to stop, with a round turn. And we’re going to stop it. However, never mind about that. That’s a detail. What is more important is that I haven’t got a clean shirt for dinner.”

“Do let me lend you one,” urged Nick. “I’ve got heaps of them.” After what Morgan had told him, Nick felt that he was prepared to part with most of the contents of his sea-chest as a sort of thank-offering. He drew out his key from his pocket and led the way to his chest, where he found Capper sewing on a button and snoring peacefully.

“Give me an evening shirt, please, Capper,” he commanded, not without a qualm.

Capper eyed Morgan suspiciously. “Dot for Bister Borgan? Adother of our shirts?”

“Yes, please.” Nick made his voice sound as commanding as possible. “It’s guest night to-night, and Mr. Morgan has run short of shirts.”

“Bister Borgan,” said Capper, “you order be ashabled——”

“That’s not the way to speak to an Acting Sub-lieutenant,” said Morgan. “And why should I feel ashamed?”

“ ’Cos of Bister Aidsworth’s pore ba.”

“What’s his mother got to do with it?”

“ ’Cos she pays for theb shirts——”

“No, she doesn’t.” Nick took the law into his own hands, and began rooting in the interior of his chest. “My father does—here we are, Morgan. You’ll let me have it back, won’t you?”

“ ’Course. Thanks most awfully.”

Capper snored louder than ever as Morgan bore the shirt in triumph to his chest and locked it away.

“You did’t order,” he muttered reproachfully to Nick. “Sood we wod’t ’ave do slops left. Thed where’ll we be?”

Nick laughed light-heartedly.

“Bast-’ead,” said Capper, biting off the end of his cotton. “Same’s Bister Borgan. That’s where we’ll be.”

The institution of guest night in the Fleet enabled friends in different ships to dine together and compare notes on their superiors, duties, food, and anything of mutual interest. It enabled term mates and old shipmates to keep in touch, and gunroom messmen to show what sort of a dinner they could provide when they really put their minds to it. For this last reason guest nights were known as “Full belly nights.”

Actually there was only one guest in the *Vengeance’s* gunroom that night. Beevers and Aberboyne had both

announced their intention of asking friends from the battle squadron, but Cradock had somehow managed to convey to them that on this particular night the presence of guests might be an embarrassment. There were queer rumours, whispering in the chest-flat and bathroom among the more junior midshipmen, and a general feeling of tension. But what exactly was going to happen no one knew.

Lascells, who appeared to be unaware of anything out of the ordinary, had a guest coming to dinner. He made it known early in the afternoon that Splodge Mercer, Sub of the *Pandora*, was honouring the mess with his society that evening. “And take jolly good care,” he shouted at the messman, “that we have something fit to eat and not the hogs’ wash you usually provide. The Honourable Eustace Mercer is dining with me.”

“Ver’ good, sair,” said the Maltese messman, “I give you first-class dinner. I give you turkey.”

“Turkey! D’you mean that old bag of bones you’ve been keeping up on the booms?”

“Santissima——!” The messman raised clenched fists to heaven. “No bag of bones, señor. Fat. Breast like a——” Words failed the messman. He threw out his chest and described imaginary curves in the air above it with both hands. “Lika dat! I feed de whole mess on de breast. I stuff it wid chestnut an’ sage. I maka full belly. I keepa my contract.”

“You’d better,” growled Mr. Lascells ferociously, and he set the junior midshipmen and Freyer to cleaning bright-work, polishing the piano, and making the mess worthy of the entertainment of Splodge Mercer.

“You!” he suddenly addressed Usher. “Thought you’d got away with it, I suppose?”

Usher, draping the beer-barrel with a Morocco saddle-cloth with a tasselled fringe, looked at him in surprise.

“Got away with what?”

“Running in Daunton to the Captain. Blabbing that you’d sold him some wine bill. Got him ticked off by the Commander, you little swine. I’m going to beat you after dinner. You can show Splodge Mercer how you take a dozen. Thinking about it will give you an appetite.” He turned abruptly on Freyer. “You!” Little Freyer, busily occupied in folding the newspapers neatly and placing them in the rack, turned white, so that all his freckles showed up very distinctly. “Are you the lowest form of animal life?”

“You say I am,” replied Freyer quietly.

“And have you composed a song about it?”

“Yes. A sort of song.”

“Well, I hope it’s a funny song. If Splodge Mercer doesn’t think it’s a funny song you’ll get a dozen, too—— You!” It was Sheep’s turn. Unlike the other two he turned crimson. “The Captain said the sketch in your log last week was nothing short of an impertinence.”

“It was the best I could do,” faltered Sheep. “I’m not very good at drawing——”

“I am,” interrupted Mr. Lascells with ready humour. “I’ll make a drawing on you after dinner with a dirk scabbard.”

To their surprise Cradock, who was reading a book in the arm-chair, removed his pipe from his mouth and burst into shouts of laughter.

Lascells looked gratified at this tribute to his wit. “Eh, Cradock? Good—eh? You know—draw a pattern of the ferrule—— Ha! ha! ha!”

“Yes, I know! Ha! ha! ha! Gosh, how funny!” Cradock’s amusement became uncontrollable. “Ha! ha! ha!” His shouts of merriment rang louder and louder. “Oh, gosh!” he kept repeating. “Oh, gosh, how funny!” Finally he rose, still laughing. “I must go and tell Giles and Morgan. They musn’t miss that.” He left the mess hastily, and his laughter died away.

“You!” Lascells addressed Nick now.

Nick looked at him squarely. “What have *I* done?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Mr. Lascells. “But I shall probably think of something by the time dinner is over.” He strolled over to the sideboard and opened a drawer.

They went on with their tasks until Freyer, who had been keeping a nervous eye on Lascells, suddenly nudged Sheep. “Quick!” he gasped, and bolted for the door. Sheep had time to see Lascells stick a fork in the overhead beam. “Fork in the beam!” he yelped and fled after Freyer. Usher followed and Nick, farthest from the door, was following too, when Lascells caught him by the collar.

“You are last out of the mess,” he said in a voice suave with pleasure.

“Somebody *has* to be last,” protested Nick.

“In the old Navy,” replied Lascells, “the Navy of masts-and-yards, some Captains always flogged the last man down from aloft. I believe in keeping the old traditions going; so does Splodge Mercer. He’s a terror for tradition. You’ll get a dozen after dinner.”

Nick fled in the wake of the others, sick with indignation, but with a feeling of relief that, after all, he was to share the fate awaiting them.

The other midshipmen were at their chests, changing for dinner, when the four juniors arrived in the flat. Aberboyne grinned at them sympathetically. "Take my advice and shove on a pair of thick winter pants. Two pairs, in fact."

Cradock exchanged glances with Giles and Morgan.

"You needn't do that," he said. "It's unnecessary. Freyer, we want to speak to you in the bathroom." He led the way to the bathroom, followed by Freyer. Giles and Morgan joined them and the door was closed.

Sheep, as was his habit in moments of depression, had retired into the interior of his sea-chest, only his head and shoulders and his legs from the knees downwards being visible. On these occasions his lips were pursed up in a soundless whistle, while his heels beat a gloomy tattoo against the side of the chest.

"Buck up, Sheep," said Nick. "It'll be all right. You wait and see."

Sheep, thus reassured, emerged with some difficulty from his retreat and began to remove his trousers. "It may be all right," he said, "but, personally, I'm not taking any chances. I shall wear *three* pairs of pants." He began exploring in the recesses of his chest. "Good thick woolly ones."

The bathroom door presently opened and Cradock, Morgan, and Giles emerged, shouting with laughter. "That's a good one, and don't forget it, mind, and stop at the second line. You've got nothing to worry about."

Freyer was smiling rather nervously, but he looked much happier, and his freckles were not nearly so conspicuous.

“It’s going to be all right,” he whispered to Sheep. “You needn’t wear all those pants.”

Sheep compromised by taking off one pair, and they concluded their toilet in a much happier frame of mind. But Freyer would not divulge a word of what had transpired in the bathroom.

The gentleman known to his intimates as Splodge Mercer had arrived on board when they all reached the gunroom. He had a rather vacant, spotty face, and he parted his hair in the middle. His eyes were prominent and slightly bloodshot, due no doubt to exposure to the elements. He was ensuring a good appetite for dinner by consuming a number of glasses of Marsala and bitters, and listening with appreciative guffaws to his host’s description of his conquest of the Captain’s fair visitor on Sunday. The midshipmen stood about and waited for dinner to be announced. Daunton, whose wine bill had been stopped, had found it more convenient to dine with a friend in a torpedo-boat destroyer. Little Freyer studied the menu with an anxious face. His worst fears were confirmed: he nudged Nick. “It *is* Gregory for dinner,” he whispered. “I couldn’t eat Gregory, could you?”

Nick glanced at the bill of fare which José had written in violet ink, with many flourishes, on behalf of the messman who could neither read nor write. As dictated by the messman it ran:

POTATA SOUP
FISH-AKE
RUSHIAN KROMESKIES FOR ENTREE
THEN TURKEY

PLUM PUDDEN
SKOTCH WOODCOK

José was very proud of his education. Nick, whose appetite had recovered, felt his mouth watering at the thought of all this nourishment. "Let's eat him with our eyes shut," he suggested.

"That's a good idea," agreed Freyer. "What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for. These things weren't written for nothing. It's probably very true. We'll shut our eyes."

At this juncture Lascells, who was getting a little concerned at the number of glasses of Marsala his guest was consuming to ensure that his appetite should be whetted to its utmost, banged the table with a soup spoon. This was a signal for them all to sit down, and the feast commenced.

Lascells's good spirits and those of his distinguished guest, who roared with laughter at every remark of his host, were most infectious. Cradock, Morgan, and Giles, in all the splendour of their new mess-jackets, waxed especially merry, and presently gave vent to their high spirits by throwing bread at each other, which caused Lascells, the President of the Mess, to fine them rounds of port as a genial rebuke. José's spelling of the menu was a further subject for mirth and Lascells vowed that after dinner, to add to the many diversions he had planned for the entertainment of his guests, José should be trussed up like a fowl and locked in the cupboard where the sextants were stowed. This suggestion so delighted Mr. Mercer that a portion of a Russian Kromesky got mixed up with his immoderate laughter, with the result that he choked, turned purple in the face, and had to be thumped on the back and restored with jorums of brandy and water.

The brandy and water was so efficacious in restoring Mr. Mercer that he asked leave to sing a song, which he did, beating time on his plate with his knife and fork, whereupon Lascells, intercepting a rather scandalised glance from Usher, which suggested that the guest's high-spirited behaviour was lacking in dignity, stuck a fork in the beam. Usher and Sheep saw it and fled for the door, but unfortunately Freyer and Nick had just been confronted with a plateful of Gregory and had closed their eyes while they munched portions of his rather tough carcass.

“Hi! You warts!” shouted the President. “Fork in the beam!”

They opened their eyes and gazed horrified at the fork. Mr. Mercer finished his song and, leaning back against the ship's side, closed his eyes for a short nap.

“All right—stay where you are,” continued Lascells. “That'll be another six each after dinner.”

Sheep and Usher were recalled, and dinner continued. The guest of the evening having been thumped heartily by his host, awoke and assured everybody that he felt absolutely all right, but had had a long and tiring day. Finally, when the Scotch Woodcok (which turned out to be rather watery scrambled egg, perched on pieces of toast smeared with bloater paste) had been disposed of, the port decanter circulated, and the Queen's health was drunk. Then pipes and cigarettes were lit, and Lascells passed the port round again. The first glass of port revived Splodge Mercer, and he asked if he might sing another song; but he was dissuaded by his host who wanted to make a speech.

“Certainly, old boy,” conceded Splodge, and he instantly fell asleep again.

At Lascells' invitation, every one charged their glasses and drank to the health of Miss Lascells and Captain Fitzhopkins, whose engagement had been officially announced and on whose charms and merits Lascells enlarged at length; and then the glasses were replenished, and Lascells called upon Freyer for a song.

“Wake up, Splodge, old boy,” he thumped his guest again. “We’re going to have some fun.”

Splodge took a good deal of waking this time, and, owing to the long and tiring day he had had and the excellent dinner he had eaten, some difficulty was experienced in explaining the situation to him before he fell asleep again. However, another glass of port worked wonders, and he announced magnanimously that not only was he prepared to listen to Freyer singing a song, but to sing a better one himself. In fact, to go on singing from then till breakfast, a feat he had frequently performed on board his own ship.

So Freyer was bidden to stand up on the form and sing his song.

In dead silence Freyer complied with the first part of the injunction. He put his hands behind his back and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. The only sound was the stentorous breathing of Splodge Mercer, whose long and tiring day again threatened to overwhelm him with fatigue.

“Go on,” commanded Lascells, “we’re waiting.”

Freyer cleared his throat, gazing at Lascells like a bird fascinated by a snake.

“Hark, hark, I’m an Assistant Clerk!” he began in a clear treble voice that suddenly cracked. “I’m sorry, that’s wrong. I forgot.

“I’m the lowest form of animal life,
But I’d cut my throat if Clara was my wife.”

He stopped again. “I’m sorry, I can’t remember the rest.”

Splodge Mercer said he thought it was a rotten song, drank another glass of port with an expression of great severity, and instantly fell into a sleep of the utmost profundity, from which it was obvious nothing would awaken him until the fatigue of his long and tiring day had worn off.

Lascells, however, was oblivious to his guest’s slightly erratic behaviour. He gazed at Freyer dumbfounded.

“Clara!” he echoed. “Do you mind telling me who you refer to?”

Freyer looked appealingly at Cradock, Giles, and Morgan in turn, but they did nothing but roar with laughter. “It’s—it’s just a name—like the heroine of a book.”

“You may or may not be aware that it is the same name as my sister’s,” retorted Lascells. “And for this piece of impertinence I shall now thrash you till your nose bleeds. Clear the table!”

José and the marine with drooping moustaches proceeded to remove the glasses and decanters from the table. Lascells rose, and from behind the sideboard he drew forth a stout rattan cane.

Freyer had subsided on to his seat, chiefly because his trembling knees would no longer support him.

“Now then,” said Lascells, removing his mess-jacket. “Have the goodness to come here, you little rat.”

There was dead silence in the mess, broken suddenly by Cradock's voice. "No!" he said, and with a glance at Freyer, added, "Stay where you are. Now, look here, Lascells," he continued, "this is going to stop. We aren't going to have any more of this filthy bullying. Only one person is going to be beaten to-night, and that isn't Freyer."

Lascells gazed at the speaker as if he doubted the evidence of his own ears. "Bullying? What the blazes are you talking about? Do you mean you are trying to interfere with the discipline of this mess, and with the old traditions of the Service?"

"What we mean," cut in Morgan, "is that we've had enough of this filthy muck, and we're going to clear the mess and each give you a dozen of the very best."

"On behalf of the warts present and all the miserable objects whose lives you've made a misery for the last year," added Giles. "We're going to beat seven bells out of you."

Lascells looked from one to the other of the speakers. They were rising slowly to their feet. He looked in desperation at Splodge Mercer, who merely snored, blissfully unconscious. Finally he glanced at the door, but Giles promptly walked towards it and planted his square form in the opening.

"I shall report you to the Captain," Lascells spluttered, white to the lips.

"You won't feel much like reporting anything to anybody when we've finished with you," was Cradock's grim rejoinder. He nodded curtly towards the door. "Every one out of the mess."

Giles stood aside as the midshipmen and Freyer fled from the scene of summary retribution. The door was closed.

CHAPTER TEN

ABOUT the time that Morgan was borrowing a shirt from Nick, a little group of men emerged from the dense jungle of equatorial Africa into an expanse of open ground. Three of them were white men, and behind them marched a small force of Hausas under command of a native sergeant. A long train of native carriers slowly defiled into the open and halted on the fringe of the forest.

The three white men advanced a little distance and stood in consultation. The ground rose slightly from all sides of the forest: in front of them was a small hill strewn with boulders and dotted with thorn bushes. The top of the hill was crowned by a native town surrounded by a stockade, and the eyes of all three men were on this stronghold as they talked.

The youngest of the three men had an anxious expression, and kept turning his head from the stockade to the Hausa guard, who had halted and were leaning on their rifles. The oldest man talked continuously, at intervals taking an eyeglass out of his eye to wipe his face with his handkerchief. He looked ill and exhausted, but he kept on talking, flicking at the ground with a walking-stick he carried, a silver-mounted affair of ebony that suggested Piccadilly rather than an African jungle.

“I shall send the interpreter to notify the King that I am here, and shall visit him in the morning,” he was saying in a fussy important voice. “We will camp here to-night, out in the open, and to-morrow I shall deliver the Queen’s message. It has been a most exhausting journey, most exhausting, but remarkable, if I may say so, in showing the prestige of the

white man in these savage jungles. No opposition, no hostility——”

“Only the drums,” said the man at his side, glancing towards the stockade. “I wish they’d stop beating those infernal drums. They’ve been in our ears for a week. They get on my nerves.” He stared towards the fortified capital on the hill, where the sound of war-drums boomed incessantly and rolled away over the forest, above which hung a slowly-declining sun. “Curious that there is nobody in sight. They don’t show any curiosity about us apparently, yet I suppose we are the first white men who have ever visited the place.”

“Perhaps they are frightened,” said the man with the walking-stick. “Spies have told them that white men are approaching. They are hiding in their huts no doubt, dreading the message I bear from the Great White Queen. Don’t you think so, Bullivant?”

The youngest man, thus addressed, shook his head. “No, Sir Everard. I wish I thought they were. If you had let me bring ten times this force——” he nodded towards the Hausas.

“Quite unnecessary, my dear fellow. I am an envoy from the Queen Empress. I maintained from the start that any armed force was unnecessary——”

“You must send the interpreter ahead with an armed escort; for one thing, he wouldn’t go to the place without it, and if he did he’d be speared. I’ll give him his orders——” He called the interpreter forward—an Arab, wearing white robes and a green turban, who, from years of slave-raiding among African tribes, had acquired a knowledge of local dialects. Bullivant explained his mission. A section of soldiers marched on either side of him, with bayonets fixed, as he

walked up the hill towards the stronghold of the African King.

Bullivant gave orders for the camp to be pitched within a circle of thorns, and their evening meal to be prepared. The Hausa sergeant posted sentries, and the bearers, servants, and water carriers moved forward reluctantly from the cover of the forest.

Sir Everard and his other companion walked slowly to and fro, awaiting the return of the interpreter. The former had lit a cigar, and the smoke hung in heavy wreaths in the still air.

Suddenly the drums stopped. There was an excited babble of talk among the carriers. Sir Everard's companion raised his head sharply like a nervous horse.

"At last!" he said. "I—I couldn't stand much more of that noise. It gets on my nerves. It's this fever, I suppose," he added with an apologetic glance at his superior.

"I take it as a sign of respect, Mawson. They have evidently received the message." He raised a pair of mother-of-pearl mounted glasses, and examined the stronghold. "Hassan is standing outside the gate. They are probably too frightened to admit him. But he has evidently delivered the message. Through a wicket in the door no doubt."

Bullivant came over to them to say that Sir Everard's tent was pitched. "We are too short of water for you to have a bath," he added. "Some of the carriers have deserted." His face was streaked with blood from insect bites, and drawn with anxiety. The envoy stared at him.

"Deserted! Why?"

"They don't like it, I suppose. I don't either. It's been too easy. A week on their jungle trails, and not an arrow loosed

or a spear thrown. And now if the water carriers bolt we're _____”

“We're what?”

Bullivant shifted his revolver holster. “Food for the crows.” He fell into a sudden passion. “I am only a Political Officer. I've only been ten years in this country. You ignore my advice. You listen to nothing I say. You come out here vested with powers that I have to accept. Whitehall—Whitehall—what does it know about Africa——” He recovered his self-control with an effort and wiped his twitching face. “I beg your pardon, Sir Everard.”

The envoy threw away the end of his cigar, and walked with dignity towards his tent. “I accept your explanation of the reason for my being unable to have a bath. I propose, however, to dress for dinner. It is necessary to keep up appearances before these fellows——” he waved his hand towards the groups of carriers squatting uneasily round their cooking-fires, and disappeared inside his tent.

As he did so the reverberations of the drums broke out afresh, throbbing in a wild rhythm that spread in undulations of sound far over the silent forest.

Hassan returned with his escort as Sir Everard emerged from his tent, faultless in evening-dress. The Arab's thin face showed no expression. He salaamed.

“What did the King say?” asked Bullivant, the Political Officer from the coast, charged with the task of conveying a high official from the Foreign Office in London to the throne of an African potentate.

“He bids the white man welcome,” replied the Arab. “He will open the gate to-morrow morning. His ears, too, will be open to hear the message of the white Queen.”

Sir Everard looked gratified. “British prestige, you see! Does he realise that I am the bearer of a stern message? Very stern indeed? Unless he gives a solemn undertaking to abstain from human sacrifices and the butchery of slaves, he will be deposed. That is what I have to tell him. That is the Queen’s message. Deposed by force of arms.”

Bullivant turned impatiently to the Arab. “Has he many warriors in the town?”

“Many.”

“Firearms?”

“I saw none. I was not admitted within the gate. A slave took my message and returned with the reply.”

Bullivant pulled at his moustache. “You will come with us to-morrow, Hassan. You will enter the gates with us. If we die, you die.”

“Every man dies at his appointed time,” said the slaver calmly. “At the will of Allah.” His dark eyes rested on Sir Everard’s white shirt front.

“I shall go to-morrow unarmed,” announced Sir Everard.

Bullivant stared at him incredulously.

“Allah the merciful,” murmured Hassan, as if following some remote train of thought.

“Unarmed!” echoed Bullivant. “Do you mean that you are going to walk into that stockade alone?”

“You will come with me, you and Mawson and the interpreter——”

“Of course we shall come,” interrupted the Political Officer. “But you must have an armed escort.”

“They will stay outside the gates. We will leave our revolvers behind. I shall carry only a walking-stick. I think it

would be more dignified. We must remember that I am an envoy from the Queen.”

The sun had sunk behind the dark line of the forest while they talked. Sir Everard looked at his watch. “It is time for dinner. After dinner I will draft out the precise words I shall employ to-morrow. It may be as well to go through the draft with the interpreter.”

He walked towards the tent without another glance at the distant stockade behind which the African war drums rolled ceaselessly, a place of blood and terror and ghoulish superstitions; where at that moment hideous rites of torture and sacrifice were being enacted in the midst of an army of warriors.

The short twilight melted into thick darkness. All night the drums reverberated.

In the morning Sir Everard dressed with care. He had brought with him, especially for this moment, a white ducksuit laced with gold, and a plumed cocked hat. Round his neck he wore a coloured ribbon from which hung suspended a decoration of gold and enamel. Carrying his silver-mounted walking-stick, preceded by Hassan and followed by Mawson and Bullivant, with the Hausa escort in the rear, they advanced to the door of the stockade.

Hassan called loudly in the local dialect, and the ponderous wooden beams were withdrawn. They saw a street of thatched huts stretching ahead of them, and on either side a great concourse of plumed warriors armed with spears and shields.

“A ceremonial guard,” murmured Sir Everard. “Most suitable. Most appropriate.”

Bullivant turned back to the sergeant of the escort, and ordered him to hold his men in readiness. "If I whistle, you are to enter at the charge," he concluded and turned to follow the others.

A little group of armed warriors led them up the roadway between rows of steel spearheads, Barbaric ornaments of shell, animal skins, and feather, decorated the motionless black bodies. The air quivered with heat and, as they advanced, grew heavy with a sickly stench like that of a slaughter-house. In the centre of a compound, before a large hut of reeds and grass, an enormous savage was sitting on a curved blackwood stool. He was naked except for a robe of leopard skin, and held a short club in his hand. Behind him was ranged a semi-circle of tree-trunks carved into grotesque figures, and at the foot of each lay a heap of dead and dismembered bodies. The images were dabbled with blood, and the dust of the compound was stained with dark patches over which flies buzzed in clouds. Terrible as was the huge immobile figure of the King, sitting with his head lowered between his massive shoulders, blinking bloodshot eyes, more terrible still was a creature that resembled an ape rather than a man, hung about with skulls and monkeys' tails, who danced wildly before the advancing envoy. On either side of the King squatted a group of chieftains or advisers.

Hassan halted a few paces from the motionless figure on the blackwood stool, and the white men followed suit.

The King said something in a guttural voice to Hassan.

"He says, 'What do you want?'" translated the slaver. The grotesque figure of the witch doctor continued to dance round them.

Sir Everard stepped forward fearlessly. His hand shook with indignation and disgust as he pointed towards the slain. "I have come to stop that," he said. "Tell him I bring the commands of the Great White Queen that there shall be no human blood spilt in sacrifice to gods in all her lands." The sun glinted on his eyeglass.

The Arab translated.

The weird gyrations of the witch doctor ceased. He crouched at the feet of the King, who made a slight movement with his club.

Three spears flew through the sunlight.

The drums that had been silent since daybreak broke out in a wild tom-tom. Out of the gateway of the stockade rushed an army of yelling savages behind a wave of steel. The Hausa escort had time for one volley before the wave overwhelmed



“I bring the commands of the Great White Queen.”

them and passed on over their bodies into the forest in pursuit of the terrified bearers. A section of the pursuers turned aside to plunder the camp.

The white-robed Hassan stood gravely before the King, turning over in his hands the decoration of gold and enamel suspended from a blood-soaked ribbon. The witch doctor,

after fruitlessly attempting to screw Sir Everard's eyeglass into his eye, gave it up and broke into a wild dance round the three bodies.

The hot wind, reeking of corruption and blood, discovered a roll of paper on the ground and blew the message of the Great White Queen under the feet of the dancing savage.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORRISSY, the Chief Yeoman, always took signals to the Captain himself. The Fleet had gone to Gibraltar, and one morning, as Captain Fitzhopkins was finishing breakfast, Morrissy entered his cabin carrying a slate.

“Signal from Flag to *Vengeance*, sir: ‘Captain repair on board forthwith.’ ”

Captain Fitzhopkins looked startled. Captains were not summoned on board the flagship at a moment’s notice unless something very unusual was afoot. For an instant it occurred to him that the Queen might have been pleased to offer him a knighthood. However, he could not, at the moment, decide the reason that had influenced Her Majesty in this eminently reasonable decision.

“Repair on board the flagship? Now what does that mean, what? I say what is all this about, Chief Yeoman?”

“Couldn’t say, sir,” said Morrissy, not very helpfully.

Captain Fitzhopkins half thought of asking the Chief Yeoman’s views on the knighthood theory, but refrained, as he thought it would be a nice surprise for everybody when he came back. He told Morrissy to bid the officer of the watch call away his galley, and shouted to his valet to bring him his frock-coat and sword.

There was a good deal of speculation on board the *Vengeance* when it became known that the Captain had been sent for by the Commander-in-Chief. Those with uneasy consciences wondered whether some rumour had reached the Admiral’s ears. Daunton, the Assistant Engineer, spent a

considerable time poring over the wine books, and decided that things looked black.

Captain Fitzhopkins was absent a long time, and when he returned his face wore an expression of almost overwhelming importance. A long consultation took place in his cabin with the Commander, First Lieutenant (who was also the Gunnery Lieutenant), and Navigating Officer. Freyer came and went with papers, and as the day wore on became more and more ink-smudged and mysterious, so that Aberboyne was impelled to kick him heartily for the good of his soul whenever he came into the gunroom.

It was still the custom of Nick, Sheep and Usher to flogather with Freyer every evening after dinner in a quiet corner on the booms. Cradock had left the ship, together with Giles and Morgan, to do courses at Greenwich, and bereft of their protection, the junior ones preferred to keep out of the way of Lascells in the evenings. Usher had a clay-pipe which they passed round; it was charged with Navy plug tobacco that had been soaked in rum, so there was a good deal of coughing and spitting into a bucket, and two or three puffs went a long way; but they were not allowed to smoke, consequently these pungent, surreptitious puffs had a full-blooded, manly, and exciting flavour.

It was while they were all crouched with their heads under the tarpaulin cover of a searchlight, to conceal the glow of the pipe-bowl, that Sheep wheedled out of Freyer the secret of the Captain's mission. Freyer was bursting to unbosom himself to somebody, and the strong fumes of the tobacco loosened his tongue.

"Well," he said, "you must swear not to tell a soul because it is very, very confidential."

They swore eternal silence, and Usher spat into the bucket in a tar-and-spun-yarn fashion as if to seal the confessional.

“Well,” continued Freyer, “the Queen sent an envoy to the King of Bengula—that’s in Africa, near the Equator—to warn him that he would be deposed unless he stopped slave-raiding and human sacrifices. The envoy, Sir Everard Beauchamp, and the whole party were murdered when they got to the capital.”

“I read about it in the paper,” said Nick. He passed the pipe to Sheep and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Here, Sheep, your turn.”

“No more, thanks. At least not just for a minute. I’m so interested. Go on, Fry.”

“There’s going to be a punitive expedition,” continued Freyer. “The Admiral at the Cape is going to be in command. He can only spare two cruisers, the *Psyche* and the *Nymph*. So our Commander-in-Chief is sending us south to reinforce his squadron.”

“Do you mean,” asked Usher, his voice trembling with excitement, “that we are going to take part in a punitive expedition in Africa?” He tried to press the glowing tobacco into the bowl with his finger-tip, as he had seen his coxswain do, and burnt himself.

“Yes. The orders are to take the King prisoner and burn the town.”

“Gosh!” Sheep wriggled delightedly. “Do you suppose we shall be landed?”

“Every available man will be landed,” said Freyer.

Nick had a vision of himself hacking his way with a cutlass into an African stronghold. He wondered whether

Usher would faint, because there would be certainly a lot of blood about.

Some sort of reflection of this kind was, in fact, passing through Usher's mind. "I wonder if there is a cure for faintness—like sea-sickness. You know, I sometimes feel queer when there's—well, blood about."

"Blood's the cure for that," said Freyer grimly. "There'll be so much flying about that you'll get used to it. You'll *wade* through blood."

Usher knocked out the pipe quickly. "When are we starting?"

"The day after to-morrow. We coal ship to-morrow, and then get in stores and things, and off we go."

"We'll have to do some cutlass drill before we get there, won't we?" ventured Sheep. "I'm not sure I'm awfully good with a cutlass."

Usher, rather preoccupied with a mental picture of himself wading about in blood and trying not to faint, said he thought it was time to turn in; the others agreed, but when they were in their hammocks sleep did not come very readily, and they lay trying to picture jungle warfare, and the storming of an African fortress, until far into the middle watch.

Next day the *Vengeance* was coaled by native labour, and as there was nothing much they could do on board, the midshipmen were given a day's leave.

Lascells had also obtained a day's leave, and at dinner the previous evening had offered to take any equestrian-minded members of the mess for a ride into Spain. He conveyed the

invitation after first hammering loudly on the table for silence.

“Which of you can ride?” he demanded.

“I can,” said Aberboyne promptly, and he spoke the truth, as the son of an Irish M.F.H. well might.

“So can I,” announced Beevers, and there was a roar of laughter because, on a previous visit to Gibraltar, Beefy had gone for a ride and returned minus his horse. “Up to a point,” he amended. “Anyhow, I’m keen. And I don’t mind how often I fall off.”

“I hope you won’t fall off to-morrow, then,” said Lascells, “because we are going to ride out to the second *venta* and lunch there.”

The messman was accordingly told to order the horses, and next morning, when the gunroom officers landed, there they were at the landing-place. One was a brisk-looking animal and the other two not so brisk-looking. Lascells, who wore spurred cowhide boots, polo breeches, a white stock, and a canary-coloured waistcoat, and cut a very gallant figure, selected the best mount for himself. Aberboyne, after casting his eye over the other two, grunted and swung his long leg over the next best, leaving Beevers to make the best of a not too good job.

The others had paired off for the day. Nick and Sheep decided to do some shopping and buy presents for their respective families. Bat Lawley, who had a passion for gambling, set off to a casino at Algeciras with Usher—the latter went with him on the understanding that he would merely watch Bat gamble and would not be required to play himself. Carver, who was a nephew of the Governor’s, took Snipe off with him to spend the day at Government House.

The riding-party had passed out of the gates of the fortress, crossed the flat isthmus of neutral ground, and entered Spain before Beevers fell off. This he succeeded in doing after they had passed through the little whitewashed town of La Linea and were riding along the sands at the edge of the Bay. On their right straggled the hovels of a fishing village, in front of which the gaily-painted boats were drawn up on the sand in a confusion of ropes, nets, and fishpots. As they threaded their way through these obstacles, a boy rose unexpectedly from behind a boat, which caused Beevers's horse to shy. Beevers promptly went over his steed's head, and while he picked himself up the boy caught the horse; finally he dusted Beevers down and held the bridle while he remounted. He was an exceedingly picturesque if somewhat grimy youth, and he smiled enchantingly at Beevers and murmured in soft Spanish. Beefy, who was unhurt by his fall, was so touched by the lad's attentive politeness that he gave him two *pesetas*, and the cavalcade rode on.

The boy, whose name was Pedro, then took to his heels like a rabbit, but was pursued by his father and uncle, who caught him with ease and relieved him of the *pesetas*.

"Clumsy fool!" stormed the former. "The one who led was a *rico*. Why did you not unseat *him*!" They buffeted the urchin angrily. "Such a one as wears a yellow waistcoat is a milord who spills money when he falls. This *joven* who fell had no money."

Pedro protested with whimpers that he had done his best.

"This evening they will return," said the uncle, biting his *peseta* experimentally and putting it in his pocket. "The wearer of the yellow waistcoat is better mounted than the

jovenes. He will gallop first. We will stretch a rope across the sands.”

“Bueno!” murmured the father.

In the meanwhile Nick and Sheep, in the happy position of having nothing very much to do and all day to do it in, sauntered into the narrow main street of the fortress. On the right rose the almost perpendicular heights of the Rock, with gaily-painted houses clinging to its lower slopes and a profusion of flowering shrubs and creepers in the gardens. The sun shone brightly, and there was a faintly foreign smell of garlic and manure and acrid Spanish tobacco. The street was crowded with people: red-coated soldiers, Moors wearing slippers and flowing robes, nursemaids with children, Spanish women carrying shopping baskets, laden donkeys. There were tobacco shops without number, curio shops kept by Hindoos or Arabs, shops that sold Maltese lace, others where one could buy dyed skins from Morocco; pastry-cooks, barbers, and saloons.

Interested as they were in their surroundings, one subject alone was uppermost in their minds—the punitive expedition in which they were to take part. All the forenoon, as they flattened their noses against shop windows and gazed up at the fortifications, their tongues wagged ceaselessly and, alas, not very discreetly.

Nick finally saw an embroidered Japanese kimono which he decided would suit his sister Ethel. The shop was kept by an Arab, and the kimono had been made in Nottingham, but nothing could have had a more Japanese effect, and Sheep agreed that it was the very thing for Ethel. They entered the shop and, like their shadow, and as silently, an Arab wearing

a green turban slipped in after them. He had, as a matter of fact, been gliding along behind them for some time, pausing to look into shop windows when they paused, following noiselessly at their heels while they walked, chattering like starlings of what was uppermost in their minds.

The shopkeeper salaamed and, on hearing what Nick required, spread silk kimonos all over the counter for their inspection. Nick finally made his choice, and the vendor named his price. Nick was staggered.

“You will pardon me if I address you,” said the stranger, speaking English admirably and with great dignity, “but this fellow asks too much.” A glance passed between the two Arabs. The one behind the counter called Allah to witness that he was offering the kimono at less than its cost price: would they consider the cost of freight from Nagasaki? The price of silk alone? The matchless embroidery——?

“And I,” interrupted the other Arab, “I say you ask three times the proper price. You know me, Ali. Tell these English gentlemen how I am known.”

“Men call you Hassan the Just,” said the shopkeeper.

“Hassan the Just,” confirmed the stranger in his grave sedate voice. “That is why I speak on behalf of these English gentlemen. I cannot be silent when I hear you ask three times the proper price.”

Nick and Sheep were greatly impressed by Hassan’s magnanimous spirit. So apparently was the shopkeeper.

“At the figure you name, O Hassan, it is a gift. Nevertheless, since these gentlemen are your friends, I will make a present to them of this kimono.” He wrapped it in paper and handed it to Nick.

Hassan turned and gravely led the way out of the shop.

“I say!” exclaimed Nick, “that was awfully decent of him _____”

“He is a robber,” said Hassan with gentle melancholy. “He hopes you will come into his shop to-morrow and buy more because you are grateful.”

“We can’t do that, I’m afraid,” said Sheep, “because our ship is sailing.”

“That is so?” commented the Arab without much interest. “You are naval officers?”

They said they were midshipmen.

“That surprises me,” murmured the Arab, “because you seem too experienced, too much, if I may say so, men of the world. I would have thought perhaps you were lieutenants.”

Nick and Usher smiled. They both decided that the stranger, in his courteous, half-melancholy manner, was charming.

“It is perhaps time for a little refreshment,” continued the Arab, his dark eyes on their faces. “I wonder if you would honour me by coming on board my dhow. I am only a poor Arab trader, but I can offer you a cup of coffee better than any you can taste ashore. You will come, yes? I shall be very proud to entertain British Naval officers.”

Nick thought it would be a very interesting experience to go on board a dhow, and Sheep thought that coffee sounded a good sort of beverage, especially when made by an Arab, so they both accepted and followed the stranger through a maze of narrow streets down to the water’s edge. Hassan waved his hand, and from the medley of outlandish-looking craft at

anchor a small boat presently detached itself and came inshore, rowed by a negro.

“Please,” said Hassan with a courteous gesture.

They climbed in and were rowed off to the dhow. She was larger than either of the midshipmen expected, with a raking mast and one long lateen-yard. Hassan led the way to a cabin built up on the high poop. It was rather dark inside but very clean. There was a carpet on the floor, and they sat down on cushions. Presently an Arab entered with a charcoal brazier, and Hassan prepared the coffee, apologising for his poor quarters and regretting that it was not in his power to offer them the traditional hospitality of his race. He went on to describe the sort of feast he would have liked to put before them, until their mouths watered, because they were growing rather hungry and mutton stuffed with raisins and stewed in cinnamon sounded pretty good. The coffee was ready at last, and Hassan the Just handed them each a cup and squatted down beside the brazier to roll a cigarette.

Nick was a little disappointed. He thought the coffee tasted rather bitter, but he drank it for the sake of politeness with apparent relish, and sat listening to their host murmuring more details about an Arab feast. A strange drowsiness settled on him as he listened. He saw Hassan pick a live ember from the brazier with a pair of tongs and light his cigarette, but Nick’s eyelids fluttered as he watched. He glanced at Sheep in time to see his head nod violently, twice—and then Sheep rolled over sideways.

“I think——” began Nick thickly, but his tongue would not articulate. He made one tremendous effort to get to his feet, then pitched beside Sheep into a black well of oblivion.

The midshipmen's leave expired at 6 p.m., and at that hour Bat and Usher encountered Carver and Snipe at the landing-place in the dockyard. Bat looked depressed, but Usher's pockets were literally bulging with shiny five-*peseta* pieces. He was still flushed with excitement, and was in the middle of a long story about staking a modest *peseta* on a number just for fun—it had turned up, and after that he could do nothing wrong—when Aberboyne, looking hot and dishevelled, came riding down on a spent horse as the boat came in to take them off to the ship.

“Where's Lascells?” asked Carver, as Aberboyne dismounted and threw the reins to a waiting groom.

“In hospital,” was the brief reply. The intelligence was received with calm by the party, and at this moment Beevers came clattering down.

“I saw the doctor at the hospital, and he says he's broken a collar-bone and a couple of ribs.” He also relinquished his steed and they all embarked in the cutter.

“What happened to him?” asked Snipe, as they settled down in the sternsheets.

“Well,” Aberboyne stretched out his legs and gazed lovingly at an old pair of Bluchers that had belonged to his father; “We had a jolly good lunch, omelettes and garlic and red wine, and on the way back, when we got to the sands near that fishing village, Lascells said we'd all have a race. He had spurs and the best horse and was leading by miles, and it appears that one of the boats had a mooring rope stretched to an anchor, and they didn't see it. The horse came down and rolled on Lascells. Some fishermen rushed out and picked him up, and I must say they were awfully decent. They carried him up to their hut and looked after him while I went

off for an ambulance. They were awfully apologetic about their beastly mooring rope, but it naturally wasn't their fault. Beefy and I raised five *pesetas* and gave it to them——”

“I raised three,” amended Beefy, “and you raised two.”

Carver looked at his watch. “Time we shoved off. Anybody seen Ainsworth and Wainwright?”

No one had seen them.

“Well,” said Carver, “the ship's under sailing orders. They'll have to find their own way off and get mastheaded for breaking their leave.” He nodded to the coxswain. “Carry on, back to the ship.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

NICK awoke with a nasty taste in his mouth and a splitting headache. It was pitch dark, and he had some difficulty in remembering where he was and what had happened to him. Gradually he recalled the events of the morning, and made a sudden effort to rise from where he was lying, only to discover that his hands and feet were tightly bound.

Bewildered and frightened, he lay still, wondering what had happened. The dhow rolled slightly, and outside he could hear the creak of running gear and the flap of the sail against the mast. He concluded that they were lying somewhere in the open sea, becalmed.

“Sheep!” he murmured in a cautious voice.

Sheep’s voice answered him from a few feet away.

“Hallo! I say, where are we?”

“In the dhow, I suppose. Are you all tied up?”

“Yes.”

They both lay silent for a while, trying to keep stark terror at an arm’s length. The dhow rolled, her timbers creaked and groaned. The darkness seemed full of the complaining of the ship. Suddenly a door opened aft and Hassan appeared, carrying a lantern. It was pitch dark outside, but through the open doorway Nick could see the far-off lights of Gibraltar twinkling. As he had surmised, they were becalmed somewhere in the Bay.

Hassan hung the lantern to a hook in the beam overhead, and surveyed his captives with thoughtful eyes. He wore a silver-hilted dagger at his waist.

“You have had a pleasant sleep?” he inquired.

“Look here,” exclaimed Nick, “what’s the meaning of all this? Why are we trussed up in this fashion?”

“A precaution only.” Hassan drew his dagger and cut the ropes that bound them. “That is no longer necessary.”

They both struggled stiffly into a sitting position.

“We’ve got to get back to our ship, you know,” explained Sheep. “She’s under sailing orders.”

A faint smile flitted across Hassan’s dark face and disappeared. “We will first have a little talk,” he said. “There is much I want to know that you can tell me——”

Nick eyed him steadily in the light of the lantern. “What about?”

“About the expedition against the King of Bengula. You see, he is my friend. I do much business with him. I would like you to tell me how many men will be sent against him. Do you take big guns through the jungle? When do you reach Lagos?”

Sheep looked at Nick. They made imperceptible movements with their heads.

“We shan’t tell you anything,” said Nick. “And you’ve jolly well got to send us ashore at once.”

Hassan the Just slid the dagger back into its sheath. “You will force me to do things to you that are unpleasant,” he murmured sadly. “Much I know already, because you talk so much in the street at Gibraltar. So you see it is no harm if you tell me more. Just the few details I ask.”

Sheep and Nick again exchanged glances. They both felt sick, and were wet with cold sweat.

“You’ll not get a word out of either of us,” protested Sheep stoutly.

The Arab gave a little sigh of regret and suddenly clapped his hands. A door on the foremast side of the cabin opened, and two negroes entered. One carried a glowing brazier of charcoal into which was plunged a pair of tongs. Hassan drew it out, and the extremity was red-hot. He eyed it reflectively for a moment and replaced it.

“Don’t weaken on it, Sheep,” murmured Nick. “He’s only trying to frighten us.”

“I’m all right,” whispered Sheep tremulously. “It’s just bluff.”

Hassan said something in Arabic, and the negroes bent over the two midshipmen, and they were on their feet again.

“Now,” said Hassan, drawing out the glowing tongs, “since you will not tell me the things I want to know I must be a little unpleasant.”

Powerful black fingers clawed at their garments, ripping them from their bodies. They were both stripped naked before they realised what had happened to them. Nick was held powerless in front of the brazier.

Nick clenched his teeth, and a sick shiver ran through him. Through the open doorway he could see the dark outline of the helmsman against the far-off lights of the fortress. He wondered how long he could keep his mouth shut under torture. He wondered vaguely what Sheep was doing behind him.... Hassan stretched out his slender dark hand and touched his shoulder. He wondered if he would faint.

At that instant a naked leg shot past him and the brazier tipped over on to Hassan’s bare feet. Something swung over his shoulder, striking the lantern and extinguishing it. Nick had a confused impression of live embers everywhere and a smell of burning; that the grip on his arms was released, and

that the silver hilt of Hassan's dagger gleamed within a foot of his hand. He grabbed it as Sheep yelled, "Come on!" and shot past him towards the open doorway. Hands clawed at Nick in the gloom and, hardly aware that the dagger was in his grasp, he slashed twice at something that grunted like a stuck pig, and then leaped in pursuit of Sheep. He just had time to see him dive overboard, and then found the shadowy form of the helmsman in front of him. He struck at him with his fist and, still clutching the dagger, hurled himself head foremost off the poop into the sea.

He swam under water as long as his breath lasted, and when he came to the surface he could hear Sheep swimming a little ahead of him. Not a breath of wind stirred the surface of the water. The night was inky dark, but he could see lights moving about the dhow and heard Hassan shouting orders in Arabic. There was a splash as of a boat being launched.

Sheep was swimming away from the lights of Gibraltar, and it flashed through Nick's mind that if the dhow launched a boat to search for them, as they apparently had, it was in the direction of the fortress they would search. With the extraordinary clearness of mind that generally accompanies a supreme crisis, Nick realised that the noises on board, the creaks and plaints of the dhow's timbers as she rolled in the swell, would effectually drown the sound of their strokes. Sheep had slowed down till Nick, the dagger between his teeth, overtook him, and then they swam on side by side through the darkness for about half an hour. Sheep had been the best swimmer in the *Britannia*, and was capable, in the training-ship days, of immense feats of endurance. Nick himself swam well, but he realised after a while that he was tiring. He grasped the dagger in his hand.

“Let’s have a spell, Sheep,” he panted. They floated side by side, watching the lights of the dhow and straining their ears to catch the sound of oars. Nick was determined, if they were discovered, to put up a desperate resistance.

“How far is it to the Rock, do you suppose?” he asked presently.

“It’s difficult to judge.” Sheep trod water. “It might be seven or eight miles, it may be less. Could you swim as far as that?”

“No.”

They lay floating and listening. A little breeze sprang up, and suddenly the lights on board the dhow were extinguished.

“Now what are they up to?” Nick was beginning to feel very cold. Cramp would be the end of them. They had eaten nothing since breakfast.

“He must have recalled the boat.” Sheep’s teeth were chattering. “There’s a little breeze, and he’s probably going to slip across to Africa.”

“Well,” said Nick, “let’s start swimming for the lights of Gib. We must just go on swimming as long as we can.”

They settled down to swim, and presently Nick was aware of a sound ahead of them. He stared through the darkness, and saw a dark shape looming down on top of them. It was the dhow, just making steerage-way through the water.

“She’ll run us down,” he thought, and the next moment the high curved prow was on top of them. Nick put out his hand to fend himself against the impact, and it closed on the fluke of her anchor. He caught Sheep’s arm and guided it to the same support. They lay floating under the curved projection

of the bow, being drawn through the water at two or three knots. Every moment carried them farther from Gibraltar.

“It’s no use, Sheep,” whispered Nick. “Let go.”

Sheep obeyed and they felt the side of the dhow glide past them, towering up into the darkness. The stern came by, and then something that bumped along the surface of the water astern of her.

Nick’s mind worked like lightning. He took three strokes and grabbed the gunwale of a small boat towing astern of the dhow; then, clinging to it with his left hand, he slashed through the towrope with Hassan’s dagger. The looming mass of the dhow’s stern and lateen-sail vanished into the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A LITTLE before the dawn a boy awoke in a hut in the fishing village on the shores of Gibraltar Bay. His first act was to remove a loose tile in the floor under his bed and reassure himself of the safety of a small hoard of coins. Somewhere in the darkness he could hear his father and his uncle snoring, and he knew that trying to rouse them would be a waste of time.

The English lord with the yellow waistcoat who had had the misfortune to fall off his horse was unconscious when they picked him up the previous evening, and the uncle, who was an adept at the game, had run through his pockets before the lord's friends reached the scene of the accident. The boy's father and the uncle had spent the evening at the local inn on the proceeds of the uncle's deft handling of the situation. They returned in such a convivial condition that it was probable they would sleep until late the next day. The boy's share of the booty had been limited to sundry coppers spilt upon the sand, which he grabbed in the first confusion of the accident. It was not much of a reward, but it was better than nothing, and would buy a ticket in the local lottery, a prize in which, if he won it, would, he thought, probably enable him to fulfil his life's ambition, which was to be a bull-fighter.

He replaced the tile and covered it with the heap of verminous rags that served him as a bed. It occurred to him, as he lay there sleepily scratching himself, that the temporary incapacity of his father and uncle afforded him an opportunity of visiting their fishpots, of selling the fish in the market, and of buying two lottery tickets instead of one. The fishpots were a long way out at the entrance to the bay, but he

calculated he could dispose of the fish and be back long before the sleepers woke.

He rose and, shivering a little in the chilly air, threw a couple of sacks into the light boat, dragged it down over the sand, and launched it. A fresh breeze was blowing from the land, and he hoisted the ragged sail, steering roughly in the direction in which he knew the pots to lie. When the dawn came he would be able to pick out the landmarks that guided him to the spot where the pots were buoyed.

He was very hungry and rather cold, but one was always hungry and either too hot or too cold, so philosophically he prayed to the saints that the fishpots might be full of fish, and then he sang a little song.

The dawn came slowly. One by one the lights ashore were extinguished. The great mass of the Rock grew hard against the eastern sky; and then the youthful fisherman saw that he was not alone on the face of the grey waters. Ahead of him and suspiciously near the fishpots was another boat. It had no sail, and it was too far off for him to decide if it had occupants. Presently, however, he saw that there were two figures in it. A suspicion that they were thieves who had come to rob his fishpots was dispelled in a few minutes by the realisation that they had no oars and were drifting helplessly. He drew nearer, and was astounded to realise that they were naked.

“*Ola!*” he shouted.

They were standing up and waving. He saw, as he brought his boat deftly alongside, that the occupants were only a few years older than himself. They were stark naked and trembling with cold. Where they had come from he had not

the slightest idea. One of them had a dagger in his hand. He pointed it in the direction of the Rock.

“Gibraltar,” he said; “can you take us there?”

Pedro concluded that they were the victims of a shipwreck, English apparently, and therefore harmless lunatics with unlimited financial resources. He abandoned the idea of hauling up the fishpots. This was a more lucrative venture.

Watching the knife warily, he motioned them to climb into his boat, and as they obeyed he realised that they were on the verge of collapse. He quietly possessed himself of the dagger. It had a silver hilt inlaid with copper. It was worth much money. They made their boat fast to his, and while they were doing so he opened a locker and pulled out two sacks and half a bottle of *aguardiente*, which his father kept there in case he felt thirsty.

“*Tienen ustedes,*” he said, smiling and nodding.

His passengers each took a pull at the bottle, and after a good deal of coughing and spluttering, another pull. They revived somewhat. With the dagger he cut slits in the sacks for their heads and arms, then put it safely away in the locker while they pulled the sacks over their heads.

The sacks smelt abominably of decayed fish, but they were some protection against the cold wind.

“Gibraltar,” commanded the taller of the two in a tone of authority.

Pedro grinned and nodded. “*Si, si!*” he said. “*Ahora!*” and hoisted the sail.

The wind was light, and they did not reach the man-of-war anchorage, where the *Vengeance* was lying, until after eight o'clock in the morning. Colours had been hoisted, and

lighters alongside were transferring stores and provisions to the cruiser. There was a great deal of activity going on everywhere, and Captain Fitzhoptkins was pacing the quarter-deck when Pedro brought his craft alongside.

Motioning him to remain there, Nick and Sheep climbed the accommodation ladder and stood side by side in their mal-odorous sacks at the quarter-deck gangway.

Captain Fitzhoptkins gazed at them as if their appearance had deprived him of speech. Beevers, who was midshipman of the watch, was so amazed that he opened his mouth, let out a bellow of uncontrollable laughter, and fled forward.

Captain Fitzhoptkins did not laugh. "Officer of the watch!" he shouted.

"Sir?" replied Wonky Willie mildly, emerging from a profound reverie as usual somewhere behind the gun-shield.

"What is this?" The Captain pointed his telescope at the sorry figures of Nick and Sheep. "Investigate and report. I say find out the meaning of this incredible behaviour. What?"

Wonky Willie advanced and sniffed distastefully. "Where have you been?"

"Please, sir, we were kidnapped by an Arab dhow and we escaped, and a Spanish fisherman brought us back to the ship," gasped Nick.

Captain Fitzhoptkins's curiosity impelled him to come closer.

"What is the meaning of this masquerade? What? I say why are they in this outrageous costume? The ship's under sealed orders. Are you aware, young gentlemen, that you have broken your leave with the ship under sailing orders?"

And how do you account for this most obnoxious smell—this _____”

“Please, sir——” began Nick.

“Put them under arrest,” commanded Captain Fitzhoptkins.

Here Sheep, whose endurance had reached its limit, swayed and collapsed in the officer of the watch’s arms. He was borne off to the sick-bay by the corporal of the watch and the sideboy.

Nick thought it would save a lot of tiresome explanations if he collapsed too. His head was spinning with *aguardiente* and he felt sick.

“Please, sir, will you give some money to the boy who rescued us? He——” Nick suddenly realised he had reached the end of his tether. He, too, began to sway.

“All right,” said Wonky Willie kindly, “I’ll attend to that.”

It was the last Nick remembered as he crumpled up, malodorous sack and all, in Wonky Willie’s arms.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

USHER, seated on the dicky-seat of the second cutter beside the coxswain, felt as if the journey up the river had been going on for weeks. Actually this was the fourth day since they disembarked from the *Vengeance*. They had met the *Psyche* and the *Nymph* off the entrance to the river, and a combined force of bluejackets and marines, under command of the Admiral of the *Psyche*, started off in tow of all available steamboats by the light of an enormous African moon.

Usher's last recollection of the ship was Captain Fitzhopkins seated on a chair on the quarter-deck, his right foot swathed in bandages resting on a pillow, while the *Vengeance's* expeditionary force filed past him down to the boats. A severe attack of gout had crippled him soon after they entered the tropics. Captain Fitzhopkins's ancestors had cured gout by drinking port wine, so he averred, and, ignoring the timid protests of the Staff Surgeon, he adopted similar heroic measures. As a result, the boats from the *Vengeance*, plodding under oars up the broad, sluggish, cocoa-coloured river, were in command of the executive officer, Commander Burgoyne.

The steamboats returned to their ships on the afternoon of the second day, as their coal would not carry them farther, and after that the progress of the expedition was under sail when there was a suitable wind, otherwise under oars. It was now the afternoon of the second day, and the men had been rowing for two hours. The oars were double-banked, and launches, pinnaces, and cutters had maxim-guns mounted in their bows. The sun blazed down on the surface of the water

with a white, pitiless shimmer; the forest grew down to the water's edge, tall trees, undergrowth, and creepers forming an impenetrable curtain on either side of their advance; the hot, still air smelt of mud and rotting vegetation, and in all the forest not a leaf moved.

Usher had to admit to himself that he was bored, cramped, thirsty, and rather sleepy. For the last two days he had been expecting something to happen, and nothing had, in fact, happened. He began to wonder whether, after all, the expedition would fizzle out in a fiasco; that is to say, he began to suspect that the enemy would go on retreating, soundless and invisible, indefinitely. That all they would have to do would be to demolish ingloriously a collection of deserted mud-huts and return to the ship.

He communicated something of these misgivings to Wonky Willie, who sat in the stern of the cutter on a pile of stores and ammunition, while in the shade of the awning the sailors swung backwards and forwards to the stroke and the heavy oars clinked in the rowlocks. Wonky Willie was staring at an eagle soaring in slow circles above the forest.

He said that he did not think they had yet reached hostile country. In any case, the enemy had not the slightest inkling that anything in the nature of a punitive expedition was afoot, and it was not anticipated that the force would meet with any resistance until after they had landed and begun the forced march through the jungle.

“When will that be, sir?” asked Usher.

“To-morrow.” Wonky Willie still watched with his kindly, dreaming eyes the soaring eagle. “The day will come,” he said presently, “when punitive expeditions will be carried out

by flying machines. They are experimenting with one now in America. It has flown several hundred yards.”

Usher was always fascinated by Wonky Willie’s theories. Unlike the other midshipmen, who thought his inventions pure moonshine, Usher regarded him as a kind of prophet. He was always foreseeing things that would happen some day, incredible developments in naval construction and armaments. The last time they had coaled ship Wonky Willie had asked him to supper in the evening, and expounded an astounding theory about oil taking the place of coal as fuel for men-of-war. Ships would carry it in tanks below the water-line, he said, and instead of hundreds of men being employed all day shoveling coal into the bunkers, the oil would be pumped through hoses into the tanks from ships built specially to carry it.

Everybody laughed so much at these fantastic ideas that Wonky Willie would not say much more, except that he muttered something about the oil being ignited in the form of a fine spray or vapour, forced through nozzles in the furnaces. “No more stoking,” he had said. “You’d regulate the oil pressure by a valve. One man——” But the roars of laughter drowned the rest.

“What would be the motive power of your flying machine?” asked Usher.

“The same as for this horseless carriage Krebs invented. It’s called an internal combustion engine. Driven by a light volatile oil. A series of explosions on top of the pistons is the principle of the thing. Vapour ignited by an electric spark. The shaft will be connected to a propeller made of wood in front of the flying machine. It will carry two men—perhaps more—and it will drop bombs from the air on armies.

Explosive bombs, incendiary bombs, perhaps even some harmless gas bomb that will just incapacitate ... make people's eyes water..." His voice trailed away. His eyes were on some remote vision.

"But——" began Usher, his imagination trying to grasp all the implications of this stupendous prophecy, "where will they come from, these flying machines? How will they get here all the way from England?"

"Specially designed fast cruisers will carry them." Wonky Willie sat hugging his sword and rocking slowly to and fro on his perch on the ammunition cases. "As a matter of fact, I've got some designs on board—some ideas I've sketched out for a flying machine that will land in the water. I'll show them to you when we get back if you are interested. They'll be carried by ships somewhere on the forecastle, and a sort of catapult——" He sketched vaguely in the air with a forefinger, and suddenly stiffened, staring ahead.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "What's going on over there?"

For some hours the river had been narrowing, twisting and turning through the jungle in wide sweeps. They had come to a rather sharper bend than usual, and on rounding it saw ahead of them a barrier of felled trees blocking their passage up the river.

A bugle sounded on board the boat flying the Admiral's flag, and all stopped rowing. The flotilla was in three columns, the flagship's boats in the centre and those of *Vengeance* and *Nymph* on either side. There was a consultation between the Admiral, the Captain of the *Nymph*, and Commander Burgoyne.

The boats waited for orders, keeping station with lazy strokes of their oars.

“They’ve got wind of the expedition,” observed Wonky Willie. “Spies have told them of our advance. That obstruction looks to me like an ambush.” He slid his revolver out of its holster, saw that each chamber was loaded, and replaced it.

The Commander came towards them in his galley. Usher could see his face, burned brick-red by the sun, and it wore an expression Usher had never seen on it before. He raised a megaphone to his mouth.

“Headly, go ahead and investigate. There’s some sort of boom across the river. See if we can cut it away with axes or if it will want blowing up. The enemy may be hanging about, so look out for a surprise attack.”

Wonky Willie raised his arm to indicate that he heard. “Aye, aye, sir,” he shouted. The men on the thwarts outside the rowers unslung and loaded their rifles; the maxim’s crew slipped a belt of ammunition into the gun and brought it to the ready. Usher’s heart beat quickly. He unfastened the flap of his holster and buckled the heavy cutlass round his waist. The midshipman in the *Psyche*’s cutter abeam of them raised his hand in a little gesture. Wonky Willie intercepted it and smiled. “*Morituri te salutamus*,” he murmured. He stood up in the sternsheets and gave the order that drove twelve oar-blades into the water. The cutter moved ahead of the flotilla, gathering momentum at every stroke, as the sweating seamen, aware that every eye in the flotilla was upon them, swung to their oars. They grinned and joked among themselves, released from the tedious monotony of the past four days by the prospect of excitement ahead of them. The forest on either side, dense, motionless, inscrutable, gave back the echo of the oars thudding against the rowlocks.

“Pull easy,” ordered Wonky Willie presently. He stood examining the obstruction through a pair of glasses as they approached it. Usher could see that it consisted of huge forest trees felled at the water’s edge and bound with creepers in a stout barricade of timber. He coned the boat alongside one of the tree-trunks and they held her there while their Lieutenant climbed out on to a branch and walked along it to the main obstruction. Usher watched him standing, dark against the glare on the water, his chin in his hand, turning over in his mind the problem of clearing the way for advance. He had seen him in that attitude so often, suddenly oblivious to everything around him, sunk in meditation. The men were silent, watching him, their rifles across their knees. Usher wished he would hurry up and decide what was to be done. The hot stillness had an eeriness about it that made one restless. It was broken by a sound like bees humming.

Zipp! went something at his side, and he saw an arrow quivering in the gunwale a yard from him. *Zipp! Zipp! Zipp!* There were arrows everywhere. The port stroke oar gave a grunt, and fell over the loom of his oar; in the same instant he saw that Wonky Willie was astride a log, clasping it face downwards as if he had suddenly fallen asleep. It all happened in an instant. It was an ambush.

“Volley firing,” he shouted, and crouching behind the gunwale, the sailors began to fire ragged volleys into the forest. The bow-men got their maxim into action the next instant. The forest threw back the echoes. *Pap! Pap-papû papûpap!* stuttered the wall of greenery, and the coxswain coughed and fell over against his midshipman, clutching at the shaft of an arrow sticking through his throat. The blood spurted between his fingers and drenched Usher’s trousers.

The man was lying limply across his knees, but somehow he had to reach his Lieutenant sprawling astride the tree-trunk. Usher thrust the twitching body aside and stumbled across the thwarts. Three men had been hit besides the coxswain. Two were already dead. The third sat with an arrow through his shoulder, and his hand on a crimson stain spreading over his tunic.

“Come on, a couple of you,” shouted Usher and, revolver in hand, he began to scramble over the obstruction with two seamen at his heels.

The firing continued but no more arrows fell. He reached the place where the Lieutenant was lying sprawling across a tree-trunk, and bent over the body. “Are you badly hurt, sir?”

Wonky Willie did not answer, and as they turned him over they saw that he was dead. A wave of indignation swept over Usher. The stupid waste of it all. The cleverest brain in the Navy extinguished by the arrow of an African savage. The brutes.... Usher, who until a minute before had never seen death, who fainted at the sight of a cut finger, raised his revolver and emptied it savagely on an impulse of futile avengement into the silent jungle.

The men were carrying the body down into the boat where the smoke of the cordite hung in an acrid-smelling haze. The bottom of the boat was littered with empty cartridge-cases and splashed with blood. The rifle-firing went on spasmodically. The maxim had jambed.

They laid the body of their Lieutenant across the thwarts. The shaft of the arrow had been broken by his fall; he looked as if he were asleep and dreaming of something that touched his lips with a half smile. Usher glanced downstream and saw the pinnaces and two more cutters dashing up to their rescue.

He no longer felt excited. His heart was like a stone in his breast, hard and cold. He watched the approaching boats, as he mechanically slipped fresh cartridges into his revolver. So this was jungle warfare, he thought to himself, and wondered why he no longer felt any emotion whatever.

“Mr. Usher, sir!” He turned and saw that it was the voice of the wounded seaman, fretting at the haft of the arrow in his shoulder.

He was filled with compunction. He seemed to be doing nothing, with men firing and dying all round him. “Oh, Stevens,” he said, “I’m *sorry*. Let me have a look——” He began to cut away the man’s red, sodden jumper.

“Now, young fellow-me-lad, step aside and let me get busy.” A red-headed bustling Surgeon from the *Psyche* was climbing across the gunwale. He cast a professional eye over the occupants of the boat.

“One wounded and four dead, eh? And Headly dead. Too bad, too bad!” He opened his case of instruments. “Now, my son, let’s have a look at this shoulder.”

Usher turned away. The pinnaces had opened fire with their maxims into the forest. Men with axes were hacking at the obstruction. Wonky Willie was dead. He stared at the duck trousers clinging wetly to his legs. He did not feel faint. Worse—much worse—he wanted to cry.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NICK and Sheep sat on either side of a small fire of sticks. Sheep, looking dirty, his long face swollen with mosquito bites and profoundly serious, was stirring something in a tin mug. Nick watched him, listening to the distant war drums that rolled waves of dreadful sound over the dark jungle.

“I learned how to brew cocoa from Vasco da Gama,” said Sheep. “And I don’t mind telling you that it’s an art.”

Nick nodded. Vasco da Gama was the sobriquet by which the Navigator, whose proper name was Ogilvie, was known to them. Sheep tipped some hot water into the mug, put the pannikin back on the fire, and went on stirring as if for a wager. All round them men lay sleeping, rolled in their oilskins, their rifles stacked in little tripods at their heads. The firelight gleamed on the bayonet of a sentry invisible in the shadow.

“Froth,” continued Sheep, “that’s the test of a good dish of cocoa. Vasco said so.”

Nick wondered how Vasco, who had been left in command of the *Vengeance* until Captain Fitzhoptkins recovered, was faring. So much had happened during the past week that it was as if a curtain had descended upon all his previous existence. Freyer, Daunton, José, and the messman, Poole the Naval Instructor, even Captain Fitzhoptkins himself, the chest flat, the gunroom, the very ship—all were like shadows of dreams that flitted across it and vanished. For three days they had been advancing through dense jungle, along a trail that narrowed the expedition to single file, through marshes, through thornbush. The flanking party, hacking a way step by step in places, were continually sniped at by arrows. Twice

the advance guard had fought their way out of ambushes. There had been hidden pits with pointed stakes at the bottom in the path of their advance, and twice they had come upon the bodies of tortured slaves tied to posts in clearings. The war drums had reverberated day and night, now far, now near. The heat soaked their clothes with perspiration all day, leeches clung to every exposed inch of their bodies, mosquitoes devoured them at night. Scores of the men were wounded, dozens were dead, scores more had fever.

“I’ve been wondering,” said Nick, “whether Hassan really managed to warn the enemy we were coming. That obstruction on the river, those ambushes, the drums all the time—they are so well prepared. It would be awful if—well, I was thinking about poor Wonky Willie. I mean if it was our fault——”

“Nonsense!” said Sheep, sipping the brew experimentally. “How could Hassan let them know? He couldn’t sail here in his dhow—I mean to the mouth of the river—in a couple of months. Here, have a suck at this.” He held out the mug. Nick took it, sipped some cocoa and handed it back.

“Couldn’t he have sailed across to Oran or somewhere, and telegraphed to Lagos—and then.... I don’t know, runners, war drums....”

“Bosh!” Sheep wiped a thick moustache of cocoa off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “You’re imagining things. You’re over-tired. Why don’t you go and turn in? We shall move forward to the attack at dawn. You’ve got time for three or four hours’ sleep.”

Sheep rose with a hitch at his belt and holster. The hilt of his cutlass gleamed dully. “I’m going round the sentries.

Then I shall wake Aberboyne. It's his trick next. Go and turn in, Nick."

"I'm not sleepy." Nick watched Sheep with a faint feeling of awe. Of all the midshipmen in the force, except perhaps Aberboyne, Sheep seemed least daunted by all he had seen and undergone. It was as if Sheep had never done anything but fight his way through a jungle all his life. Usher, on board the most imperturbable of the three, ex-cadet captain in the *Britannia*, had shown signs of strain before they disembarked from the boats, and had been carried back on a stretcher to the base camp with a bad bout of fever on the evening of the first day's advance. Carver, wounded in an ambush, was also on his way back along the guarded line of communication. Only Aberboyne, forever sharpening his cutlass with a pocket whetstone, frankly exulted in the whole business and had grown what promised to develop into a disreputable-looking black beard. But Sheep, the rather timid, gentle Sheep, exhibited a matter-of-fact nonchalance throughout all the discomforts, horrors, and hazards of jungle fighting that Nick thought altogether admirable. And it was Sheep's presence of mind, courage and endurance that had brought them safely out of the dhow and rescued them from an unthinkable fate.

He rose from the log on which he was sitting and walked in the direction of the shelter where Aberboyne was sleeping. He could not rid himself of the morbid conviction that in some way or other Hassan had been able to communicate to the King of Bengula the news of the expedition. He longed to be able to do something that would make amends for his indiscretion in talking about the expedition in the streets of Gibraltar.

A lantern shone feebly under the tree where Aberboyne lay sleeping, his head on his holster, his cutlass by his side. Nick smiled at the recollection of Aberboyne, the evening they left the *Vengeance*, propping up one of the gunroom settee cushions and lunging at it with his cutlass, uttering weird Irish war cries. He was about to lie down beside him and try to get a few hours' sleep when he saw Peerless Percy, the Lieutenant of his platoon, kneeling by a box of revolver ammunition and filling his pouch with the stumpy blunt-nosed cartridges.

"Hallo, sir!" he said in a low voice.

"Hallo!" drawled the Lieutenant. He closed the pouch, examined his revolver, and replaced it in the holster. "You ought to be turned in, y'know. Attack on the beastly capital at dawn. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy and all that sort of thing, y'know. I mean it's just before the battle mother, and so on and so forth."

"I'm not sleepy, sir." He noticed that Peerless Percy had discarded his sword and eyeglass. The only time he had seen him do that was when they coaled ship.

"Is anything happening, sir? I mean, are you going anywhere in particular?"

"Well, since you ask me, I am. I'm going to have a nose round the jolly old fort, stockade, encampment, citadel, or what not."

"D'you mean you are going for a reconnaissance, sir?"

"Yes. Roughly speakin'. Very roughly." Peerless Percy took a drink from his water-bottle and hung it on the tree beside them. "Them's my orders."

"Alone?" gasped Nick.

“That’s the rough idea.”

“Take me, sir. Oh, let me come with you!” Nick pleaded in such a desperately anxious voice that the Lieutenant laughed.

“You oughtn’t to go alone, sir.”

“Quite. I don’t feel I ought to go at all. Lose my beauty sleep. No roses in my cheeks to-morrow, y’know. But the Admiral wants——”

Voices in the darkness cut his words short. Sheep came quickly towards them.

“A sentry dead, sir. Speared. None of the others heard a sound.”

“Report to Lieutenant Stirling.”

“I have, sir. He’s doubling the sentries. He told me to tell the Commander and ask if we’re to stand to.” Sheep, grave and collected, stood calmly at attention in the light of the lantern.

“Well, carry on. I’ve got my own fish to fry.”

Sheep vanished in the darkness. Nick crammed a handful of cartridges into his pouch and ran after his Lieutenant, who was moving off.

“Heah!” drawled Peerless Percy. “I told you to turn in, y’know.”

“*Can’t* I come, sir?”

“No.”

“Sir, *do* let me.”

“Y’know what happened to the sentry.”

“Yes. That’s why. The jungle’s full of the enemy. We can fight back to back if we’ve got to.”

“Personally, I’ve no intention of fighting. Quite enough of that to-morrow.”

“Then can I come?”

“Beastly persistent, ain’t you? Take your cutlass off then; you won’t want that. Got some cartridges?”

Nick obeyed him hurriedly. “Yes, plenty.”

“Come on, then. Don’t blame me if you get a spear through you. And don’t make a sound or you will, and so shall I, y’know, and I’d hate it.”

They passed through the cordon of sentries and the outer line of defences of the camp. It had been pitched on the edge of the wide plateau of comparatively open ground where the capital was situated. Sir Martin Fortescue, the Admiral commanding the expedition, had intended to reach the position with sufficient daylight left



There was a blinding flash and report.

to carry out the assault. But his guides were not very reliable, and the difficult country had delayed his force; by dint of a forced march they had succeeded in reaching the edge of the plateau and pitching camp as night fell.

Lieutenant Adams consulted a luminous pocket compass and started off through the darkness. The moon had not yet risen, but where the trees were few there was a perceptible amount of light, and they avoided these open spaces, passing swiftly from one patch of dense shadow to the next. They came presently to more open ground where the grass grew as high as their knees and the country was dotted with isolated thorn bushes. Adams appeared to steer by these, now running, now crawling on all fours, pausing at intervals to consult the compass. Above the dark outline of the forest the sky took on a reddish illumination where the moon was rising.

For half an hour Nick followed the Lieutenant in this erratic progress; they were crawling forward from the shelter of a thorn bush when Adams suddenly dropped flat on his face and lay motionless. Nick, who happened at that moment to be beside him, followed suit. Far away ahead of them the sound of war drums was answered by the dull reverberations from the forest.

Adams raised his head very cautiously and pointed. His mouth was within a few inches of Nick's ear. "One of their sentries," he whispered.

Wishing his heart would not thud so loudly, Nick stared over the grass that concealed them and saw the form of a man standing motionless. In the darkness he looked at first like a small tree, but Adams handed him his binoculars, and then he saw that the sentry's head was crowned with feathers. He was leaning on a long spear.

"We must get past him quickly," breathed Adams, "or the moon will be up and he'll see us."

They began to wriggle softly through the grass, thankful that the sound of the war drums deadened the rustle of their movements. Ahead of them was a thorn bush towards which Adams was steering; they were only a few yards from it when the form of another sentry loomed up ahead of them. He was standing in front of the bush, invisible till they were almost at his feet.

Peerless Percy cocked his revolver, and the click of the mechanism, tiny as it was, caught the ear of the savage. He challenged in a loud guttural voice. The other sentry answered him, and the man ahead of them muttered something and strode forward. In another instant he would have seen them. Peerless Percy leaped to his feet: there was a flash and report, and the man fell, his shield and spear pitching almost at Nick's feet.

"Come on," shouted Adams. "Run for it." Nick turned in the direction from which they had come, to see the first sentry leap towards them.

Bang! went Adams' revolver again, and the next second they were sprinting for dear life.

"Look out, they're after us!" Nick glanced back to see shadowy forms bounding in pursuit. A spear passed over his shoulder and struck the ground with a snick. Adams caught his foot in something and went rolling over and over like a shot rabbit. Nick turned and faced their pursuers. There were three. He aimed low and fired all six chambers of his revolver. Adams was on his feet again. "Hurt, sir?"

"No, I'm all right. Come on!"

Nick saw that he had checked the pursuit. The moon had risen clear of the tree-tops, and in its light he saw two of their assailants outstretched on the ground and the third crawling

away on hands and knees. A wave of savage excitement swept over him. He jerked the empty shells out of his revolver and reloaded as they stumbled panting through the grass.

“Never thought they’d have that cordon of sentries, y’know,” gasped Peerless Percy, slowing down to a walk. “Moon like a searchlight, too. Well, we’re snookered. Back to barracks, me lad.”

They headed towards the dark wall of jungle and broke into a run again. The next instant half a dozen savages, plumed and paint-daubed, armed with spears and shields, rose, it seemed to Nick, out of the ground at their feet.

His impetus hurtled him into the arms of a warrior, knocking him backwards. They rolled over, grappling: he felt the naked sweating chest against his face, the sinewy fingers groping for his throat; and as he heard Peerless Percy fire and fire again, he screwed the muzzle of his revolver into his assailant’s ribs and pulled the trigger. The arms about him relaxed their grip; the gigantic body heaved convulsively and lay still. Wrenching himself clear into a kneeling position, Nick saw Adams leap aside to dodge a spear-thrust, and saw the spurt of flame from his revolver.

Something grazed his cheek-bone and stung like a wasp. A thrown spear buried itself in the ground a yard beyond him, and he fired again, point blank. Peerless Percy had emptied his revolver and was lunging at a naked figure with a spear he had grabbed in the mêlée; and suddenly he was down. Nick fired at the last figure he could see, and leaped over his body to the side of his Lieutenant.

“Dash!” exclaimed Peerless Percy, sitting up and holding his thigh. “That fellah got me.” He looked round the bodies

lying in the moonlight. “But we cleaned that party up all right. Ouch! what a mess. Have you got a tourniquet in your bag, my dear fellah?”

Nick fumbled for his first-aid outfit, and dressed the wound as best he could by moonlight. He managed to arrest the worst of the bleeding. “It’s pretty bad, sir,” he said soberly.

His excitement and fighting fury had left him. He felt sick and shaky.

“Might be worse, y’know,” said Peerless Percy. “Help me to my feet, my dear fellah.” Nick helped him up, but it was obvious that walking was out of the question.

“I’ll have to give you a piggy-back,” he said. “I think I can manage if we rest occasionally.”

“Bleedin’ like a stuck pig yourself,” said Peerless Percy, screwing in his eyeglass and eyeing him. “Didn’t you know you’d bought it?”

Nick touched the cut on his cheek-bone. “It’s nothing. Only a spear graze.” He bent down. “Can you manage ...? Hold on to my shoulders.... Am I hurting you, sir?”

“Dev’lish good of you, y’know. I ought to stop there I suppose and let you go back to the camp. But there’s no point in bleedin’ to death unnecessarily. Matter of fact, there’s a girl at home——” A grunt of pain cut his words short. Nick set his teeth and stumbled onward with his burden. Fortunately Peerless Percy was very lightly built, and the heat of the tropics had sweated off what little flesh there had been on his bones.

He had fallen silent except for an occasional quick indrawn gasp of pain. Nick reeled along towards the line of trees that

seemed to rise and fall in undulations, while the moon swam to and fro like a swaying lantern and the thudding of his heart was an echo of the unending clamour of the war drums.

They heard voices ahead, and he halted. Peerless Percy slid to the ground, keeping his arm round Nick's neck to support him.

"It's all right," said Nick after listening for a moment with his revolver cocked. "They're English voices." He hailed them, and there was an answering shout. A Lieutenant from the *Psyche* and a picket of marines approached.

"Hallo, there!" He came towards them with the moonlight shining on his drawn sword. "We heard the firing, and thought you might want help."

"We do," said Peerless Percy. "My dear fellah, we've had the deuce of a picnic." Nick felt him go limp. The *Psyche's* Lieutenant caught him as he fell unconscious.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT was still dark when the Reveille awakened the camp. Lanterns and cooking-fires gleamed on rifles and cutlass hilts and on the men's sleepy faces, grimy and distorted by insect bites after four days of forced marching through the jungle. The darkness resounded with gruff voices and occasional laughter. "The spirit of the men," wrote Sir Martin Fortescue, in his report of the expedition, "was admirable throughout," and never was it more admirable than in that clammy hour before the dawn on the day of the attack. The midshipmen of the *Vengeance* had formed a mess of their own whenever they camped, and Gunner Capper, R.M.A., had constituted himself their caterer, cook, and dish-washer. By methods known only to himself he contrived to secure the most unexpected delicacies, and proved an adept at transforming the ordinary rations into palatable dishes.

The last breakfast before the assault was his *pièce de résistance*, for he had produced half a dozen tins of sardines, a pot of jam, and, most incredible feat of all, a Melton pie in a tin which he prized open with his bayonet. There was also a fanny of hot cocoa, hard tack, and a ration of bully beef all round.

The original gunroom of the *Vengeance* had dwindled. Usher was down with fever, Carver wounded, Freyer remained at the base camp, helping the Fleet Paymaster of the *Psyche* with the stores of the expedition. Snipe Hepburn had wangled (although the word was not then coined) a place on the Admiral's staff as an additional aide-de-camp.

"Gosh, Capper!" exclaimed Aberboyne, as they squatted round their improvised table under the lantern. "Where did

you get that pie from?”

“Sir Jod,” muttered Capper. “Sir Jod ’Epburd snaffled it frob the Adbiral’s stores. ’E give it to be. ’E cobe to by bivouack last dight, an’ shove it in by helbet. ‘That’ll put sobe guts idto eb afore they attack terborrer bording,’ ’e said.”

“Good for Snipe!” said Bat, carving off a lump. “And what about the sardines?”

“Captaid of the *Dibf*, ’e’ll dever biss them. ’Ave a drop bore cocoa, Bister Waidwright.”

“Thanks, awfully.” Sheep, who was eating them out of a tin with his fingers, nodded appreciation of the Captain of the *Nymph*’s taste in sardines.

Bat Lawley spluttered as the hot cocoa burned his mouth. “How’s the face, Nick?”

“It’s all right, only I can’t laugh. It’s got six stitches in it.”

“Who wants to laugh?” asked Beevers. “My shirt’s full of ticks, and my feet are ghastly. How’s Peerless Percy?”

“Fair to medium,” said Aberboyne. “I was on watch when Nick and the party from the *Psyche* brought him in. The doctors reckon he’ll live. You saved his life, Nick. You’re the boy hero of this outfit, my bonny face-ache. Did you get any sleep?”

“All I wanted.” Nick mumbled at a bit of pie.

“How many braves did you scupper?”

“I don’t know.” Nick ached from head to foot with fatigue. A curious feeling of detachment possessed him. He felt as if he were observing everything that was going on from an immense distance; as if the events of the previous night had

given him a burden of years and experience that he had carried beyond all that the others knew.

“ ’Ere, Bister Aidsworth,” murmured Capper, and slipped a little flat bottle into his hand. It was the type of bottle the men used tucked into their socks for smuggling spirits into the ship.

“What is it?” he asked dully.

“Rub,” explained Capper in a sotto voce snore. “I save it for yer. Slip it id yer pocket, sir, ad swig it later.”

Bugles were sounding in the encampments. There was a rattle of arms and equipment as the punitive expedition heaved itself to its feet and stood to.

“Good luck to us all!” murmured Capper, and vanished into the gloom.

The purpose of the reconnaissance in which Nick had participated with so little success, had been to ascertain the strength and nature of the stronghold’s defences. As this had failed, a reconnaissance in force went forward to investigate, as soon as it was light, under the command of the Captain of the *Nymph*.

In the meanwhile the Admiral divided his force into four parties. The marines were to assault the town from the north, the *Psyche* and *Nymph*’s seamen from the east and west respectively, and the *Vengeance*’s from the south. In the half-light these separate forces took up positions on the outskirts of the jungle and awaited orders.

The *Vengeance*’s had not been long in their allotted position when Snipe Hepburn arrived with a message from the Commander-in-Chief. The reconnoitring party had fired

the town in several places with war-rockets, and reported that a direct assault with scaling ladders was likely to be a costly operation.

The Commander of the *Vengeance* read the message delivered by Snipe, and beckoned to the Gunnery Lieutenant; his name was Simmonds: a short, thick-set individual with sandy eyelashes, who, in moments of emotion, had a curious habit of reeling off, with an air of immense sagacity, a string of platitudinous proverbs that had no bearing whatever on the situation. He was without fear or imagination, and as tough as a bag of nails.

“Look here, Guns, the Commander-in-Chief wants us to send a party in advance of the main attack, place demolition charges against the main gateway, and blow it up. Take the Gunner and a Midshipman and a half-company with a Maxim, and see what you can do. I shall be in support in your rear, and if you succeed in blowing the gate down we’ll rush the entrance.”

Guns grinned delightedly. “Faint heart never won fair lady, and a stitch in time saves nine. That’s easy, sir. The stuff’s all ready. Give me five minutes to pick my men, and I’m O-P-H—off! Many are called but few are chosen.”

He hurried away to his company.

The Commander scribbled a note and handed it to Snipe. “Enjoying yourself on the Staff?”

Snipe’s expression suggested that by dint of prayer and fasting he was doing his best. “Yes, thank you, sir.”

“My duty to the Admiral, and tell him I shall move forward in support of the demolition party.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Snipe saluted and trotted away with the message.

A quarter of an hour later Simmonds and the Gunner, with Aberboyne and a party of picked seamen, moved off in the direction of the stronghold, looming up in the centre of the plateau.

Aberboyne, his revolver in his hand and his cutlass swinging against his thigh, was in his element. The advance through the jungle; discomforts, fatigue, thirst and hunger; the hazards of ambush and pitfall; the leeches and mosquitoes, ticks and prickly heat, wounds and sudden death around him—none of these things had daunted his soul. He was like a wolfhound running on a scent, and nothing but death or disablement would have checked him. Gaunt and unshaven, with a wild light in his Celtic blue eyes, he went forward beside the Gunnery Lieutenant in the same spirit of exaltation with which he rode to a kill across the glens of Antrim.

“I’m glad we couldn’t get the guns through,” he confided as they advanced. “We could have blown the place to smithereens with a twelve pounder, but this is more sporting, don’t you think, sir?”

Simmonds retorted enigmatically that all was not gold that glittered.

As they drew near, they could see that the ramparts were manned by warriors. A wild tumult of yells and the beating of tom-toms reached them faintly as they halted to survey their objective out of range of arrows. The wind was coming out of the forest behind them, and Aberboyne, standing beside Simmonds, who was staring through his glasses at the gateway of the stockade, had a sudden inspiration. It was not

exactly an original idea, but he remembered once being on watch with Wonky Willie at sea during some manœuvres. The funnel smoke of a battleship had temporarily obscured a flotilla of torpedo boats, and Wonky Willie, in one of his visionary moods, had told him that some day attacking torpedo-boats would deliberately make smoke-screens, mixing some chemical with the funnel gases, so that it lay upon the water like a curtain to conceal their retreat.

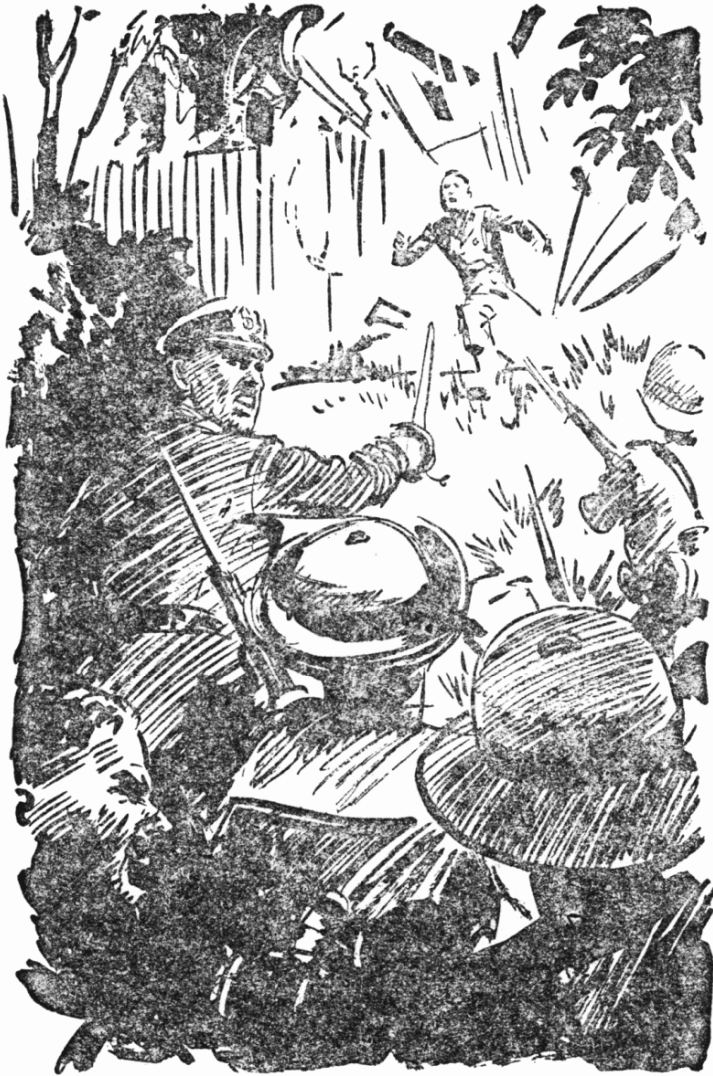
“Why not fire the grass, sir, and rush the gateway under cover of the smoke?” he suggested.

Guns, whose imagination would never have soared to such heights, was impressed by the idea. He spread his force out in a long line, and with their tinder-boxes the men ignited the grass; yellow flames began to creep forward in places, wriggling and twining through the grass like fiery snakes. Then with a crackle the whole line ignited and, fanned by the wind, swept forward beneath a mounting canopy of smoke. Guns gave the signal, and with a cheer the demolition force advanced across the charred ground, with the main body in support in the rear, cheering as they came.

A ragged volley of rifle shots sounded ahead of them, and a bullet struck the ground in front of Aberboyne, sending a spurt of earth into his face. It was the first intimation that the enemy had firearms; they were firing at random into the smoke, and presently the first of the arrows began to fall; the smoke that had been the screen of the attackers grew thinner as they reached the trodden ground surrounding the stronghold. Through rifts in the curtain they had glimpses of the outer stockade, of loopholes spurting flame, and barbaric bow-men in the towers that flanked the gateway. Men were dropping here and there along the line of advancing seamen.

Guns decided that the moment had come, and halted his force.

“Carry on volley-firing,” he said to Aberboyne. “Try and keep the towers and the loopholes clear.



He met the first of the *Vengeance's* line of attackers as it swept forward cheering.

I'm going to have a dash for it. Laugh and the world laughs with you."

The Gunner and six picked seamen ranged up beside him.

"Good luck, sir!" cried Aberboyne. It was as much as he could bear, to stand his ground, calmly directing the firing, while Guns and his party went forward with the demolition charges and the fuses. "Good luck all!"

"Snore and you sleep alone," retorted Guns stolidly. "Come on, my hearties," and with that they started off at a run towards the gateway.

The smoke that had covered their advance now hindered the firing. It cleared intermittently, and presently Aberboyne saw that Simmonds and the Gunner and one seamen had reached the gateway. The others lay motionless along the line of their desperate rush. His men went on firing as hard as they could reload and pull the triggers; the Maxim sprayed the ramparts above the gate with lead, till a drift of smoke momentarily obscured it.

Aberboyne stared ahead expectantly. At any moment they would see Guns and the other two rushing back towards them through the curtain of smoke, and hear the roar of the explosion.

The wind blew the veil aside, and he saw the three where they lay motionless at the foot of the gateway.

Still he waited, expecting to see the whole structure blown into the skies, but nothing happened. They had failed, speared or shot down before they could ignite the charges.

It seemed to Aberboyne as if all his life he had been travelling towards this moment. Some one had to reach those charges and detonate them, and now that Guns and the Gunner were killed he was plainly the one for the job. It never entered his mind that he too might be killed. He had reached a state of exaltation that lifts mankind above considerations of life and death, and he began to run towards the gateway, swerving and dodging like a Rugger three-quarter with the ball. Bullets sang past him, arrows and throwing-spears fell thick about his track, but with the charmed life of a Kilkenny cat he reached the gateway unhurt.

Guns lay on his back, clutching the haft of a spear that, thrown from above, had pinned him to the ground. The Gunner and seaman were also dead, apparently from bullet wounds. Simmonds had contrived to place the charges, and had fired the fuse before he died, but it had become disconnected and lay smouldering on the ground. All this Aberboyne noted in a few seconds of time. The firing from his own party, now reinforced by the main body, had momentarily cleared the towers of defenders. He bent down, connected the smouldering fuse, cast one more look at his shipmates to satisfy himself that they were dead, and took to his heels across the charred and smoking ground.

He met the first of the *Vengeance's* line of attackers as it swept forward cheering, with the Commander at its head; the wave of steel engulfed him; there was a roar of "Bravo! Mr. Aberboyne!" The sour smell of charred grass, sweat, and cordite smoke filled his nostrils; drawing his cutlass he was swept back towards the gateway in the irresistible, exultant torrent of the charge.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GUNNER CAPPER, Royal Marine Artillery, who was accustomed to do what he was told and ask few questions, found himself on the top rung of a scaling-ladder that did not quite reach to the top of the wall. The man ahead of him had been speared, and Capper had shot the warrior at point-blank range—the two of them tumbled on top of him and come near to knocking him off the ladder.

That was all right as far as it went, because the top of the wall seemed to be clear. Capper got his hands over it and heaved his big bulk up, pushed by the marine behind him. He swung his leg over the wall, and sat with his finger on the trigger of his rifle, staring into the smoke, uncertain what to do next. The noise of the explosion that blew in the gateway seemed to have drawn the defenders away from that part of the defences; fires in different quarters of the town glowed red through the smoke; there was a terrible din going on, yells and cheering, the rattle of rifle-fire, drums going like mad, and a stench that nearly turned his stomach up. Further along the wall he could see the Major waving his sword and shouting something. He peered down through the smoke, and saw the thatch of a building below.

“Go on, Cap,” urged the man behind him. “The Major says ‘Jump, you blighters!’ ”

“Blibe!” ejaculated Capper, who was no acrobat, but he instinctively obeyed orders. He saw the Major leap, and followed suit. His fourteen stone landed on the thatch and went through it, precipitating him into the midst of what he thought for a moment was a cat fight. He realised next instant that he was surrounded by women, all yelling as if their

throats were being cut, and scratching at him with their finger-nails.

He bolted for the low doorway, pushing them aside, and muttering distractedly, "Orl right, orl right, Susie!" till he regained the outer air. He had lost his helmet, but he had his rifle and bayonet in his hand, which was just as well, because a figure rushed out of the smoke and lunged at him with a spear. Capper parried the spear-thrust and lunged with the bayonet. "'Old that!" he snored angrily, and, having disposed of his assailant, looked about him for fresh orders.

His chief concern was the safety of his midshipmen. Where they were in that yelling pandemonium of flames and smoke he had no idea, and his impulse to go in search of them was checked by the uncertainty of the Major's orders.

The Major had ordered him to jump and he had jumped, and here he was alone in the smoke, with his face scratched, a dead African brave at his feet, no helmet, and no orders.

"Proper picdic!" observed Gunner Capper, and hearing shouts and firing on his left, he advanced in the direction of the sound. As far as he could judge, he was in a sort of street. It smelt worse than any street he had ever been in, and every now and again he saw things through the smoke, things tied to posts and crude wooden crosses that made him sick. He advanced cautiously, with his rifle at the ready and his finger on the trigger; above the din and firing he suddenly heard the Major shouting, "Rally, *Vengeance's*."

That cheered him up, because he didn't like being lost and only seeing awful things that turned his stomach, and having no orders. He broke into a run, and came suddenly on an open space somewhat clear of smoke, held by a cordon of marines. They were *Psyche's* marines (of whom he held a low

opinion), and beyond them a sullen throng of warriors stood herded together inside a ring of rifle muzzles, their spears flung in a heap on the ground. It didn't look as if his help was needed here. The sound of firing was dying away.

“Rally *Vengeance's!*” Off he went in another direction. It was like blind man's buff, looking for his detachment and the flagship's major. Forms, feathered and painted, rushed past him in the smoke, throwing away their spears as they ran. One nearly knocked him over in his haste, and Capper lifted his boot half-mechanically and helped him on his way. He realised suddenly that there was a drive in progress. They were rounding up the enemy systematically. The backbone of the defence was broken.

The sun had risen and was beating down through the smoke and flying sparks that singed his hair. Capper remembered he had lost his helmet somewhere inside a hut. Pity to lose a helmet; the Sergeant-major would have something to say to him about that; besides he'd probably get sunstroke presently.

Gunner Capper's slow mind revolved round the problem. Which hut was it? He'd lost his bearings properly, and one hut looked very like another except that some were on fire and some weren't. He could no longer hear the Major ordering him to rally. But he could hear women caterwauling away on the left. That must be the beauties who had scratched his face. Gunner Capper didn't particularly want to get his face scratched again, but he did want his helmet. The fear of the Sergeant-major's reproaches was stronger than the dislike of being scratched. He made off in the direction of the sound, averting his eyes from a whole row of the horrible things on posts, and came to a hut that seemed larger than any

he had seen. But the sound of women's voices raised in lamentation issued from it, and Capper concluded that it was the one he had entered through the roof. This one had a hole in the roof too, which had actually been caused by a fire that had been extinguished.

Bending low, Gunner Capper insinuated his formidable bulk through the doorway, and gazed round in quest of the missing helmet. The smoky sunlight poured through the hole in the roof, and showed him a confused mass of screaming women clustered like bees round an enormously fat savage whose only covering was a leopard skin.

“By 'elbet——” began Gunner Capper, as if apologising for the intrusion, when something he took for an instant to be a large monkey sprang at him out of the shadows. There was a flash of steel: a hot pain shot through his side.

The thing was too near for him to use his bayonet. He jerked the butt upwards, and struck again and again; it lay motionless at length, and he saw that it was not an ape, but a man; a grotesque feathered creature, hung with skulls and fur.

Gunner Capper was angry. The spear-thrust had only grazed his ribs, but he could feel the blood running down into his left boot and no man likes that.

“ 'Ere!” he said levelling his bayonet at the fat savage trembling among his women, “You cobe outer this!” He jerked his head towards the doorway.

The women screamed louder than ever, but the fat African, confronted with a bayonet in the hands of a wrathful Gunner R.M.A., decided to abandon them to their fate, and crawled across the ground as Capper backed out, covering him with the muzzle. They emerged from the hut as the Major, with a

detachment of *Vengeance's* marines, appeared through the smoke.

“What have you got there?” demanded the Major. The detachment halted. Gunner Capper brought his rifle to the salute.

“This 'ere party——” he began.

The Major stared at the grovelling figure.

“Holy smoke!” he ejaculated. “Man alive, I believe you've captured the king!”

“ 'Ad lost be 'elbet, sir,” snored Gunner Capper regretfully, with one eye on the Sergeant-major by way of propitiating the wrath to come.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN all things were accomplished, the *Nymph* went south to Cape Town; the *Psyche* conveyed the King of Bengula, a prisoner, to a west coast port, and handed him over to the consular authorities to await the Queen's pleasure as to his disposal; the *Vengeance* had orders to return to England, coaling at Gibraltar on the way.

Captain Fitzhopkins had recovered from his attack of gout, and was once more in active command of the ship. The more seriously wounded officers and men were sent to hospital; these included Peerless Percy, but Usher had recovered from his attack of fever, and Carver had retired to Government House to be nursed in luxury. Lascells, it was discovered, had recovered sufficiently from his injuries during the absence of the *Vengeance* to return to England in one of the ships of the Channel Fleet.

Nick and Sheep looked with rather mixed feelings at the Rock looming up above them, as the *Vengeance* entered harbour and secured to her buoy. Their adventures in the dhow, their escape and rescue by Pedro, had all been related to Captain Fitzhopkins when they recovered sufficiently from their ordeal to tell a coherent story. But by that time the ship was on her way south, and Captain Fitzhopkins had other preoccupations in any case, nothing could be done, and he contented himself with a severe lecture, not even punishing them, and then the expedition drove the incident into oblivion. They had omitted to make mention of Hassan's motive in kidnapping them, and Captain Fitzhopkins took the view that it was merely robbery, which perhaps was just as well.

The unfortunate Pedro, while waiting alongside the *Vengeance* for due recognition of his services, was seen by Captain Fitzhobkins who, waving poor Wonky Willie away, ordered him peremptorily to shove off and not disgrace his ship by lying alongside. Pedro indignantly attempted to explain the part he had played in restoring the two young officers to their ship and safety, but as he only spoke his native tongue, and Captain Fitzhobkins could not understand a word of it, his persistence in remaining at the bottom of the gangway was regarded as the effrontery of an illiterate foreigner, and ended in orders for a hose to be played on him, which was done, and Pedro retreated spitting abuse and reproaches like an angry wildcat.

Nick and Sheep, when they heard of the incident were filled with compunction. Nick found a letter with a cheque in it from his father waiting for him when they arrived at Gibraltar, and Sheep borrowed some money from the messman. Between them they made up a “purse” of ten golden sovereigns, and as all midshipmen were given a day’s leave while their ship was coaling, they decided to go off to the fishing village on the shores of the bay and try to find their benefactor.

It was a long expedition on foot, but, as on a previous occasion, their minds were happily engrossed and their tongues wagged ceaselessly: last time they walked through the streets of Gibraltar they could think of nothing but the expedition. That was over now, and Nick had a nice pink shiny scar over his cheek-bone to show for it. This time the only thing worth thinking or talking about was the leave awaiting them when they got back to England.

Freyer was a bit of a responsibility to his three friends. His parents were in India, and they had ascertained, not without difficulty, because Freyer did not talk readily about himself, that he usually spent his holidays at Folkestone with his grandmother. The only good point about the grandmother, as far as they could discover, was that she liked food; rich food and a great deal of it. But, as Freyer said, you can't eat *all* the time, to which the others reluctantly agreed. And there was nothing else to do. The old lady never allowed a window to be opened, and the house was full of fat, over-fed lap-dogs, china ornaments, and stuffed fish. Freyer's late grandfather had been a great fisherman, but he had never eaten the fish he caught. He had had them stuffed and put in glass cases. "They *glare* at you," said Freyer. "I mean, wherever the china ornaments give a fish room to glare, they glare."

Nick could not rid himself of the mental picture of poor little Freyer surrounded by glaring fish. "We'll have to have him to stay with us in turn," he said, as they trudged along the dusty road across the neutral ground connecting the fortress with the town of La Linea. "My father has got a bit of fishing, and I'll lend him a rod."

"I don't know if he likes fishing. When he was stuck at the base camp, counting tins of bully beef and things, he used to borrow a rifle and go off shooting rhinos. It must have been pretty dull for him, while we were having all that——" Sheep nearly said "fun" but substituted "excitement."

"Yes." Nick's mind roamed over the advance through the jungle, the assault, the desperate fighting inside the stockade, the bloodshed, smells, heat, flies—all that went to make up excitement for Sheep. He had no wish to think or talk about it much. "I daresay Usher would have him for a bit." Usher's

father was a widower, a Harley Street specialist. However, Usher was not there to consult.

“I’d like him to come to us first,” said Sheep. “My sisters would rag him, and that’s just what he wants. He’s got no sisters of his own——”

Sheep’s father was the vicar of a scattered moorland parish in Derbyshire, and whereas he did look rather like a kindly, intelligent sheep, Sheep’s sisters didn’t. They all had pigtails of various lengths and thicknesses, and red faces, wore thick boots, thick stockings, serge knickers, and short skirts, and were boisterous, laughing, tomboy creatures who did eventually do the sisterless Freyer all the good in the world; so much so that there came a day when he looked back and saw how all his real happiness in life dated from that never-to-be-forgotten leave.

However, that is looking farther ahead than this book will carry us.

While Sheep and Nick were trudging along the dusty road, full of projects for the leave, Pedro, the fisher lad, was stretched upon his bed of rags, enjoying his afternoon siesta. He was the only occupant of the hut, and although he was asleep, it was a sleep as light as a wolf’s; he was dreaming that he was a *torero*, a bull-fighter, and had just administered the thrust that brought the bull to its knees amid the tumultuous applause of thousands of throats, when a shadow fell across him. He opened his eyes, instantly awake, and saw an Arab standing in the doorway. Pedro knew him; his father and his uncle had had dealings with him on several occasions. They took heavy cases in their boat out to a dhow under cover of darkness, and received payment in silver dollars. None of the dollars ever came Pedro’s way, and when

he asked questions he got kicked; but being well able to put two and two together he assumed that the cases contained rifles which were being smuggled into Morocco to arm the tribesmen.

“*Ola!*” he ejaculated, and was on his feet in one lithe bound. He was afraid of the Arab, whose name was Hassan. There were rumours along the coast of boys being kidnapped by Arabs and sold as slaves, and he had once or twice seen Hassan looking at him in a peculiar way that made him uneasy. However, Pedro took comfort in the reflection that he had a dagger: it was one he had acquired from the English boys he had rescued, whose *Capitano* had shown him vile ingratitude. He kept it in the hole under his bed, and prayed the saints that some day they would so order things that he might cut the *Capitano's* throat with it.

“Greeting,” said Hassan in his gentle voice, speaking in Spanish. “I seek your father and your uncle, Enrique.”

Pedro said sullenly that they were in La Linea, but he could find them, and offered to guide Hassan to them.

“I have work for them to-night,” explained Hassan.

Pedro nodded. He remembered there was no moon, and it was on such nights that his father's and his uncle's services were usually in demand by the Arab. He led the way outside the hut, and looked round the bay. There was no sign of the dhow, but he knew that directly it was dark she would glide away from the crowded anchorage in the shelter of the Rock and anchor inshore.

They walked in silence till they came to the outskirts of the squalid little town. Pedro's father and uncle were, he knew, in a gambling den, and he guided the Arab through the narrow streets, with barred windows and mysterious walled

courtyards, past sleeping dogs and scabrous beggars, till they came to the alleyway that led to the den. He indicated it with a jerk of the head. “Down there!” he said.

The Arab made a gesture of acknowledgment, and turned into the alley. Pedro was about to retrace his steps to the village, when, to his astonishment, round the corner walked the two English boys he had rescued.

“*Dios!*” he ejaculated. The next moment the recognition was mutual. They rushed up, grasping him by the hand and patting his shoulder with such obvious pleasure that, although Pedro could not understand a word they said, he decided that something more than handshakes would result from the meeting. So he too laughed and patted their shoulders, and while they were standing trying to convey to each other their pleasure in this unexpected reunion, Hassan suddenly reappeared. He came from the entrance to the alley without a sound.

“They are not there,” he said in Spanish, and at the sound of his voice Nick turned and saw him. His blood froze.

Sheep recognised the Arab at the same moment, and stepped back a pace instinctively.

Hassan, after his first quick glance, ignored them completely. “They are not there,” he repeated calmly.

“Then they are in the next house,” said Pedro. “My uncle has a friend there.”

Nick stepped forward and confronted Hassan. His first impulse, which was to go in search of the police and have Hassan arrested, he rejected as impracticable, remembering they were on Spanish soil.

“Well,” he said, “so we meet again.”

Hassan's dark eyes travelled over them gravely without the faintest sign of recognition. He murmured something to Pedro.

"*No comprende,*" said the boy shaking his head at Nick and laughing.

The Arab again addressed Pedro. This time the conversation was longer. Pedro appeared to demur at something the Arab said; Hassan's voice changed to a note of authority: almost like a threat. Pedro turned away, beckoning Nick and Sheep to follow him. The Arab disappeared down the alleyway.

"I suppose we weren't mistaken, were we?" asked Sheep, as they followed the smiling, beckoning Pedro. "Was that really that ruffian Hassan the Just? So much seems to have happened since that morning in the dhow, and we never saw him clearly again."

Nick himself was beginning to have doubts as to the Arab's identity. It seemed impossible that anybody could exhibit such self-control, and assume such a mask of indifference, in the circumstances of their unexpected meeting. Unfortunately it was not possible for them to question Pedro, as neither midshipman could talk Spanish.

"Hadn't we better give him the money, and turn back?" he ventured presently. They had reached the outskirts of the fishing-village by this time, and a few of the ragged inhabitants, awakened from their siestas, stared at them curiously.

Sheep said he thought it would be a mistake to exhibit so much money in public, and suggested that they should wait to see where the boy was leading them.

They were not long in doubt, for in a few minutes they reached the hut on the beach where Pedro lived. Bowing and smiling, with the easy courtesy of his race, he ushered them inside.

Nick promptly produced the ten shining sovereigns and poured them into Pedro's hand.

The effect of such sudden wealth on Pedro was almost overwhelming. He kissed their hands and danced for joy, pouring out a flood of gratitude in incomprehensible Spanish.

Finally, going to a cupboard, he produced half a bottle of wine, some coarse bread and garlic, and a packet of tobacco. These he laid on the table and motioned his guests to partake of the feast, having concealed the gold somewhere about his ragged person.

Sheep and Nick, anxious not to hurt their benefactor's feelings, sat down to the table with quailing stomachs. The wine was thin and sour, and the bread tasted of mice, but they made a brave show of enjoyment, while Pedro, first patting his hidden hoard of sovereigns, enacted a sort of charade for their benefit; it represented a popular bull-fighter in the ring, playing and ultimately killing a spirited bull.

It was a lengthy performance, and Nick and Sheep, sipping the lamentable wine and nibbling the deplorable bread, forgot the passage of time while they watched and applauded.

They sat with their backs to the door, and neither noticed the form of the Arab that suddenly appeared in the opening and withdrew again. A moment later Pedro's father and Uncle Enrique appeared. They were bare-footed and made no sound. Each carried a sack, and they crept up behind the two midshipmen as Pedro, in a poise of incomparable grace, was

acknowledging the plaudits of his audience, real and imaginary.

The next moment Nick and Sheep each simultaneously felt a sack descend over his head and shoulders. A familiar odour of decayed fish filled their nostrils, as their arms were pinned to their sides and ropes swiftly and tightly bound round and round their struggling legs and bodies. Strong arms picked them up and carried them a few yards, and then they were flung down on to the ground. Some one laughed, a door slammed, and there was silence.

How long they lay thus they had no idea. It is difficult to estimate the passage of time when your head is enveloped in an evil-smelling sack, and your arms are bound so tightly to your side that breathing is an effort. Moreover, both Nick and Sheep felt that this time Hassan (who they concluded was responsible for their capture) would not let them slip from his clutches; their thoughts, and what muffled conversation they were able to exchange through the sacking, were concerned with what manner of end awaited them, and as the slow hours of suspense dragged on, their courage ebbed to a very low level.

“Let’s go for him, anyhow,” murmured Sheep at length; “if they cut our lashings, let’s both have a smack at him. We’ll probably get knifed, but that’s better than——” He broke off at the sound of the bolt in the door being turned. They waited, frozen with suspense, for something to happen. There was not a sound. Then some one struck a light, and they heard Pedro’s voice ejaculate the familiar “*Ola!*” in a low tone.

The next moment Nick felt the intolerable constriction round his ribs relax. The sack was jerked off his head, and he

saw Pedro bending over him with Hassan's dagger in his hand. Save for the glimmer of a candle the hut was in darkness. The boy put his finger to his lips, enjoining silence, and with a swift slash severed the rope binding Nick's ankles. He grinned and nodded reassuringly, and released Sheep, who sat blinking like an owl in the candlelight. Pedro was in a hurry and breathing hard, as if he had been running. He stuck the dagger into his waistband and busied himself with the *cache* under his bed, transferring his meagre hoard of coins to a place of security among the rags on his person; then he picked up the remainder of the bread and, with a quick glance round the hut, beckoned them towards the door. "*Pronto!*" he whispered.

It was pitch dark outside, but, taking Nick's hand, he guided them across the soft sand to where a small boat was lying. Between them they ran it hastily down to the water's edge, launched it, and jumped in. Pedro seized the oars, and as he began to row they heard voices behind them on the beach. Pedro rowed as if possessed. The voices were raised to shouts that grew fainter and died away.

Pedro boated his oars and began to step the mast.

"Where's he taking us?" asked Sheep. "Can we trust him?"

"We've got to," replied Nick desperately. He had taken the tiller while Pedro was preparing to hoist the sail.

"Gibraltar?" he said, raising his voice.

"*Si, si,*" replied Pedro in a guarded undertone, as he hoisted the sail. He passed the sheet aft to Nick, and crouched in the bows, staring into the darkness ahead.

They had not been under way for more than a few minutes when Pedro turned, grabbed the halliards, and lowered the sail again.

They peered in the direction indicated by his outstretched arm, and could just make out the form of a dhow; she carried no lights, and appeared to be at anchor. Pedro resumed the oars and, very cautiously, they approached the bows of the dhow. She was riding by a single rope cable, and they heard no sound of life on board.

Pedro manœuvred the little boat under her bows, seized hold of the cable with one hand, and drew his dagger. His intention flashed through the minds of both midshipmen at the same moment. Nick took the dagger while Pedro held the cable; Sheep possessed himself of the oars.

It was blowing freshly off-shore, and the dhow rose and fell at her cable, snatching it from Pedro's grasp; but Sheep kept the boat steady while Nick slashed with the dagger. The fourth cut severed the cable. Sheep backed away as the dhow drifted out of their sight into the darkness of the bay.

It was some time before they dared give vent to their feelings; not till Pedro had hoisted the sail again and the little boat was skimming away across the waves in the direction of the Gibraltar lights.

Then they all crouched together in the stern and thumped Pedro on the back till he coughed, and laughed their fill at the thought of Hassan worsted again, and of the dhow drifting anchorless. Then they remembered that on the morrow they were going to sail for England and home, so they sang "Rolling Home," and tried to teach Pedro the tune.

Pedro was also in the highest spirits: his home was behind him for ever. He had purloined his uncle's boat and was going to sail her round the coast to a big seaport—Malaga, perhaps. There he would sell her, and with the proceeds buy a railway ticket for Madrid, or Barcelona. After that the saints

would do the rest. He had his dagger, half a loaf of mouldy bread, ten golden English sovereigns, and boundless optimism. The bull-ring in Madrid was his ultimate goal.

Nick and Sheep were ignorant of Pedro's intentions, but when the lights of the harbour drew near, and they were able to make out the *Vengeance* lying at her buoy, gratitude towards the raggamuffin fisherlad who had twice saved their lives, filled their hearts. Having no words in common with which to thank him, they emptied their pockets of all they contained into his hands; when at last he brought the boat alongside and they stood up to disembark, he laid a ragged arm round the shoulder of each in turn, and kissed them on the cheek.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" he murmured, and as they ascended the ladder they saw the little boat with her ragged helmsman and ragged sail, glide out of the faint circle of illumination from the gangway lights into the darkness and the unknown.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ALL the way from Gibraltar to Plymouth, Nick and Sheep kept watch and watch in the engine-room, as a punishment for again breaking their leave on the eve of sailing. Captain Fitzhopkins listened to their story of the mysterious Arab with some scepticism, not lessened by the fact that they had again been brought back to the ship by the same Spanish raggamuffin. He suspected that they had been to La Linea to gamble, and that their story of being kidnapped a second time was a pure fabrication.

“This Arab,” said Captain Fitzhopkins in the course of the inquisition; “am I asked to believe that he pulled sacks over your heads, what? Why should he pull sacks over your heads? Did you see him do that, Mr. Ainsworth?”

Nick had to admit that he had seen nobody until the sack was over his head.

“And you, sir?” The Captain addressed Sheep. “Did you see this Arab pull a sack over *your* head?”

Sheep confessed that this was pure conjecture. All he knew was that somebody pulled a sack over his head.

“And what steps did you take? I say what did you do then, when you felt your head in a sack?”

Sheep said he struggled.

“Struggled. Very well, then. You struggled, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what good did that do? Did it bring you back to your ship before the expiration of your leave?”

Sheep shook his head, feeling a little unequal to this profound logic.

“No—or Ainsworth either. Disgraceful conduct. Both of you. I’ve seen men flogged at the gangway for less. I say in the masts-and-yards Navy——”

“Please, sir——” began Nick, but Captain Fitzhophkins cut him short and pronounced sentence accordingly.

Consequently they were not on deck when the *Vengeance* came up harbour and secured to her buoy in Plymouth harbour.

Sheep was in the stokehold, and Nick in the port engine-room when the telegraphs rang “Stop” for the last time, and the engines came to a standstill.

Presently, down the voice-pipe from the bridge came a voice, “Finish with the main engines.”

This Nick duly reported to the Chief Engineer, who pushed back his cap and wiped his forehead with a piece of cotton waste, because he was one of the old school. “Well, thank Crump for that,” he said.

Nick, uncertain who Crump was, remained standing to attention amid the warm oily steam and shining machinery.

“Haven’t ye got a home to go to?” inquired the Chief Engineer.

Nick said he had.

“Then ye’d better go there.”

Nick thanked him and rushed off to the stokehold in search of Sheep. He found him, black as the ace of spades, doing something with a coal-slice under the superintendence of Daunton.

“Come on, Sheep, the Chief says we can go on leave.”

“That’s all you brats think about,” grumbled Daunton. “Rush off on leave directly the killick’s down, and leave the

engineers to do all the work. I'm the only one in this hooker who does any honest work most of the time."

"Can we carry on, please, Daunton? The Chief says——"

"Go on. Shove off out of it. I shan't miss either of you."

They did not wait to hear more of Daunton's regrets at their departure, but fled up the steel ladders and aft to the chest-flat, which they reached as the other midshipmen came clattering down the hatchway, released from their duties on the upper deck. Trunks and portmanteaux filled every bit of clear space between the chests, and Capper stood in an attitude of defeat, clasping a pile of garments in one hand and a bundle of African throwing-spears in the other, and contemplating Nick's already bulging portmanteau with mournful snores.

"These' ere souvedirs, Bister Aidsworth——" began Capper despairingly.

Bat Lawley spied Sheep's face at this moment, black with honest coal dust. "The King of Bengula!" he yelled delightedly. "Dogs of war! Dogs of war!" and, snatching a spear from Capper, he came leaping over the chests. Sheep, who had flung off his stokehold garments preparatory to bathing, feeling naked and unprotected, bolted howling round and round the flat.

Snipe and Beevers were trying to lock poor Freyer in his sea-chest. Freyer's shouts for help were ignored by all but the white-faced emaciated Usher, who, forbidden to exert himself unduly, succeeded in getting Snipe down and sitting on his head. Clad chiefly in tattoo marks, Aberboyne had donned an African head-dress and was doing a war-dance and chanting ribaldry for the edification of Beevers, who was wandering about with his face lathered and an open razor in his hand,

trying to shave in anybody's mirror that happened to reflect his countenance. Nick, catching sight of Freyer's predicament, had hurled himself into the fray, and narrowly escaped being speared by Bat on the way.

Such was the pastoral scene that met the eyes of Major Ainsworth as he reached the chest-flat, guided by a messenger, in quest of his son.

Nobody saw him except Capper. Sheep had flung himself yelping into the sanctuary of the bathroom and bolted the door. Bat, brandishing the spear, turned away thwarted. He found himself face to face with Nick's father.

"Hallo, sir?" he said, uncertain who he was.

"My name's Ainsworth. I wonder if by any chance my son _____"

"Bister Aidsworth!" snuffled Capper agitatedly. "'Ere's yer pa!"

Nick turned from his task of errantry and saw his father. Everybody else saw him at the same moment, and there was a deathly silence.

"Hallo, dad!" said Nick, feeling slightly embarrassed. "I'm awfully dirty—just come up from the engine-room." He held out a grimy paw to his father, and they shook hands. "D'you remember Usher and—Sheep's having a bath. This is Lawley—Aberboyne——" One by one he introduced his mess mates, who shook hands a bit self-consciously. Nobody likes to be suddenly seen by a stranger doing a war-dance, or chasing a friend with a spear, or stuffing Freyer into his sea-chest.

Perhaps Major Ainsworth realised that the moment was inopportune. "I'll go along and wait in the gunroom," he said

rather humbly, which made Nick suddenly want to hug him. “You get all ready to go ashore, and then we’ll lunch and catch a train—eh? And here—” he pulled a newspaper out of his overcoat pocket—“here are the despatches and the honours list for the Bengula expedition. They came out this morning. You might like to glance at them.”

“I congratulate you, Aberboyne,” he continued. “Everybody in England is talking about you this morning.”

“About *me*?” echoed Aberboyne in a startled voice, struggling into a pair of trousers.

“You have been awarded the Victoria Cross.”

“Serve you jolly well right,” shouted Bat Lawley, advancing with the spear levelled at an inviting and still untrouserred target.

Major Ainsworth thrust the paper into Nick’s hands and retreated up the hatchway, feeling that the situation was somehow rather beyond him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IN the end they all had lunch with Major Ainsworth in a large hotel ashore—a meal such as they had dreamed of for months, washed down with tankards of honest English beer.

They were all a little shy at first, but by degrees the good food and drink dispelled the slight constraint; their tongues were loosened, and by the end of the meal Major Ainsworth had heard more of the Bengula expedition than ever appeared in despatches.

Nick was not very enlightening about the scar which was destined to ornament his cheek-bone for the rest of his life, or the adventure with Peerless Percy that rewarded him with a mention in despatches.

Nick's father, however, heard a great deal about Commander Burgoyne, now a Post-Captain and D.S.O., of his unflagging courage and good humour, and his achievements when he led the *Vengeances* into the desperate hand-to-hand fighting inside the stockade.

He also heard of Freyer's exploits at the base-camp, of the rhinoceros he shot, and how one morning at dawn he surprised a lion at a kill and laid it out with a lucky shot before it winded him.

"I expect you do a lot of shooting," said Major Ainsworth, with respect in his voice.

"No, sir," was the unexpected reply. "I don't really care about killing things. But being a non-combatant officer I could not accompany the expedition into the jungle, and it didn't seem fair not to take any risks when the others were in danger of being killed at any moment, so I used to go off

shooting rhino. I'd never shot anything before, and I don't suppose I shall again."

"Do you wonder, sir, after that," asked Beevers, "why we lock the lad up in his sea-chest? That's what we were doing when you came on board."

"What I'm wondering," announced Bat, "is, why you and Snipe got mentioned in despatches. All Snipe did was to lick the Admiral's boots clean every morning and dine off *paté de fois gras*. That was called 'great gallantry in carrying messages under fire.' And as for Beefy—what *did* you do, Beefy? It says in the paper: 'Set an example of courage and coolness in the face of the enemy when a Maxim jambed and the gun's crew were in danger of being overwhelmed.' Tell us about that, Beefy. It's the first we've heard of it."

Beefy blushed and buried his face in his tankard.

"He can't remember," said Aberboyne. "I'll tell you what happened. Capper gave Nick a bottle of rum just before we stood-to—didn't he, Nick?"

Nick nodded, laughing. "A small bottle."

"And Beefy pinched it——"

"I gave it to him. He had a touch of fever, and said he was feeling rotten——"

"Well, anyhow, he drank it—admit you did, Beef!"

"Some of it," confessed the victim.

"And it made him spiflicato. He can remember nothing about the incident. I saw something of it out of the corner of my eye, and I confess I thought Beefy was behaving in a very rough, ungentlemanly manner."

"I——" began Beefy, then lapsed into silence again, blushing more than ever.

“The truth is,” said Aberboyne, who had himself had all the beer that was good for him, leaning back and sticking his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and adopting a rather pompous manner they all recognised instantly, “the boy’s an inebriate. I say the boy’s a dipsomaniac, what?”

They all roared with delight, and poor Usher, looking, Major Ainsworth thought, like the ghost of the boy he remembered at Weymouth, choked and had to be thumped violently on the back to restore him.

Then it was time for everybody to rush off and catch trains.

Aberboyne, shaking off with difficulty a swarm of reporters who had just run him to earth, was the first to leave: then Snipe and Bat and Beevers; and finally Nick and his father, Usher, Sheep, and Freyer, bound for London. They had a carriage to themselves, and they settled down in it rather silently. The sudden severance from the ship and the companionship of the others gave them freedom for the first time to think about their homes, and to realise that they were actually back in England and off on leave.

Major Ainsworth sat looking at his son’s scarred face, as the train rushed through the peaceful English country, and realised that he was looking for some one who wasn’t there. The boy he knew, who had sailed out of his life under sealed orders, had vanished into the unknown and would never come back.

Nick, staring out of the window at the green woods and cows grazing in the fields, at all the tranquil beauty streaming past, was thinking about the kimono he had bought for Ethel, and wondering what had happened to it, when the train, with a warning shriek, plunged into a tunnel. He continued to sit motionless, staring through the dark window-pane, and

suddenly his father saw him start and clutch the seat on either side of him.

It seemed to Nick that a face had appeared for a moment in the darkness of the tunnel and looked at him; the face of Hassan.

Major Ainsworth leaned forward and touched him on the knee.

“What’s wrong, old boy?”

“I——” Nick wiped his hand over his eyes. “Nothing. I thought I saw—but it was nothing.”

The train emerged from the tunnel into the spring sunshine.

“You want some leave, old chap,” said his father.

It came over Nick like a wave, the realisation of home awaiting him: of his mother and Ethel, the dogs, his own room over the porch where you could smell the jasmine....

Jasmine!

“Oh, gosh,” he exclaimed, “won’t it be *marvellous!*”

THE END

[The end of *Under Sealed Orders* by Lewis Anselm da Costa Ricci (Ritchie) (as "Bartimeus")]