

ROUND THE
WORLD IN THE
"GOLDEN
GLENER"

Percy F. Westerman

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A SMART PIECE OF WORK

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Frontispiece

ROUND THE WORLD
IN THE
“GOLDEN GLEANER”

BY

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ROUND THE WORLD IN THE “GOLDEN GLEANER”

CHAPTER I

THE START OF THE HOLIDAY

“Quite a decent-looking kind of show!” declared Gerald Stacey.

“Not so dusty!” agreed Peter Meadowes. “Looks all right from the outside. What’s it like inside?”

It was the chums’ first glimpse of the *pension* “Quatre Vents”. It was also their first visit to Switzerland, and so far—from the moment their train had arrived at Lausanne—almost everything they had seen was of the nature of a favourable surprise.

Also it was the last holiday they were likely to have for quite a long time. They were both a little over sixteen. They had both been to the same school—a well-known educational establishment in the West Country—and were due to join their first ship, the *Golden Gleaner*, owned by the well-known firm of Whatmough, Duvant and Co., on the 25th of January.

Gerald was an only son, although he had two sisters, Joan and Peggy. They lived—except when he was at school—with their parents in a fairly large house in Balham, where, to all intents and purposes, Peter Meadowes was one of the family.

Peter was an orphan. He could hardly remember his parents, who had died when he was quite young. Under the terms of a Trust he was in receipt of enough money to pay for his keep and education—and very little more until he became of age.

Their friendship started almost at their first day at boarding school, five years ago. Before the summer of that year had passed something happened to cement their bonds of comradeship.

It was at Newquay, a Cornish seaside resort. The school was having a half-term holiday. Quite a number of boys were surf-bathing, presumably under alert supervision, but only one youth saw that Gerald Stacey was being carried out of his depth by the undertow of a receding wave.

At that time Gerald couldn’t swim.

The boys were kicking up quite a row, and only Peter, who was but an indifferent swimmer, heard his strangled cry for aid.

Unhesitatingly he plunged through the surf to reach and grasp his chum by getting behind him and taking a firm hold of the drowning youth. Fortunately for them both, Gerald did not attempt to struggle once he realized that his head was being held above water.

Getting back into shallow water was a very different proposition. The undertow of each successive wave was taking the pair of them farther and farther from shore.

It might have ended in a double fatality. There were no boats. Even had there been any, it would have been doubtful if one could be launched without the almost certain risk of swamping by the crested breakers.

Then one of the masters, alarmed by the other boys' shouts, came headlong to the rescue.

Seizing one of the lifebuoys thoughtfully provided by the local authorities, and handing an end of the attached line to some of the bystanders, he plunged into the surf.

Fortunately for all concerned, the men tending the lifeline knew what to do. Without impeding the rescuer's progress, they paid out the long, thin rope as he swam with powerful strokes towards the two drifting youths.

Reaching them, he placed the buoy over Gerald's head and shoulders, warning him that he must not on any account try to pull himself out of the water. Then, receiving an assurance that Peter could maintain a grip upon the buoy, the master shouted to his helpers to haul in carefully.

As they did so, the sports master swam within a yard or so of the buoy, keeping a wary eye on the two youths in case one or both might relax his grasp.

Luckily nothing of that sort happened; and though both youths collapsed when assisted ashore—having swallowed too generous a quantity of the Atlantic Ocean—they were little the worse by the time they arrived back at the school.

Incidentally, both Mr. Hughes, the games master, and Peter received certificates from the Royal Humane Society for their respective parts in the rescue operations.

Before that eventful summer was over Gerald had not only learnt to swim, but could beat his chum at it over any distance up to two hundred

yards.

It was Mr. Stacey who suggested a holiday in the New Year before the two chums joined their first ship.

“I can manage a week or ten days,” he announced. “Where would you two like to go?”

“On the Broads, Father!” replied Gerald promptly.

“Not in mid-winter, thank you!” objected his parent. “Even if one could hire a craft, it’s much too cold. And there are your mother and sisters to be taken into consideration. I might also remind you that when you go to sea professionally you’re likely to get all the cold weather you want—and perhaps very much more!”

“Why not Switzerland?” suggested his son.

“It’s pretty cold there, I should imagine,” rejoined Mr. Stacey.

“Not really, sir!” countered Peter, speaking for the first time during the discussion. “One of our fellows at school—Briggs Major—was at Davos last January. He said it was cold but somehow one doesn’t feel it.”

“It’s a dry cold and not a damp one,” supplemented Gerald. “I remember Briggs Major telling us that he never wore an overcoat. He didn’t even bother to take one with him!”

The other members of the family supported Gerald and Peter in their second choice.

“We’ll see,” declared Mr. Stacey guardedly. “I’ll look in at a Travel Agency on my way home from the City to-morrow.”

Replies to his inquiries were evidently of a satisfactory nature; for when Mr. Stacey returned on the following late afternoon he looked particularly pleased.

“The agency staff was most helpful. Everything’s cut and dried. I’ve booked accommodation at a *pension* called—now what was it? . . . I have it written down somewhere . . . Yes, here it is: the place is called ‘Maison Quatre Vents’——”

“That sounds decidedly draughty to me, my dear,” remarked Mrs. Stacey.

“But all four winds couldn’t be blowing at the same time,” countered her husband. “And quite possibly it will be calm during most of our stay. That’s

what the agent told me.”

“Where is the place, Dad?” asked Gerald.

“I was coming to that when I was interrupted, my boy! Here we are: ‘Maison Quatre Vents’ at Chamoisette, which is only twenty kilometres from Lausanne. It’s run by a Monsieur André Dubois, who, I have been given to understand, speaks English fluently.”

“But the rest of the staff: do they speak English?” asked Mrs. Stacey, conjuring up language difficulties. “The owner or manager—which is he, George?”

“I don’t know,” confessed her husband. “Quite possibly he’s both. But you were about to ask me something. Oh! The rest of the staff? Honestly, I don’t know whether they are linguists. I should imagine most, if not all of them, are so. We’ll find that out later. What really matters is this: I suggested a week, but the agent persuaded me to extend our holiday to ten days. So I have booked rooms from the 10th to the 20th of this month. We’ll be leaving here on the 9th and be home again by the 21st. That will leave four days clear before Peter and Gerald join their ship at Southampton.”

“Are we going by air to Switzerland?” asked Gerald hopefully.

His father shook his head.

“Too expensive,” he declared.

So that was that!

As is generally the case, the task of making the bulk of the preparations fell upon the lady of the house. It was Mrs. Stacey who saw to the packing of their clothes other than those they were to wear for the journey. In addition—providing for the unlikely event of their return being delayed—she had placed the budding cadets’ sea-going kit into their trunks, and had given them definite instructions as to where their uniforms had been hung up ready to put on when the momentous time arrived.

It was to be a momentous time—leaving home to go to sea. It eclipsed the more immediate prospect of a Swiss holiday, although both lads were tremendously keen on that too.

The Staceys’ holiday started under most favourable auspices. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Their house was locked up and the key left with a neighbour, who promised to look in every day just to see that everything was all right.

In addition, Mr. Stacey notified the police that his house would be unoccupied for eleven days, while tradesmen had been instructed not to call during that period.

The sea-passage was smooth and almost uneventful. The weather was fine and somewhat misty, the sea as calm as the proverbial mill-pond.

Gerald and Peter watched the white cliffs of Dover recede and disappear in the mists.

Little did they know that more than a twelvemonth would elapse before they saw those chalk cliffs again!

Then followed a long train journey through most of the long night, in a *wagon-lit*, a delay in Paris and finally another train that deposited the Staceys, and Peter, at Lausanne at nine o'clock.

There were about three inches of snow on the ground, but this seemed to be no impediment to traffic.

The Stacey party, complete with luggage, took their seats in a large automobile not unlike a shooting brake. In this they set off on the last stage of their outward journey to "Quatre Vents".

"Quite decent looking" and "Not so dusty" were two vague descriptions of the pension.

Actually it was a long one-storeyed building, mostly of wood. The roof was low-pitched and on it were perched several large stones. Later in their holiday the chums asked why they had been placed there, to be told that they served as weights to prevent the building being unroofed by violent winds.

In front of the building was a wide veranda. During the summer months this could be a veritable sun-trap; but at the time of the Staceys' visit the surrounding mountains, that seemed to close in the narrow valley, prevented any direct sunshine upon it.

Right behind the house a snow-covered mountain rose to a height of some five or six thousand feet. Several men roped together and looking about the size of field-mice were already making the climb to its summit.

Ascending the snow-covered slope between the "Quatre Vents" and the main road along the valley, the motor car conveying the new arrivals had to make three acute turns before it pulled up outside the pension.

Monsieur André Dubois came out to welcome his guests.

He was about fifty years of age, inclined to stoutness, although still very active. He might well have been taken for an English country inn-keeper. When he spoke there was hardly any foreign accent.

“Welcome to ‘Quatre Vents’, ladies and gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “Your luggage will be taken to your rooms. Leave all that to my staff. You need have no anxiety on that score. Meanwhile *petit déjeuner* is indicated.”

Soon the new arrivals were enjoying a light though generous meal. There were rolls of a lightness and freshness that the younger members of the party had never tasted at home, although Mr. and Mrs. Stacey remembered the time when bread in Britain was bread and not the stodgy substitute that came into being during the last war, and has remained ever since. There was fresh butter, too; unlimited quantities of it, with apparently no restrictions as to quantity. Neither Gerald nor Peter cared very much for coffee when they were at home, but here a first sip of the fragrant beverage made them change their opinion.



THE BUILDING, SOLIDLY BUILT AS IT WAS, SEEMED
TO LURCH BODILY

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The meal over—a four-course lunch would be served in two hours' time—Mr. and Mrs. Stacey went to their rooms, while Peter and Gerald with the latter's two sisters were shown round the grounds by Monsieur Dubois.

They could still see the party roped together—mountaineers—apparently slowly making their way towards the summit.

Monsieur Dubois produced a pair of binoculars and invited his guests in turn to watch the climbers.

“Too jolly hard work!” declared Gerald.

“Excellent exercise!” exclaimed Dubois. “Perhaps during your visit you would like me to accompany you to the top of the Spitz.”

The chums exchanged glances. If this stout little man could scale the mountain, why shouldn’t they?

“And what happens when a fellow gets to the top, monsieur?” asked Peter.

The proprietor paused before replying. He hadn’t been asked that question previously.

“It is a feat of endurance,” he declared. “You ascend, you reach the summit, then you descend.”

“Do you have any avalanches, monsieur?” asked Gerald.

Dubois glanced sideways at him and then shrugged his shoulders.

“You see that wall?” he asked, indicating a massive stone structure, shaped in plan like a lance-corporal’s chevron. It was about fifty yards behind the house and was about ten feet in height and strengthened by several buttresses. “Occasionally we have small avalanches. The Spitz is good to us in that respect. The snow that glissades down the mountain is diverted by that wall. No, Monsieur Stacey, we have nothing to fear on that account. For thirty years I have been here, and never once has ‘les Quatre Vents’ been in danger from avalanches.”

What he omitted to mention was the fact that thirty-five years previously the then “Quatre Vents” had been overwhelmed and destroyed by enormous masses of snow sliding down the mountain-side. Perhaps it was just as well, from the viewpoint of his guests, that he hadn’t enlightened them on that point!

CHAPTER II

THE AVALANCHE

For the next week the Staceys' holiday proceeded upon more or less conventional lines.

Gerald and Peter were taught to ski, their instructor being André Dubois' eldest son Gaston, aged nineteen, who was not only efficient as a teacher and guide, but also spoke English almost as well as his parent.

Under him the chums learned how and when to bend their knees to avoid an awkward and humiliating side-slip, especially if one foot skidded in one direction and the other in an opposite one. But daily—even hourly—the two youths progressed, gaining in efficiency till they became fairly proficient skiers.

Nor were Joan and Peggy anything but apt pupils, and before the week was out they were able to accompany the two youths on expeditions down to the village of Chamoisette.

By this time the chums had changed their attitude towards Dubois *père's* suggestion that they should scale the Spitz. Perhaps this was owing to the bracing air and also to the example shown by other young visitors to "Quatre Vents". Two German youths, younger than they, had already made a successful ascent and descent—the descent, although it took less time, being considered to be more risky than the climb. Gerald and Peter were not going to be beaten by a couple of foreigners!

But on the morning planned for the storming of the Spitz something happened that was to throw the Staceys' time-table completely out of gear.

Gerald's mother went down with influenza.

Monsieur Dubois was, to use his own expression, "desolated". His concern, however, was mostly of a mercenary nature. If other guests of the pension contracted the malady he might have to shut down.

Mrs. Stacey was confined to her bedroom. A doctor was hurriedly summoned from Lausanne. "Quatre Vents" reeked of disinfectants. Belying

its name, there wasn't any wind to disperse the warm and possibly germ-laden air from the now practically draught-proof building.

The next day Joan went down with the complaint, quickly to be followed by her sister. Some of the staff were also infected, but Monsieur Dubois kept that news from his guests. Actually two of them were down with 'flu before the Staceys arrived, but Dubois also kept that information a secret, blaming Mrs. Stacey for having introduced the complaint into his establishment.

Towards noon a strong wind sprung up, accompanied by heavy falls of snow. Outdoor activities had to be suspended. There was nothing much that the inmates—a description that suited them—could do beyond keeping to the warm, stuffy room, conversing in four different languages.

Monsieur Dubois did his best to rouse their flagging spirits.

“To-morrow it will be fine,” he announced successively in French, German and Italian. “It is not often we have very high winds at this season. Yes, to-morrow the storm will have spent its strength and again you will be able to enjoy outdoor sports.”

“You aren't feeling rotten, are you?” asked Peter, as the chums were preparing for bed.

“No, what makes you think that?” rejoined Gerald.

“I thought you looked a bit off colour,” remarked his chum, with brutal candour. “I shouldn't be a bit surprised if both of us are down with 'flu to-morrow. If we are we should be fit again before we join the *Golden Gleaner*.”

The possibility that they might not be hadn't struck Gerald before.

“Gosh! I hope we don't get the beastly thing,” he exclaimed. Then: “What's that?”

“Thunder, I guess,” suggested Peter.

They listened.

The none-too-distant rumbling sound continued and increased in volume.

“I've never known a peal of thunder to last all that time!” declared Gerald.

He drew aside the window-curtain.

That didn't help. The panes of glass were thickly plastered with frozen snow.

Soon the noise increased to a menacing roar.

"Perhaps it is an avalanche," suggested Peter.

"Old Dubois said there weren't any around here," said his chum. "Perhaps he's wrong for once. Even if he is, the stone wall will keep it from striking the house."

He had to raise his voice to make himself understood. In other rooms some of the occupants were shouting. It was just possible to hear their voices above the noise outside the house, but neither of the chums could hear what was being said, except for one word:

"Avalanche!"

A moment later "Quatre Vents" received the first impact. The building, solidly built as it was, seemed to lurch bodily. Above the roar came a terrific crash. The window of the chums' room had been forced inwards, letting in a large mass of snow. With it was part of a big tree-trunk that, stripped of its branches, was now in effect a battering-ram.

Gerald and Peter instinctively backed away from the inrush. They made for the door, only to find that the snow had piled itself up against it to a depth of about six inches.

Desperately they strove to open the door. Even that six inches of driven snow was enough to frustrate their efforts.

Then, to add to their difficulties, the electric light failed. Whether the cable conveying power from the village had been disrupted or whether the break had occurred inside the building was a matter of future investigation. The fact remained that there was no light. Judging by voices coming from other parts of the house, "Quatre Vents" had been entirely plunged into darkness.

"What's to be done now?" asked Peter breathlessly, bawling into his chum's ear.

Apparently there was little that they could do. They were almost breathless as the result of their futile exertions. Probably for the first time during their holiday they were conscious that the wind, eddying through the rapidly decreasing window-space, was really cold.

The while the whole building was trembling. Several loud rumbles, distinct from the noise of the avalanche, indicated that the large stones, resting on the roof to give it greater stability, had been forced from it to add to the debris on the snow-covered ground.

A rapid succession of more snow and debris continued to pound the house. The window of the chums' bedroom was now entirely blocked. More snow was prevented from entering by masses of it forming a ramp that more than half filled the room.

Noises, both exterior and interior, continued. To the imprisoned youths it seemed as if the battered house was being forced bodily down the hillside.

For all they knew, "Quatre Vents" was not only being displaced; it was being buried deeply by the avalanche. Would the low-pitched roof eventually collapse under the enormous weight?

Presently the roar of the avalanche subsided, to be succeeded by a shrieking noise as if the four winds had literally been simultaneously unleashed. Actually it was caused by the filling-up of deep "air-pockets" that had followed the abnormal displacement set up by the avalanche.

At length these sinister noises died down. The chums hadn't the faintest idea of how long they had lasted. They seemed to have lost all count of time as they leaned against the snow-blocked door, wondering, apprehensively, what was going to happen next.

They were in utter darkness. The masses of snow and rubble were impervious to light, even though the stars might be shining in a now unclouded sky.

Most of the exterior noises had ceased, but there seemed to be considerable activity on the part of Monsieur Dubois, his staff and the guests.

"I hope your mother and sisters are all right," said Peter.

"So do I," replied Gerald.

For the present there was nothing they could do to relieve their anxiety for the three temporary bed-ridden patients who, because of their illness, had been more or less isolated in a wing of the building.

A succession of knocks on the bedroom door reassured the lads that they hadn't been forgotten and that they were still in touch with the rest—perhaps only a part—of the house.

“Are you all right?” boomed Mr. Stacey’s voice.

“Yes; but we can’t get out,” replied his son.

“Because there’s snow heaped up against the door,” supplemented Peter.

There was a pause during which the two youths could faintly hear an animated discussion between Monsieur Dubois and some of his staff on the one hand and Mr. Stacey and a few of his fellow guests on the other.

Apparently the latter were proposing to open the blocked door by brute force; while Dubois and his supporters were opposing the suggestion on the grounds that enough damage had been done to his property without the wrecking of the door.

Finally they compromised, Dubois agreeing to one of the four door-panels being forced.

This was done and once again artificial light played into the previously dark room. It wasn’t the brilliant electric light bulbs that were responsible for that—only four paraffin lamps. Compared with the intense darkness this was almost luxury.

“Are mother and the girls all right?” asked Gerald.

“So far,” replied his father. “We’ve moved them to one of the front rooms. . . . Now, one at a time.”

The chums’ efforts to wriggle through the gap in the door were futile. Monsieur Dubois had grossly under-estimated the girth and breadth of shoulder of each of the British youths. It dawned upon him that, should either get stuck, considerably more damage would have to be done to the door before they could be released.

“Wait a little longer!” he urged. “I give you a spade.”

One was passed through the door to the trapped youths.

“Be very careful with ze spade,” Dubois warned them. “Do not scrape ze paint from ze door with ze spade!”

In an attempt to preserve his property from more and perhaps needless damage, Dubois had let his previously almost faultless English go by the board!

There was nearly a contest between the chums as to the first spell with the spade. They were feeling so cold that they wanted manual exercise to send the blood coursing once more through their chilled veins.

Gerald started first, plying the spade so vigorously—in spite of Monsieur Dubois' warnings—that it wasn't until he handed the implement to Peter that he realized he'd piled the displaced snow on his own bed!

That hardly mattered, for the bed had already been covered by the drifts and it was most unlikely that he would ever sleep in it again.

At last the accumulation of snow against the door was removed. When lights were brought into the room a scene of desolation and destruction presented itself. From the top of the window—where every pane was missing—there was a steeply sloping bank of snow extending to the opposite wall. Almost buried under it was the gaunt tree trunk that, pressing down upon Gerald's suitcase, had practically flattened it.

Peter's was in a slightly better state. He had left it, opened, upon a chair close to the foot of his bed. When it was dug out, its contents were in a sodden condition. The snow, unlike the powdery stuff common to Switzerland, had melted in the comparatively warm room and had filled his case with a mixture of sodden slush and dirt.

Only partly clad—for they hadn't undressed for bed when the avalanche began—the two lads were taken into the dining room, where they were provided with overcoats by some of the visitors whose things had escaped the catastrophe.

Peter had left his wrist-watch under his pillow. Gerald still wore his but it had stopped. A cuckoo-clock on the wall told them that it was one o'clock in the morning.

It had seemed a very long time that they had been trapped, and the fact that only three hours had elapsed since the avalanche crashed down upon "Quatre Vents" took them completely by surprise.

Rising nobly to the occasion, Monsieur Dubois rallied his kitchen staff and provided his guests with a hot meal. The electric range was out of action—as were all the much-advertised electric "gadgets". The failure of the current had been responsible. There was no heat to be had from the radiators, the lighting had to be limited to candles and oil-lamps. The telephone was dead, cutting "Quatre Vents" off from the outside world.

There was no coal to be had; but, fortunately, Monsieur Dubois had laid in a good supply of logs. Although he had discounted the idea of an avalanche, he had nevertheless taken precautions against such a thing happening.

At the back of the building the snow was above the eaves and also lay thickly in patches on the roof. On the front, overlooking the valley, it was high enough to block completely any view from the windows.

“How long do you think it will be before we can leave, Monsieur?” asked Mr. Stacey.

The proprietor shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps three days,” he replied. “Perhaps one week, or longer. But rest assured: there will not be another avalanche. We have plenty food and plenty fuel. There is no cause for alarm. As soon as possible help will arrive.”

Already Mr. Stacey realized that he and his family were in a distinctly unfortunate position. They were to all intents and purposes part of a beleaguered garrison. It might be a week or more before his wife and daughters would be fit enough to travel. They would have to stop where they were, and he would have to remain with them until they could leave “Quatre Vents”.

With Gerald and Peter the situation was different.

There were now only three clear days to the time they were due to join their first ship at Southampton. Anything might happen during those three days. What mattered most, as far as the chums were concerned, was whether they would or would not catch the S.S. *Golden Gleaner*. To them it seemed as if their future career as officers of the Merchant Navy depended upon the happenings of the next few days.

CHAPTER III

BESIEGED BY NATURE

Gerald's and Peter's chances of catching their ship seemed to be very remote. The "Quatre Vents" was practically in a state of siege, its occupants held, not by human agency, but by the forces of nature.

The night wore on. Few, if any, of the besieged thought of going to their rooms. The herd instinct made them prefer society to solitude. Most of the guests were able to bring their beds to the large *salon*. Those whose bedding had been either saturated or buried under masses of snow—Gerald and Peter came in that category—tried to make the best of a bad job, by placing cushions and rugs upon the floor.

The influenza cases, now found to number seven, were accommodated in a nearby room, heat and warmth being somewhat inadequately provided by a wood fire and a couple of candles.

In the salon, conditions were worse. After the guests had turned in, the fire was banked up and all lights extinguished with the exception of a solitary oil lamp, Monsieur Dubois explaining that, although he possessed reserves of fuel and light, it was inexpedient to use them unnecessarily since there seemed to be no prospects of their speedy relief.

Deprived of its usual method of central heating, with parts of the building open to the accumulated masses of snow, "Quatre Vents" did not appear to belie its name. There were draughts everywhere. Ominous noises were of frequent occurrence. No one knew whether a fresh avalanche would complete the task which the earlier one had begun.

At length came the dawn. It was hardly noticeable within the house. The small amount of light that filtered in did so through the snow covering the as yet unbroken window-panes.

A scratch breakfast was provided. Spirits began to rise after the meal. Some of the guests accepted the situation more or less philosophically. Others—especially Gerald and Peter, and to a slightly lesser extent Mr. Stacey—were distinctly worried.

The prospects of an early release were discussed. Gaston Dubois, in spite of an obviously warning look from his parent, declared that he knew of a family whose house in the valley had been completely buried in snow for ten days. When rescued they were in good health, the building remaining warm under its mantle of snow. Fortunately there had been an ample stock of provisions. Eventually a deep trench had to be cut in the snow in order to release the trapped family.

“Can’t we dig a way out, Monsieur Dubois?” asked Peter.

A characteristic shrug of the shoulders was the proprietor’s only reply.

The chums would not have minded if they were to be imprisoned under the snow had it not been a matter of urgency for them to be at Southampton within the next sixty hours. There was also anxiety for Gerald’s mother and sisters. They could not be moved until they were better; and Mr. Stacey would have to remain with them until they could be taken down to Lausanne.

During the forenoon the chums borrowed spades, and having obtained Monsieur Dubois’ reluctant permission, proceeded to their room to excavate their buried clothes and other personal belongings.

Assisted by other temporary residents, they tackled the task with a will. The exercise sent the blood coursing through their veins again, as they removed shovelful after shovelful of partly frozen snow from one end of the room to the other.

Soon they were rewarded by recovering most of the clothes they had removed prior to turning in. Then Peter’s suitcase was exhumed, its contents saturated although otherwise apparently intact.

Gerald’s suitcase was in a hopeless state, one side having been completely wrenched away by the weight of the tree-trunk that had been forced through the window.

“Why can’t we dig a way out through here?” suggested Peter, indicating the shattered window-frame.

“What’s the use?” objected his chum.

“Well, we might have a chance to see what’s going on outside,” replied Peter.

“And what are we going to do with the snow we remove?”

“Pile it up on top of the snow already in the room.”

“Dubois wouldn’t like that: not a little bit,” Gerald pointed out.

“He needn’t know till we’ve shifted the stuff,” countered Peter. “Let’s lug these clothes to the kitchen and see if they can be dried and then we’ll have a shot at shifting the snow.”

It was a stiff task but not so arduous as Gerald had expected. What it amounted to was shifting the snow above the inclined tree trunk and piling the displaced stuff against one of the walls of the room.

Helped by a couple of young Frenchmen, the chums toiled for two hours until, above the end of their inclined tunnel, sunlight began to filter through the thin barrier of frozen snow that separated them from the open air.

Suddenly and without the slightest warning the end of the tunnel caved in, burying Peter’s head and shoulders.

Gripping his chum by his ankles, Gerald dragged him backwards and clear of the accumulated snow. Above them was an opening considerably wider than a man’s shoulders.

“Are you all right?” asked Gerald.

“All serene!” replied his chum somewhat breathlessly.

Two large branches partly buried in the wall of snow served as stepping places to gain the open.

Peter swarmed up, Gerald followed, and behind him appeared the two French youths.

They were above the level of the roof of “Quatre Vents”, which was covered to a depth of about a couple of feet. The large stones that had been purposely placed on it to prevent the roof being removed by high winds had disappeared. More snow, with partly buried trees and rocks, extended towards the towering heights of the Spitz. The wall that had been built with the object of diverting avalanches had disappeared. Either it had been carried away or had been buried deep in debris, but about where its apex had been was an enormous boulder, much of it sunk in the snow. Had it continued its career for another fifty yards or so it would have meant the destruction of “Quatre Vents”.

The sky was perfectly clear. The summit of the Spitz could be distinctly seen. Most of the peak was covered by virgin snow, but a large dark patch, probably a quarter of a mile wide, showed the path of the avalanche down the mountain-side. A group of pine trees—yesterday a feature of the Alpine landscape—had been completely uprooted. Most of the trees had been

buried in the debris, but a few stuck up at varying angles above the white though somewhat mottled covering of snow.

The chums then directed their attention to the opposite direction—down the long steep slope to the narrow valley. Some of the houses in the village had been overwhelmed. Men, looking little larger than ants, were swarming over the drifts, engaged upon rescue work. Farther up the valley, a snow plough had been attempting to cut its way, only to be brought to a complete standstill.

“It’s getting too beastly cold!” declared Gerald. “Let’s go down out of it.”

“Zat means ze snow it melt,” said one of the French youths. “Soon ze snow it move. It vill make anoder avalanche.”

In the salon Monsieur Dubois said nothing to express his disapproval of the youths’ activities. In fact he was favourably surprised. Apparently the usual procedure when a house is buried by an avalanche is for the occupants—if they survive—to sit tight until rescuers arrive upon the scene. Digging themselves out is something that rarely enters into their consideration.

“Couldn’t we ski down to the village, Monsieur?” suggested Peter. “We’re awfully anxious to get home some time to-morrow.”

“And so are many other people,” rejoined Dubois, with a vigorous shake of his head.

He went on to explain that the snow lay deep on the slope, extending from well above his pension down to the valley. For the present it was still. The upper layer was frozen hard, but where the underside of the snow was in direct contact with the ground a thaw was already setting in. There was no direct danger from that unless people or cattle moving over the frozen snow—or even the report of a gun—set the whole mass in motion. The result might be a minor but still dangerous avalanche, causing death and destruction to more of the inhabitants of Chamoisette.

“And so you will agree that one must exercise patience,” he added. “It is better for you to continue to be my guests than to be eventually carried to the cemetery of Chamoisette!”

The chums agreed that there was a tremendous lot of horse-sense in what Dubois had said.

Their chances of joining the *Golden Gleaner* were hourly growing more and more remote.

During that afternoon the now despondent chums were able to resume their own clothes, even though, in the course of the drying operations, their coats and trousers had definitely shrunk.

Another night passed, almost uneventfully. Dawn meant that within the next thirty-six hours the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* would be on her way. Little short of a miracle could save the situation as far as Gerald and Peter were concerned.

After another uncomfortable night—the salon being crowded by people “sleeping rough”—the chums made their way through the tunnel they had made to the top of the immense mound of debris.

This time Gaston Dubois went with them. His father had been invited to make another addition to the party, but he asked to be excused on account of pressure of work. Gerald and Peter felt certain that this was not the reason. It was more than likely that Monsieur Dubois’ girth had been and still was the deterrent!

Again the sun, though low down, was shining dazzlingly in a clear blue sky. There was no wind, not even a light breeze. The sloping snowfield in front of Quatre Vents looked much the same as it had done on the previous day, but Gaston expressed the opinion that a thaw had set in and soon the whole field would be set in motion. In present conditions he declared that any attempt to ski down to the village would be suicidal.

They could see men at work at Chamoisette, but there remained a lot of work to be done before all the inhabitants could be rescued. The snow plough still appeared to be inactive. Temporarily, the task of clearing a road through the valley had to be abandoned.

Presently a droning sound reached the ears of the “observation party”, which had now increased to five by the arrival of the two French boys.

Skimming the mountain crests beyond the valley was a helicopter. It was flying more or less in the direction of the camouflaged Quatre Vents, with its helices turning slowly lest the disturbed air might set more snow in motion to increase the amount that had already partly overwhelmed the village.

The helicopter was in no hurry. Descending until it was but a hundred feet or so above the houses of Chamoisette, it began to follow the valley road. Then, for no apparent reason, it turned and, regaining altitude, seemed to be making straight for Quatre Vents.

“I know zat aviateur,” declared Gaston. “He is great friend of my fader. But why he come I do not know. *Regardez bien!* He descends!”

Obviously it was the pilot's intention to bring the helicopter to earth, or, rather, to alight on the snow massed behind Quatre Vents. The machine was barely hovering in order to minimize the risk of causing another avalanche.

It touched down within twenty yards of the snow-buried house. Gaston walked across the intervening strip of frozen snow to greet the pilot. Gerald and Peter followed. They were curious to see the weird-looking machine at close quarters.

The conversation between Gaston and the pilot was animatedly carried on in a mixture of French and German. Several times the chums heard the words *la grippe*, so evidently the subject of influenza was being discussed.

Then Gaston, still talking at high speed, pointed to Gerald and Peter in turn. The pilot nodded and the conversation went on for about a couple of minutes more.

"I have told mine friend you are anxious to return to London to go on a ship," explained Gaston. "He vill fly you to Lausanne *tout de suite*. Zat is if you wish. He give you ten minutes to make preparation."

It looked like a heaven-sent opportunity.

The chums had practically abandoned all hope of joining their ship—at Southampton and not at London, as Gaston had erroneously stated. That was a mere detail. What mattered was that, quite unexpectedly, a chance had been offered them to make amends for the bitter disappointment of the last two days.

"Thank him very much, Gaston," said Gerald. "We won't be more than ten minutes."

They dived into the mouth of the tunnel, leaving the two French boys, who were not handicapped by differences in language, to ply the airman with a spate of technical questions concerning his machine.

"There's a helicopter waiting to take us to Lausanne, pater!" announced Gerald. "I hope you don't mind?"

CHAPTER IV

A RACE AGAINST TIME

“Mind—why should I?” asked Mr. Stacey. “I wish for some things I were going too. But I can’t leave your mother and the girls.” This was obvious. “You’d better not say good-bye to them. Your mother might be anxious about you flying. You have your tickets and passports? Money: no more than that? I haven’t any too much either.”

“Permit me, Monsieur Stacey,” said Dubois, who had been listening to the conversation. “I can trust an English gentleman. Never have I been—how shall I say?—done in ze eye by one. Except in one instance——”

Leaving Dubois to relate the incident and also to assist his guests financially should the need arise, the chums set about their hasty and limited preparations.

Since Gerald’s suitcase was no longer usable, they packed their joint essentials into Peter’s with the result that it could not be fastened.

“It’ll have to do,” declared Gerald. “And we won’t have the bother of having to open it when we pass the Customs.”

Another difficulty confronted them. The suitcase was too bulky to be taken through the tunnel. A lot of their belongings had to be removed and handled separately before the case could be pushed and pulled into the open air.

In spite of these difficulties, the chums and their luggage boarded the helicopter with thirty seconds to the good!

Although not suitably clad for flying—even for a journey of no more than ten minutes’ duration—the chums enjoyed their flight over the snow-clad mountains and ravines. They were in high spirits, too, at the prospect of joining their ship, even though time was getting short.

Descending slowly and almost vertically, the helicopter touched down in a square within a couple of minutes’ walk of the railway station. Quickly a crowd gathered to watch the chums alight. There were murmurs of sympathy as they did so. Without having to be informed, the kindly Swiss

throng seemed to know that the two English youths had been rescued from the scene of the avalanche.

In turn Gerald and Peter shook hands with their pilot.

“*Merci, monsieur!*” exclaimed the former. “*Combien?*”

The man made a negative gesture, clearly indicating that he wished for no payment for his services. Then, accelerating, the helicopter soared once more into the blue sky.

A number of people escorted the chums to the *gare*. There was quite a scramble to carry their bulging suitcase for them, with the result that half a dozen articles fell out and a halt made for them to be restored to their insecure place.

They found that they would have to wait an hour for their train—sixty minutes of impatient delay—but they filled in most of the time by having quite a sumptuous meal. As Peter remarked, it was their last chance of a good tuck-in on Swiss soil and goodness only knew when they would be able to do so again.

The express took them to Paris, where, owing to some misunderstanding, they boarded another train, which they thought would deposit them in Calais. Actually it landed them at Le Havre where, after being questioned by Customs officials, they were permitted to board a steamboat for Southampton. That was where they were to join the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* in fifteen hours' time. Meanwhile they must journey to London and back in order to change into uniform and collect their sea-going kit.

It was now nearly midnight. The night was dark and there was a blustering wind, accompanied by showers of rain. They knew that their ship was lying at a nearby wharf but there was nothing they could do about it. The train to Waterloo was leaving in twenty minutes' time.

Fortunately for them there was no delay at the Customs. On being told that they were virtually refugees from the avalanche village of Chamoisette—details of the disaster had been reported in the British press—the officials passed them through without examining the disorderly contents of their joint suitcase.

They caught the London train with five minutes to spare. They were now in good if not high spirits.

According to the time-table, they would arrive at Waterloo at two in the morning. There would be neither a tube train nor a bus to take them to Balham at that unearthly hour. They could walk that distance; but, even so, the house would be locked up and, even taking the circumstances into consideration, they couldn't knock up their friendly neighbour before seven in order to obtain the key to the Staceys' residence.

Working things out they found that, barring accidents, they would be home between seven and eight. Allowing two hours to have baths, change into uniform and pack their sea-kit, they would be able to catch the ten o'clock quick train to Southampton, where it was due to arrive shortly after midday. That would afford them ample time to report for duty on board the *Golden Gleaner*, which was timed to sail at a quarter to one in the afternoon.

It wasn't so easy as all that!

For one thing, after killing time at Waterloo for a couple of hours, they were not able to get hold of the key until a quarter to eight. Then there wasn't a fire at the Staceys' house. That meant no hot baths—an absolute necessity—until a couple of kettles of water had been boiled on the gas stove.

After that Gerald couldn't find some of his clothes, in spite of the fact that his mother had expressly told him where they were before starting on their disappointing though exciting Swiss holiday.

As things turned out, they caught their train at Waterloo by the skin of their teeth.

The train was crowded, but Gerald found himself sitting opposite a bronzed man of about fifty, who was wearing a reefer jacket, blue trousers and a peaked cap bearing the badge of a well-known south coast yacht club. The chums could not help wondering why he was obviously on his way to join a yacht at this season of the year.

He, on his part, was sizing up the lads sitting opposite. He knew by their cap badges that they belonged to the fleet owned by Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co. As a matter of fact, his only son was fourth officer in the S.S. *Golden Effort*. Although his home was at St. Alban's, Mr. Gregory—that being his name—kept a small cabin motor-launch in commission almost all the year round. Her home port was Southampton, and during the period when most amateur yachtsmen lay up their craft he used his principally for fishing trips.

“Just off on another voyage?” he asked tactfully.

He guessed from the fact that they were wearing brand new uniforms that they were joining their first ship, but it was advisable to practise a little deception in that matter. He was a little surprised, however, when Peter replied that this was the first time they were going to sea in a professional way.

“You belong to Whatmough, Duvant’s fleet, I see,” continued their questioner. “And how was my young friend Duvant when you last saw him?”

Gerald had to reply that, as far as he knew, he hadn’t set eyes upon the shipping firm’s junior partner. At their initial interview another member had “put them through their paces”.

The conversation continued, during which it transpired that Mr. Gregory was going to spend a long week-end on board his motor-launch *Fidelity*, and that he hoped to augment his family’s rations by returning with a tidy catch of whatever fish the Solent provided.

Then the chums related their experiences in the avalanche and of the race against time to enable them to join their ship.

“And it looks as if you’ve won by a good margin,” observed Mr. Gregory. “You’ll have more than an hour to get to the docks.”

A few minutes later the train came to a standstill. No one seemed to pay any attention to the fact, except that it hadn’t stopped at a station. Then, after a seemingly unaccountable delay of at least ten minutes, the passengers began, literally, to sit up and take notice.

“I thought there was only one stop—at Winchester—until we get to Southampton,” said another of the occupants of the carriage.

“Then you’ve guessed wrong for once,” rejoined his opposite number. Then, as the guard made his way along the corridor: “Why have we stopped?” he inquired.

The guard, who had been asked a similar question about twenty times in the last few minutes, grunted: “Line’s blocked!” and resumed his way.

The chums went out into the corridor and, leaning through the open window, saw the cause of the delay. A goods train engine had jumped the rails, with the result that both up and down lines were blocked. All along the whole length of the train, passengers were crowding to the corridor windows.

Another five minutes of inaction passed. The chums' fears—that had persisted in varying degrees over the last four or five days—returned. Would the delay result in their missing their ship?

The guard came back, this time along the permanent way. He, being a stout person, chose that method rather than to attempt to force a passage along the now tightly packed corridor.

"We're going back to Woking Junction, and then going on by the Portsmouth line," he announced.

"What does that mean, sir?" asked Gerald of Mr. Gregory, after they had resumed their seats. "Will it take very much longer?"

"I'm afraid it will," was the none-too-reassuring answer. "But you'll do it, I think. Something often happens to delay a vessel's departure beyond the advertised time."

Slowly the train crawled backwards over the two miles' stretch to Woking. Then there were more delays before it was again on its way.

Seemingly at long last the train pulled up at Southampton Terminus Station.

The time was five minutes to one. If the *Golden Gleaner* had kept to her schedule, by now she would be well on her way down Southampton Water.

"I'll come along with you," declared Mr. Gregory, unexpectedly. "I know where she berths—you don't. Hello, Fishwick!"

A man in the rig of a professional yacht hand flung open the carriage door.

"Here, take hold of this!" exclaimed Mr. Gregory, handing the man a bulky kitbag. "All ready to start? Good! I'll be with you in twenty minutes. Come along, you two!"

They had but to cross a busy road before they were in the docks. A policeman on the gate, recognizing the owner of *Fidelity*, passed them in without delay.

They had but a couple of hundred yards to go before arriving at the berth that the *Golden Gleaner* had occupied. She was no longer there. A dockside worker pointed her out as she was merging into the wintry haze over Southampton Water.

"Now what are you going to do?" asked Mr. Gregory.

CHAPTER V

A FRIEND IN NEED

“We don’t know,” admitted Gerald miserably.

The bottom seemed to have been knocked out of the chums’ world. After days of alternate hopes and fears they had raced against time and adverse conditions only to be “pipped on the post” by a matter of minutes.

“I do!” declared their benefactor briskly. “We’ll overhaul her in *Fidelity*. Get a move on!”

There was no time for conversation or explanation.

The two lads gripped their suitcases, and, already almost breathless, panted heavily as they accompanied their new friend.

It was about a quarter of an hour’s brisk walk to the shipyard where the motor-launch was usually kept during her owner’s absence.

Fishwick, the paid hand, was on deck. If he wondered who were his employer’s two guests he expressed no surprise. The one thing that did worry him was—supposing them to be on board over the long week-end—whether he’d laid in a sufficient stock of provisions.

“All aboard, you two!” exclaimed Mr. Gregory, indicating a narrow gang-plank. “Stow your gear in the cabin. Start her up, Fishwick!”

Already that morning *Fidelity*’s engine had been running. It required one touch of the starter for the motor to resume activity.

Mr. Gregory, accompanied by the chums, went into the sunk wheel-house, while the paid hand hauled the gang-plank inboard and dexterously jerked the two bowlined securing ropes from their respective bollards.

Then, pulling the gear lever in the ahead position, the owner gave a slight turn of the steering-wheel.

The *Fidelity* leapt forward. They were under way. It was all as simple as that.

By the time they were clear of the estuary of the Itchen and were heading down Southampton Water, the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* was out of sight.

“I reckon she’ll be doing twelve knots compared with our fifteen, lads,” declared Mr. Gregory.

“But will she stop for us?” asked Peter.

“Not likely,” replied *Fidelity’s* owner. “You could hardly expect the master of a seven thousand tonner to stop for a motor-boat of this size. We’ll have to follow her down the Needles Channel and then put you two aboard when she stops to drop her pilot.”

“Aren’t we taking you a lot out of your way, sir?” asked Gerald.

“That’s nothing,” declared Mr. Gregory. “It doesn’t matter to me whether I go fishing on Lymington Banks at one end of the Solent, or on Ryde Middle, at the other. Are you fellows hungry?”

The chums had to admit that they were. They had eaten nothing since their scratchy breakfast at about seven that morning.

“Fishwick!” shouted his employer, raising his voice to make himself heard above the noise of the engine and the *plash* of the waves under the motor-launch’s lean bows.

“Sir?”

“Open a tin of turkey and cut sandwiches. We’ll have coffee in preference to tea. Bring the grub here, then we won’t need to use the cabin.”

Presently the *Fidelity* passed a low-lying spit of land to starboard, that was crowned by a circular stone fort.

“That’s Calshot—a Royal Air Force station,” explained their host. “See that buoy to port? That marks the Brambles Shoal. Two years ago I saw one of Whatmough, Duvant’s ships pile herself on it during a thick fog and, but for radar, your *Golden Gleaner* would have crashed into her stern. There’s shoal water to port of us, but enough for our draught. We’ll cut off a couple of miles, while the *Golden Gleaner* must follow the tortuous buoyed channel. We ought to be sighting her soon.”

But, except for a collier heading for Southampton, the visible part of the Solent appeared to be deserted. The Isle of Wight was lost to sight in the thin mist that was reducing visibility to about half a mile.

The almost *al fresco* lunch was disposed of and enjoyed. Again the chums' spirits rose until Mr. Gregory asked: "Where is the ship bound for?"

Neither of them knew. They were in ignorance of the fact that a letter had been lying in the letter-box of their home for the past week, informing them that the *Golden Gleaner* was under orders for Sydney, New South Wales, and advising them that tropical clothing would be necessary for part of the voyage.

"I hope for your sakes that she isn't bound for a Scandinavian or a German port," remarked Mr. Gregory.

"Why, sir?" asked the chums simultaneously.

"Because, if she is, she'll be off the eastern end of the Wight by now and on an opposite course to ours," was the disconcerting reply.

That probability caused yet another drop in the youths' mental barometer.

"We hope not," declared Peter.

"It's a three to one chance in your favour," declared their host. "Now keep your eyes skinned. We may see her at any moment now—if we are to see her this trip!"

"There's something, sir!" exclaimed Gerald.

Mr. Gregory raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes.

"It's a destroyer bound for Spithead," he announced, adding facetiously: "We can't ask her to stop to inquire whether she's passed the *Golden Gleaner*!"

"Couldn't we hand-flag her, sir?" asked Peter.

"You might. I've forgotten my semaphore," admitted Mr. Gregory. "She'd be in Portsmouth Harbour before I finished making the signal."

"I'm a bit rusty too, sir. I learned how to semaphore when I was in the Sea Scouts. But I haven't forgotten it."

A pair of hardly ever used flags were produced from the flag locker. Armed with these, Peter took up a precarious position on the *Fidelity's* fore-deck.

The destroyer was approaching at high speed. Provided she held on her present course, she would pass *Fidelity*—port to port—at a distance of about

half a cable's length. There would be very little time for Peter to send the message and for the destroyer to reply—if she condescended to do so!

It was hardly any use for Peter to start his message until the on-coming warship bore broad on the motor-launch's bow, and it would be equally futile when she bore astern. Between those two periods Peter must slap in his message and receive the reply.

He held the two hand-flags at the "preparatory". Within a matter of seconds a signalman appeared upon the deck of the destroyer's chart-house.

"Have you seen *Golden Gleaner*?" asked Peter.

There was a brief pause. Evidently the "bunting-tosser" was asking instructions from one of the officers on the bridge as to what to reply.

Then came the answer in three words, with one letter misread:

"Off Mack Jack!"

There wasn't time for Peter to ask for the message to be repeated. All he could do was to signal the "acknowledgment" before the bearing and distance were too great for the hand-flags to be read.

"Hold on!" shouted *Fidelity*'s owner.

The warning came only just in time. Dropping the flags on the deck, the amateur signalman gripped a hand-rail as the *Fidelity* bucked and plunged into the destroyer's swell.

"Her skipper ought to be run-in for furious driving, sir," declared Peter.

"Yes; but did you get the reply?" rejoined Mr. Gregory.

"Off Mack Jack, sir, whatever that may mean," replied Peter. "But I'm not certain about the M."

"That's all right," declared Mr. Gregory. "It should be 'Black Jack', a buoy off Yarmouth. If the destroyer passed her there, say ten minutes ago, the *Golden Gleaner* must be about off Hurst Castle. We should be within a mile of her—ah! that's a siren! She'll be warning the pilot cutter that she's getting ready to drop her pilot."

This assumption proved to be correct, for some minutes later, the *Golden Gleaner*—Mr. Gregory was positive that it was she—loomed through the lifting mist at about a mile away.

Probably owing both to hazy conditions and to the fact that she was warning the pilot cutter, she had reduced speed to about eight knots. *Fidelity*

was overhauling her hand over fist.

The motor-launch was slowed down. There was no object in attempting to tranship the two cadets until the ship had stopped, and that wouldn't be until the pilot was ready to quit her.

For several minutes *Fidelity* continued to keep in the *Golden Gleaner's* wake without arousing any interest on the part of the latter's crew. Then a man in dungarees appeared by the taffrail. He, evidently, drew someone's attention to the persistent "hanger-on", for presently more men crowded aft, some in dungarees, others in jerseys and canvas trousers. They began to wave. The chums guessed correctly that they were some of their future messmates—cadets of the S.S. *Golden Gleaner*, even though they weren't in uniform.

Then an officer came aft. Through a megaphone he hailed *Fidelity*: "Come alongside when we lose way!"

That took the last remaining load off the chums' minds. They were being welcomed like a couple of lost sheep!

The officer megaphoned again.

"Defer coming alongside until pilot has left!"

"That's to remind you two that you're very small fry!" commented Mr. Gregory. "You have to give right of way to an exalted member of the Board of Pilotage!"

The pilot cutter was now in sight, as she prepared to close with the stationary *Golden Gleaner*.

The chums had hitherto been under the delusion that a cutter was a single-masted craft, generally a yacht, that carried a mainsail, staysail and jib. This one didn't have canvas and was entirely dependent upon mechanical power. They had hardly got over this surprise when they were up against another. They had expected the pilot cutter would run alongside the larger craft and that the pilot would leave the latter by means of an accommodation ladder.

Instead a boat pushed off from the cutter and the pilot swarmed down a very shaky rope ladder.

This operation looked a most interesting one, although the chums felt a bit sorry for the pilot—a short, tubby man—as he descended the side of the slightly rolling ship.

Then they began to feel sorry for themselves when they realized that they would have to use that self-same ladder—but in reverse—to gain the deck of their future floating home.

The pilot cutter's boat pushed off and made for its parent.

"Come alongside!" shouted the officer who had previously warned the *Fidelity* off.

Mr. Gregory certainly knew how to handle his craft. Leaving Fishwick to put fenders over the side and heave the fore and aft lines, he brought *Fidelity* gently alongside.

"Sharp as you can, lads!" he shouted over his shoulder from the enclosed wheel-house.

A rope was dropped from the *Golden Gleaner's* well-deck. Fishwick took a quick turn with it round the chums' suitcases—they thought that the line was intended for them!—and signalled the crew to haul away.

Peter was the first to climb the rope ladder. He did so very gingerly, with his heart figuratively in his mouth. He'd been warned not to look down during his ascent, so he divided his attention between seeing where his hands were gripping and looking upwards to the down-turned faces of his new shipmates.

With each roll of the ship the wooden rungs, including those his feet were on, bumped with a succession of dull thuds. How he escaped barking the knuckles of his clenched hands remained a minor mystery. The whole business was like a nightmare until he realized that he was being helped over the rail by a couple of hefty, grinning lads.

Gerald, once his chum was on board, followed. He wasn't going to risk that dizzy ascent until Peter was clear of the ladder. The rungs were slippery and he didn't relish Peter's ten-stone descending upon his head and shoulders!

Safe on deck, they had a hazy notion that they were being hemmed in by a small crowd of boisterous cadets and hearing a gruff but hearty greeting from one of the ship's officers.

"We haven't said good-bye to Mr. Gregory!" declared Gerald, suddenly aware of the omission.

They looked over the rail.

They were too late to carry out their good intentions.

The *Fidelity* was already heading back, under full power, for the calmer waters of the Solent.

CHAPTER VI

JOINING THEIR SHIP

“Better late than never,” commented Fourth Officer Angus Cross. “Captain Harrington will see you at four bells, so you’d better not shift into working kit until you’ve made your peace with him. Don’t look so scared. He won’t eat you! Miller! Show Stacey and Meadows where to sling their hammocks!”

“Aye aye, sir!” rejoined the senior cadet. “This way, you two!”

Picking up their belongings they followed their guide along the deck, their shoes making a decided clatter compared with the canvas footgear of the dungaree-clad Dusty Miller. At sea the adjective “Dusty” is very frequently applied to men whose surname happens to be Miller, particularly in the Royal Navy. Whatmough, Duvant and Co.’s fleet had its Dusty Millers too. One had risen to be entitled to the designation “master”. There were others of lesser importance. Amongst them was the present senior cadet of the S.S. *Golden Gleaner*.

“Here’s our mess,” he announced, opening a sliding door. “There’ll be some char going—that’s tea if you shouldn’t happen to know—just before two bells. And here’s your cabin.”

A modern vessel, the *Golden Gleaner* embodied all the improvements to Britain’s post-war Merchant Navy. Amongst them were cabins for cadets and apprentices. There were two bunks to each cabin, one above the other and placed athwartships so as to lessen the risk of the occupants being slung out by the rolling of the vessel. They ran less chance of being ejected by her pitch as she pounded into a head sea.

The chums stepped over the coaming and then stood gaping. It was not the austere yet inviting appearance of their very own cabin that had figuratively rooted them to the spot, but the sight of a couple of painted sea-chests, each with the owner’s name on the lid.

How did they come here?

They knew that Mr. Stacey had ordered them from a well-known firm of marine outfitters in the City. They were to be delivered on the day following the party's return from their Swiss holiday. The avalanche and its immediate results had upset that arrangement, and although their uniforms and other garments were already in their possession, Gerald and Peter had reconciled themselves to the fact that there would be certain deficiencies in their kit on this their first voyage.

"The Owners sent your sea-chests to the ship a couple of days ago," Miller informed them. "When you didn't turn up, our chief officer was going to land them, only something happened to make him forget all about it. You'd find yourselves in a fine old lash-up if they had been dumped ashore at Southampton. What made you miss the ship, anyway?"

Briefly Gerald, occasionally prompted by Peter, related the circumstances under which they had run the risk of losing their lives in the avalanche.

"And you call that enjoying winter sports in Switzerland!" observed the senior cadet, at the conclusion of the brief narrative. "I'd far rather be in a ship any day or anywhere. It's a jolly sight safer! Well, I must be getting along!"

"What have we to do, sir?" asked Peter.

"Cut out the 'sir', my lad!" rejoined Miller. "I'm just a cadet, except that I'm the senior one. Just hang on to the slack and don't get in anyone's way. You're allowed twenty-four hours to sling your hammock, although there aren't any on board. But remember that the Old Man wishes to see you at four bells. I'll show you the ropes when it's time."

Dusty Miller left them to their own devices.

But not for long.

They were still making a survey of their future sleeping-quarters when a couple of cadets appeared. "'Scuse us blowing in like this!" exclaimed one apologetically.

"Not at all," rejoined Peter.

"It wouldn't have made much difference if you had," said the cadet, with an expansive grin. "We've got to know one another some time and the sooner the better. My name's Nelson—no relation to the Little Admiral! This is Oxley, who answers readily to Bull. What happened to make you miss the jolly old bus?"

The same narrative that had evoked the senior cadet's scorn had to be repeated.

"You certainly did cut it fine," remarked Cadet Nelson. "But you fetched up here all right. What watch are you in?"

"I beg your pardon!" rejoined Gerald.

"If you aren't now, you will be in one or the other before long," explained Nelson. "You'll be either in port or starboard, though both of you may be in the same watch. You're chums, aren't you?"

The newly joined cadets admitted that they were and asked for more information.

"It's like this: if you're in different watches you'll see precious little of one another. I'll tell you what: I'll tackle Dusty Miller and get him to see Mr. Temple—he's chief officer—and see if both of you can't be put into the starboard watch. Of course he may kick at having two greenhands in the same watch, but it's worth trying. Like to have a look round the ship? We mustn't make ourselves too conspicuous or Paddy Quinn—he's the bos'n—may put us on to some rotten job, even though it's the first dog watch!"

Under the guidance of Cadets Nelson and Oxley, the chums made a restricted tour of the ship, taking good care not to trespass upon the bridge. In any case they would be well acquainted with that part of the ship before the voyage ended. They asked innumerable questions of their guides, and although some of the answers seemed to indicate that they were having their legs pulled, they tactfully refrained from adopting the attitude of a pair of "Doubting Thomases".

Then came tea—served in mugs—with sweetened condensed milk, together with biscuits of a consistency near that of cast iron! It wasn't what Gerald and Peter had been accustomed to—not even when they had been besieged by nature in "Quatre Vents"—but, strange to relate, they enjoyed it!

"Come along, you fellows!" exclaimed Senior Cadet Miller. "It's time for you to see the Old Man!"

They followed him up several ladders to the lower bridge. By this time the *Golden Gleaner* was out of sight of land, although should visibility become better, they would sight the Lizard before dropping the English coast for a very indefinite period.

If Gerald and Peter thought that they would have the moral support of Cadet Miller during their impending interview with the immediate human arbiter of their fate, they were going to be disappointed.

“Cadets Stacey and Meadowes, sir!” announced Miller, saluting the young officer whom they now knew to be Fourth Officer Angus Cross.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” declared Mr. Cross, as he returned the chums’ half-hearted salute. “Bring your right hands up smartly to the brim of your caps. Keep them there while you count two and return them—also smartly—to your side. Now don’t get flustered. The Old Man won’t bite you, unless you jolly well deserve it! And remember to keep your caps on while you’re in his cabin.”

The fourth officer tapped on the door.

“Come in!” boomed a deep yet pleasant voice.

“Cadets Stacey and Meadowes reporting for duty, sir!” announced Mr. Cross.

“Very good!” rejoined Captain Harrington. “You needn’t wait, Mr. Cross!”

The Old Man already knew a good deal about the two newly joined cadets. A confidential report from the firm’s interviewer was already in his hands. He knew, for instance, and amongst other things, where they had been educated and why, in their examiner’s opinion, they were fit aspirants for the rank of cadets in Whatmough, Duvant’s fleet.

What Captain Harrington didn’t know was the reason why they had failed to join the *Golden Gleaner* at the port of Southampton at the specified time and date. Frankly he was curious to know what had happened to them.

“You cut it pretty close, young gentlemen!” he observed.

Instinctively Gerald raised one hand, pushed his cap aside, and smoothed his closely trimmed hair. He was quite under the impression that the Old Man was criticizing that. Then conscious of the real meaning of the remark, he brought his hand down smartly to his side.

“I’m afraid we did, sir!” agreed Peter.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of if your explanation is a genuine one. Now fire away and tell me all about it!”

Thus encouraged, Peter, taking the initiative, related the already several times told story of the avalanche and its consequences.

“Most interesting!” was Captain Harrington’s comment. “Only you haven’t told me how you came to be brought off to the ship in that motor-launch.”

Their meeting with Mr. Gregory in the train and his subsequent offer to give them a lift in *Fidelity* had to be narrated.

“One chance in a hundred, I should imagine,” commented the Old Man. “I hope you thanked him for his good offices.”

“We didn’t, sir,” replied Gerald. “You see, we were in such a tear to come on board that we clean forgot to do so!”

Captain Harrington smiled. What he didn’t tell the two cadets was the fact that he’d watched the transshipment operations from the wing of the bridge. Seeing yet unseen, he’d noted their decidedly timorous ascent of the ship’s side. They were supposed to be Sea Scouts. Perhaps they were fairly proficient in that line; but it was perfectly obvious to him that they hadn’t any previous experience in swarming up a Jacob’s ladder. In fact at the time he had seriously thought of ordering a cargo-skip to be lowered—a humiliating way of being taken aboard!

All this the Old Man kept to himself. Perhaps he still remembered, only too vividly, the circumstances under which he, a budding cadet, joined his first ship.

“Forgot to do so!” he rejoined. “What an admission! You’d better get Sparks to send him a radio message.”

The interview ended with a discreetly worded reminder of what the two cadets’ duty consisted. Provided they obeyed orders promptly and intelligently, there was nothing to prevent them becoming deck-officers in a few years.

“It was awfully decent of him to suggest we send Mr. Gregory a radio message,” declared Gerald, when they returned to the messroom.

“Yes, but we don’t know his address,” demurred his chum.

“Not his home address,” admitted Gerald. “But we could send it to the yacht-yard where he keeps his motor-craft. He’d get the message sooner or later.”

“I reckon you’re right,” agreed Peter. “And while we’re about it, what about sending a wireless message to your pater? It may get through, even if “Quatre Vents” is still snow-bound. He’ll be wondering what’s happened to us.”

“We should have written directly we reached home,” admitted Gerald. “I say, I am a silly ass!”

“What have you done now?” inquired Peter, seeing the look of consternation on his friend’s face.

“I’ve only brought the front-door key away!”

That was a grave oversight. The key had been borrowed from the neighbour who had been entrusted with it by Mr. Stacey. They had forgotten to return it on the morning of their hurried departure. As far as they knew it was the only key. They drew a mental picture of the rest of the Stacey family returning home, perhaps late at night, after a strenuous journey from Switzerland, only to find themselves locked out.

“It’s a dead cert we can’t send the key back by radio!” declared Peter.

CHAPTER VII

UNDER INSTRUCTION

“You want to send off a couple of radio messages? That’s dead easy,” declared Senior Cadet Miller. “We’ll breeze along to the wireless cabin.”

“How much will they cost to send?” asked Gerald, mindful of the small amount of ready cash at his disposal.

“Nixes!” replied Dusty. “Every member of the crew can send two messages free. Any above that number will be charged the usual rates. Most of us keep our free messages until we’re nearing port on our homeward voyage, just to let our people know when to expect us. But it’s up to you, you know.”

Faced with this problem, Gerald decided to make use of the concession now. A lot might happen before the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* returned to Southampton. She might not go there. There were several ports in the British Isles to which she might be diverted when she returned to home waters.

Dusty Miller led the way up several ladders to the wireless cabin. By now it was pitch dark, except for the reflected gleam of the port and starboard lights and, well above them, the white masthead lamp. The chums had expected the ship to be brilliantly illuminated—like a small liner, in fact. Actually every scuttle, porthole and window had been well screened.

“Mind those deck-ventilators,” cautioned the senior cadet, who appeared to be gifted with the eyes of a cat, although, actually, he knew most parts of the ship well by this time.

A cold head wind was blowing. The chums were beginning to wish that they had put on their pilot coats; but Dusty was wearing only his dungarees without apparent discomfort. If he could stick it, why shouldn’t they?

A couple of men were leaving the wireless cabin as the three cadets arrived. Evidently Sparks was being kept busy.

The operator was sitting at a kind of desk with a formidable array of knobs and switches confronting him. He had a pair of headphones clipped to his ears, but that didn’t prevent him from speaking. Listening in, as far as he

was concerned, meant hearing a seemingly chaotic jumble of radio signals, but paying no attention to them except to those directly affecting the ship.

“Evening, Dusty!” exclaimed the radio officer cheerfully.

It was part of Sparks’s policy to keep on friendly, even cordial, terms with cadets though they ranked lower than him. The time might come and probably would when Dusty Miller would be the master of one of Whatmough, Duvant’s fleet and he, Sparks, even though he might be a senior wireless officer, would be subordinate to him.

Gerald was invited to write his two signals on an official writing-pad.

“Regret omitting to thank you for your kind help,” was his message to Mr. Gregory.

To his father he sent:

“On board *Golden Gleaner*. All well. Have key!”

“O.K.!” exclaimed the radio officer.

If the chums had expected to see him tapping out the messages straight away they were disappointed. He put the two forms on a file. There would be ample time to get these—and others—away before his watch finished.

Then came the last meal of the day, generally referred to as “tea”. The ships of the “Golden Line” prided themselves upon the meals served to officers, cadets and the hands. There was breakfast, consisting mainly of porridge and cereals, followed at noon by dinner in which salt beef or pork alternated with meat from the ship’s refrigerators. At four, the cadets had a sort of stand-up tea—usually with dry biscuits. Then, during the evening, they had their last official meal of the day.

Gerald and Peter were placed towards the foot of the long table, one on either side. Since there was hardly any sea running, the table had been clamped down and hadn’t to swing to every roll of the ship.

The meal began almost in silence except for the clatter of knives and forks and occasional requests to pass the salt or mustard. The youths were hungry and it was not until their appetites were appeased that conversation became general.

“Are you Stacey?” asked a pleasant-faced youth sitting next to Peter.

“No; that’s Stacey,” replied Peter, indicating his chum opposite to him.

“Oh, I just wondered,” replied the cadet. “My name’s Purchase, although there’s precious little I can purchase on my measly pay. Who was that who brought you off to the ship—your pater?”

“My father’s dead,” replied Peter.

“Sorry! Who was the fellow in the launch, anyway?”

“We met him on the train to Southampton this morning for the first time. Gregory’s his name.”

“Indeed!” Purchase looked interested. “If that’s the fellow I think he is—I know he runs a yacht—I was chummy with his son. He’s a cadet in the *Golden Gain*, or was when I last heard from him. Do you run a motor bike?”

Peter shook his head.

“Couldn’t run to it,” he explained. “I know how to ride one, though!”

“Good egg!” exclaimed his new acquaintance. “If and when we fetch Sydney we’ll have a run round. I know a fellow there who hires out motor bikes quite cheaply. We can run out to Manly and get some surf-bathing. You can swim, of course?”

“If he hadn’t been able to, I wouldn’t be here now,” declared Gerald, thinking it was about time he butted into the conversation.

“How was that?” asked Purchase.

Gerald briefly related the circumstances under which his chum had saved him from drowning in those seemingly far-off days when they had been in the same school near Newquay.

“Avast kagging!” ordered Senior Cadet Miller, meaning that it was time conversation ceased and the members of the mess resumed their duties.

“You’re excused!” Dusty informed the two newly joined cadets. “Amuse yourselves till it’s time to turn in.”

This was easier said than done.

The chums went on deck, but there was nothing to see but an expanse of dark water and sky. The sea was rising rapidly. It was cold. The motion, different from that of the cross-channel steamers, was beginning to make itself felt.

They beat a hurried retreat to the messroom and ten minutes later, as if by common consent and understanding, they attempted to turn in. It wasn’t the now lively pitching of the ship that prevented them from doing so.

Neither of them could throw back the bedclothes covering their respective bunks.

It needed but a brief examination to discover the cause. Sheets, blankets and coverlets had been firmly sewn together, not with ordinary household thread but with seaming twine. Although thin it was sufficiently strong to support the weight of a heavy man.

No wonder, then, that they plucked unavailingly at the stitches until they all but skinned their fingertips; and it was not until they had laboriously cut through each lock-stitch with their sheath-knives that they were able to seek repose.

It wasn't merely a question of seeking repose—sleep refused to be wooed. Perhaps it was their unaccustomed surroundings, even though their bunks were luxurious compared with the rough-and-tumble bed they had been forced to use during their latter nights at “Quatre Vents”. And, perhaps, they were both threatened by an attack of *mal-de-mer*. Neither dared to admit it, but the preliminary symptoms were there.

Towards midnight they fell asleep despite the strange noises on board.

Suddenly both were awakened by a raucous blast.

The ship's siren was blaring. It sounded most peremptory.

Then it stopped. Nothing unusual seemed to be taking place on board. The propeller shaft maintained its regular pulsations.

“That was Morse,” declared Gerald, trading upon his Sea Scout lore.

“Didn't sound like it to me,” replied Peter doubtfully.

Then the blasts were renewed.

“It started off with M in Morse,” declared Gerald. “After that it might have been anything!”

His chum felt too drowsy to express his opinion and presently they dropped soundly asleep.

At six o'clock they were awakened by the senior cadet with a reminder that they were to don working kit.

“You're not on board for ornament, you know,” he added.

“What was that frightful noise in the night?” asked Gerald. “It woke us both up.”

“I never heard any noise,” rejoined Miller.

“The ship’s siren,” Gerald informed him.

“Oh, that!” exclaimed Dusty indifferently. “That’s nothing. I thought you meant you’d heard some heavy gear carrying away! Yes, I heard it too, but I paid precious little attention to it. Actually we were ticking off some perishing old hooker because her lights were either out or burning badly. The Morse sign for that is Q.M., but evidently you didn’t notice the pause between the two letters.”

After breakfast the chums had another surprise. They knew that the pair of them were in the starboard watch, which was supposed to be off duty. They with the other cadets were set to work to clean their cabins and their messroom. If Gerald and Peter had expected this task to be carried out by the hands they were speedily undeceived. In fact they had to assist in the cleaning and “squaring off” of the cadets of the port watch as well!

They carried out this task by the aid of artificial light since the sun had not yet risen. When it was about to do so there was a brief break for the strenuously worked cadets of the starboard watch.

The chums went aft to watch the sun rise, only to be sternly ordered to clear off out of it by Fourth Officer Angus Cross. It was well for them that they did, instead of asking why!

While in home waters during the winter months, all hands had been ordered never to appear anywhere on deck unless warmly clad, less the sudden change of atmosphere might cause cases of pneumonia.

Feeling considerably chastened, Gerald and Peter went below to spend the rest of a spell that certainly wasn’t standing easy!

“Where have you been sculling around?” demanded the senior cadet. “Don’t you know it’s ‘Bends and Splices’?”

“We didn’t,” Gerald tried to explain. “No one told us.”

“Love a duck!” ejaculated Dusty. “You’ve got eyes, haven’t you? What’s wrong with that noticeboard?”

They hadn’t seen it. Nobody had called their attention to it; but there it was!

There was no need for excuses. The chums mumbled an apology.

“That’s all right,” rejoined Dusty, somewhat mollified. “I’m the one to be hauled over the coals if you don’t show up on time. The others have

fallen-in already.”

It was now raining heavily. In consequence the cadets were mustered in their messroom instead of on the after well-deck, usually the *venue* in fine and dry weather.

They sat in a semicircle. In the centre stood Paddy Quinn, the bos’n, while in front of him was an assortment of ropes and a number of tools necessary for the practical explanation of his talk.

The bos’n was something of a character. A product of Southern Ireland, he was rather inclined to be temperamental. When he became excited—which was a fairly frequent occurrence when dealing with the cadets—he’d delight them with his rich Irish brogue. During the instruction it was a fairly easy matter—as most of the youths had long discovered—to lure Paddy away from his subject and, instead, to get him to relate a really amusing yarn.

He could be very strict, but, almost invariably, he addressed the cadets as “young gentlemen”, probably with the same motives as the senior wireless officer.

Some day some of those young gentlemen might conceivably become masters or chief officers while Paddy Quinn—still a relatively youngish man—would have risen no higher than his present rank.

“This mornin’ Oi’m showin’ ye how to make a grommet,” he began, holding up one end of a coil of two-inch rope. “An’ what’s a grommet for, some of ye’ll be asking. Oi’ll be tellin’ ye.”

He went on to explain the somewhat limited uses to which a grommet—a rope in the form of a ring—could be used.

“An’ could ye suggest any more uses for ut?” he asked.

“Yes, for deck-quoits,” replied Cadet Oxley promptly.

The bos’n glared.

“Oi’m askin’ for something useful, young gentleman!” he rejoined. “And if any of you mess up my decks wi’ chalk for that game Oi’ll——”

“Didn’t you drop a real quoit over a bull’s horns, Mr. Quinn?” interrupted Nelson, with his tongue in his cheek. “Wasn’t it at Barcelona?”

“No, it wasn’t a quoit an’ it weren’t at Barcelona,” declared the bos’n. “’Twer when we were a-lying off Corunna—that’s right across t’other side of Spain—in the old *Dispatch*. Rightly it wur loike this——”

He plunged into his narrative. Most of his audience had heard it before and more than once, but Cadet Oxley had gained his objective—a diversion from the somewhat monotonous task of making a grommet.

Paddy Quinn had finished his yarn some five minutes before the instruction was timed to end.

“Now Oi’ll show you the way to make one,” he declared. “Cut off a length of rope three and a half times the length of the grommet——”

Gerald and Peter showed more than usual interest in the bos’n’s demonstration. In their Sea Scout days they had been taught how to make the simpler bends and hitches, but this was the first occasion that they had actually seen the making of a grommet in all its stages.

“A jolly old waste of time!” declared Cadet Purchase, during yet another stand-easy. “If a grommet is wanted—goodness only knows what for!—then let the hands get on with it.”

Gerald and Peter tactfully refused to be drawn into the argument. They were interested only to the extent that they had improved their knowledge of rope craft.

Little did they know that, well before the present voyage was ended, their ability to make a grommet would extricate them and some of their messmates from a very awkward situation.

CHAPTER VIII

“THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA”

On the fourth day from her departure from Southampton the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* was in the latitude of Gibraltar, although too far to the eastward for the recently joined cadets to obtain even a distant glance at the famous rock.

By now their sea knowledge had improved, although they knew that they had a very long way to go before they could be described as finished products of the British Merchant Navy.

They had been informed by their messmates—though not without a certain amount of leg-pulling—that the ship was bound for Sydney, New South Wales, with an intermediate call at Cape Town. Her cargo consisted principally of motor cars and motor wagons together with a considerable quantity of mechanized and non-mechanized farm implements. Her holds would be completely cleared at Sydney, with the result that the choice of her next port of call would be in the lap of the gods. A lot depended upon whether there was any cargo available there or even at a New Zealand port.

The chums were daily—even hourly—gaining knowledge. In addition to seamanship they were being given instruction in navigation by one or other of the ship's officers. It was by no means an easy task, both from an instructor's or a learner's point of view.

For instance, when Peter was asked to fix the ship's position, according to his calculations the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* was plumb in the middle of the Atlas Range.

There was plenty to do on board to keep the cadets occupied both in mind and body. Captain Harrington and his officers saw to that! It didn't mean that the youths' noses were, figuratively, kept to the grindstone. By a judicious mixture of duty and leisure that grim spectre of boredom could be—and was—kept at bay!

There was a certain amount of interest to be derived from outside the ship. So far rarely did an hour pass without another vessel being sighted. Sometimes the passing craft exchanged signals—by wireless, semaphore or

International Code. Sometimes, though rarely, those from the *Golden Gleaner* were ignored.

Nor was there any dearth of up-to-the-minute news. Apart from the ship's standard radio equipment, there were several privately owned radio sets on board—sometimes too many, judging by the muted cacophony coming not only from the cadets' and crew's messes, but from the officers' cabins.

It was in the latitude of Gibraltar that the chums witnessed a sight that stirred them to the core—and they were by no means the only ones on board to experience similar emotions.

“Sail on the starboard bow, sir!” bawled one of the look-outs.

“Sails” had been reported several times during this part of the *Golden Gleaner's* voyage. Very rarely had they been sailing-craft in the strictest sense of the term. Those that were, were Portuguese fishing-craft with multi-hued canvas.

This craft was under sail. Her size appeared to be less than that of any of the *Golden Gleaner's* lifeboats. Her white hull was dingy through exposure to the sun, winds and waves. As she heeled to the steady breeze it could be seen that below her waterline the underbody was thickly coated with marine growth—growth of a kind that is associated with tropical waters.

She was a cutter. Instead of a lofty and apparently fragile Bermuda mast, she had been fitted with the older type of pole-mast. Her canvas was of a greyish hue, due to the effects of the weather; but an almost new cloth in her mainsail pointed to the significant fact that quite recently her crew had had to repair a large and serious tear in her canvas.

From her peak fluttered a tattered Red Ensign—that emblem of unity and comradeship of British seafarers the world over.

Her crew consisted of one man—a short stocky individual whose whole visible attire consisted of a pair of shorts, canvas shoes and a yachting cap—the latter probably having been put on in honour of the occasion. He was sporting a thick, unkempt beard while the rest of his visible anatomy was a rich mahogany hue.

He began signalling with a pair of hand-flags. Using International Code flags would have taken up too much time. By semaphore he reported that the yacht was the *Musette* of Plymouth, that her last port was Bahia in the Brazils, that all was well with her and that she was in no need of assistance, but would the *Golden Gleaner* report her to Lloyds?

Already way was being taken off the ship, otherwise she would have passed out of signalling distance before the *Musette's* signals were finished. Then as the little yacht drew abeam, the lone yachtsman promptly dipped his ensign in salute, the compliment being as promptly returned by her far bigger sister.

“Give him three cheers, lads!” shouted Captain Harrington from the bridge.

By this time every available man on board—officers, cadets, deck-hands and engine-room staff not actually on duty—were crowding to every point of vantage. They would have cheered the gallant little *Musette* in any case, but it would have been a somewhat ragged effort.

Led by the Old Man it was some cheer!

“Sooner him than me, sir,” remarked Chief Officer Temple.

“You’ve said it, Mister,” agreed Captain Harrington. “But, by smoke, that fellow has guts!”

“And jolly good luck to him,” rejoined Mr. Temple.

Ten minutes later the *Musette* was lost to sight in the haze.

Almost twenty-four hours later another incident occurred—a reverse of the previous picture.

This time the look-out reported: “Some h’objec’ on the port bow, sir!”

The cadets of the starboard watch were receiving instructions on the for’ard well-deck, under Fourth Officer Angus Cross. He had the reputation of being an alert and zealous officer. He was keen on discipline, especially as the cadets were concerned, the reason being—if Dusty Miller’s explanation could be accepted—that only a couple of months previously, he’d been borne on the ship’s books as a cadet.

The weather was now fine and very warm. Winter rig was now a thing of the past. The lads were wearing the minimum of clothing. Their bodies from the waist upwards had been tanned almost to the degree of the sun-burnt lone voyager of the *Musette*.

At the look-out’s shout the cadets simultaneously dropped what they were doing and rushed to the side. In other circumstances Fourth Officer Cross would have given them a taste of his tongue, good and proper. He might even have put the delinquents in the captain’s report for neglect of duty.

Perhaps it was the unusual hail that had also aroused Angus Cross's curiosity. A "h'objec'" might mean anything except a vessel either large or small.

He made no attempt to keep the excited lads to their task. Instead he went with them to the nearest vantage point from whence the object was visible.

Captain Harrington and some of his officers were on the bridge, scanning what looked like a black rectangle rising and falling slowly in the Atlantic swell.

The engine-room telegraph bell clanged loudly.

For the second time in two successive days the ship's speed was being reduced. On long ocean runs this was a rare occurrence. Day after day for weeks on end the *Golden Gleaner's* diesel engines would maintain their monotonous revolutions with neither variation nor respite.

It was a raft, about the size of those inflated rubber contraptions Gerald and Peter used to frolic with at Newquay. Instead of riding buoyantly, this contraption was very nearly water-logged. On it was a box—probably a seaman's chest—while a spar, ill-supported by three sagging shrouds, served as a mast. There were no signs of a sail. Even had that spar been used to fly a signal of distress, the flag attached to it had long since been blown to shreds.

The deck of the raft was seen to be constructed of rough planks lashed to a heavier framework of tree-trunks. Underneath, though out of sight except when one side lifted oh the swell, were several barrels with very little reserve of buoyancy.

As the ship bore down, the raft swung round under her suction. Then, only too plainly, the watching youths realized at first hand that they were seeing one of many tragedies of the sea.

Stretched over the planks were the remains of what was once a human being. Now little more than bones were left; but attached to the right wrist of the corpse was a thin wire rope. The other end was secured to a ring in one end of the sea chest.

"I hope the Old Man won't heave-to and lower a boat," said Dusty.

He knew from past experience that on rare occasions when a boat was sent away from the ship, the cadets—providing there wasn't much sea—

would be called upon to man her, although she would be in charge of one of the junior officers.

Usually these were exciting though pleasant operations. Investigating a raft on which were human remains just wasn't!

But Captain Harrington had no such intentions. There was nothing he could do, short of attaching iron ballast to it, to sink the raft. It was hardly large enough to be a menace to shipping, although had the little *Musette* hit it some of her planks might have been stove in.

The ship's speed was increased to normal. A general radio signal was sent out warning all shipping in the vicinity of a small obstruction having been sighted in such and such latitude and longitude. The incident was duly entered in the "journal" or rough ship's log.

Having thus carried out his obligations in the matter, the Old Man let the incident fade in his mind.

He had other matters to merit his attention.

Not so the cadets. Although they returned to their place of instruction, the rest of the morning was not devoted to seamanship and navigation. The subject of the raft and its grisly burden was too fresh in their minds; and even Fourth Officer Angus Cross joined in the conversation.

"Where did you think that raft came from, sir?" asked Cadet Purchase. "From a sinking craft?"

"Hardly," replied the Fourth Officer cautiously. "Did you notice those planks? They were rough-hewn. They weren't deck-planks. And to me it looked as if the lashings weren't rope but made up of tendrils. I reckon the raft was made somewhere on the African coast and drifted out here. The framework, too, was made of tree-trunks."

"Yes, sir, but the barrels?" asked Cadet Nelson.

"There are barrels to be found ashore as well as on board," countered Mr. Cross.

"Why was the man—the corpse, I mean—lashed to the chest by that length of wire, sir?" inquired Oxley.

"Probably to keep himself from rolling overboard while he slept," suggested the fourth officer.

"Supposing that chest contained treasure, sir?" asked Peter. "I was wondering——"

“Then you can go on wondering, my lad!” interrupted Fourth Officer Cross, now conscious of the fact that the Old Man from his elevated position on the bridge was watching the supposed instruction. “Now, Cadet Meadows, under what circumstances does a vessel under sail give way to one under power?”



PETER MEADOWS MADE A FLYING TACKLE

CHAPTER IX

THE RAID

In due course the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* berthed at Cape Town in order to discharge part of her cargo. Unfortunately for her owners, Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co., the port was being held up by a dockers' strike. A dispute over what appeared to be a minor incident had developed into a serious situation. The stoppage was already well into its second week and no sign of a settlement was in sight.

Of those on board who were least concerned were the cadets. The strike appeared to have little to do with them. It gave them the opportunity of being allowed ashore to sample the flesh-pots of Adderley Street when they might otherwise be "sweating off the callow suet" by hard work on board.

The *Golden Gleaner* had barely been berthed before the Owners' agent came on board, bringing with him the ship's mail.

Gerald and Peter received quite a number of letters. So did the rest of the cadets' mess for that matter, and it was amusing to notice how each youth pounced upon his mail and promptly made for the more secluded parts of the ship to read the news from home in comparative privacy.

Gerald and Peter, being chums of long standing, retired to their cabin, there to read their letters in silence and without comment until they had devoured their correspondence from beginning to end.

The first envelope Gerald opened was addressed in his father's familiar handwriting. It was an air-mail letter posted in London only a week earlier and had been lying in the agent's office three days prior to the *Golden Gleaner's* arrival in Table Bay.

The closely written pages described at some length the adventures of the rest of the party who had been marooned at "Quatre Vents" after the chums' lucky departure by air.

"When we arrived home it was after six," wrote Mr. Stacey. "I went round to Smithson to get the key. To my astonishment he told me that he had given it to you and that he hadn't set eyes upon you or the key since!

“Leaving your mother and the girls at the Smithsons, he and I set off on an attempt to break into our house. First we tried the front door lock with almost every key Smithson possessed—but nothing doing!

“Then we tackled the back of the house. There didn’t seem much chance in that direction until Smithson remembered that he possessed a diamond glass-cutter. He fetched it along and we were making good progress in cutting a hole in a pane of the kitchen window when a policeman suddenly pounced on us!

“Explanations seemed to be useless. He’d caught a couple of burglars red-handed. He would have marched us straight to the police station if I hadn’t asked him whether he’d looked into the front porch. He replied, ‘No, why?’ I told him if he had he would have seen it half filled with our luggage. After that the policeman was quite affable and helpful. He pointed out that his sergeant had told him to keep an eye on the house while we were away, and he’d certainly been doing it!

“Eventually I climbed in through the window and opened the back door. I expected to find that you’d pushed the key through the letter-box. It wasn’t until I received your cablegram—or whatever they call it—that I guessed what you meant with reference to the key. Don’t bother to send it home, I’ve had others fitted.”

There was another and equally interesting letter from Gerald’s mother. The only fly in the ointment was a gentle reproof for the untidy state of the house—especially of the kitchen—as the result of the two youths’ hurried visit. But then, she knew nothing of the terrific scramble they had to make in order to miss and finally to gain their first ship!

There were other letters, too, from his sisters, Joan and Peggy, mostly dealing with their ultimate rescue from “Quatre Vents”.

“If we hadn’t had ’flu we should have enjoyed ourselves,” wrote Joan. “I hope we will go to Switzerland next winter. I love the snow, don’t you?”

Her brother, lying on his bunk in the warm air, didn’t agree. Perhaps, before the voyage was over, he might have to change his mind!

During the first few hours of the *Golden Gleaner’s* arrival, Captain Harrington was exceptionally busy—even to the point of being harassed. In addition to having business with the agent he was badgered by representatives of the motor industry, all wanting to know whether the vehicles could not be unloaded by the ship’s crew. To these requests he replied, with his tongue in his cheek, that he was prepared to place the

vehicles on the dockside if the firms to whom they were consigned would drive them through the dock-gates. Knowing the ugly temper of a section of the strikers, the consignees did not close with the Old Man's offer.

Although very busy he did find time to give shore leave to the cadets of both watches. Coupled with a warning to conduct themselves properly, and be a credit to their ship, he handed each lad an advance of pay.

The cadets left the ship and made their way to the docks' entrance without difficulty, the strikers placing no obstacles in their way.

At the lower end of Adderley Street—Cape Town's principal thoroughfare—the lads split up into small parties, Gerald and Peter finding themselves with Oxley and Purchase.

"Grub first!" decided Purchase.

They went into a somewhat busy restaurant where the food was both plentiful and lavish. Oxley declared that he had never in the whole course of his life had a better or more satisfying repast.

"Are we tackling Table Mountain?" asked Peter, towards the end of the feast.

Half an hour earlier the others might have fallen in with their companion's suggestion. Now, more than replete, the idea of scaling that formidable peak became far less attractive.

"I vote we give it a miss to-day," objected Oxley, stifling a prodigious yawn.

"There's the railway to the top," suggested Gerald.

"Why waste money on that when we've good pairs of legs?" asked Purchase.

"Have we?" rejoined the principal objector. "Mine feel like a pair of broomsticks."

The others agreed. Coming ashore after the long voyage from home, they were already conscious of flabby calf muscles.

"Let's stroll round on the level, then," proposed Oxley. "We might do a cinema or something if our legs refuse to support us."

They settled their account and left the restaurant conscious of the fact that they had done themselves proud in the provision line, and that they still

possessed the rolling gait that had been so pronounced from the moment they had stepped ashore.

It was still the lunch hour—or rather the protracted period taken up by most of the population of Cape Town for their midday repast. Consequently the streets were by no means crowded.

A leisurely stroll had taken the four cadets some distance from Adderley Street. They had noticed several picture palaces, but so far none of the advertised films had appealed to them. Most of them they had seen in London a twelvemonth earlier—at least Gerald and Peter had.

Presently they found themselves in a fairly wide and almost deserted side street in the northern outskirts of Cape Town. Here, too, was a picture house. It advertised a picture that neither of the cadets had previously seen. That looked promising, but the snag was that the doors would not be opened for twenty minutes.

They were still debating whether to wait until this picture house opened or whether they would try their luck elsewhere, when they hardly noticed a car pull up about twenty or twenty-five yards from the spot where they were standing. Still less did they notice that the car had drawn up close to the entrance to a bank.

The bank was by no means a pretentious building. It was just a branch of one of South Africa's principal banking establishments. From the outside there was little to be seen of its activities within. There was the entrance, the outer door being kept open during business hours and the inner one being of the push or pull open variety.

The four cadets hardly noticed the two men who had alighted from the car and were entering the building. It was Peter, however, who remarked that the engine of the stationary vehicle was still running and that the driver was sitting bolt upright behind the steering-wheel.

"Those two fellows aren't up to any good!" declared Peter.

"Why?" rejoined Purchase. "What do you mean?"

The answer was promptly forthcoming, although Peter hadn't to give it.

From within the building came a popping sound, somewhat like that of a cork being pulled from a bottle. It was immediately followed by an exclamation of surprise and pain.

A few seconds later one of the two men from the car reappeared holding a leather bag in one hand. He had a distance of about three yards to cover

between the entrance to the bank and the waiting car.

He never made it!

Before his chums could realize what was happening, Peter Meadows made a flying tackle. Literally throwing himself at the man, he gripped him with both arms between the fellow's waist and knees.

They measured their length on the pavement, Peter being uppermost, while the bag, flying from the raider's grasp, slid under the still stationary car.

Realizing by this time what was happening, Peter's chums came to his assistance.

The accomplice waiting in the car didn't attempt to help his prostrate pal. He drove off, leaving his former companions to their fate.

"Let me alone!" spluttered the now spread-eagled smash-and-grabber. "I'm a police officer!"

For a brief instant Peter wondered whether he had or had not made a mistake. In any case he'd better go through with it and risk possible consequences.

"Keep him down, you fellows!" he exclaimed.

His fellow cadets complied with the request. Peter regained his feet, conscious of a sharp pain in his right knee and of a torn pair of trousers.

That didn't worry him much at the moment. What did was the knowledge that the third member of the gang was still on the bank premises. Presumably he was armed with a firearm fitted with a silencer. The pop-like report the chums had previously heard tended to confirm that fact.

What was taking place in the building?

Being lunch-time, most of the staff had gone out for meals. The only ones left on duty were the cashier and a junior clerk. The former was behind the counter, while the latter was seated at a desk close to the door of the safe.

Evidently the bandits knew something about the layout of the bank.

The cashier looked up, expecting to see two genuine customers. Instead he found himself staring at the muzzle of what appeared to be an automatic pistol.

It was a new experience for him, even though he'd been twenty years in the service of the bank.

Instinctively he began to raise his arms above his head. As he did so the bandit fired, sending not a bullet but a charge of ammonia full into the face of the unfortunate cashier.

Temporarily blinded and in great pain, he could do nothing to thwart the immediate intentions of his assailants. Both men vaulted over the counter. The one with the pistol smashed the telephone with the butt of his weapon, thus putting the instrument out of action. Then, grabbing every bank note he could lay hands upon and scooping handfuls of silver coins from the tills, he stuffed his booty into a leather handbag.

Meanwhile his companion had forced the terrified junior clerk into the strong-room and had slammed the door. It would have taken too long to examine the contents of the place. At best it would keep the clerk from raising an alarm until long after the bandits had effected their getaway.

Unfortunately for him, the fellow was unacquainted with one if not more of the bank's precautions against robbery, armed or otherwise.

With the slamming of the strong-room door a heavy metal grille slid from a recess across the short passage between the strong-room and the main-office.

Before he could do anything about it—there was little he could do in any case!—the bandit found himself helplessly trapped.

“Let me out!” he implored, addressing his still busy accomplice.

There is a saying that there's honour amongst thieves; but in actual practice there was very little of that sort of thing amongst this trio of smash-and-grabbers.

Collecting his spoils—only a small proportion of the quantity he had hoped to obtain—the now thoroughly terrified man had no thought beyond effecting his escape, leaving his confederate in crime to his fate.

He made a dash for the waiting car, only to be brought down in a flying tackle by Cadet Peter Meadows.

By now quite a crowd had collected. Amongst them was a policeman who knew his job!

It would be a mere waste of breath on the part of the captured man for him to attempt to declare to the policeman that he, too, was a member of the force.

Sullenly he obeyed the crisp orders to stand up. Deftly a pair of handcuffs were clapped on his wrists.

The policeman then proceeded to use his “walkie-talkie” apparatus to call up assistance from the station.

“Don’t you boys go away,” he cautioned, while awaiting the arrival of his fellow police. “Did any of you notice the number of that car?”

“I did,” replied Peter.

“That won’t help you, Sarge!” interrupted the arrested man, probably under the impression that he’d secure slightly better consideration if he split on his pal. “False number plates, that’s what they are. That car came from _____”

“Shut up!” exclaimed the policeman. “You’ve been warned. Any statement you care to make will be used in evidence!”

An inspector, a sergeant and four constables were quickly upon the scene. The arrested man was then taken away, while the inspector questioned Peter and his companions, pending the arrival of the bank manager. Until he arrived the trapped bandit could not be removed from behind the grille. Neither could the clerk be released from the strong-room. The cashier, still in considerable pain, had already been taken to hospital for treatment to his eyes.

“Let’s clear out of here while the going’s good,” suggested Oxley, mindful of a crowd of complications if the four cadets were summoned to appear in court as witnesses.

As things turned out perhaps it was just as well that they didn’t act on Oxley’s proposition.

“I’ll want to take statements from you,” announced the inspector. “Come this way!”

The four youths followed him into the office, where a couple of men were trying—so far without success—to liberate the imprisoned clerk. His muffled voice could be faintly heard, declaring that so far he wasn’t feeling suffocated, but that the sooner he was released the better.

“Now, young gentlemen!” resumed the inspector, “I’ll trouble you to give me your names. I’ll have to ask you a few questions. You’re on a ship, I take it?”

“Yes, we’re *in a ship*,” amended Cadet Purchase. “The *Golden Gleaner*. We’re waiting to discharge cargo.”

“And that won’t be until the dockers’ strike is settled,” rejoined their questioner. “By that time we’ll have dealt with this case.”

The inspector hadn’t gone very far with his questions when the somewhat agitated manager arrived.

“There’s nothing missing,” reported the inspector, after he had reassured the manager that the cashier was now receiving medical attention. “Thanks to these young men who tackled one of the bandits, who looked like getting away with it, a bag containing notes and coins has been recovered. How much was in it, Wilson?”

“Four hundred and five pounds, sir,” replied the constable, who had been given the task of counting the contents of the leather case.

“You acted with remarkable presence of mind,” declared the manager, addressing the four cadets. “No doubt the directors of the bank will see to it that your aid will be suitably rewarded.”

“I hope they will, sir,” rejoined Peter. “I’ve spoilt my best shore-going pair of trousers!”

There was a general laugh at Peter’s statement.

“You can rest assured that the matter will receive satisfactory consideration,” the manager promised him.

By the aid of the manager’s master-key the grille was removed and the trapped bandit released, only to be promptly handcuffed.

The junior clerk was then freed from the strong-room, little the worse for his adventures. In fact he was looking rather pleased with himself.

There seemed no point in the four cadets remaining on the bank premises any longer. They asked the inspector if they couldn’t be allowed to go.

“Yes, certainly,” he replied. “The accused will appear in court tomorrow, but that will be only a brief hearing. You needn’t be present unless you wish. You’ll have good warning of the actual trial. And thank you very much for your valuable assistance.”

The four cadets made their exit. A small crowd still lingered outside the building.

“That’s the one who tripped the man!” declared a buxom woman. “The one with the torn trousers!”

Much to the lads’ relief, none of the onlookers attempted to follow them. For the present the four cadets had had enough—and more than enough—of Cape Town. Now that the excitement had died down they were able to visualize certain complications that were almost bound to arise.

“I hope we sail before the trial comes off,” said Oxley.

“Precious little chance of that while the strike lasts,” rejoined Purchase glumly. “If she does, then we might have to be left behind.”

“There’s a risk of that,” admitted Gerald. “I suppose we must report to the Old Man on what’s happened.”

“I wouldn’t answer for the consequences if we didn’t,” declared Purchase; then, changing the subject: “There was over four hundred pounds in that case. I wonder what they’ll give you, Meadows? Ten per cent, I expect! Forty pounds isn’t to be sneezed at!”

“It’s ten pounds for each of us,” asserted Peter.

“But you were the one who grappled with the fellow,” persisted Purchase. “And you ruined your best pair of bags!”

“Maybe I did,” admitted Peter. “All the same, if there is any money in the matter it’s share and share alike! Hullo! What’s all that noise?”

Although they were still some distance from the nearest entrance to the docks, they could distinctly hear a continuous roar of cheering.

“It sounds as if the strike’s settled,” suggested Gerald. “If only the ship were unloaded! We’d be under way before sunset!”

CHAPTER X

CAUGHT BY WIRELESS

Gerald's surmise proved to be correct. The strike was over. The fact remained that the *Golden Gleaner's* cargo—or rather, the portion consigned to South Africa—had not been cleared, and until this was done there was no likelihood of her resuming her voyage. When she did, would the Cape Town police insist upon the four cadets remaining behind as witnesses for the prosecution of the two—and possibly three—bandits?

The novelty of spending the evening ashore had waned as far as Gerald and his three fellow cadets were concerned. Their chief thought was to report the raid to Captain Harrington before he had a chance to hear about it from outside sources.

“And keep mum about it—from the rest of the mess,” declared Purchase. “We don't want any of the officers getting hold of what's happened before we've reported to the Old Man.”

“I don't see why,” objected Oxley. “Temple or Downing is bound to know. We'll have to put our request to see the Old Man through one or other.”

“Admitted, but there's no need to tell them our reason. Once we've seen Captain Harrington it won't matter how much or how little they know.”

It wasn't so easy as that!

On going on board, the four cadets learned from the quartermaster on the gangway that Captain Harrington had gone ashore during the afternoon and that the time of his return was uncertain.

“He may be back sooner, now that the strike is over,” suggested the petty officer.

“When do we start unloading, do you know?” asked Cadet Purchase.

“That I can't say,” was the indefinite reply. “The fourth officer is having the cargo lamps rigged up in case unloading starts at eight bells.”

It was now six o'clock and not far off sundown. The four youths settled down, as best they could, to await Captain Harrington's return. The rest of their messmates were still ashore, probably enjoying themselves. On board no preparations had been made for a meal. The steward, reckoning upon the probability that all the cadets would be off the ship till close on midnight, had packed up and had gone ashore too.

"Why are we looking so beastly glum?" asked Gerald. "Anyone would think that we were the bandits!"

"I wish for a good many reasons I'd never set eyes on that bank," declared Peter. "If we are roped in as witnesses——"

His words were interrupted by the appearance of a messenger.

"Captain wishes to see Cadets Oxley, Purchase, Stacey and Meadows in his day-cabin at once!" he announced.

This looked ominous. Not only had the Old Man come on board without having been seen by the four youths—he had evidently learned already of the attempted bank robbery and of the part four of his "young gentlemen" had played. Otherwise why should they be summoned, individually and by name, to his presence?

In double quick time the four youths ascended the three ladders to the lower bridge.

Fourth Officer Angus Cross was standing outside the door of the captain's cabin. He greeted the quartette with a cheerful grin that seemed to suggest the question: "Now what have you four been up to?"

Without speaking a word, Mr. Cross intimated that they should enter.

They did so, temporarily dazzled by the bright artificial lighting.

"Close that door, one of you!" ordered the Old Man. His voice didn't sound sharp and stern as it generally did when defaulting cadets were "on the carpet".

Captain Harrington was not seated at his desk. He was standing on the hearth-rug in front of an unlighted fireplace. He wasn't alone.

By his side was a somewhat stern-looking individual. Even though he was in plain clothes, the four cadets recognized him as the police inspector who had directed the "mopping-up operations" following the abortive raid on one of Cape Town's branch banks.

“Inspector Van Hoyst has called on me on behalf of his colleagues and himself in order to express their appreciation of your prompt action in foiling a raid on the Reinhout Street bank,” announced the Old Man. “I suggested that he might convey that appreciation to you in person.”

“And I am most pleased to agree to your captain’s suggestion,” added the inspector. “Acting as you did, at considerable risk to yourselves, I think your promptitude and disregard of personal danger deserves the highest praise.”

“But, sir, there wasn’t any actual danger,” protested Peter. “The fellow we brought down had left his pistol—it was only an ammonia one, as you know—inside the place when he bolted.”

“Your statement is perfectly correct,” agreed Van Hoyst. “But that doesn’t alter the fact that he was also armed with an automatic ‘three-o-three’, capable of inflicting a mortal wound. Fortunately for you—and no doubt the bandit as well—you tackled him so efficiently, Mr. Meadows, that his arm was pinned down and in consequence he was unable to draw the weapon. Had he been able to do so, there is little doubt that he would have used it effectually, not only upon you but upon your companions as well. His record shows that he’s a man unlikely to stop at anything with his liberty at stake!”

This was news to Peter Meadows. Up to now he had had no idea of the risk he and his chums had run. They hadn’t any knowledge that the criminal was in possession of a lethal weapon when they tackled him. Instead of being in the Old Man’s cabin they might be lying in a mortuary!

“I have mentioned to Captain Harrington the subject of the trial of the two accused,” said the inspector in the course of conversation. “I don’t suppose he relishes the possibility that he might have to leave behind four members of his crew. Nor do I suppose that you would be at all keen to remain for the purpose of being called as witnesses.

“So I have made arrangements, in the event of your ship’s early departure, for you to make declarations upon oath, which will relieve you of the responsibility of a personal appearance at the trial. Would the hour of eleven to-morrow morning be convenient? At my office? Good! I’ll arrange for an attorney to take down the necessary statements.”

At the conclusion of the interview the four cadets left the captain’s cabin in far higher spirits than when they had entered it some twenty minutes earlier.

A load had been lifted off their minds. No longer were they haunted by the dread that they might have been left behind when the *Golden Gleaner* resumed her voyage.

Before the evening was over everyone on board had heard about the part four members of the ship's crew had played during the raid on the bank. The Old Man told the story to his officers. Perhaps, more modestly, the four cadets spun the yarn to their fellow messmates. But how the story came to the knowledge of the rest of the crew was something of a mystery—but it did!

Next morning the Old Man accompanied the four cadets to Inspector Van Hoyst's office, where the necessary affidavits were prepared, signed, witnessed and sealed. After that Captain Harrington stood them a more than satisfying lunch at one of Cape Town's leading restaurants.

Then they bought copies of the *Cape Argus* and *Die Burger* to send home to their relatives and friends with accounts of the raid. It gave the four cadets something of the nature of a thrill to see, perhaps for the first time, their names in print!

Altogether it was an exciting day. By no means the least satisfactory part of it was the fact that while they were enjoying themselves at their captain's expense their brother cadets were hard at it in the ship's hold!

But Senior Cadet Dusty Miller wasn't having any more of that! Work was going on day and night to land the vehicles and other cargo consigned to Cape Town. What better contribution to that task could the four "excused duty" cadets make than to be put in the late afternoon shift?

So while their messmates were placed off duty, the four had to don working kit and set-to. It wasn't a particularly hard task, consisting chiefly of carrying out the third officer's orders.

On the following day the two men charged with armed robbery were brought into court and committed to the Assizes, which were due to be held in a fortnight's time. A warrant was issued for the arrest of one Jan Groote, the driver of the raiders' car, who, so far, had escaped arrest. The car had been found abandoned near Sellenbosch and was discovered to be the one reported missing by its lawful owner, a resident of Simonstown.

Two days before the start of the Assizes, the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* sailed for her next port of call—Fremantle in Western Australia, a distance of just over four thousand seven hundred miles.

On the fourth day after leaving Cape Town the ship's radio picked up news that the trial of the two bandits had been completed, that they each had been found guilty on all counts and had been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

Quickly the news spread throughout the ship, officers and men taking a lively interest in what they considered to be almost a personal matter.

It was in the first dog-watch that Gerald and Peter heard the news. It was their stand-easy—they were due to come on watch at 8 p.m.—and they were on the for'ard well-deck when Fourth Officer Angus Cross told them the result of the trial.

They were still discussing the matter—Mr. Cross declaring that in his opinion the four cadets would eventually receive considerably more, than ten pounds reward—when one of the hands approached the fourth officer.

“There's hammering in No. 3 hold, sir!” he reported.

“What sort of hammering?” asked Mr. Cross, who knew that no one could have gained access to the hold once the hatch covers had been replaced and properly secured—a job that had been carried out previous to the ship's departure from Cape Town.

“Just hammering, sir,” replied the man.

“Sure it isn't some metal object that's come adrift?” suggested the fourth officer.

“It's too sharp for that, sir,” declared the man. “Sort o' tap-tap-tap.”

“Very good! Ask the bos'n to come here,” ordered Mr. Cross. “Tell him to bring a couple—no, four hands with him.”

In a few minutes Mr. Quinn was on the scene, accompanied not by four but by a dozen of the hands. These were joined by Cadets Miller, Oxley and Purchase. Already the “buzz” had gone round to the effect that there was a stowaway in No. 3 hold.

Stowaways were fairly frequent in Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co.'s fleet. Most of them were West Indian coloured folk hoping to find employment in the Old Country. Next, in point of numbers, were British youths who stowed themselves away on board outward-bound vessels in quest of adventure. Most of these were soon convinced, once their presence was discovered, that reality fell far short of anticipation!

One of the hatches was removed and a ladder lowered into the hold. By now the hammering had ceased.

“Below there!” challenged Bos’n Paddy Quinn.

There was no reply.

“Below there!” shouted the bos’n again. “Out you’ll be comin’ or ye’ll be falin’ sorry for yourself if Oi’m fetchin’ you!”

“All right, boss, I’m coming up!” replied a hesitant voice—a voice so cracked that the word “boss” sounded like the South African “baas”. Perhaps it was baas.

Slowly, doubtful of his reception, the stowaway began the ascent of the none-too-steady ladder, until his face emerged in the still strong sunlight.

After more than four days of self-inflicted captivity, he presented a doleful sight. His face was grey and streaked with black oil. He had been violently sea-sick and the result didn’t improve his appearance.

The hands regarded him without feelings of pity. To them he was an intruder who would have to be fed out of their rations and one who wouldn’t or couldn’t earn his keep.

The man stumbled over the raised coaming.

“Sit down!” ordered Mr. Cross considerately, for the stowaway was obviously in a weak state. “What’s your name?”

“John Smith, sir.”

This raised a laugh from the onlookers, but the fourth officer accepted it without audible comment. He made a note in his pocket-book.

Why had John Smith stowed himself on board? Because he wanted to get back to his wife, who lived in Perth, Western Australia. Had he any sea training? No, he’d been employed on a farm near Paarl, South Africa.

Other questions followed, then Mr. Cross ordered the bos’n to take him away and give him a meal.

“The captain will see him after he’s had dinner,” he added.

John Smith was taken for’ard to be cleaned up and fed before his impending interview with the Old Man. Most of the interested onlookers dispersed to various parts of the ship.

The five cadets remained—four of them because they were interested in something or somebody, and Dusty Miller, who was curious to know “what was in the wind”. As senior cadet he considered it was his right to take part in any informal discussion that had to do with the cadets as a whole.

“Are you sure?” asked Purchase, addressing Gerald.

“Fairly so,” admitted the youth.

“Only fairly?”

“Well, you see, I only saw him side face,” explained Gerald.

“And what about you?” inquired Purchase, turning to Peter.

“I was too busy with the other one to take notice of his features,” replied Peter.

“I could swear to it that he’s the man,” asserted Oxley, forestalling his brother cadet’s question.

“What’s all this about?” demanded Miller.

“Only that that stowaway is the driver of the bandits’ car, Dusty,” declared Purchase.

“Then it was a jolly sound idea of yours to keep your mouths shut about it till now,” declared the senior cadet judicially. “Do you think the fellow recognized any of you?”

“He had less chance to see our faces than we had to see his,” replied Purchase. “Hadn’t you better report to Cross?”

“I’m not directly involved,” replied Miller. “You were, so you’d better tackle him. But keep it dark from the others. Whatever we do, this John Smith, as he calls himself, mustn’t know what we know about him!”

Accordingly Purchase approached the fourth officer and, saluting, asked to have a few minutes’ conversation with him.

“Fire away!” prompted Angus Cross.

Purchase did so, relating his brother cadets’ reactions and statements made after John Smith had been taken away.

“And you’ve—all of you—kept this knowledge to yourselves?” asked the fourth officer.

“Between the four of us; but we had to let Dusty into it. He is our senior cadet.”

“You’re telling me,” rejoined Mr. Cross oracularly. “But he won’t go spinning the yarn to everyone. I have to report to the captain about finding the stowaway, and now I can add a most interesting bit of news! Keep quiet about this business. I’ll let you know what Captain Harrington has to say.”

When, some time later, the Old Man had made an excellent meal and was enjoying a post-prandial cigar, Fourth Officer Cross tapped on his cabin door.

“Well, Cross, anything wrong?” he inquired.

“I’m afraid there is, sir!”

It wasn’t the reply the Old Man had expected. His fourth officer wasn’t one given to complaining.

“What is it?”

“We’ve found a stowaway, sir!”

“Confound the fellow!” ejaculated Captain Harrington.

His exasperation was justified. There was a difference in procedure between landing a stowaway in a port of the United Kingdom and setting him ashore in one of the Dominions. He would have to appear personally in court and take part in a lot of procedure before the man was convicted, especially if the accused could obtain the services of a clever lawyer.

“And that’s not all,” continued Mr. Cross in the course of his report. “Cadets Oxley, Purchase and Stacey declare that the fellow is the driver of the car that took the bandits to the bank at Cape Town.”

“Worse and worse!” declared the Old Man. “I suppose that news is all over the ship by this time?”

“Indeed no, sir!” protested the fourth officer. “They arranged to keep their mouths shut. Only Cadet Miller knows about it as well.”

“That’s good!” declared the Old Man. “And I suppose Sparks will have to know; but he’ll be as mum as the proverbial oyster!”

During the rest of the evening and well into the early morning things moved rapidly. A coded message was dispatched to the Cape Town police declaring that a stowaway had been discovered on board who, although giving the name of John Smith, had been recognized as the driver of the car whose occupants had attempted to rob the bank. The man had not been charged with the offence, but merely with unlawfully concealing himself on board. Had the Cape Town police any suggestions to make concerning the

immediate treatment of the suspect? The *Golden Gleaner's* next port of call would be Fremantle, Western Australia.

In the interval pending a reply from the South African police, the Old Man had the stowaway brought before him. He treated the fellow just as he would any other stowaway, taking care not to ask any questions that might arouse suspicions in the bandit's mind. Then, having warned him that his good behaviour while on board would tell in his favour when brought before the magistrates at Fremantle, the Old Man dismissed him.

Next Captain Harrington sent for the four cadets, who reiterated the statements they had previously made to Fourth Officer Cross.

Three of them were definitely positive that the stowaway was the driver of the waiting car, even though they had only had brief glimpses of his profile.

Captain Harrington had only just terminated that interview, when the senior wireless officer entered his cabin with a decoded signal received from Cape Town.

It acknowledged Captain Harrington's message and stated that there was every reason to believe that John Smith and Jan Groote were one and the same person. It approved the suggestion that the suspect would be kept in ignorance of the fact that he had been identified as an accomplice of the gang. The Western Australian police would be communicated with, and, if considered necessary, detectives from Cape Town would be flown to Fremantle to effect Groote's arrest. The wireless message also stated that a reward of three hundred pounds had been offered for information leading to Jan Groote's arrest.

For the rest of the east'ard run to Fremantle life on board the *Golden Gleaner* was otherwise uneventful. Always in the minds of those entrusted with the secret was there a dread that it might leak out. The Old Man had had quite enough anxiety already over the presence of John Smith *alias* Jan Groote on board. The fellow was undoubtedly a dangerous criminal. What he might or might not do should he become aware that arrest awaited him was a matter for speculation.

The *Golden Gleaner* was still not within three miles of her first Australian port of call when a motor-launch was sighted, heading for the ship.

To most of the crew this was no unusual sight. By the flag she was displaying from her stumpy mast it was evident that she was bringing off the

pilot who was to take the ship up the estuary of the Swan River. But in addition to the pilot and the launch's crew, there were a couple of men in the stern-sheets—men in civilian clothes and wearing bowler hats.

“Who are those fellows, I wonder?” asked Cadet Nelson, who wasn't in the know, of Peter Meadows, who was.

“How should I know their names?” rejoined Peter ingeniously and evasively.

Nelson did not press the point.

The cadets, together with several of the crew, lined the rail to await the pilot's arrival. Those not in the know started the old sea-custom of betting which of the pilot's feet would be the first to touch the deck.

“Afternoon, Cap'n!” hailed the pilot before his craft was actually alongside. “My orders are to put these two medical officers aboard you!”

In other circumstances Captain Harrington would have asked the reason. By the look of the two bowler-hatted men they were no more doctors than he was!

Resisting an urge to wink his eye, the Old Man invited the two “medical men” to follow the pilot up the side. Then he ordered his chief officer to muster the starboard watch for medical inspection. Presumably the hands of the port watch would be examined later.

Then a hitch occurred.

The two “doctors” declined to trust themselves to the Jacob's ladder. The ship, having lost way, was rolling heavily in the swell. Since they were supposed to be members of the port medical board, they should have been quite accustomed to boarding craft under all ordinary conditions. Their refusal had undoubtedly raised suspicions in the minds of many of the crew as to their *bona fides*; but Jan Groote was not one of them. Ignorant of what was in store for him, he was standing with the rest of the starboard watch, probably thinking out some plan to get ashore and make himself scarce. If he were unable to do so, the alternative, according to his calculations, would be a month or six weeks in quod for having stowed himself on board the ship.

There was considerable delay while the accommodation ladder was being lowered into position. Then, preceded by the pilot, the two detectives awkwardly made their way up the swaying ladder.

Captain Harrington took the two “medical men” aside, where they were more or less out of sight of the part of the crew drawn up on the well-deck.

“There’s your man, gentlemen,” he explained. “The one with a three weeks’ growth of beard. He’s fallen in with the cook’s party.”

“Right!” rejoined one of the police officers grimly. “We’ll soon take him off your hands.”

The two detectives went down to the well-deck. They passed along the line of men, stopping here and there to examine an out-thrust tongue, until they were opposite the fellow they were after.

Almost before Groote realized what had happened and before he could give tongue in a torrent of filthy abuse, the handcuffs were snapped round his wrists.

CHAPTER XI

AT TAMBO WARRA

Within a few minutes of Jan Groote's arrest, the *Golden Gleaner* was once more making way, and, in charge of the pilot, was keeping in the wake of the pilot launch.

"That's a cool three hundred of the best for you, Cap'n," declared the pilot.

Captain Harrington shrugged his shoulders—a habit of his when he was feeling put out. He didn't want to touch what looked like being blood-money. He was fed up to the back teeth with the affair.

"I suppose this means that I and some of my crew will have to attend proceedings in court?" he asked.

"Not unless you're prepared to fly back to Cape Town," replied the pilot. "These 'tects aren't Australian Commonwealth police. They flew to Perth a fortnight ago, and now they've got their man I take it they're off back to Cape Town as quick as their plane can do the run!"

This information, that in the main proved to be correct, lifted a load off Captain Harrington's mind. Essentially he was a seaman, wedded to his profession. That did not include getting mixed up with the activities of smash-and-grab criminals and others of that ilk.

The question of the three hundred pounds reward, in addition to the four cadets' forty pounds, still remained to worry him. What was to be done with it? Would the Owners demand a share? It was their ship, especially her wireless, that had been employed to effect the bandit's arrest. Would the ship's officers, especially those in the radio cabin, look to a proportion of the reward coming their way?

The Old Man brushed these thoughts aside. There would be time to deal with these problems when the three hundred pounds were paid.

As soon as the *Golden Gleaner* berthed at Fremantle, the detectives took their prisoner ashore. That was the last that any member of her crew saw of Jan Groote.

Her stay was of short duration. A small proportion of her original consignment of motor vehicles and farm machinery was landed; then, having replenished her fuel tanks, the *Golden Gleaner* left for her next port of call.

The cadets had been given no chance for a run ashore. Gerald and Peter had been looking forward to seeing Fremantle and Perth at close quarters. They realized now that a merchant vessel is a means of making money for her Owners, and that any detention in port in addition to the time unloading and taking in cargo is something of the nature of a dead loss.

The *Golden Gleaner's* run across the Great Australian Bight was uneventful. Although summer was almost over—it was now early March—the weather was warm and the sea generally smooth.

At Melbourne conditions were very much the same as they had been at Fremantle. More cargo was put ashore but none taken on board. There was no leave granted to the cadets; but, against this, mail from home helped to ease their disappointment. Most of the lads' correspondence seemed to have one subject in common—the seemingly endless succession of heavy rain. In Melbourne they were having days of brilliant sunshine.

While in port something happened for the first time since the *Golden Gleaner* first put to sea. It was also a most rare occurrence as far as Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co.'s fleet was concerned.

Two members of her crew “ran”. In other words, they deserted. The police had been informed. They scouted the suggestion that the men might have been the victims of foul play; yet it seemed strange why they should have absented themselves. Each had a good character. They were efficient seamen; yet they had secretly gone ashore, leaving their admittedly scanty personal belongings behind, and had vanished without a trace!

The *Golden Gleaner* proceeded to Sydney. Here things were much the same as they had been at her previous port of call. The remaining cargo was put ashore, but, so far, there was none to take its place. If none were soon forthcoming, the ship might be compelled to “seek”. That meant being in ballast until cargo was forthcoming at another port. Where that port was to be found was as yet an unsolved problem. A year might well elapse before the ship returned to Southampton.

Gerald and Peter saw very little of Sydney except from their ship. They had one consolation—if consolation it could be termed—none of the cadets was allowed ashore. They had one compensating factor, however, when a

firm of solicitors in Cape Town sent a cheque to Captain Harrington for the sum of forty pounds to be given in equal shares to the four cadets who had foiled the raid on the bank.

“What’s the good of ten quid if you can’t get ashore to spend it?” grumbled Cadet Oxley. “I’ll bet the Old Man’s wild ’cause that three hundred pounds for Groote’s capture hasn’t come along yet. That’s why he won’t give us shore leave.”

The lad had misjudged Captain Harrington. There were other reasons.

Then came the agents’ instructions ordering the ship to proceed “light” to Brisbane, there to take on board a full cargo of rice for Hong Kong. Why rice for Hong Kong? To the cadets, and no doubt to others of the crew, this was equivalent to sending coals to Newcastle, though within the last two or three years American coal had been shipped there. Probably a failure of the China rice crop had had repercussions upon the dense Chinese population of Hong Kong. In any case the Queensland authorities were helping to close the gap.

“I hope we get a few days’ leave at Brisbane,” said Cadet Purchase, when the news of the ship’s next port of call had been announced.

“Some hope!” exclaimed Oxley. “But what’s the bright idea, supposing we’re allowed ashore?”

“I’ve an uncle—I’ve never seen him—who lives about fifty miles from Brisbane,” explained Purchase. “Years ago, before my first voyage——”

“That’s not so very long ago,” interrupted Oxley.

“Maybe, but that’s not the point. What is the point is that he gave me an invitation to look him up if I ever found myself in Brisbane. Well, here’s the chance. I don’t want to go all that way on my own, so what about you fellows coming along?”

At the moment “you fellows” meant Gerald, Peter and Oxley. The cadets who had foiled the bank raiders.

“But I say, wouldn’t your uncle jib if four of us descended upon him without warning?” asked Gerald.

“Oh no!” replied the proposer of the scheme. “Actually, he mentioned in his letter that any chums of mine would be welcome. And it isn’t a case of dropping in on him without warning. I’ll write from here, and he’ll get the letter before the ship arrives at Brisbane.”

“How do we get to his place?” asked Peter.

“I don’t know,” confessed Purchase. “He has a big farm called Tambo Warra. Whether the railway goes anywhere near or whether there’s a motor bus I just don’t know. He’ll tell us how to get there in his reply. As for the ready, the Old Man’ll advance us some money when he knows where we’re going.”

“Providing the ship’s stopping at Brisbane,” added Oxley.

“Exactly,” agreed Purchase. “It all depends on that!”

When, thirty hours after leaving Sydney, the *Golden Gleaner* arrived at Brisbane, there was a letter awaiting Purchase from his Uncle George.

It was brief and to the point. He’d be very pleased to see his nephew and any chums he cared to bring along. The railway wouldn’t be of much use, but there was a motor bus running within ten miles of the farm.

“Does that mean we have to pad the hoof for the last ten miles?” asked Oxley dubiously.

“No; his letter goes on to say that he’ll meet us in his car,” replied the planner of the expedition. “Now we’d better tackle the Old Man.”

“Don’t you think it would be better if you asked him?” suggested Oxley.

“I don’t,” replied Purchase. “There’s safety in numbers, so they say. I’ll tackle Cross now.”

The fourth officer raised no objection when the four cadets asked to see the Old Man on urgent business, and presently they were ushered into his cabin.

On behalf of his chums Purchase made his request for shore leave, backing up his application by producing Uncle George’s letter.

“Since we’re here for at least a week, I see no reason why you shouldn’t have three days off,” decided Captain Harrington. “When do you wish to start?”

“To-morrow, sir,” replied Purchase. “If I write to my uncle now he’ll get the letter in time to pick us up in his car.”

The next day dawned with a promise of subtropical heat. The four cadets, each with five pounds in his pocket (although goodness only knew why they took such a sum!), went ashore in their best uniforms. Even on a remote farm they must keep up appearances.

Then, almost at the start, things began to go wrong.

The motor bus that the lads concluded would be running daily—perhaps twice daily—was only in operation on Saturdays and Mondays. This was Tuesday. Unless they could find some other means of transport, their visit to Tambo Warra was off!

“I’ll tell you what!” suggested Purchase. “What’s wrong with a couple of motor bikes? You can ride one, Oxley, and I the other. Stacey and Meadows can ride pillion.”

“We haven’t driving licences,” objected Oxley. “Even if we had—and I’ve let mine lapse—they wouldn’t be valid out here. And we aren’t insured against third party risks.”

Purchase snorted contemptuously.

“You always are a fellow for raising objections,” he said somewhat heatedly. “Who’s going to ask us for our driving licences—even supposing they are used in Queensland? If we are nabbed, we can explain that we’ve come ashore from a ship and don’t know anything about regulations.”

Gerald and Peter raised no objections to Purchase’s suggestions. If anyone were to be run in, it wouldn’t be they.

A bystander directed them to a store where motor cycles could be hired.

They approached the proprietor with considerable trepidation. What were his charges? Would he demand a deposit against the safe return of the two machines? If he did, then their five pounds wouldn’t go far!

The storekeeper was quite a decent sort—a typical bluff, outspoken Aussie. When he knew that the four lads wanted to go to Tambo Warra and that George Purchase was uncle to one of them, he seemed most interested.

“Sure I know George Purchase,” he declared. “More years than I care to remember he’s been in and out of my store.”

He agreed to let them have two motor cycles at the reasonable sum of ten shillings a day, the hirers to pay for “gas” and oil. The question of a deposit was waved aside, with a reiterated “George Purchase is a chum o’ mine. Served together in France we did!”

Nor was it a very auspicious start, both drivers wobbling considerably while their pillion riders had difficulty to keep their balance. After a bit they grew more accustomed to the motor cycles, and presently they were bowling along at a modest thirty miles an hour.

For more than half the distance the road was in very good condition, comparing favourably with Britain's overlaid highways; but for the remainder of the way the motor cycles were bucking like a pair of bronchos.

It was the two pillion riders who fared worse. Actually they weren't pillions in the strictest sense but merely cushions strapped to the luggage carriers. Gerald and Peter had been used to hard seats on board, but they were luxuries compared with these!

Whenever there was a branch road they had to dismount and read the crude ill-painted boards that served as direction-posts. Tambo Warra certainly took some finding, but eventually, more by good luck than good management, they arrived at George Purchase's farm.

The house was a large, one-storeyed, rambling building of no architectural pretensions. Rough hewn timber and corrugated iron figured largely in its construction. There were no chimneys, their functions being performed by about half a dozen stove-pipes. Yet the place looked well cared for. Evidently its owner was a man of substance, but where was he?

Painfully the four cadets alighted. Peter, in particular, was so stiff that he could hardly move. He was dreading the moment when he would be invited to sit down.

That moment was not yet. The house seemed to be deserted. There didn't appear to be a door-bell, but the door under the wide veranda was wide open.

Purchase sounded his horn. For about five minutes nothing happened, then a big burly man of about fifty appeared. Neither Gerald nor Peter had previously seen anyone with exaggerated bow-legs. Surely he couldn't be Purchase's uncle?

"What'll you be wantin', chums?" he inquired.

"Is Mr. Purchase at home?" asked the cadet sharing the same surname.

"No, he ain't," replied the bow-legged individual. "Is he expectin' you?"

"Sort of," admitted Purchase. "I'm his nephew. I wrote saying we were coming to see him to-day."

"When did you write?"

"Yesterday, from Brisbane."

"We fetch our mail twice a week from Gurra-Gurrah post-box. That's fifteen miles from here. The boss will be lucky if he gets that letter of yours

afore Friday. He's away just now."

"When will he be back?" asked Purchase.

"Difficult to say. He's away round the farm. The boundary fence over there'll be twenty miles from here. But come right in. You'd better put your cycles over there, out of the sun. Mebbe you can do with something to eat and drink."

The motor cycles having been temporarily garaged—and how their riders' limbs ached during that operation—Uncle George's deputy led the four cadets into a large and comfortably furnished room.

"Whisky, gin or rum?" inquired their deputy host.

"Neither, thanks," replied Purchase. "You see, we don't drink spirits. Do you mind if we have tea?"

"Tea's a drink with meals," the bow-legged man pointed out. "For a cooler 'tween meals, seeing you won't carry your liquor, there's lime-juice."

He left them to their own devices for some minutes, presently to return with "his missus", who was carrying a well-laden tray.

There was a large jug of lime-juice, a quantity of tropical and subtropical fruits, and a plate of toasted cakes which went by the name of dampers.

The four youths set to work with a will. They were hungry and thirsty. They could use their jaws efficiently and without physical discomfort, which was more than could be said of their limbs!

They had barely finished their repast—they had been warned that they would be expected to tackle the principal meal of the day in an hour's time!—when the sound of horses' hoofs was heard.

Uncle George, accompanied by half a dozen of his men, had returned before he had been expected.

They could hear him giving orders for the animals to be stabled, then he entered the room to find his unexpected guests there.

The owner of Tambo Warra was a tall, well-set-up man in his fifties. He was well over six feet in height, blue-eyed, clean-shaven and with a complexion that matched his leather gaiters.

"So you've made it!" he exclaimed, his eyes moving from one to another of his visitors. "And which of you happens to be my nephew?"

Informal introductions were carried out and conversation became general. If Uncle George wanted to have his nephew to himself he gave no hint of his wish to do so. The impression amongst the other three cadets was that he was keen to hear about the Old Country no matter from what source.

“You’d like a dip in the swimming pool before you have your grub,” he suggested. “Then I’ll show you round. I hope you can all ride?”

CHAPTER XII

CUTTING IT FINE

The four cadets did their best to conceal their misapprehensions. It was a very poor best. What excuse could they offer in order to decline their host's invitation? Riding horseback with their hinder parts still raw—for Purchase and Oxley had suffered almost as much as their pillion riders—would be the last straw.

"We've never ridden horseback, Uncle," declared his nephew.

"That's no reason why you shouldn't make a start," rejoined Purchase senior. "You'll learn quite a lot about horses while you're here, I reckon!"

"We've been vaccinated, Uncle," declared his nephew.

In a way that was a true statement. All four cadets had been vaccinated at some period of their existence.

"On the arm, I take it," rejoined Mr. Purchase. "That won't affect your seat in the saddle, and it didn't prevent you coming here on those bone-rattling motor bikes!"

The wretched truth had to come out.

Between them the four victims of saddle soreness explained their reluctance to take advantage of their host's offer. Had they been fit they would have liked nothing better than to sit astride a horse. As it was, apart from the acute physical discomfort, they must keep themselves fit in order to report for duty. Captain Harrington's last injunction still rang in their ears that, happen what may, they were to return to their ship not a minute later than 6 p.m. on the following Thursday.

Once he was acquainted with the facts, George Purchase was most sympathetic. He knew of an infallible cure. His four guests should go for a swim. After that they should apply powdered alum to the affected parts and all inflammation would speedily disappear. The treatment proved to be highly successful.

That night the lads were glad to turn in early.

For some reason they were very sleepy. It was as much as they could do not to yawn and keep their eyes open. Had they eaten too much? Mr. Purchase reassured them that they hadn't. In his opinion they hadn't done justice to Queensland up-country fare. It was the air. Ever since January the cadets had never once till now been away from a salt sea-laden air. Now they were fifty miles from the nearest sea and no longer influenced by it.

Thursday morning dawned all too soon. Apparently fit for anything, the four cadets prepared for their return run to Brisbane. Everything seemed to be in their favour. There had been a heavy shower during the night, but this had not adversely affected the state of the roads. The strong wind, too, was in their favour.

Having obtained a promise from each of his guests that whenever they might again be in Brisbane they would make a point of visiting him—whether individually or otherwise—Mr. Purchase bade his visitors *au revoir*.

For the first ten or twelve miles all went well. Then, with a loud report, the front tyre of Oxley's hired mount burst. Somehow he managed to bring the machine to a standstill without throwing off either his pillion rider—Gerald—or himself.

"Let's hope there's a repair outfit," observed Gerald.

There was, but that didn't improve the situation.

The burst had occurred near the tread and quite close to the valve stem. Quickly the outer cover was removed. The inner tube had been previously repaired more than once, but one of the patches close to the valve stem had blown.

"It'll mean a new inner tube," declared Purchase. "You'd never get a patch to hold there! Didn't we pass a store somewhere near here?"

"Yes, it can't be more than a mile from here," said Gerald. "Put the cover back. We'll have to push the beastly thing!"

This they did—no light business under a very warm sun. The store—otherwise a general shop—was found to be nearer two than one mile. Just as they were arriving there, the rear tyre of the other motor cycle was almost flat.

"Bad show, lads!" exclaimed Oxley. "It isn't as if we had been riding it! We'll tackle the puncture while you are changing your front wheel."

"But I haven't a front wheel," objected Purchase.

“You know jolly well what I mean,” countered Oxley. “So let’s get on with it.”

Light-heartedly the four cadets set about their two tasks. Removing the front wheel was the easier task, but when the inner tube was exposed, it was found that there were not less than four patches close to the valve stem. How the tube had remained air-tight was something of a mystery. As a tube it was of no further use.

The storekeeper was of no practicable use. He had but a couple of tubes in stock, and they were of the wrong size.

“Jefferson might give you a lift in his truck, only it’s not his day,” he observed. “To-morrow he’ll be passing. If you’d like a shake-down to-night, I’ll——”

“That won’t do,” interrupted Purchase impatiently. “We must be in Brisbane well before six.”

“Then I reckon I can’t help,” rejoined the man, and with that he retired into his store.

“I’ve an idea!” announced Peter. “It may work; on the other hand it may not, but it’s worth trying.”

His mind had gone back to one of the first few days of the *Golden Gleaner’s* present voyage, when the bos’n had been instructing the cadets in the way to make a grommet.

“Might do,” conceded Purchase, after Peter had explained matters.

Peter went into the store, where the owner was reclining against a large barrel.

“Can you let me have a piece of rope, please?” he asked.

“Mebbe; what for—a tow line?”

“No, a length of two-inch rope—about a couple of fathoms.”

“And what would a fathom be?” asked the storekeeper, whose knowledge of marine measures of length was *nil*.

Peter explained.

“You’ll pay for it?” asked the man.

“Rather!”

With that the storekeeper's attitude changed, although he would have been prepared to give a length of thinner rope for use as a tow-line. He was beginning to be interested. For what purpose did that young "pom" want such stout rope?

He cut off the required length and, unable to restrain his curiosity, he followed Peter into the open, or rather, under the wide veranda.

The faulty inner tube was scrapped. Then, carefully placing the rope round the rim in order to ensure a tight fit, Peter set to work on his oversize grommet.

It took him the best part of three-quarters of an hour to complete the loop, during which time he reckoned that he'd lost a pint of perspiration. The hardest part of the job was yet to come. That was to coax the outer cover back, with the rope acting as a sorry substitute for the inner tube.

The help of his three companions was necessary before this was accomplished.

"Looks all right," conceded Purchase. "There's one blessing: we haven't got to blow the blessed thing up!"

The punctured tyre of the other motor cycle had been repaired a quarter of an hour earlier. Provided Peter's experiment was a success, there was nothing to prevent the quartette from proceeding on its way.

With the good wishes of the now genial storekeeper ringing in their ears, they resumed their interrupted journey.

The front wheel of Purchase's machine showed a tendency to wobble and to skid on the more dusty stretches of the road. Nothing of a capsize resulting, he increased speed to a modest twenty miles an hour, until rejoining one of the first-class highways, Purchase revved up to a more or less steady thirty! Then just as they were about to pull up outside the Brisbane store the back tyre burst!

It was then a quarter to six.

"We'll do it, lads!" declared Oxley.

They had yet to square matters up with the owner of the two motor cycles. Much to their satisfaction he made light of what had happened, declaring that perhaps the tyres weren't all they should have been and refusing to take any payment beyond that for the hiring.

Clear of the store the four cadets took to their heels. Apparently running in the streets of Queensland's capital isn't "the thing". For one thing it can be hot there, even though it is outside the tropics. People stopped and stared at the quartette, their clothes smothered in grey and white dust, and their hands and faces streaked with grease, oil and perspiration.

Not that the four cadets minded.

Four bells—the end of the first dog-watch—sounded as they hurried up the gangway of the *Golden Gleaner*.

They had made it!

CHAPTER XIII

TWO MISHAPS

Loading cargo had finished for the day. The ship looked almost deserted when the four cadets came on board. Senior Cadet Miller was standing close to the head of the gangway.

“You fellows do look a sight,” he observed. “You’d better get clean and shifted before the Old Man spots you. Had a good time?”

“Yes, thanks,” replied Purchase, speaking for his companions as well as for himself. “Any mail in yet?”

“No, worse luck!” declared Dusty. “A hitch somewhere, I expect, but I live in hopes. Look out, here’s the Old Man!”

The cadets were too late to make themselves scarce.

They stood to attention, wondering what Captain Harrington would say to their disreputable appearance. One thing the Old Man was always insisting was that cadets when given shore leave would return in a spick-and-span state. At the moment they looked far from being that!

To their surprise Captain Harrington didn’t register disapproval.

“Dead on time!” he observed genially. “Have you had a good time?”

“Yes, sir,” spluttered Purchase. “Quite a decent time.”

“Then get shifted and have dinner with me at two bells,” rejoined the Old Man. “Then you can tell me all about it.”

“I don’t think we’d better tell him *all* about it,” said Purchase, after the captain was well out of earshot. “There were moments when we didn’t uphold the dignity of cadets of the Merchant Navy.”

“You’d better cut the cackle and get rid of your horrible grease paint,” suggested Dusty Miller. “You’ve less than an hour, and the Old Man mustn’t be kept waiting.”

They went to the bathroom where, since there were half a dozen baths for cadets’ use, there was no waiting. Removing the dust from their hair and

bodies was a fairly straightforward task; but when it came to shifting oil from their faces and hands—that was a very different proposition!

Soap and hot water seemed to have no effect. They scrubbed their tanned faces until they felt raw, and, although the tan changed to a boiled lobster hue, the black grease persisted. It was not until someone brought them a tin of solvent that hands and faces could be termed clean.

To put on their travel-stained shore-going uniforms was out of the question until these had been cleaned and pressed. The cadets were used to doing that for themselves, but obviously there wouldn't be time before dining with the captain. Perhaps it was a humorous idea on the part of the Old Man to invite them at short notice, if only to see how they would grapple with sartorial problems!

Fortunately their No. 2 rig was presentable, although Oxley and Purchase had to borrow trousers from Cadets Miller and Nelson. These were not at all a fit, but it was to be hoped that the Old Man would not notice that; or, if he did, he would refrain from making what he imagined to be a humorous remark.

As a matter of fact the Old Man quickly put his youthful guests at their ease. It wasn't the first time by any means that they had found themselves with their legs under the captain's table. Usually he messed with his officers, but there were occasions when he had his meals in his cabin. When he did he was rarely alone, preferring to invite two, three or four of the cadets as his guests.

He listened with genuine interest to the lads' recital of their adventures. At times their voices clashed in their enthusiasm. The one subject that they refrained from mentioning was their acute physical pain in the latter stages of their outward journey. Their description of George Purchase's farm made the Old Man wish that when he "swallowed the anchor" he'd settle down to a country life somewhere in the Dominions—New Zealand for preference.

The cadets' joint description of their adventures was nearing its end when there was a tap on the door.

"Come in!" invited the Old Man.

He was prepared to see Mr. Temple, the chief officer, or one of the other deck officers. The person he didn't expect was Chief Engineer Dougal McFee. When he put in an appearance it almost invariably meant that there was trouble in the engine-room.

Trouble there frequently was. The *Golden Gleaner* had certainly been living up to her reputation as an unlucky ship, due, according to nautical superstition, to two causes. One was that at the last moment prior to her launching she had been given a different name to that under which she had been laid down. The other was that when the time came for her to glide down the slipway into her natural element she had stubbornly refused to do so. Instead she launched herself during the following night.

Bye and large she had been unlucky, even to the extent of having to beach herself on the Arabian coast. There were minor mishaps as well and the engine-room had had, and was having, its share. Under Mr. McFee these were usually dealt with—successfully in most cases—by the chief engineer without his having to report to Captain Harrington after the defect had been made good.

When McFee *did* report before repairs had been effected, that meant trouble.

There was an anxious expression on his face now.

“What’s wrong, Chief?” asked the Old Man.

“A wee bit of trouble with a sleeve of the engine shaft, sirr!”

“Only slight, I hope?”

“I’ll nae say that,” declared McFee, in contradiction to his first statement. “Mebbe it will take twenty-four hours, mebbe a couple o’ days.”

A couple of days! The *Golden Gleaner* should have been well on the next stage of her voyage by then.

“Why didn’t you report to me earlier?” asked Captain Harrington, naturally enough. “The defect must have shown itself while the engines were running.”

“’Deed it did, sirr. There was a little overheating, but I didna think the defect would develop. There are metal fragments in the sleeve.”

“Surely you don’t suspect sabotage?” asked the Old Man anxiously.

“That I do not, sirr,” was the chief engineer’s reassuring reply. “It’ll be just a case of a little overheating. My staff will sort it themselves; there’ll be no call to have assistance from the shore.”

Presently Mr. McFee left the cabin.

The rest of the four cadets' evening was spoilt. Although conversation continued for another half-hour, it was quite evident to them that the Old Man's thoughts were directed to the subject of a defect in the propeller shaft.

Next morning they were on duty, their task being to assist the officers superintending the stowage of cargo in the holds.

It was a hot and uninteresting task. Four bags of rice were picked up in each operation by one of the shore cranes, to be deposited in one of the holds, there to be securely stowed. Three cranes were being similarly employed in filling the other holds.

There was dust everywhere, not only driven by the wind from the adjacent quay but from the bags while in transit to the holds.

Bursts were not infrequent. When one occurred, the sack shed its contents impartially over officers, cadets, seamen and stevedores alike. It was the first occasion that Gerald and Peter had seen rice in its primitive state. At home, they were well acquainted with the white, polished grains. This stuff was of a dirty greyish colour. They were glad that rice in this state didn't figure in the menu either on board or at home!

Gerald and Peter had been stationed on the for'ard well-deck by No. 1 hold. At the adjoining hold Nelson and Oxley were similarly employed.

Presently there was a lull. More trucks were being shunted along the quayside railway to take the place of those that had just finished unloading.

"Hotter than usual!" shouted Purchase. "This knocks yesterday into a cocked hat! Roll on sunset. Then we may have a chance to cool down!"

Before either of the chums could reply—and they too were looking forward to iced drinks in the cool of the evening—the crane over No. 2 hold swung out ready to lower its quota of well-filled sacks into the space awaiting them.

Then, before anyone could give a warning in time—there were shouts of "Stand from under!" when it was too late—something carried away from the head of the crane.

The four sacks fell like plummets, some dropping into the hold. Two of them struck the coaming, where they burst in a cloud of dust like the explosion of a shell.

When the dust had drifted away, Gerald and Peter could see Downing, the second officer, and Cadet Nelson hurrying to the spot where the bags had fallen. Some of the hands were following hard on their heels.

Cadet Purchase was also there, but he was lying limply on the metal deck with his legs from the knees downwards hidden by a partly emptied sack.

It seemed almost a miracle that he hadn't been killed outright. Apparently, warned by the shouts that had come too late, he'd stepped backwards and, slipping on the previously spilt rice, had measured his length upon the metal deck. One of the two sacks that had fallen there had missed him by a matter of a few inches, while the other had dropped heavily upon his legs.

Carefully the sack that had done the damage was removed. The cadet, still conscious, was in great pain. Both feet lay limply and unnaturally upon the deck.

Happily the chums did not attempt to move him. It was a case for prompt medical treatment, facilities for which were absent in the *Golden Gleaner*.

"Stand over him and keep the sun from his eyes," ordered Mr. Downing. "You, Stacey, nip ashore and telephone the nearest hospital. Tell them it's a case of compound fracture of both legs! Off you go!"

By now Captain Harrington was on the spot, though there was nothing he could do beyond what was already being done. The part he would have to take would be much later, when he would have to make the necessary written report to the proper authorities. For the present he could only deplore the accident that meant the loss to the ship of a smart and promising cadet.

Meanwhile, although the crane serving No. 2 hold was still out of action, work had been resumed in other parts of the ship.

Peter, who was acting as a human sunshade, saw the injured cadet's lips twitch every time a load of rice was dumped into the adjoining hold. Then he noticed that there was blood on the deck, coming no doubt from a wound in the back of the lad's head.

It looked as if Purchase, in addition to a pair of broken legs, might be suffering from concussion.

It wasn't long before one of Brisbane's well-equipped ambulances arrived on the wharf. Four uniformed men with a stretcher boarded the ship. The stretcher was then laid on the deck by the side of the injured cadet. Then like a well-trained team—which they were—they lifted the patient sideways on to the stretcher.

Cadet Purchase knew nothing of this. Mercifully he had lost consciousness.

Almost as soon as the injured cadet had been carried off the ship, workmen from the shore set to work to replace the defective gear of the crane. Then the task of completing the loading of the cargo proceeded at top speed. Well before sunset the hatches were replaced. Unless anything unforeseen happened to warrant their removal, they would not be disturbed until the ship berthed at Hong Kong.

That same night Captain Harrington received a message from the hospital to the effect that Cadet Purchase was suffering not only from a compound fracture of both legs but had sustained concussion to the brain. At the moment the doctors could not give a definite report as to his condition, which though serious was not dangerous.

It left the Old Man with a sad and disagreeable task. He had to send off a cablegram to the cadet's parents stating that the injured youth stood an excellent chance of recovery—a statement for which he accepted full responsibility. As things eventually turned out, it was just as well that he had deprecated their son's state. It had saved both parents a good deal of anxiety.

What might happen should the lad take a turn for the worse, Captain Harrington didn't dare to think!

Two days later, repairs to the main shaft having been completed, the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* was reported to be ready to resume her voyage. Chief Engineer McFee had informed the captain that, to the best of his knowledge and belief, the shaft would stand up to any work required of it; but, he went on, until the ship was actually under way, his statement couldn't be confirmed.

The Old Man had found time to visit the crippled cadet in hospital; but no other visitors were allowed. Purchase's brother cadets had to be contented with the statement that he was making satisfactory progress. Whether any of them would ever set eyes upon their injured messmate again was a question that none could answer.

So they had to leave him behind. His personal belongings were sent to the hospital against the time when he was fit once more to quit. Whether he would again be able to serve in one of the ships of Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant's fleet was another question to which no answer could be given.

Thirty hours beyond the time provisionally given for her departure, the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* left Brisbane. No one on board knew at the time—

though soon they would—how that delay was to be a blessing in disguise.

CHAPTER XIV

REPTILES

Captain Harrington was free to make the choice of one of two sea routes between Brisbane and Hong Kong. One, a slightly longer one, was through Torres Straits, then skirting the north-eastern tip of the erratically shaped Celebes and through the South China Sea. The alternative lay west of Papua and the Philippines and thence across to Hong Kong. Either entailed careful and skilful navigation. He decided upon the second course. It was short, although less frequented. There were plenty of small islands, and not a few detached shoals, none of which presented difficulties to the average ship-master.

On the second day out, by which time the *Golden Gleaner* was well north of the Tropic of Capricorn, the cadets of the starboard watch were having the customary stand-easy in the first dog-watch.

It was far too warm for any strenuous physical amusements. The ship had a following wind roughly equal to the speed she was making. On deck it was unpleasantly hot in spite of the slight protection from the rays of the sun by means of awnings. Below deck, the heat was oppressive. Even the electric fans, sucking in air through the open scuttles, failed to make an appreciable difference to the temperature.

Wearing a minimum of clothing, the off-duty cadets were lounging under the boat-deck. For quite a time hardly anyone spoke. What they wanted most of all was sunset—due soon after six o'clock—when a welcome fall in temperature was to be expected.

Presently an object moving along the waterway attracted Gerald's notice. It resembled a newt—a creature Peter and he had often caught in pools while they were at school in Cornwall. A newt is not a particularly attractive-looking animal, rarely attaining a length of four or five inches. This creature, although it bore a slight resemblance to its British cousin, was larger and its body was covered with vivid colours.

"I say, you fellows, what's that?" asked Gerald.

"What's what?" rejoined Miller, too drowsy even to move his head.

Oxley, who was lying face downwards, raised his head.

“Gosh!” he ejaculated. “What is it—a young alligator?”

At that Dusty Miller stirred himself. So did the others.

“It’s a salamander,” he declared.

“Is it poisonous?” asked Peter.

“No more than you are,” replied the senior cadet. “We’ll nab it. I know a pets’ shop in Southampton where you could get ten bob for every salamander you take there. Spread yourselves out, all of you! Then gradually close in on the brute!”

By now the discomfort of the torrid heat was forgotten. Cautiously the five cadets closed in upon their prey, all of them conscious of the fact that they weren’t far off a state of complete nudity. Supposing, in spite of Dusty’s assertion that the salamander was harmless, that the reptile did nip one of its would-be captors?

“What do we do when we get him?” asked Gerald. “Where are we going to put him, I mean?”

Dusty hadn’t thought of that. Had he been wearing his jacket he would have placed the creature in one of the pockets. Had there been time he would have related with great gusto the story of how once he had emptied a compartment of a suburban railway carriage by taking a pet salamander from his coat pocket and placing it on his knees.

“Hang on, you chaps!” he ordered. “I’ll nip along to the galley and ask the cook to lend me something that’ll do.”

In spite of the heat Dusty hurried off. The other lads, squatting in a rough semicircle, waited for him to return.

By now the salamander must have been fully aware of the threat to its liberty. However, it showed no sign of fear. It remained almost motionless, its eyes blinking at Nelson, who was facing it.

Presently Dusty returned, bringing with him a four-sided galvanized contraption, perforated with small holes and with a hinged metal lid.

“He says we can keep it till to-morrow,” he announced.

“What: the salamander?” asked Oxley. “What’s it got to do with cookie?”

“No, this,” explained the senior cadet, as he placed the receptacle on the deck. “I’ll knock up a proper cage as soon as I can. Now then; who’s going to nab the brute?”

There were no volunteers.

“Call yourselves cadets of the Merchant Navy?” asked Dusty contemptuously.

“We’re cadets, not reptile hunters,” protested Oxley.

“Here, get out of my way!” exclaimed the senior cadet. “I’ll collect it!”

Seeing its would-be captor approach, the salamander made a half-turn. It gave a very audible hiss.

Dusty stepped back.

“I’ve never known a salamander to hiss,” he declared. “The one I used to have never did.”

“Go on, nab it!” prompted Nelson.

The senior cadet didn’t take to the suggestion. Probably there was a great difference between a Queensland lizard and one bought in a London store!

One of the seamen approached the crouching lads.

“’Scuse me, sir!” he said, addressing Dusty. “I’m after that there salamander, s’mine. He broke adrift from his cage. Cook told me you had found it.”

“You’re welcome to it, Smithson!” declared Dusty, in a tone of condescension.

Unhesitatingly the man stooped and picked up the unresisting salamander. It didn’t hiss this time.

“Naughty Clement!” he exclaimed chidingly. “That’s his name—Clement,” he went on to explain. “Gave half a dollar for him back in Brisbane. I’m taking him ’ome for my nipper.”

“Let’s hope he won’t nip your nipper, Smithson,” said Dusty banteringly.

“Not ’im, sir,” declared the seaman confidently. “Clement’s a perfect gen’lman, ’e is!”

The man went off with the salamander perched on his shoulder and its head nestling against its master’s cheek.

It was slightly cooler now. The five youths, no longer somnolent, began yarning.

The opening topic was salamanders, from which it turned by easy stages to that of reptiles in general.

"I've never seen a snake," declared Peter in the course of conversation.

That was a perfectly true statement. Neither he nor Gerald had even been to the London Zoo or to any other place of a similar character where snakes are kept in captivity.

"I reckon you've been jolly close to a few," said Oxley.

"Not that I know of," declared Peter. "Where?"

"Away over there," replied Oxley, with a vague sweep of his arm in the direction of the now invisible Australian coast. "When we went along to Purchase's uncle's we must have passed hundreds."

"Small ones, perhaps," suggested Gerald.

"Yes, but the little 'uns are often more dangerous than the big 'uns," added Oxley. "You can usually see the larger ones at some distance away. The small ones you nearly tread on before you know they are there, and you get a dose of deadly poison shot into you before you can say 'knife'!"

"I wonder how Purchase is getting on," remarked Dusty. "When he comes out of hospital I reckon he'll go along to his uncle's place. I shouldn't be surprised if he chucks the sea and takes to farming out there."

"I doubt it," demurred Oxley. "There's such a thing as sea-fever you know."

During the next twenty-four hours nothing happened to disturb the routine of life on board ship. At least nothing that was visible as far as Cadet Peter Meadows was concerned. He didn't put undue stress upon the fact that Dusty and Oxley had made themselves scarce during the second dog-watch.

Just before ten o'clock that evening, Peter prepared to turn in.

"Aren't you for a piece of shut-eye?" he inquired of his cabin mate, since Gerald was making no attempt to divest himself of his clothes.

"Didn't you know?" rejoined Gerald. "I thought I'd mentioned it."

"Mentioned what?" asked Peter. "What's in the wind?"

“Dud Downing has been on to me. Says my stellar observations are putrid. He’s taking me on in a quarter of an hour’s time to see if he can improve my sextant work.”

Second Officer Downing—dubbed “Dud” behind his back since his initials spelt that inefficient word—was a keen and alert officer. There was nothing dud about him except his nickname. He, like the rest of the officers, took a keen interest in the cadets in their professional duties. Finding that Gerald Stacey was weak in astronomic navigation, he had offered—it was not an order—to improve the lad’s knowledge of that subject.

“You’ll be back before I’m asleep,” said Peter. “I’ve one or two things to see to before I turn in properly.”

The cadets’ mess was deserted. The other youths had either gone to their cabins or were on duty.

Left to himself, Peter took his “housewife” from a locker and set to work to repair his canvas shoes, the rope soles of which required mending. He found that he could do this while sitting up on the upper berth.

He had barely made a start when, above the usual ship’s noises, he heard an unusual scratching noise. It came from somewhere on or near the cabin deck.

He craned his neck over the edge of the bunkboard and looked down. The electric light in the deckhead was casting deep shadows. He couldn’t be quite sure, but something seemed to be moving close to the compactum wash-basin.

Yes, there was something on the move—something with elongated flat head and a pair of lustreless eyes.

A snake was emerging from behind the wash-basin.

For about ten long-drawn-out seconds Peter watched its movements. Stark fear paralysed both brain and limbs. He had heard stories of snakes fascinating their victims before they struck. Now he was experiencing the real thing.

The snake drew nearer the double-tiered bunks. It wasn’t wriggling. It seemed to be gliding over the deck without any apparent muscular effort; until, raising its head, it looked to be preparing to strike with its hideous projecting fangs.

The creature was about thirty inches in length. That wasn’t so very large; but hadn’t Oxley told him that the smaller one could be quite as dangerous

as the larger species?

Strangely enough, the snake wasn't hissing. Its silent approach seemed to make it all the more terrifying.

Then, almost as remarkably, Peter's panic left him. He'd have to do something to frustrate the reptile's attack.

Snatching the water-bottle from the top of the compactum, he found himself in possession of a formidable weapon. True, he couldn't bring himself to use it as a kind of club, but it would be most effective as a missile and provided it hit its mark.

If he threw it and it missed, what then? Would the snake make for its hiding-place—where it would still have to be tackled—or would it press home with its attempt to shoot a dose of deadly poison into the lad's throat or between his eyes?

Peter raised the water-bottle, only to hit the deckhead. He'd forgotten to gauge the distance between the ceiling and the upper bunk on which he was now crouching.

Although the blow was a heavy one the glass withstood the strain. That went to show how efficient his improvised weapon could be.

Again he raised the bottle and hurled it with all his might. This time it was shattered into innumerable pieces. The snake remained motionless. There wasn't even a hint that it was in its death agonies. Its head should have been pulped under the impact. For some unknown reason it wasn't. There were fragments of glass and a pool of water, but no gore from the snake's head.

Peter let out a fearful yell. He just couldn't help it!

He heard the sliding door of the adjacent cabin open. Some of his messmates were coming to his aid.

Were they laughing? It seemed incredible that they were.

But they were!

The door of Peter's cabin was slid back to its widest extent. Framed in the doorway were Nelson and Oxley, their faces ringed with broad smiles. Behind them stood Senior Cadet Dusty Miller. He wasn't smiling. Perhaps he realized that a practical joke could be carried a little too far.

Pushing past the two cadets, Dusty stooped and picked up the "snake". Then he detached a thin wire that was practically invisible in the artificial

light.

“We didn’t mean to put the wind up you, Meadowes,” he declared apologetically.

“But you did,” admitted Peter.

“It was just a stunt to see what you’d do,” continued Dusty. “Now don’t get off your bunk. You’ll cut your bare feet if you do. Set-to you chaps, and clear up this mess.”

The snake had been made out of a long, narrow strip of canvas, suitably painted. Its eyes consisted of a couple of beads, its fangs of two pieces of flexible wire. In Peter’s absence a small hole had been bored through the bulkhead between the two adjacent cabins to take a thin wire that had been made fast to the imitation reptile’s head. At the other end the practical jokers manipulated its movements that had ended disastrously to the water-bottle.

In other circumstances the cadet or cadets occupying the cabin would be responsible for paying for the broken article. Dusty, fair-minded as he was, rose to the occasion.

“I’ll bring my water-bottle along, Meadowes,” he promised. “I may be able to wangle one for nixes from the steward. If I can’t, then I’ll pay up and look pleasant.”

By the time Gerald returned, the practical jokers had gone, and the cabin was once more in its normal state.

Peter wasn’t absolutely certain on one point, although he didn’t raise it: had his chum Gerald been in the know?

CHAPTER XV

THE WAVE AND THE VOLCANO

One evening, some days later, Gerald was standing his trick on the bridge. It was in the middle watch. He rather liked being on duty during the middle watch, especially under Fourth Officer Angus Cross. Why he did he couldn't say.

It didn't seem so very long ago when one of his tasks during that period of duty was to make hot cocoa for the watch-keeping officer and himself. That was in far colder climate than the one they were now experiencing. Now iced lime-juice was a prime favourite drink, served not in tumblers but in quart pots. In the tropics, whether by day or by night, a man could empty the contents and feel bone dry within the next hour. Whether he exerted himself or did not the result was the same. Excessive perspiration saw to that.

"Put it down there," ordered Mr. Cross, who was holding a pair of night glasses to his eyes.

That was a departure from the usual procedure. Whenever his lime-juice was brought to him, he'd at once take a mighty gulp.

"See that glare over there?" he asked. "About a couple of points on our starboard bow."

Since he had come straight out of the well-lighted chart-house, it wasn't surprising that Gerald replied in the negative.

Half a minute later Mr. Cross handed him the night glasses.

"Now look!"

Gerald did so. A very long distance away was a fire of considerable magnitude. The flames were below the horizon and as yet invisible from the ship.

"Is it a vessel on fire, sir?" he asked, as he handed back the binoculars.

"It might be," replied the fourth officer cautiously. "But I don't think so."

Mr. Cross retired to the chart-room to make a note of the occurrence in the rough log. It read simply:

“0210. Observed glare of large fire bearing twenty degrees.”

He had hardly returned to the bridge when one of the look-outs shouted: “Big wave bearing down on the starboard bow, sir!”

At the moment the ship was ploughing her way through a calm sea. In the starlight it was possible to see a mile ahead.

The seaman hadn’t been under a delusion: there was an enormous wave just coming within sight. In the distance it looked like a gigantic wall, for the most part of a dark grey hue. There seemed to be no foam, no breaking crests, nor at the moment was there any noise.

The ship wasn’t approaching it in a position known as “dead bows on”. Had the wave been on the beam or nearly so, it might have flung her on her beam ends.

Fourth Officer Angus Cross had to make his own decision. The situation hardly warranted calling the Old Man, unless he, Cross, had greatly underestimated the risk and danger. He decided not to warn the captain. Instead he gave the helmsman orders to meet the approaching wave and then rang down to the engine-room, informing the chief of the impending situation in case any of the staff, taken unawares, might lose their balance.

On swept the wave, still without making audible sounds. The *Golden Gleaner* was now bows on to the wall of water, while the apparent position of the glare in the sky had already moved until it, too, was dead ahead. Presently its reddish hue was hidden behind the enormous wave.

“Get on out of it!” shouted the fourth officer, inelegantly, hailing the look-out on the fo’c’sle.

Promptly the man dived down the ladder, taking temporary shelter under the break of the fore-deck.

The ship was now feeling the effects of the undertow—displaced water rushing to meet the wave.

“Steady on your helm, quartermaster!” ordered the fourth officer.

“I can’t keep her at it, sir!” declared the helmsman, as he juggled with the wheel. “Something seems to have got her!”

Then came the impact.

Involuntarily Gerald hunched his shoulders and gripped the stanchion rail. He looked like getting a dose of Saltash Luck—otherwise a ducking in salt water. If that were all it wouldn't very much matter, especially on a hot tropical night. But what if the mass of water swept the bridge?

On it came. There was still no appreciable sound. Its eerie silence had almost the same effect upon Cadet Stacey as if the menacing wave were accompanied with a deafening roar.

There was now plenty of noise—the thud of the ship's bows as they plunged into the wave, the machine-gun-like rattle of spray and a dozen or more other sounds.

She was through.

The old hooker had shipped surprisingly little solid water. Although there were other rollers to follow, none had the menacing appearance of the first one.

“What are we doing, Mr. Cross?” asked a deep voice.

Both the fourth officer and the watch-keeping cadet turned to find the Old Man on the bridge. He was wearing pyjamas. His feet were encased in carpet slippers. The sole visible article of clothing that indicated his rank was his peaked cap, set *à la* Beattie at a jaunty angle.

“We've been hit by a tidal wave, sir,” replied Mr. Cross.

“Tidal wave—I doubt it. What do you make of that red glow over there?”

“I don't quite know, sir,” admitted the fourth officer.

“Neither do I,” rejoined Captain Harrington. “But I can hazard a fairly safe guess. That's a volcano in eruption. The tremors it is setting up are responsible for that big wave.”

“It's not on the chart, sir.”

“No, it hasn't been active during this century. It is now. The island's called Pulo Tama.”

“I saw that on our track chart, sir,” declared Mr. Cross. “There's nothing to show that it is volcanic. Our course lies fifty miles to the west'ard.”

“You've evidently missed a recent ‘Notice to Mariners’, Mr. Cross. In it there's a notice to the effect that the supposed extinct volcano called Warru

on Pulo Tama island is showing signs of activity. I should most decidedly say it has! Well, good night!”

The Old Man returned to his sleeping-cabin.

“Only another hour and it’s shut-eye for us, Stacey,” declared Mr. Cross, consulting the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. “Roll on, morning watch, say I!”

He went into the chart-room once more, this time to record the ship’s encounter with the tidal wave. He was in no hurry. The longer he took in writing his report the sooner would the time pass until he was relieved by Third Officer Andrews.

Gerald hadn’t been left for more than a couple of minutes before the senior wireless officer appeared on the bridge.

“Where’s the officer of the watch, Stacey?” he asked.

“In there,” replied the cadet, indicating the chart-room, the door of which had been closed before the electric light had been switched on. “He’s writing up an account of the wave. Did it do you any damage?”

“None, so far as I can make out,” replied Sparks. “I was lying down on the settee. Do you know what caused it?”

“Captain Harrington was on the bridge just now. I heard him tell Mr. Cross that it might be caused by a volcano. We can see the glare in the sky from here.”

“It seems so,” agreed the wireless officer. “I’ve just picked up a ‘Calling all Shipping’ signal. Can’t make head or tail of most of it; but half the island’s been blown sky high.”

He crossed the bridge to the chart-room and banged on the door.

“Who’s that?” demanded Mr. Cross a little impatiently. He disliked being disturbed while writing up his journal. He knew that it wasn’t the Old Man demanding admittance, because he would have come straight in without any warning.

“Sparks—urgent!” replied the wireless officer.

“Then come in. What’s wrong now?”

Evidently something was. Unless a signal was of extreme urgency it was put aside until his trick was over.

Sparks entered and shut the door. Gerald could not hear what was being said, although he knew about it later.

It appeared that the operator was “twiddling the knobs”—to use his own expression—when he picked up a faint message in Morse. It wasn’t being sent out by a professional transmitting operator. It was more like the efforts of a tyro. The sender wasn’t sending his message in code; it was being tapped out—as Sparks observed—like a kid learning to play the piano with one hand.

All the same—provided it wasn’t a hoax—the news was extremely grave.

The volcano known as Warru had violently erupted, though with very little warning. A large part of the crater had been blown away and through the gap enormous quantities of molten lava were surging. Two villages had been overwhelmed and the rest of the island was threatened.

To add to the horrors of the catastrophe, the sea had receded, leaving most of the encircling lagoon almost dry. Then it had rushed back again, flooding the land in some cases for a distance of about one hundred yards beyond normal high-water mark. In so doing it had either destroyed or seriously damaged every boat and canoe the inhabitants of Pulo Tama had possessed.

The sender of the message continued with an urgent call to all shipping in the area to make for the island in order to evacuate the survivors of the disaster.

“Right! I’ll inform Captain Harrington at once,” declared Mr. Cross, retaining possession of the signal pad upon which the message had been written. “While I’m doing that you’d better make a general signal to all ships. None have contacted you, I take it?”

Sparks replied in the negative. In fact, during his watch, he had not taken in any radio messages other than the amateurish one.

Captain Harrington was asleep when the fourth officer entered his cabin. He was a light sleeper and he was quickly awake. He knew perfectly well that something of importance had happened, otherwise Mr. Cross would not have disturbed him.

Almost without comment the Old Man read the news contained in the radio message.

“How does the island bear?” he asked.

The fourth officer gave him that information, adding that if the ship's present course were maintained she would pass the island at a distance of roughly fifty miles.

"Very well! Alter course," ordered the captain. "We should be able to close the island by seven. It'll be getting light then. Ask Mac if he can let us have another couple of knots."

Captain Harrington didn't accompany his subordinate to the bridge. He could rely upon Fourth Officer Angus Cross to carry out his orders. Sleep was essential, since there would be no rest for him once the evacuation operation was in full swing.

At length the middle watch was over.

Gerald went below, but not to turn in immediately, as he usually did.

The news was too exciting to be kept from his brother cadets, even though it meant rousing them from their slumbers.

CHAPTER XVI

TO THE RESCUE

Captain Harrington's surmise had proved to be correct. Chief Engineer McFee had risen nobly to the occasion and the *Golden Gleaner's* speed had been considerably increased. As a result seven o'clock in the morning found her easing down off the entrance of the lagoon encircling Pulo Tama.

Every member of the cadets' mess was on deck. So were most of the officers and hands. It should have been broad daylight, but the air was thick with a pungent brownish vapour. It was too thick for the shore and the erupting volcano to be seen, although a reddish glare gave some indication of the direction of the burning mountain.

The entrance to the lagoon was visible through the haze, probably owing to the fact that there was a light on-shore breeze. Had it been an offshore one the surface of the sea for miles off land would have been blanketed in a dense cloud of volcanic dust.

As it was, Captain Harrington was taking a great risk by attempting to take the ship through the gap in the encircling reefs. He had only a small-scale chart to work on, supplemented by a meagre description of the island given in his "Pilot's Guide" to this part of the wide Pacific Ocean. An error of about fifty yards either to port or starboard might almost certainly result in piling the ship on the coral ledges.

He couldn't hope for a pilot. Even under normal conditions there would hardly be a white and qualified one; although there might be natives sufficiently intelligent to undertake the task. Since all craft belonging to Pulo Tama had been smashed to bits by the tidal wave—actually it had been set up by a violent submarine disturbance allied to the eruption—there seemed no possible likelihood that a pilot, native or otherwise, would be forthcoming.

Up to her arrival off the island the ship had been relying upon her echosounders. These had given a fairly uniform depth of one hundred fathoms. Nearer the entrance to the lagoon it had suddenly dropped to a bare thirty feet. At that depth mechanical depth indicators were most unreliable.

Captain Harrington had to rely upon the time-honoured old-fashioned hand lead-line.

Slowly the *Golden Gleaner* approached the narrow entrance, the outer edge of the reef being marked by masses of foam. In different conditions the foam would have been white in colour. Now, like everything else, it was of a brownish hue. The colour of earth, sea and sky was being affected by the sulphur-laden discharge of the six thousand feet high volcano.

“We’ll want gas masks for this job,” declared Dusty.

The other cadets agreed with him. Some were already coughing violently. They looked as if they were “for it”, but there could be no turning back. For one thing, the channel was too narrow for the ship to back; for another—the paramount one—she was on an errand of mercy.

It was indeed fortunate that the ship had the advantage of the on-shore wind. It kept her clear of the deadly poisonous gases from the still fiercely erupting Warru. Even so her crew were breathing air that seemed to be momentarily charged with sulphur fumes.

Suddenly there was a terrific splash less than twenty feet from the ship’s side. A large rock thrown up from the crater six or seven miles away had hurtled through the air. As it struck the water it emitted a loud hissing sound. A cloud of steam rose in the air after it had disappeared beneath the surface; while some of the water thrown up by the concussion fell inboard, drenching one of the leadsmen to his skin.

A couple of minutes later, undeterred by his narrow escape, the man shouted: “By the mark thirteen, sir!”

The Old Man gave a grunt of satisfaction. The ship was safely inside the lagoon and the depth was now nearly eighty feet.

“Stand by to let go!” he ordered.

One of the anchors plunged beneath the surface, followed by a generous scope of cable. Then, snubbing at the chain, the *Golden Gleaner* swung round until her stern was pointing shorewards.

A part of the island was now visible through the thin haze. It presented a picture of desolation. There were coco-palms, some at varying angles, others flattened to the ground. Against the stumps were piled mounds of debris, the remains of shattered small craft and of wrecked native dwellings.

There was quite a number of people on the beach. Some were sitting with their chins sunk on their chests, giving the impression that they were

beyond caring what was happening. Others were standing and gazing in the direction of the anchored ship, as if they were merely curious at the unexpected apparition. Never before had they seen a craft of that size. They stood there in silence, too bewildered to realize that help was at hand.

Up to then unnoticed by anyone on board, two white men could be seen standing in front of the crowd of natives. At least they might be whites, but their faces were almost as dark as their scanty clothes, now torn and discoloured by fumes and dust.

The ship's boats were swung out and lowered, each either in charge of one of the officers or of an experienced cadet. In order to make the most possible room for the natives and since it was but a short distance to the shore, each boat had but a couple of oarsmen.

Gerald and Peter wished that they had been allowed in the boats. They hadn't sufficient knowledge of handling one—that was Chief Officer Miles Temple's decision—to undertake the ferrying of what might prove to be a mob of terrified natives.

By now the air had cleared considerably. The on-shore wind was driving the fumes before it. In the direction of Warru the still fiercely erupting mountain was hidden in dense clouds of smoke, through which the fiery glow could be seen. Occasionally white-hot stones would hurtle through the air, either to drop harmlessly into the sea or to fall inland to start fresh fires in parts of the island so far beyond reach of the streams of molten lava.

"We must keep the refugees to the well-deck, Mister!" declared the Old Man, addressing the chief officer. "Station a couple of men at the head of each ladder to stop them from swarming all over the ship."

"Aye aye, sir!" rejoined Mr. Temple.

"And find out how much fresh water we have," continued Captain Harrington. "You'd better get hold of McFee. Tell him to start up the distilling plant. There'll be some dry throats amongst that crowd, I reckon, judging by the state of mine."

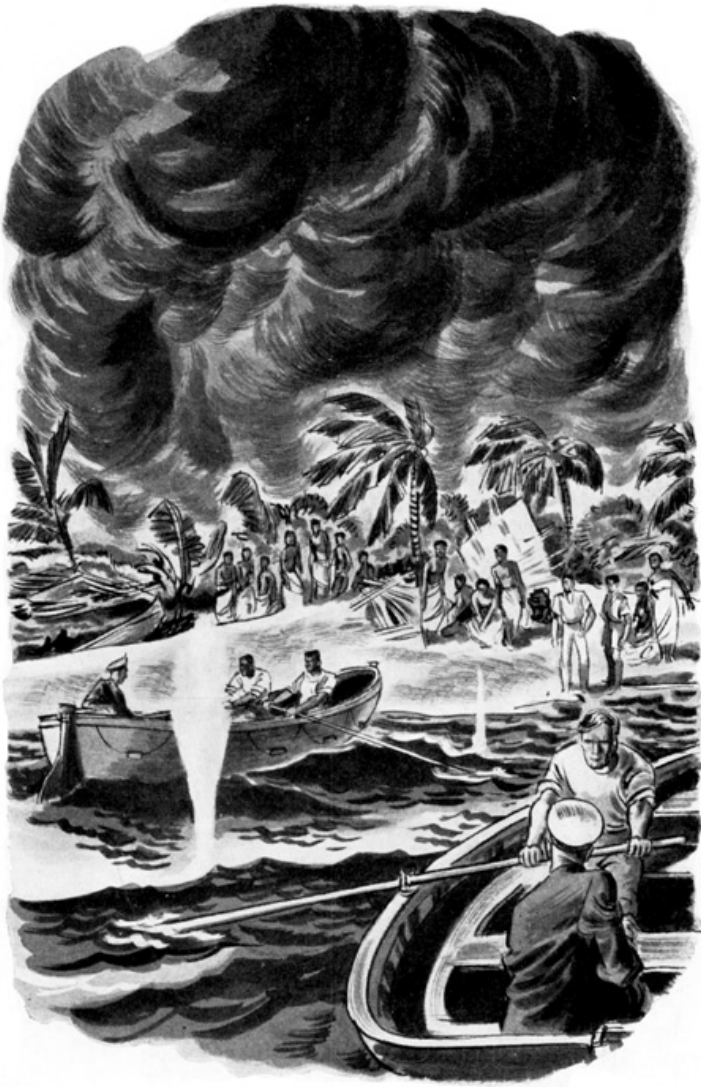
"And mine too, sir!"

The knot of off-duty cadets was now chiefly concerned with the boats that were now returning to the ship. Each was crowded well beyond its normal capacity by brown-skinned natives, men, women and children. In the stern-sheets of the leading craft was one of the two whites.

“What’s that chap doing?” asked Peter. “It looks as if he’s showing the white feather, coming off with the first boat-load.”

“In a way I don’t blame him,” said Oxley. “It must be hell ashore! Where’s his pal?”

There was now no sign of the second European—supposing him to be one. The throng on the beach did not appear to have been diminished by the embarkation of so many of their fellows. Perhaps more refugees had arrived from other parts of the island. They, too, were uncannily silent, although, apparently, there was no white man left to control them.



AFTER THE ERUPTION

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By this time the first boat had come alongside the ship. Most of the natives in her were quite capable of swarming up the side. Some attempted to do so until restrained by an order from Captain Harrington that no one was to be let on board until the accommodation ladder had been lowered.

The white man translated the order; then—again to the cadets' disdain—he was the first to leave the boat.

Almost the first words the man spoke changed their opinion of him.

“Glad you’ve arrived, Captain!” he exclaimed. “I’m not stopping—at least not awhile. I’ll just see this lot stow themselves where you want them and then I’ll go ashore.”

Evidently he was a man having authority.

At his orders the refugees began ascending the accommodation ladder in orderly fashion, women and children first. From the boat-deck, they were sent down to the for’ard well-deck, which was to be their haven of refuge until they could be landed at the nearest convenient island.

“You won’t have any trouble with them, Captain,” declared his visitor. “I’ve told off a couple of headmen to keep order—not that it’s at all likely they’ll kick up a shindy.”

“I’m much obliged to you,” declared the Old Man. “You’ve eased the situation considerably. By the way, I don’t happen to know your name.”

“Cranstone—Jimmy Cranstone. I’m joint manager with my pal, Charlie Bishop, of the Pulo Tama estates—or of what’s left of them, which isn’t much, I guess.”

“Have a whisky and lime before you go,” urged Captain Harrington.

“Thanks, Captain! It’s more than a couple of days since I had a drink other than sulphur water! You’ve enough drinking-water for that crowd, I hope?”

“My chief engineer is arranging that,” the Old Man reassured him. “Come along to my cabin.”

It was what is known as a quick one. In less than five minutes Cranstone reappeared, shouted what was evidently a reassuring message to his coloured employees, and then boarded the waiting boat.

As soon as it was clear of the gangway another took its place, disgorging its human cargo in the same orderly manner. The evacuation continued until two hundred natives crowded the for’ard and aft well-decks. It was not yet a case of “House Full!”

By radio it was learned that other ships were racing to the doomed island. The first of these was due to arrive at about four in the afternoon.

Three more were expected to reach Pulo Tama before midnight, provided they could find their way into the lagoon during the hours of darkness.

This information placed Captain Harrington on the horns of a dilemma. He had two hundred weary natives on board who must be fed and supplied with drinking-water. That put a heavy strain upon the resources of the ship. The sooner they were landed at the nearest convenient island—Diu Tama, about a hundred miles to the nor'ard—the better both for them and the *Golden Gleaner's* crew.

On the other hand, Captain Harrington could render great help to the ships arriving both before and after sunset by signalling them directions for navigating the narrow channel from his anchored craft. With the situation on shore becoming worse—the volcano showed no signs of abating its fiery discharge—every hour was vital if the rest of the survivors were to be removed from the island in time.

In the circumstances radar would be of little or no use unless there were definite solid objects on which to take bearings. The only useful one would be the *Golden Gleaner*, moored between the entrance to the reef and the shore. The beach presented such a uniform and monotonous appearance that there would be nothing on the radar screen to assist a vessel closing the shore.

Under the influence of the steady breeze—it was still an on-shore one—the haze from the smoke of the volcano was less than it had been.

The Old Man considered the possibilities of training a searchlight on the entrance, but the chief officer pointed out that helmsmen of vessels attempting the narrow channel would be blinded by the glare.

“Is there anything you can suggest, Mister?” asked Captain Harrington.

“Yes, sir,” replied Mr. Temple. “Something, I think, that would let us be well under way before the first vessel arrives, and would also enable her to find her way in even at night.”

“What is it?” demanded the Old Man eagerly.

CHAPTER XVII

GERALD'S TASK

"The reef's well uncovered, sir, and low water isn't before one o'clock. There's very little surf. A boat could effect a landing on the inside. We can spare a boat with, say, eight or nine hands. They could drive in a couple of iron stakes, one on each side of the channel, and leave a lighted lantern on each. Even when we're well under way we can radio ships making for the lagoon and inform them that there are temporary navigation lights in position."

The Old Man considered the idea.

"Supposing the haze renders the lights invisible?" he asked.

"There's little chance of that, sir," replied Mr. Temple. "If anything this breeze is increasing. It will drive the haze farther shorewards. Even if it doesn't, the lanterns will still be there both by daylight and at night. We had nothing like that when we found our way in."

"Right, we'll try it," decided Captain Harrington. "Who will you be sending in charge of the boat?"

"That's a bit of a problem, sir," admitted the chief officer. "Cross and Downing are away, so are Miller and Nelson. I might send Stacey."

"Is he capable?"

"I think so, sir; he seems to have his figure-head screwed on the right way."

"Very good!" agreed the Old Man. "You'd better give him his instructions."

Gerald was sent for.

"I've rather a tricky but important job for you, my lad!" began the chief officer, pointing through the haze to the just visible entrance. "See those reefs—those nearest the channel? I want you to fix up a lighted lantern on each."

He went on to explain in simple and precise terms exactly what was required.

“You’ve got the hang of it?” asked the chief officer.

“I think so, sir!”

“You think? There’s more than thinking required for this job although that does go a long way. Remember you’ll be in charge of the boat and you will primarily be held responsible for anything that might go wrong.”

The *Golden Gleaner* was temporarily under-manned, since the task of evacuating the natives was still in operation. Consequently there was a difficulty in finding a boat’s crew for the expedition to the reef, even after one of the cooks had volunteered to go.

“Can’t I go?” asked Peter. “You might ask Mr. Temple if I may.”

Gerald didn’t mind taking his chum except for one thing.

“We can’t both be in command,” he remarked to his chum.

“You needn’t worry about that,” rejoined Peter. “You’ll boss the show, never you fear!”

Gerald’s doubts set at rest, he successfully applied for permission to take his fellow cadet.

Then came the task of providing the necessary gear. In addition to the two lanterns—which would be sacrificed from the ship’s stores in a good cause—two iron bars each ten feet in length, pointed at one end and with an eye at the other, had to be provided as “expendable stores”. Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co. wouldn’t see these articles again.

In addition, shackles, wires, and sledge-hammers were placed in the boat together with a six-foot wooden ladder.

“What’s that for, my lad?” asked Mr. Temple, indicating the last article.

Gerald explained that since the two iron rods were each ten feet in length they couldn’t be driven in by a sledge-hammer handled by a man standing on the ground. Therefore a ladder became necessary.

The chief officer felt sorry that he’d asked that question. The explanation had tended to prove his recent statement that the youth “had his figure-head screwed on all right”.

The boat pushed off. The oarsmen gave way though not exactly with a will. The air was uncomfortably warm and impregnated with unpleasant

fumes. Soon they were in a bath of perspiration.

Half-way between the ship and the reef, Gerald gave the order: “Avast rowing—lay on your oars!”

The men were only too glad of the respite. Some of them doubtless wondered why the order was given until they realized the cause.

The cadet in charge of the boat was taking no unnecessary risks. By the aid of the compass he was noting the position of both the ship and the entrance to the lagoon, just in case the haze developed into a dense mist.

There was hardly any swell on the inner side of the reef. The crew landed but made no attempt to haul the boat out of the water. Instead a kedge anchor was taken ashore and one man left in charge.

The reef, composed of coral, was fairly clear of other marine growth. Nor was it slippery, although awash for three or four hours of every tide.

Operations began.

The first metal rod was held upright. Close to it was reared the ladder, steadied by a couple of men. Even so it felt a bit shaky as the hand, grasping the heavy hammer, balanced himself on one of the uppermost steps.

The coral reef was decidedly soft in places. It seemed strange that it should have withstood the ageless onslaught of the breakers.

In less than an hour—the hammer-men working in relays—the rod was driven to the required depth, the lantern was secured and lighted. Then the working-party re-embarked to resume operations on the other side of the approach channel.

Here the metal bar had been driven in to a depth of one foot when the wielder of the hammer declared that he had had enough of that job for the time being.

“I’ll give you a spell, Crusher!” volunteered the cook, who was standing up to the heat better than any of the rest of the party.

With two of his shipmates steadying it, the cook rather gingerly climbed the ladder until the top of the rod was level with his waist.

He raised the heavy sledge-hammer well above his head. He’d show the others how to use it!

Down it came but not on the end of the rod. Missing it by an inch, the hammer continued its resistless swing until it crashed into the step of the

ladder under and next to the one upon which the luckless cook was standing.

The men supposed to be steadying the ladder jumped aside. Perhaps it was as well that they did; for, with a mighty crash, the lower half of the ladder flew apart, depositing the cook, face downwards, upon the ground.

The onlookers' first reactions were to roar with laughter at the plight of their unfortunate comrade; but mirth gave place to concern when he raised his head, from which blood was already streaming.

Two of them went to the cook's assistance. In addition to head injuries, his feet refused to support him, while the knuckles of both hands looked like small lumps of raw beef. Yet none of his injuries had been caused by the downward swing of the sledge-hammer, which was lying nearly twenty feet away from the damaged ladder.

"Fetch the First Aid chest," ordered Gerald. "Lay him flat on his back!"

One of the crew hurried off to fetch the chest from the boat. Others lowered the injured man into a more comfortable position.

"How goes it, cookie?" asked one.

"Not so dusty," replied the patient.

"There's one blessing," rejoined the first speaker. "You won't be able to 'andle none of our grub wi' hands like that!"

"You'd better see what you can do about it," suggested Gerald to his chum. "We'll have to get on with the job."

As a former Scout, Peter had learned the rudiments of First Aid, so he set to work to patch up his patient sufficiently for him to be taken back to the ship.

The rest of the landing-party resumed their task of driving the second iron rod to its required depth. To do this they had to invert the ladder, so that the damaged part was uppermost. It was then held firmly by a couple of the men while a third, taking the disabled cook's place, mounted the steps, sledge-hammer in hand.

Bearing in mind what had befallen his immediate predecessor, the man proceeded cautiously.

"Put more beef into it!" said Gerald, realizing that at the present rate it would take at least an hour to drive the rod to the required depth.

Thus encouraged, the hammer-man made a terrific swipe. Then he, too, overbalanced and fell sprawling upon the ground.

He'd done the job only too well.

The point of the rod had been resting on a patch of soft rock. One blow of the sledge-hammer had driven it a foot lower than was intended. As likely as not, the lantern, when in position, would be but half a yard above the level of the high tides.

Fortunately the wielder of the hammer, unlike the damaged cook, was unhurt.

He and several of his shipmates tried to pull up the rod until the eye was at the required height. They twisted it, they heaved at it. Once down, the metal bar refused to budge.

All this while they had been working in a thin, copper-coloured haze, through which the ship was faintly visible. It extended skywards to a great height. Above it the tropical sun was shining in a cloudless atmosphere, but from the ground the "orb of day" looked like a large reddish disc.

Frequent explosions indicated that the invisible volcano was still in a state of violent eruption. There were tremors that disturbed the otherwise placid surface of the lagoon.

A thought crossed Gerald's mind: supposing the bed of the lagoon were forced upwards and the channel through the reef were to be blocked, perhaps for all time. Any one of those tremors might result in a tremendous upheaval of the sea-bed. If it did, what would be the fate of the *Golden Gleaner*, of her crew and of the crowd of refugees that she had on board?

Above nature's noises came the wail of the ship's siren—a signal for the recall of Cadet Stacey and his boat's crew. They had been ordered back before their task had been accomplished.

"That's our recall, sir!" declared one of the men.

"Don't I know it!" rejoined Gerald. "But this job's got to be finished first!"

Quickly the second lantern was lighted and secured to the upright bar. Then gathering up their tools—the damaged ladder wasn't worth taking—they hurried back to the boat, in which the injured cook had previously been placed.

By this time another atmospheric freak had occurred. The haze increased until visibility was down to about fifty yards. It looked as if Gerald's foresight in taking a compass bearing of the ship was to be of practical value.

Then the hitherto almost motionless haze was rent by a sudden and unexpected squall, this time from seaward. The thick mist was dispersed as if by magic, revealing, for the first time for several days, a clear view of Warru in a state of eruption.

Above the inferno of many-hued flames pouring out of the half a mile wide crater was a gigantic pillar of smoke that at an enormous height was mushrooming like an umbrella. Its general drift showed that much of the smoke was moving against the wind.

The squall ceased as suddenly as it had arisen. The enormous mass of cloud above the volcano was advancing in the direction of the *Golden Gleaner*. What dread possibilities and danger lay in that menacing smoke?

Hurriedly the boat pushed off on her return to her parent. For a part of the distance the men were straining at their oars under an unclouded, scorching sun. Then with incredible rapidity the volcano-generated cloud overshadowed both the island and the lagoon.

It grew so dark that Gerald had difficulty in reading the compass. Visibility was now down to a couple of boat-lengths. The air, too, reeked of sulphurous fumes, causing the boat's crew to cough and gasp.

The *Golden Gleaner* continued at intervals to sound her siren; but as far as the boat's crew was concerned it was of no practical use. It was a matter of pure conjecture to guess from which direction it came; but it did serve to let the men feel that they weren't forgotten. Their hopes of finding the ship were centred upon the cadet in charge; would his compass work enable them to regain the ship?

Again there was an abrupt change in the atmospheric conditions. There was now a decided offshore breeze. The darkness gave way to a purple haze that in turn grew thinner and thinner.

"There's the ship, lads!" exclaimed Gerald.

There she was! Almost dead ahead and about a hundred yards away, the *Golden Gleaner* loomed up like a picture on a cinema screen.

Some of the oarsmen looked over their shoulders to get a glimpse of their parent ship.

“Eyes in the boat!” ordered Cadet Stacey sternly.

Dash it, all! Wasn’t he in charge! He’d let the Old Man know how he could handle her! He’d let him see—taking for granted that the skipper was on the look-out—how to bring the boat alongside!

“ ’Way ’nough! Boat oars!” ordered Gerald.

Ten seconds later he gave a gasp of apprehension.

The boat was carrying too much way.

He hadn’t the faintest idea how to check it. To make matters worse, the boat wasn’t answering to her helm. Perhaps she was in the grip of some freakish eddy; or a sudden gust of wind might be swinging the ship round.

Whatever the cause, the boat’s stem-head hit the foot of the accommodation ladder with a good and hearty bump. Most of the oarsmen slid backwards off their thwarts to bring up in a state of confusion on the bottom-boards. Luckily the bowman was able to engage his boat-hook and prevent the boat drifting away from the ship’s side.

Gerald, greatly mortified, looked up to see if Captain Harrington or Chief Officer Temple was watching his mishap from the wing of the bridge. They weren’t! Neither were any of his brother cadets or any of the hands witnessing his discomfiture.

But—and this was too humiliating—the rail of the entire length of the well-deck was lined by a row of copper-coloured natives whose glistening teeth and broad grins showed that at least they were amused!

CHAPTER XVIII

FEEDING THE REFUGEES

Gerald hurried up the accommodation ladder, with Peter hard at his heels, to find the chief officer on the lower bridge. Captain Harrington wasn't anywhere within sight.

"Lanterns fixed and lighted as ordered, sir!" reported Cadet Stacey with a smart salute.

He hoped Mr. Temple wouldn't mention the mishap to the boat. Apparently, by his rejoinder, he knew nothing about it.

"Very good!" said the chief officer. "Carry on!"

"Is that all the thanks I'll get for executing his job—the one he planned?" thought the lad.

What he didn't know was that—while the last boat was being hoisted—Mr. Temple was seeing Captain Harrington in his cabin.

The Old Man was not alone. With him was Jimmy Cranstone, one of the joint managers of the now devastated Pulo Tama estates.

Yielding to pressure on Captain Harrington's part, Cranstone had consented to accompany the first batch of refugees to the island of Diu Tama, while his co-partner, Charles Bishop, would remain until the final evacuation was complete.

At first Cranstone had refused a passage in the *Golden Gleaner*, until Captain Harrington pointed out that, although the two native headmen were quite capable of keeping order, neither could speak more than a few words of English.

Cranstone, therefore, would have to serve as the necessary link between the ship's officers and the crowd of natives monopolizing the well-deck.

The Old Man and he were discussing the question of food and water for the refugees when the chief officer entered.

“Don’t go, Cranstone,” urged Captain Harrington. “You’ve met my chief officer before? Well, what is it, Mister?”

“We’ll be ready to up-anchor and get under way, sir, in a quarter of an hour.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” rejoined the Old Man.

“And there’s one other matter, sir! You will be pleased to know that Cadet Stacey seems to have made an excellent job with the fairway lights. Unfortunately there was one casualty, Symonds the cook. I haven’t been able to obtain details of the accident yet, but I understand he will be unable to attend to his duties for the next few days.”

“That’s a pity,” observed Captain Harrington.

Mention of the cook turned his thoughts in a similar direction. Cranstone was thinking much the same—about providing food and water to the coloured passengers.

“Directly we’re clear of the island you had better see to an issue of rice, Mister,” ordered the Old Man.

“Very good, sir!” rejoined Mr. Temple.

He wasn’t going to like the job. It was somewhat out of his line, although, like the vast majority of seafaring men exercising authority, he could rise to the occasion.

From the lower bridge, Gerald and Peter watched the operation known as getting under way. At the start it didn’t go so well as Chief Officer Miles Temple had hoped.

A party consisting of four seamen under Third Officer Brian Andrews began to make its way for’ard. It was held up on the well-deck by the crowd of refugees. Some of them were squatting on the deck, others were standing so closely together that a passage between them seemed to be out of the question.

“Gangway, there!” shouted the third officer.

He might as well be addressing Cleopatra’s Needle. The natives didn’t understand the order—a good number of Britons would be equally ignorant of its significance.

Andrews waved his arms. That, too, had not the slightest effect.

The chief officer was already on the bridge. His wrist-watch told him that his estimate of a quarter of an hour had already gone by the board.

Presently the Old Man, accompanied by Cranstone, joined him.

“Mr. Andrews appears to be having difficulty in going for’ard, sir!” reported the chief officer.

The Old Man agreed. This was an entirely new situation for him. To use his own words, “It had him beat!”

“What’s to be done, Mr. Cranstone?” he asked.

“You want a way through? Right! Here goes!”

One of the two native overseers was on the after well-deck, but the other was standing under the break of the boat-deck. Like the rest of the refugees he was decidedly scant in attire, but, as a sort of distinguishing badge, he wore a collar of sharks’ teeth.

Cranstone told him what was wanted in quite a lengthy speech. The native put both hands to his forehead, probably as a sign that he understood.

Then, waving his arms vigorously and singing in a monotone—at least that’s what it sounded like—he forced a passage through the throng.

They gave way for the most part docilely. Men, squatting on deck, rolled backwards in order to get out of his path.

The way was clear. In single file the anchor party gained the fore-deck.

The windlass began to revolve. Foot by foot, fathom by fathom, the studded-linked cable came inboard.

“Up and down, sir!” shouted the third officer.

The engine-room telegraph bell clanged—a warning for the chief engineer to stand by.

“Close up, sir!” reported Mr. Andrews.

The stock of the anchor was now housed in the hawsepipe. The ship, no longer tethered to the bed of the lagoon, was free to depart; though there was always the chance that, by some mishap, she might pile herself upon the reef.

All this while Warru had continued to belch out flames and dense clouds of smoke to the accompaniment of loud and persistent rumbles.

The haze still persisted. Through it the beach could be discerned with its crowd of natives. Perhaps they were watching the departure of the ship carrying their more favoured kinsfolk; perhaps they were patiently awaiting the arrival of other vessels. The refugees on board were gazing shorewards at their fellow islanders and thinking of their devastated homes; but hardly a sound came from them. They seemed too dazed and apathetic to care.

Slowly the *Golden Gleaner* swung round until her bows were pointing in the direction of the entrance to the lagoon. It was now hardly visible—not solely on account of the volcanic haze but on account of the fact that the tide was at its full.

On either side and well above the surface were the lanterns that Cadet Stacey's party had placed in position earlier in the day.

It was now two in the afternoon; yet, through the drifting haze, their lights could be seen. They weren't of any assistance to the ship—though the lanterns themselves were—but they would be to any vessels closing the island after dark.

All the same, the Old Man smiled cheerfully at his chief officer once the reef was left astern and the echo-sounder gave a depth of one hundred fathoms once more.

Then he retired to his cabin. He had a task before him that he heartily disliked. That was using a pen. He had to write a lengthy report upon the disaster to Pulo Tama and the part the ship had played in rescue work.

Sparks, too, was very busy. He had to keep in touch with the five vessels known to be making for the island. Each had expressed its thanks for the assistance given by the *Golden Gleaner* in providing lighted beacons to mark the otherwise unsurveyed entrance.

In addition, Sparks got in touch with Singapore so that the world in general would know of the catastrophic destruction of the major part of the hitherto almost unheard-of island of Pulo Tama.

Having handed over the bridge to Second Officer Downing, Mr. Temple mustered the cadets of both watches.

"I've put you on special duty," he informed them. "The refugees must be fed and given water. There's a hose coupled up for'ard and aft. Four of you will fill buckets with water. The natives will be drawn up in some sort of lines. Each man will drink while you count ten. Then you'll pass along to the next one. Is that clear?"

The cadets signified that they understood.

“What about something for them to eat, sir?” asked Dusty Miller.

“I’ll be coming to that later,” replied the chief officer. “Meanwhile, get busy!”

Again Mr. Cranstone proved his worth. Under his direction the natives were drawn up in four lines. They weren’t particularly straight lines, since the sluggish motion of the ship had already affected their legs and their digestive organs.

Chief Engineer McFee had already provided plenty of distilled water. It had lost its salty taste but it had a distinct flavour of sulphur; yet in spite of that the parched refugees drank with avidity. Many of them couldn’t understand why they were limited to roughly ten seconds; yet with few exceptions they allowed the cadets to take the buckets away and pass on to the next man in the line.

Watering operation completed, the cadets were ordered to stand-by for further instructions.

One of the hatch covers of No. 1 hold was removed and a couple of sacks of rice were brought on deck.

Captain Harrington had no qualms about making immediate use of some of the rice consigned to Hong Kong. Had the need arisen, he would have had the hold cleared.

Again the chief officer addressed the willing youths.

“Fill your buckets with rice and serve out one handful—a large one, mind!—to each man. Give the same amount to each child—if it’s overfed that’s its mother’s affair—and two handfuls to each woman.”

“Why two to each woman?” asked Oxley, when the cadets were out of Mr. Temple’s hearing.

“ ’Cause her hands are smaller,” replied Dusty Miller, drawing a bow at a venture.

It was a pathetic though somewhat revolting sight to see the ravenously hungry natives plunge their hands into the mass of greyish grains and stuff them into their mouths. The contents of the six buckets disappeared in no time, the men, when they had eaten, casting envious glances at the others who were gulping down the unappetizing grains.

Half-way through the operation Gerald's feet slipped on the already none too clean deck. He just managed to save himself from measuring his length, but the rice from his bucket—which was nearly full—was upset.

It was too great a temptation for the hitherto well-disciplined natives. Those nearest the scene of the mishap broke ranks. A wild scramble ensued, men scooping up double handfuls of rice and, because they couldn't swallow all of it in a couple of gulps, stowed it away for future consumption in their loin-cloths!

"I don't think I'll ever touch rice pudding again," confided Gerald to his chum after they had finished their task.

"I wonder!" rejoined Peter.

CHAPTER XIX

CRANSTONE'S STORY

Soon after the “feeding of the multitude”, as Mr. Temple termed it, Gerald had to go on watch.

It wanted an hour before sunset when a vessel was reported on the port bow. Coming within visual distance she “made her number”, in accordance with an old sea-custom in existence long before radio telegraphy was ever heard of.

Those four flags indicated that she was the S.S. *Ravenscar* of London. Other hoists showed that she was from a Japanese port and was bound for Auckland, New Zealand. She had altered course for Pulo Tama, as the result of the *Golden Gleaner's* general signal for aid.

All this and more about the *Ravenscar* was already second-hand news, since the radio officers of both ships had been in communication with each other at intervals for several hours.

Now, at full speed, the second rescuing ship was on her way to the island, guided by the glare of the erupting Warru.

It wasn't a case of ships that pass in the night. It was still daylight, although the brief interval between sunset and total darkness was close at hand.

There was one person at least on board the *Golden Gleaner* who had failed to see the passing *Ravenscar*.

That was Jimmy Cranstone. The co-manager of the Pulo Tama estates had not had a wink of sleep during the last seventy-odd hours. Stretched on a settee in the captain's day-cabin, he was making up for arrears. Even the raucous bellow of the ship's siren as it bade farewell to the *Ravenscar* failed to disturb his slumbers.

At sunrise next morning he was up and about, although not exactly feeling like a giant refreshed with wine. He had done a grand piece of work, even though it meant leaving his partner, Bishop, and many of the survivors behind. He wondered how they were faring and whether they had been

overwhelmed by the red-hot rivers of molten lava. He could not hope to hear what had befallen them until the *Ravenscar* reported the situation by wireless.

He found himself pondering on the future. He had shares in the Pulo Tama estate, but the island was finished from a commercial point of view. The ground, so carefully tended, was now, for the most part, covered with lava which, when it cooled down, would become solid rock.

His meditations were interrupted by Captain Harrington coming out of his sleeping-cabin. He, too, had had an opportunity for making up arrears of rest and slumber.

“ ‘Morning, Cranstone!” he greeted his guest. “Have you had a good night?”

“I’ve been dead to the world, Captain!”

“Glad to hear you say so. Now how about breakfast? It’ll be ready in half an hour. . . . You know where the bathroom is?”

Cranstone had had a wash and brush-up on the previous evening. Soap and water had removed the thick covering of dirt and oil from face and arms, while his scanty wardrobe had been replenished by gifts of clothing from the ship’s officers. All the same, a bath was most desirable.

The Old Man was curious to know Cranstone’s story. It didn’t take much prompting; and after breakfast was over his guest began his narrative.

“We had precious little warning,” he explained. “Two days before the big bust-up Warru started sending up a thin column of smoke. There were earth tremors, too, but we didn’t take much notice of them. As you probably know, Captain, we have quite a lot of them in these parts.

“Then came the big eruption. It looked as if the whole of one side of the crater was blown clean away. Then lava, like a torrent, poured out of the gap. It was a proper trap. There would be streams of the stuff up to a quarter of a mile apart surging down across the cultivated ground. Some of them would unite, cutting off the natives’ huts. There was no escape for them. In addition, the air was thick with fumes and smoke, while red-hot rocks came crashing down, killing men, women and children and starting fires that were impossible to control.”

“It must have been terrible,” observed Captain Harrington.

“Terrible doesn’t half describe it,” continued the narrator. “I was a prisoner of war in Jap hands, and I saw Hiroshima blotted out by an atomic

bomb. If I had the choice between being snuffed out by a volcanic eruption or by an atomic bomb, I'd plump for the bomb every time. It does the job quicker and neater!"

"Perhaps!" observed the Old Man. "Opinions on that might differ."

"Everyone's entitled to his opinion, Captain, and I'm just giving you mine. But to get on with my story. Charlie Bishop's bungalow went up in flames and he just managed to escape being cut off by the molten lava. He hadn't a chance to save anything. Mine looked the next on the list. I was sending out an S.O.S. on my transmitting set—I'm not much of a hand at that sort of job——"

"We picked up the signal all right," interrupted the Old Man. "That's when we altered course. It was a piece of luck really. We had had engine trouble at Brisbane and in consequence we were delayed for a couple of days. But for that the ship would have been three hundred miles to the nor'ard of Pulo Tama and too far away to be of any assistance. But carry on!"

"I'd only just finished sending out the message—I'd been doing it at intervals during the past twenty-four hours—when bang, wallop! A lump of red-hot rock came crashing through the roof, and that put paid to my transmitter and the bungalow!

"I made a dash for it. Charlie Bishop was waiting outside and we only just escaped being cut off by a stream of molten lava. Most of the labourers who had escaped were already well on their way to the beach. There didn't seem much chance for them or us, 'cause a big wave had smashed up all the boats and canoes.

"Half-way there we met Little Willie——"

"Who's Little Willie?" inquired the Old Man.

"If you'd been in the army instead of being afloat, Captain, you'd call him a padre. A missionary society planked him down on Pulo Tama about three years ago without so much as 'by your leave'. Not that we minded although he did put ideas into the natives' heads. Charlie had to tell him that there wasn't room for two Bishops on the blinking island. But, I'll admit, he did a lot of good. For one thing, he started a sort of hospital and that cost him his life.

"Through the smoke we saw him staggering towards us. He was coughing worse than we were. 'You're going the wrong way, padre!' shouted Charlie Bishop.

“‘I’m not!’ he answered. ‘My duty lies there—at the hospital.’

“‘Don’t be a fool,’ says I. ‘The place has gone to flames by this time.’

“But he would go. That was the last we saw of him. Well, there’s not much more to tell. We hung around the beach with no grub and no water, and the flames getting nearer and nearer. Then, when we’d almost given up hope, we saw your ship coming through the smoke.”

“How many are there on the island?” asked Captain Harrington.

“There were nigh on three thousand. I reckon a couple of thousand have gone under. You’ve picked up a tidy few. I reckon there’ll be five hundred or more still waiting on the beach unless the flames haven’t driven them into the lagoon. Yes, I’m thinking a lot about my pal, Charlie Bishop.”

“Probably they are rescued by this time,” suggested the Old Man. “You saw that vessel with which we exchanged signals yesterday afternoon?”

“I never saw her,” declared Cranstone.

“It must have been while you were sound asleep. She was the *Ravenscar*, and she was making for Pulo Tama at full speed. We ought to have heard from her by now.”

Cranstone continued his story and expressed his fears of the future.

Captain Harrington let him talk. It was all helping to keep his guest’s mind occupied. All the same, he was wondering why news from the *Ravenscar* was not forthcoming and whether the crowd of refugees on the well-deck would have to be fed again before they were landed at Diu Tama.

There was a knock on the cabin door.

In reply to the Old Man’s invitation to enter—he thought it might be the chief officer asking for instructions about water and rice for the refugees—Sparks stepped over the coaming and into the cabin. He held a leaf from a writing pad which he tendered to the captain.

“Radio signal from *Ravenscar*, sir!” he announced.

The Old Man took the wireless message, glanced through it, and then read it aloud.

“*Ravenscar* to *Golden Gleaner*—Anchored in lagoon with Dutch motorship *Banckert*. All survivors have been taken off. Proceeding Diu Tama. Clutterbuck, Master.”

With the greatest difficulty Cranstone refrained from dancing a jig in the Old Man's cabin. It was the best and most exciting news he had received since that memorable day when—a prisoner of war in Jap hands—he had had the news of the Japanese unconditional surrender.

Then a thought struck him. All survivors had been taken off the island. Was his pal Charlie Bishop included or had he lost his life before the rescuing ships arrived?

Sparks was still waiting in case the Old Man was to send a message in reply.

“Anything the matter?” asked the Old Man, quick to notice the change of expression on the face of his guest.

Cranstone explained in words the doubt he had in his mind.

“I think we can get over that,” declared Captain Harrington. “Here, Sparks, take this down. You know the trimmings. Thank Captain Clutterbuck for his message and ask if he will kindly inform me whether Charles Bishop is amongst the survivors.”

The wireless officer had hardly left the cabin when the bell of the inter-com rang.

The Old Man went to the receiving end of the instrument. It was a message from the bridge reporting that the island of Diu Tama was in sight.

He made his way to the upper bridge.

There, dead ahead, lay the island on which his passengers were to be set ashore. The ship should be anchored in the lagoon within the next half-hour, unless any unforeseen difficulties arose. It was always wise to make that proviso!

He glanced downwards to the well-deck. The natives had evidently found out that the island on the horizon was to be their future home. Most of them were leaning outboard and craning their heads in its direction.

“We'll be spared from having to give them grub!” declared the Old Man to the chief officer.

“Aye aye, sir!” replied Mr. Temple, in agreement. “But it'll take a terrific amount of squeegee graft before yon well-deck's fit for inspection!”

CHAPTER XX

THE ISLAND OF REFUGE

Unlike the passage through the reef at Pulo Tama, the entrance to the lagoon at Diu Tama presented no difficulty to the arrival of the *Golden Gleaner*.

It was well beacons. There were two conspicuous leading marks that, kept in line, led through the channel to the anchorage. The passage through the reefs was both wide and deep.

"I hope the Old Man will let us go ashore," said Peter. "It seems ages since we did back in Brisbane."

"Was that the last time?" asked Gerald.

"Of course it was."

"No, it wasn't," contradicted his chum flatly. "Weren't both of us on the reef at Pulo Tama?"

"Sorry; you're right," admitted Peter. "But that didn't give us a chance to stretch our legs."

"We'll get that all right," declared Dusty Miller. "And without going ashore!"

"What do you mean?" asked Peter.

"I heard Temple say that the well-deck wants a terrific lot of cleaning down, after that crush has gone ashore," replied the senior cadet. "And you can take it from me that we'll be put on to the job!"

With this dismal prospect in store for them, the cadets lost much of their interest in Diu Tama.

This island was five or six times the size of Pulo Tama. It was by no means as mountainous, none of the peaks rising above a thousand feet. There were no records of earthquakes or even earth tremors during the last couple of hundred years. Most of the ground was given over to forestry and agriculture. During the Japanese occupation of this part of the Pacific an

epidemic, which the Jap doctors could not or would not cope with, had decimated the native population. One result of this was that there was still an acute shortage of labour. In a sense the eruption of the volcano Waru was likely to prove a blessing in disguise. Diu Tama was ready to absorb all the refugees from Pulo Tama.

The island boasted of a capital. Its white inhabitants consisted of a British administrator, his staff, a dozen planters and about the same number of merchants. At one time it supported a number of beach-combers, but the Japs had removed them to unknown destinations. New-comers to that calling had been effectually prevented from landing. The pearl fisheries got on very well without them.

News of the arrival of the *Golden Gleaner* and of the expected *Ravenscar* and the Dutch *Banckert* made most of the inhabitants of Diu Tama desert their morning tasks to gather on the wooden piers that contribute to the usefulness of the harbour.

There was at least one drawback so far as shipping was concerned. Craft of the size of the *Golden Gleaner* were of too great a draught to be able to berth alongside. They had to drop anchor two cables' lengths offshore, where they were still sheltered by the reef.

Barely had the *Golden Gleaner* anchored and swung head to wind—there were no tidal currents within the lagoon—when small ships and canoes put off from shore. Amongst them was a motor-launch carrying the administrator and three of his staff.

The disembarkation of the refugees had not yet commenced. For the time being their attention was directed upon the white-uniformed officials as they ascended the accommodation ladder.

Captain Harrington met his guests and invited them to take refreshments.

"You've done a remarkably fine piece of work, Captain," declared the administrator.

"We were fortunate in being comparatively close to Pulo Tama when the catastrophe occurred," rejoined the Old Man.

"And you and your crew have been put to considerable inconvenience by the crowded state of your ship," continued the official.

"Well, the atmosphere on board, especially on the well-deck, is not what one might call normal," rejoined Captain Harrington. "I've carried queer cargoes in my time, but never one like this. It's all in a day's work," he

added philosophically. "It won't take us very long to get things shipshape and Bristol fashion once more!"

"I'm sure you will," added the administrator, who was wishing that he had deferred his courtesy visit until the cleaning-up operations had been carried out.

"I'd like you to meet Mr. James Cranstone," said Captain Harrington, beckoning to the late manager of the Pulo Tama estates to come up to be introduced. The Old Man, always keen to do a good turn to genuine ill-luck cases, saw his opportunity to do so now.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Cranstone," declared the official. "I've heard quite a lot about the part you played during the eruption."

"You've heard quite a lot, sir?" asked Cranstone, taken completely by surprise.

"There's such a thing as wireless," the administrator reminded him. "The *Golden Gleaner's* radio operator has sent me a very nice and interesting story of the part you played. But for you the natives would have been panic-stricken and got out of hand. Then anything might have happened!"

"But my pal, Charlie Bishop, did as much as I did—perhaps more."

"So I understand," rejoined the official.

The outcome of this meeting was that both Cranstone and Bishop obtained good posts at Diu Tama where, with the refugees from Pulo Tama under them, they were put in full charge of one of the largest copra-producing estates in the island.

Meanwhile the task of landing the *Golden Gleaner's* passengers was proceeding. Some of the natives expressed their thanks in broad smiles and appreciative gestures.

This time it was not necessary to lower the ship's boats. Lighters and other small craft ranged alongside, to make for the shore only when they were crowded to their utmost capacity.

While this operation was in progress, the *Ravenscar* arrived, to be quickly followed by the *Banckert*. Dropping anchor close to the *Golden Gleaner*, they, too, lost no time in sending their quota of rescued natives ashore.

Perhaps there had been only one previous occasion when the water-front of Diu Tama had witnessed such a scene of excitement. This was on the memorable day when the Japanese had left the island after having it in their grasp for four long years.

The excitement almost developed into a frenzied outburst of delight, as the rescued refugees found friends and relations from one or other of the three large vessels anchored in the lagoon. Nor were the survivors allowed to go thirsty or hungry. They were considerably outnumbered by the inhabitants of Diu Tama, who were literally falling over themselves in their eagerness to give yams, taro, breadfruit and mealies to the victims of Warru's wrath.

Declining Captain Harrington's offer to put him up for the night, Cranstone went ashore to find his co-partner and to give him the glad news that their future was no longer in jeopardy.

Their reunion was—for the present at least—of brief duration. Before they could earn and enjoy their night's rest, they were called upon by the authorities to marshal the one thousand or more of the survivors from the eruption and to march them in orderly fashion to four large go-downs temporarily allotted to them before they could be transferred to another part of the island.

That was the last Cadets Stacey and Meadowes saw of Jimmy Cranstone.

That didn't mean that they had no reminder of the run from Pulo Tama to Diu Tama.

The cadets' forebodings were only too well founded; for hardly had the last consignment of her human cargo left the ship when they were ordered to begin what Dusty Miller termed "mopping-up operations".

In temperate or cold climes, men employed on the task would be wearing either rubber or leather knee-boots. In the tropics they would go bare-footed. Accordingly the cadets of both watches, armed with brooms and squeegees, waded for the most part ankle deep in water delivered through the ship's hoses.

It was a very disagreeable task compared with the ordinary one of "scrubbing down" the decks; but the cadets on the for'ard well-deck set to work with a will. The sooner they accomplished their task the better. They were also out to beat part of the ship's company performing a similar task on the after well-deck.

They had nearly finished the job—it was now after sunset and the moon was giving them sufficient light—when the S.S. *Ravenscar* began signalling.

All the cadets could read Morse. They dropped what they were doing and rushed to the side to find out what possessed the *Ravenscar* to use her Aldis lamp.

“*Ravenscar* to *Golden Gleaner*,” read the message. “Lying to lee’ard of you, I appreciate the fact that you are cleansing your Augean stables—Clutterbuck, Master.”

“I wonder how the Old Man will take that,” remarked Dusty Miller. “I bet he’ll score over Old Man Clutterbuck!”

There was an interval of about a quarter of an hour before the *Golden Gleaner*’s Aldis lamp began its reply. A considerable part of that interval had been taken up by Captain Harrington in turning over the pages of the New Testament.

When the message to Captain Clutterbuck was sent, it referred him to book so-and-so, chapter and verse also so-and-so.

Bursting with curiosity, the cadets completed their task to Chief Officer Miles Temple’s satisfaction. They hurried below to the messroom. A Bible was produced. They turned up the verse.

It read, “Go thou and do likewise”.

Early on the following morning—the wind having shifted so that she was to lee’ard of the S.S. *Ravenscar*—the *Golden Gleaner* resumed her interrupted run to Hong Kong.

CHAPTER XXI

“MAN OVERBOARD!”

The eruption of the volcano of Warru and its consequences were fast becoming ancient history, as far as the cadets of the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* were concerned.

Now they were looking forward to arriving at Hong Kong. Meanwhile they had to make the best of yet another long sea passage. Beyond their normal sea-going duties there was little to vary the sometimes seemingly unending and uninteresting routine.

Even the “first voyagers”, Cadets Stacey and Meadowes, had to admit that life afloat had its many and monotonous drawbacks. It wasn’t so bad when the ship put into port and when, on rare occasions, they had been allowed ashore, Cape Town and Brisbane for example. There they did have a good time, even though at the former place they got involved with a party of crooks.

The ship’s visit to Hong Kong offered exceptional opportunities for the cadets to go ashore and enjoy themselves. Through Fourth Officer Angus Cross they had learned that the *Golden Gleaner* would be there for a considerable time. She would have to discharge her cargo of cereals. That wouldn’t take long. It was the question of finding cargo that had to be taken into account. Advance information by radio had hinted that Hong Kong had too many visiting craft to deal with her exports to Britain. The *Golden Gleaner* might be obliged to proceed light—or in ballast—to some port on the east coast of either North, Central or South America before she could be loaded down to Plimsoll line.

Yes, Hong Kong offered possibilities to the members of the cadets’ mess by way of amusement and recreation. There was the almost certain prospect of the arrival of the ship’s mail. Some of it they had missed by a few hours at Brisbane, even though the ship’s departure had been unavoidably delayed—a delay that had resulted in the saving of hundreds of lives on the island of Pulo Tama.

The *Golden Gleaner* was barely two days out on her run to Hong Kong when something happened to disturb the monotony.

Peter Meadowes was standing middle watch with Second Officer Downing in charge of the bridge. “Dud” Downing was in a communicative mood, relating incidents of his early days afloat, in particular the one in which he had received three bullet wounds in his left leg. Even now he limped slightly as the result.

Suddenly the second officer broke off his narrative.

“What are those men doing there?” he asked, pointing to four shadowy figures crouching on one of the hatch covers of No. 1 hold.

They were hands of the duty watch. There seemed no reason why they should congregate on the for’ard well-deck under the eyes of the officer of the watch.

They most certainly would not have chosen that part of the ship to indulge in a quiet game of “Crown and Anchor” in order to make the time pass more quickly.

“I don’t know, sir,” replied Peter.

“I don’t suppose you do,” rejoined Mr. Downing. “But there’s no reason why you shouldn’t find out. Off you go!”

Peter clattered down the ladders from the bridge to the deck. He didn’t want to take possible delinquents and duty shirkers by surprise. To prowls around on that sort of unpleasant job was foreign to his nature. He hoped they wouldn’t be put into the captain’s report.

As a matter of fact the *Golden Gleaner*’s transgressors were few and far between. Very rarely had the Old Man to come down upon slackers with a heavy hand. He had set an example to his officers in that respect, and although they could be—and were—strict when a case of necessity arose, there was a state of harmony between all ranks.

“Anything wrong?” asked the cadet.

“We don’t exactly know, sir,” replied one of the quintette, for in the last minute another seaman had joined the party.

“There must be something or you wouldn’t be here,” suggested Peter.

“There’s someone knockin’ on the underside of this ’ere hatch cover,” declared the seaman.

The cadet listened. Above the usual noises common to a vessel under way, there was nothing to support the man's statement.

"I can't hear anything," declared Peter.

"But there was a knockin'," persisted the seaman, and his mates expressed agreement on that point.

"Perhaps it's a rat," suggested the cadet.

"Rats don't tap, sir," demurred another man. "They just gnaw and nibble."

"Quite!" agreed Peter.

He rapped on the tarpaulined hatch cover.

Almost at once came three relatively light taps on the underside of the wooden cover.

"There's someone there," declared the cadet. "Nip along and fetch a lantern, one of you!"

"What's happening?" asked Mr. Downing from the bridge, impatient to know what was going on.

"There's someone in the hold, sir!" replied Peter, convinced that it wasn't a rodent, but a human being. "I'm having the hatch cover removed."

The second officer smiled to himself. The cadet—a junior at that—was taking upon himself the responsibility of removing the cover without first obtaining permission to do so.

"Carry on!" rejoined Downing briefly.

The seaman returned with a lighted lantern and a mallet. Placing the light in a handy position, he set to work to knock out the wedges securing the tarpaulin to the coaming of the hatch.

A sufficient quantity of the canvas cover was then rolled back to expose one of the several wooden covers.

A succession of raps came from the inside of the hold.

"Seems he's in a mighty 'urry," observed one of the men. "Think it likely 'e stowed hisself aboard at Brisbane an' has been down there ever since?"

"Hardly," replied Peter. "And we've had the hatch covers off since then. I guess it's a Kanaka."

The section of the hatch cover was removed.

In the light of the lantern there could be seen a dark-brown native, wearing only a scanty loin cloth. He had been lying face downwards upon some of the bags of rice, but was now supporting his body by his hands and was looking up, rather apprehensively Peter thought, at his liberators.

“Lumme! It’s one o’ those blacks we picked up at Pulo Tama!” declared one of the seamen. “Come on outa it, Sambo! We ain’t goin’ ter eat you!”

The native had to be helped over the coaming.

Although it was a hot night he was trembling violently.

“’E don’t arf niff!” declared another of the party inelegantly. “You leave him to me, sir! I’ll give ’im a good scrub down, then a bite an’ a sup. Reckon ’e can ’ave a stretch off the land in the lamp-room till mornin’.”

There was nothing more for Peter to do. He knew that the warm-hearted seaman would treat the stowaway—for that he undoubtedly was—like an oversized mascot.

“That’s the second stowaway this trip,” observed the second officer, when Peter returned to the bridge. “Between ourselves, Meadowes, I’d prefer that rascal Groote to that fellow.”

“How did he get into the hold, sir?”

“When you lads were serving out rice to the refugees, I expect,” suggested Mr. Downing. “He must have slipped into the hold like a greasy eel.”

“But why, sir?”

Dud Downing shrugged his shoulders—a favourite gesture of his when he was at a loss to give a satisfactory answer.

“Goodness only knows,” he rejoined. “More than likely we’ll never know. I don’t suppose he knows more than a few words of English, if that; and it’s a dead cert that not a soul in this ship, barring himself, can speak his lingo.”

A little later on the watch was changed. Peter lost no time in turning in. Exciting as his spell of duty was, he refrained from waking Gerald up and telling him of what had happened. The news of the discovery of the stowaway would be all over the ship before then.

Captain Harrington first heard of it from the officer of the morning watch. He decided that no useful purpose would be served if he saw the man, as he would have done had the stowaway spoken English. It would be of little use trying to get in touch with either Cranstone or Bishop, since they had neither time nor opportunity to make a list of the survivors from Pulo Tama. The only thing to be done would be to hand the native over to the authorities at Hong Kong and let them accept responsibility. The incident would have to be recorded in the ship's log and there the captain's responsibility would cease.

That's what he thought.

During the course of the forenoon Second Officer Downing thought he'd better see how the native was faring.

He sent for the seaman who had offered to look after the native.

"Just can't make 'im out, sir," replied the man, in answer to Mr. Downing's inquiry. "I put 'im in the lamp-room where there was plenty o' room for 'im to stretch his legs. I gives 'im grub but 'e wouldn't 'ave none, though 'e did have a sip o' cold char. Seems to me 'e didn't cotton on to cold tea. I reckon 'e got burnt a bit when that there volcano got busy."

"Burnt?"

"Well, sir, there's nasty blisters on him."

"You should have reported that before, Jones," said Mr. Downing severely. "Bring him to me."

While waiting for the stowaway to arrive, Mr. Downing called to Peter, who was hovering in the background and awaiting developments, to ask the captain's steward to come along with his First Aid chest. By this time several cadets and deck-hands had come along to see what was happening.

The native followed Seaman Jones on deck. He wasn't trembling as he did when released from the hold. His temporary guardian had carried out his intention of giving him a good scrub down. The stowaway certainly looked more presentable, but the treatment had not improved the ugly blisters on his legs.

"What a mess, poor blighter!" exclaimed the second officer sympathetically. "You say he doesn't speak English?"

"Not a word 'as I knows on, sir," replied Jones.

Just then the captain's steward arrived with his First Aid chest.

“A nasty mess, sir!” he declared. “He shouldn’t be standing. Can you get him to lie flat, sir? Then I can get to work with him.”

That was far easier said than done.

Seaman Jones by signs began to indicate that his protégé should assume what is technically known as a recumbent position.

“Come on, Sambo!” he urged. “Lay down flat! We ain’t a-goin’ ter eat you!”

It happened almost in the twinkling of an eye.

Before any of the bystanders could realize what was happening, the native made a half turn and sprang. He cleared the ship’s rail without touching it and disappeared over the side.

There was a rush to the rail. Some of the crew began throwing lifebelts overboard. The sinister shout of “Man overboard!” was taken up until it reached the bridge.

Chief Officer Temple, who was in charge on the bridge, acted promptly. He rang down for half-speed ahead and then ordered the wheel to be put hard over to port, his object being to make a sixteen point turn and approach the spot where the man had disappeared. The idea was to stop the ship and to lower a boat in the shortest possible time.

Being a single-screw ship, the *Golden Gleaner* turned slowly and ponderously, listing heavily outwards as she did so. All the same, the manoeuvre was smartly executed, the ship coming to a standstill within a cable’s length of the nearest of three jettisoned lifebuoys.

Almost every point of vantage was occupied by officers, cadets and men not otherwise on duty.

“He should be somewhere about,” declared Mr. Downing. “These fellows are like fish in the water.”

“I reckon the screw’s got him, sir,” suggested Paddy Quinn, the bos’n.

That seemed to be the correct explanation of the unfortunate native’s disappearance; for although the ship remained near the spot for an hour there wasn’t the slightest trace of him.

CHAPTER XXII

AT HONG KONG

Although the lost man was—to quote Cadet Dusty Miller—only a black without a tally, the tragedy cast a temporary gloom upon the ship’s company. The men who had first heard the tapping reproached themselves for calling the second officer’s attention to it. The stowaway could well have survived the rest of the run to Hong Kong. Peter found himself wondering whether there was anything he had said or done that had contributed to the unhappy occurrence. Mr. Downing wasn’t too happy at the thought that it was his action in bringing the captain’s steward, armed with his First Aid chest, upon the scene that had terrified the native into jumping overboard.

Actually the brunt of the tragedy fell upon the shoulders of Captain Harrington. But for that the report of the discovery of the native stowaway would have been limited to a couple of lines in the ship’s log. Now he was confronted with the prospect of having to write two lengthy reports—one for the “appropriate authority” at Hong Kong, the other for the ship’s owners in distant London. There was the possibility—a slight one he hoped—that the matter mightn’t end there.

Still forty-eight hours beyond her schedule, the S.S. *Golden Gleaner* berthed at Hong Kong.

The work of unloading her cargo commenced within an hour of her arrival. The consignees didn’t raise any objection to the fact that there was a shortage in the quantity of rice. Several bagfuls had either been eaten or damaged by the refugees from the volcanic eruption, but these were written off without any claim for compensation. The Old Man had been right in his surmise.

Then came a glorious week as far as the cadets were concerned. They still had morning duties to perform, but there were no watches to be kept. From two in the afternoon till ten o’clock at night they were free to go ashore and to indulge in any amusements—with certain very necessary restrictions—as far as their limited monetary resources would permit. Very quickly they discovered that a British one pound note wouldn’t go very far in terms of Hong Kong dollars!

But the day—the day of days almost—was the one on which the long-anticipated mail from home arrived. There was great excitement when three bulging bags and one much smaller were brought on board. In the latter were air-mail letters, some of which had been written in British homes only four days previously.

Under a double awning spread over the fore-deck sat First Officer Miles Temple, as temporary assistant to His Majesty's Postmaster General. He was there merely to keep order should the need arise. The actual distribution was made by Fourth Officer Angus Cross.

Deftly the task proceeded. The air-mail letters were the first to be distributed, followed by those sent by sea, and finally newspapers and parcels.

Mr. Cross knew his job. He'd done a similar task on several occasions. His one regret, shared by his shipmates, was that mail-day didn't come oftener!

Some of the crew had quite a number of missives. As soon as the distribution was over they would find a secluded spot to devour their contents. Others, judging by their long faces, were not so lucky; although there were only three of the hands who drew blanks.

All the cadets were amongst the lucky ones.

Gerald received a baker's dozen, Peter six. Of these three might be regarded as duplicates since they came from members of the Stacey family. The subject matter consisted of trivialities of slight interest; but how eagerly the two youths enjoyed reading these letters from home!

Captain Harrington had by far the greatest number of letters; but, as had been the case at Cape Town, more than half were of a strictly business nature, calculated to keep him busy for the next few days, in addition to his duties as master of the S.S. *Golden Gleaner*.

The last envelope he opened was from Cape Town. It contained a bankers' draft for the sum of three hundred pounds—the reward offered by the Government of South Africa for the arrest of the bank bandit Jan Groote.

The Old Man frowned as he read the covering letter. He foresaw complications. How was the money to be distributed? On the spur of the moment he couldn't say. He'd have to speak to Mr. Temple about it. He'd have to send an acknowledgment—that was the obvious thing to do. Perhaps he'd better shelve the distribution until the ship was nearly due to arrive at Southampton.

Then there was the little matter dealing with the loss of the native stowaway. He'd sent in a report to the proper authority at Hong Kong. It hadn't even been acknowledged. Perhaps the influx of Chinese refugees from the mainland was taking up so much of the Government officials' time that the case of the disappearance of a solitary, unnamed native of Pulo Tama wasn't worth following up.

As far as Gerald and Peter were concerned—this also applied to the other members of the cadets' mess—the time passed only too quickly. There was much to see in Hong Kong. The one fly in the ointment was when Gerald bought, for the sum of five dollars, an embossed brass pot that, according to the history of it—given in pigeon English by a native shopkeeper—had come from the Imperial Palace at Peking in the days when China was ruled by an emperor.

It was Second Officer Downing—a Birmingham born man—who, when Gerald displayed his find—pointed to cryptic markings on the base of the vase which indicated that it had been manufactured, with thousands like it, in a Solihull factory in the year of grace 1951.

Gerald couldn't find the vendor again. He couldn't even locate the street where the shop was. In the native part of the city one street was very much like any other.

He spent three hours that evening in erasing the tell-tale marks that showed the brass pot to be of Brummagen origin.

So far no cargo had been found at Hong Kong. It looked as if the ship would have to sail in ballast for part of her homeward voyage, trusting more or less to luck to pick up consignments on the way. The only redeeming feature, so far as the cadets in particular were concerned, was that they would shortly be homeward bound. The voyage might take an exasperatingly long time, but there was the prospect of seeing relations, friends and home again.

But Gerald and Peter were soon to be made to realize the uncertainties of life in the Merchant Navy as applied to cargo boats not confined to runs on defined routes.

An American cargo vessel, laden with superfluous war materials bound for 'Frisco, had been diverted to Hong Kong. A few miles from that port she had been in collision, with the result that she had been brought into dry dock with a gaping hole in her side.

The *Golden Gleaner*, acting up to her name, was chartered to take the disabled vessel's cargo on board—no vessel flying the Stars and Stripes being available—and deliver it to San Francisco.

What this would mean was a warmly debated subject in the cadets' mess. From 'Frisco whither? Would their ship proceed through the Panama Canal to Southampton or return to that port via Australia and the Cape of Good Hope? Or, perhaps, she might take the Suez Canal route. In any case, the distances were tremendous. It meant sailing round the world. Its circumference was roughly twenty-five thousand miles, but before the *Golden Gleaner* saw Southampton Water again she would have covered half as many miles more.

Their nostalgia was increased when Dusty Miller had a letter from Purchase. In it he said that he was still in hospital in Brisbane but expected to be out "before this reaches you". His uncle at Tambo Warra was sending him to England by air and later on he was returning to Queensland—also by air—to take a permanent post with Uncle George. He had definitely decided to swallow the anchor. He hadn't the slightest wish to go to sea again.

"His Uncle George must be jolly well off to send him to England and back by air," observed Nelson. "By air! Just think of it. We could fly home from Hong Kong in four or five days——"

"If we had the oof," interrupted Oxley.

"Of course, you chump: if we had the money. We haven't. Besides, we're cadets of the Merchant Navy. Taking the rough with the smooth, I wouldn't swop it for any shore job going."

Gerald and Peter silently concurred with these sentiments. There were times when life on board tended to become monotonous, but on the whole they were jolly glad that they were sailing under the house-flag of Messrs. Whatmough, Duvant and Co.!

The work of transshipping the cargo from the damaged American ship to the *Golden Gleaner* proceeded apace. The former was in dry dock, the latter alongside a wharf some eighty yards away. Cranes lifted the cargo out of one ship, gangs of coolies transported it close to cranes near the *Golden Gleaner*, and these lowered the bulky crates into the depths of her hold.

A fortnight after her arrival at Hong Kong the *Golden Gleaner*, again down to Plimsoll line, left port on the first stage of her voyage across the vast Pacific.

CHAPTER XXIII

ACROSS THE PACIFIC

The ship was within eight hours' steaming distance of Hawaii when one of the look-out men reported a small craft, apparently in distress, about a couple of miles away on the port bow.

Turning his glasses in that direction, Fourth Officer Angus Cross saw that it was a canoe in which were two men. They weren't using their paddles, but one of them was waving a white cloth in what proved to be a successful attempt to attract attention.

"It looks as if we're picking up a couple of blacks to replace the one lost overboard, Meadows," said the officer of the watch. "Pass the word for the captain!"

Quickly the Old Man was on the bridge, but already the fourth officer had given orders for the ship's course to be changed in order to close the drifting canoe. Men were also standing by, ready to lower a boat. Rescue operations should have been carried out within the next ten minutes.

It was not to be—or at least not in the manner Captain Harrington had intended.

He had just rung down for "Stop"—the ship would carry enough way to close with the canoe—when seemingly from nowhere—none of the ship's crew had seen or heard her as she glided overhead—a large flying-boat made contact with the sea.

Swinging head to wind she taxied close to the canoe. A port in her fuselage was opened, and in remarkably quick time the two occupants were taken on board.

Again she taxied, then, having gained height, the flying-boat waggled her wings, probably as a gesture of appreciation for the Britisher's thwarted attempt at rescue.

Then off she flew in the direction of Hawaii, and was quickly lost to sight in the haze of the blue sky.

“Smart piece of work, that!” commented the Old Man.

“Yes, sir,” agreed the fourth officer.

He couldn’t very well say otherwise. He was wondering why Captain Harrington hadn’t given orders for the ship to resume her course instead of wallowing, without way, on the long gentle swell.

“They might have finished the job properly,” continued the Old Man. “They ought to have salvaged that canoe.”

“I don’t quite see how, sir,” rejoined Mr. Cross.

“Neither do I,” admitted Captain Harrington. “But we can. More than likely those two natives can’t afford to lose her.”

One of the boats was called away. In her went Cadet Peter Meadowes. The operation would give the lad practice. Had there been any risk the Old Man would have sent one of the officers. There wasn’t. Except for the slight swell the sea was as calm—at times even more so—as the proverbial mill-pond. He was curious to see how the cadet would tackle the somewhat unusual operation. He wasn’t going to interfere—and he would see to it that his officers wouldn’t—unless the cadet looked like making a mess of things.

It didn’t take the boat more than a few minutes to leave her parent and then range alongside the drifting canoe. It was about eighteen feet in length and appeared to be in very good condition—a marked contrast to the ones he’d seen littering the shore at Pulo Tama. Inside bow and stern—she was double-ended—were ring bolts.

Peter’s first act was to remove the heavy outboard engine that was lying in the bottom of the canoe and transfer it to the boat. Then he towed the canoe alongside the ship.

So far, so good! But now a difficulty arose. The hooks of the lower blocks of the falls were too big to engage in the canoe’s ring-bolts. He had to find two lengths of thin rope and “marry” the hooks and ring-bolts.

“Haul away roundly!” he shouted to the party manning the falls.

The men hauled with a will, whisking the canoe to the davit-heads. The little craft was then slung inboard, removed from the falls and stowed on deck.

Again the davits were swung outboard. The hoisting tackle was engaged and the boat, with Peter and her crew, hoisted inboard.

The whole operation had taken but a quarter of an hour.

Leaning over the bridge rails, the Old Man called out to Cadet Meadowes to come on the bridge.

Peter obeyed with remarkable alacrity. He knew that the Old Man was about to express his pleasure at the way in which the salving of the canoe had been carried out. Up to a point his surmise was correct. Captain Harrington did say that the operation had been carried out quickly and for the most part smartly.

“But there’s one thing, Cadet Meadowes,” he continued, “you’ve heard the warning ‘stand from under!’ given in this ship a few times?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then why did you bring your boat alongside and under the canoe while it was being hoisted? Supposing those ring-bolts had carried away: the canoe would have crashed down upon the boat and its crew. If it had there would have been a few funerals in a Hawaiian cemetery,” he concluded grimly.

Gerald, who was standing some distance away, guessed by the colour on his chum’s face that Peter was being ticked off. He couldn’t overhear what was being said, but he made up his mind to ask Peter what it was all about.

The *Golden Gleaner* was soon on her former course, but before the Old Man returned to his cabin he observed to the officer of the watch:

“That flying-boat did us very nearly in the eye, Mr. Cross.”

“So it seems, sir,” agreed the fourth officer.

“It reminds me of something I saw on one of our English rivers,” continued Captain Harrington reminiscently. “I happened to be walking along the bank when I caught sight of a trout, dead and floating on its side. On the surface a large pike was making for it, expecting a good meal no doubt. But before it could seize its prey a gull swooped down and snatched up the trout before the pike’s eyes.”

“A smart bit of work, sir!”

“It was. We’re much in the position of that pike; only the gull left nothing behind. That flying-boat did—a perfectly good canoe. I’ve been looking at it. I shouldn’t be surprised to hear that it cost five hundred dollars to build. It’s up to us to find out who the owner is and let him have his craft back.”

The *Golden Gleaner* arrived at Honolulu without further incident. She had no mail to collect but she had to refuel before completing her long run across the Pacific. Arrangements had also to be made about handing over the salvaged canoe to the harbour authorities.

“There’s quite a crowd on the wharf, sir,” declared the first officer, as Captain Harrington was completing his preparations for going ashore.

There were about forty natives, their heads and shoulders decorated with bright-coloured flowers, gathered close to the *Golden Gleaner’s* berth. Behind them were, perhaps, a thousand Americans, chiefly tourists, to see what the demonstration was about.

“What have they gathered here for?” asked the Old Man.

“I reckon they’re waiting to see you, sir,” replied Mr. Temple with a breezy laugh.

The chief officer’s surmise proved to be correct. Amongst the natives was the owner of the salvaged canoe, who was also the leader of a famous band of Hawaiian dancers.

Unless Captain Harrington stuck to his ship—which he couldn’t very well do—there would be no escape for him.

Putting a bold face on the matter, he descended the brow to the wharf. Amidst the loud noise of native instruments the principal figure in the demonstration rushed up to the Old Man and placed a large wreath round his neck! But when he announced that he had no intention of claiming salvage money from the canoe’s owner—who was perfectly prepared to pay—the enthusiasm of the natives was simply terrific.

Eventually, accompanied by Mr. Temple, Captain Harrington managed to escape from the demonstrators and proceed upon his business.

Demonstrations of good will didn’t end there. There were offers of entertainment for officers and men, while gifts of fruit and flowers came up the gangway in a steady stream.

“If all this fuss is being made because we picked up the canoe, I wonder how much more was made over the crew of the aircraft that picked its owner up?” observed Peter, who in common with the rest of the cadets’ mess, had been putting away generous quantities of freshly gathered fruit.

“We could do with a week of it here,” declared Dusty Miller, who, in the course of his so far brief life afloat, had been entertained perhaps a dozen times before in various ports. “I’ve never been lushed up like this before!”

“We could,” agreed Oxley, who was beginning to feel that his capacity for stowing away fruit was being strained to repletion. “We’re getting a jolly sight more thanks for salvaging that canoe than we did when we took that crowd off Pulo Tama!”

On that score Oxley had been wrong. The natives from the volcano-devastated island weren’t able to express their feelings to the same degree.

After a stay of three days at Honolulu, the *Golden Gleaner* proceeded to San Francisco, where she landed the cargo she had taken on board at Hong Kong.

Again Captain Harrington was worried over the question of more cargo. There seemed to be slight prospects of picking up any on that side of the Pacific that would be consigned to British ports, while most of the sea-borne trade between ’Frisco and Japan was carried in vessels sailing under the Stars and Stripes.

Eventually a small quantity of cargo was forthcoming. It was enough to pay for the ship’s voyage to the Old Country. It also meant that she would proceed through the Panama Canal. Whether she would be able to take in more cargo in that locality was a doubtful surmise. There were, under the Panama flag, far too many decrepit ships whose owners, pursuing an under-cutting policy, were quoting freight charges with which British ships had little or no chance of competing.

The cadets certainly had no cause for anything approaching boredom during the *Golden Gleaner*’s passage through that masterpiece of American engineering, the Panama Canal. From the moment the ship entered the massive Miraflores Locks until she cleared those of Gatun there was something of absorbing interest to demand their attention. It took but nine hours for the ship to pass from the Pacific to the Atlantic. She was now but a mere four thousand three hundred miles from her home port Southampton. How many more miles would she have to sail before she reached there?

CHAPTER XXIV

CAP'N BANKES

At Colon a cablegram from the Owners was delivered to Captain Harrington. Its contents banished from his mind the disturbing thoughts that had worried him since the day at Hong Kong when she was ordered to 'Frisco.

There was more than enough cargo awaiting her at Grenada to enable her to return home.

The Old Man was pleased in more ways than one. It would be his third call at St. George's, the capital of what is one of the most picturesque islands of the West Indies. He had gained several friends mere and it was something to look forward to meeting them again.

The news was well received in the cadets' mess. The only one of its present members who had been to the island was Dusty Miller. That was before he'd attained the dignity of being senior cadet. He had also learned quite a lot about the place from former cadets in the *Golden Gleaner* who were now, with few exceptions, still serving in other vessels of Whatmough, Duvant's fleet.

From Dusty Miller his brother cadets learnt something of Grenada's history—how that the French bought the island from the aborigines with a few knives, hatchets, glass beads and a couple of bottles of brandy; how in the second half of the eighteenth century the British wrested it from the French, only to hand it back to them in 1779; and how four years later Grenada again became a British colony and has been so ever since.

Dusty told them, too, of an English schoolmaster, Morgan by name, who had settled on the island in somewhat peculiar circumstances. He had practically kept open house for the cadets of the *Golden Gleaner* on his previous visits. In addition to teaching at a Government school in St. George's, Mr. Morgan devoted much time to his pet Siamese cats. Frequently, after he had been able to reassure himself that they would be well cared for, Mr. Morgan would present the cadets of a visiting ship with one of the numerous kittens.

“I’ll take you fellows out to see him,” continued the senior cadet. “He lives a few miles out of the town.”

Excitement amongst the cadets continued to rise as the *Golden Gleaner* ploughed her way through the blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. They had seen tropical islands before, though not under happy conditions. Here was their chance to visit a West Indian one where British colonists and American tourists—not too many of them—rubbed shoulders in the streets of St. George’s, and where white, black and brown men lived in harmony in an island rich both in its traditions and its natural productions.

At length the island hove in sight. Several schooners, with a rig peculiar to these waters—stump foremast and top-masted mainmast—were slipping along on their way to and from the fishing grounds. One of them, however, was heading towards the *Golden Gleaner*.

Peter was on the bridge at the time, standing a short distance from Captain Harrington. With the Old Man was the second officer. Both were directing their binoculars in the direction of the approaching schooner.

“That’s the *Frigate Bird*,” declared the captain. “Old Man Bankes has pulled it off again!”

The schooner was no longer alone. Two others had altered course and were standing in her wake. Peter guessed rightly that all three were pilot vessels, competing in a contest to see which pilot would be the first to board the *Golden Gleaner*, and take her into port.

Captain Harrington rang down for “Stop”. It was the first occasion on which he had had to use the engine-room telegraph since the ship left Colon.

By the time the *Golden Gleaner* had lost way, the *Frigate Bird*, making a wide graceful sweep, was lying hove-to at half a cable’s length away. Some of her coloured hands were already engaged in getting a boat over the side.

From the aft side of the bridge, Peter could see most of his messmates and several of the crew watching the approaching boat. Some of the hands—and the cadets as well—were speculating in mild gambles as to which foot the pilot would first touch the deck.

The boat was manned by four coal-black negroes—coloured gen’lmen as they much preferred to be designated. In the stern-sheets was a white man, so heavily tanned by sun and salt breezes that he was only a few degrees lighter in complexion than his crew.

The boat rounded-to against the lower rungs of the Jacob's ladder. Agilely, in spite of his bulk, Cap'n Bankes transferred himself from his boat to the ladder and began his ascent.

Before he reached the rail the boat had pushed off and was speeding back to the *Frigate Bird*.

Judging by the subdued groans of the group anxiously awaiting his arrival, the pilot had thwarted his backers by swinging his stumpy legs over the rail and planting both feet simultaneously upon the deck.

He made his way to the bridge, where Captain Harrington awaited him.

"Good voyage, Cap'n Harrington?" he asked.

"So so," was the cautious reply. "And how go things with you?"

The pilot answered that as far as he, personally, was concerned he hadn't much to grumble about.

"But," he continued, "we've a bit of trouble in the island—a sort of labour dispute. We've never had this sort of thing before, and I don't suppose it'll last very long. At any rate it hasn't spread to St. George's, and it's my opinion it won't."

The *Golden Gleaner* was now proceeding at half-speed towards the harbour. The pilot, while reassuring himself that the helmsman knew his job, continued his friendly chat with the Old Man.

"You've got a new lot of 'prentices, Cap'n," he observed. "Different lot to when you were here in the old *Golden Venture*."

"Yes, with one exception. You remember Dusty Miller? There he is, standing alongside that red-haired lad."

"Shouldn't have recognized him," declared Cap'n Bankes. "Time flies! Last time you were here, my beard was black. There's a dash o' white in it now."

"So I observe," agreed Captain Harrington.

"Look here," continued the pilot. "Talking of them 'prentices—but they're called cadets, ain't they? Well, I'm off to Stringer's Island the day after to-morrow. If a couple o' the lads would care for a trip in the *Frigate Bird*, what would you say to that? It would give them a chance to handle a craft under sail."

"How long would you be away?"

“A week at most.”

Reluctantly the Old Man declined the invitation. Stringer’s Island, which was uninhabited, was leased to Captain Bankes, who visited it at intervals in his schooner. There were relics there of the time when the notorious Captain Morgan used the island to hide some of his ill-gotten booty.

“Sorry,” he replied. “I’m hoping to be homeward bound within a week from now. I’ve had to leave one of my cadets behind at Brisbane, and I don’t want to leave two more in Grenada. How’s the other Morgan getting on—the one who once imagined he was one and the same as the old pirate with that tally?”

“I haven’t seen much of him lately,” confessed the pilot.

“Still absorbed in his Siamese cats?”

“He lost all of them in some sort of epidemic last year. Pretty cut up about it.”

“So I can imagine. And your Siamese?”

“Old Bungo-ho?”

“Yes, you used to come aboard with him perched on your shoulders.”

“He’s aboard her now,” replied Captain Bankes, indicating the *Frigate Bird*, which in the light breeze was following in the *Golden Gleaner*’s wake. “Won’t leave her now when I’m boarding a strange craft; and all because I took notice of the *Eagle Star*’s lurcher.”

“What happened?” asked Captain Harrington.

“Before you could say knife there was a most unholy scrap. I’ll give Bungo-ho his due—he started it. Somehow we got them apart. The dog, yelling like blazes, disappeared into the lazarette, while the cat jumped back on my shoulder with part of his tail missing. It was nipped keen off at the kink.”

“The kink?” asked the Old Man.

“Didn’t you know, Cap’n? All Siamese cats—if they are proper Siamese—should have a kink in their tails—a natural one, if you take my meaning. That’s one of their good points. After that dust-up Bungo-ho steered clear of strange craft.”

The *Golden Gleaner* was duly berthed in St. George’s harbour and the pilot prepared to go ashore.

He beckoned to the little group of cadets.

“Guess you’re Dusty,” he asked, addressing the senior cadet. “Remember me?”

“Of course I do,” replied Miller.

“More’n I did. Guess you’ve changed some since you were here last.”

They conversed for several minutes, during which time Dusty had introduced some of his messmates, including Gerald and Peter.

“Going to call on Mr. Morgan?” asked Captain Banks.

“If I get the chance,” replied the senior cadet. “And I’ll take some of the others along too. He told me he’d be only too glad to welcome cadets from the Golden Line at any old time.”

“Then take him at his word,” declared the pilot. “He’ll lush you up good and proper, I guess!”

“Who’s the chap Morgan?” asked Peter, after Captain Banks had gone ashore. “You’ve mentioned him to us before.”

Dusty began to explain.

“He was an R.N.V.R. officer who was wounded in the head during the war. When he was demobbed he became headmaster of a school somewhere down in Cornwall——”

“At Dodbridge High School!” interrupted Gerald excitedly. “That’s where Peter and I were, although that was before our time. We heard quite a lot of him though!”

“Are you telling the yarn or am I?” asked the senior cadet in mock reproof.

In spite of several interruptions he continued his story. How that Richard Morgan as a result of his wounds, had a brain-storm while cruising in a yacht with four of his pupils as crew. Instead of carrying out his original plan of sailing along the coasts of the English Channel he set a course for the West Indies, convinced in his disordered mind that he was Henry Morgan, the notorious buccaneer of the seventeenth century. In due course the yacht made the crossing only to get into difficulties at Stringer’s Island, whence she was rescued and taken into St. George’s harbour at Grenada. A surgical operation freed Morgan from his hallucinations and, having no further interest in Dodbridge High School, he had taken a bungalow on the beach a few miles from the capital of the island.

“What happened to his crew—the four boys?” asked Oxley.

“I don’t quite know. One of them—now what was his name? It began with Cur——” declared Dusty.

“I know—it was Curtayne,” interrupted Gerald. “I remember him calling at the school. He was in Merchant Navy rig.”

“He’s in Whatmough’s fleet,” continued Miller. “The only time I came across him was when he was fourth officer in the *Golden Gain*. It’s a small world, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER XXV

A DISAPPOINTMENT

The work of taking in cargo—enough to fill the hitherto half-empty holds to capacity—began. Very soon, however, Captain Harrington became aware of the fact that it was not proceeding satisfactorily. The cargo was being brought off to the ship in boats manned by coloured folk, but they were not working at their usual rate of efficiency, even if making allowances for the humid tropical heat.

“I reckon, sir, it’s due to the trouble on the island,” suggested the chief officer.

“You think so?” rejoined Captain Harrington. “There are reports that the riots are spreading. That may be an exaggeration. At any rate there are no disorders in St. George’s. Should there be, the police should be quite efficient.”

“Cadet Miller has put in a request that he and some of his chums wish for shore leave, sir,” said Mr. Temple. “In present conditions is it wise for them to do so?”

The Old Man considered the idea.

“I really don’t see why they shouldn’t be given leave,” he replied. “Provided they keep within the limits of St. George’s, they shouldn’t come to any harm. It’s the centre of the island where the disorders are taking place.”

“It’ll be a serious matter if these niggers get out of hand, sir.”

“Quite; but I don’t suppose that the rioting will become worse simply because they are coloured people,” observed Captain Harrington. “I’ve seen Germans rioting in Hamburg, Indians completely out of hand in Bombay. Whether the rioters are inflamed with drink or by religious or racial disorders, they are all much alike whether they are white, black or yellow. What does matter is the ability of authority to quell the disturbances. When that’s done, grievances can be examined and peacefully settled. That’s how I look at it.”

“Then I can let Cadet Miller know that there is no objection to their having leave, sir?”

“Certainly, subject to the condition I made,” agreed Captain Harrington.

There was no need for the lads to be on duty during the loading operations. The cargo was easy to handle. Under the supervision of the ship’s officers and of the native overseers it should proceed smoothly—too smoothly perhaps judging by the unconcealed go slow methods employed by the coloured workers.

“But, sir, we want to pay a visit to Mr. Morgan’s,” announced the senior cadet, after the chief officer had stated the Old Man’s conditions.

“Mr. Morgan—who for goodness’ sake is he?” asked Mr. Temple, who, perhaps, was the only executive officer in the ship who was unaware of his existence. “Look here, you’d better see Captain Harrington yourself. Tell him I sent you.”

The Old Man was on the lower deck, conversing with one of the port officers.

Dusty hung about at a discreet distance, waiting for his opportunity to make his request.

Looking shorewards, the senior cadet could see little to suggest that all was not well with the island of Grenada. Apart from the obvious tardy movements of the coloured lightermen and the sight of about a dozen policemen, apparently unarmed, who were boarding a motor bus there was nothing to suggest that rioting was going on within a dozen miles of St. George’s . . . unless those columns of black smoke rising away to the northward meant anything. Of course they might be caused by native workmen engaged in burning fires to clear the ground. They might also be due to another and sinister reason.

The Old Man’s visitor was about to leave.

“—even if we have to wait a fortnight,” Dusty overheard the captain saying.

“It will be all over long before that,” declared the harbour official.

“Well, and what do you want to see me about?” inquired the Old Man.

“Please, sir, Mr. Temple sent me.”

“With a message?”

“Not exactly, sir; he told us that we might go ashore but not beyond the town.”

“That’s the stipulation I gave to Mr. Temple.”

“We badly want to go to Mr. Morgan’s place, sir!”

“I might have guessed that,” rejoined Captain Harrington with a suspicion of a smile.

He considered the situation. The rioting was taking place in the centre and northern parts of the island. No disorders had been reported—as far as he knew—anywhere near Morgan’s bungalow.

“Very good, you may go,” he agreed. “And give Mr. Morgan my compliments and say I’ll be very pleased if he cares to come on board at any time to suit his convenience.”

After the midday meal Dusty Miller assembled his party. The invitation to visit Mr. Morgan’s bungalow had been issued to the cadets of both watches; but, for some reason, only Nelson, Oxley and the almost inseparable chums Gerald and Peter decided to go.

They set out on foot, with the temperature at eighty degrees in the shade. Actually it was several degrees higher, since the sun was shining in a clear sky and there was little or no shade.

For the greater part of the distance the road, that quickly deteriorated into a bare track, ran between plantations of sugar-canes, with tropical fruit-bearing trees here and there. Usually coloured workmen would be cutting and tending the plantations. Now, ominously although the lads didn’t notice the fact, there wasn’t a coloured gen’lman in sight.

Occasionally the lads stopped to pluck bananas, oranges and other fruit. Peter and Gerald did so diffidently at first—not because they had been warned against the possible effects upon their digestions but because they were under the impression that they were helping themselves to other people’s belongings.

Dusty assured them that no one would mind. The fruit was practically growing wild.

“Only if you go on stuffing yourselves,” he declared, “you won’t be able to tuck away the gorgeous spread that Mr. Morgan is sure to provide!”

At length they reached the beach where their host lived. The chums wondered what their reception would be like. Even though Mr. Morgan had

issued a standing invitation, it seemed to them to be a bit thick when five unexpected visitors descended upon him without previous warning.

There were a few bungalows, each situated some distance from its neighbour, standing within a few yards of the beach. Mr. Morgan's was the nearest one and was considerably larger than the rest. There was someone reclining in a deck-chair under the wide veranda.

Catching sight of the approaching youths, he raised his head and looked in their direction. It was only a casual sort of glance. He reverted to his former somnolent state.

"Is that he?" asked Oxley.

"I don't think so," replied Dusty. "I'm not sure though."

The cadets halted. With the exception of the senior cadet none of them had seen the ex-schoolmaster with such an interesting record. It was almost four years since Miller had last seen him. A man can change his appearance considerably in that time, especially in the tropics.

The senior cadet remembered that Mr. Morgan was tall but sparely built. The man reclining in the deck-chair appeared to be neither.

"Perhaps he's another visitor," suggested Nelson.

"Perhaps," agreed Dusty. "Come on! He can't eat us!"

The man never stirred until the cadets reached the steps of the veranda.

"What'll you be wanting?" he demanded in a truculent tone and without attempting to heave himself out of his deck-chair.

"We've called to see Mr. Morgan, sir," replied Dusty.

"You have, have you?" rejoined the man. "Then you're unlucky. He's away."

"When will he be back, sir?" continued the senior cadet.

"Don't know. He's over at St. Lucia for a month—p'raps longer. Good afternoon!"

There was such a studied directness in the man's tone that the cadets realized they were not wanted and that no useful purpose was to be served in prolonging the interview.

Wishing the surly individual "Good day"—a greeting that he completely ignored—they walked slowly along the sandy foreshore.

“What a wash-out!” declared Peter. “Who’s that fellow? A pal of Mr. Morgan’s?”

“How should I know?” rejoined Dusty. “Sorry to have lugged you all this way for nothing.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Gerald. “I say; it’s not so bad here. What about a bathe?”

They continued along the beach, until they were out of sight of the bungalows—it wouldn’t have mattered in the slightest if they hadn’t, since none was occupied, and, getting out of their clothes, rushed in a state of *in puris naturalibus* into the clear warm water.

“I’m jolly hungry,” declared Oxley, after they had been revelling in the Caribbean Sea. “But no more fruit for me, thank you!”

“You won’t get anything else to eat here, my lad!” rejoined Dusty. “Let’s make our way back to St. George’s; there’ll be lashings of grub there, I fancy!”

With this object in view the lads set off on their return journey. They hadn’t gone more than a mile when, rounding a bend in the road, they saw a most extraordinary sight.

CHAPTER XXVI

CADETS TO THE RESCUE

Across the narrow road a carriage had been drawn up. It was of a type long out of date on British roads. It had a raised box for the driver—who wasn't in evidence—and, behind, seats for four people. At the moment there were no signs of any occupants; but, ominously, the carriage was surrounded by a number of drink-inflamed negroes. By no stretch of the imagination could they be referred to as "coloured gen'lmen". In their present state they could not be compared favourably with the beasts of the field.

Not only were they surging round the vehicle; some of them were about to remove forcibly a white woman!

That was enough for the cadets.

There wasn't the slightest doubt in the minds of each one of them of what was taking place. The negroes—whether a rascally gang or an integral part of the large body of rioters—had held up and were attacking a white woman. The fact that most of them were armed with sticks—and in all probability with knives and *machetes*—and that they outnumbered the cadets by at least four to one, wasn't worth taking into consideration.

What was remarkable was the fact that the five youths had taken in the situation so rapidly.

"At 'em, lads!" shouted Dusty.

It might have been better strategy had he not shouted. The cadets would then have reduced the distance considerably before the negroes realized that now they were the threatened party.

But for better or worse the alarm had been raised.

Before a blow could be struck half a dozen negroes bolted. Most of them were too drunk to do more than stagger, but they were certainly afraid to stand up to the on-rushing cadets.

That left ten—but not the "ten little nigger boys" of the nursery rhyme. They were big, hefty fellows, hideously lipped and with horribly rolling

eyes. Some of them were so completely intoxicated that they could hardly keep on their feet, but even a negro in that condition could be a dangerous antagonist.

“Keep together!” urged Dusty rather breathlessly, for he hadn’t run far for many a day and, though otherwise fit, was already feeling the effects of his unaccustomed sprint.

It was sound advice. Outnumbered and separated, the odds against the cadets would be much greater. More or less shoulder to shoulder their chances of success were considerably higher.

Even so it was a tough and bitter struggle.

Gerald found himself opposed to a couple of particularly nasty-looking negroes. He drove a powerful left to the head of one. It seemed to have very little effect, for the fellow ducked just in time. Instead of taking him on the point of the jaw—as Gerald had intended—it landed without any visible result upon the man’s thick skull.

Both negroes lashed out simultaneously with their heavy sticks. Had either blow struck home, Gerald would have been out perhaps for good. As it was, the weapons clashed in mid-air. The cadet leapt backwards, the cudgels missing him by inches. One of the drink-sodden men overbalanced and measured his length in the dust, where he chose to remain. The other, whose stick had flown from his grasp, also went down as the result of another straight left to the point of his chin.

Peter was not so fortunate. Set on by three of the negroes he succeeded in knocking one out, only to receive a blow in his side and another on his cheek that all but dropped him. Fortunately for him Dusty, who had accounted for his antagonists, had wrenched a length of bamboo from one of them—afterwards it was found to be loaded with lead—and gave him such a hefty crack that even his thick skull couldn’t stand up to it. Half stunned he staggered away, unable to take any further active part in the proceedings.

For several minutes the seemingly unequal contest was maintained. Peter was now of little use but his chums, following Dusty’s example, found chances of gaining possession of some of the negroes’ weapons. These they used to such good effect that the blacks withdrew, leaving two of their number lying, partly dazed, upon the ground.

It had been a hard-fought fight, but it was not yet over. The negroes, including those who had bolted before the scrap started, were standing in a

group about fifty yards away and were evidently planning a renewal of the fight.

The lady in the carriage was now sitting up. She was holding to her side a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, who was sobbing hysterically. Both were wearing dresses that once were white. Now they were torn and streaked with dust.

“I hope you are not hurt, Madam,” said the senior cadet politely, and at the same time raising his somewhat dishevelled cap.

Before she could reply a stone crashed against the back of the carriage. Had it been a foot higher it would have struck her with serious if not fatal results.

It was the first of a fusillade. The negroes, afraid to come to close quarters, were starting another action, this time at long range.

The cadets, spreading themselves out, began to return the fire with stones picked up from the road. This sort of thing was for the most part in the negroes’ favour. Although some of them were too drunk to hurl stones that distance or with any degree of accuracy, the others, well outnumbering the cadets, could do serious damage.

“Young man!” exclaimed the lady in the carriage—she was again crouching to shield herself and her companion from the flying stones, “there’s a gun under the driver’s box. It’s only loaded with blank, but it will scare that mob away!”

Dusty climbed into the front of the vehicle. As he did so a stone struck him between the shoulder blades. It made him gasp but, although it was a painful blow, it didn’t deter him from his purpose.

He found the weapon. Under different circumstances he would have been interested in it solely as an antique. It was a blunderbuss of ancient vintage, with a mouth about four inches in diameter. When in active use—that must have been a very long time ago—it was discharged by a flint and steel.

Kneeling on the front seat, Dusty levelled the ancient weapon in the direction of the stone-throwing negroes. Sub-consciously he had full-cocked the hammer.

There was a violent explosion. The next thing Dusty knew he was lying on his back between the shafts. The blow between the shoulder blades was practically negligible compared with the mighty kick of that blunderbuss.

Someone—perhaps it would never be known who that someone was—had put a heavy charge of powder and a generous amount of dust shot into the weapon. Its kick had been terrific. More by sheer good luck than anything else the blunderbuss hadn't burst!

Dusty's companions rushed to aid him. They could well afford to do so, since with the discharge of the firearm it had good and truly splattered the negroes with pellets. Their howls of rage gave place to squeals of pain as they took to their heels to disappear into the sugar-canes.

"It hurts a bit," he replied, in answer to his chums' anxious inquiries. "Are you all right, Meadowes?"

Peter answered—untruthfully but with the best intentions—that he was. Actually he was still feeling dizzy and blood was trickling down his cheeks.

"It's no use hanging on the slack here!" declared the senior cadet. "Those blighters may be back in greater numbers at any moment."

He returned to the carriage. The girl had apparently got over her fright and her older companion looked as if she were smiling.

"I am sorry about that gun," she observed. "But it was just a little amusing to see you go head over heels when it kicked!"

"It wasn't very amusing for me," rejoined Dusty. "But things might have been a jolly sight worse! Hadn't we better get moving in case those niggers show up again?"

"We must wait until Louis comes back," declared the lady.

"Who's Louis?" asked Dusty.

"My coachman. I'll have to ask him about that gun being loaded. Some of those men pulled him off his box, dragged most of his clothes off him and chased him up the road. But he will be back presently."

"We'd better not wait," urged the senior cadet.

A deadlock ensued. The lady absolutely refused to abandon her carriage and walk with her rescuers into St. George's. She would wait until her coachman returned with the horse. Fortunately, she stated, the negroes had not cut the traces and the animal was probably on its way home, unless Louis had intercepted it.

Dusty consulted his companions. He pointed out that they just couldn't push off and leave the occupants of the carriage open to danger. He couldn't understand the motives that prompted the lady to remain in her temporarily

immobile carriage. The cadets couldn't stop there indefinitely, faced as they were by the possibility that the rioters might return in force.

"Why not drag the carriage?" suggested Gerald. "At least for part of the way. The nearer we get to St. George's the safer it will be."

"Sounds quite a good scheme," agreed Dusty, even though it was an idea of a junior cadet. "Four of us should be able to man-haul the carriage. Not you, Meadowes, you aren't fit. You'd better hang on behind and hold that blunderbuss. That'll scare the blighters if they should show up again!"

The lady offered no objection to her carriage being moved. Accordingly two cadets lifted each of the two shafts and set the vehicle in motion.

Peter, taking his instructions literally, "hung on" to a box at the rear of the carriage. What with his gory face and the fearsome weapon he was nursing he presented a spectacle calculated to strike terror into the heart of any mad-drunk negro within sight!

The hauling party hadn't covered more than a quarter of a mile and were dripping with perspiration as the result of their exertions when they came upon the missing horse. It was contentedly grazing on the scanty herbage by the roadside, apparently unaffected by the rough handling it had received.

Docilely the animal allowed itself to be led back to the carriage, but when Dusty and Oxley tried to place it between the shafts it lashed out furiously.

"Leave him alone and he'll find his way home!" declared the lady.

"That won't help us," thought Dusty.

He abandoned his attempt to make fast the traces. Almost at once the horse trotted to the rear of the carriage, its nose within a few inches of Peter's knees.

The other cadets resumed their back-aching task. They began to wonder what the inhabitants of Grenada's capital would think at the sight of four perspiring youths hauling at the shafts of a driverless carriage and a horse trotting sedately behind!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WORLD ENCOMPASSED

Luckily the townsfolk of St. George's were spared that sight, for presently four policemen, accompanied by the coloured coachman, came upon the scene. With that escort Louis had recovered from his fright and from his drastic treatment at the hands of the rioters. He had also found time to make good the deficiencies of his wardrobe.

The coachman had no difficulty in placing the now docile animal between the shafts and securing the traces.

"Thank you so much for all you have done!" declared the lady. "My husband will certainly call upon your captain when he returns—he is on the north end of the island just now—to express his appreciation of your gallantry."

The carriage rolled on towards the town. The policemen, after having asked the cadets some questions concerning the mêlée, proceeded in the opposite direction.

There were several indications, as the lads approached the harbour, that the disturbances were spreading. Several buildings on the outskirts of St. George's, including a Government school, were ablaze. White planters and their coloured overseers were taking refuge in the town together with a considerable number of British and American tourists. Where and how the rioting would end no one seemed to know.

The *Golden Gleaner* appeared to be strangely silent when the five cadets came on board. The work of loading cargo, which had been proceeding at a very leisurely pace when they left the ship that afternoon, had come to a complete standstill. Either the negro stevedores had been threatened by the rioters or else they saw the chance of doing a little profitable looting should the already dangerous situation take a turn for the worse.

Captain Harrington was going through a worrying time. It was not solely on account of the five cadets whom he had allowed to go to what was thought to be a part of the island well away from the disturbed areas.

It concerned the immediate future of his ship. It was essential that she should complete loading cargo at Grenada; but, owing to the paralysing state of things, there was no labour available to proceed with the task. The ship might be held up for a month or more.

“Thank goodness you’ve returned!” exclaimed the Old Man, as he surveyed the five dishevelled youths. He hadn’t even given them a chance to wash and spruce-up so anxious he was to hear their story. “What happened? No, not all at once! Your report, Cadet Miller, please!”

Dusty started off. He was a good though modest narrator, keen to tell the part his companions had played yet reticent as far as he, personally, was concerned.

“I wonder who the fellow is,” commented the Old Man, when told of the uncouth individual occupying Morgan’s bungalow. “It seems strange that Mr. Morgan should have left the island—even temporarily—and left his abode to a fellow like that! But proceed, Miller!”

The senior cadet proceeded with his narrative, describing the timely arrival of the lads to rescue the two ladies in distress.

“Good for you!” declared the Old Man, when Dusty had described the scrap with the numerically superior negroes.

Almost he wished he’d been there to see it and take part in the fight. It reminded him of his cadet days, when he and three others were involved in a scrap with a gang of low-down natives in the outskirts of Rio. The Brazilian police had intervened, with the result that Cadet Harrington and his messmates had to cool their heels in prison until their skipper secured their release on the following morning.

“As you know there’s trouble in the port,” he said at the conclusion of Dusty’s narrative. “We may be here for weeks before we resume taking in cargo. In your own interests I can’t give you any more leave until things become normal once more.”

For more than one reason he was sorry he hadn’t let some of the cadets go away in Cap’n Banks’ *Frigate Bird* to Stringer’s Island. He would have done if he could have foreseen the present situation.

Early next morning another vessel arrived—the *Eagle Star*—flying the Stars and Stripes. Captain Harrington knew of her only by repute. She was the vessel on board of which Cap’n Banks’ Siamese cat had had a scrap with the ship’s dog. This time she came in without the aid of a pilot, probably on account of the rioting.

“Registered at Boston, Mister!” announced Captain Harrington to Chief Officer Temple. “She won’t load cargo any quicker than we can.”

“But she’ll be useful, sir, if she has to help in the evacuation of American tourists from the island.”

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Captain Harrington. “And we may have to do a similar job for British tourists before this trouble’s over.”

Three more days passed. The situation showed no signs of becoming easier. Most of Grenada seemed to be in possession of the lawless negroes. Reports—many of them only rumours—came pouring in of excesses by the rioters. There were clashes with the armed police, whose numbers were too small for them to cope with the disturbers of law and order. Hundreds of rioters, who had nothing to do with the labour dispute that had caused the trouble, poured into St. George’s, looting, burning and committing acts of violence against defenceless people.

Then—and what a reassuring and inspiring sight it was!—a British light cruiser arrived and brought up outside the harbour. Hardly had she dropped anchor before her boats were being lowered. Filled to capacity with armed bluejackets and marines, they made for the shore.

In a very few minutes, St. George’s was clear of the rioters. Without a shot being fired the landing parties had restored order.

Police, too, were being flown in from Trinidad and St. Lucia. It looked as if authority had been restored, when, ominously, warnings were issued that, for their own safety, all tourists still on the island should leave.

A day or so later the light cruiser left. Her departure was a signal for another outburst of violence. Crops were wantonly destroyed. Young nutmeg plants—one of the chief sources of Grenada’s exports—were uprooted and burnt, and since it requires a period of six years for these plants to mature, the rioters, in their folly, were depriving themselves of their livelihood.

There could now be little doubt that the island of Grenada—until so recently one of the gems of the West Indies—had been struck a crippling blow and that there was small chance of it recovering its prosperity within the next decade.

Reluctantly Captain Harrington changed his plans. There seemed no immediate possibility that the *Golden Gleaner*—belying her name—would be able to complete the stowage of her holds. A cable to the ship’s owners brought a reply to the effect that her captain should act as he thought best.

Within an hour, following the receipt of the message, the *Golden Gleaner* left the roadstead of St. George's on the last lap of what was to be a voyage round the world.

In common with the other cadets—and indeed of the rest of the crew—Gerald and Peter were glad that their prolonged stay at Grenada was over. During their enforced detention on board—they hadn't been allowed ashore again—they had witnessed scenes from her deck which they fervently hoped they would never see again. The listless almost docile behaviour of the natives of Pulo Tama, when in dire peril during the eruption of the Warru volcano, was not to be compared with the senseless attitude of those drink-inflamed negroes of that West Indian island.

Neither the Old Man nor the five cadets who had gone on a fruitless visit to Mr. Morgan ever heard directly from the husband of the lady whom Dusty and his chums had rescued. Later, however, Captain Harrington heard from the master of the American vessel *Eagle Star*, who had written to him from Boston of what he termed “a proper lash-up”.

The *Eagle Star* left Grenada roughly six hours after the departure of the *Golden Gleaner*. Just as the Yankee craft was about to get under way a couple of negroes came on board bearing a large crate and a small box wrapped in canvas. These were left with the quartermaster of the gangway with the vague announcement that they were for “de cap'n”.

Knowing that Captain Burnaby couldn't attend to the matter while the ship was getting under way, the quartermaster didn't report the matter until some hours later.

When the packages were opened it was found the large crate was packed full of fruit, and contained a card, without name or address, which stated that the gift was for the cadets in recognition of a gallant deed.

“What the blazes is this, Mister?” asked Captain Burnaby. “We ain't got caydets in this hooker!”

He then opened the smaller package. It contained a hundred choice Cuban cigars.

Captain Burnaby wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He promptly lit what he termed a segar. Not until he had nearly finished it did an idea occur to him.

“Say, Mister! I guess this lil' lot's come to the wrong packet. It's for the limejuicer ship, the *Golden Gleaner*.”

“Mighty small chance of gettin’ hold of her,” opined the *Eagle Star’s* chief officer.

By the time Captain Harrington had heard of the mix-up the fruit had been consumed. Otherwise it would have gone bad. As for the cigars, Captain Burnaby offered to mail ninety-nine of them to Captain Harrington at Southampton. Since the latter wasn’t partial to cigars—almost invariably he smoked a pipe—and because he had no intention of paying a heavy duty on them, he wrote to his American correspondent to the effect that he could do what he liked with them, provided he didn’t send them to him!

There the matter ended; for since the sender of the fruit and tobacco hadn’t enclosed either his name or address his identity remained unknown.

Almost without incident, the *Golden Gleaner* ploughed her way across the Atlantic and up the English Channel, until, six months to the day upon which she began her voyage, she berthed at Southampton.

Gerald and Peter were wildly excited—to the undisguised amusement of the rest of the members of the cadets’ mess. The chums were completing their first voyage. As far as their messmates were concerned, they had made several trips and homecoming had lost its primary thrill.

The ship would be at Southampton for perhaps a week or ten days. Then having taken off and taken on board her cargo and having refuelled and reprovisioned she would be off again, perhaps to the ends of the earth. That was one of the uncertainties of life which most members of the Merchant Navy had to accept.

But before she sailed once more, would there be a chance for Gerald and Peter to go home, if only on twenty-four hours’ leave?

It was Fate, in the guise of Chief Engineer McFee, who intervened on the chums’ behalf.

Within half an hour of the Old Man’s order, “Finished with the engines”, McFee, having washed and donned a clean collar and tie, knocked on the door of the captain’s cabin.

“Nothing wrong, I hope?” asked Captain Harrington, as his visitor stepped over the coaming of the door.

“Indeed, aye, sirr. Ah didna wish to speak to ye before, though perhaps Ah’m failing in ma duty by holding ma tongue.”

Pressed for an explanation, the chief engineer explained that when within a couple of days’ steaming distance of Southampton, the main-shaft,

that had been overhauled at Brisbane, again showed signs of weakness. McFee felt confident that he could nurse his engine for the rest of the homeward run without causing needless anxiety to the captain.

This he had succeeded in doing; but now he was of opinion that the defect should be rectified before the ship put to sea again.

“And how long will that take, Chief?” asked the Old Man, hoping, now the ship had to be dry-docked, that he would have an opportunity to spend perhaps a week with his family.

“Ten days an’ all,” was the reply.

So the S.S. *Golden Gleaner*, never a very lucky ship, was dry-docked and left in charge of a “repairs and maintenance party”. Some of her officers elected to remain on board; but all the cadets were fortunate in obtaining a week’s leave.

In the train that was speeding them London-wards, Gerald and Peter could not help comparing the present with the past, even though that past was but six months old. Then they were two apprehensive youths, fresh from boarding-school, scared at the thought that they might miss their first ship. They would have done, but for the timely help given them by an entire stranger.

Now they were in high spirits. Life afloat had taught them to be self-reliant and how to be able to stand firmly on their own feet. Physically, too, they had improved. They had increased both in height and breadth of shoulders. The muscles principally of their arms and the hardness of the palms of their hands bore testimony to the fact that a voyage in the *Golden Gleaner* had improved their bodies as well as their minds.

That same evening the chums had to relate their adventures to an audience comprising Gerald’s father and mother and his two sisters.

Mr. Stacey, who was an out-and-out landsman and had had no aspirations to go to sea, could not help feeling a little envious of his strapping son and of Peter, who was virtually one of the family.

“You’ve had enough adventures to last you a lifetime,” he declared. “Are you still keen on spending the rest of your lives at sea?”

“There’s nothing to beat it,” replied his son.

Peter nodded vigorously to confirm that statement. “The Red Duster’s good enough for me!” he added.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Round the World in the "Golden Gleaner"* by Percy F. Westerman]