ON BOARD THE ESMERALDA

BY

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Freeditorial

On Board the Esmeralda

Chapter One

Early Days

It is strange what trifling events—little things apparently in themselves—seem to have the power of shaping our different destinies, and colouring, so to speak, the whole course of our subsequent life!

To illustrate this, I may state without exaggeration that, had it not been for Dr Hellyer's hat—taken in connection with the mischievous promptings of that madcap Tom Larkyns, my special chum at the time—it is more than probable that the grand climax which so abruptly brought my school-days to a close might have been averted; and, in that case, following out the argument, I should not have gone to sea; have never started on that disastrous voyage round Cape Horn which nearly terminated my then newly-commenced nautical career as summarily as my whilom academical studies had been put a stop to just previously; and, as a natural consequence, I should most certainly have never had the opportunity or necessity for spinning the present yarn. But, perhaps, the best plan for me to pursue, in order to make you fully understand the matter in all its bearings, will be to "begin at the beginning," as your regular 'longshore professional storytellers say, in the good old-fashioned way, without any more backing and filling, and veering and hauling, which mode of progression, as every decent sailor knows, only tends to take a craft off her proper true course, and make lots of leeway; whereas, if we sail on free, with a fair wind and a steady helm, you'll soon be able to follow in my wake and form a correct opinion of your own as to the merits of my logical conclusions.

I will now, therefore, put back again and select a fresh point of departure after this little bit of sea lawyering; so, here goes for a start in earnest!

My name is Martin Leigh, and my mother died shortly after I was born, worse luck for me! My father, who was a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, being within a year or two subsequently killed in action up the Niger river on the west coast of Africa, I was left an orphan at a very early age, without having ever experienced, even in my most remote childish recollections, those two greatest of all blessings—a mother's love and parental guidance—which many who have been more fortunate than myself to possess are, as I have frequently noticed in after-life, but too often in the habit of undervaluing and making light of.

At the time of my birth, my father was abroad on service in the exercise of his profession, having no private fortune or other resources which would have enabled him to live at home on his half-pay; and on my mother's early death I was taken charge of at his request by his brother, a man considerably older than himself, with a wife and family of his own. Of course, while my father lived he made over a portion of the honorarium given him by a grateful country in return for exposing his life at the call of duty; but, on his suddenly succumbing to the effects of a murderous slug shot through the lungs, fired from the old flint musket of one of the King of Abarri's adherents, in the pestilential African stream up which he had gone to demolish a native stronghold that had defied the fetish of the British flag, this allowance for my support ceased, and I was thenceforth left a poor pensioner on my uncle's bounty. I will do my relative the justice of stating that I do not believe he would have grudged the extra expense I entailed on his already well-populated household, had it not been for my aunt. This lady, however, affectionately regarded me as an interloper from the very first; and I have a vivid memory, even now, of the aggravating way she had of talking about the food I ate and the clothes I wore out—although, goodness knows, my tailor's bill could not have amounted to much in those days, as I was invariably made the residuary legatee of my elder cousin Ralph's cast-off jackets and trousers, which, when pretty nearly dilapidated, used to be made over to my use, after being first cut down by my Aunt Matilda's own fair hands to suit my more juvenile proportions.

To make a long story short, I could plainly perceive, young as I was, long before I had cut my eye teeth, that I was looked upon as an uncalled-for incumbrance by my relatives, senior and junior alike—Aunt Matilda never being dissuaded, by any fear of hurting my feelings, from continually speaking of my pauper condition, and throwing it, as it were, in my face, wondering in her hypocritical way what special sin she could have committed that she should thus be afflicted in having to "deny her own children their rightful bread," that I, miserable orphan, might "wax fat and kick," as she said; while my cousins, who were a very mean lot, dutifully followed the example set them by their mother, in making me "realise my position," as they termed their cruel tyranny. Uncle George used sometimes to take my part when some hazy recollection of his dead brother came before his mind, declaring that as long as he had a crust to spare I should not want; still, as the incessant dropping of water will in the end wear away stone, so my aunt's persistent nagging and iteration of my shortcomings in resisting my cousins' bullying had their due effect in time.

The upshot was that, when I had just turned my twelfth year and had experienced a childhood of martyrdom which I trust few others situated like myself will ever have to undergo, my uncle came to the determination of sending me away to a cheap boarding-school at a distance, where I was to be taught and boarded and "found" for the munificent sum I believe of twelve pounds annually. The proviso was, I may add, especially insisted on by my Aunt Matilda, that I was not to return "home"—I beg that hearty word's pardon for so misapplying it—for the holidays at any period whatever, but was to spend my whole time under the academical roof-tree until my pupilage should expire.

Hitherto I had received no regular instruction whatever, and had it not been for the kind offices of a good-natured servant-maid, I would have been unable either to read or write. Indeed, I believe the neighbours must have gossiped about my neglected state and the position I occupied in the house, where I had to perform all sorts of menial offices, and was hardly ever allowed out of doors, except on Sundays, when I had to go to the chapel which my aunt attended. Be that as it may, at all events, I was told by my friend, the maid-servant aforesaid, that the minister of this chapel had remonstrated on my behalf. Thence came the determination on my uncle's part to send me to school; for I am certain that if my dear aunt could have had her own way, without the fear of being talked about in the locality, she would much rather have entrusted me to the care of the parochial authorities. However, in whatever way the matter was decided, I know that when I heard the news I felt inclined to jump for joy, considering "going to school," which is so dreaded at first by boys with happier homes than I had been accustomed to, would be a delightful deliverance from the misery to which I had been condemned from infancy in my uncle's house—living like an Ishmael, with every hand, save that of Uncle George and Molly the maid, raised against me.

"Now, Martin," said my uncle, when he informed me of the result of the family council held on my case, "as I'm only a poor man, I'm straining a point and crippling my means in order to send you to school; but I am doing it so that you may be educated to earn your own living, which you'll have to do as soon as the three years expire for which I have contracted with Dr Hellyer; after that it will be out of my power to do anything further for you."

"All right, uncle," said I, buoyantly, so carried away with excitement at the news that I almost felt kindly disposed towards my aunt, who was standing by, although she tried to damp my spirits as much as in her lay.

“You are only throwing away your money, George,” she remarked acidly to my uncle. “He has always shown an ungrateful, thankless disposition; and his bad, undutiful temper will be certain to bring him to ruin!”

“Let us hope not,” replied uncle, placidly. He was a quiet, easy-going business man, employed in the City, and used to let things quietly take their own course, except when sometimes they touched him too keenly to be left unnoticed. He then went on addressing me:

“You will have to be steady and diligent, making the most of your time; and the master will report to me every quarter as to your conduct and zeal in learning.”

“Nice reports they’ll be!” interposed my aunt, mockingly.

“Well, well,” hurriedly concluded Uncle George, to get the thing ended as soon as possible. “Your fortune is all in your own hands, and I hope and trust, if only for your father’s sake, you will turn out well! Remember, that if Dr Hellyer gives a good general report of you at the end of your three years’ term, I’ll try to get you into a City warehouse or office; but if you behave badly, why, you’ll have to shift for yourself, and go your own course, as I shall wash my hands of you!”

There the conversation ended, with an intimation that I was to go to Dr Hellyer’s school in three days’ time.

The interval passed like a whirlwind to me; for not only were my thoughts full of the new life on which I was entering, but there was in addition the very unusual bustle attendant on my being provided with a wardrobe—I for whom anything had been good enough before! My uncle, however, had now made it asine quâ non that I should be fitted out properly with decent clothes, and, consequently, my aunt was obliged to furnish me with a thorough rig, selected from my Cousin Ralph’s surplus stock. One thing pleased me in this better than all else! It was that, instead of having my outer raiment composed, as previously, of Ralph’s cast-off garments, I was measured for an entirely new suit of my own. This alone was an unexpected gratification; for I hated the fact of my being compelled to wear Ralph’s discarded clothes. It had been gall and wormwood to me. I loathed myself for having to put them on, and loathed him as the malicious instrument that caused me to be so degraded—the more especially as my cousin would in “a friendly sort of way” frequently allude to the circumstance of the clothes having been formerly his, calling attention to my want of care in treating them properly!

All things have an end, fortunately, and the morning arrived at last when I had to bid farewell to the villa on the outskirts of Islington where I had passed so many miserable years. Molly, the servant-maid, was the only one in the house with whom I parted with any regret; and it was with feelings considerably more exultant than sad that I accompanied my uncle to the City in the omnibus which he always took to his place of business, that convenient vehicle passing by in its route the corner of the road where uncle lived.

Arriving at the London Bridge terminus, Uncle George ensconced me and my box in a train, bound for Beachampton, at which retired and out-of-the-way little watering-place was situated Dr Hellyer's school.

Handing me then my railway ticket and a two-and-sixpenny "tip," Uncle George gave me a hearty hand-shake, wishing me good-bye and a safe journey.

"Mind you be a good boy, and pay attention to your lessons," he said. "And—listen, Martin—should you ever be in any serious trouble, you can write and let me know. But mind," added Uncle George, "you mustn't forget, my boy, to address your letters to my office, and not to the villa; for your Aunt Matilda might not like the idea, you know, eh!"

"All right, Uncle George," I answered. "I will remember where to write to, never fear. Good-bye now, and thank you for all your kindness to me."

"Good-bye, Martin!" he echoed; and, as the train moved slowly out of the station, I really felt quite sorry to part with him; but, as the panting engine proceeded on its way, going faster as it emerged from the labyrinthic terminus on to the open line, dragging the groaning, wheezing, jolting carriages behind it—the clatter of the wheels and rattle of the coupling-chains keeping time with the puffs and pants of escaping steam—my temporary emotion at parting with Uncle George was banished by the exultant feeling of being set free, like a bird let loose from a cage.

I was only conscious that I was flying along to new scenes and new surroundings, where everything would be fresh and novel, and entirely unlike what I had previously been accustomed to at Tapioca Villa.

Chapter Two

At Beachampton

My journey "down the line" was a momentous matter to me in more ways than one; for, independently of the fact of its being the first opportunity I had ever had of riding in a railway train, it was while travelling down to Brighton, and thence along the endless south coast route past Shoreham and Worthing, that I had my first sight of the sea—that sea on whose restless bosom my floating home was to be made for many a year afterwards in good fortune and ill.

I must confess, however, that this first view of the element did not impress me very greatly, in spite of the tendency of my mind at that period to take a rose-coloured view of everything new that came within range of my vision, so long as it was totally disconnected with old associations of the Islington villa; for, from the window of the third-class carriage, whence I was peering out eagerly to see all that was to be seen, the marine horizon that stretched out before my gaze appeared more like a large inverted wash-hand basin than anything else, with the ships that were going up and down Channel, seeming to be sailing in a curve along its outer rim; while, instead of the vivid hue of cerulean blue that had been pictured in my imagination as the invariable tint of Neptune's domain, the sober tone of the tumid element was that of a dull brownish-grey, reflecting the unwholesome leaden-tinged sky above, and, there being no wind to speak of, there wasn't the ghost of a ripple perceptible on its sullen, silent surface!

Even novelty tires after a time, and long before I had reached my destination I had got heartily sick of railway travelling; so, I was very glad when, after changing carriages at a junction between Brighton and somewhere else on the line, sometimes going fast, sometimes slow, and thus crawling along landwise and seaward through miles of country for four hours or more, the train came to a standstill beside the platform of the little station to which I had been consigned on leaving London.

"'Champt'n! 'Champt'n!" cried out somebody with a cracked voice, and this sound approximating to the name of the place I was looking out for, combined with the fact that the engine began vigorously to blow off steam, I became convinced that I had arrived at my goal; so, out I got from the uncomfortable and cushionless carriage in which I had performed the toilsome journey, not forgetting, you may be sure, the box containing my grand rig-out of new clothes, which Aunt Matilda would not let me wear on the journey for fear, as

she said, of my spoiling them. This box I had carefully kept on a seat beside me, in full view of my watchful eye, all the way, lest some accident might befall it, although not another soul save myself occupied the compartment.

When taking leave of me, Uncle George had said that some responsible person would meet me on my arrival at the station to take charge of me, from the "scholastic establishment;" and as I had conceived the most magnificent ideas of this place from a lithograph I had seen at the top of the prospectus referring to it, representing a palatial mansion standing in its own grounds, with a commanding view of the adjacent sea, I stared about the platform, expecting to see a gorgeous footman in livery or some other imposing personage, who would presently step up requesting me to take a seat in a coach-and-four or similar stately vehicle, and then drive me off in triumph to the educational mansion.

But, lo and behold! no footman or imposing personage made his appearance; nor did any one seem to be on the look-out for my insignificant self. My spirits began to sink almost to zero, which point they reached anon in the descending scale, when, as soon as everybody else who had come by the train had bustled out of the station, an old and broken-down looking porter, in a shabby velveteen jacket, standing on the other side of the line, shouted out to me across the rails in a tone of inquiry, and in a voice which I immediately recognised as that which had screeched out the name of the place as the train ran in—

"B'y fur Hellyer's, hey?"

I felt annihilated.

"Do you mean to ask whether I am the new pupil for Dr Hellyer's establishment?" I said—with some dignity, I flatter myself.

But that horrible porter was not a bit abashed!

"Yees," he drawled out in his cracked accents, with an intonation that clearly evinced the fact of his having been born in Sussex. "Hellyer's school i' the village, b'y, that's wat I mean! Y'er to come along o' me. Poot yer box on yer shoulder and crass the line, young maister, an' I'll shoo yer way down."

This was not to be borne.

I had been treated like a menial in my uncle's household, and had perforce to bear it, but I had made up my mind on leaving Tapioca Villa that I should never be so degraded again if I could possibly help it.

It wasn't likely, therefore, that I was now going to be at the beck and call of a railway porter, after all my boastful resolves—not quite!

I flew into a passion at once: I felt inclined to kill the unfortunate man.

"Come over and take up my box yourself, porter," I cried angrily, my face flaring up furiously as I spoke, I have no doubt. "I shall not forget, either, to complain to Dr Hellyer about your insolence."

"Ho, ho, ho, the-at be a good un," laughed the old man from his vantage-ground on the opposite platform. "I thinks I say un neow, an' you a-talkin' 'bout I!"

However, as I stamped my foot and repeated my order in a tone of command, he, evidently much surprised and obeying from the force of habit in one accustomed to yield to others, crossed over the line, the broad country yokel grin with which he had received my first reply, giving place to a surly look.

"Y'er a foine young bantam," he muttered grumblingly in his wheezy cracked voice, as he stooped to raise my precious box, "but I specs, young maister, yer'll soon ha' yer comb cut, sure-ly!"

I said nothing further to this sally, my anger having by this time evaporated; and the old man, poising the light load easily on one shoulder, walked leisurely out of the station without uttering another word, I following him also in silence.

Proceeding along a straggling street, which was more like a country lane than anything else, with a few shops scattered about here and there at intervals, for more than half a mile or more—he in front with my box, I closely stepping in the rear—after turning sharp round to the right and then to the left, past a little corner building which seemed to be a wayside inn, but was triumphantly lettered "hotel" along the top of its gable end, we at length debouched on to a solitary-looking semi-deserted row of red-brick houses that occupied one side of a wild-looking, furze-grown common, which I could perceive faced the sea; the sound of the low murmurs of the waves on the beach alone breaking the stillness of the desolate scene.

This terrace apparently consisted entirely of lodging houses, and it being the month of November, and the "season" of the little watering-place having closed, bills with "Apartments to Let" were exposed in the windows of almost all; almost, but not quite all, for my crack-voiced friend when he arrived about the middle of the row stopped in front of one of the most unprepossessing habitations of the lot, without any notice displayed like the others. Here, putting down my box on the steps, he rang a side-bell that gave out a melancholy clang for a moment, and caused quite a bustle of excitement in the two adjacent houses, heads being popped out to see who the unexpected new-comers might be.

"Here be un," said the old porter, taking off his leathern cap, and wiping his forehead with what looked like a tattered "Danger" flag that had been used up on the line and discarded from further service.

"Oh!" I ejaculated, having nothing further to say, for, on seeing the grand establishment I had anticipated dwarfed to such very humble proportions, I felt terribly small and contemptible in my own sight. The dignity that I had so recently aired at the old man's expense shrank into nothingness, and I was quite relieved that he did not take advantage of the opportunity to "put me down a peg or two."

As a sort of sop to Cerberus, and in order to try and maintain my position of independence a few moments longer, I drew out the odd sixpence which Uncle George had put into my hand along with the two shillings of my tip, giving it to the old porter with the air of one with whom such trifling coins were as plentiful as blackberries!

"Take that, my good man," said I, "for your trouble in showing me the way."

"H'm!" he grunted between his teeth, but whether meaning to thank me or not, I could not say; and then, without waiting for the door to be opened, as I naturally imagined, he turned on his heel, and made off back again towards the station.

I had to ring a second time at the side-bell before any person appeared to answer my summons; and then, sad be it to relate, the portal of the mansion was opened by a dirty, down-at-heels, draggle-tailed old woman instead of the staid, respectable man-servant who should have officiated as janitor to be in proper keeping with the brilliant prospectus before mentioned.

“Oh, it’s you, is it!” exclaimed the old woman, who had drawn back the door gingerly as if she had expected some one else on possibly a hostile mission, for an expression of relief came over her face when she saw only me; and then, ushering me into a little room leading out of the hall, she left me there, telling me to sit down. I had brought my box in with me, you may be sure, otherwise this feat would have been impossible, as there was not a single chair in the apartment, the major portion of the furniture of the house, as I subsequently learnt, having been seized by the sheriff’s officers for rent.

My first interview with Doctor Hellyer did not last very long; but it certainly was to the point, so far as it went towards impressing me with his ponderous personality, for he was a big, smooth-faced, fat, oily man, with a crafty look in his little twinkling eyes.

“Ah, Leigh—ah,” said he on coming, presently, into the room, “you’ve come at last—ah?”

This “ah-ing” of his was a confirmed habit, for he never seemed able to begin or end a sentence without dragging in the ejaculation.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, rising up from my box, and taking off my cap politely.

“Ah—I’ve had a nice character of you from your aunt, my dear young gentleman,” he proceeded, blinking his little ferret-like eyes furiously, and with a dubious sort of grin expanding his wide mouth, which was furnished with a set of teeth like a shark’s. “She tells me—ah—Master Leigh, that you are rude, and bold, and bad, and disobedient—ah—and that I shall have to keep a strict watch over your conduct; but I think—ah—you will find yourself in good hands here, my dee-er boy, really in good hands at last—ah!” and, smiling an ogreish smile, he rubbed the palms of the said members together up and down and over one another in a circular way as if he were kneading up a little ball of putty within them, and I was that ball!

Chapter Three

My Chum

Of course, as you may suppose, I offered no reply to this characteristic introductory address of Dr Hellyer, although the allusion he made to Aunt Matilda's treachery in trying to prejudice him against me—an attempt which, apparently, was as successful as it was intended to be—made me boil over with suppressed passion. It was just like her, I thought! I had hoped, on leaving Tapioca Villa, to have escaped the influence of her spiteful malignity; and yet here, at a distance, it was pursuing me still, when I really believed myself for ever beyond its reach.

The reflection so maddened me that, as I was unable at the time to give vent to my anger, my face flushed up as it always did when I was so roused by my temper getting the better of me; and I dare say I looked like a bellicose young turkey-cock.

My schoolmaster took advantage of the opportunity to "improve the occasion."

"Ah, I see," he went on, "your aunt was quite right in her estimate of your disposition; but, my dear excitable young friend, I must—ah—give you fair warning that if you feel inclined to be rude at any time, you'd better not be rude here, and if you are bold—ah—you'll get bowled out! Ah—that was an unintentional pun, Leigh, but I don't think you'll find me joking when I have to come to the point. Mind, I never flog a boy under any circumstances, but I've got an equally efficacious way of my own for making my pupils obey me, which never fails, and you'll probably have an early chance of getting familiar with it! Oh no, I never flog, but I've a way of my own, Master Leigh, a way of my own—ah!"

The infinite relish and gusto with which he repeated these last words of his are utterly indescribable; while the grin that overspread his fat countenance, wrinkling up its fleshy folds, can only be compared to the expression one sees carved out on those hideous gargoyles with which the architects of former days decorated the odd corners of our cathedrals.

I couldn't help shivering in my shoes; and Dr Hellyer, noticing this, evidently thought that he had made sufficient impression for a start, for, dropping his terrible, rolling, ponderous voice, he spoke to me more amiably.

“Now, leave your box here and it shall be taken up presently to the dormitory. Come along with me and I’ll introduce you—ah—to your schoolfellows.”

To hear was to obey; so, deserting my hitherto keenly-watched little property with many misgivings as to the chances of my ever setting eyes on it again, I followed Dr Hellyer out of the room and along a narrow passage that led directly to the back of the house. Throwing open a door at the further end, a flight of short stone steps was disclosed, descending to a wide yard or garden—that is, if one solitary tree in a remote corner supplied sufficient vegetation to give the place such a name—where I could see a lot of boys of all ages and sizes jumping about and otherwise diverting themselves.

“Ah—this is our—ah—playground, Leigh,” explained the master, with a comprehensive wave of his arm; and, then, the chorus of yells, shouts, screams, and stray laughter that at first echoed through my ears, like the din of Pandemonium, having ceased as soon as the Doctor’s presence in their midst was perceived by the boys, that worthy very briefly introduced me.

“Here’s a new boy—ah—make friends with him; but, ah—no fighting!”

Having thus done as much as he thought necessary, the master withdrew, shutting the door that communicated with the house behind him; and I, going down the steps, with some little hesitation in the face of all the mass of boys who were now staring at me, with, it seemed to me, the concentrated look of one, found myself in a minute surrounded by them.

I was just like a solitary pigeon amongst a flock of rooks, for all, as if with a single voice, began eagerly shouting out a series of the most personal questions, without giving me time to answer them individually.

After a bit, the clamour somewhat ceased, and then a tall, slenderly-built chap, who appeared to be the cock of the school, came up to me, while the others formed a circle around us two, waiting for the upshot of their leader’s action. It was enough to make one feel nervous, for they all became suddenly silent, although I could see one or two nudging each other and grinning gleefully, as if some highly interesting episode was expected at my expense.

“What is your name?” said the tall one.

“Martin Leigh,” I replied, civilly, seeing no harm in the question.

“Oh, that’s a fine name,” observed my interlocutor, sneeringly; “I suppose you’re the son of a duke, and a nobleman in disguise?”

“No,” said I, calmly, put on my mettle by hearing the others sniggering at their leader’s wit, as they thought it—“my father was an officer.”

“That’s a good one!” said the tall chap, with a stagey laugh; “I think he must have belonged to the Horse Marines—didn’t he?”

At this there was a chorus of chuckles from the surrounding boys, with cries of “Go it, Slodgers!” and other impertinent interruptions, causing my quick temper to fire up.

“You’re wrong again, ‘Mr Sharp,’” I said, angrily. “He was an officer in the navy, and a gentleman—more than yours was, I should think.”

“You impudent young beggar, what do you mean?” retorted the tall boy, taking a step nearer me, and raising his hand as if to give me a slap on the face; “your father was a sweep, you hound!”

“You lie!” I yelled out, in a white heat with passion; and, without waiting for him to give me the first blow, I sprang up and planted my fist between his eyes, knocking him back so suddenly that he would have fallen but for the others advancing closer and shoring him up, as it were, by their pressure, so that he couldn’t tumble down.

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” said my opponent, recovering himself at once quickly; and, before I could put up my hands, he had dealt me two swinging blows right and left, making my nose bleed and bringing me in a heap on to the ground.

I was not beaten, however, for I was on my feet again in a second, dashing in madly at him; and, but for the intervention of another boy, not quite so tall as my antagonist, but with much broader shoulders and of heavier weight, who got in between us and prevented further hostilities, I should probably have come to sad grief.

“Let him alone, Slodgers; he’s only a new boy, remember,” said this peacemaker, warning me off with one outstretched arm while he pushed back my antagonist with the other, as he was making for me again.

“I know he’s a new boy; but the cheeky young beggar has given me a black eye, confound him! and the Doctor is safe to see it when we go in. I must pay him out for it, Larkyns; move away, and I’ll thrash him within an inch of his life!”

With these words, the tall boy, or Slodgers, as he was called, made another rush at me; but the other interposed once more, and this time more forcibly.

“No, I tell you,” said he, “let him alone, or I’ll have to make you,” and he gave Slodgers a quiet sort of tap on the chest that had the effect of at once stopping his advance, the bully and coward, as he seemed to me to be, retiring sulkily to the corner of the yard under the tree, accompanied by two of his select cronies, grumbling in an undertone about “somebody’s” meddlesomeness in interfering with “other people’s business,” although he did not take any further notice of the stalwart Samaritan who had thus come so opportunely to my aid, baulking the summary vengeance he had intended taking on my unhappy head.

The other boys, too, were just as disgusted at the turn events had taken, for they had looked for rare sport in seeing me mauled by their champion. They also now went off in a body, leaving my protector and myself alone together, close to the steps where the little fracas had occurred.

“You are a plucky fellow,” said my new friend, confidentially, as soon as the rest were out of hearing. “I don’t think Master Slodgers has had such a prompt lesson before to correct that nasty way he has of frightening every new boy that comes here; but I tell you what, though, you mustn’t go hitting out at big chaps like that, you know! Slodgers would have pounded you into a jelly if I hadn’t interfered.”

“I dare say he would,” I replied, passionately, not having yet quite calmed down—the sight of the blood dropping from my poor nose adding to instead of abating from my courage. “But, I would have made him feel something first! I don’t care if he had killed me! I would do the same again if he made fun of my father. He said I told lies when I was telling the truth.”

“Well, well, that’s all right,” said my rescuer, soothingly. “I’ve no doubt I should have struck him, too, if I had been in your place. I like you for standing up to him so bravely, and that’s the reason I took your part, independently of my always trying to stop his bullying. Slodgers is a cur at heart, and I dare say you would lick him in the end if you could hold out long enough, although I wouldn’t advise you to tackle him until you know how to use your fists better,

if I am not by! I think you said your name was Martin Leigh, to change the subject from the brute, eh?"

"Yes," I answered, readily; "and I must now thank you for your kindness in coming to my help."

"Oh, stow all that! May I call you Martin?"

"By all means," said I, gladly; "there's nothing I should like better."

"All right then, that's agreed. My name is Tom Larkyns, and you may call me Tom, if you like."

"May I?" I asked, deferentially, proud of his condescending to be on such cordial terms with me. "Won't it sound too familiar?"

"Nonsense," said he, laughing cheerily. "We'll swear a bond of eternal friendship, like Damon and Pythias," and he squeezed my hand in his strong grip, as if he meant it.

Tears came into my eyes; but not with pain. It was at the happy consciousness that at last I had come across some one who really cared for me personally. Uncle George's scanty amount of affection for me was due to the fact of my being his brother's child, while Molly, the maid-servant, the only one else who had ever evinced any kindly feeling towards me, had been actuated by pity for my forlorn and neglected condition amongst my own kindred; but Tom was my very own friend, mine by choice and selection. Had he not singled me out and taken my part, besides asking me to be his comrade? That alone would have made me his staunch ally, even without the proffer of his friendship; so, needless to say, I vowed there and then my fealty as his chum through thick and thin!

Presently, Tom took me round to a side door of the house, through which admittance was gained to the kitchen, where, procuring some water, he helped me to stop the bleeding from my nose, caused by Slodgers' blow, and otherwise wash away the traces of the combat. We subsequently returned to the "playground," Tom saying that we could remain there if we liked until the tea-bell rang, as it was a half-holiday, and there were no more lessons for the day.

The other boys had mostly gone in by this time, disappearing in batches of twos and threes, tired of being out in the bare yard, and having exhausted all attempts at amusing themselves. We remained here over an hour longer,

walking up and down, exchanging confidences and forming the most wonderful plans of what we would do together bye-and-bye, not only while at school, but when we grew up and went into the world. I, of course, told him all about my cruel bringing-up under Aunt Matilda's auspices, and he imparted the information that he was almost an orphan like myself; his father, who was a clergyman, having died early and left his widowed mother with a large number of children to support on a scanty income; whence the fact of his being at such a poor second-rate school as Dr Hellyer's, about which Tom then proceeded to unfold the most wonderful revelations.

The master, he said, in spite of his generally having thirty boys at least, from whom he managed to get an income of six hundred a year or so, was always in hard straits, and at his wit's end for money; although, apparently, he could not have any great expenditure, the rent of the house or houses occupied by the school being cheap, his cost for the aid of masters not by any means excessive, and the boys' keep not too extravagant, judging by the meals they had. Dr Hellyer was "an ignorant, uncultivated brute," Tom averred, and his degree of "Doctor" was only derived from the fact of his having paid ten dollars to an American university to air this specious prefix to his scholastic name!

The whole school, my new friend told me, was a sham, for, instead of there being some dozen of masters, as stated in the prospectus sent to Uncle George, there were only two besides "The Doctor"—Mr Smallpage, the mathematical master, called by the boys "Smiley," on the lucus a non lucendoprinciple, I suppose, because his face ever bore an expression of gravity; and Monsieur Achile Phélan, professor of foreign languages and dancing, christened by Tom Larkyns "The Cobbler," on account of his teaching a certain number of extra-paying pupils how to "heel and toe."

Whatever was the reason for "The Doctor's" hardupishness, however, the fact was undeniable; and Tom said that for weeks at a time the establishment would be in a state of siege, from tradespeople coming after their "little accounts," which the master put off settling as long as he could. The old woman who had opened the door to me, my chum stated, was popularly believed to be the principal's maternal relative, as she kept a watchful eye upon the portal, besides presiding over the interior economy of the school. She was so sharp, Tom averred, that she could smell a "dun," experience having so increased the natural keenness of her scent.

Sometimes, too, Tom said, when Dr Hellyer could get no credit with the butcher, they lived on Australian tinned mutton, which he got wholesale from

the importers, as long as three months at a stretch; and once, he pledged me his word, when the baker likewise failed to supply any more bread by reason of that long-suffering man's bill not having been paid for a year, Dr Hellyer, not to be beaten, went off to Portsmouth and bought a lot of condemned ship biscuits at a Government sale in the victualling yard, returning with this in triumph to the school, and serving it out to the pupils in rations, the same as if they had been at sea!

In the midst of all these interesting disclosures, a terrible drumming, buzzing noise filled the air.

"What's that din?" I asked Tom.

"Oh, that's the tea-gong," he replied. "We must go in now, as we'll get none if we are late, for the Doctor teaches punctuality by example."

"He told me he had 'a way of his own' for making his pupils obey him," said I.

"Did he? Ah, you'll soon find out what a brute he is! Let us look at your nose, though, Martin, before you go in. You recollect what he said about not fighting, eh?"

"Yes; does it look all right now?" I asked, anxiously.

"Pretty well," said Tom, critically examining the damaged organ. "A little bit puffy on the off side but I think it will pass muster, and you'll escape notice if that sneak Slodgers doesn't split about his eye—which I believe you've pretty nicely marked for him."

"Do you think he'll tell?" I whispered to Tom as we ascended the steps and he turned the handle of the door leading into the house.

"More than likely, if the Doctor pitches on to him! He will spin a fine story about your having attacked him, too, to excuse himself; for he's a liar as well as a cur and a bully. But, come on, Martin, look sharp! There's the second gong, and if we're not at table in our seats before it stops, it'll be a case of pickles!"

With these words, Tom dashed into the passage with me after him; and, after racing up a bare, carpetless flight of stairs, I found myself in a wide large room, which, the evening having closed in, was lighted up only by a single gas-burner. This made its bareness all the more apparent; for, with the exception of

having a long table stretching from end to end—now covered with a semi-brownish white table-cloth, and cups and saucers and plates, not forgetting a monstrous big tin teapot like a Chinese junk, in the centre, and a couple of narrow deal forms without backs placed on either side for seats—the apartment had no other furniture, a broad shelf attached to the wall opposite the fireplace serving as a buffet, and an armchair at the head of the festal board, for the presiding master, completing its equipment.

Tom had whispered to me as we went up-stairs that either “Smiley” or “The Cobbler” would officiate at the tea-table, those two worthies taking that duty in turn; but this evening, strange to say, whether in honour of my arrival or on account of some other weighty motive, the seat of honour at the end of the table was filled by the portly form of the head of the establishment.

“By Jove!” ejaculated Tom, sliding into a vacant place along the form nearest the door, and motioning to me to follow his example, “something’s up, or he wouldn’t be here!”

Tom’s supposition proved correct.

Something was “up” with a vengeance—at least as far as I was concerned.

Chapter Four

School Experiences

As two or three others, late like ourselves, were scrambling into their places when Tom and myself took our seats, while the old woman who had opened the door for me was bustling about the table, filling a series of tin mugs from the Chinese junk teapot and passing them along towards the outstretched hands that eagerly clutched at them en route downwards from the head of the board, I hoped that my damaged face would have escaped notice, but the master's ferret-eyes singled me out apparently the instant I entered the room, for he pounced on me at once.

"Boy Leigh," he shouted out in his deep rolling voice, "stand up!"

I obeyed the order, standing up between the table and the form on which I had been sitting; but Dr Hellyer said nothing further at the time, after seeing me come to the attitude of "attention," as a drill sergeant would have termed it, and there I remained while the other pupils proceeded with their meal. You must remember that I was almost famishing, for I had had nothing to eat all day beyond the scanty breakfast which I was too much excited to eat before leaving my uncle's house at Islington in the morning; while the long journey by rail combined with the effects of the fresh sea air had made me very hungry.

It may be imagined, therefore, with what wolfish eyes I watched the boys consuming the piles of bread-and-butter which the old woman distributed, after serving out the allotted allowance of tea in each pupil's mug! Tom looked up at me sympathisingly every now and then between the bites he took out of the thick hunches on his plate; but the fact of my starving state did not appear to affect his appetite. This made me feel hurt at my chum's indifference to my sufferings, envying the while every morsel he swallowed, and wondering when my suspense would cease; and, although I had not then heard of the tortures of the classic Tantalus, my feelings must have much resembled those of that mythical person during this ordeal.

At the expiration of, I suppose, about twenty minutes, within which interval every one of the busy crowd round the table had made short work of his portion, not leaving a crumb behind as far as I could notice, the master, pushing back his armchair, got on his feet, an example immediately followed by all the boys, and, all standing up, he said grace.

This ended, the boys, with much shuffling of feet on the bare boards composing the floor of the apartment, were about to rush out en masse, when Dr Hellyer arrested the movement.

“Stop!” he cried in stentorian tones, drowning the clatter of feet and whispering of voices; “the pupils will remain in for punishment!”

Every face was turned towards him, with astonishment, expectancy, and dread marked in each feature; and, with a gratified grin on his broad flabby countenance, he remained for a moment or two apparently gloating with gusto over the consternation he had created, amidst a stillness in which you could have heard a pin drop.

After holding all hearts for some time in suspense in this way, glaring round the room with an expression of diabolical amusement, such as a cat may sometimes assume when playing with a mouse before finally putting it out of its misery, Dr Hellyer spoke again. It was to the point.

“Boy Leigh,” he exclaimed, “come here.”

I advanced tremblingly to where he stood. Though I was pretty courageous naturally, his manner was so strange and uncanny that he fairly frightened me.

“What is the matter with your nose?” was his first query, as soon as I had come up close to him, pointing with his fat forefinger at the injured member, which I had vainly thought would have escaped the observation of his keen eye.

“I—I—I’ve hurt it, sir,” said I, in desperation.

“Boy Leigh, you are not truthful,” was his answer to this, shaking the fat forefinger warningly in my face, rather too near to be pleasant. “You’ve been fighting already, and that against my express injunctions; and now, you attempt to conceal the effects of your disobedience by telling a falsehood—worse and worse!”

“I—I really couldn’t help it; it wasn’t my fault, sir,” I pleaded.

“Ah, worse still! He who excuses, accuses himself,” said the stern Rhadamanthus. “Boy Slodgers, approach.”

My whilom opponent of the playground thereupon came up to where I was in front of the Doctor; when on closer inspection, I could see that he was in a fair way of having a splendid pair of black eyes from the blow I had given him. This was some satisfaction, and put a little more pluck into me as I faced my judge. I trembled no longer.

“Boy Slodgers, what’s the matter with your eyes?” asked Dr Hellyer of the fresh culprit, in the same searching way in which he had interrogated me.

“Please, sir, Leigh hit me, sir,” said the sneak, glibly, in a whining voice that was very different to the bullying tone he had adopted when catechising me before our “little unpleasantness” occurred.

“Ah—Leigh—ah—you see my boys tell the truth,” observed the Doctor parenthetically to me; and then, turning again to Slodgers, he said, inquiringly, “And, I suppose, you then—ah—returned his blow?”

“Oh no, please, sir,” replied he, confirming what Tom had told me of his inveracity; “I happened to have my hand up, sir; and, rushing at me in his fury, he ran against it, sir, that’s all. I wouldn’t have hurt him, sir, for the world, as I know your orders, sir, about fighting.”

“Good boy! I’m glad you pay attention to my wishes, Slodgers, and as the fight wasn’t of your seeking, I’ll let you off without an imposition, as I had at first intended. You can go back to your place, Slodgers. I see—ah—ha—too, you’ve been punished already, which is another reason for my leniency;” and so saying, the Doctor dismissed him.

Would you believe it? That cur went down the long room again with the most unblushing effrontery, after telling those flagrant falsehoods he had done about me! I really don’t know which I was the more angry with—at him, for cooking up that story about me, or with Dr Hellyer for believing him! The latter had not done with me yet, however.

“Now, my pugilistic young friend,” he said to me aloud, so that all the boys could hear, “you and I have a little account to settle together. Hold out your hand!”

Nerving myself up to the inevitable, I stretched out my right palm; and “whish”—with the sound that a flail makes when wielded by an experienced thresher—Dr Hellyer came down, right across my fingers, with a tingling blow

from a broad flat ruler, which he must have kept concealed behind his back, as I had not seen it before. He seemed to throw all his strength into the stroke.

The pain made me jump, but I didn't cry out or make the slightest exclamation. I would have bitten my lips through first; for all the boys were looking on, with the expectation probably of hearing me yell out—especially that sneak Slodgers, who, I made up my mind, should not be gratified by any exhibition of yielding on my part.

"The other now!" cried the Doctor; and, "whack" came a second dose of the flat ruler on my left digits.

"The right again!" sang out the big brute, I obeying without wincing after the first stroke; and so he went on, flaying my poor hands until he had given me six "pandies," as the boys called the infliction, on each, by which time both of my palms were as raw as a piece of ordinary beefsteak, and, I'm certain, far more tender.

"That will do for a first lesson—ah—Martin Leigh," said my tormentor, when he had concluded this performance. "You can go now, but, mark me, the next time I hear of your fighting you shall have a double portion! Boys, you're dismissed."

With these parting words, Dr Hellyer waved me off; on which I followed slowly after the rest, who had at once rushed off from the room.

Being the last, when I got outside the door, all the boys had disappeared, with the exception of Tom, whom I found waiting for me at the head of the stairs.

I felt inclined to be indignant with him at first for not speaking up for me and contradicting the false statement of Slodgers; but Tom soon persuaded me that such a course on his part would probably only have increased my punishment and brought him in for it as well, without doing good to either of us, or harming the cur who had told such lies about me.

"Dr Hellyer," said Tom, "always takes everything Slodgers says for gospel, and it's not a bit of use going against him when brought to book. The only way for you to pay him out, Martin, will be to learn to use your fists properly, and give him a good thrashing some day when we are out of doors. You will then only get some more 'pandies' like what you had just now, and I think the gratification of punching his head ought to be worth that."

“Right you are, Tom,” I replied. “I’m game for it: I will never feel happy till I make him acknowledge the lie he told to-day against me.”

“Bravo, that’s hearty,” said Tom. “You’re a big fellow for your age, and with a little training will soon be a match for that cur, as he’s a coward at heart. But, look here, Martin—see, I didn’t forget you, as I believe you thought I did at tea-time. I saved this for you, as I could see you were hungry.”

The good-hearted chap had managed to stow away a thick slice of bread-and-butter in his trousers pocket, and this he now brought out and handed to me. It was dirty and greasy, and had little bits of paper sticking to it, from the mixed assortment of articles amidst which it had been crammed; but, as it was the first morsel of food I had given me after my long fast, I received it from my chum with the utmost gratitude, putting my teeth through it without delay. I really think that it was the most appetising thing I had ever tasted in my life, up to the present, and I longed for more when I had finished it up, although, alas, no more was then to be had!

Little as it was, however, this slight apology for a meal made me feel better and stronger; so, I told Tom, after I had swallowed the bread-and-butter, that I was fit for anything, which pleased him very much.

“You’re just the sort of fellow I thought you were,” said he, clapping me on the back. “I have been looking out for a chum like you ever since I came here, and we’ll have fine times together, my boy! But, come along now, and put your hands under the pump—the cold water will pain you at first, but it will do a world of good, and to-morrow the hands’ll feel all right.”

So saying, Tom, catching hold of my arm, lugged me off down-stairs, and through a lot of mysterious passages and dark ways, to the wash-house at the back of the kitchen again. Arrived here, he pumped away for a good half-hour on my hands, in spite of all my entreaties to the contrary; but, at the end of that time, although they were almost benumbed, the pain from the Doctor’s pandies had passed away, and the palms, which had been previously almost rigid, had regained their flexibility.

“There, that’s enough for the present,” said Tom, quite out of breath with his exertions at the pump-handle, kindly taking out his pocket-handkerchief and gently dabbing my hands with it until they were dry. “I think they’ll do now, and won’t pain you to-morrow; but you must try, old fellow, and avoid getting another taste of the Doctor’s ruler till they’re a bit more recovered.”

At that moment the gong struck up again its ringing, buzzing, drumming sound, and I pricked up my ears, in the vain hope of having a meal at last.

“Is that for supper?” I asked him, recollecting well what it had rung for before.

“Oh no,” answered Tom, “we never get anything else after tea here of an evening. That’s the call to go to sleep: ‘Early to bed, early to rise,’ you know, Martin! I didn’t think it was so late; look sharp and follow me, and I’ll show you the way to the dormitories. There are two of them, and I don’t know which room you’ll be sent to—I hope mine, but we’ll soon see, as ‘Smiley’ arranges all that.”

Passing back through the same passages again by which we had descended from the eating-room—or “refectory,” as Dr Hellyer styled that bare apartment—and up a second flight of stairs beyond, Tom leading the way, we finally reached a long chamber which must have stretched along the whole front of the house, immediately above the room devoted to meals.

Some twenty beds were ranged down the length of this dormitory, in the same way as is customary in a hospital ward, some of them already occupied by boys who had quietly undressed, while the rest of the fellows were hurriedly pulling off their clothes and preparing their toilets for the night.

At the door of the dormitory stood a tall, cadaverous-looking man of some fifty years or thereabouts whom I had not before seen. To him Tom now briefly introduced me in the most laconic fashion.

“New boy, Mr Smallpage,” he said.

“Oh, new boy—Leigh, I suppose, eh?” replied this gentleman in an absent sort of way—“Is he in your charge, Larkyns?”

“Well, sir,” said Tom, rather at a loss to answer this question, not wishing to tell an untruth and yet desirous for certain reasons that I should be associated with him, “I’ve made friends with him, that’s all.”

“Ah, then, he can have that vacant bed next yours,” decided Mr “Smiley,” kindly, seeing Tom’s drift.

“Thank you, sir,” said my chum in a gleeful tone at having his wish gratified. “Come along with me, Martin, and I will show you your place. Is it not jolly?” he whispered to me as we proceeded up the room along the centre space left

vacant between the two rows of beds lining the walls on either side, “why, it’s just the very thing we wanted!”

Tom’s bed and mine were close to one of the windows in the front of the house, which fact delighted me very much, as I thought I should be able to see the sea as soon as I woke in the morning.

My chum, however, threw a damper on this reflection by suggesting that, when the first gong sounded our reveille at six o’clock AM, we should have such sharp work before us to dress and get down to the refectory in the quarter of an hour allowed us for the operation, that unless I wished to lose my breakfast—a dreadful contingency considering the then empty state of my body—I should have precious little time for star-gazing!

Tom’s mention of “shovelling on my clothes,” as he delicately termed the act of dressing, immediately reminded me of my box, which I had quite forgotten all about ever since my leaving it behind me in the little room out of the hall on the termination of my first interview with Dr Hellyer.

“I wonder where it is?” I asked Tom.

“Oh, it has been brought up-stairs all right. The old woman would see to that,” he said.

“Then where is it?” I inquired. “I want my night-shirt now.”

“It is probably in the locker room,” replied my chum, “shall I ask Smiley to let us go and see?”

“Do, if you don’t mind,” said I; and Tom, whisking down the room in a somewhat negligé costume, readily obtained the requisite “permit of search.” He then beckoned me to follow him towards a second door communicating from the dormitory with a smaller apartment beyond, whose sides, I observed on entering within, were buttressed from floor to ceiling with a series of diminutive square wooden chests, ranged along the walls on top of one another, like the deed boxes noticeable in the private office of a solicitor in large practice, and all numbered in similar fashion, seriatim, with large black figures on their front faces.

“Every boy has one of these lockers to stow his traps in,” explained Tom, “and Smiley said you could have 31, next to mine, which is 30—just in the same way, old fellow, as our beds are alongside—good of him, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, “he seems a kind chap.”

“He is,” said Tom; “but, come, Martin, if your box is here you’d better bundle in your things at once, and leave it out on the landing for the old woman to take down again to the cellar, where all our trunks and such-like are kept.”

My box was soon found; and my scanty wardrobe being quickly removed to the numbered receptacle allotted to me, Tom and I returned to the dormitory, where, as I had taken care to bring back with me the garment I required for present exigencies, we both soon made an end of our toilets and jumped into our respective beds.

I had expected that as soon as all the boys were under the sheets, the mathematical master would have left the room; but, no, “Smiley,” much to my surprise, proceeded to undress, and occupy a large bed at the end of the dormitory close to the entrance.

Under these circumstances, therefore, instead of the row that would otherwise have gone on, in the absence of any presiding genius of order, the room was soon hushed in quiet repose; and, the last thing I can recollect hearing, ere dropping to sleep, after wishing Tom a sotto voce “good night,” was the sound of the many-voiced sea as the waves whispered to each other on the beach—the gentle lullaby noise it made, to the fancy of my cockney ears, exactly resembling that created by the distant traffic of the London streets in the early hours of the morning to those living within the city radius.

Chapter Five

A Secret Conspiracy

I awoke from a confused dream of having a quarrel with Aunt Matilda at Tapioca Villa about taking the tea-tray up to the parlour, and, in my passion at being condemned to exercise Molly's functions, kicking over the whole equipage, and sending all the cups and saucers flying down the kitchen stairs—where I could hear them clattering and crashing as they descended—to the far different reality that, instead of being still under my uncle's roof at Islington, I was actually at school at Dr Hellyer's. And that dreadful gong which had interrupted my slumbers, and which must once have belonged to a mandarin of the most warlike tendencies, and of three buttons at least, judging by the din it was capable of, was banging away down-stairs and reverberating through the house; while the score of boys or so, who occupied the dormitory along with Tom and myself, were jumping out of bed and dressing as hurriedly as they could in the semi-darkness of the wintry morning, which the twinkling of the solitary gas-jet, still alight near the door, over Smiley's couch, rendered even more dusky and dismal by contrast.

The windows were shrouded in a thick white fog, that had come up with the rising tide from the sea, which I was thus prevented from seeing had I the time to spare to look out; although, the thought of doing so never crossed my mind, for, independently of the noise of the gong and the scurrying of the other fellows out of the room as soon as they were partly dressed, being suggestive of my also hurrying on my clothes as quickly as I possibly could, I hardly needed Tom's reminder to "look sharp!" Really, no sooner had I stood on my feet and been thoroughly roused, than I was assailed by such a feeling of ravenous hunger that it would have been quite sufficient inducement for me to make haste without any further spur to my movements. I certainly did not intend to be late for breakfast—this morning at all events—and so I told Tom!

Within less than two minutes, I think, I had scrambled into my shirt and trousers; and, throwing my other garments over my arm in imitation of Tom, I was racing along with him down to the lavatory in the lower regions where our ablutions had to be performed. Thence, there was another mad rush up-stairs again to the refectory, which we reached before the second gong, calling us to the matutinal meal, had ceased to sound.

Porridge, with mugs of skim sky-blue milk-and-water, and a couple of slices of bread-and-butter for each pupil, comprised the bill of fare; but it might have

been a banquet of Lucullus from the way I did justice to it after my prolonged fast. Noticing my voracity, the old woman, who, as on the evening before, acted as mistress of the ceremonies, gave me an extra allowance of porridge, which made me her friend thenceforth—at least at meal-times, that is!

On breakfast being cleared away, the "refectory," by the simple process of removing the dirty table-cloth from the long table occupying the centre of the apartment, was converted into a school-room, Dr Hellyer coming in immediately after a third gong had rung for a short interval, and taking the armchair at the head—that seat of honour which had been temporarily filled by "the Cobbler" during our meal being vacated by Monsieur Phélan with much celerity as soon as the Doctor's expansive countenance was seen beaming on us through the doorway, "like the sun in a fog," as Tom whispered to me.

The great man had not long taken his seat before he called me up to him, and, with many "ah's," interrogated me as to my acquirements. He was evidently not greatly impressed with my proficiency; for, severely commenting on the ignorance I displayed for a boy of my age, he relegated me to the lowest class, under Mr Smallpage, or "Smiley," who set me tasks in spelling and the multiplication table, after which school regularly began for the rest.

Books were produced in the most extraordinary and mysterious fashion from hidden cupboards, and desks improvised out of hinged shelves of deal affixed to the walls, and supported by brackets likewise movable, one of the forms along the centre table being shifted for the accommodation of those taking writing lessons; and, at intervals, Dr Hellyer had up a batch of boys before his throne of office, rigidly putting them under examination, varied by the administration of "pandies," and the imposition of ever so many lines of Caesar to be learnt by heart, when they failed in construing it.

At sharp eleven, a large clock over the fireplace, with a round face like that of our podgy preceptor, telling the time, Dr Hellyer pushed back his chair as a sign that our morning studies were over; and the boys then all trooped out into the playground for an hour, coming back again punctually at twelve to dinner in the re-transformed room, at the summons of the inveterate gong.

As the butcher had been lately conciliated apparently, there was no recourse to tinned meats of Australian or South American brand on the first occasion of my partaking of this meal at the establishment. Roast beef, and plenty of it, was served out to us, with the accompaniment of potatoes and cabbage, vegetables being cheap at that time on account of the watering-place's season

being ended; while such of the pupils whose parents paid extra for the beverage, in the same way as they did for French and dancing lessons from the "Cobbler," were supplied with a mug apiece of very small beer—the remainder, and far larger proportion of us, being allowed cold water "at discretion."

After dinner came afternoon school, lasting till four o'clock; when followed another hour's diversion in the playground; and then, tea, similar to the repast I had been a spectator, but not partaker of, the evening before. After tea a couple of hours' rest were allowed for reflection, in the same apartment, during which time the boys were supposed to learn their lessons for the next morning, but didn't—Dr Hellyer relegating his authority at this period of the day generally to Smiley, who went to sleep invariably when in charge of the room, or the Cobbler, who as invariably sneaked out and left the pupils to themselves, when the consequences may be readily imagined.

At eight o'clock, to bring this category of our day's doings to a close, the final gong sounded a tattoo, sending us all aloft, like poor Tom Bowling, to the dormitories to bed.

Such was the ordinary routine of our life at the Doctor's, according to my two years' experience, the only exception being that our meals varied, as to quantity and quality, in direct proportion to the Doctor's credit in the neighbouring town; for, I will do our preceptor the justice to state that, should fortune smile on him, in respect to the facilities afforded him by the tradespeople with whom he dealt, he treated us with no niggard hand and we fared well; while, should the fickle goddess Fortune frown, and provisions be withheld by the cautious purveyors thereof until ready money was forthcoming, then we suffered accordingly, there being a dearth upon the land, which we had to tide over as best we could, hoping for better times. Every Wednesday and Saturday, too, there was no afternoon school, the boys on these half-holidays being either allowed additional exercise in the so-called "playground," or taken out for long dreary walks under the escort of Smiley or the Cobbler; and on Sundays we were always marched to church in state, be the weather what it might, wet or fine, Dr Hellyer leading the van on these high parade occasions—in full academical costume, and wearing a most wonderful sort of archdiaconal hat that had a very imposing effect—with the two assistant masters acting as the rearguard, and closing the procession.

In summer we used to have more latitude in the way of outdoor exercise, the boys being taken down every morning to bathe in the sea, when the tide allowed, before breakfast; or, if the far out-reaching sands were not then

covered with water, later on in the day. We had also cricket and football on the common during the hours of relaxation spent in winter on the barren playground in the rear of the house. Sometimes, in our solemn walks under charge of the under-masters, we occasionally encountered “the opposition school” or college fellows belonging to a large educational institution near us, when it was no rare occurrence for a skirmish to ensue between the two forces, that led to the most disastrous results, as far as subsequent “pandies” and impositions from the Doctor were concerned, or, rather, those who had to undergo them!

This, of course, was in the working terms—when the school was in full blast, so to speak, and everything carried on by rule in regular rotation; but, at vacation time, when all the boys had dispersed to their several homes and were enjoying themselves, as I supposed, to their heart’s content, in their respective family circles, the life that I led was a very different one. As at my uncle’s house, I was still the solitary Ishmael of the community, doomed to spend holidays and periods of study alike under the academical roof.

The first of those educational interludes during my stay at the establishment occurred at Christmas, shortly after I had taken up my residence there, and the thought of all the jollity and merry-making my more fortunate schoolfellows would have at that festive season, about which they naturally talked much before the general breaking-up, made me feel very lonesome when left behind at Beachampton; although I did not for a moment desire to return to Tapioca Villa, in order to share the delightful society of my relatives there. However, this feeling wore off in a few days, and long before the boys came back I had learnt to be pretty well contented with my solitary lot.

But, when the midsummer recess came round, in due course, matters had altered considerably for the better on my being again left behind in my glory; and, but for the fact of being deprived of the close companionship of my constant chum Tom, I can honestly say that my life was far happier than when the school was going on as usual.

I was alone, it is true, but then I had the great counterbalancing advantage of almost entire liberty of action, being allowed to roam about the place at my own sweet will and pleasure, with no lessons to learn, and the only obligation placed on me that of reporting myself regularly at meal-times; when, as the penalty for being late consisted in my having to go without my dinner or tea, as the case might be, and I possessed an unusually sensitive appetite which seldom failed to warn me of the approach of the hour devoted to those

refections, even when I was out of earshot of the gong, I earned a well-founded reputation for the most praiseworthy punctuality—the lesson I had when I first arrived at the school having given me a wholesome horror of starvation!

In my wanderings about the neighbourhood I explored the country for miles round. As for the beach, I investigated it with the painstaking pertinacity of a surveying officer of the hydrographic department of the Admiralty mapping out some newly-discovered shore. I knew every curve and indentation of the coast eastwards as far as Worthing, with the times of high and low water and the set of the tides, and was on familiar terms with the coastguardsmen stationed between Eastbourne and Preston and thence westwards. Crabs, too, and zoophytes, sea anemones, and algae, were as keenly my study as if I were a marine zoologist, although I might not perhaps have been able to describe them in scientific language; while, should a stiff south-westerly gale cast up, as it frequently did amongst other wreckage and ocean flotsam and jetsam, fresh oysters torn from carefully cultivated beds further down the coast, none were sooner acquainted with the interesting fact than I, or gulped down the savoury "natives" with greater gusto—opening them skilfully with an old sailor's jack-knife, which was a treasure I had picked up amidst the pebbly shingle in one of my excursions.

My chief resort, however, when I could steal away thither without being perceived from the school, was the quay close to the entrance to the harbour, at the mouth of the little river which there made its efflux to the sea.

Here the small coasting craft and Channel Island steamers of low draught of water that used the port would lay up while discharging cargo, before going away empty or in ballast, as there was little export trade from the place; and it was my delight to board the different vessels and make friends with the seamen, who would let me go up the rigging and mount the masts to the dog-vane, the height of my climbing ambition, while telling me the names of the different ropes and spars and instructing me in all the mysteries of shipping life, in which I took the deepest interest.

I was a born sailor, if anything.

There is no use in my denying the fact I must have inherited it with my father's blood!

Once, Dr Hellyer spying about after me, on account of my not having turned up either at dinner or tea—a most unusual circumstance—found me messing with the hands in the fo'c's'le of a coal brig.

I recollect he pushed me along back to the school the whole way, holding me at arm's length by the scruff of the neck; and, besides the infliction of a round dozen of "pandies" and an imposition of five hundred lines of Virgil's Aeneid to learn by heart, threatened me with all sorts of pains and penalties should he ever catch me going down to the quay again.

But, all his exhortations were of no avail! Go to the harbour amongst the vessels I would, whenever I could get an opportunity of sneaking away unnoticed; and, the more I saw of ships and sailors, the more firmly I made up my mind to go to sea as soon as I saw a chance of getting afloat, in spite of the very different arrangements Uncle George had made for my future walk in life—arrangements that were recalled to my mind every quarter in the letters my relation periodically wrote to me after the receipt of the Doctor's terminal reports on my character and educational progress. These latter were generally of a damaging nature, letting me in for a lecture on my bad behaviour, coupled with the prognostication, which I am sure really came from Aunt Matilda through this side wind, that unless I mended my ways speedily I should never be promoted to that situation of clerk in uncle's office which was being held open for me as soon as I was old enough, and the thought of which—with the enthralling spell of the ocean upon me—I hated!

To tell the strict truth, these quarterly reports of Dr Hellyer in respect of my conduct were not wholly undeserved; for, with the exception of displaying a marked partiality for mathematics, which, fortunately for my subsequent knowledge of navigation, Mr Smallpage kindly fostered and encouraged to the best of his ability, my studies were terribly irksome to me, and my lessons being consequently neglected, led to my having impositions without number. I believe I must have learnt the whole of Virgil by heart, although I could not now construe the introductory lines of the first book of the Aeneid; and as for history I could then, nor now, no more tell you the names of the Roman emperors, or the dates of accession of the various Kings of England, than I could square the circle, or give you the cubical contents of the pyramids of Egypt off-hand.

The personal rows, too, that I got into with Dr Hellyer were innumerable; and I really think he wore out three flat rulers while I was a member of the school, in inflicting his dearly-loved "pandies" on my suffering palms.

The most important of these, what I may term “private differences,” between my worthy preceptor and myself, after my first experience of his “way” of making the boys obey him, without flogging them, arose from the same cause—Master Slodgers, my enemy from the date of my entrance within the select academy, although, if you recollect, he did not “get the best of me” even then!

Some six months after that memorable occasion, having developed much bone and sinew in the meantime, besides cultivating the noble art of self-defence under the tuition of my chum Tom, I challenged the lanky cur on the self-same ground where he had first assailed me; when I gave him such a beating that he could not leave his bed in the dormitory for nearly a week afterwards. For this—what I considered—just retaliation, I received the encomiums of the majority of the fellows, who detested Slodgers for his sneaking as well as bullying ways with the youngsters; but Dr Hellyer, with whom he still continued a favourite, took my triumph in such ill part, that he treated me to no less than six dozen “pandies,” incarcerating me besides in an empty coal cellar, on a diet of bread and water, in solitary confinement below for the same length of time that Slodgers was laid up ill in bed above stairs.

However, after that day I had it all my own way with the boys, for I was strongly-built and thick-set for my age, looking two years older than I really was. I could fight and lick all the rest of the fellows at the time, not excepting even Tom my instructor, although he and I were much too good friends to try conclusions on the point, and I was the acknowledged leader of the school. Athletics, indeed, were my strong point, for I may say, almost without egotism, that I had so cultivated my muscles to the sad neglect of my proper studies, that I could swim like a fish, dive like an Indian pearl hunter, run swifter than anybody else, and play cricket and football with the best; but, as far as my real school duties were concerned, I’m afraid I was a sad dunce, as I was always at the bottom of my class.

I am now approaching the period to which these reminiscences of my school-days have all along tended, albeit I have been a long time in reaching it.

You may remember my calling your attention to the fact of the Doctor always marching us to church on Sundays, and heading the procession, wearing a most peculiar-looking hat the while?

Well, “thereby hangs a tale,” as a wise jester says in one of Shakespeare’s plays.

I had just completed my two years' residence under the academical roof; the summer vacation had come and gone; the boys were all back again at school, and settled down for the winter term; the month of October had flown by with unlagging footsteps; and November had come in, gloomy and dismal, with white fogs and sea mists—such as haunt some parts of the southern coasts in the autumn.

The "Fifth" was a great anniversary at the establishment.

If Guy Fawkes' Day were uncared for elsewhere, we at all events held the memory of the defunct conspirator in high reverence; and invariably did it such honour by the explosion of gunpowder, in the shape of squibs and crackers as our means afforded.

The pocket-money of those having friends with long purses was saved up for weeks beforehand for this purpose; while any boys without a regular allowance had to "beg or borrow," so that they might contribute to the general fund.

The couple of odd shillings Uncle George had slipped into my hand on leaving London, had, of course, melted away long ago, and, until this year, he never seemed to think of renewing the tip, supposing, perhaps, that I did not want anything, for I was too proud to ask him; but at Michaelmas, when my birthday came round—I was just fourteen then—he quite unexpectedly sent me a post-office order for half-a-sovereign in the possession of which I felt as rich as Croesus.

Tom, naturally, was told of the arrival of this enormous treasure instantly. Indeed, he accompanied me on the next half-holiday, when we were allowed out, to get the order cashed; but beyond expending about eighteenpence in hot three-corner jam tarts and ginger beer, at a favourite confectioner's patronised by the school, we devoted the sum to purchasing the best fireworks we could get for the money, carrying our explosives back to the school carefully concealed on our persons, and secreting them in our lockers.

"We'll have such a lark!" said Tom.

"Won't it be jolly!" I chimed in, with equal enthusiasm—adding, however, a moment afterwards, as the reflection occurred to me, "What a pity, though, Tom, that the Fifth falls this year on a Sunday? I declare, I never thought of it before!"

"Nor I," said he, and both our faces fell six inches at least.

But, Tom's soon brightened up again, as some happy thought flashed across his mind.

"Why, it'll be all the better, Martin," he cried out, greatly to my surprise.

"How can that be?" I exclaimed, indignantly. "The Doctor will never allow us to have our bonfire, I'm sure!"

"Hush, you stupid," said Tom. "I do declare your brains must be wool-gathering! Stop a minute and listen to me."

He then whispered to me a plan he had thought of for signalising "the glorious Fifth," in spite of Dr Hellyer, and in a manner which that worthy would never dream of. It was a scheme quite worthy of Tom's fertile imagination.

"Oh, won't it be a lark!" I cried, when he had finished; and we both then burst into an ecstasy of laughter at the very idea of the thing.

Chapter Six

Our Plot and its Results

“Now, mind,” said Tom, after a pause in our giggling, “we won’t tell any one else about it!”

“No,” I agreed; “it will be all the more fun to keep it to ourselves, and, besides, there will be less chance of our being found out.”

True to our compact, not a word of our conspiracy was breathed to a soul in the school; and the eventful day approached at last, if not “big with the fate of Caesar and of Rome,” pregnant with a plan for astonishing our master, and celebrating the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot in a manner never known before in the traditions of the establishment—although, perhaps, perfectly in keeping with the idea of the original iconoclast, whose memory we intended to do honour to in fitting manner.

When Dr Hellyer awoke to the knowledge of the fact that the Fifth of November fell this year on a Sunday, had he generously made allowance for the patriotic feelings of his pupils, and allowed them to have their usual annual firework demonstration on the Saturday prior, which happened to be a half-holiday, the matter might have been harmoniously arranged, and Tom and I been persuaded at the last moment to abandon our daring enterprise—possibly, that is, though I doubt it much.

But, no. Dr Hellyer grasped the chance afforded him by the fortuitous cycle of dates as a splendid opportunity for putting down what had been a yearly bête noir to him; and so, he rushed madly on to his fate.

After dinner in the refectory, on the third of the month—two days beforehand, so as to give them clear notice of his intentions, in order not be accused of taking them unawares, and causing them to lay out their savings uselessly—just as the boys were going to rush out of the room for their usual hour’s relaxation before afternoon school, he detained them, with a wave of his well-known fat arm and the sound of his rolling accents.

“Boys,” he cried, “wait a moment! I have—ah—determined that—ah—as Guy Fawkes’ day this year—ah—will be next Sunday, when—ah—of course—ah—you will be unable with any regard for the solemn associations—ah—of the—ah—Sabbath, be—ah—able to celebrate it in your usual fashion—ah—that—ah—you must—ah—postpone—ah—your—ah bonfire—ah—till next year.”

A loud murmur ran round the room at this, an expression of popular opinion which I had never heard previously in the school.

The master, however, was equal to the occasion.

“Silence!” he roared out at the pitch of his voice, making the ceiling ring again, dropping his “Ahs” and drowning the sibillation of the malcontents by sheer dint of making a superior amount of noise. “Any boy I catch hissing, or otherwise expressing disapproval of my orders, had better look out, that’s all! There will be no celebration of Guy Fawkes’ day here, do you hear me! No, neither this year, nor next year, nor any year again, so long as I am master of this school! You can disperse now; but, mark my words, any one found letting off a squib or cracker, or discovered to be in the possession of gunpowder, or other explosive compound, will have to render an account to me. Boys, you’re dismissed!”

Bless you, when Dr Hellyer ceased speaking there was a silence that could almost be felt, and we all sneaked out of the room with corresponding quietude—adjourning to the playground as if we were going to attend a funeral instead of going out for diversion!

But, it was a silence that meant mischief, a quietude that was next door to hatching a mutiny; and, when we had got outside, there was a general howl of indignation that the Doctor could not have helped hearing, although the door communicating with the house was closed and he was still in the refectory in front, while we were at the rear of the establishment.

Of course, as was natural at such a crisis, the boys grouped themselves into little coteries, considering what should be done in such an unlooked-for emergency. Even Slodgers, the sneak, pretended to be as angry as anybody, desiring to have revenge for the deprivation of our annual gala show; but Tom and I kept aloof from all, and held our own counsel, much to the disgust of Slodgers, as we could easily see, for the cur wanted to hear what we might suggest so that he could go and report to Dr Hellyer.

We were too wary birds for Slodgers, however; we were not going to be caught, like young pigeons, with his chaff—no, we knew better than that!

We agreed with the mass of our schoolfellows that the Doctor’s arbitrary proclamation was an act of unmitigated tyranny and a “jolly shame;” but,

beyond that, Slodgers could get nothing out of us, although we listened cordially to all the others had to say, and regulated our procedure accordingly.

“I vote,” said Batson, one of the big boys like Tom and I were now, “that we buy our fireworks on Saturday, in spite of what Old Growler has declared, and if he does not allow us to let them off in the evening, why we’ll have ‘a grand pyrotechnic display,’ as the newspapers say, at night in the dormitories.”

“Hear, hear!” shouted all the fellows in rapturous enthusiasm at such a bold idea; and even Tom and I wondered whether this plan would not be better than ours. But it was only for a moment. Reflection told us that the Doctor would certainly hear of our doings in time, through Slodgers, to nip the brilliant design in the bud ere it could be matured; so, while the majority of the boys devoted all their spare cash on the Saturday afternoon, when some of us were allowed to go into the town, in the purchase of squibs and crackers, and Roman candles, we declined all share in the enterprise on the plea of having no money—an excuse readily recognised, as the finances of most of the pupils were known to be not in a flourishing condition.

While Batson and his confrères took advantage of the half-holiday to go out to buy these fireworks, Tom and I remained indoors, he on the plea of indisposition and I for the ostensible purpose of writing out an imposition; but we both utilised the time thus afforded us by artfully removing the store of combustibles we had already secreted in our lockers, bringing them down-stairs, and placing them for safety and concealment in the cellar below, where our boxes were kept.

It was a timely precaution.

Slodgers had evidently played the sneak as usual, although keeping up the semblance all the while of being one of the prime movers in the pyrotechnic display suggested by Batson. Indeed, he went so far as to buy and bring home a shilling’s-worth of detonating powder to aid the contemplated feu de joie; but, no sooner had the boys got in and gone up-stairs to arrange their clothes for Sunday, as was our custom before tea-time every Saturday afternoon, than Dr Hellyer, accompanied by Smiley and the Cobbler, and the old woman, who had the keenest eye of the lot for the detection of contraband stores, came round to the dormitories on an exploring and searching expedition. There was a grand exposé of the conspiracy, of course, at once; for, the contents of all the lockers were turned out and the newly-purchased fireworks confiscated to the last cracker!

“Ah—you can’t deceive me!” exclaimed the Doctor, as he departed triumphantly, his arms and those of his assistants loaded with the spoils of their raid, “I told you I would not have any fireworks in my school this year, and shall keep my word, as you see! You have only to thank yourselves—ah—for wasting your money! But, for disobeying my orders the boys will all stop in next week on both half-holidays;” and, so concluding his parting address, with a triumphant grin on his huge round face, he went out, leaving the baffled conspirators in agonies of rage, swearing vengeance against the unknown spy who had betrayed their preparations.

Tom and I were jubilant, however. Nothing could have worked better for the end we had in view; as, after this failure of Batson, the surprise we intended for the Doctor would be all the more unexpected and correspondingly successful.

It was a sad night, though, for the other fellows.

When Sunday morning came, the boys got up grumbling, moody, defiant, and almost inclined to weep over their frustrated efforts; while Tom and I were so jolly that we could have sung aloud.

We always breakfasted later on this day of the week, and after the meal was done generally lounged about the room while the old woman was clearing up, waiting till it was time for us to assemble for what we styled our “church parade;” but, this morning, the boys seemed out of sorts, and went back again up-stairs after they had finished, leaving only Tom and myself in the refectory, while the old woman was removing the breakfast things and putting on a clean table-cloth for dinner. She quitted the apartment as soon as she had swept up the fireplace, placing enough coal on the fire to last till the afternoon, and otherwise completing her arrangements—then going down to the kitchen, from which we knew she would not emerge until we came back from church again, when it would be time to sound the gong for dinner—which meal was also an hour later on Sundays than on week days; and, being generally of a more sumptuous description, it required extra cooking.

This was the opportunity Tom and I had waited for all along, in pursuance of our plan; so, long ere the old woman had reached her sanctum below, we were at work, having taken advantage of the time we were washing in the lavatory before breakfast to put our fireworks and combustible matter in our pockets, whence we now quickly proceeded to extract the explosive agents, and deposit them in certain fixed positions we had arranged beforehand after much consultation.

Now, what I am going to relate I would much rather not tell about, as it concerns what I consider a very shameful episode in my life. The only thing I can urge in extenuation of my conduct is the lax manner in which my earlier life was looked after in my uncle's house, where my worse passions were allowed full play, without that judicious control which parental guidance would perhaps have exercised on my inherent disposition for giving vent to temper, with no thought whatever of the consequences of any hare-brained act I might commit. I narrate, therefore, the circumstances that led to my running away from school, merely because my mad and wicked attempt to injure Dr Hellyer is a portion of my life-history, and I wish to describe all that happened to me truthfully, without glossing over a single incident to my discredit. I thus hope that no boy reading this will, on the strength of my example, be prompted to do evil, with the malicious idea of "paying off a grudge." I may add that I entirely take all the blame to myself, for, had it not been for me, Tom Larkyns, I am sure, would have had no hand in the matter; and you will see later on, if you proceed with my story, how, through the wonderful workings of Providence, I was almost subjected to the same terrible fate I had been the means of preparing for our schoolmaster; although, fortunately, the evil design I and Tom planned only reverted on our own heads. Our diabolical scheme was more than a thoughtless one. It might, besides, jeopardising the life of Dr Hellyer, have set fire to the house, when, perhaps, many of our schoolfellows might have been burnt to death.

The first thing Dr Hellyer always did on entering the refectory when he returned from church was, as we well knew, to walk up to the fireplace, where he would give the bars a thorough raking out with the poker and then heap a large shovelful of coals on from the adjacent scuttle. In this receptacle, Tom and I now carefully placed about a quarter of a pound of gunpowder with some squibs, the latter blackened over like the shining Wallsend knobs, so as to escape detection; and then, such was our fiendish plan, we concealed under the cushion of the Doctor's armchair a packet of crackers, connected with a long tiny thread of a fuse leading midway under the centre of the broad table, so that it could not be seen or interfered with by the boys' feet as they sat at dinner, along the floor to the end of the form where we usually sat, near the entrance to the apartment.

"I shall manage to light this fuse somehow or other," Tom said, assuming the control of this infernal machine; and then, after going into the hall to get our caps, giving another look round the room when we came back, to see whether our preparations were noticeable, we awaited Dr Hellyer's summons to proceed

to church—with calm satisfaction at the so far successful issue of our calculations.

During our processional walk we were both in high glee at the grand "blowing up" that would happen on our return—a sort of "Roland for an Oliver" in return for the many different sorts of blowings up we had received at Dr Hellyer's hands at one time and another. I was all the more excited, too, for I had made up my mind to attempt another exploit of which I had not even warned Tom, but which would probably throw his sublime conception into the shade.

I had, in my visits to the different coasting craft in the harbour, been presented by a fisherman with a lot of very small fish-hooks. These I had in the morning attached by thin pieces of thread to several fire crackers, which I intended for my own personal satisfaction to present to the Doctor, although in a way he would not relish or dream of.

If there was one thing more than another that Dr Hellyer esteemed I think I have already sufficiently pointed out it was his dignity—to the glory of which the archdeacon's hat he always wore on Sundays eminently contributed; and, as may be believed, he venerated this head-covering accordingly.

It was against this hat I contemplated taking especial proceedings now.

Being held to be an outlaw to all ordinary discipline, the Doctor, to have me under his own eye, made me walk close behind him in the procession formed for our march to and from church. Tom and some three or four other unruly members were also similarly distinguished; and, as walking two-and-two abreast we made such a long string, that the masters behind could not see what was going on in front, we usually had a good deal of fun in the rear of the Doctor, without, of course, his perceiving it, or the teachers betraying us.

Watching my chance, soon after we came out of church on this eventful occasion, I dexterously managed to fasten the fish-hooks with the crackers attached not only to different points of the master's garments, but also to his hat; and, the scrunching of our feet on the gravel pathway from the village deadening the sound I made in scratching the match I used, I contrived to light the crackers before any one, save the boys immediately alongside of me, perceived what I was doing.

Everything favoured me.

Presently, whiz—crack—and the Doctor's coat tails flew up as if by magic, swaying to and fro in the air, although there was no wind; and the fellows, smelling a "rat" as well as the burnt powder, began to titter.

"What is that?" said the Doctor, sternly, turning round and confronting us with an even more majestic deportment than usual.

Of course, nobody answered; but, the crack, crack, cracking continued, and in another minute, with a bang, off went Dr Hellyer's hat!

Nor was that all. Putting up his hand, with a frantic clutch, to save his headgear from falling into the mire, it being a drizzling, mizzling, dirty November day, our worthy preceptor pulled away what we had always imagined to be a magnificent head of hair, but what turned out now, alas for human fallibility, only to be a wig!

This was a discovery with a vengeance; and, as might have been expected, all the boys, as if with one accord, shouted with laughter.

Dr Hellyer was speechless with indignation. He was mad with pain as well, for in clutching at his hat he had got one of my fish-hooks deeply imbedded in the palm of his hand—a sort of just retaliation, I thought it, for all he had made me suffer from his cruel "pandies."

He guessed who was the offender at once, as he caught me laughing when he turned round, with the end of the smouldering match still held between my fingers.

"Oh—ah! It is you, is it?" he gasped out, giving me a ponderous slap on one side of my face with the big broad hand that was uninjured, which made me reel and tumble down; but a second blow, a backhander on the opposite side of my head, brought me up again, "all standing." Still, although I felt these gentle taps, I could not help grinning, which, of course, increased his rage, if that were possible.

He certainly presented a most comical spectacle, dancing there before us, first on one leg and then on the other, his bulky frame swaying to and fro, like that of an elephant performing a jig, with the crackers exploding every instant, and his bald head surrounded apparently with a halo of smoke like a "nimbus." The boys fairly shrieked with laughter, and even Smiley and the Cobbler had to turn their heads aside, to hide their irrepressible grins. As for myself, I confess that at the moment of perpetrating the cruel joke, I felt that I wouldn't have

missed the sight for anything. I was really extremely proud of my achievement, although conscious that I should have to pay dearly bye-and-bye for my freak in the way of “pandies” and forced abstention from food; but I little thought of the stern Nemesis at a later period of my life Providence had in store for me.

In a little time the crackers had all expended their force; when the Doctor, jamming down the wig and his somewhat crushed and dirty hat over his fuming brows, with a defiant glare at the lot of us, resumed his march homeward—taking the precaution of clutching hold of my arm with a policeman-like grip, as if he were afraid of my giving him the slip before he had pandied the satisfaction he clearly intended to have out of my unhappy body. But he need not have been thus alarmed on the score of any attempted flight on my part, at least then; for I was quite as anxious to reach the school as he was to get me there. Much as I had enjoyed this cracker scene, which I had brought about on my own account, I was longing to see the denouement of the deeply-planned plot, the details of which Tom and I had so carefully arranged before starting for church. My little venture was nothing in comparison with what this would be, I thought.

My ambition was soon gratified.

Our little contretemps on the way had somewhat delayed dinner, which was already on the table on out arrival; so, without wasting any more time, Dr Hellyer marched us all in before him, still holding on to me until he had reached the top of the refectory, where, ordering me to stand up in front of his armchair, he proceeded as usual to poke the fire and then shovel on coals.

Bang!

In a second, there was a great glare, and then an explosion, which brought down a quantity of soot from the old-fashioned open chimney, covering me all over and making me look like a young sweep, as I was standing right in front of the fireplace, and came in for the full benefit of it. I was not at all frightened, however, as, of course, I had expected a somewhat similar result as soon as the coals went on.

Not so the Doctor, though. With a deep objurgation, he sank back into his armchair, as if completely overcome.

This was Tom’s opportunity, and he quickly took advantage of it. Glancing slily down under the table, I could see him in the distance stoop beneath it and

apply a match to the end of the fuse, which being a dry one at once ignited, the spluttering flame running along like a streak of lightning along the floor and up the leg of the chair on which Dr Hellyer was sitting—too instantaneously to be detected by any one not specially looking out for it, like myself.

Poof—crack—bang, went off another explosion; and up bounced Old Hellyer, as if a catapult had been applied below his seat.

You never saw such a commotion as now ensued. Tom and I were the only ones who preserved their composure out of the whole lot in the room, although Dr Hellyer soon showed that, if startled at first, he had not quite lost his senses.

He rushed at me at once, quite certain that as I had perpetrated the former attack on his sacred person while on the way from church, I must likewise be guilty of this second attempt to make a Guy Fawkes of him; and, striking out savagely, he felled me with a weighty blow from his great fist, sending me rolling along under the table, and causing me to see many more stars than an active astronomer could count in the same space of time—but I'm sure he had sufficient justification to have treated me even worse!

"You young ruffian!" he exclaimed as he knocked me down, his passion getting the better both of his scholastic judgment and academical dignity, and he would probably have proceeded to further extremities had not Tom Larkyns started up.

"Oh, please don't punish Leigh, sir," I heard him cry out as I lay on the floor, just within reach of the Doctor's thick club-soled boots, with which I believe he was just going to operate on me in "Lancashire fashion," as fighting men say. "Please, sir, don't hurt Leigh—it was I who did it!"

At this interruption, which seemed to recall him to himself, the master regained his composure in an instant.

"Get up, boy!" he said to me, gruffly, spurning me away with his foot, and then, as soon as I was once more in a perpendicular position, he ordered me, sooty as I was, to go and stand up alongside of Tom.

"Brothers in arms, hey?" chuckled our incensed pedagogue, pondering over the most aggravating form of torture which he could administer to us in retaliation for what we had made his person and dignity suffer. "I'll make you sick of each other's companionship before I've done with you! Stand up there together now, you pair of young desperadoes, while the rest of the boys have dinner, which your diabolical conduct has so long delayed. Mr Smallpage, say grace, please."

"Smiley" thereupon performed the Doctor's usual function; then the fellows were helped round to roast mutton and Yorkshire pudding—Tom and I, both

hungry as usual, you may be sure—having the gratification of smelling without being allowed to taste.

This was Dr Hellyer's very practical first stage of punishment; he always commenced with starving us for any offence against his laws and ordinances, and then wound up his trilogy of penance with a proportionate number of "pandies" and solitary confinement.

After dinner the other boys were dismissed, but Tom and I remained still standing there; Dr Hellyer the while seated in his armchair watching us grimly as if taking pleasure in our sufferings, and without uttering a word to either of us.

The afternoon progressed, and the fellows came trooping in to tea at six, the old woman first arriving; to lay the cloth and put on the china teapot and tin mugs. We, however, had to pass through the same ordeal as at dinner; there was none for us, for still the Doctor sat there in the armchair by the fire, looking in the dancing gleams of light like some old wizard or magician weaving a charm of spells which was to turn us into stone where we stood, if that process should not be rendered unnecessary by our being frozen beforehand from cramp through remaining so long in the one position.

When the bed gong sounded, we heard the boys trooping up-stairs; and then Dr Hellyer rose at last.

"Martin Leigh and Thomas Larkyns," he rolled out in his very deepest voice, making the ceiling of the refectory ring as usual. "I intend to expel you from my school. I shall write to your friends in the morning; and, in the meantime, you will be confined here until they come to remove you!"

He then left the room, locking the door behind him, when the single jet of light from one burner went out suddenly with a jump, showing that he had turned the gas off at the main, and that we should not have a cheering beam to illumine our solitary vigil throughout the weary night.

A little bit of fire was still flickering in the grate, however, and, by this feeble light Tom and I looked at each other in desperation.

We were in a hobble, and no mistake!

What was to be done?

Chapter Seven

Catching a Tartar

"Well, this is a nice mess we're in!" said Tom, after a moment's pause, during which we stared blankly at each other in front of the fire, which we had approached as soon as our janitor had departed. My chum seated himself comfortably in the Doctor's armchair, which he drew near the hearth, putting his feet on the fender so as to warm his chilled toes; but I remained standing beside him, leaning against the chimney-piece.

"Yes," I replied, disconsolately. "It's too bad though; I say, old fellow, I'm awfully hungry!"

"So am I," said Tom, "but I don't suppose we'll be able to get anything whatever to eat before morning—if the Doctor lets us have breakfast then!"

"Oh, bother him!" I exclaimed; "I'm not going to starve."

"Why, what can we do, Martin? I don't think you'll find any grub here. The old woman swept away every crumb, even from the floor, after tea; I was watching her like a dog after a bone."

"What are we to do, eh?" I repeated, cheerfully, my spirits rising to the occasion; "why, get away from this as soon as we can!"

"Run away?" ejaculated Tom in astonishment.

I nodded my head in the affirmative.

"But how can we get out?"

"I'll soon show you," I said, complacently. "I thought we'd be placed in a fix after our lark, and I made my preparations accordingly."

"By Jove, Martin, you're a wonderful fellow!" cried Tom, as I then proceeded to peel off my jacket and waistcoat, unwinding some twenty feet of thick cord, which I had procured from my sailor friends in the harbour and had been carrying about me all day, rolled round my body over my shirt, so as not to lacerate my skin—fearing all the while that the podgy appearance which its bulk gave to me would be noticed, although fortunately it had escaped comment.

“We’ll get down from the balcony outside the window by the aid of this,” I explained, as soon as I had got rid of the rope from about my person, coiling it up handily, first knotting it at intervals, so that we could descend gradually, without hurting our hands, already sore from “pandies.”

“And, once outside the house, why, we’ll make off for the harbour, where I’ve no doubt my friends on board the coal brig, which was lying alongside the quay last Wednesday, when I was down there, will take us in, and make us comfortable.”

“My!” exclaimed Tom, “why, you’re a regular brick, Martin. One would think you had planned it out all beforehand!”

“Just precisely what I did,” I replied, chuckling at having kept my secret. “I have determined ever since last summer to run away to sea at the first opportunity I got; and when you suggested our blowing up Dr Hellyer, and making a regular Guy Fawkes of him, I, thought it would be too warm for us here afterwards, and that then would be the time to bolt. There is no use in our remaining now, to be starved first and expelled afterwards—with probably any number of ‘pandies’ given us to-morrow in addition.”

“No,” said Tom, agreeing with this pretty correct estimate of our present position and future prospects. “Dr Hellyer will whack that ruler of his into us in the morning, without fail—I could see it in his eye as he went out of the room, as well as from that grin he put on when he spoke. I dare say, besides, we won’t be allowed a morsel to eat all day; we shall be kept here to watch the other fellows feeding—it’s a brutal way of paying a chap out, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m not going to put up with it, for one,” said I, decisively. “You know, Tom, as soon as my uncle hears of my being expelled, prompted by Aunt Matilda, he will seize the chance of doing what he has long threatened, and ‘wash his hands of me,’ and then, why I will be in only just the same plight as if I take French leave of Dr Hellyer now!”

“My mother, though, will be grieved when she hears of this,” put in Tom, as if hesitating what he should do.

“Nonsense, Tom,” I replied—still exercising the influence I possessed over my chum for evil!—“I am certain that if she knew that the Doctor had treated you as he has done, starving you and keeping you here all night in the cold out of your bed, she wouldn’t mind a bit your running away from the school along

with me; especially when I'm going to take you where you'll get food and shelter."

This argument decided Tom at once. "All right," said he, in the usual jolly way in which he and I settled all our little differences. "I'll come, Martin. But it is getting late. Don't you think, too, we'd better look alive and start as soon as we can?"

"I was waiting till we heard the Doctor snoring," I replied. "Go and listen at the door; his room, you know, is on the other side of the landing, and you'll be able to tell in a minute whether he is asleep or not."

Tom did as I requested, stealing noiselessly across the room for the purpose, returning quickly with the news that our worthy preceptor was fast in the arms of Morpheus, judging by the stentorian sound of his deep breathing. Dr Hellyer had made a hearty dinner, in spite of our having upset his equanimity so unexpectedly. He had likewise disposed of an equally hearty tea; so he was now sleeping soundly—his peaceful slumbers doubtless soothed with sweet dreams in reference to the punishment he intended inflicting on us on the morrow, not thinking for a moment, unhappy dreamer, that the poor birds whom he had, as he imagined, effectually snared and purposed plucking, would by that time, if all went well with our plans, have flown far beyond reach of his nervous arm!

The master asleep, we had no fear of interruption from any one else, for the old woman took her repose in the back kitchen, out of earshot of anything happening in the front of the house, and Smiley and the Cobbler were probably snoring away as composedly as their chief in the dormitories above, of which they were in charge; so, Tom and I at once began operations for effecting our "strategic retreat" from the establishment.

The windows of the refectory opened on to a narrow balcony that ran along the front of the house; and these, having heavy wooden shutters, fastened by horizontal iron bars, latching into a catch, we had some little difficulty in opening the one we fixed on for making our exit by, the bar securing it being some height from the floor and quite beyond our reach.

However, as Tom magniloquently quoted, difficulties were only made for brave men—or boys—to surmount. By lifting one of the forms as quietly as we could close to the window, and standing on this, the two of us managed to raise the iron bar from the catch and let it swing down, although the hinges made a terrible creaking noise in the operation, which we thought would waken Dr

Hellyer up. However, on going to the door to listen again, we heard him still snoring, so we then proceeded to unfasten the window, letting in the cold night air, that made us shiver as it blew into the room from the sea.

It was quite dark when we got outside into the balcony, although we could see a star or two faintly glimmering overhead; while away to the westward, across the common, the red light at the pier-head marking the entrance to the harbour was visible.

Like most watering-places in the "dead season," everybody went to bed early in the terrace; so that, although it could have been barely ten o'clock, not a light was to be seen from the windows of the neighbouring houses.

"Just the night for a burglary!" said Tom with a snigger, on our cautiously looking round us to see if the coast was clear.

"Yes," I chimed in, joyously, "only, we are going to burgle out, instead of breaking in;" and we then both had a hearty chuckle at this little joke.

Still, no time was to be lost, now that we had got so far. The next thing, therefore, to do, was to descend the balcony; and, here, my happily-thought-of rope ladder came in handily to deliver us from durance vile.

Knotting it securely to the top rail of the balustrade, I gave it a strong tug or two to test its strength, making the balcony shake and tremble with the strain.

"Do you think it will bear our weight?" asked Tom, anxiously, noticing me do this and feeling the vibratory movement.

"Bear our weight, you shrimp," I rejoined, "why, it would hold forty of us, and Dr Hellyer too!"

At this we both sniggered again, suppressing our merriment, however, for fear of being overheard; and then, drawing-to the shutter inside as close as I could, so that it should not show too plainly the fact of its being unbarred, and closing the window itself, which was a much easier task, we prepared to slide down to the pavement below.

"I had better go first," I said to Tom, "I'm the heaviest; so, if I reach the ground all right, there'll be no fear of the rope giving way with you."

Tom argued the point, considering that the question was one of honour, like that of leading a forlorn hope; but, on my saying that I had planned the enterprise and thereby was entitled by right to be the first to venture down, quite apart from the fact of my supplying the rope, he yielded gracefully. Thereupon, without any more fuss, I got over the railings of the balcony, and holding on tightly to the frail cord with both hands, letting my legs drop, and then obtaining a grip below with my ankles, I allowed myself to slide down below, checking the rapidity of my descent by the knots I had previously placed there, a foot or so apart, for this especial purpose.

I swayed round a bit, but the rope held firmly; and in a few seconds I was standing on the steps below, waiting for Tom to join me.

He came down much easier than I did, from the fact of my holding the other end of our improvised ladder, thus preventing it from twirling him about in the same way as it had treated me, causing me almost to feel giddy.

As soon as he stood beside me I coiled up the end of the cord, flinging it back with a dexterous heave, in the way my sailor friend had taught me, over the balcony again, so that the end of it might not be seen hanging down, and so betray us too soon should any passer-by notice it.

“Come on, Tom,” I then said, “a long good-bye to the Doctor’s, my boy, the blessed place shall never see me again, if I can help it! Let us make for the quay now, and get on board the brig if we can—that is, unless it be too late, in which case we must hide somewhere till the morning.”

“All right,” he replied; and the two of us at once started off at a jog-trot up the terrace and along the road that led into the town.

We were successful so far, but we were almost captured on the threshold of victory through an unforeseen contingency; for, just as we turned round the corner of the terrace by the country inn, or “hotel,” which I had noticed on my way from the station when I first arrived at the place with Grimes, the cantankerous old railway porter escorting me to the school, who should we meet point-blank but that identical worthy!

He was evidently going home to bed having just been turned out of the inn, which was shutting up for the night. He had, apparently, spent a most enjoyable evening, for he seemed in good spirits—or, rather, perhaps had a pretty good amount of spirits or beer in him—as he reeled somewhat in his

gait, and, although it was Sunday, was trying in his cracked falsetto voice to chant a Bacchanalian ditty assertive of the fact that he wouldn't "go home till morning!"

But, in despite of being tipsy, he recognised us both instantly. He was in the habit of coming constantly to and from the station to Dr Hellyer's with parcels, and was, besides, frequently employed by the Doctor in odd jobs about the house, consequently he was perfectly familiar with our faces—especially mine, which he had never forgotten since that little altercation I had with him on my first introduction. I believe the old fellow bore me a grudge for having spoken to him so peremptorily on that occasion, which even my present of sixpence had not been able to obliterate.

He saw us now without doubt, as we passed by hurriedly, close to one of the street lamps which shone down full upon us; and, alert in a moment, he hailed us at once.

"Hullo, you young vaggybones," he screeched out with a hiccup; "where be ye off ter now, hey?"

We made no answer to this, only quickening our pace; and he staggered after us waveringly, wheezing out in broken accents, "I knows you, Master Bantam, I does, and you Tom Larkyns; and I'll tell the Doctor, I will, sure—sure—sure-ly."

But, unawed by this threat, we still went on at our jog-trot until we were well out of his sight, when, retracing our steps again, we watched at a safe distance to see what he would do. We were soon relieved, however, from any anxiety of his giving the alarm, for, although he attempted to take the turning leading down to the school, his legs, which had only been educated up to the point of taking him home and nowhere else after leaving the inn, must have refused to convey him in this new direction, for we could see him presently clinging to the lamp-post that had betrayed us, having a parley with the mutinous members—the upshot being that he abandoned any design he might have formed of going there and then to Dr Hellyer, postponing his statement as to what he had seen of us, as we could make out from his muttered speech, "till marn-ing," and mingling his determination with the refrain of the ditty he had been previously warbling.

This was a lucky ending to what might otherwise have been a sad mischance, if Dr Hellyer had been at once made acquainted with our flight; so, devoutly thankful for our escape, we resumed our onward jog-trot towards the quay, which we reached safely shortly afterwards, without further incident or accident by the way.

After being out in the open air a little while, the evening did not seem nearly so dark as we had thought when first peering out from the window of the refectory before making our final exit from the school. Our eyes, probably, became more accustomed to the half-light; but whether or no this was the case, we managed to get down to the harbour as comfortably as if going there in broad day.

The brig which I had been on board of on many previous occasions, the Saucy Sall, of South Shields, was lying alongside the jetty in her old berth, with a plank leading up to the gangway; and, seeing a light in the fo'c's'le, I mounted up to her deck, telling Tom to follow me, making my way forwards towards the glimmer.

All the hands were ashore, carousing with their friends, with the exception of one man, who was reading a scrap of newspaper by the light of a sputtering dip candle stuck into a ship's lantern. He looked rather surprised at receiving a visit from me at such a time of night; but, on my telling him the circumstances of our case, he made us both welcome. Not only this, he brought out some scraps of bread and meat which he had stored up in a mess-tin, most likely for his breakfast, urging on us to "fire away," as we were heartily free to it, and regretting that was all he had with which to satisfy our hunger.

This man's name was Jorrocks, and he was the first seafaring acquaintance I had made when I had timidly crept down to the quay two years before during the summer vacation; thus, we were now old friends, so to speak. He told us, after we had polished the mess-tin clean, that the brig was going to sail in the morning, for Newcastle, with the tide, which would "make," he thought, soon after sunrise.

"Why, that'll be the very thing for us," I exclaimed. "Nothing can be better!"

But Jorrocks shook his head.

"I don't know how the skipper'd like it," he said doubtingly.

"Oh, bother him," interposed Tom; "can't you hide us somewhere till the vessel gets out to sea; and then, he'll have to put up with our presence whether he likes it or not?"

"What, hide you down below, my kiddies!" said the man, laughing. "Why, he'll larrup the life out of you with a rope's-end when he finds you aboard. I tell you what, he a'most murdered the last stowaway we had coming out of Shields two years ago!"

"Never mind that," I put in here; "we'll have to grin and bear it, and take monkey's allowance if he cuts up rough. All we want to do now is to get away from here; for, no matter how your captain may treat us, Dr Hellyer would serve us out worse if he caught us again! Do help us, Jorrocks, like a good fellow! Stow us away in the hold, or somewhere, until we are out of port."

Our united entreaties at last prevailed, Jorrocks consenting finally to conceal us on board the brig, although not until after much persuasion.
"Mind, though, you ain't going to split on who helped yer?" he provisoed.
"No, Jorrocks, we pledge our words to that," Tom and I chorused.
"Then, come along o' me," the good-natured salt said, and lifting the scuttle communicating with the hold forwards, he told us to get down into the forepeak, showing us how to swing by our hands from the coaming round the hole in the deck, as there was no ladder-way.
"There, you stow yourselves well forrud," he enjoined, as soon as we had descended, chucking down a spare tarpaulin and some pieces of canvas after us to make ourselves comfortable with. "Lie quiet, mind," he added as a parting injunction, "the rest of the hands and the skipper will be soon aboard, and it'll be all up if they finds you out afore we start."
"All right, we'll be as still as if we're dead," I said.
"Then, belay there," replied Jorrocks, shouting out kindly, as he replaced the hatch cover, which stopped up the entrance to our hiding place so effectually that the interior became as dark as Erebus. "Good, night, lads, and good fortune! I'll try and smuggle you down some breakfast in the mornin'."
"Thank you; good night!" we shouted in return, although we doubted whether he could hear us now the scuttle was on.
Thus left to ourselves, we scraped together, by feeling, as we could not see, the materials Jorrocks had supplied us with for a bed, on which we flung ourselves with much satisfaction, thoroughly tired out on account of the Doctor's having kept us standing up all day, in addition to the exertions we had since made in making our escape from school.
The novelty of our new situation, combined with its strange surroundings, kept us awake for a little time, but we were too much fatigued both in body and mind for our eyelids to remain long open; and soon, in spite of our daring escapade and the fact that the unknown future was a world of mystery before us, we were as snugly asleep as if in our beds in the dormitory at Dr Hellyer's—albeit we were down in the hold of a dirty coal brig, with our lullaby sung by the incoming tide, which was by this time nearly on the turn, washing and splashing by the bows of the vessel lying alongside the projecting jetty, in its way up the estuary of the river that composed the little harbour.
How long we had been in the land of dreams, and whether it was morning, mid-day, or night, we knew not, for a thick impenetrable darkness still filled the forehold where we were stowed; but, Tom and myself awoke to the joyful certainty that we were at sea, or must be so—not only from the motion of the brig, as she plunged up and down, with an occasional heavy roll to port or starboard; but from the noise, also, that the waves made, banging against her

bow timbers, as if trying to beat them in, and the trampling of the crew above on the deck over our heads.
We listened to these sounds for hours, unable to see anything and having nought else to distract our attention, until Tom, becoming somewhat affected by the smell of the bilge water in the hold as well as by the unaccustomed rocking movement of the brig, began to feel sea-sick and fretful.
"I declare this is worse than the Doctor's," he complained.
"We'll soon be let out," I said, "and then you'll feel better."

But, the friendly Jorrocks did not appear; and, at length, wearied out at last by our vain watching, we both sank off to sleep again on our uneasy couch.

After a time we woke up again. There was a noise as if the hatchway was being raised, and then the welcome gleam of a lantern appeared above the orifice.

It was Jorrocks come to relieve us, we thought; and so we both started up instantly.

The hour for our deliverance had not yet arrived, however.

"Steady!" cried our friend. "We're just off Beachy Head, and you must lie where you are till mornin'; but, as you must be famished by now, I've brought you a bit of grub to keep your pecker up. Show a hand, Master Martin!"

I thereupon stretched out upwards, and Jorrocks, reaching downwards, placed in my grip our old acquaintance of the previous night, the mess-tin, filled with pieces of beef and potatoes mixed up together, after which he shoved on the hatchway cover again, as if somebody had suddenly interrupted him.

I made a hearty meal, although Tom felt too qualmish to eat much, and then we both lay down with the assurance that our troubles would probably soon be over.

I suppose we went to sleep again, for it seemed but a very brief interval, when, awaking with a start, I perceived the hatchway open.

"Rouse up, Tom," said I, shaking him; "we'd better climb on deck at once."

"All right," replied Tom, jumping up, and he was soon on the fo'c's'le, with me after him.

“Who the mother’s son are you?” a gruff voice exclaimed; and, looking round, I saw the skipper of the brig advancing from aft, brandishing a handspike.

I immediately stepped forwards in front of Tom.

“We’ve run away to sea, sir,” I explained.

“So I see,” said the skipper, drawing nearer; “but, what right have you to come aboard my craft?”

“We couldn’t help it, sir,” I answered, civilly, wishing to propitiate him. “It was our only chance.”

“Oh, then you’ll find it a poor one, youngster,” said he grimly. “Boatswain!”

“Aye, aye, sir!” responded Jorrocks, stepping up.

“Do you know these boys?”

“I’ve seen ’em at Beachampton,” said our friend.

“You don’t know how they came aboard, eh?”

“No, I can’t say as how I can say, ’zactly, cap’en.”

“Well, then tie ’em up to the windlass and fetch me a rope’s-end. Now, my jokers,” added he, turning to us, “I’ve sworn to larrup every stowaway I ever finds in my brig, and I’m a going to larrup you now!”

Chapter Eight

"A Friend in Need"

Jorrocks had no option but, first, to proceed to pinion us, and then tie us separately to the windlass, using us as kindly as he could in the operation and with a sympathising expression on his face—that said as plainly as looks could speak, "I am really very sorry for this; but I told you what you might expect, and I can't help it!"

He afterwards went aft to the skipper's cabin, bringing forwards from thence a stout piece of cord, with the ends frayed into lashes like those of a whip, which had evidently seen a good deal of service. This "cat" he handed deferentially to the commander of the brig; who, seizing it firmly in his right fist, and holding the handspike still in his left, as if to be prepared for all emergencies, began to lay stroke upon stroke on our shoulders with a dexterity which Dr Hellyer would have envied, without being able to rival.

It was the most terrible thrashing that either Tom or myself had ever experienced before; and, long ere the skipper's practised arm had tired, our fortitude broke down so, that we had fairly to cry for mercy.

"You'll never stow yourself away on board my brig again, will you?" asked our flagellator of each of us alternately, with an alternate lash across our backs to give emphasis to his question, making us jump up from the deck and quiver all over, as we tried in vain to wriggle out of the lashings with which we were tied.

"No, I won't," screamed out Tom, the tears running down his cheeks from the pain of the ordeal. "I'll promise you never to put my foot within a mile of her, if you let me off!"

"And so will I, too," I bawled out quickly, following suit to Tom.

I can really honestly aver that we both meant what we said, most sincerely!

"All right then, you young beggars; that'll do for your first lesson. The thrashing will pay your footing for coming aboard without leave. Jorrocks, you can cut these scamps down now, and find them something to do in the fo'c's'le—make 'em polish the ring-bolts if there's nothing else on hand!"

So saying, the skipper, satisfied with taking our passage money out of our hides, walked away aft; while Jorrocks began to cast loose our lashings, with

many whispered words of comfort, which he was afraid to utter aloud, mixed up with comments on the captain's conduct.

"He's a rough customer to deal with—as tough as they make 'em," said he, confidentially, removing the last bight round Tom's body and setting him free; "but, he's all there!"

"So he is," said Tom, with much decision, rubbing his sore shoulders. "I will vouch for the truth of that statement!"

"And, when he says he'll do a thing, he allys does it," continued Jorrocks, in testimony to the skipper's firmness of purpose.

"He won't flog me again," said Tom, savagely, in answer to the boatswain's last remark.

"Nor me," I put in.

"Ah, you'd better keep quiet till you're ashore ag'in," advised our friend, meaningly. "You won't find much more harm in him than you've done already; and bye-and-bye, when he's got used to seeing you about, he'll be as soft and easy as butter."

"Oh yes, I can well believe that!" said Tom, ironically; but then, acting on the advice of Jorrocks, although more to save him from getting into a scrape on our behalf, than from any fear of further molestation from the skipper, against whom our hearts were now hardened, we bustled about the fo'c's'le, pretending to be awfully busy coiling down the slack of the jib halliards, and doing other odd jobs forward.

Up to this time, neither of us had an opportunity of casting a glance over the vessel to see where she was, our attention from the moment we gained the deck having been entirely taken up by the proceedings of the little drama I have just narrated, which prevented us from making any observations of themise en scène, whether inboard or over the side.

Now, however, having a chance of looking about me, my first glance was up aloft; and I noticed that the brig was under all plain sail, running before the wind, which was almost dead aft. Being "light," that is having no cargo on board beyond such ballast as was required to ensure her stability when heeling over, she was rolling a good deal, lurching from side to side as her canvas filled out to the breeze, with every fresh puff of air.

Away to the left, over our port beam, I could see land in the distance, which Jorrocks told me was the North Foreland—near Margate—a place that I knew by name of course, although this information did not give me any accurate idea of the brig's whereabouts; but, later on in the day, when the vessel had run some fifteen or twenty miles further, steering to the north-east, with the wind to the southward of west, we passed through a lot of brackish mud-coloured water, close to a light-ship, that my friend the boatswain said was the Kentish Knock, midway between the mouth of the Thames and wash of the Humber, and it was only then that I realised the fact, that we were running up the eastern coast of England and were well on our way to Newcastle, for which port, as I've intimated before, we were bound.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Tom, when I mentioned this to him. "We'll soon then be able to give that brute of a skipper the slip. I won't stop on board this horrid brig a minute longer than I can help, Martin, you may be certain!"

"Avast—belay that!" interposed Jorrocks, who was close behind, and heard this confession. "Don't you count your chickens afore they're hatched, young master! Take my word for it, the skipper won't let you out of his sight 'fore you've paid him for your grub and passage."

"But how can he, when we've got no money?" asked Tom.

"That makes no difference," said Jorrocks, with an expressive wink that spoke volumes. "You'll see if he don't make you work 'em out, and that'll be as good to him as if you paid him a shiner or two. You jest wait till we gets to Noocastle, my lad, and I specs you'll larn what coal-screening is afore you've done with it."

"And what if we refuse?" inquired Tom, to whom this grimy prospect did not appear over-pleasant.

"Why, there'll be larruping," replied the boatswain, significantly, with another expressive wink, and Tom was silenced; but, it was only for a moment, as he looked up again the instant afterwards with his usual bright expression.

"Perhaps it will be wisest to make the best of a bad job, Martin, eh?" he said, cheerfully. "We have only to thank ourselves for getting into this scrape, and the most sensible thing we can do now is to grin and bear whatever we've got to put up with."

This exactly agreed with my own conclusions, and I signified my assent to the sound philosophy of Tom's remark with my usual nod; but, as for Jorrocks, he was completely carried away with enthusiasm.

"Right you are, my hearty!" he cried, wringing Tom's hand in the grip of his brawny fist as if he would shake it off. "That's the sort o' lad for me! You've an old head on young shoulders, you have—you'll get on with the skipper, no fear; and me and my mates will make you both as com'able aboard as we can; theer, I can say no better, can I?"

"No," replied Tom, in an equally hearty tone.

The Saucy Sall being only of small tonnage, she had a correspondingly small crew, seven men and a boy—including the skipper and Jorrocks, and excluding ourselves for the present—comprising "all hands."

Of this number, one was aft now, taking his turn at the wheel, with the skipper standing beside him, while a couple of others were lounging about, ready to slacken off or haul taut the sheets; and the remainder, whose watch below it was, were seeing to the preparations for dinner—a savoury smell coming out from the fo'c's'le heads, that was most appetising to Tom and me, who were both longing to have once more a good hot meal.

Presently, the skipper shouted out something about "making it eight bells," whereupon Jorrocks took hold of a marlinspike, which he had seemingly ready for the purpose, striking eight sharp, quick blows on a little bell hanging right under the break of the little topgallant fo'c's'le, with which the old-fashioned coaster was built.

"That's the pipe down to dinner," he said to us in explanatory fashion. "Come along o' me, and I'll introduce you to yer messmates in proper shipshape way!"

Thereupon, we both followed Jorrocks into the dark little den in the fore-part of the vessel, with which Tom had first made acquaintance the night we went on board, after escaping from Dr Hellyer's, now four days since—a long while it seemed to us, although only so short an interval, from the experiences we had since gained, and our entirely new mode of life. The place was small and dark, with bunks ranged along either side, and a stove in the centre, at which one of the hands, selected as cook, was just giving a final stir to a steaming compound of meat, potatoes, and biscuit, all stewed up together, and dubbed by sailors "lobscouse."

Most of the crew I already knew, from my visits to the brig during vacation time; but, Tom being a comparative stranger—albeit all of them had witnessed the “striking proof” of the honour the skipper considered our coming on board had done him—Jorrocks thought best to introduce us in a set speech, saying how we were “a good sort, and no mistake”; and that, although we were the sons of gentlemen, who had “runned away from school,” we were going to shake in our lot with them “like one of theirselves.”

This seemed to go down as well as the stew, of which we were cordially invited to partake, that disappeared rapidly down our famished throats; and, thenceforth, we were treated with that good fellowship which seems natural to those who follow the sea—none attempting to bully us, or take advantage of our youth, and all eager to complete our nautical education to the best of their ability. Perhaps this was principally on account of Jorrocks constituting himself our friend and patron, and keeping a keen eye on our interests in the food department, so as to see that we had a fair share of what was going; but, at any rate, thus it was, for, with the exception of the skipper, we had no reason to complain of the treatment of any one on board the brig, from the time we joined her in the surreptitious manner I have described, to the moment of our leaving her.

Towards evening, the wind shifting more to the westwards and bearing on our quarter, the yards had to be braced round a bit and the jib sheet hauled in taut to leeward, giving Tom and me an opportunity of showing our willingness to bear a hand. Otherwise, however, until we arrived at Newcastle there was little to do in the way of trimming sails, as the wind was fair all the way, giving no occasion for reefing or furling canvas until we got into port. I don’t believe, either, we were out of sight of land once during the progress of the voyage; for, the skipper, like the commanders of most coasting craft, hugged the shore in navigating to and fro between the different places for which he was bound, never losing sight of one prominent landmark or headland till he could distinguish the next beyond, in the day-time, and steering by the lighthouses and floating beacons, by night.

If times had been easy for us so far, when we arrived at Newcastle we had terrible work to balance our good fortune in this respect.

Talk of galley slaves! no unfortunate criminals chained to the oar in the old days of that aquatic mode of punishment ever went through half what poor Tom and I did at this great coal centre of the north—none at least could have suffered so much in body and spirit from the effects of a form of toil, to which

the ordinary labour of a negro slave on a Cuban plantation would be as nothing!

The skipper never allowed us once to leave the vessel to go ashore, although all the other hands went backwards from brig to land as it seemed to please them, without any restraint being apparently put on their movements; but, whether our stern taskmaster was afraid of our “cutting and running” before he had his pound of flesh out of us, or whether he feared being called to account under the terms of the Merchant Shipping Act for having us on board without our names being on the brig’s books as duly licensed apprentices, when he might have been subjected to a penalty, I know not. The fact remains, that there he kept us day and night as long as we remained taking in a fresh cargo of coals. We never once set foot on land during our stay in port.

And the work!

We did not have to carry the bags of coal, as the rest of the crew did, from the wharf to the gangway of the vessel, as then we might have been seen; but we had to bear a hand over the hatches to shunt the bags down into the hold, into which we were afterwards sent with rakes and shovels to stow the rough lumps into odd holes and corners and make a smooth surface generally, until the brig was chock full to the deck-beams, when we couldn’t even creep in on our hands and knees to distribute the cargo further!

This job being finished, the hatches were battened down, and the brig made sail again for the south.

This time, our destination was further along the coast westwards, the collier brig proceeding to Plymouth instead of returning to our previous port of departure—a circumstance which rejoiced us both greatly, as we should not have liked to have been landed again at the place we had left: Dr Hellyer, perhaps, would have been more pleased to see us than we should have been to meet him!

The wind, on our return trip, was still westerly, and consequently against us; so I had no reason to complain of any lack of instruction in seamanship on this part of the voyage. It was “tacks and sheets”—“mainsail haul”—and “bout-ship”—“down anchor” as the tide changed, and “up with it!” again, when the flood or ebb was in our favour—all the way from the Mouse Light to Beachy Head!

In performing these various nautical manoeuvres, I had plenty of exercise aloft, so that my previous teaching, when I used to go down to the quay in the summer vacations on being left alone at school, stood me now in good stead; and in a little while I became really, for a lad of my years, an expert seaman, able to hand, reef, steer, and take a watch with any on board, long before we got to Plymouth!

But, it was not so with Tom.

The coal business, he thought, having no turn for colliery work, was bad enough; but, when it came to have to go aloft in a gale of wind and take in sail on a dark night, with the flapping canvas trying to jerk one off the yard, Tom acknowledged that he had no stomach to be a sailor—he preferred gymnastics ashore!

Although, otherwise, I had found him bold and fearless to desperation, he now evinced a nervous timidity about mounting the rigging that I didn't think he had in him. It seemed utterly unlike the dauntless Tom of old acquaintanceship on land.

He said that he really "funked" going aloft, for it made his head swim when he looked down. I told him that if he got in the habit of looking down at the water below whenever he ascended the shrouds, instead of its only making his head swim, as he now complained, it would inevitably result in his entire self being forced to do so! However, he said he could not possibly help it, and really I don't believe he could.

Some people are so constituted.

The upshot was that the skipper, noticing his inefficiency in the work of the ship, made him his cabin boy, in place of the lad who had hitherto occupied that enviable position, and whom he now sent forward amongst the other hands in the fo'c's'le.

But the change did not bring any amelioration to poor Tom's lot. It was "like going from the frying-pan into the fire;" for, now, my unfortunate chum, being immediately under the control of the skipper, who was a surly, ill-tempered brute at bottom, he paid him out for his laziness in "shirking work," as he termed the constitutional nervousness that he was powerless to fight against—Tom coming in for "more kicks than halfpence" by his promotion to the cabin,

and having “purser’s allowance” of all the beatings going, when the skipper was in one of his tantrums.

I got into a serious row with the brute for taking Tom’s part one day. In his passion, the skipper knocked me down with his favourite handspike, giving me a cut across my temple, the scar of which I’ll carry to my grave. My interference, however, saved Tom and myself any further ill-treatment, as I bled so much from the blow he gave me and was insensible so long, that the men thought the skipper had killed me. They accordingly remonstrated so forcibly with him on the subject that he promised to let us both alone for the future, at least so far as the handspike was concerned.

Fortunately, however, we were not much longer at the mercy of the brute’s temper; for, the morning after this, we reached Beachy Head, anchoring there to await the ebb tide down Channel, and the wind chopping round to the north-eastwards, made it fair for us all the way, enabling us to fetch Plymouth within three days.

Here, no sooner had the brig weathered Drake Island, anchoring inside the Cattwater, where all merchant vessels go to discharge their cargoes, than the skipper at once gave us notice to quit, almost without warning.

“Be off now, you lazy lubbers,” he cried, motioning us down into the Saucy Sall’s solitary boat, which had been got over the side, and which, with Jorrocks in charge of it, was waiting to take us ashore. “I’m glad to get rid of such idle hands; and you may thank your stars I’ve let you off so cheaply for your cheek in stowing yourselves away aboard my brig! You may think yourselves lucky I don’t give you in charge, and get you put in gaol for it!”

“You daren’t,” shouted back Tom, defiantly, as soon as he was safely down in the stern-sheets of the dinghy. “If you wanted to give us in charge, you ought to have done so in Newcastle, instead of making us work there for you like niggers. I’ve a great mind to have you up before the magistrates for your ill-treatment!”

This appeared to shut up the skipper very effectively, for he didn’t offer a word in reply; and, presently, Jorrocks landed us at the jetty stairs, close inside the Cattwater.

Our old friend seemed quite sorry to part with us; and, knowing our destitute condition, he kindly presented us with the sum of five shillings, which he said

was a joint subscription from all hands, who had “parted freely” when they learnt that we were about to be turned adrift from the brig, but which I believe mainly came out of his own pocket.

“Good-bye, my lads,” were his last words. “Keep your pecker up, and if you’ll take the advice of an old sailor, I’d recommend you to write to your friends and go home.”

“Much he knows of my Aunt Matilda!” I said to Tom, as we watched the good-hearted fellow pulling back to the old tub on board of which we had passed through so much. “If he were acquainted with all the circumstances of the case I don’t think he’d advise my going home at all events!”

“I’m not quite sure of that, Martin,” replied Tom, who was now thoroughly tired of everything connected with the sea, vowing that, after the experience he had gained, he would not go afloat again, to be made “Lord High Admiral of England!”

“Well, we’ll deliberate about it,” said I, as we turned away from the jetty and walked towards the town, where our immediate intention was to enter a coffee-shop and get a substantial breakfast out of the funds which Jorrocks had so thoughtfully provided us with.

Here, Tom’s fate was soon decided; for, we had not long been seated in a small restaurant where we had ordered some coffee and bread-and-butter, which were the viands we specially longed for, than an advertisement on the front page of an old copy of the Times caught my eye.

It ran thus:—

“If Tom L—, who ran away from school in company with another boy on the night of November the Fifth and is supposed to have gone to sea, will communicate with his distressed mother, all will be forgiven.”

“Why, Tom,” said I, reading it aloud, with some further particulars describing him, which I have not quoted—“this must refer to you!”

“So it does,” said he.

“And what will you do?” I asked him.

“Well, Martin, I don’t like to leave you, but then you know my mother must be so anxious, as I told you before, that I think I’d better write to her.”

I suggested a better course, however, as soon as I saw he wished to go home; and that was, that, as his mother lived not very far from Exeter, he should take the balance of the money we had left after paying for our breakfast, and go off thither by train at once.

This, after some demur, he agreed to; so, as soon as we had finished our meal and discharged the bill, which only took eightpence put of our store, we made our way to the railway station.

A train was luckily just about starting, and Tom getting a ticket for half-price, he and I parted, not meeting again until many days had passed, and then in a very different place!

When I realised the fact that Tom was gone, and that I was now left alone in that strange place, where I had never been in my life before, I felt so utterly cast down, that instinctively I made my way to the sea, there seeking that comfort and calm which the mere sight of it, somehow or other, always afforded me.

I got down, I recollect, on the Hoe, and, walking along the esplanade, halted right in front of the Breakwater, whence I could command a view of the harbour, with the men-of-war in the Hamoaze on my right hand, and the Cattwater, where the Saucy Sall was lying, on my left.

I was very melancholy, and after a bit I sat down on an adjacent seat; when, burying my face in my hands, I gave way to tears.

Presently, I was roused by the sound of a man’s voice close at hand, as if of some one speaking to me.

I looked up hastily, ashamed of being caught crying. However, the good-natured, jolly, weather-beaten face I saw looking into mine reassured me.

“Hullo, young cockbird,” said the owner of the face—a middle-aged, respectable, nautical-looking sort of man—speaking in a cheery voice, which went to my heart; “what’s the row with you, my hearty? Tell old Sam Pengelly all about it!”

Chapter Nine

Old Calabar Cottage

I don't know why, excepting that the words had a kindly ring about them, in spite of the almost brusque quaintness of the address, that touched me keenly in the depressed state of mind in which I was; but, instead of answering the speaker's pertinent question as to the reason of my grief, I now bent down my head again on my arm, sobbing away as if my heart would break.

But this only made the good Samaritan prosecute his inquiry further.

"Come, come, stow that, youngster," said he, taking a seat beside me on the bench, where I was curled up in one corner, placing one of his hands gently on my shoulder in a caressing way. "Look up, and tell me what ails you, my lad, and if Sam Pengelly can help you, why, there's his fist on it!"

"You—you—are very k–kind," I stammered out between my long-drawn sobs; "but—but—no—nobody can—help me, sir."

"Oh, nonsense, tell that to the marines, for a sailor won't believe you," he replied, briskly. "Why, laddie, anybody can help anybody, the same as the mouse nibbled the lion out of the hunter's net; and, as for Mr Nobody, I don't know the man! Look here, I can't bear to see a ship in distress, or a comrade in the doldrums; so I tell you what, young cockbird, raise your crest and don't look so peaky, for I'm going to help you if it's in my power, as most likely it is—that is, saving as how it ain't a loss by death, which takes us all, and which the good Lord above can only soothe, bringing comfort to you; and even then, why, a friendly word, and a grip o' some un's hand, sometimes softens down the roughest plank we've got to tread.

"I tell you, my hearty," he resumed again, after a brief pause, during which my sobs ceased, "I ain't a going to let you adrift, now I've borne down alongside and boarded you, my hearty—that's not Sam Pengelly's way; so you'd better make a clean breast of your troubles and we'll see what can be done for 'em. To begin with, for there's no use argufying on an empty stomach, are you hungry, eh?"

"No," I said with a smile, his cheery address and quaint language banishing my melancholy feelings in a moment, just as a ray of sunshine or two, penetrating the surface mist, that hangs over the sea and land of a summer morning before

the orb of day, causes it to melt away and disappear as if by magic, waking up the scene to life; “I had breakfast in the town about an hour ago.”

“Are you hard up?” was his next query.

“No,” I answered again, this time bursting into a laugh at the puzzled expression on his face; “I’ve got a shilling and a sixpence—there!” and I drew the coins from my pocket, showing them to him.

“Well, I’m jiggered!” murmured the old fellow to himself, taking off the straight-peaked blue cloth cap he wore, and scratching his head reflectively—as if in a quandary, and cogitating how best to get out of it. “Neither hard up or hungry! I call this a stiff reckoning to work out. I’d better try the young shaver on another tack. Got any friends?” he added, in a louder key—addressing himself, now, personally to me, not supposing that I had heard his previous soliloquy, for he had merely uttered his thoughts aloud.

This question touched me on the sore point, and I looked grave at once.

“No,” I replied, “I’ve got none left now, since Tom’s gone.”

“And who’s Tom?” he asked, confidentially, to draw me out.

Thereupon, I told him of my being an orphan, brought up by relatives who didn’t care about me, and all about my being sent to school. I also detailed, with much gusto, the way in which Tom and I had made our exit from Dr Hellyer’s academy, and our subsequent adventures in the coal brig, down to the moment when I saw the last of my chum as he steamed out of the Plymouth railway station in the Exeter train, leaving me desolate behind.

My new friend did not appear so very much amused by the account of our blowing up the Doctor as I thought he would be. Indeed, he looked quite serious about it, as if it were, no joking matter, as really it was not, but a very bad and mischievous piece of business. What seemed to interest him much more, was, what I told him of my longing for a sea-life, and the determination I had formed of being a sailor—which even the harsh treatment of the Saucy Sall’sskipper had in no degree banished from my mind.

“What a pity you weren’t sent in the service,” he said, meditatively, “I fancy you’d ha’ made a good reefer from the cut of your jib. You’re just the very spit of one I served under when I was a man-o’-war’s-man afore I got pensioned off, now ten year ago!”

“My father was an officer in the Navy,” I replied rather proudly. “He lost his life, gallantly, in the service of his country.”

“You don’t say that now?” exclaimed my questioner, with much warmth, looking me earnestly in the face; “and what may your name be, if I may be so bold? you haven’t told it me yet.”

“Martin Leigh,” I answered, promptly, a faint hope rising in my breast.

“Leigh?—no, never, it can’t be!” said the old fellow, now greatly excited. “I once knew an officer of that very name—Gerald Leigh—and he was killed in action up the Niger River on the West Coast, while attacking a slave barracoon, ten years ago come next March—”

“That was my father,” I here interposed, interrupting his reminiscences.

“Your father? You don’t mean that!”

“I do,” I said, eagerly, “I was four years old when Uncle George received the news of his death.”

“My stunsails!” ejaculated the old fellow, dashing his cap to the ground in a fever of excitement; and, seizing both my hands in his, he shook them up and down so forcibly that he almost lifted me off the seat. “Think of that now; but, I could ha’ known it from the sort o’ feeling that drew me to you when I saw you curled up here, all lonesome, like a cock sparrow on a round of beef! And so, Lieutenant Leigh was your father—the bravest, kindest officer I ever sailed under! Why, youngster, do you know who I am?”

He said this quite abruptly, and he looked as if he thought I would recognise him.

“No,” I said, smiling, “but you’re a very kind-hearted man. I’m sure, to take such an interest in a friendless boy like me.”

“Friendless boy, be jiggered!” he replied—“You’re not friendless from now, you can be sarten! Why, I was your father’s own coxswain in the Swallow, off the coast, and it was in my arms he died when he received that murdering nigger’s shot in his chest, right ’twixt wind and water. Yes! there’s a wonderful way in the workings o’ Providence—to think that you should come across me now when you needs a friend, one whom your father often befriended in old times, more like a brother than an officer! I thank the great Captain above,”—and the

old fellow looked up reverently here to the blue heaven over us as he uttered these last words—"that I'm allowed this marciful chance o' paying back, in a poor sort o' way, all my old commander's kindness to me in the years agone! Yes, young gentleman, my name's Sam Pengelly, and I was your father's coxswain. If he had ha' lived he'd have talked to you, sure enough, about me."

"I'm very glad to hear this," said I; and so I was, for my hopeful surmise had proved true.

"Well, laddie—you'll excuse my speaking to you familiar like, won't you?"

"Call me what you please," I answered, "I'm only too proud to hear your kind voice, and see your friendly face. I have had all nonsense about dignity and position knocked out of me long since!"

"Well, perhaps, that's all for the best—though mind, Master Leigh, being your father's son, you mustn't ever forget you've been born a true gen'leman, and don't you ever do an action that you'll have cause to be ashamed on! That's the only proper sort o' dignity a gen'leman's son need ever be partic'ler about, to make people recognise him for what he is; and, with this feeling and eddication, you'll take your proper place in the world, never fear! Now, what do you think about doing, my lad? for the day is getting on, and it's time to see after something."

"I'm sure I don't know," I replied. "I should like to go to sea, as I've told you. Not in a coasting vessel, like the coal brig, but really to pea, so as to be able to sail over the ocean to China or Australia; and, bye-and-bye, after awhile, as soon as I am old enough and have sufficient experience, I hope to command a ship of my own."

He had shown such sympathy towards me, that I couldn't help telling him all the wild dreams about my future which had been filling my mind for the last two years, although I had not confided them even to Tom, for I thought he would make fun of my nautical ambition.

Instead of laughing at me, however, my new friend looked highly delighted.

"I'm blessed if you aren't a reg'ler chip of the old block," he said admiringly, gazing into my face with a broad smile on his weather-beaten countenance, that made it for the moment in my eyes positively handsome. "There spoke my old lieutenant, the same as I can fancy I hear him now, the morning we rowed up the Niger to assault the nigger stockade where he met his death. 'Pengelly,'

sez he, in the same identical way as you first said them words o' yourn, 'I mean to take that prah,' and, take it he did, though the poor fellow lost his life leading us on to the assault! I can see, very plain, you've got it all in you, the same as he; and, having been a seafaring man all my life, first in the sarvice, and then on my own hook in a small way in the coasting line, in course I honours your sentiments in wishing to be a sailor—though it's a hard life at the best. Howsomedevers, 'what's bred in the bone,' as the proverb says, 'must come out in the flesh,' and if you will go to sea, why, you must, and I'll try to help you on to what you wish, as far as Sam Pengelly can; I can't say more nor that, can I?"

"No, certainly not, and I'm much obliged to you," I answered; for he made a pause at this point, as if waiting for my reply.

"Well, then, that's all settled and entered in the log-book fair and square; but, as all this can't be managed in a minute, and there'll be a lot of arrangements to make, s'pose as how you come home along o' me first? I'm an orphan, too, the same as yourself, with nobody left to care for or to mind me, save my old sister Jane, who keeps house for me; and she and I'll make you as welcome as the flowers in May!"

I demurred for a moment at accepting this kind proposal, for I was naturally of a very independent nature; and, besides, the lessons I had received in my uncle's household made me shrink from incurring the obligation of any one's hospitality, especially that of one with whom I had only such brief acquaintanceship, albeit he was "an orphan"—a rather oldish one, I thought—"like myself."

But my new friend would not be denied.

"Come on, now," he repeated, getting up from the seat, and holding out a big, strong hand to me, with such a beaming, good-natured expression on his face and so much genuine cordiality in his voice, that it was impossible for me to persist in refusing his invitation; the more particularly as, seeing me hesitate, he added the remark—"leastways, that is, unless you're too high a gen'leman to consort with an humble sailor as was your own father's coxswain!"

This settled the point, making me jump up in a jiffey; when, without further delay, he and I went off from the Hoe, hand in hand, in the direction of Stoke, where he told me he lived.

It was now nearly the middle of December, six weeks having passed by since the memorable Sunday on which I and Tom had made a Guy Fawkes of Dr Hellyer, and run away from school—the intervening time having slipped by quickly enough while on board the coal brig at Newcastle, and during our voyage down the coast again—but the weather, I recollect, was wonderfully mild for the time of year; and, as we walked past the terraces fronting the Hoe, the sun shone down on us, and over the blue sea beyond in Plymouth Sound below, as if it had been a summer day. Indeed, no matter what the weather might have been, I think it would have seemed fine and bright to me; for, I don't believe I had ever felt so happy in my life as I did when trudging along by Sam Pengelly's side that morning.

"You're a pretty strong-built chap for your age," said Sam, as we went along. "I suppose you're close on sixteen, eh?"

"Dear me, no," I laughed, light-heartedly. "Why, I'm only just fourteen! I told you I was four when my poor father was killed; and that, as you yourself said, happened ten years ago, so you can calculate yourself."

"Bless me, so you must be by all accounts; but, sure, you look fully two years older! Humph, you're a little bit too young yet to get apprenticed to the sea regularly as I thought of; but there's plenty o' time for us to study the bearings of it arter we fetch home. Come along, step out. I feel kind o' peckish with all this palavering, and thinks as how I could manage a bit of dinner pretty comfably, and it'll be just about ready by the time we reach Stoke, as Jane's mighty punctual to having it on the table by eight bells; step out, my hearty!"

Presently, turning off from the main road into a sort of bye-lane, my conductor finally stopped before the entrance porch of a neat little cottage, standing in a large garden of its own, that stretched away for some distance on either side. There was an orchard also in the rear, the fruit-trees of which, such was the mildness of the season, appeared ready to break into bud.

"Here's my anchorage, laddie," said he, with a wave of his hand—indicating the extent of his property.

"What a jolly little place!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he replied, with pardonable pride, "I set my heart on the little cabin years ago—afore I left the navy—and I used to save up my pay and prize money, so as to buy it in time. I meant it for mother, but she died before I could manage it; and then I bought it for myself, thinking that Jane and I would live here until we should be summoned for the watch on deck above, and that arter our time Teddy, my nephew, Jane's only boy, would have it. But, not long arter we settled down comfably, poor Teddy caught a fever, which carried him off; and Jane and I have gone on alone, ever since, with only our two selves."

“You must miss your nephew Teddy,” I said, sympathisingly, seeing a grave look on his face.
“Yes, laddie, I did miss him very much, but now, my cockbird,” and here his face brightened up with another beaming smile, as he laid a meaning emphasis on his words, “but now I fancy, somehow or other, I’ll not miss Teddy as much as I used to; d’ye know why?”
“No,” I said, hesitatingly, and somewhat untruthfully, for I pretty well guessed what he meant.
“Then I’ll tell you,” he continued, with much feeling and heartiness of expression, “I’ve christened this here anchorage o’ mine, ‘Old Calabar,’ in mem’ry o’ the West Coast, where I sarved under your father in the Swallow, as I told you just now; and, Master Leigh, as his son, I hope you’ll always consider the little shanty as your home, free to come and go or stay, just as you choose, and ever open to you with a welcome the same as now?”
What could I say to this?
Why, nothing.
I declare that I couldn’t have uttered a word then to have saved my life.
But he did not want any thanks.
Pretending not to notice my emotion, he went on speaking, so as to allow me time to recover myself.
“Rec’lect this, laddie,” said he, “that my sister Jane and I have neither chick nor child belonging to either of us, and that your presence will be like sunshine in the house. Come along in now, my boy. I’ll give Jane a hail to let her know we’re here in harbour, so that she can pipe down to dinner. Hi—hullo—on deck there!” and, raising his voice, in this concluding shout—just as if he were standing on the poop of a vessel in a heavy gale of wind and hailing a look-out man on the fore-crosstrees—he opened the door of the cottage, motioning me courteously to enter it first.

Chapter Ten

A Welcome Guest

The little hall, or passage way, opening out of the porch, in which I now found myself, was like the vestibule to a museum.

It was crammed full, from floor to ceiling, with all sorts of curios, brought from foreign parts, evidently by the worthy owner of the dwelling, when returning home after his many cruisings in strange waters—conch shells from the Congo and cowries from Zanzibar; a swordfish's broken spear from the Pacific, and a Fijian war-club; cases of stuffed humming-birds from Rio, and calabashes from the Caribbean Sea; a beautiful model, in the finest ivory work, of a Chinese junk on one side, vis-à-vis with a full-rigged English man-of-war on the other; and, above all, in the place of honour, the hideous body of a shark, displaying its systematic rows of triangularly arranged saw-like teeth, now harmless, but once ready to mangle the unwary!

All these objects, of course, immediately attracted my attention, but I had not much time for glancing round the collection; for, almost as soon as we got inside the little hall, a bright-faced middle-aged woman, with jet-black hair and eyes, the very image of my new friend, only much more comely in feature, stepped forward from a room opening out of the other end of the passage.

"Dear me, Sam, is that you?" she cried out in a voice closely resembling his in its cheery accents, although more musical by reason of its feminine ring; "I'm just dishing up, and dinner'll be ready as soon as the pasty's done."

Her brother did not apparently pay any attention to this highly important announcement for the moment.

"Come here, Jane," he said, "I've brought home a visitor."

With this she advanced, courtesying, her face changing as soon as she came nearer and saw who the stranger was.

"My, Sam!" she exclaimed, "who is he? Why, he's the very image of poor Ted!" and she raised the corner of her apron to her eyes as she spoke, as if to stop the ready-starting tears.

"Whoever do you think he is?" said Sam Pengelly, triumphantly; "look at him carefully, now. No, Jane, my woman, I don't believe you'd ever guess!"

“Who?”

“Why, the son of my good old commander, Lieutenant Leigh, of the Swallow, him as I’ve spun you so many yarns about! Why, Jane, my woman, I found the poor little laddie a desarted young orphan on the Hoe just now. He’s friendless, with never a home to go to; and so I asked him to come along o’ me, saying as how you’d welcome him to ‘Old Calabar’ the same as I.”

“And so I will, too, Sam,” replied the other, coming up to me and speaking; “I’m main glad to see you here, young gentleman, for I’ve often heard Sam talk of your father, saying how good and kind he was to him. You’re heartily welcome to our little home. My gracious, Sam!” she added, turning aside and using her apron again; “he’s as like my Ted as two peas! I can’t help it!” and so saying, she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me.

The action somewhat confused me; for, it was the first motherly caress I had ever experienced in my life. Aunt Matilda, you may be sure, never once thought of so greeting me!

“Avast there, Jane,” laughed out Sam, much pleased at the way in which his sister had received me. “What d’ye mean by boarding my prize in that fashion? But I’m glad you think he’s like Teddy—it will make it more like old times and home-like for us to have the laddie with us.”

“Aye, and he can have Ted’s room,” answered the other—all eagerness now to see to my being completely arranged for—“I think the poor boy’s clothes will fit him too.”

“So they will, and just in time, too, for he wants a new rig,” said her brother, casting a critical eye over my wardrobe, which had not been improved by my stay on board the coal brig.

We then proceeded to enter a nice roomy old-fashioned kitchen, with a cleanly-scoured floor like the deck of a man-of-war, and all resplendent with rows of plates and burnished pewter pots and dish-covers, where we had, what I considered both then and now to be, the best dinner I had ever eaten in my life, winding up with an apple tart that had Devonshire cream spread over it like powdered sugar—a most unparalleled prodigality of luxury to my unaccustomed eyes and palate!

Afterwards, I was shown a little room at the back, looking out into the garden, which had been formerly occupied by Teddy. Of this I was now put in formal

possession, along with a good stock of clothes which the bereaved mother had carefully preserved in the chest-of-drawers in one corner, just as if her boy had been still living, all ready for use. These, she now told me, with tears in her eyes, I was heartily welcome to, if I were not too proud to accept them, as, in wearing them, she said, I should make her think that she yet had poor Ted to comfort her, and I would take his vacant place in her heart. The good woman, however, with housewifely care, brought up to the room a large tub with a plentiful supply of hot water and soap, so that I might have "a thorough wash," as she called it, before putting on the clean clothes. Thus, through the kind hospitality of brother and sister alike, before the day was out, I was as thoroughly at home in the household as if—having stepped into the lost Teddy's shoes metaphorically as well as practically—I had lived there for years!

It would take a volume for me to tell of all the kindness I received from these people, the brother and sister vying with each other in their endeavours to make me feel comfortable and at ease with them in my new home.

Sam Pengelly, thinking it the right thing to do, wrote to Uncle George, informing him where I now was; and saying, that, if my relatives had no objection, he should like to be allowed to look after my future as if I were his own son.

To this a reply soon came, to the effect that, as I had of my own will thrown away all the advantages that had been secured for me in putting me to a good school and holding out the offer of a situation afterwards in a merchant's office, my uncle "washed his hands of me" on account of my ungrateful and abandoned behaviour; and that, henceforth, he did not care what became of me, nor would he be answerable for my support!

"That's a good 'un," said Sam Pengelly, as he read this. "That cranky Aunt Matilda, you told me about, laddie, must ha' had a hand in this, sartin; for, perhaps you don't know that I've diskivered as your uncle drawed what they calls a 'compassionate allowance' from My Lords of th' Admiralty for your keep all them years they starved you under their roof and pretended you was livin' on their charity!"

Sam Pengelly looked quite fierce and indignant as he made this, to me, new revelation.

"Really?" I asked him, eagerly.

“Yes, laddie, it’s true enough, for I’ve taken the pains to find it out for a fact from a friend o’ mine at head-quarters. Th’ Admiralty allers give an annual ’lowance for the support of the childer o’ them officers as is killed in action, that is when their folks are left badly off; and some one must ha’ put up your uncle to this, for he took precious good care to draw it every year you was along o’ him.”

“Oh, I’m so glad!” I exclaimed, joyfully. “I only wish, though, I had known it before, so that I could have thrown it back in Aunt Matilda’s teeth when she used to tell me that I was robbing her children of their bread every meal I took in the house, taunting me with being only a pauper!”

“Never mind that now,” said Sam Pengelly—quite his composed, calm, genial self again, after the little ebullition he had given way to on my behalf. “Better let byegones be byegones. It is a good sailin’ direction to go upon in this world; for your cross old aunt will be sartin to get paid out some time or other for her treatment o’ you, I’ll wager! Howsomedevers, I’m glad we’ve got that letter from your uncle, though. You see, laddie, it cuts them adrift altogether from any claim on you; and now, if you be so minded, you can chuck in your lot with old Sam and his sister—that is, unless you want to sheer off and part company, and desart us?”

“Oh no, I’ll never do that if I can help it,” I replied, earnestly. “Why, I did not know what it was to be happy and cared for till I met you, and you brought me here to your home. I shall never willingly, now, leave you here—that is, except you want me to.”

“Then, that’ll be never,” said he, with an emphasis and a kindly smile that showed his were no empty words.

Nor did they prove to be as time rolled on.

For many months after that casual meeting of ours on the Hoe, which I little thought was going to lead to such happy consequences, the little cottage at Stoke was my home in winter and summer alike; when Nature was gay in her spring dress, and when dreary autumn came; although, it was never dreary to me, no matter what the season might be.

In the summer months I used generally to accompany Sam in the short trading trips he made in a little foretopsail schooner—of which he was the registered owner, and generally took the command—when we would fetch a compass for

Falmouth or Torquay, and other small western ports; between which places and Plymouth the schooner went to and fro when wind and weather permitted.

Sometimes, tempted by the inducement that early potatoes and green peas were plentiful and cheap at Saint Mary's, Sam would venture out as far as the Scilly Isles; and once, a most memorable voyage, we made a round trip in the little craft to the Bristol Channel and back—facing all the perils of the "twenty-two fathom sandbank" off Cape Cornwall, with its heavy tumbling sea.

This was not time wasted on my part; for I had not forgotten my ambition of being a sailor, and now, under Sam Pengelly's able tuition I was thoroughly initiated into all the practical details of seamanship, albeit I had not yet essayed life on board ship in an ocean-going vessel.

Sam Pengelly said, that, at fourteen, I was too young to be apprenticed regularly to the sea, and that it would be much better for me to wait until I should be able to be of use in a ship, and get on more quickly in navigation. Going to sea before would only be lost time, for I could gain quite as much experience of what it was necessary for me to know in the schooner along with him, until it was time for me to go afloat in real earnest.

This was what my old friend advised; and, although he declared himself willing to forward my wishes should they go counter to his own views, I valued his opinion too highly to disagree with it, judging that his forty years' experience of the sea must have taught him enough to know better than I about what was best in the matter.

My life, therefore, for the two intervening years, after I had run away from school and before I went actually to sea, was a very even and pleasant one—cut off completely, as it was, from all the painful past, and the associations of Aunt Matilda and Dr Hellyer's. I had heard once from Tom, my whilom chum, it is true, telling me that his mother had persuaded him to go back to the Doctor's establishment, and that I should not have any further communication from him in consequence—which I didn't; and there was the one letter from Uncle George to Sam Pengelly, "washing his hands of me," which I have already alluded to. With these, however, all connection with my former existence ceased; and I can't say I regretted it, cherished as I now was in the great loving Cornish hearts of Sam and Jane Pengelly.

Sam would not let my education be neglected, however.

“No, no, laddie, we must keep a clear look-out on that,” he often said to me. “If I had only had eddication when I was in the sarvice, I’d ha’ been a warrant officer with a long pension now, instead o’ having a short one, and bein’ ’bliged to trust to my own hands to lengthen it out. If you wants to be a good navigator, you must study now when you’re young; for arterwards it will be no use, and you may be as smart a sailor as ever handled a ship, and yet be unable to steer her across the ocean and take advantage of all the short cuts and currents, and so on, that only experienced seamen and those well up in book knowledge can know about.”

Acting on this reasoning, he got the master of a neighbouring school to give me after-time lessons in mathematics and geography; and, in the course of a few months, I was able to be inducted into the mysteries of great circle sailing and the art of taking lunars, much to the admiration of Sam, whom I’m afraid I often took a delight in puzzling with trigonometrical phrases that sounded full of portentous difficulty, albeit harmlessly easy.

As time went on, although I was happy enough at the cottage, I was continually asking Sam if he had found me a ship yet, he having promised to “keep his eye open” and let me know as soon as he saw a good opportunity of placing me with some captain with whom I was likely to learn my nautical calling well and have a chance of getting on up the ladder; but, as regularly as I asked him the question, the old salt would give me the same stereotyped answer—“No, laddie, our ship’s not got into port yet. We must still wait for an offing!”

But at last, after many days, this anxiously awaited “offing” was, much to my satisfaction, apparently thought within reach by my old friend.

One morning I did not accompany him as usual into Plymouth after breakfast, where the old fellow regularly proceeded every morning—never feeling happy for the day unless he saw the sea before dinner. I was busily engaged trimming up a large asparagus bed in the garden, wherein my adopted mother took considerable interest.

I recollect the morning well.

It was just at the beginning of summer, and the trees were all clothed in that delicately-tinged foliage of feathery green, which they lose later on in the season, while the ground below was covered with fruit blossoms like snowflakes, a stray blue flag or daffodil just springing up from the peaty soil, gleaming out amidst the vegetable wealth around, and the air perfumed with a

delicious scent, of the wallflowers that were scattered about the garden in every stray nook and corner.

Sam was late on his return.

“Eight bells,” his regular hour, had struck without his well-known voice being heard hailing us from the porch; and it was quite half-past twelve before the customary shout in the porch of the cottage told of his arrival, for I was keeping strict watch over the time, having been rendered extra hungry by my exertions in the garden—our dinner being postponed till the missing mariner came.

However, “better late than never,” says the old proverb; and here he was now—although as soon as I saw him I noticed from his face that something unusual and out-of-the-way had happened, his expression always disclosing if anything was on or in his mind, and being a sad tell-tale.

He did not wait to let me ask, though.

“Hullo!” he cried, as soon as he came into the kitchen-parlour, where the principal meal of the day was invariably partaken of, “I’ve got some news for you.”

“A ship?” I said, questioningly.

“Yes—an A1 too, my hearty.”

“Hurrah!” I exclaimed—“Going a long voyage?”

“To Callao and back again, on a round trip.”

“Better and better still,” I said, in high glee, in which Sam Pengelly shared with a kindred feeling, while his sister put up her apron to her eyes, and began to cry at the idea of my going to sea. “Is she a large vessel?”

“Aye, aye, my cockbird. A barque of a thousand tons, or more, and her name’s the Esmeralda.”

Chapter Eleven

Signing Articles

"She's loading at Cardiff—cargo o' steam coals, I b'lieve, for some o' them Pee-ruvian men-o'-war out there," explained Sam, presently, when the first excitement occasioned by his announcement of the news had somewhat calmed down. "It's lucky, laddie, as how the schooner's all ready for sailing, as I thought o' fetching down to Saint Mary's morrer mornin', arter some new taties; but the taties must wait now, and I fancy as how this arternoon tide'll sarve jest as well for us—the wind's right fair for the Lizard, too!"

"What, Sam—you don't mean that, really?" exclaimed Jane Pengelly, not expecting such a hurried sending of me off to sea. "Surely not so soon, my man, eh?" She was almost breathless with grief and surprise.

"Aye, but I do mean it," persisted he. "The shep's a loadin' now, I tell you, and she oughter start on her v'yage in a fortnight's time at th' outside; and if you reckon as how we'll take a week to reach Cardiff, we'll ha' no time to lose, for, if the wind changes arter we rounds the Longships, we'll ha' all our work cut out to beat up the Bristol Channel, in time to see the lad comf'ably off!"

"My, Sam! couldn't you take the train across country to Cardiff, when you'd all ha' more time for getting ready, and I could see to mending all the poor dearie's things before he goes for—it'll be the last sight I'll ever see of his blessed face?"

Jane Pengelly said this timidly, wiping her eyes carefully, with each corner of her apron in turn; for, she well knew her brother's horror of the railway, and all conveyances—indeed, he disliked any mode of land travelling, save on foot, or "on Shank's mare," as he called it, which was the plan he invariably adopted for reaching such places which he could not get to by water.

"Why, Jane, my woman," Sam indignantly rejoined; "your brains must all be a wool-gathering! Catch me and the lad agoing by that longshore schreechin', smokin', ramshacklin' fire engine, when we can ha' a boat's sound plank under our foot, and sail over the sea in a nat'ral sort o' way, such as we're born to! You're the last person to think as how Sam Pengelly 'd desart his colours and bringing-up, for to go over to such an outlandish way o' fetching the port for which he's bound! No, Jane—I ain't angry, but I feels hurt a bit on the h'insinivation—but there, let it be. We'll go round to Cardiff in the schooner, as is as smart a little craft for a passage boat as ere a one could wish to clap eyes

on, though I says it as shouldn't, and we'll start, laddie, this arternoon, as soon as the tide sets down Channel; so, you'd better see after your traps, and stow your chest when dinner's over—and then, we'll get under weigh, and clear outwards!"

Little dinner, however, was eaten that day at the cottage, notwithstanding the fact that Jane Pengelly, as a reward for my industry in making up and remoulding her asparagus bed, had concocted a favourite Cornish dish for our repast, y'clept a "Mevagissey pie" - a savoury compound consisting of alternate slices of mutton and layers of apples and onions cut into pieces, and symmetrically arranged, the whole being subsequently covered with a crust, pie-fashion, and then baked in the oven until well browned; when, although the admixture seems somewhat queer to those unused to a Cornish cuisine, the result is not by any means to be despised; rather is it uncommonly jolly!

Generally, this dish would have been considered a tour de force on the table, and not much left of it after our united knife and fork play when operations had once begun; but now, albeit Sam Pengelly made a feeble pretence of having a tremendous appetite, failing most ridiculously in the attempt, while his sister heaped up my plate, we were all too much perturbed in our minds to do justice to the banquet. So it was that the Mevagissey pie, toothsome as it was, went almost untasted away, Jane removing the remains presently to the larder—that was, as she said, but I could not help noticing that she did not return afterwards to clear away the dinner things and make matters tidy in the kitchen, as was her regular custom when we had finished meals.

I soon found out the reason of this, when, on going up shortly afterwards to my little room, I discovered the soft-hearted creature bending over the sea-chest which I had been presented with—in addition to her son Teddy's clothes and other property—"having a good cry," as she said in excuse for the weakness.

From some cause or other, she had taken to me from the moment her brother Sam first brought me to the cottage, placing me in the vacant spot in her heart left by Teddy's early death, and I am sure my own mother, if she had lived, could not have loved me more.

Of course I reciprocated her affection—how could I help it, when she and her brother were the only beings in the world who had ever exhibited any tenderness towards me?

Strangely enough, however, she would never allow me to call her “mother” or “Mistress Pengelly,” as I wanted to—thinking “Jane” too familiar, especially when applied by a youngster like myself to a middle-aged woman.

No, she would not hear of my addressing her otherwise than by her Christian name.

“If you calls me Missis anything, dearie, mind if I don’t speak to you always as ‘Master Leigh’—that distant as how you won’t know me,” she said; so, as she always said what she meant, I did as she wished, and she continued to style me her “dearie,” that being the affectionate pet name she had for me, in the same way as her brother Sam had dubbed me his “cockbird,” when he first introduced himself to me on the Hoe, a mode of address which he still persisted in.

I may add, by the way, to make an end of these explanations, that Jane Pengelly had married her first cousin on the father’s side, as the matter was once elaborately made plain to me; consequently, she was not compelled, as most ladies are, to “change her name” when she wedded Teddy’s sire, and still retained after marriage her ancestral patronymic—which was sometimes sported with such unction by her brother, when laying down the law and giving a decided opinion.

Partings are sad things, and the sooner they are over the better. So Sam thought too, no doubt, for he presently hailed us both to come down-stairs, as time was up, and a man besides waiting with a hand-truck to trundle my chest down to the quay in the Cattwater, off which Sam’s little schooner was lying.

Thereupon, Jane giving me a final hug, my chest was bundled below in a brace of shakes, and Sam and I, accompanied by the man wheeling the truck, were on our way down the Stoke Road towards Plymouth—a lingering glance which I cast behind, in order to give a farewell wave of the hand to my second mother, imprinting on my memory every detail of the little cottage, with its clematis-covered porch, and the bright scarlet geraniums and fuchsias in full bloom in front, and Jane Pengelly’s tearful face standing out amidst the flowers, crying out a last loving “good-bye!”

We reached the schooner in good time so as to fetch out of the Sound before the tide ebbed, and, after clearing the breakwater, as the wind was to the northward of east, Sam made a short board on the port tack towards the Eddystone, in order to catch the western stream—which begins to run down

Channel an hour after the flood, when about six miles out or so from the land, the current inshore setting up eastwards towards the Start and being against us if we tried to stem it by proceeding at once on our true course.

When we had got into the stream, however, and thus had the advantage of having the tideway with us, Sam let the schooner's head fall off; and so, wearing her round, he shaped a straight course for the Lizard, almost in the line of a crow's flight, bringing the wind nearly right aft to us now on the starboard tack as we ran before it. We passed abreast of the goggle-eyed lighthouse on the point which marks the landfall for most mariners when returning to the English Channel after a foreign voyage, close on to midnight—not a bad run from Plymouth Sound, which we had left at four o'clock in the afternoon.

It was a beautiful bright moonlight night, the sea being lighted up like a burnished mirror, and the clear orb making the distant background of the Cornish coast come out in relief, far away on our western bow. The wind being still fair for us, keeping to the east-nor'-east, Sam brought it more abeam, bearing up so that he might pass between the Wolf Rock and the Land's End, striking across the bight made by Mount's Bay in order to save the way we would have lost if he had taken the inshore track, like most coasters—and, indeed, as he would have been obliged to do if it had been foggy or rough, which, fortunately for us, it wasn't.

By sunrise next morning we had fetched within a couple of miles of the Longships; when, bracing round the schooner's topsail yard and sailing close-hauled, with the wind nearly on our bow, we ran for Lundy Island in the British Channel.

I never saw any little craft behave better than the schooner did now, sailing on a bowline being her best point of speed, as is the case with most fore and aft rigged vessels. She almost "ate into the wind's eye;" and, although the distance was over a hundred miles from the Longships, she was up to Lundy by nightfall, on this, the second day after leaving home.

From this point, however, we had to beat up all the way to Cardiff, as the easterly wind was blowing straight down the Bristol Channel, and consequently dead in our teeth, as soon as we began to bear up. It was a case of tack and tack about—first a long leg over to the Mumbles on the starboard tack, followed by a corresponding reach towards Dunkery Beacon on the port hand; backwards and forwards, see-saw, turn and turn about, until, finally, we

rounded Penarth Heads, arriving at our destination on the afternoon of our fourth day from Plymouth.

We got to Cardiff none too early, either.

The Esmeralda having completed loading in her cargo sooner than the owners had expected, had cast-off from the jetty and was now lying in the stream off the harbour. She was quite ready to start on her voyage, and seemed longing to be on the move, for her topsails were hanging loose and the courses were in the brails, so that they could be let fall and sheeted home at a moment's notice.

We could see this for ourselves, as we rounded close under the vessel's stern when running into the harbour; and further particulars of the ship's readiness to set sail we learnt at the agent's ashore, with whom Sam Pengelly had been in communication for some time, unknown to me, with reference to having me articled as a first-class apprentice in one of their best ships. The good-hearted fellow, too, without my knowledge, although I learnt this later on, had entered into an agreement to pay a good round sum as a premium for me in order that I might have accommodation aft and mess with the officers.

Sam enlightened me about some of these particulars, mentioning the arrangements he had made for my comfort, while we were making our trip round to the Bristol Channel in the schooner, our departure from the cottage having been too hurried for me to gain any information on the point, save the great fact of my being about to go to sea at last. The reason for the delay in this, Sam now explained to me, was on account of the absence of the Esmeralda on a long round voyage to the China seas and back, my worthy old friend having picked that vessel out from amongst the many that had put into Plymouth since I had been with him, and which he had overhauled for the special purpose in view, because of her staunch sailing qualities and the clipper-like cut of her lines, besides his personal knowledge that she was "commanded by a skipper as knew how to handle a shep," as he said, "so as a b'y might expect to larn somethin' under him," and he had therefore set his heart on my going in her.

We had not now been long at the agent's, from the windows of whose small office we could see the barque riding at her moorings, before this identical gentleman came bustling in as if in a most desperate hurry.

"Why, here he is!" ejaculated Sam aside to me as he entered, saying to the other as he took off his cap with one hand and shoved out his other fist in

greeting, “Sarvent, sir, Cap’en Billings; how d’ye find yourself since we last met in Plymouth Sound?”

“Oh, is that you, Pengelly?” responded the skipper of the Esmeralda cordially, accepting Sam’s proffered hand and shaking it heartily, “I was just thinking of you and your boy—have you brought him with you?”

“Aye, there’s the b’y,” replied Sam, pushing me forward affectionately, “and a right good straight up and down youngster you’ll find him, Cap’en Billings, with all the makings of a sailor in him, I tell you, sure’s my name’s Sam Pengelly!”

“Well, I’ll take your word for that,” laughed the other.

He seemed to me at first sight a genial good-tempered man—with rough reddish hair and beard, and a pair of merry twinkling blue eyes; but I could also see, from a quick sharp look he threw over me, reckoning me up from top to toe, that he’d all his wits about him and was used to command.

He looked like one of those sort of fellows that wouldn’t be trifled with when roused.

“I’m glad to see you, Leigh, and have you with me,” he said to me, affably—although he didn’t offer to shake hands, some distance lying between the position of a skipper and an apprentice. “You’re lucky to be just in time, though, for we’re all ready to sail as soon as the tide serves for us to cross the outer bar and be off. Got all the papers ready, Mr Tompkins?”

“Yes, captain,” replied the agent. “Here they are; Leigh and Mr Pengelly have just signed them.”

“All right then. If you’ll come along with me over to the Marine Superintendent’s office,” said Captain Billings, to us two, “we’ll have the signatures witnessed to these indenture articles; and then the thing’ll be all settled, and the boy can come aboard at once.”

“Heave ahead, my hearty,” replied Sam. “We’re both ready and willing;” and thereupon we all adjourned to the presence of the responsible official of the port entrusted with the supervision of all matters connected with the mercantile marine, in whose presence I was formally bound apprentice to the captain of the Esmeralda.

These preliminaries duly arranged, Sam Pengelly had some further dealings of a private nature with the captain and agent, in which the chinking of gold coin had apparently a good deal to do; and then he and I, at the skipper's invitation, taking our seats in a boat that was lying by the side of the jetty started off for the Esmeralda, whither Sam had previously directed one of the schooner's men to have my sea-chest removed while we went on to the agent's.

Really, I could not explain the mingled feelings of hope, joy, pride, and satisfaction, that had filled my breast at the thought that I was really going to sea, and having the darling wish of my heart at last gratified—my contentment much increased by my overhearing a whispered comment of my new captain to Sam Pengelly, that I "wasn't a pigeon-toed landsman, thank goodness!" He said he could see that from the manner in which I put my feet on the side cleats, as I got out of the boat and swung myself up to the gangway.

"Now at length," thought I, speaking of myself in Sam's fashion, as if I were some other person—"Martin Leigh you are going afloat at last!"

And, although I was only an humble reefer in the merchant service, whose spick-and-span uniform of blue serge and gold-banded cap had never yet smelt salt water to christen them, I felt as proud on first stepping "on board the Esmeralda" as Nelson must have done, when standing on the quarter-deck of theVictory and seeing her close with the Spanish fleet immediately after his famous signal was displayed—"England expects every man this day to do his duty!"

Chapter Twelve

Making "Westing"

She was a fine-looking barque—as Sam had explained to me beforehand, when first telling me the news of his having secured a berth for me aboard her—with a good forecastle and clean run of deck aft to the poop, saving a small deck-house amidships, on a line with the cook's caboose, where were the separate cabins devoted to the use of the boatswain and carpenter.

Captain Billings showed us over her, pointing out the special arrangements for the comfort of his officers; and then, much to my surprise, and to that of Sam as well, for that matter, although he had stipulated for good treatment on my behalf, the skipper said that I could have an empty bunk to myself, alongside of the boatswain's quarters.

It was almost too good to be true!

"Why, laddie, you'll be a blessed sight better off than if you were a middy aboard a man o' war!" said Sam, exultantly; but, whilst he was engaged showing me how to put my chest and stow my things, so as to be easily within reach and yet out of the way, in order not to encroach on the limited space at my command, our attention was drawn away from the consideration of such personal matters by the loud hail of Captain Billings ringing through the ship fore and aft—

"All hands, make sail!"

The pilot had come off from shore in the same boat with us; and, as the only thing the Esmeralda had been awaiting was the water to rise sufficiently for her to cross the bar, Cardiff being a tidal harbour, now that it was approaching the flood, it was time to make ready for a start. We were going to make a move "while the day was yet young," so to speak, for it was only about five o'clock yet in the afternoon.

On hearing the skipper's cry, Sam and I at once made our way aft up the ladder on to the poop, where Captain Billings was standing, shouting out his orders, according to the directions of the pilot standing beside him—that gentleman, while in charge, being commanding officer, having the precedence of a captain even on board his own ship!

I was all eagerness to assist, and anxious to enter on my duties; but the skipper motioned me aside, saying that he'd put me into a watch and give me regular work to do as soon as we had got fairly to sea, for he "didn't want any idlers hanging round them to encumber the men." So, acting on the principle that "a nod was as good as a wink to a blind horse," I sheered over to the other side of the deck. Here, Sam Pengelly was standing by the taffrail, and from this coign of vantage we both watched with much interest the operation of getting the ship under weigh.

The vessel's topsails, as I have mentioned before, were already cast loose from the gaskets and her courses hung in the brails, while she was lying in the stream, heading almost due south and facing the entrance of the harbour, into which the tide was still running and, consequently, keeping her cable as taut as a fiddle-string; but now, on the captain's command causing the hands to man the topsail halliards and run up the yards to the mast-head, the ponderous folds of canvas expanded with the wind, which was still to the nor'-east and blowing from aft, and the ship, in spite of the incoming tide, surged up to her anchor, bringing it right under her fore foot, thus slackening the strain on the cable.

Another party of the crew, meanwhile, under the superintendence of the boatswain, had manned the windlass, bringing in the cable slack with a "slip-slap" and "click-clack" of the pall, as the winch went round, the moment the skipper's warning cry, "Hands up anchor," was heard from aft.

"Hove short, sir," then sang out the boatswain.

"Up with it, then, men," returned the skipper; and in another minute, for we were only in some six-fathom water, the anchor-stock showed itself above the surface and was run up to the cathead.

Now, free from the ground, the bows of the vessel began to rise and fall as she curtsied politely to the stream, which was just on the turn, preparing to bid adieu to Cardiff harbour; so, Captain Billings himself jumped from where he had been standing, by the pilot's side, to the wheel, making the spokes rapidly fly round until the helm was hard up, putting the ship before the wind and steering towards the mouth of the harbour ahead.

"Sheet home!" was the next order; and, with a "yo-heave-ho," the clews of the topsails were hauled out to the end of the yards, while the clewgarnet blocks rattled as the main sheet was brought aft; then, the yards were braced round a

bit to the starboard and the vessel headed out into the Channel, with the wind on her quarter, on the port tack.

“Hoist away the jib!” shouted out Captain Billings, on this much being achieved; when the Esmeralda began to gather way, the bubbles now floating past astern as she commenced to move through the water—at first slowly, and then with more speed, as the sails, already set, filled and drew.

“Look smart there, men, and run away with those halliards,” echoed the mate, repeating the captain’s order anent the jib; and the Esmeralda, being now well under control of her helm, a picked hand came aft to take Captain Billings’ place at the wheel, of which he had retained charge until now, while another man was put in the main chains with the lead, heaving it at intervals and chanting out the soundings in a monotonous sing-song drawl of “By the mark, four,” and so on, until we reached six-fathom water, and then “The deep nine!”

All this time we had been heading over to the Somersetshire shore; but when we were a couple of miles or so out from Cardiff, the pilot told the skipper that it was time to come about, as we had got into the proper fairway of the Channel and our course now should be west instead of south.

Captain Billings didn’t need a second hint as to what he should do.

“Hands ’bout ship!” he roared out the instant the pilot had spoken, the mate and boatswain repeating as before the order after him in turn, and the man at the wheel putting down the helm instanter.

“Helm’s a lee!” shouted the skipper, the head sheets being let go as he spoke, and the jib flattened on the vessel going into stays.

“Raise tacks and sheets!” and the fore-tack and main sheets were cast-off, while the weather main brace was hauled taut.

“Mainsail haul!” was the next order; when, on the heavy yard swinging round, the Esmeralda came up to the wind slowly, as if casting a long, lingering farewell look at the Welsh coast, in deep regret at leaving it.

The head yards were then braced round, the fore-tack boarded, and the mainsheet hauled aft; after which the spanker was set, and the men sent aloft to loosen the topgallant sails, the yards of which had been crossed while we were still at anchor, so as to be ready when wanted. The ship then filled away again on the port tack, starting off with renewed speed, in a due west direction

now, down the Bristol Channel, with the wind, which was on her beam, blowing at the rate of about an eight-knot breeze.

“We’ve made a good start, Pengelly,” said Captain Billings, coming up to where we were still standing, rubbing his hands cheerfully together and seemingly much at ease now that we were well under way. “It isn’t often one gets a nor’-east wind at this time of year, hereabouts, and when we do chance upon it, why, there’s no use in wasting it.”

“Sartinly not, Cap’en Billings,” responded Sam; “them’s jest my sentiments! I suppose as you’ll be a’most out of the Channel by mornin’, if the wind holds?”

“Aye, we ought to be off Ilfracombe soon after sunrise, the pilot says. Will you like to go ashore when we drop him there, eh?”

“That’ll do nicely, Cap’en,” replied Sam. “I only jest wanted for to see the last of the b’y, and I s’pected as how you’d land your pilot thereabout or at Bideford, where I told the man in charge o’ my schooner to call in for me; but it don’t matter much where I get ashore.”

“All right then,” said Captain Billings; “so, now, as the ship’s going on at a spanking rate, with no danger ahead and in charge of the pilot, suppose you and the lad come down to the cabin along with me and have a bit of something to eat, for it’s getting late? I dare say the steward’ll find us some grub somewhere, though it’s rather early in the voyage for regular meals.”

So saying, the skipper dived down the poop ladder, we two after him, when we found a well-spread table below, the sight of which pleased Sam as much as the appearance of my bunk—although, mind you, only on account of his interest in me, as there wasn’t a bit of the gourmand about him.

“See, my laddie,” said he, nudging me, and speaking in a whisper. “The cap’en ain’t a going to starve you!”

When we got on deck again, after a hearty meal, the sun had set and the evening was closing in; but, it was bright and clear overhead and the twinkling Nash lights, two white and one red, by Saint Donat’s Castle, were well away to windward on the starboard hand.

Although there was no necessity whatever for my keeping up, I was too much excited to turn in, even for the purpose of seeing how snug my new quarters were; so, Sam keeping me company, in order to have as much of me as he

could—for the time was now approaching for our parting—he and I paced the poop all night, talking of all sorts of things, and planning out a wonderful future when I should be captain of a ship of my own.

Early in the morning watch, the wind lulled down to a gentle breeze, as it frequently does in summer before sunrise. This checked the ship's rate of speed through the water considerably, so staying our progress that, instead of our arriving off Ilfracombe close on to daylight, as Captain Billings had sanguinely reckoned, it was long past eight bells and the hour of breakfast, to which we were both again invited into the cabin, before we neared the headland marking the bay sufficiently for us to heave to and signal for the pilot's boat to come off and fetch him.

We were not long detained, however.

Hardly had the Esmeralda's main-topsail been backed, ere a smart little cutter came sailing out towards us, with the familiar "P" and her number displayed on her spanker; so Sam hastened to bid his last farewell to me, making ready to accompany the pilot ashore.

"Good-bye, my cockbird," said he, wringing my hand with a grip that made it wince again, a tremble the while in his voice and something suspiciously like a tear in his eye. "Keep honest, and do your duty, and never forget your father, laddie, nor old Sam Pengelly, who'll be right glad to see you again when you return from this v'yage!"

"Good-bye, and God reward you, Sam, for all your kindness to me," I returned, almost breaking down, and having to exercise all my self-command in order not to make an exhibition of myself before my new shipmates. "I'll be certain to come and see you and Jane the moment I touch English ground again."

"All right, my hearty, fare thee well," said he, stepping into the boat of the pilot after that worthy, while the Esmeralda's sails were let fill again on the vessel resuming her course down the Bristol Channel; but, as I bent over the taffrail, and waved my hand to Sam for the last time, I could hear his parting hail in the distance, sounding as loud almost as if he were alongside.

"Good-bye, my laddie, and good luck to the Esmeralda on her v'yage. Cap'en Billings, remember the b'y!"

"Aye, aye, my hearty, so I will," shouted out the skipper, cordially. "Good luck to you, Pengelly!" and then the pilot made in for the land, and the ship's yards

were squared. The royals were soon afterwards sent aloft, the wind having sprung up again steadily, still from the nor'-east, as the tide began to make, and we ran now before it, almost sailing free, so as to pass to the southwards of Lundy Island and weather Hartland Point, on our way out into the open sea.

Captain Billings, seeing the wind so favourable, instead of hugging the land, determined to make all the westing he could at this the very outset of our voyage, in order to avoid the cross currents hanging about the chops of the Channel, and off the Scilly Isles—which frequently, when aided by the contrary winds they engender, drive a ship on to the French coast, and into the Bay of Biscay, thus entailing a lot of beating up to the northwards again to gain a proper westerly course.

Under these circumstances, therefore, my skipper, who I could see thus early "had his head," as they say, "screwed on straight," taking his point of departure from Lundy, and so bidding farewell to the land which he didn't intend approaching again for the next few weeks if he could help it, kept a straight course by the compass due west for twenty-four hours, by the end of which time, and this was about noon on our second day out, we had cleared the Scilly Islands, passing some twenty leagues to the northward of the Bishop's Rock. We were now well in with the Atlantic Ocean, and pursued the same direction, right before the wind, until we reached the meridian of 12 degrees 15 minutes West, when we hauled round more to the southwards, shaping a course to take us well to the westward of Madeira.

Before this, however—that is, on our first day out, shortly after we had cleared Lundy Island, and when Sam and the pilot and his cutter were out of sight, and the ship clear of "strangers"—Captain Billings called a muster of all hands aft, when he divided the crew into two watches, officered respectively by the first and second mates.

The "complement," as they say in the Royal Navy, of the Esmeralda, I may as well state here, consisted of the skipper, Captain Billings; the two mates, one occupying the proud position of "chief of the staff," and the other being merely an executive officer of little superior grade to one of the foremast hands; a boatswain, carpenter, sail-maker, cook, steward, and eighteen regular crew—the vessel, on account of her being barque-rigged, not requiring such a number of men in proportion to her tonnage as would have been necessary if she had been fitted as a ship, with yards and squaresails on the mizen-mast.

When apportioning out the hands to their several officers, Captain Billings assigned me to the starboard watch, under charge of the second mate, telling the boatswain at the same time to “keep an eye upon me,” so as to have me thoroughly initiated into the practical part of my profession.

I had not observed this latter individual previously, he having been employed forwards while I had been mostly on the poop ever since I had come on board the ship; now, however, that the skipper thus specially entrusted me to his care, I looked across the deck, when I noticed that his face seemed strangely familiar to me, although I could not exactly say how and where I had seen him before, although I puzzled my head in vain to guess who he was.

But, my quandary did not last very long; for, on Captain Billings dismissing the men after the full-dress parade he had held on the quarter-deck, the boatswain came up to me with a genial grin on his hairy face.

“Hullo, Master Leigh,” said he, “Who’d a’ thought of us two meeting ag’in like this?”

Chapter Thirteen

An Old Acquaintance

"What!" I exclaimed, in much amazement. "Is it really you, Jorrocks? I can hardly believe my eyes!"

"Aye, aye, it's me sure enough," replied my old ally of the Saucy Sall, shaking hands with great heartiness, as if he were really glad to see me again under such altered circumstances. "It's me sure enough, Master Leigh—that is, unless I've got some double of a twin brother, as like me as two peas, a-sailing round in these latitudes!"

There could be no question of his identity after I had once heard the tones of his well-remembered voice; but the beard which he had allowed to grow since I had last seen him had so completely altered the expression of his face, or rather indeed its entire appearance, that there was some excuse for my not recognising him at the moment.

Jorrocks, however, he was without doubt; and, I need hardly say that I was quite as much pleased at this unexpected meeting as he seemed to be—albeit the sight of him, when I realised the fact that it was really himself and heard his cheery familiar accents, brought back in an instant to my mind the scene on board the coal brig that eventful day when the Saucy Sall's surly skipper discovered that Tom and I had stolen a march on him, and treated us each to a dose of his sovereign specific for stowaways!

"How is it, though, Jorrocks, that you've abandoned the brig?" I asked him presently, when we had got over our mutual surprise at thus meeting in such an unlooked-for fashion. "I thought you were a fixture there, and didn't know you were a regular sailor—I mean one accustomed to sea-going ships like this?"

I said this with much dignity, being greatly impressed with the responsibility of my new position; and I'm sure I must have spoken as if I were a post captain at least, addressing some subordinate officer!

Jorrocks, however, took my patronage in good part, although I could detect a faint cock of his eye, denoting sly amusement at my ridiculous assumption of superiority. This he now proceeded to "take down a peg" in his roundabout way.

“Why, bless you, Master Leigh, I sailed as able seaman in a China clipper afore you were born, and when I were that high!” he replied, laughing, putting his hand about a foot above the deck to illustrate his approximate stature at the period referred to, and representing himself to be at that time certainly a very diminutive son of Neptune.

“You must have been very young, then,” said I, a little bit nettled at his remark—thinking it a slur on my nautical experience, so bran-new as that was!

But Jorrocks went on as coolly as if I had not cast a doubt on the veracity of his statement concerning his early commencement of sailor life.

“Aye, aye,” he answered, quite collectedly, “I grant I were young, but then you must rec’lect, my lad, I got the flavour o’ the sea early in a lighthouse tower, where I was born and brought up, my father having the lantern to mind; and, since then, I’ve v’y’ged a’most to every part you could mention, and shipped in a’most every kind of craft, from an East Indyman down to a Yarmouth hoy. Bless you! I only took to the coasting line two or three years ago, when you and I first ran foul of each other; and the reason for my doing that was in cons’quence of my getting spliced, and the missus wanting me to take a ’longshore berth. Howsomedevers, I couldn’t stand it long, being once used to a decent fo’c’s’le in a proper sort of vessel v’y’ging o’er the seas in true shipshape fashion; and so, I parted company with the brig and came aboard the Esmeralda eighteen months ago come next July—a long spell for a sailor to stick to one ship without changing, but then Cap’en Billings ’s a good sort, and he made me boatswain o’ the craft last v’y’ge but one, so I hopes to remain with him longer still.”

“You like him, then?” I said, tentatively, looking him straight in the face.

“Oh, aye—first-class,” replied Jorrocks to my implied question, with much seriousness, “He’s not only a good skipper—as good as they make ’em, treating the hands as if they were men, and not dogs—but he’s a prime seaman, and knows what’s what in a gale, better nor most I’ve ever sailed with. Howsomedevers, he’ll stand no nonsense; and when he puts his foot down, you may as well give up, as you might sooner soft-sawder a trenail into a two-inch plank as get over him and shirk your duty! The old man, easy-going when you take him right, is as stiff as a porkypine when you runs foul of his hawse; so, you’d better not try on any o’ them pranks o’ yours you told me you and your messmate played off on your old schoolmaster, for Cap’en Billings has cut his eye teeth, my hearty.”

“Why, I wouldn’t dream of such a thing,” I exclaimed, indignantly, “what Tom and I did to Dr Hellyer was quite different, and served him right for his cruelty.”

“Aye, aye, that may be accordin’ to your notion,” said Jorrocks, sententiously; “but that schoolmaster were the skipper of his own ship, the same as Cap’en Billings is here aboard this here craft, and it ain’t right to trifle with them as is set in authority over us!”

I can’t tell what I might have replied to this appropriate little sermon that Jorrocks delivered about the mischievous and dangerous trick that Tom and I conspired together to commit, and which I have often subsequently reflected might have led to the most disastrous consequences, and perhaps injured the Doctor for life; but, at that moment, Captain Billings, seeing my old friend and I chatting together, came over to leeward, where we were standing.

“Hullo, boatswain!” he shouted out, “making friends with the youngster, eh?”

“Why, bless you, Cap’en Billings,” answered Jorrocks, touching his cap, “he and I are old shipmates.”

“Indeed! I had no idea of his having been at sea before,” said the skipper, apparently very much astonished at this news.

“Oh, aye, sir, he has,” returned my old friend, glad to be able to put in a good word for me, as he thought, after the little lecture he had just given me. “He was on board a coal brig with me two years ago, a coasting craft that plied up along shore to Noocastle and back; and you’ll find him no green hand, Cap’, but a smart able chap, one that’ll get out to the weather earing when there’s a call to reef topsails sooner than many a full-grown seaman, for he knows his way up the rigging.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” said the skipper, turning to me, with an affable smile that lighted up his twinkling blue eyes. “When Sam Pengelly told me you were a capable lad, of course, I naturally took his opinion to proceed more from personal bias than practical comment on your seamanship; but, now that I learn from Jorrocks here, on more independent testimony, that you’re no novice on board ship and have already mastered the rough rudiments of your profession in the best way possible—that of having been before the mast as a regular hand—why, you’ll be able to get on all the faster, and be able to command the deck by-and-by on your own hook. How are you up in navigation, eh?”

“I can take the sun, sir,” said I, modestly, not wishing to blow my own trumpet.

“Anything else?”

“Yes, sir, I can work out a reckoning, I believe,” I answered.

“Ha, humph, pretty good! I’ll try you by-and-by, Leigh,” said Captain Billings, turning aside for the moment to order the port watch to give one extra pull to the weather braces—“mind and bring out your sextant when you see me on deck at eight bells. I suppose you’ve got one in your chest, eh?”

“Oh yes, sir, Sam Pengelly gave me one,” I replied, and the skipper then went into the cabin while Jorrocks and I resumed our interrupted conversation.

My old friend took advantage of the opportunity to put me up to a good many wrinkles concerning my fellow-shipmates.

The mate, Mr Macdougall, who was a tall, hatchet-faced Scotsman, with high cheek-bones and a very prominent nose—Jorrocks told me, in confidence—was a tight-handed, close-fisted, cross-tempered man, ever fond of displaying his authority and working the hands to death, under the plea of preventing their idling or “hazing,” as he called it.

“I advise you not to get into a row with him, Mister Leigh, if so as you can help it; ’cause, once a chap falls foul of him in any way, he neversomedevers by no chance forgets or forgives it, nohow.”

“I shan’t give him the chance,” I answered to this, with a laugh. “I suppose he doesn’t think himself greater than the captain!”

“Ah, you just wait a bit ’fore you decide that p’int. The first mate aboard a marchint ship is a sight more powerful than a judge on the bench, as you’ll find out! The skipper allers tells him what he wishes, and the mate sees to its being done, an’ it depends what sorter fellow he is, and not on the cap’en, as to how matters go on when a vessel’s at sea; for, it’s in his power for to make things pleasant like and all plain sailing, or else to cause the crew for to smell brimstone afore their time, I tell you! That Macdougall, now, though you laugh in that light-hearted way, ain’t to be trifled with, Mister Leigh, I warn you; and if you go for to raise his dander ag’in you, why, you won’t find it worth grinning at, that’s sartin, for he’s as nasty as he’s spiteful, and every man Jack of us hates him like pizen, and wishes he were out of the ship. The skipper, I knows,

wouldn't have him aboard if he could have his own way, but he's some connection of the owners, and he can't help himself."

"All right, Jorrocks, I'll try and steer clear of him," I said, trying to look grave, for I saw the old sailor was in earnest, and only speaking for my good. "I will endeavour to do my duty, and then he won't have any occasion to find fault with me."

"Ah, but you'll have to do more than that; for, like most of them uppish chaps, if you don't truckle under to him and purtend as how he's the Lord Mayor, he's safe to be down on you."

"I'm not going to crawl under any man's feet, first mate or no first mate!" I said, proudly. "Why, I'm a first-class apprentice, and the captain has rated me as third officer in the ship's books."

"Now, Mister Leigh, don't you go on for being bumptious, now, my lad!" replied Jorrocks, laughing heartily at my drawing myself up on my dignity. "A third officer or 'third mate,' as we calls him, has a dog's berth aboard a ship if he doesn't lend his hand to anything and button to the first mate! You needn't go for to really humble yourself afore that Macdougall; I only meant you to purtend like as how you thinks him a regular top-sawyer, and then you'll sail along without a chance of a squall—Mr Ohlsen, the second mate, in charge o' your watch, is an easy-going chap, and you'll get on well enough with him."

"All right," I said in response, as if agreeing with his advice; but I formed my own resolution as to how I would treat the Scotsman should he try to bully me unjustly.

He would find no cringe in me, I vowed!

The rest of my shipmates, Jorrocks then went on to tell me, were a very jolly set of fellows, forming as good a crew as he'd ever sailed with—fit for anything, and all able seamen "of the proper sort."

Haxell, the carpenter, he said, was a quiet, steady-going, solemn sort of man, with no nonsense about him, who kept himself to himself; while Sails, the sail-maker, whom I have omitted mentioning in his proper place as one of the officers ranking after the boatswain, was a cheery chap, who could sing a good song on Saturday night in the fo'c's'le; but, the life of the crew, Jorrocks said, was Pat Doolan, the cook, an Irishman, as his name would imply. He was always ready to crack a joke and "carry on" when there was any skylarking

about, besides willing to lend a hand at any time on a pinch. Jorrocks told me "to mind and be good friends with Pat," if it were only for the sake of the pannikin of hot coffee which it was in his power to dispense in the early morning when turning out on watch in the cold.

"Ah, you were not born yesterday, Jorrocks!" I said, when he imparted this valuable bit of information to me, as one of the state secrets of the fo'c's'le.

"No, Mister Leigh," he answered, with a meaning wink; "I've not been to sea, twenty year more or less, for nothing, I tell you."

The steward—to complete the list of those on board—was a flabby half-and-half sort of Welshman, hailing from Cardiff but brought up in London; and, as he was a close ally of the first mate, I need hardly say he was no favourite either of my friend Jorrocks, or with the crew generally—all the hands thinking that he skimped the provisions when serving them out, in deference to Mr Macdougall's prejudices in the way of stinginess!

The Esmeralda, therefore, carried twenty-seven souls in all of living freight, including the skipper and my valuable self, besides her thousand tons of coal or so of cargo; we on board representing a little world within ourselves, with our interests identical so long as the voyage lasted.

While Jorrocks and I were talking in the waist of the ship to leeward, I observed the first mate, Mr Macdougall—who had the forenoon watch, and was in charge of the vessel for the time—approach close to the break of the poop, and stop in his walk up and down the deck once or twice, as if he were on the point of hailing us to know what we were palavering about; but something seemed to change his intention, so he refrained from calling out, as I expected, although he glowered down on Jorrocks and I, with a frown on his freckly sandy-haired face, "as if he could eat us both up without salt," as the boatswain said, on my pointing out the mate's proximity.

I believe Mr Macdougall took a dislike to me from the first; and the skipper's apparent favour did not subsequently tend to make him appreciate me any the better, I could see later on.

That very day, shortly before noon, when Captain Billings came out of his cabin with his sextant, and found me all ready for him with mine, in obedience to his order, I heard Mr Macdougall utter a covert sneer behind the skipper's back respecting me.

“Hoot, mon,” he said aside to Ohlsen, the second mate—“Old son of a gun” as the men used to call him, making a sort of pun on his name—“the old man’s setting up as dominie to teach that bairn how to tak’ a sight, you ken; did you ever see the like? These be braw times when gentlefolk come to sea for schoolin’, and ship cap’ens have to tak’ to teachin’ ’em!”

Ohlsen didn’t reply to this save by a grunt, which might have meant anything, but I was certain Macdougall was trying to turn me into ridicule.

Captain Billings, however, did not overhear the remark; and proceeded to test my accuracy with the sextant, making me take the angle of the sun and that of the distant land on the port bow. He was delighted when, afterwards, I had worked out my calculations, based on the sight taken of the sun’s altitude, and, deducting the difference of the ship’s mean time from that observed, found out that our true position on the chart was very nearly 50 degrees 55 minutes 20 seconds North and 4 degrees 50 minutes 55 seconds West, or about ten miles to the south-west of Hartland Point on the Devonshire coast. It was all a labour of love, however, for the land was still within reach, and we had not long taken our “point of departure;” while soundings could still be had, if we wished, in thirty fathom water; so, there was no necessity for our taking an observation so early in the voyage. The skipper only did it to test my knowledge, and he was perfectly satisfied with the result apparently.

“Why, Macdougall,” he said to the Scotsman, who was waiting by with an air of ill-concealed triumph on his face, hoping to hear of my failure to work out the reckoning, “he’s a better navigator than you are!”

This, you may be certain, did not please the mate, who muttered something of it’s “all being done by guess work.”

But the skipper wouldn’t have this at any price.

“No, no, Macdougall,” he replied, quickly, “it’s all fair and square calculation, such as I couldn’t have managed at his age;” then, turning to me, he added, kindly, “you stick to it, my lad, and you’ll beat us all with the sextant before we get to Callao!”

The captain desired me, also, to work out the ship’s reckoning each day and to keep a log, the same as the first mate had to do, which that individual resented as a sort of check exercised upon him, and hated me accordingly. As I afterwards found out, he was an extremely bad navigator, and ignorant of all

the newest methods, such as Sumner's, for shortening calculation, consequently, he was afraid of his errors being discovered too easily if his log should be compared every day with mine.

Unaware of all these kindly feelings towards me, Captain Billings filled up the measure of Mr Macdougall's wrath by inviting me to come into the cabin to dine with him that day at six bells, instead of waiting until the termination of Ohlsen's watch, and go in with him to the "second table," as it was termed, after the skipper and first mate had finished their repast—such being the etiquette in merchant ships.

Macdougall almost boiled over with anger when he heard the skipper ask me. His freckled face looked just like a turkey's egg—boiled!

"Vara weel, vara weel, Cap'en Billings," said he, with a mock deference that little disguised his rage: "but I'd ha'e you to know that I didn't ship aboard here to mess wi' 'prentice lads."

The skipper fired up in an instant, a light darting from his blue eyes which one would not have thought their liquid depths capable of.

"And I would have you to know, Mr Macdougall," he retorted, quickly, uttering every word, however, with distinct emphasis, "that I'm captain of my own ship, and shall ask whom I please to my table. Steward," he added, calling out to that worthy, who was just sauntering by into the cabin from the cook's galley with a covered dish in his hands, "lay a plate and knife and fork for Mr Leigh; and bear in mind that he dines with me every day when his duties allow!"

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Owen Williams, proceeding on into his pantry with his dish, and I followed the skipper into the cabin shortly afterwards.

This was undoubtedly a blow to the mate, as I thought, sniggering over the little episode at the time; but, Mr Macdougall did not forget the fact of my having been the occasion of his getting a "dressing down" from the skipper, and he debited it carefully in his account against me, determining to pay me out for it on the first convenient opportunity—a resolution that was carried out quite soon enough for me, as you will presently learn!

Chapter Fourteen

In the Horse Latitudes

At noon on our second day out, running right before the north-east by east wind all the while and making but little southing, with our royals and studding-sails set, and everything that could draw—the Esmeralda averaging nearly ten knots an hour every time we hove the log from the time of our clearing the Bristol Channel—we had reached the meridian of 12 degrees 15 minutes west; for Captain Billings wisely took advantage of such a favourable breeze, as I've remarked before, to get well to windward of the French coast, knowing well that we might shortly meet with westerly winds of a variable nature that would probably put us quite as far to the eastward as we should want—in the event of our making too much westing.

However, having now gained such a good offing, we hauled our wind, and steered a west-sou'-west course, as previously mentioned, towards Madeira.

Up to this time we had not started a brace, or loosed a sheet, the wind being fair from aft while we were steering to the west, and now well abeam, on our bearing up to the southward on the port tack; but, we had hardly made a couple of days' sail in our new direction, running down to the parallel of 45 degrees north, which we crossed in 15 degrees west, before the wind began to come in light puffs. Shortly afterwards, it shifted round to the westward, backing occasionally to the east and south-east and causing us plenty of work in the way of tacking, first to starboard, and then to port again—the skipper striving all the while to keep all the westing he had made, and preserve a diagonal course for the Line; although the set of the Gulf Stream, in towards the coast of Portugal, gave us a lot of leeway to add to our dead reckoning.

What with the baffling breezes and occasional calms, it took us another four days to get to the southwards of the Azores, passing them much further to the eastwards than Captain Billings had calculated on; but then a fresh wind sprang up from the north-west, bidding fair to last, which took us down to the thirty-fifth parallel in fine style, the Esmeralda covering over three hundred miles between the morning of one day and noon the next.

All hands now began hoping we were going to make a quick run of it after all, in spite of the tedious delays of the last few days; but it was a very fallacious hope, as we quickly found out.

The favourable north-wester lasted another twelve hours, driving us down our latitudes on the starboard tack, the ship sailing pretty free, with the wind nearly abeam and all her canvas set that could draw, racing through the water like a crack cutter at a regatta; when, on the evening of our eleventh day out, by which time we had nearly reached the parallel of Madeira, although forty miles or so to the westward of the island, the breeze failed us all of a sudden, just close on to midnight, a dead calm setting in, accompanied by a heavy rolling swell.

"Ah," said Jorrocks, who was sharing the first watch with me—Mr Ohlsen, the second mate, being ill and excused from duty—"we're now in the Hoss Latitudes, Mister Leigh, and may know what we've got to expect!"

"Horse Latitudes?" I repeated after him, inquiringly, thinking he was having a little joke at my expense, and taking advantage of my ignorance.

"Aye, I ain't trying to bamboozle you, my lad! They calls them so, 'cause, in the old days, the West India traders that carried out hosses to the Windward Islands had frequently to throw 'em overboard during the shifts of wind and changes they had when they got hereabouts; for the weather can't be depended on for an hour at a time, it being calm, just as now, one minute, and the next a gale springing up strong enough to blow the masts out o' your ship 'fore you can let the sheets fly."

"Oh!" I exclaimed; "and, do you think there's any likelihood of a hurricane now?"

"Can't say," replied Jorrocks, sententiously. "We'd better give the skipper a hail; he left orders to be called if the wind dropped, or in case of any change."

"All right," said I, turning to leave the poop. "I will go down and rouse him at once, and I may as well knock up Mr Macdougall at the same time to relieve the deck, for it's past eight bells."

"Aye, aye, do so, sir," responded the boatswain; so I hastened below to perform my mission, leaving him in charge until I returned.

Captain Billings answered my call almost the instant I rapped at his door, coming from his cabin fully dressed, having turned in to his bunk "all standing," as if prepared for the summons; but the first mate was a heavy sleeper, and it took me more than ten minutes to rouse him, so that when I had gained the deck again the port watch had come on duty, the "starbowlines"

having gone to their bunks as soon as relieved by the fresh hands. Jorrocks, however, I noticed, remained still on the poop; and, knowing that he would not thus inconvenience himself by going without his proper "caulk," like the rest, unless there was some urgent reason—for he dearly loved his sleep when duty did not interfere with the indulgence—I stayed behind, too, the more especially as I remembered what he had said about there being the chance of a "blow."

In the short time I had been away, a change was apparent, even to my unaccustomed eyes, unused as they were as yet to many nautical phenomena.

The stillness of the atmosphere I had noticed when I quitted the deck to summon the skipper, had been succeeded by a series of light puzzling puffs of air; while, although the night was clear, with a few stars shining overhead, fleecy fragments of cloud were whirling about in eddies, some settling in heavy masses on the water and banking themselves round the horizon.

But, the sea itself showed much the greatest sign of coming disturbance. The waves, no longer following each other in long heaving rollers, were curving upwards and jostling each other—like so many fiery coursers, suddenly thrown back on their haunches, by reason of being reined in when in the full burst of their mad career, and now champing their bits with angry impatience!

There was, likewise, an alteration in the aspect of the ship.

Captain Billings had already reduced his canvas, the topgallant sails having been taken in and the courses clewed up; and now, pretty nearly stripped of all her "drapery," like a gladiator entering the arena, the Esmeralda appeared awaiting the issue of whatever decision the elements might arrive at—ready to take her part in the conflict should strife ensue between the opposing forces of the wind and waves; or, in the event of a contest being avoided through the disinclination of the storm fiend to "come to the scratch," equally prepared to spread her wings again and proceed on her voyage.

"It's just a toss up now, whether we'll have it or not," whispered Jorrocks to me as we stood side by side together on the poop, watching the skipper, whose eyes were as intently riveted on the dog-vane at the main truck above.

Just at this moment, Mr Macdougall came lazily sauntering up the poop ladder. He did not see that Captain Billings was on deck; and, eyeing the change in the ship's appearance, exclaimed, angrily, with that Scottish burr of his, which was always more pronounced when he was excited—

“Hoot, mon, wha’ the dickens hae ye takken the sails off her—who ordered ye, I’d like ta ken?”

He was addressing Jorrocks; but the skipper, who was annoyed by his late arrival to relieve the watch, answered him sharply—

“I gave the order, Mr Macdougall, which you should have been up in time to have seen carried out; and, if you’re a seaman and will just give a glance round, you’ll soon see the reason why!”

The first mate made no reply to this save to follow out the captain’s suggestion of looking over the side; and what he saw there did not appear to give him any excuse for controverting the skipper’s words; for, the clouds had now spread over the horizon—except to the southward, where it was still clear, and from which a short sharp gust of wind came every now and then, filling out the loose folds of the courses, and then, as it died away, letting them flap against the masts with a heavy dull sound as of distant thunder, an occasional streak of pale lightning darting across the sky to the north-west, where the heavens were most obscured, as if to bear out the illusion.

“We’re in for it now, for certain,” said Captain Billings presently, noticing a faint stir in the air above amidst the whizzing clouds, the upper strata of which were going in a contrary direction to that in which the vane pointed, which was still to the south-east. “Boatswain, rouse out the watch below!”

Jorrocks thereupon immediately went forward towards the fo’c’s’le, knocking with a marlinspike three times on the deck, and shouting out the well-known hail that every sailor knows but too well.

“Tumble up there! All hands shorten sail!”

The men, who had hardly shifted their clothes and turned in, after being relieved by the port watch at eight bells, came tumbling up on deck hurriedly, and the skipper at once ordered the topsail and foresail to be reefed, spanker to be brailed up, and the main course furled; while the vessel was kept with her head to the southward, that is, as well as the cross sea and the fitful gusts of wind would allow, under her jib, fore and main-topsails and forecourse.

Presently there was an ominous hum in the surrounding atmosphere, when the waves calmed down as if by magic; and then, a large rent disclosed itself in the sombre curtain of cloud to the north-west, the heavy masses of vapour that had been previously piling themselves along the horizon there and spreading

up to the zenith falling back again and scurrying away in a retrograde direction, like skirmishers on a battle-field driven-in on to their supports by a rush of cavalry trying to cut them off.

“Here it comes!” shouted out Captain Billings, ordering the hands at the same time to “stand by” the braces and topsail halliards; and, almost ere the crew could get to their respective posts, the clouds had disappeared, with what seemed a supernatural celerity from the heavens, letting the clear blue sky be seen again and the bright twinkling stars peep down to see what all the fuss was about, all being calm and easy up there!

Thanks to the skipper’s precautions, the outburst of the gale did not take the Esmeralda aback, as would most probably have been the case if the first mate had been in charge of the deck, when we should have most likely lost our spars, if the vessel had not foundered, as frequently happens when a ship is caught unprepared; as it was, she only winced slightly, with a shiver through her frame, as the wind struck her on the quarter, the masts and yards creaking and the topsails expanding with a sound like that of an explosion as they were blown out to their fullest extent, almost jumping from the bolt-ropes, and then her hull lay over to leeward while she began to push through the water, driven along before the blast at racehorse speed.

“Ease off those starboard braces there, and haul in to leeward?” cried out Captain Billings, directing the man at the wheel by a wave of his hand to put the helm down slightly, so as to bring her head more up to the wind; but this was more than the steersman could do unaided, the vessel—carrying out the analogy I recently used—resembling a vicious charger that had taken the bit between his teeth—so, Mr Macdougall at once sprang to help the steersman, when the two together managed, by exerting all their united strength, to jam the spokes round so that the ship’s head was brought over to the south-west, bearing off then with the wind before the beam.

The north-west gale was then blowing with tremendous force and increasing to the power of a hurricane each instant as it whistled through the cordage, wailing and shrieking like the lost souls in Dante’s “Inferno.” The momentarily quiet sea, too, had got up again, and was now covered with huge broken waves—raised aloft in pyramids one moment, and the next scooped out into yawning valleys, into which the vessel plunged, with a shock that made her timbers vibrate with the sledge-hammer thud of the bows meeting the billows full butt, the concussion causing columns of spray to be thrown up that came in over the cathead, drenching the fo’c’s’le and pouring in a cascade into the

waist, whence the broken water, washing aft along the deck, forming a lake on the lee-side, where the scuppers were level with the sea, from the ship's heeling over.

We were still carrying too much sail; and this the skipper was as quick as any one to perceive, although he was anxious to pursue his course as long as he could, and make as much capital as he could out of the north-wester in his way to the Line.

"Hands shorten sail!" accordingly was the repeated cry; and, knowing what was wanted, the crew were soon racing up the shrouds to close-reef the topsails, although the force of the wind nearly pinned them to the rigging like spread eagles, and they had hard difficulty in gaining the yards, and working out along the foot-ropes, especially on those to windward.

The topsail halliards had of course been let go before this, and the loose sails were filled out like balloons, so that it took some time to get in the bunt and tie the reef points; but it was at last done, and we returned to the deck—I being especially triumphant at having out-paced one of the smartest topmen in the ship, in gaining the weather earing of the foretop sail before him, and completing my task so quickly as to get down on deck before some of the rest had yet left the yard.

Captain Billings, I was pleased to see, noticed my activity, giving me an approving smile, which more than counterbalanced the scowl that Macdougall greeted my reappearance with below; but all such thoughts were soon banished by the skipper's fresh order to go aloft and take in the topsail we had only just close-reefed, the vessel being buried too much by the head.

Away up the rattlins we all climbed again; while those below, on the halliards being started by the run, began hauling on the clewlines and buntlines, bagging up the sail so that we could hand it easier. It was stiffer work furling it than the reefing had been; but, at length this, too, was accomplished, albeit I nearly narrowly got knocked off the yard-arm by the flapping back of the folds of canvas in my face as the wind caught the leech sideways. We then returned once more to the more substantial platform of the deck, glad enough to get down safe again.

"Let go the jib halliards!" was the next command, some of the hands starting forwards to man the down haul; but the moment the halliards were cast loose, the accommodating sail saved us any further trouble in the way of stowing it,

by blowing clean away to leeward with a report as if a small cannon had been fired off on the fo'c's'le—floating out against the dark background of the sky like a child's kite whose string has parted and let it go to grief, tumbling down from its soaring height, and disappearing in the dim distance to leeward, where the clouds had already vanished.

The ship was now only under her close-reefed main-topsail and reefed foresail, all the rest of her canvas having been taken off her by degrees; still, she laboured so greatly, and got such a list to leeward—with the topmasts bent like fishing rods under the strain, while the weather shrouds were as taut as fiddle-strings, and those on the port side hung limp and loose through the stretching of the rigging—that the skipper saw she would not stand driving any more. The only thing now to be done, he thought, was to lay her to, so that, as he could not get her any further on her forward journey, she should not, at all events, lose the progress she had already made save by leeway drift, which of course was unavoidable.

"Ease down the helm!" he cried to the two men, who were now necessary at the wheel, while the fore-tack was boarded, the lee braces hauled aft, and the mainyard braced in, when the ship was brought up to the wind, bowing and scraping, and taking in tons of water over the fo'c's'le, in this operation, that washed everybody off their legs in the waist, bundling them away to leeward in a bunch.

For a time the Esmeralda now behaved very well, the mizen trysail being set to steady her, although, being hove to on the starboard tack, she drifted sideways, before the fierce north-west gale, making as much leeway towards the south and east as if she had been running free; but, presently, there was a loud crack heard forwards, and Haxell, the carpenter, came up to the skipper on the poop, looking even more serious than usual as he crawled aft under shelter of the bulwarks.

"The foremast is sprung, sir," said he in a melancholy tone of voice, as if he were announcing the fact of his just going to be hanged.

"Is it serious?" asked Captain Billings.

"Aye, aye, sir, it's all that," replied Haxell. "There's a big flaw close under the slings of the foreyard. It won't stand the pressure of that foresail ag'in it much longer, Cap'; and it'll be safe to carry away presently."

“Then we must relieve it before that happens,” said the skipper, giving orders for us to furl the foresail and hoist the fore-topmast staysail in its place, for that would serve to keep control of the helm, he thought. The ship required some headsail, and this would not try the damaged mast so severely as the foresail had done, with its wide extent of canvas.

By the time all these different manoeuvres had been essayed and effected it was broad daylight. It was a fine morning, too, although the wind was still blowing a hurricane and the sea was fearfully high and choppy, for there wasn’t a cloud to be seen in the heavens, while the sun was shining down with almost tropical heat; but, in spite of its looking so bright, we hadn’t done with the nor’-wester yet.

Towards mid-day, when we found from observation that we were in latitude 27 degrees North and longitude 18 degrees West—nearly abreast of the island of Palma in the Canaries, and a terrible distance to the eastward of our position on the previous day, thus showing all the leeway we had lost—the wind increased so much in strength that it blew now with even greater force than at its first onset the evening before on the breaking out of the gale.

This was not all, either.

The heavy waves that dashed against the ship as she headed them, broke upon her bows with such fury that it seemed every moment as if they would beat in the timbers; while, every now and then, some billow mightier than its fellows would force her head away, making her fall off, and then, the succeeding sea would take her broadside on, hurling tons of broken water on her decks that would have soon filled her had not the hatches been battened down, which precaution had been taken when we first reduced sail.

The situation became serious on this being repeated several times during the afternoon, for there was great danger of the vessel being any moment thrown on her beam ends, when there would certainly be a clean sweep made of everything on board and the Esmeralda be speedily converted into a floating wreck!

Captain Billings accordingly called a council of his officers, I standing by and listening to what Mr Macdougall and Jorrocks advised should be done in the emergency. These both, however, came to the same opinion as the skipper, that scudding would be the best course to pursue under the circumstances—although, like him, they were well aware that the difficulty which faced us all

consisted, not so much in running before the wind, as in managing to get the vessel's head round so as to do it without broaching or letting her to.

Still, the manoeuvre had to be tried as a last resource.

"I don't see that anything else can be done," said Captain Billings, with a more anxious look on his face than I had ever noticed there before. "I only hope we'll manage it successfully; for, if we once get broadside on in the trough of this sea, she'll never rise out of it, with the heavy cargo she carries, and so it will be a case of Davy Jones' locker for the lot of us!"

Chapter Fifteen

"A Little Unpleasantness"

"Say, Cap', we'll have to strip her first," suggested Jorrocks, when it was thus decided to carry out the contemplated measure for the relief of the ship—"if we don't do that, we'll have every stick taken out of her as soon as we try to wear her!"

"Oh, aye, boatswain, I haven't forgotten that, you may be sure," said the skipper; and the hands were then once more sent aloft to furl the main-topsail, while the mizzen trysail was hauled down and the braces manned, so as to help the vessel round with the yards the moment the helm was put up.

It was a ticklish job, though. The utmost care was necessary in order that the manoeuvre might be successfully accomplished.

Should one of the heavy rollers strike her after she had once yielded to the influence of the rudder and while coming round with the wind, before she had fully paid off—thus presenting her stern to the attack of her stubborn assailants even as she now faced them, like a stag at bay or a cat fronting a bull-dog—why, the gale would undoubtedly catch her broadside on. In such a case, the Esmeralda would be exposed at her weakest point to the full force of the wind and sea, in the same way as the deer or cat turning tail to its pursuer—with what result we on board could readily anticipate, even without the skipper's warning words!

As Jorrocks expressed it, in the event of such a catastrophe happening, "It was all Lombard Street to a China orange we'd lose the number of our mess and sarve as food for fishes!"

Everything, therefore, depended on our seizing the right moment for putting the helm up and bringing her head round, the critical period being that between the onslaught of one of the rollers and the advent of the next; when, if the vessel answered her helm smartly, rising out of the trough of the sea ere the following wave had time to reach her, she would be away scudding in front of the gale safely, before many minutes would be past and the present peril might then be a thing to look back upon with feelings of thankfulness and satisfaction.

Captain Billings explained this to Jorrocks, while all the remaining canvas was being stripped off the vessel, with the exception of the fore-topmast staysail,

which was still retained in order to assist in forcing her head round when all was ready for trying the hazardous experiment.

“You know what I want, Boatswain,” he said, sending Jorrocks forwards to watch for a favourable opening between the following waves and turn the ship—“the moment you see our chance, give the word; and then, Heaven help us to get round in time and not broach-to!”

“Aye, aye, sir, I knows what you want,” answered Jorrocks, who then proceeded to crawl as carefully towards the fore-chains, as the carpenter had come aft—bending down beneath the protection of the weather-bulwarks as he crept along the waist, and holding on by a stray rope’s-end here and there to preserve his balance—although he did this as much to prevent exposing his body as leverage for the wind to force the vessel over to leeward before the proper time, as to shield himself from its boisterous buffeting.

Arrived at the point he had selected, Jorrocks drew himself up gingerly into the fore-rigging, his hat blowing from off his head and his hair streaming out before the wind the instant he abandoned the shelter of the bulwarks. However, he had not long to remain in that exposed position.

He had waited to stand up until he heard the blow of one of the heavy billows as it careered before the gale, coming against the bows in due rotation, and the instant he heard this he raised himself erect at once, receiving part of the deluge that broke over the cathead in a fountain of spray on his exposed head and hairy face, the impromptu shower bath making him appear like a dripping merman fresh from the briny deep.

Jorrocks, however, did not mind the cold bath. He had much more serious matter on hand to take notice of it, beyond giving himself a shake like a retriever fresh from a dip.

Looking over the side to windward, as quickly as he dashed the water from his eyes, he noticed that the following wave succeeding the one which had just delivered its attack, was quite two cable lengths off—a more than usually long interval between the waves as yet.

It seemed like an interposition of Providence in our favour, I thought, noticing the lull from my station on the poop almost as soon as Jorrocks perceived it in the bows, and I feared he would have missed the opportunity.

But the boatswain was too good a seaman for that. The very instant the reflection crossed my mind that he would be too late, for the whole thing happened in the "wink of an eye," he raised his right hand high in the air, standing up to his full height on the bulwarks, while holding on to the ratlines of the foreshrouds—thus allowing his body to act as a sort of additional headsail to aid the fore-topmast staysail, which, as I've said before, was the only rag the ship had on her, in forcing her bows round.

Captain Billings was watching Jorrocks even more intently than I; and, without a second's delay, the moment the latter gave the signal that the critical point for action had arrived, he roared out in a voice of thunder, "Hard up with the helm, hard up, my men, for your lives!"

Mr Macdougall and the two seamen who were standing on either side of the wheel, clutching hold of the spokes and holding on to them with all their might, shifted it round almost as quickly as the skipper's order was given. But they had to put all their strength into the task to overcome the resistance of the dead weight of the hull, aided as that was by the mountain of water pressing it back upon them and thus resisting their efforts to shift the helm over to port.

For a brief space of time, hardly an instant though it seemed an eternity, the ship appeared somewhat sluggish to respond to the movement of the rudder, hanging in stays and settling down into the great valley of water that loomed on our lee; but the next moment a glad cry of relief burst from all as she answered her helm, a wavering motion of her bows denoting this being then perceptible.

"Now, men, look alive," cried the skipper. "Cast-off those lee braces here; haul round to windward sharp, and square the yards!"

These orders were executed as rapidly as they were given, the hands being ready at the braces, and only waiting for the word of command to ease the yards round. When these were squared, however, the fore-topmast staysail fluttered and filled with a jerk that made the foremast crack and tremble, the vibration shaking the ship to her centre and penetrating even as far as to the deck beneath our feet as we stood awaiting the issue of the operation—the very planks "creeping" with the concussion caused by this and the bows meeting the send of the sea.

But the power of the little staysail forward, and the effect of the exposed surface of the boatswain's body in the rigging, both catching the wind at the same time, settled the matter.

Without making any further opposition to our wishes, the Esmeralda payed off handsomely; and, rising up on the crest of an enormous green roller, that had swept up to overwhelm her, but which now passed harmlessly under her keel instead, she surged through the water, gathering way every moment as she showed her heels to the gale, careering over the stormy billows before the blast like a mad thing, as if rejoicing in her freedom after so long being forced to lay to—although the fore-topmast staysail, which had done such good work in getting her head round, parted company as soon as the yards were braced round, blowing away to atoms, and floating off in the distance in the same kite-like fashion in which the jib had previously disappeared.

The loss, however, seemed to affect the ship's speed but little, for she scudded off under bare poles at as great a rate as if she had all her canvas set, and was running before a ten-knot breeze.

"Thank Heaven!" I heard Captain Billings exclaim in a low voice, taking off his cap reverently, as soon as we were safely round before the wind; and I could see his lips move as if in silent prayer. In this, I confess, I joined with all my heart; for, if ever in my life I experienced the feeling of religious emotion which causes us to express our gratitude for rescue from peril, I had that feeling then!

The Esmeralda, though, was not out of all danger yet.

There was still the fear of her being pooped by the following waves, which now raced after, in anger at her having escaped their clutches; so, to lessen this possibility, the skipper had the reefed main-topsail set again, and the mizzen trysail once more hoisted, so that the ship might get through the water faster than the pursuing rollers. The strain on the masts was tremendous; but, fortunately, everything held, and under the impetus of this additional sail power she doubled her speed, bidding defiance to the harpies of the ocean that had so nearly worsted her in the combat.

It was just four bells in the afternoon watch when we got her head round before the wind, although it was not until nearly midnight that the hurricane blew itself out, the wind then dropping almost as suddenly as it had sprung up twenty-four hours before.

During all this time, only one of the watches had a short spell below, and neither the skipper, Jorrocks, nor I, had ever left the deck after the gale had begun—the only exception being Mr Macdougall, who had turned in for a caulk

when we were lying-to. Had it not been, however, for the praiseworthy exertions of Pat Doolan, the Irish cook, I do not believe we should have been able to hold out so long.

The willing fellow, despite the series of liquid avalanches that were constantly flooding the ship as she took in the green seas over her bows, managed in some wonderful way or other to keep his galley fire alight, supplying us with a grateful cup of hot coffee at intervals through the harassing night; and, late in the afternoon, when we were all utterly exhausted, he served out to each of us, much to our surprise, a pannikin apiece of the most delicious pea-soup I ever tasted—"It was enough," as one of the men said on receiving the welcome refreshment, "to have put life in a post!"

This was while our struggle with the elements yet lasted; but as soon as that was over, and when all fear of peril was dispelled by the lulling of the gale, the inevitable reaction after such protracted exertions without any recuperative rest became painfully apparent, and I was not at all sorry when Captain Billings told the hands belonging to the port watch that they might go below.

"And I fancy, Mister Leigh," said Jorrocks to me, "we can go down and turn in too; for we ain't a going to have another such a blow in a hurry again for a month of Sundays!"

Nor did it look like it either, the stars twinkling away in a cloudless sky, and the night being perfectly bright and clear, although there was no moon, while the rollers were rolling less angrily, as if the ocean were hushing itself down into repose at last.

There was nothing, therefore, to keep me on deck any longer; so, following the example of my old friend Jorrocks, I speedily sought my bunk, and, turning in, did not wake again until nearly noon on the following day—the good-natured skipper having given orders to Mr Macdougall not to disturb me when the starboard watch was relieved in the early morning, saying that I had earned my rest fairly by rolling two days' duty into one, which, indeed, I believe I had!

I was up on deck again, however, in time to "tak' the soon," as the Scottish mate termed it in his north-country accent, for I was anxious to see how far the gale had driven the vessel off her proper course.

It was our thirteenth day out, counting from the time we "took our departure," as navigators say, from Lundy Island; and both the skipper and I made it out,

after working the reckoning, that we were as far down as the twenty-fifth parallel, although a good deal to the eastward of what our true position should be—the leeway we had made while lying-to, and our subsequent scudding for nearly twelve hours before the north-wester, having taken us much too close in towards the African continent, thus causing us to lose all that westing we had secured on our first start from the Bristol Channel, and which we had afterwards so carefully preserved, even amidst the baffling winds of the middle latitudes.

Still, this mortifying conclusion had a redeeming feature.

If we were too far to the eastwards, we were as assuredly beyond the region specially designated by Jorrocks as the "Horse Latitudes," where the calms of Cancer hold sway; for, now, setting all plain sail before a steady breeze from off the land, we soon managed to run into the regular north-east Trades, picking them up in the next degree or two we ran down to the southward.

From this point, keeping on the starboard tack again, with the wind well on our beam, we ran for the Line; but before crossing the equator, Mr Macdougall and I, between whom relations had been somewhat strained almost from our first introduction, came to an open rupture, the "little unpleasantness" happening in this wise.

Mr Ohlsen, the second mate—"Old son of a gun," as the crew called him, from his taciturn manner of going about his work—was still on the sick list; and Captain Billings, who had expressed himself much pleased with my behaviour since I was on board, especially during the storm, had assigned the performance of this gentleman's duties to me.

At this Mr Macdougall was extremely indignant, remonstrating with the skipper for putting so young a lad as myself in such an important post as that of second mate.

"What are your reasons for objecting to him?" asked Captain Billings.

"Why, the loon's but a bairn," said Mr Macdougall, at a nonplus for some objection to my promotion.

"If he's young," answered the skipper, "he's got a man's courage and a seaman's aptitude, which is more than I can say for some aboard here!"

"Hoot, mon, d'ye mean to eenseenuate?"

“I insinuate nothing,” interrupted Captain Billings, hotly. “If the cap fits you, why, you can wear it! Leigh is a strong, sturdy fellow, worth any two hands on a yard; and, as for navigating, he can work out a reckoning better than—than myself!”

“That mebbe, that mebbe, I dinna gang for to denee that stat’ment, Cap’en,” said the Scotsman, sneeringly, implying that I or anybody else might easily eclipse the skipper’s powers of calculation; “but I hae my doots, mon, I hae my doots.”

“You can ‘hay’ your grandmother if you like,” retorted Captain Billings, decisively; “still, it’s my order that Leigh acts as second mate until Mr Ohlsen is able to return to duty. I’m captain of this ship, Mr Macdougall, please remember!”

This was the invariable expression the skipper always made use of when he had made up his mind to anything, so the mate knew that there was no use in his trying to argue the point any further, and he left the poop, where the altercation had taken place, in a towering rage. This his freckles plainly showed, his equanimity not being restored by the ill-concealed titters of the men standing by, for they had overheard most of what had been said, and repeated the substance of the conversation to me afterwards.

I was, it is true, only sixteen at the time; but, being a sturdy, broad-shouldered chap, I looked all two years older; and I really do not think the skipper complimented me too strongly when he said I was worth a couple of hands on a yard, for, during my experience in the coal brig under Jorrocks’ tuition, I had acquired considerable proficiency and dexterity in most of a seaman’s functions, which aptitude I had further improved while sailing in Sam Pengelly’s schooner between the various ports between Plymouth and the Land’s End for two years nearly at a stretch afterwards.

My nautical education, too, as I have already mentioned, had not been neglected all the time I had been waiting to get on board a sea-going ship, for since I had joined the Esmeralda I had not lost a single opportunity for developing my book learning by practical examples in seamanship, Captain Billings encouraging me to persevere whenever he saw me inclined to laziness, and giving me all the advantage of his own training and experience; so that, by this time, I believe I was almost as competent to take charge of the ship on an emergency and navigate her to her destination, as if I had passed the Trinity

House examination and received a first mate's certificate like Mr Macdougall, whom in the mathematical part of navigation I could beat easily.

Of course, I was not up in sailor lore as to atmospheric changes and those signs and tokens which it takes a long apprenticeship to the sea thoroughly to learn; but in the ordinary work of the ship I was second to none, the men, with whom I was a prime favourite, thanks to Jorrocks, acknowledging that I could reef, hand, and steer, with any of them.

Mr Macdougall was jealous of me—that was the reason of his animosity; so he took advantage of every chance he had to discount the captain's favour by making me in the wrong, to prove his assertion as to my incompetence to take charge of a watch.

One day I had taken an observation at noon as usual, the skipper of late leaving that operation entirely to me, for he knew Mr Macdougall would be certain to get a sight too, if only in order to have a wrangle with me as to the right position of the ship. Having made out the reckoning with a stop watch, I was busily engaged marking out our place on the chart on top of the cabin sky-light, as it was a fine day, with a pair of callipers and parallel rulers, when the Scottish mate came up to me.

"And whaur d'ye find us the noo?" said he, insinuatingly, to me.

"We're in 1 degree 35 minutes north, and 28 degrees west; and I think ought to alter our course a trifle more to the southward to avoid the Saint Paul islets, which we must be heading for direct, steering south-west as we are now."

"Whaur d'ye mean, bairn? There's no land near us, I ween, save the Rocas, and that is far awa' to the westwar'."

"I tell you," said I, positively, with perhaps a good deal of bumptiousness, "we're heading on straight for those rocks there marked on the chart!"

"Why, ye're mad—a stork staring loon!" retorted Mr Macdougall, in the most irritating way; "ye'd better gang awa' to schule again."

"I think you had," I answered; "I have forgotten more than you ever learned!"

Now this was very rude and impertinent for me to remark to a man so much older than myself, and my superior officer; but I did not reflect at the moment what I said to my tormentor, for he used to nag at me every day about the very

same point—my taking the sun and working out the reckoning. It was a very sore subject with him ever since the skipper praised me at his expense on our first day out.

At all events, rude or not, my reply had the desired effect of exasperating Mr Macdougall to the last pitch of endurance, for he was very easily excited.

“Gin you say that ag’in, ye onmannerly loon,” said he, foaming with passion, his pale complexion becoming paler, which made the freckles stand out prominently, “I’ll knock ye doon.”

“Will you?” I cried, “you just try it, that’s all!”

He did; and down I went on the deck, as flat as a pancake, from a well-directed blow of his brawny fist!

I was not beaten, however.

Jumping up, I faced him again, only to undergo a repetition of the flooring process; when, seeing that I with my boy’s strength was no match for him as yet, and losing my temper quite as much as he had done, I seized a large snatch-block which was lying by on the deck close to my hand, hurling it at his head with all my force.

The mate started back in terror, for the missile only missed him by half an inch, and if it had struck him would most certainly have killed him on the spot, although I did not think of that when I pitched it at him; and, just at that moment, I heard Captain Billings’ voice behind us.

Chapter Sixteen

Breakers Ahead!

"Hullo, steady there—belay that!" exclaimed Captain Billings, half-way up the poop ladder, which he was ascending hastily, two steps at a time, "Mr—Mr Macdougall—Martin Leigh! What's this disgraceful row about?"

I had quickly picked up a handspike when I saw that I had missed my aim with the snatch-block, while my antagonist—who, to do him justice, had plenty of pluck, and had only been startled for the moment by the heavy missile hurtling through the air close to his projecting nose—was advancing to attack me again with his fists clenched, a savage look the while on his face, as if he meant to settle me this time; but, on this interruption from the skipper, we both relinquished our hostile attitudes, Mr Macdougall slinking towards the binnacle, as if innocently engaged in studying the bearings of the compass there, and I dropping the handspike incontinently.

There was a ringing tone of command in the skipper's voice which meant that he intended to be obeyed; but mixed with this, beyond a slight suspicion of surprise at the unexpected scene which met his gaze, there was a good deal of subdued irritation, which really was not to be wondered at.

He had been having an afternoon nap in his cabin, which was situated immediately below the deck where the mate and I had been rehearsing the little drama I have just detailed; and the noise we had made with "the movements of the piece," to speak theatrically, having very unceremoniously disturbed his slumbers before the period he generally allowed himself for his "forty winks" had expired, his temper was not sweetened thereby beforehand, only just needing the unseemly fracas which he noticed on coming on the poop to send it up to fever-heat.

I had never seen Captain Billings so angry since I had been on board the Esmeralda; his blue eyes fairly flashed forth fire!

He took no notice of me at first, advancing towards the chief mate.

"Mr Macdougall," said he, sharply, "I call upon you for an explanation of this—this—discreditable affair!"

“Yon dratted loon, Capting, sought me life!” replied the other, glibly. “He hove a snatch-block at me, and takkin’ the pairt of my ain defeence I was gangin’ to poonish him a wee when ye came on deck.”

“And did you give him no occasion for behaving so insubordinately, sir?” asked the skipper, looking Mr Macdougall straight in the face with a piercing glance, as if defying him to answer him untruthfully.

But the mate was too old a hand at “spinning a yarn,” as sailors term dealing in fictitious statements. He could utter a falsehood without winking once!

“Nae, sir,” said he, as cool as a cucumber, making no reference to the fact of his having twice knocked me down before I retaliated on him, “I did naething to the loon, naething at a’! I only joost reprovit him a wee for his bad language and inseelance, ye ken, an’ he oops wi’ yon block an’ heaves at me puir head. It’s joost a marcy o’ Proveedence he did nae knockit me brains oot!”

Fortunately for the Scotsman, his good or bad angel was in the ascendant at this moment, substantiating this incomplete account he gave as to what had happened. As luck would have it, too, Captain Billings had only got up the poop ladder in time to take heed of the latter part of the fray, and thus the evidence of his own eyesight corroborated apparently the mate’s assertion, that I had made a most unjustifiable assault on him.

Greatly incensed, therefore, he now turned on me.

“I saw the assault myself, Mr Macdougall; so I don’t merely take your word alone for it. What have you got to say, Leigh, in excuse for your outrageous behaviour? It’s—it’s scandalous; I could thrash you myself!”

My pride, however, was roused by the fact of his having accepted the mate’s explanation without asking me for any explanation first, and so condemning me unheard; consequently, without taking into consideration the thought that it was only proper that Captain Billings should support the authority of his chief officer unhesitatingly, I answered him rather pertly, only feeling my own wrong, and not considering what was the skipper’s obvious duty.

“If you believe Mr Macdougall,” I replied, in a rude, off-hand way, “there’s nothing for me to say.”

“You ungrateful young hound!” cried out the skipper, who, if angry before, was now as mad as a hatter at my impudence. “That’s the thanks I get, is it, for

favouring you and promoting you out of your station! Listen; consider yourself disrated from this instant—do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear, Captain Billings," said I, in a sullen voice.

"Then, heed sharply, my lad," he retorted. "Get off this deck and go forward. Your place, henceforth, sir, will be in the fo'c's'le, along with the other hands; and the sooner you lug that chest of yours out of the spare bunk I gave you amidships, the better!"

This was a terrible downfall; but, of course, there was no use my arguing against the skipper's decision, the master of a merchant ship being lord paramount on board his own vessel, and having the power to make and unmake his officers, like a nautical Warwick, the whilom creator of kings!

So, much chapfallen, I withdrew from the poop; and, abandoning all my dignities as acting second mate and first-class apprentice, proceeded to make myself at home with the crew forward—much against the grain, I confess, although the men received me cordially, and took my part, not only from their liking for me personally, but from their hatred of the chief mate as well.

Mr Macdougall, I could plainly see, was cock-a-hoop at my disgrace, from the malicious grin on his freckled face.

His triumph, however, was not very long-lived.

On making me relinquish my functions on the quarter-deck, the skipper had sent for Jorrocks, telling him that he would have to take charge of Mr Ohlsen's watch in my place.

"But I doesn't know nothing o' navigation, Cap'," said the boatswain, who felt keenly my abasement, and was loth to "step into my shoes," as it were.

"Oh, never mind that," replied the skipper. "Mr Macdougall will give you the courses to steer; and, if anything particular happens—which I don't expect, with the wind we have now and us in the open sea—why, you can call me."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered Jorrocks, being thus foiled in his attempt at getting me reinstated, which he thought might have been the case on his pleading his inability to con the ship; and so, when Macdougall went below with the starboard watch at eight bells in the afternoon, the boatswain took charge of the deck with the relief hands—the mate telling him still to keep to the same

west-sou'-west course which I had suggested to Mr Macdougall, a couple of hours or so before, should be altered to a more southerly one, and the controversy about which had caused that "little unpleasantness" between us, which had terminated so disastrously for myself.

To explain this matter properly, I should mention that, when, on our thirteenth day out, after the cessation of the north-westerly gale that had driven us to the south of the Canaries, Captain Billings discovered that we were so near in to the African coast, in taking advantage of the wind off the land he had perhaps committed an error of judgment in making an attempt to recover our lost westing, instead of pursuing a course more directly to the southwards; for, in the early part of the northern summer, the Equatorial Current begins to run with greater rapidity towards the west, causing vessels to lose much of their true direction, and the most experienced navigators recommend crossing this stream at right angles, if possible, so as to get beyond its influence as speedily as circumstances will permit, at least at that time of year, when an easterly passage of the equator is advisable.

However, the skipper acted for the best, wishing to get well to the windward of Cape Blanco and the contrary currents and variable breezes generally encountered in that vicinity; and so, the Esmeralda had therefore continued on a diagonal course across the equatorial stream even after we had picked up the regular north-east Trades, until we had reached the meridian of 25 degrees West, when we had run as far south as 8 degrees 15 minutes North.

Here, we lost the Trades that had blown us so far on our route, entering into the second great belt of calms met with in the Atlantic to perplex the mariner when essaying to pass either to the north or south of the equator—a zone of torpidity, known popularly under the name of the "Doldrums," which was originally derived most probably from the old Portuguese phrase dolorio, "tormenting."

This belt of calms separates the two wind zones of the north-east and south-west Trades, which meeting here, their opposing forces are neutralised, and the air they bring with them from the colder regions of the north and south, becoming rarified by the heat of the equator, passes up into the higher atmosphere, producing a stagnation of the wind currents; and hence ensue calms that vary in duration according to the position of the sun, whether north or south of the Line, calms that are sometimes accompanied by tremendous rain showers, and sometimes varied with frequent squalls and thunder and lightning, followed sometimes by thick fogs hanging on the surface of the water.

The belt of the Doldrums has an average width of some six degrees, or about five hundred miles of latitude, roughly speaking; and in crossing it we were not much more favoured than most navigators, having to knock about for seven days under a sweltering tropical sun—taking advantage of whatever little breeze we could get that aided our progress to the equator, until we emerged from the retarding influence of this zone of inactivity, some three degrees to the northward of the Line, when we fortunately succeeded in sailing into the south-east Trades almost before we expected.

We had, however, lost some little way eastwards through the sweep of the Guinea current, a stream which seems strangely enough to take its rise in the middle of the ocean, and makes a sudden set thence towards the Bight of Benin; so, Captain Billings, who appeared to be prejudiced on the subject of the western passage of the equator, instead of now trying again to shape a true south course towards our point of destination, Cape Horn, directed a parallel so as to fetch the Brazilian coast. The ship, consequently, after leaving the Doldrums was steered south-west and by west, a direction which, if preserved, would have run us on in a straight line to the Rocas, a dangerous reef stretching out into the sea off the westward peak of the island of Fernando Noronha, some eighty-four miles out from the mainland to the northward of Cape Saint Roque.

This was on our thirtieth day out from the Bristol Channel, two days before the first mate and I had come to loggerheads; and since then the vessel had kept on in the same course, closing with the equator each hour under the steady south-easterly breeze which we had with us, on the port tack, and speeding even more rapidly to the west than our skipper imagined—for, through the set of some current to the northward and westwards, our dead reckoning showed a wide discrepancy from the position of the ship by observation, as I made it on the day of the row—when, as I've stated, the skipper, feeling indisposed, had left me to take the sun, knowing that the mate would check my calculations.

But, as things turned out, the altercation which occurred completely took off the attention of Captain Billings from the subject; and, as I left the chart which I had been using on the top of the cabin sky-light when he ordered me to quit the poop without informing him of the serious error I had discovered, and Mr Macdougall, wise in his own conceit and confident that he and the dead reckoning were both right, did not hint of the ship's course being wrong, on we went, with all our canvas spread, racing into the teeth of a danger which the skipper never dreamt of our being near.

The weather was now beautifully fine, the breeze tempering the heat of the sun, and flying fish and albicore playing around the vessel as we neared the equator; while, occasionally, a school of whales would spout to windward, or a shoal of porpoises, having a game of high jinks as they leaped out of the water in their graceful curves one after the other, would cross our bows backwards and forwards in sport, apparently mocking our comparatively slow progress through the sea in contrast to their own rapid and graceful movements, and showing how easily they could outstrip us when they so pleased.

I was standing on the fo'c's'le head, sadly looking out over the bows, while the light lasted, at the moving panorama of Nature around me; the dancing waves curled up on either side of the catheads as the vessel plunged her forefoot down, and streaming aft in a long wake to leeward; the cloudless sky above; the vast solitary expanse of the horizon; the leaping fish and spouting whales—keenly alive to everything and yet my mind full of all my grievances, being especially wrathful with the skipper for accepting Mr Macdougall's statement against me, without first allowing me to utter a word in my own defence.

It was worse than tyranny, I thought, this arbitrary conduct in disrating me unjustly!

I remained here till I heard one bell strike soon after the second dog-watch commenced; for I was waiting for Jorrocks to be relieved, as I wished to speak to him in order to get him to put in a word for me with Captain Billings, when he had calmed down and could listen to reason. While I was waiting, the evening closed in, the sun having not long set; for, in the tropics, night succeeds day with startling rapidity, there being no twilight to temper the transition between bright sunshine and darkness—the one ensuing almost immediately after the other without any "toning down," as painters express it, to lessen the effect of the change.

Hearing, as I fancied, a whale spouting nearer than usual—these monsters of the deep making a noise as they eject the water through the spout-holes on top of their heads in a fountain of spray, after drawing it with their gills, like surf breaking on a distant shore—the sound somehow or other took back my thoughts to the chart, and I suddenly remembered what I had told the mate about the danger of the ship approaching the Islets of Saint Paul.

These are a cluster of rocks, called by the early Portuguese navigators the Peñedo de Saint Pedro, lying almost in mid-ocean, close to the equator, in latitude zero degrees 55 minutes 30 seconds North, and longitude 29 degrees

22 minutes West; and, from the water being beyond soundings in their immediate neighbourhood, they must form the peak of some submarine mountain range. They are only about sixty feet or so in height clear above the level of the sea; and, consequently, being only visible at a comparatively short distance off—not more than a couple of leagues at the outside, even in broad daylight—and situated as the shoal is in the direct track of the trade wind, the rocks form a source of great peril to mariners traversing their bearings, especially at night time, nothing existing to give warning of their proximity until a vessel may be right on to them, as it were.

Thinking of all this, which I had read in the "Sailing Directions for the North Atlantic," a book which the skipper had lent me to study, in order to perfect me in navigation, I felt a sudden fear lest the ship should be wrecked on the reef, making up my mind to tell Jorrocks about the error I had discovered in our position on the chart, which I determined to ask him to fetch for me, so as to show it to Captain Billings.

Jorrocks, however, was a long time coming forwards after being relieved from charge of the deck by Mr Macdougall, remaining some little time talking to him on the poop; so that it was nearly two bells, and quite dusky, when he made his way to where I was standing looking out for him, I having asked one of the hands to say that I wanted to speak with him.

"Well, Mister Leigh," he said, on making his appearance, "here I am at last; better late nor never, as the old folks say! But that blessed Scotchman would have a long yarn with me, about goodness knows what!"

"I'm glad you've come," I replied; and then I went on to tell him about my fears of peril to the ship from our vicinity to the Rocks of Saint Paul, which I was certain we were approaching every mile we ran further west.

But the boatswain was almost as incredulous of our being near the shoal as the first mate had been in the afternoon.

"Bless you, Mister Leigh, we're miles to windward of that place," said he with a laugh. "But it's allers the way with your young navigators as is full chock up to the bung with book larnin' and hasn't had no real 'sperience o' the sea yet! They allers fancy all sorts o' dangers that your old seamen who've been a v'yage or two never thinks o' reckonin' on!"

However, the good-natured fellow, seeing how earnest I was in the matter, promised to take the chart to the skipper, who was lying down in his cabin again, feeling far from well of late, as, indeed, his looks lately showed—and we were all afraid he had caught the same sort of low fever like Mr Ohlsen, the second mate.

“An; I’ll tell him as mildly as I can, Mister Leigh, of this here mare’s nest as you’ve found out, so as not to make him angry with you again.”

“Thank you, Jorrocks,” I replied heartily; but, just at that moment, hearing the whales making a noise quite close to the ship’s side as I thought—although I could not see them within the limited circle of dusky light to which the surrounding gloom narrowed my vision, I said, “What a row those whales are making, are they not? They’re quite near, and yet, although it’s not dark enough yet to hide them from our gaze, there’s not a trace of one in sight!”

Jorrocks cocked his head on one side and listened; but in an instant there was a striking alteration in the quizzical look with which he had at first regarded me, under the evident idea that I had discovered another “mare’s nest.”

“By Jingo, Mister Leigh, you’re right after all!” he exclaimed, his face turning pale as if with sudden fright.

“What, do you think we’re running on the rocks I spoke about?” I asked, anxiously.

“Aye, not a doubt of it,” he answered, in the same quick way, bending his head again to listen over the side. “Either them identical ones, or else we’re on the Rocas off the Brazilian coast.”

In another moment, however, if in doubt previously, his suspicions were apparently confirmed; for, springing up again, and rushing aft as if he were suddenly possessed, Jorrocks roared out at the pitch of his voice—the words ringing like a trumpet note through the ship—

“Breakers ahead on the weather bow! Hard up with the helm—hard!”

Chapter Seventeen

Pat Doolan "Carries On"

Jorrocks's cry to put the helm up was instantly obeyed by the man at the wheel, who jammed it hard-a-port with all his strength. The hands belonging to the watch on duty, at the same time, knowing with the aptitude of seamen what this order necessitated, rushed to the lee braces, easing them off without any further word of command, while those on the weather side were hauled in, thus squaring the yards and getting the ship round before the wind, when she ran off to the north-westwards, on a course almost at right angles to her former direction—which was on a bowline, with the sou'-south-east wind nearly on her beam.

"Hoot mon, what d'ye mean?" shouted Mr Macdougall, when he had recovered from the surprise which the unexpected order of the boatswain, so rapidly carried out, had caused. "Are ye gone clean daft?"

But Jorrocks had no need to explain the reason for his interference with the mate's duties.

As the vessel payed off, the sound of surf, loudly thundering against some rocky rampart projecting from the deep which opposed the onward roll of the ocean billows, was heard louder and louder; and, in another instant, Mr Macdougall and those who stood beside him on the poop held their breath with awe as the Esmeralda glided by a triangular-shaped black peak that seemed as high as the foretopsail yard—so closely that they could apparently have touched it by merely stretching out their hands, while over it the waves, driven by the south wind, were breaking in columns of spray, flakes of which fell on the faces of all aft, as they looked over the side, and trembled at the narrowly-avoided danger.

"Whee-ew!" whistled Jorrocks through his teeth. "That were a squeak, an' no mistake!"

It was.

We had been saved by a miracle.

Five minutes, nay, half a minute longer on our previous course, and the Esmeralda would, with the way she had on her, have been dashed to pieces on the jagged teeth of these isolated rocks standing in mid-ocean, when never a

soul on board would have lived to tell the tale of her destruction; for, in the pale phosphorescent light emitted by the broken water surrounding the crag, some of the sailors averred, as we sheered by, that they saw several sharks plunging about—ready to devour any of us who might have tried to swim ashore had the vessel come to grief.

It was an escape to be thankful for to Him who watches over those who travel on the treacherous seas, and protects them from its perils "in the night, when no man seeth!"

A dead stillness prevailed for a moment on board after the bustle of wearing the ship round had ceased, so that you might have heard a pin drop, as the saying is, although in the distance away astern the melancholy cadence of the waves breaking on Saint Paul's Islets was borne down to us on the wind. As I stood in the waist, whither so far aft I had followed Jorrocks, I could have caught any words spoken on the poop above me, but I noted that Mr Macdougall didn't utter a syllable in continuance of the reprimand he had begun against the boatswain for his "officiousness," as he apparently considered his order to put the ship off her course. He was terror-stricken on realising the motive for the boatswain's interference; however, before he had time to open his mouth again, the skipper, who had been roused up by the sudden commotion on the deck over his head, rushed past me up the poop ladder like lightning.

Captain Billings' first look, sailor-like, was aloft; and noticing the vessel was before the wind, while the spanker, which had been eased off, prevented him from seeing the shoal we had so narrowly avoided, he turned on the mate for explanation.

"Hallo, Macdougall!" he exclaimed, "what's the reason of this, eh?"

But the mate did not answer at once. He still seemed spellbound.

"We've just wore her, sir," said Jorrocks, stepping forwards, and accompanying Captain Billings as he made his way to the binnacle.

"So I see," drily replied the skipper, after a hasty glance at the standard compass. "But what has been the reason for thus altering the course of the ship? I gave orders for her to be steered south-west by west; and here we are now heading direct up to the northward again! What's the reason for this, I want to know? Speak, now, can't you?"

Macdougall, on this second inquiry being directed to him by the skipper—who for the moment seemed to ignore the boatswain's presence beside him—mumbled out something about the rocks, but he spoke in so thick and indistinct a voice that Captain Billings believed he was intoxicated.

"Rocks, your grandmother!" he cried angrily. "The only rocks hereabouts are those built up in your brain through that confounded bottle you're always sucking at below!"

"Indeed, sir," put in Jorrocks at this point, taking the mate's part, "Mr Macdougall's right, Cap'. We've just had the narrowest squeak of going to the bottom I ever 'sperienced in all my time. Look there, sir, o'er the weather taffrail, an' you'll see summat we pretty nearly ran foul of just now—it were a risky shave!"

Captain Billings, somewhat puzzled by the boatswain thus "shoving his oar in" for a second time unasked, cast his eyes in the direction pointed out to him, where, now lighted up by the newly risen moon, could be distinctly seen the Peñedo de San Pedro, with the surf breaking over it in sheets of silver foam.

He recognised the place in a moment, having passed close by the spot on a previous voyage; and he was greatly astonished at our being in its near vicinity now.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated, "what an escape we must have had; but how came we near the place at all?"

"That I can't explain, sir," replied Jorrocks meaningly. "Perhaps, though, as how there was something wrong in the ship's position on the chart to-day."

"Ha, humph!" muttered the skipper to himself. "This comes of my being ill and entrusting my duties to other hands; but I'll never do it again, I'll take care! Mr Macdougall," he added aloud, "I beg your pardon for what I said just now in the heat of the moment, and I hope you'll excuse it, as I was greatly flurried, and do not feel very well yet. What position did you place the vessel in to-day, by the way, when you took your observation at noon?"

This was a ticklish question, and the mate hardly knew how to answer it, recollecting, as he did in an instant, what I had said—of our being much further westwards than the skipper thought. Even if he did not agree with me, the point should have been referred to Captain Billings, as it so vitally concerned the interests of all on board. Almost tongue-tied, therefore, now by

his former silence on the subject, he temporised with the difficulty, determined not to be cornered if he could help it.

"'Deed an' I mad' it e'en the same as the deed reck'nin' cam' to, Cap'en, a wee bit to the westwar' o' twenty-seven, and close to the leen."

"Then your sextant must have been out of order, or your calculations wrong," replied the skipper, shortly. "We are evidently much to the westwards of your reckoning. How did you observe the danger—was there a man on the look-out?"

"Nae, sir, I didna think we required yon," answered Macdougall, now at his wit's end for a reply.

"No, I should think not," said Captain Billings, in his dry way; "but who was it that warned you in time to wear the ship?"

"Mister Leigh, sir," put in Jorrocks, thinking the time now come to speak up for me. "He heard the noise of the breakers first, and called my 'tention to 'em, and I then sung out to put the helm up."

"Oh!" ejaculated the skipper, quite taken aback by my name being thus suddenly brought up by Jorrocks—just as he was thinking of me and my recent shortcomings, as he afterwards explained to me.

"Yes, sir," continued my old friend the boatswain, believing it best to push the matter home, now he had once introduced me on the carpet; "and he begged me to tell you, sir, as how he'd left his chart on the cabin sky-light, where he'd jotted down summat as he'd diskivered when taking the sun, before the rumpus arose 'twixt him and Muster Macdougall."

"Chart!" interposed the mate, making a step towards the sky-light, and trying to throw the tarpaulin that was hanging there over it whilst pretending to drag it off, "I see no chart here."

"Why, here it is," exclaimed the skipper, noticing one end of the roll, which projected from beneath the tarpaulin; and, pulling it out, he walked back again towards the binnacle, by the light of which he inspected my tracing of the ship's path on the chart carefully.

"Pass the word forwards for Martin Leigh," he cried out presently; and I, listening below in the waist, just under the break of the poop, to all that had transpired, very quickly answering to the call of my name as it was sung out by

Jorrocks, mounted up the poop ladder, and advanced aft to where Captain Billings stood.

“Leigh,” said he, quietly, “I have sent for you to explain matters about this chart. Did you take an observation to-day as I told you?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“And did you agree with Mr Macdougall?”

“No, sir,” said I, unable to avoid the joke, “we didn’t agree—we fell out, as you saw!”

Jorrocks burst out laughing at this, and even the skipper himself couldn’t repress a smile—although he bit his lips to hide it, seeing the first mate scowling at me as if he could eat me up without salt, for he was afraid of the truth now coming out.

“Don’t be impudent, Leigh! you know what I mean well enough. Did your calculation agree with that of Mr Macdougall?” asked Captain Billings again.

“No, Captain Billings,” I answered, this time gravely enough. “I found that our dead reckoning was nearly thirty leagues out, some set of current having carried us considerably to the westward; but when I told this to Mr Macdougall, he called me a fool.”

“Why did you not come and report the matter to me?”

“Well, sir, I didn’t have time to,” I said. “When Mr Macdougall spoke to me in that way, I suppose I gave him a cheeky retort, for he threatened to knock me down.”

“And then?” asked the skipper, when I paused here, not wishing to tell of my being floored.

“Why, I dared him to touch me,” I continued, “and he did knock me down.”

“Did he? I heard nothing of this before! I thought that you had attacked Mr Macdougall first—indeed, he told me so himself!” Captain Billings said, with much surprise, eyeing the first mate suspiciously.

At this point, an unexpected witness stepped forth in my defence, in the person of Haxell, the taciturn carpenter. This individual seldom spoke to any one

unless previously addressed; so his voluntary testimony on my behalf was all the more striking and effective, especially as it was given in the very nick of time.

“Aye, but the lad didn’t,” now sang out Haxell, who had come up on the poop without any one previously noticing him. “I saw Mr Macdougall knock him down twice afore ever he raised his hand ag’in’ him.”

“The deuce he did!” exclaimed the skipper, indignantly; and then turning on the first mate, he gave him another “dressing down” before all the men, such as I never heard given to any one before. It, really, almost made me feel sorry for him!

“You lying thing!” he cried to Mr Macdougall in withering accents, the scorn of which was more than I could express in words. “I can’t call you a man, and you aren’t a sailor, by Jove, for sailors don’t behave like that to poor friendless orphan boys! You have told me a heap of falsehoods about this whole occurrence from first to last, and I despise you from the bottom of my soul for the way in which you have acted throughout. I’m only sorry we’re at sea, for you shouldn’t stop an hour longer in my ship if I could help it!”

“But, Cap’en,” interposed Mr Macdougall, feebly, trying to ward off the storm of the skipper’s wrath, “the ill favourt loon provokit me, and was mair than inseelent.”

“Phaugh, man!” exclaimed Captain Billings, with intense disgust. “Don’t try and excuse yourself; it only makes matters much worse! I don’t mind your knocking the lad down, and I daresay Leigh would forgive you for that, too; but what I am indignant at is the fact of your telling such a gross lie about the transaction, and allowing me to take an unjust view of the quarrel—making me disrate the young fellow, and punish him as I did, under a false, impression of what his conduct had been, all of which a word from you might have altered! Besides, just think how in your conceited ignorance you nearly wrecked the ship and sacrificed all our lives through your refusal to take a hint from the lad as to our position. Why, I don’t mind receiving a suggestion from the humblest foremast hand any day!”

“But—” put in the mate again, trying to defend himself.

His appeal, however, was in vain, for the skipper would not listen to him for a moment.

“You had better go below, Mr Macdougall,” he said. “I cannot speak calmly to you now, and the sooner you’re out of my sight the better for you! But stop a minute,” he added, as if on after reflection. “As you were present when I disrated Leigh—on the ground mainly of your false statements as to his having assaulted you without any provocation on your part, which has now been proved to have been false—it is only right that you should also be present at the restoration of the lad to his former post. Leigh!”

“Here, sir,” I replied to this last hail of the skipper’s, on his completing his reprimand to the mate. I anticipated, of course, what was coming, and my heart gave an exultant thump, almost “leaping into my mouth,” as the saying is.

“I’m sorry, my boy, I did you a wrong this afternoon,” said Captain Billings, stretching out his hand kindly to me as he spoke. “I hope, however, you’ll forgive me, and bear no malice. I now wish you to return to your duties as acting second mate in Mr Ohlsen’s place until he’s fit and well again; and I trust you’ll have no further disagreements with any of the officers of the ship.”

“Thank you, sir,” I answered respectfully, accepting the hand he offered and giving it a cordial shake. “I will be very careful of my conduct in future, and I’m sorry for being impertinent to Mr Macdougall—”

I turned here towards where the first mate had been standing; but he had disappeared, so the skipper accepted the apology I intended for him, on his behalf in his absence, making short my amende honorable.

“Never mind him now, my lad,” he said, waving his hand as if dismissing Mr Macdougall from further consideration. “He’s gone below, and joy go with him, if he’s got any conscience! And, by the way, Leigh, I shan’t forget that you’ve saved all our lives to-night by your timely warning.”

“It was more Jorrocks than I, sir,” I interposed here, stopping the skipper’s thanks. “I thought the sound of the breakers was caused by a lot of whales blowing near us; but he knew better, and he it was who sang out to the helmsman.”

“Well, well, we won’t argue the point,” replied Captain Billings, laughing. “I will say you both had a hand in it, if that’ll suit you better; but now, to end the controversy, you can go and turn in to your old bunk, as I intend keeping the first watch till we’re safe on our right track again.”

To hear was to obey, although, before I left the poop, the Esmeralda having got well away from the perilous rocks that had nearly been her ruin, I had the satisfaction of seeing her hauled round again up to the wind, with her head pointing south, thus resuming her proper course towards Cape Horn—only now with a more southerly pitch, sailing close-handed on the port tack.

Towards four bells in the morning watch we achieved the wonderful nautical feat of "Crossing the Line," and, as I was on deck at the time, interviewing Pat Doolan in order to coax some coffee out of him, the Irish cook had a joke or two at my expense, under the plea of christening me on my entrance into Neptune's rightful "territory"—if that term be not a Hibernian bull, considering the said territory is supposed to lie below the sea!

It was only our thirty-third day out, and some of the hands were congratulating themselves on our having got so far on our journey, many vessels knocking about the equator when within reach of it for days frequently before they can accomplish the passage.

"Be jabers!" said Doolan, "I call to mind once whin I was goin' from Noo Yark to Australy in a schooner with a cargo o' mules—"

"Lor', here's a bender coming now!" interrupted one of the crew with a laugh.

"Whisht, now!" ejaculated the cook indignantly. "Sure an' it's the trooth I'm tell'n ye, an' niver a lie! Whin I were a goin' to Australy in this here schooner, we kept dancing about hereabouts till a lot ov them blessed mules died, an' in coorse we hove 'em overboard as soon as they turned up their toes."

"That's a good un!" put in Jorrocks, who was standing by. "This is the fust time I ever heard tell of a mule having toes!"

"Well, hooves thin, if you likes them betther," said Pat, a little upset by this correction. "But, as I was a sayin' when this omahdaun here took the word out ov me mouth, unlike the raal gintleman he ginerally is—"

"Stow that flummery," cried Jorrocks, putting his hands before his face, under pretence of blushing at the compliment; but Doolan took no notice of him further, proceeding with his yarn.

"Whin we hove them mules over the side, I noticed one as was coollured most peculiar, all sthripes ov black on a white skin, jist like one ov them zaybrays

they haves in the sarcus show, an' they're called so, by the same token, 'case they brays like a donkey and comes over the zay, you see?"

"Aye, we see," said the hands, winking at each other and whispering that Pat was "carrying on finely this morning!"

"Well, bhoys, as I was a sayin'," continued the narrator, serving out pannikins of hot coffee to the watch the while, and so attending to duty and pleasure in the same breath, "I notic't this sthripy mule when it was chucked over the side at the beginning of the month. It was last August twelvemonth as how we was crossing the Line; and, after pitching the poor brute over, we sailed on and on—would you belayve it?—aye, for thray weeks longer, as I'm a living sinner, whin one foine mornin', jist the same as this now, the look-out man sings out as he says a boat floating ahid ov the schooner! Our old man, thinkin' there might be sowls in the blissid thing, puts the vessel off ov her coorse to fetch to windward ov it; and blest if what the look-out man thought was a boat wasn't the self-same carkiss ov that there sthripy mule we hove over three weeks before!"

"You'll do," was the comment of Jorrocks to this story. "You 'mind me, Pat, of a yarn I heard once about an old lady and a chap who knew how to 'bowse his jib up,' same as yourself."

"What was that?" I asked, seeing that Jorrocks looked as if he were primed up to fire off another story, and only needed a little pressing to make him reel it out.

"Lord, Mister Leigh, it ain't nothing to speak of," he began, with a preliminary hitch of his trowser stocks; "it's only what them book-people calls a nanny goat."

"An anecdote, eh?" I said. "Well, that'll be all the better. Heave ahead with it now you're on the tack."

"All right, then," replied Jorrocks. "Here goes. You must know as how this old lady were going over the Atlantic for the fust time, being on a voyage from Falmouth to Saint Kitts, in the West h'Indies; and she were mighty curious, when she had rekivered from sea-sickness, about all the strange sights o' the h'ocean, pestering the cap'en to death with questions.

"One day she tackled the old man 'bout flying fish. 'Bless me, Mr Capting,' she says, 'is it really true as how there be fishes as fly hereabouts?'

“Now, it were just on to noon that day, and the old man was busy ’bout taking a sight o’ the sun, the same as you’re so handy with, Mister Leigh; so he says to the old lady, ‘I’m engaged, mum, at present, but if you axes that man there at the wheel while I goes below, he’ll tell you all about it.’

“So, as soon as he dives down the companion to take the time of the chronometer below, the old lady goes up to the helmsman—all bridling up and curtseying down, the same as a ship in a heavy head sea.

“‘Good-morning, Mr Sailor,’ says she.

“‘Mornin’,’ says the man at the wheel, who was a rough old shellback, and didn’t waste his words like Pat Doolan here.

“‘Is it really true, Mr Sailor,’ says the old lady, ‘as how there are fishes in the sea in these latitoods, as can fly in the air, like birds? The capting told me to ax you, or I wouldn’t trouble you.’

“‘Bless you, mum, no trouble at all,’ answered the man. ‘In course there be flying fish hereabouts; you’ll see flocks of ’em presently.’

“‘And are they very large, Mr Sailor?’ says the old lady.

“‘Large, mum?’ repeats the helmsman, looking around as if in search of something to liken the size of the fish to. ‘Why, I’ve seed em as big round as—aye, as the stump of that there mizzen-mast there!’

“‘My good gracious!’ screams the old lady, ‘Why, they must be larger nor crocodiles!’

“‘Aye, all that,’ says the man, as cool as you please. ‘The last voyage I was on, my mate was in the foretop of the vessel I was in, looking out to windward, when pop jumps one of ’em right down his throat!’

“‘And the fish was as big as the mizzen-mast there?’ says the old lady, curious like, in her surprise at the chap’s awful bender; although she didn’t misdoubt his telling her the truth, for she would ha’ took in anything!

“But he was too fly for her, was my joker!

“‘You mustn’t speak to the man at the wheel!’ says he, gruffly; and so he got out cleverly from answering any more questions on the point—smart of him, wasn’t it?”

I could not help laughing at this story, the other hands joining in the merriment; all of us, though, wondering how Pat Doolan would take it.

The Irishman, however, did not consider there was anything personal in it. Other people's pulls at the long-bow always seem much more apparent than one's own!

"Ov coorse that chap was takin' a rise out of the ould lady," he said parenthetically; "but what I tould you ov the mule was thrue enough."

"What! do you mean to say that you were sailing away from the carcase for three weeks and came across it again?" I inquired, with a smile.

"Not a doubt ov it," replied the Irishman, stoutly, "and going good siven knots an hour by the log, too, at that! I rec'lect that v'yage o' mine in that schooner well, too, by the same token! It was there I found that Manilla guernsey ov mine so handy ag'in' the could."

"A Manilla guernsey?" said Jorrocks, in much amazement. "I know what Manilla cables are, and I've heard tell o' Manilla cigars, though I've never smoked 'em; but a Manilla guernsey—why, who ever came across sich an outlandish thing?"

"Be jabers, I have, boatswain," cried Pat Doolan. "Sure, an' I made it mysilf; so, if you'll listen, I'll till ye all about it."

"Hooray, here's another bender!" sang out the chaps standing by; but, seeing that the cook appeared as if he would turn rusty if they showed any further incredulity at his statements, they composed their faces—"looking nine ways for Sunday," as the phrase goes; or, like the Carthaginians when the pious Aeneas was spinning that wonderful yarn of his which we read about in Virgil, in the presence of Queen Dido and her court, conticuere omnes et ora tenebant!

Chapter Eighteen

Caught in a Pampero

"Sure an' you must bear in mind, messmates," commenced Pat, coming outside his galley and leaning against the side in free-and-easy fashion, "when I wint aboord that vessel in Noo Yark, I was a poor gossoon, badly off for clothes, having no more slops than I could carry handy in a hankercher."

"Not like your splendiferous kit now," observed Sails, the sail-maker, with a nudge in Jorrocks' ribs to point the joke—the cook's gear in the way of raiment being none of the best.

"No, not a ha'porth ov it," proceeded the Irishman, taking no notice of the sarcastic allusion to his wardrobe. "To till the truth, I'd only jist what I stood up in, for I'd hard times ov it in the States, an' was glad enough to ship in the schooner to git out ov the way ov thim rowdy Yankees, bad cess to 'em! They trate dacint Irishmen no betther nor if they were dirthy black nayghurs, anyhow! How so be it, as soon as I got afloat ag'in, I made up my mind to git some traps togither as soon as I could."

"Let you alone for that!" interposed Sails again, maliciously.

"Arrah, be aisy now, old bradawl and palm-string, or I'll bring ye up with a round turn!" exclaimed Pat, getting nettled at the remark.

"Why can't you let him be?" cried the rest, thereupon. "Heave ahead, cooky;" and, so encouraged, the Irishman once more made a fresh start, declaring, however, that if he were once more interrupted they'd "never hear nothing" of what he was going to tell them, "at all, at all!"

Peace being then restored, he resumed the burden of his tale.

"As soon as the ould schooner was riddy to start with all thim mules aboard, we got a tugboat to take us in tow down the harbour out to the Narrows, as they calls the entrance to Noo Yark Bay; and whin the tug's hawser was fetched over our bows to be fastened to the bollards I sees that the rope's a bran-new Manilla one.

"'Aha,' thinks I, 'that's a foine pace of rope anyhow! I'll have a bit ov you, me lad, to stow away with my duds; mayhap ye'll come in handy by-and-bye!' and so saying to meeself, I sings out to the chap on the tugboat a-paying out the

hawser, to give me some more slack, and he heaves over a fathom or two more, which allowed me to cut off a good length, lavin' plenty yit to belay around the bollards; an' whin no one was lookin' I takes the pace ov cable below and kicks it away in the forepeak, so as I could know where to foind it forenenst the time I wanted for to use it.

"Well, we sailed away from Sandy Hook down to the Line, an' sailed and sailed, losin' most of our mules, and making no headway, as I've tould you, until at last we got into the south-east Trades, same as this ship is now, and fetched down the coast to Cape Horn.

"Presently, it begins to get so could, that for want of clothing I was nearly blue-mouldy with the frost in the nights, until I could stand it no longer; but none ov the chaps had any duds to spare, an' I was clane out of me head what for to do.

"One evening, howsoever, whin I were that blue with could as I could have sarved for a Blue Pater if triced up to the mast-head, a sinsible kind ov idea sthruck me.

"'Be jabers,' sez I to mesilf, 'I'm forgettin' that pace of Manilla hawser I've got stowed away; sure an' it'll make an illigant overall!'

"No sooner I thinks that, than down I goes to the forepeak, where I found me rope all right; and thin, thin and there, boys, I unreaves the strands, making it all into spun yarn—you know, I s'pose, as how I'm a sail-maker by rights, like Sails here, and not a reg'ler cook?"

"The deuce you are!" ejaculated Sails; "you never told us that before."

"No fear," replied Pat. "Faix, I don't till you iverythin' I knows—I larnt better nor that from the monkeys in Brazil, old ship!"

"But what did you do with the Manilla hemp arter you unrove the hawser?" asked Jorrocks, his curiosity now roused by the matter-of-fact way in which the Irishman told his story—relating it as if every word was "the true truth," according to the French idiom.

"Why, you omahdaun, I jist worked it into a guernsey, knitting it from the nick downwards, the same as the ladies, bless 'em! do them woollen fallals that they wear round theirselves."

“You wove it into a guernsey?” cried Sails, in astonishment.

“Aye, I did that so,” returned Pat; “and wore it, too, all round Cape Horn!”

“Then let me look at you a little closer,” cried the sail-maker, pulling Doolan towards him, and passing his hand over his nose.

“What the blazes are ye afther, man?” asked Pat, not being able to make out what the other meant by handling him in that fashion.

“Only seeing if you had my mark,” said Sails, calmly; “and here it is, by all that’s powerful!”

“Your mark, Sails? What on airth d’ye mane?”

“Why, whenever I sews up a chap in his hammock as dies at sea, which I’ve often had to do as part of the sail-maker’s duty in the many ships I’ve been in, I allers makes a p’int of sticking my needle through the corpse’s nose, to prevent him slipping out of his covering.”

“What!” ejaculated the Irishman, startled for the moment out of his native keenness of wit; “an’ is it m’aning to say as it’s a could corpus I’ve been, an’ that I’ve bin did an’ buried in the bottom of the say?”

“Aye, aye, my hearty,” answered Sails, with great nonchalance. “And I’ve sewed you up in your hammock, too, for sarten—that is, just as sure as you fetched across that there streaky mule of yourn, arter sailing over the ocean for three weeks, and made a guernsey frock out of a Manilla hawser!”

There was a regular shout of laughter from all hands at the sail-maker thus turning the tables so completely on the Irishman, who got so angry at our merriment for the moment that he retired within his caboose, slamming the half-door too, and declaring that not a single mother’s son of those present should have the taste of hot coffee again in the morning watch!

However, Pat’s fits of temper were as evanescent as they were quickly produced, and presently he was laughing and talking away as if he had not been offended, enjoying the joke Sails had against him almost as much as any of the others.

Two days after crossing the Line we sighted the Rocas, on passing the parallel of Fernando Noronha, where the Brazilians have a penal settlement; and, on

the third day, we cleared the Cape of Saint Roque, which is the most projecting point of the South American continent—stretching out, as it does, miles into the Atlantic Ocean, while the coast-line on either side of it trends away in a wide sweep, away westwards, north and south, back from the sea.

After passing Saint Roque, we ran down our latitudes rapidly, the south-east Trades keeping with us until we had reached the twentieth parallel; and we fetched Rio on our forty-second day out. This was not bad time, considering the great distance we were driven out of our way by the gale, and the fact of our subsequently knocking about for a week in the Doldrums.

With regard to matters on board the ship, I may state here, that, from the date of that eventful night when the Esmeralda had so providentially escaped being wrecked on the Rocks of Saint Paul, and Captain Billings, after "dressing down" the mate, had restored me to my former position aft, Mr Macdougall had not spoken a single word to me, although I had made many overtures of peace towards him, wishing the matter to drop—nothing being so unpleasant as to be on awkward terms with any one with whom one is brought in constant contact, especially when the daggers-drawn parties are cooped up together in a vessel on the high seas.

But, no; he would not accept the olive branch.

When it was time for me to relieve his watch, the mate invariably sent one of the hands to summon me, telling me through the same medium the course to be steered, and giving what orders were necessary for the working of the ship, so that there should be no occasion for any conversation between us; and it likewise happened that when we were on deck together, as was frequently the case during the day, he always walked on the weather side of the poop, while I took the leeward place—that is, unless the skipper was there too, when of course the latter promenaded the more honourable beat, and I walked by his side, while Mr Macdougall had the lee-side then all to himself.

At meal-times also, in the cabin, he took care that we should not meet, never coming in until after I had left the table, and always rising up to go on deck should I enter while he was there.

The mate held aloof in a similar fashion from the skipper, the two never interchanging a word save with reference to the navigation of the vessel. He seemed, indeed, to have sent us both to Coventry, although Captain Billings made no comment to me on his conduct; but I did not fail to notice—what

indeed was the popular belief through the ship—that, if the first mate was paying us out in this way, he did not forget to “take it out of the crew” in another and very practical mode of his own, which was by driving them as hard as a workhouse superintendent in charge of a lot of poor paupers.

To return to the ship and her voyage, I should observe that, after the south-east Trades failed us—succeeded for a short spell by light variable winds, as we kept well away from the coast, and so perhaps missed the land breeze that we might have had—we picked up the south-west monsoon, which carried us past Rio Janeiro.

The term monsoon, or “monsun,” I may explain, is derived from an Arabic word, mausim, meaning “a set time, or season of the year;” and is generally applied to a system of regular wind currents, like the Trades, blowing in different hemispheres beyond the range of those old customers with which ordinary voyagers are familiar.

From Rio we ran down in five days to the Plate River, having fine weather and making pretty good sailing all the time, as indeed we had done since crossing the Line; but, arrived off Monte Video, we soon had warning that our quiet days of progress through the water on one tack, without shifting a brace or starting a sheet, were numbered with the fortunate things of the past.

One morning, just when we were in latitude 34 degrees 55 minutes south, and 55 degrees 10 minutes West, or nearly a hundred miles off the wide estuary of the Rio de la Plata, I noticed a peculiar phenomenon.

The wind was blowing from the northward of west, while the atmosphere was bright and clear, so that the horizon was extended to almost double its ordinary distance; but, although no land was to be seen anywhere in sight, myriads of little winged insects began all at once to hover over us, just as if we were close in shore under the lee of some tropical forest, while our hands, clothes, faces, and the ship’s rigging as well, began to be covered with long, white, hair-like webs, similar to those woven by spiders in a garden shrubbery! I couldn’t make it out at all, feeling inclined to view the matter as one of those extraordinary freaks of Nature, which even science is unable to throw any light on—phenomena that are every now and then exhibited to us, as if only to show our ignorance of the workings of the invisible Power around us guiding the movements and physical cosmogony of our sphere; but Jorrocks, who was a thorough seaman, believing in portents, and thinking that everything unusual

at sea was sent for a purpose, and “meant something,” advised my calling the skipper.

“I ’specs, Mister Leigh,” said he, “as how there’s a squall brewing, or summat, for they’re pretty plentiful down here when the wind bears round to the west.”

“All right, Jorrocks; I’ll give him a hail,” I replied; and leaving the boatswain in charge of the deck, it being my watch, I went down to wake up the skipper, he having only turned in just before I came on duty.

“How’s the glass?” asked Captain Billings, as soon as I had roused him and told him what I had observed.

“I didn’t think of looking at it, sir,” I replied.

“Then do so at once,” he said; “a sailor should never fail to consult his barometer, even when the weather is apparently fine, for it gives warning of any change hours, perhaps, before it may occur. It is an unswerving guide—more so than the wind and sky in some latitudes.”

I hastened now to look at the instrument, and noticing that it had fallen, I reported the fact to the skipper as he was dressing.

“Ah,” said he, “then that has occurred since I turned in;” and, completing his toilet rapidly, he soon followed me on deck, whither I returned at once.

In the short interval of my absence below, however, there was a marked alteration in the scene.

The wind had dropped to the faintest breeze, which presently, too, died away, succeeded by a dead stillness of the atmosphere, while the sea became like glass, except where an occasional heave of the unbroken surface betrayed the restless force beneath that seeming calm; and, instead of the clear sky and wide-stretching horizon melting into the azure distance, which had previously struck me with admiration, a thick haze had crept up over the heavens from the westwards, which, extending right up to the zenith, had soon shut out the bright sunlight, making it darker than night—the air becoming at the same time chill and cold.

I had not much leisure, though, to note the pictorial effects of the scene; for I heard the skipper’s voice behind me.

“By Jove, Leigh!” he exclaimed, “we’re going to have one of those pamperos, as they call them, that come off the mouth of the Plate; and we’ll have all our work cut out for us to be ready in time. Call the other watch, boatswain!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” replied Jorrocks; and quickly his familiar hail rang out fore and aft, as he rapped on the scuttle forwards—

“All ha–a–ands take in sail!”

We were carrying a full spread of canvas at the time; but the men, tumbling out of their bunks with a will, not having had much of that sort of work lately, were soon clambering up the rigging, furling the royals and topgallant sails—I amongst them, you may be sure, having been the first, as usual, on the main royal yard.

“Now, men, take in the flying jib,” cried Captain Billings, when we had come below, having so far stripped the ship for the coming fight; and the headsail was stowed, the spanker and trysail were brailed, the courses hauled up and the yards squared, when we awaited the attack of the pampero.

“It’ll soon be on us now,” said the skipper, seeing that the heavens became blacker and blacker to the westwards; and presently it came!

A streak of vivid lightning shot out from the blue-black storm-clouds that were hung over the ship like a funeral pall, lighting up the surrounding gloom and making it appear all the more sombre afterwards from the momentary illumination; and then, with a crash of thunder—that seemed as if the sky above was riven open, it was so awfully loud and reverberating—the tornado burst upon us, accompanied by a fierce blast of wind, that almost took the ship aback, and would have sent her down beneath the water in an instant to a certainty if we had been under sail.

“Let fly everything!” shouted the skipper; and the halliards being cast loose, the topsails came down on the caps by the run; when the Esmeralda, paying off from the wind, began to exhibit her old form of showing her heels to the enemy—tearing away through the sea with all her sheets flying.

Along with the pampero came a terrific shower of hail that lacerated our faces and almost took away our breath for the moment; but, never heeding this, on the skipper issuing his orders, we were up aloft again reefing topsails in a jiffey, and, as soon as the halliards had been manned and the yards rehoisted, the courses were furled and the jib hauled down, the fore-topmast staysail being

set in its place. Everything being now made snug, the vessel was brought once more round to her course on the starboard tack, heading a little to the westward of south.

To the hail succeeded a heavy storm of rain; and then, the pampero having blown itself out by its sudden frenzy, a short calm now came on, after which the wind chopped round to the old quarter, the southwards and eastwards, bringing us back again to the port tack as we steered between the Falkland Islands and the South American continent—keeping in closer to the land now, for any fresh wind that might spring up would be certain to come from off shore.

The day of the pampero, however, did not pass by before another incident happened on board the Esmeralda.

When "all hands" were called, of course Mr Macdougall came up too; and, although he did not go aloft the same as I did to help in reefing topsails and furl the canvas—for he was neither so young nor so active as myself, and besides, it was not his place as first mate of the ship thus to aid the crew in doing the practical part of their duty—yet, on deck, he was of much assistance to the skipper in seeing that his different orders were promptly executed at the moment required; being not chary either of lending a hand at a brace when help was necessary, and exerting himself as much as any one, in a way very unusual for him.

So now, when the pampero had passed away and the excitement was over, Captain Billings, in his joyful exuberance of feeling at the Esmeralda having weathered the peril, went up to him and shook hands cordially.

"Hurrah, Macdougall!" he exclaimed, "the old barquey has been too much for my River Plate bully of a pampero."

"Aye, mon, she's weethered it weel, I ween," replied the mate, accepting the proffered pledge of restored friendship; and he was shaking away at the skipper's fist as if he was never going to relinquish its grasp, when, suddenly, the calm came on that I have mentioned, and the sails flapped against the masts heavily, shaking the ship and making the rigging vibrate.

Both Mr Macdougall and the skipper looked aloft, impelled by the same instinct, as they stood aft, the mate close to the taffrail; when, at that instant,

the spanker boom swinging round, the lee sheet—not being hauled taut—caught the mate athwart his chest and swept him incontinently over the side!

I was on the opposite side of the deck, witnessing with much satisfaction the mode in which he and the skipper had made up their differences, the feud having lasted for over a fortnight; but, on seeing the accident, was for a moment horror-struck.

However, I soon recovered myself.

“Man overboard!” I shouted out, with all the power of my lungs; and then, without hesitation, I plunged after Mr Macdougall into the sea.

Chapter Nineteen

On Fire In The Hold!

The wind had dropped to a calm, as I've mentioned, just before this; but the sea was still running high, with those heavy waves that get up in a moment in the lower latitudes as soon as it begins to blow. But I never thought of this when I plunged in to the mate's rescue.

When I was at Dr Hellyer's, the only two things I ever really learnt that were of any use to me in my after-life were, a substantial grounding in mathematics—thanks to "Smiley"—which subsequently made the study of navigation easy to me when Sam Pengelly put me under charge of a tutor; and, secondly, the art of swimming, the place where the school was situated and the practice of taking out the boys on the beach for the purpose every day, offering great facilities to any one with the least aptitude for taking to the water and possessed of a desire to learn how to support himself in it.

Now, therefore, I found the second of these acquirements to stand me in good stead—the consciousness of knowing how to swim, not only giving me the courage to leap over the vessel's side after the unfortunate man, but also enabling me to decide what to do when I found myself battling with the waves on my errand of succour.

The Esmeralda's quarter was a good height from the sea level; so, on my diving off, what with this and the impetus of my leap, I went considerably below the surface, coming up panting for breath some distance away from the ship, which, having still a little way on her, besides offering a considerable surface of hull for the waves to act upon, was drifting further and further off each instant.

I had no concern about this, though, the only impression on my mind being the necessity of getting hold of Mr Macdougall as soon as I could; and when I had recovered from the half-suffocating feeling produced by my impromptu long dive beneath the Atlantic rollers, I raised myself on the top of one of these, and proceeded to look for the first mate, who ought, I thought, to be pretty close to me.

The water struck bitterly cold, as I trod it down in order to elevate myself as much as I could and so have a wider view around, for it made my limbs feel as if cramp was coming on; but I kicked out vigorously, and the sensation passing off I began to feel more at home in the water, and as confident as if I were

bathing off the shore at Beachampton—albeit I was now having a bath in the middle of the Southern ocean, with my ship almost half a mile from me by this time!

I did not see Mr Macdougall anywhere at first, so I feared that the force with which the boom sheet had come against his chest might have so injured him as to paralyse his movements when he fell overboard; but, presently, when I rose on the crest of another huge rolling billow that took me up a little higher aloft, I saw him struggling in one of the watery valleys between the ridges of the waves about half a cable's length away to the windward of me, so that I was between him and the ship, whose sails alone now were all I could see of her from my low position in the water.

Catching sight of him, at once inspired me with fresh courage, making me as buoyant as a cork; and I faced the task before me, offering up a heartfelt prayer that I might accomplish it successfully.

"Hold up, Mr Macdougall! I'm coming to help you!" I cried out as loudly as I could, for he seemed just then, from the look of despair I saw on his face, to be on the point of chucking up his hands and allowing himself to sink to the bottom, impressed probably with the hopelessness of attempting to reach the vessel. Then, striking out with a good strong breast-stroke, which is worth all your fancy side business in rough water, I made towards him; although, having to go against the set of the sea, I found it much harder work than merely keeping myself afloat, which was all that I had previously tried to do, without actually swimming.

He did not hear my shout, being to windward; but, when I rose presently on another wave-crest nearer him, I could perceive that he saw me, from the way in which he raised one of his arms in his excitement—the effect of which was, of course, to cause his head to go under and make him believe his last hour was come.

"Help, help!" he screamed, when he got above the surface again, spluttering out words and water together; "I'm droonin', mon—help, mon, help!"

I could hear him distinctly from my being to leeward, and as I was much nearer to him now, I cried out again to encourage him—

"Hold on, Mr Macdougall! I'll be with you in a minute!"

Then, with half a dozen strong, sturdy strokes, aided by a wave that worked him towards me, I was by his side.

He was utterly exhausted, having, like most unpractised swimmers, pumped himself out by splashing about with short jerky movements of his hands and legs, which only wearied him without advancing him through the opposing billows or assisting him to keep up; and, on my coming up to him, as all drowning men in similar circumstances invariably do, he made a frantic clutch at me, when, if he had succeeded in grasping me, we should both have sunk to the bottom.

But I took very good care he should not touch me, for Tom Larkyns and I when at Hellyer's used to make a practice in fun of pretending we were going down when out bathing, and the one or other of us who acted the part of rescuer would always study how to approach the feigning drowner, so as to help him effectually without incurring any risk of being pulled below the surface; so, on Mr Macdougall stretching out his clutching hands, endeavouring to get hold of me, I was quite on my guard to avoid his grip.

Diving below him, I seized him by the back of the neck, his long sandy hair, which was streaming with water, enabling me to take a firm grip.

"Don't try to hinder me," I cried hurriedly between breaths, for the sea was very rough, and it wasn't easy to speak. "Keep perfectly quiet, and I'll save you."

The Scotsman gave a wriggle or two, but, like most of his countrymen, he had a good deal of common sense and self-command, which made him remain passive after a bit; when, throwing myself on my back, I floated, dragging his head across my body, so that he might rest awhile and recover himself before trying to swim towards the ship.

Presently he endeavoured to look round, so as to see who it was that had come to his assistance.

"Hold hard!" I said. "You mustn't move, or I'll have to let you go;" for, I can state, it was a difficult job supporting him in that way, and it took all my paddling to keep our united weight up.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I ken the voice—eet's you, Leigh, eesn't it?"

"Yes, Mr Macdougall, it's me," said I. "Do you feel better now?"

But he did not answer me for a moment, although I felt a tremble go through his frame.

A moment afterwards, with what sounded like a sob, he cried out, “You brave laddie! To theenk that you of all ithers should ha’ coom to save a reckless loon lik’ me, the noo! It’s a joogement on me for me cruel leeing again’ you, boy; you’ve heapit coals o’ fire on me head!”

“Never mind that now, Mr Macdougall,” I said. “We’ve got to see about getting back to the ship, and then we can let bygones be bygones! Have you got your breath back now?”

“Eh?”

“Do you think you can manage to put a hand on my shoulder, and rest quiet in the water while I tow you along?”

“Aye, I’ll try it, laddie.”

“Mind, you mustn’t clutch hold of me too hard,” I cried; and, easying him off from my chest, I turned round again in the water.

He sank about a foot at first from the change of position, but, keeping strict heed to my injunctions, and gripping my shoulder with a grasp of iron, he was presently floating half alongside and half behind, with his head well out of the water, as I struck out to where I could still see the ship as we rose every now and then at intervals on the crests of the following waves; although, when we descended again between the intervening hollows, we seemed shut in by a wall of sea.

The pampero having blown off from the pampas inland—whence the local name for these tornadoes—had come from the westwards, and, of course, the set of the waves, even after the wind had ceased to move them, continued in a south-westerly direction, whither the Esmeralda had also been carried away from us, the exposed surface of her hull drifting her more rapidly away than such tiny atoms as we presented to the influence of the rollers. When, therefore, Mr Macdougall was so far recovered as to permit of my attempting to regain the ship, she was already quite a mile off, if not more!

As I looked at her distant sails, which came in sight when we got atop of the billows, they seemed to be gliding further and further away each fresh time that I saw them, showing that there was no wind; so, knowing that a boat

would have to pull all that distance against a heavy head sea in order to fetch us, I almost despaired of our being picked up.

No one but those who have undergone a similar experience, can imagine the utter loneliness that strikes upon the heart of a solitary swimmer, struggling in the middle of the ocean for dear life. The sea never looks so terribly wide and vast as then, the sky never so far off, as he gazes upwards in piteous entreaty; while the elements appear to mock his puny efforts to reach the receding vessel containing his comrades of a moment ago, who now seem basely leaving him to perish!

These thoughts flashed through my mind as I struck out in the direction of the Esmeralda. All the sins and omissions of my past life then rose before my mental kaleidoscope, making me conscious of my unpreparedness to die, and yet want of justification to live; but I struck out bravely nevertheless, and I need hardly say, I did not whisper a word of my fears to the mate, who kept silent and motionless the while, without incommoding my efforts.

My strokes got slower and slower, for the wash of the sea over us every now and then was terribly fatiguing; for, although I was very strong for my age, and powerfully built, still the strain of supporting Mr Macdougall besides myself, was more than I was able to manage—the strongest man couldn't have done it.

He saw this even before I did, and took away his hand from my shoulder.

"Let me bide, laddie," he said. "You've doon your best to save me, but you canna do't mair; gang awa' and save your ain sel'."

"No I won't, Mr Macdougall," I cried, stopping and treading water for a minute or two, while he imitated my example. "If I'm saved, you shall be saved; and if you drown, I'll drown too!"

"That's bravely said, laddie," he replied, "but your streength will na let you bear my lumpy karkus. I'm a meesereeble sinner, ye ken, and it's na richt as a brave lad lik' you should lose his ain life for a worthless loon lik' me!"

"No more of that, Mr Macdougall!" I cried, stoutly. "I made up my mind to try and save you when I jumped overboard after you; and save you now I will, with God's help—so there's no use trying to prevent me! Now put your hand on my shoulder again, for it's time for us to be moving on after our rest."

The short “spell off” from swimming had rested me, and I struck out once more with renewed vigour, my progress with the mate in tow being now much more rapid, for the sea was calming down, beginning to feel the cessation of the wind.

“We’ll reach the ship, never fear!” I said presently, seeing her still in the distance when we rose upon a wave from the watery abyss in which the previous dialogue had taken place.

“I hope so, laddie, I hope so,” said Mr Macdougall, but his words did not sound very cheering, and I went on swimming hard, saying nothing further. By-and-bye, just when my strength began to fail again, and I felt that I could never get over the distance that separated us from the vessel, I saw to my joy a large object floating near.

“Hullo!” I cried, “here’s a boat, or raft, or something in sight; cheer up, Mr Macdougall, we’re saved!”

But, he was so worn out with the exposure, and his previous efforts to keep up before I went to his assistance, that he had now almost lost the power of speech, only moaning something like “Eh, laddie?” behind me.

I saw, therefore, that I must now trust entirely to my own exertions for our joint safety—the more so since that, as the mate lost his consciousness, although still keeping hold of me in the way I had directed him, his limp, passive weight pressed me down lower and lower in the water; so, putting out all my energies for a final effort, and clenching my teeth together with grim determination, I struggled forward, swimming as hard as I could towards the floating object I had seen, and which I had caught sight of only just in time.

One stroke—two—three—and a roller throws me back again. I renew the contest—another stroke, accompanied by as vigorous a kick out as I can manage, with Mr Macdougall’s prostrate body touching my legs; and then—I clutch hold of the thing at last—hurrah!

It was a large hencoop, which used to be fixed on the starboard side of the Esmeralda’s poop; so I suppose some one must have pitched it overboard after me the moment I gave the alarm.

But, no matter when it was sent adrift or why, it now saved both our lives; for I don’t believe I could have swum a stroke further, while as for Mr Macdougall, he was already like a man dead.

There was a piece of rope lashed round the coop, and with this I at once made the mate fast to it, raising his head well up, and shouting in his ears to revive him.

In a minute or two, he opened his eyes, and appeared more like himself, a smile spreading over his face, as if in thankfulness for escaping death.

As for me, I was as right as a trivet now that I had come across such a splendid raft; and, climbing on top, and balancing myself so as not to let it lurch over, I proceeded to look for the ship—which I had almost forgotten while striving to reach this nearer haven of refuge.

No sooner, however, had I mounted the hencoop, which floated nearly a foot above the surface, even with my weight on it—for it was a big piece of woodwork, with plenty of timber in it, and as light as a cork—than I felt a faint current of air blowing in my face from a direction quite opposite to that of the drift of the waves, the tops of which now began to curl and break off.

"Hullo, the wind has changed!" I sang out to Mr Macdougall, as he looked up at me to hear my report; and then, glancing round, there I saw the Esmeralda, with her yards squared, approaching us rapidly, the breeze having caught her up long before it reached us.

I could have shouted aloud for joy.

"Cheer up, Mr Macdougall!" I said, repressing my emotion as much as it lay in my power. "The ship is making for us, and we'll be on board again in a brace of shakes."

"Nae, ye're jookin', laddie!" he cried despairingly. "She'll never reach us 'fore dark."

"Aye, but she will, though," I replied, as she was nearing us so fast that I could now see her hull, which had before been invisible; and, almost as I spoke the words, she rose higher and higher, until I could make out an object at the mast-head like a man on the look-out for us and signalling, for I could see his arms move.

"Hurrah! she's coming up fast now!" I cried, to convince Mr Macdougall; when, seeing my excitement, he at last believed the good news, the effect on him being to cause him to burst into a passion of tears, of which I took no notice, leaving him to recover himself.

Presently, I could not only perceive the Esmeralda, but a boat also ahead, to which the man I had noticed in the foretop was making motions.

“We’re all right now, Mr Macdougall,” I said.

“I thought they wouldn’t desert us! They have launched a boat, and it is pulling towards us now. Let us give them a hail; raise your voice, sir—one, two, three—now then. Boat ahoy!”

The mate did not help the chorus much, his voice being too weak as yet, and his lungs probably half full of salt water; but still, he joined in my shout, although those in the boat were too far off to hear it.

“We must hail them again,” I said, “or else they’ll pass to windward of us. Come, Mr Macdougall, one more shout!”

This time our feeble cry was heard; and a hearty cheer was borne back down on the breeze to us, in response, the men in the boat pulling for us as soon as they caught our hail.

In another five minutes, it seemed, but perhaps it was much less—the tension on one’s nerves sometimes making an interval of suspense appear much longer than it really is—the Esmeralda’s jolly-boat was alongside our little raft, with the two of us tumbled into the stern-sheets, amidst a chorus of congratulations and handshakings from Jorrocks, who was acting as coxswain; and, before we realised almost that we were rescued, we were safe on board the old ship again.

It was all like a dream, passing quite as rapidly!

The skipper, when I climbed the side ladder which had been put over for us, assisted up by a dozen pairs of willing hands, almost hugged me, and the crew gave me three cheers, which of course gratified my pride; but, what I valued beyond the praises bestowed on me for jumping overboard after Mr Macdougall—which was a mere act of physical courage which might have been performed by any water-dog, as I told Jorrocks—was the consciousness that I had made a friend of one who had previously been my enemy, returning good for evil. It was owing to this only, I fervently believe, that my life was preserved in that perilous swim!

Mr Macdougall was ill for some days afterwards, the shock and exposure nearly killing him; still, before the end of the week he was able to return to duty, a much changed man in every respect. Thenceforth, he treated the men with far

greater consideration than previously, and he was really so painfully humble to me that I almost wished once or twice that he would be his bumptious, dogmatic old self again. However, it was all for the best, perhaps, for we all got on very sweetly together now, without friction, and harmony reigned alike on the poop and in the fo'c's'le.

The south-easterly wind, which had sprung up so fortunately for our rescue, lasted the Esmeralda until she had run down the coast of Patagonia to Cape Tres Puntas, some three hundred and twenty miles to the northward of the Virgins, as the headlands are called that mark the entrance to the Straits of Magellan.

Of course, our skipper did not intend to essay this short cut into the Pacific, which is only really practicable for steamers, as the currents through the different channels are dangerous in the extreme, and the winds not to be relied on, chopping round at a moment's notice, and causing a ship to drop her anchor in all sorts of unexpected places; but he intended to go through the Straits of Le Maire, instead of going round Staten Island, and thus shorten his passage of Cape Horn in that way.

However, when, on our fifty-ninth day out, we were nearing the eastern end of Staten Island, the wind, which had of late been blowing pretty steadily from the northward of west, hauled round more to the southward, and being dead against the Le Maire channel, we were forced to give the island a wide berth, and stand to the outside of it.

It was fine light weather, with clear nights, all the time we had been sailing down the coast; for we could see the Magellan clouds, as they are called, every evening. These are small nebulae, like the Milky Way, which occupy the southern part of the heavens, immediately above Cape Horn, whose proximity they always indicate.

Shortly after our passing Staten Island, however, a change came, the wind blowing in squalls, accompanied by snow and sleety hail, and the sea running high as it only can run in these latitudes; but still, everything went well with us until we were about 55 degrees South and 63 degrees West, when a violent gale sprang up from the north-west.

Everything was hauled down and clewed up, the ship lying-to under her reefed main-topsail and fore-topmast staysail, and Captain Billings was just saying to me that I was now going to have "a specimen of what Cape Horn weather was

like," when I noticed Mr Macdougall—who had been making an inspection of the ship forwards—come up the poop ladder with his face much graver than usual, although, as a rule, his expression of countenance was not the most cheerful at any time.

"Whatever is the matter with Mr Macdougall?" I said to Captain Billings. "I'm certain something has happened, or he would not look so serious!"

"Bless you, Martin, you mustn't judge by his phiz. I daresay the men have only been skylarking in the fo'c's'le, and it doesn't please him."

But it was something far more important than that which had occasioned the gravity of the mate's face, as the skipper soon heard; for, on Mr Macdougall coming up close to us, he whispered something in the skipper's ear which made him turn as white as a sheet.

"Martin, Martin," he said to me, dropping his voice, however, so that the men might not hear the terrible news before it was absolutely necessary to tell them, "the coals are on fire in the main hold!"

Chapter Twenty

The Last Disaster

After the first shock of surprise at the alarming intelligence—the most awful that can be circulated on board a ship, and one that fills up the seaman's cup of horrors to the brim—Captain Billings quickly recovered his usual equanimity. He was his own clear-headed, calm, collected self again in a moment.

"How did you discover it?" he asked the mate, in a low tone.

"I was ganging forwarts," said Mr Macdougall, in the same hushed key, so that only Captain Billings and I could catch his words, "when a' at once I smeelt somethin'—"

"Ah, that raking flying jibboom of yours wasn't given you for nothing!" whispered the skipper, alluding to the mate's rather "pronounced" nose.

"Aye, mon, it sairves me weel," said Mr Macdougall, feeling the ridge of his nasal organ with much apparent satisfaction, and then proceeding to finish his statement. "But I could no meestake the smeel, the noo."

"Something burning, I suppose?" said the skipper interrogatively.

"You're right, Cap'en; the smeel was that o' boornin' wood and gas."

"What did you do then?" asked Captain Billings.

"I joost slippet off the main hatch, and the smeel was quite overpowerin', enough to choke one! so I e'en slippet the hatch on again, walking forwarts so as not to alarm the crew; and then I cam' aft to tell your ain sel'."

"You did right," said the skipper. "I'll go presently and have a look myself."

Captain Billings' inspection proved that the mate's fears were but too well-founded; so he immediately had the pumps rigged by the watch on duty—"all hands" not being called yet, as the vessel was lying-to, and there was not much work to be done. But a lot of water was pumped into the hold, after which the hatches were battened down, and we hoped the fire would die out from being smothered in this way.

Meanwhile the north-westerly gale increased to almost a hurricane, the ship taking in great seas over her bows that deluged the decks, so that the waist sometimes was all awash with four feet of water on it; but this did not trouble us much, for of the two elements the sea was now the least feared, as we hoped that the one would check the spread of the other.

Next day, however, when the gale lightened a little, and the Esmeralda rode easier, still head to sea, the men complained that the fo'c'sle was getting too hot for them to live in it, although the temperature of the exterior air was nearly down to freezing point.

This looked ominous; so Captain Billings, determining to adopt more stringent measures to check the conflagration that must be raging below in the cargo, caused the hatches to be opened; but such dense thick volumes of smoke and poisonous gas rolled forth the moment the covers were taken off, that they were quickly battened down again, holes now being bored to insert the hose pipes, and another deluge of water pumped into the hold, forwards as well as amidships.

"I don't know what to do," said the skipper to Mr Macdougall. "If it were not for this gale I would try to run for Sandy Point, where we might get assistance, as I've heard of the captain of a collier once, whose ship caught fire in the cargo like mine, careening his ship ashore there, when, taking out the burning coals, he saved the rest of his freight and stowed it again, so that he was able to resume his voyage and deliver most of the cargo at its destination. But this wind is right in one's teeth, either to get to Sandy Point or fetch any other port within easy reach."

"We moost ae just trust to Proveedence!" replied the mate.

"Oh, yes, that's all very well," said the skipper, impatiently. "But, still, Providence expects us to do something to help ourselves—what do you suggest?"

"I canna thaenk o' naught, Cap'en," replied Mr Macdougall, in his lugubrious way.

"Hang it, neither can I!" returned the skipper, as if angry with himself because of no timely expedient coming to his mind; but just at that moment the gale suggested something to him—at all events in the way of finding occupation!

All at once, the wind, which had been blowing furiously from the northwards, shifted round without a moment's warning to the south-west, catching the ship on her quarter, and heeling her over so to leeward that her yard-arms dipped in the heavy rolling sea.

For a second, it seemed as if we were going over; for the Esmeralda remained on her beam ends without righting again, the waves breaking clean over her from windward, and sweeping everything movable from her decks fore and aft; but then, as the force of the blast passed away, she slowly laboured up once more, the masts swaying to and fro as if they were going by the board, for they groaned and creaked like living things in agony.

"Put the helm up—hard up!" shouted the skipper to the man at the wheel; but, as the poor fellow tried to carry out the command, the tiller "took charge," as sailors say, hurling him right over the wheel against the bulwarks, which broke his leg and almost pitched him over the side. Had this occurred it would have been utterly impossible to have saved him.

Mr Macdougall and I immediately rushed aft; and, the two of us grasping the spokes, managed to turn the wheel round with our united strength; but it was too late to get the ship to pay off, for, a fresh blast of wind striking her full butt, she was taken aback, the foremast coming down with a crash across the deck, carrying with it the bowsprit and maintopmast, the mizzen-topmast following suit a minute afterwards.

This was bad enough in all conscience, without our having the consciousness that besides this loss of all our spars, making the vessel a hopeless log rolling at the mercy of the winds and waves, our cargo of coals was on fire in the hold, forming a raging volcano beneath our feet!

Fortune was cruel. Mishap had followed on mishap. The powers of evil were piling Ossa on Pelion!

The skipper, however, was not daunted yet.

All hands had rushed aft, without being specially called, roused by the crash of the falling spars, so he immediately set them to work with the hatchets fastened round the mainmast bitts, cutting away at the wreckage; and then, as the clouds cleared away and a bit of blue sky showed itself aloft, Captain Billings expressed himself hopeful of getting out of the meshes of that network of danger in every direction with which we seemed surrounded.

“Look alive, men, and don’t despair,” said he to the crew, encouraging them; for they were almost panic-stricken at first, and it was all that Jorrocks and I could do to get them to ply their tomahawks forwards and cut away the rigging, which still held the foremast with all its top-hamper attached to the ship, thumping at her sides as the lumber floated alongside, trying to crunch our timbers in. “Look alive, men, and put your heart into it; all hope hasn’t left us yet! The gale has nearly blown itself out, as you can see for yourselves by that little bit of blue sky there overhead, bigger than a Dutchman’s pair of breeches; so, as soon as the sea goes down a little, we’ll hoist out the boats, so as to have them handy in case we have to abandon the ship, should the fire in the hold get too strong for us, although I don’t fear that yet, my hearties, for the water may drown it out soon, you know. But work away cheerily, my lads, and clear away all that dunnage, so that we can set a little sail presently on the mainmast and mizzen, which we still have standing, when we can make a run for some islands lying close by under the lee of Cape Horn, where I’ll heave her ashore if I can; but, if the vessel don’t reach the land, you needn’t be afraid of not being able to do so in the boats, which we can take to as a last resource, so there’s no fear of your lives being lost, at any rate!”

“Hurray!” shouted out Jorrocks, leading a cheer; and Pat Doolan seconding him heartily, the hands started at the rigging with greatly renewed vigour, slashing at the shrouds and stays until they parted, and the foremast was at last cut away clear, floating astern on the top of the rolling waves.

“There it goes!” cried the skipper, “and joy go with it for deserting us in that unhandsome way!”

“Ah, sir,” observed Haxell, the carpenter, who was standing close beside him now, quiet a bit after exerting himself like a navvy in helping to clear the wreck, “you forgets as how the poor dear thing never recovered that spring it had off Madeiry!”

“No; for it has lasted well, nevertheless, and I oughtn’t to complain of it now,” said Captain Billings, with a responsive sigh to the carpenter’s lament over the lost foremast. Haxell looked upon all the ship’s spars as if they were his own peculiar private property, and spoke of them always—that is, when he could be induced to abandon his chronic taciturnity—as if they had kindred feelings and sensibilities to his own!

The dark threatening clouds which had enveloped the heavens for the past twenty-four hours now cleared away, although the wind still blew pretty fresh

from the south-west, and the sun coming out, Captain Billings told me to go and fetch my sextant in order to take an observation so as to ascertain our true position; for, first with the north-easter, and then with the squall from the south, we had been so driven here, there, and everywhere, that it was difficult to form any reasonable surmise as to where we really were—especially as there was a strong current supposed to run round Cape Horn from the Pacific towards the Atlantic Ocean at certain tides.

I fetched my sextant and took the sun; and I may say confidently to all whom it may concern that this was the last observation ever made by any one on board the ill-fated Esmeralda!

The skipper checked me in the time, from the chronometer in the cabin; and when I had worked out the reckoning, we compared notes on the poop.

“What do you make it?” said he.

“56 degrees 20 minutes South,” I said.

“And the ship’s time makes us about 66 degrees West. Ha! humph! we must be about forty miles to the south of Cape Horn; and, by Jove,” he added, looking to the north-west, where the blue sky was without a fleck save a little white cloud, like the triangular sail of a boat, seen dimly low down on the horizon, “there’s my gentleman over there, now!”

The knowledge of the vessel’s position appeared to give the skipper greater confidence; and, the waves ceasing to break over us, although the huge southern rollers swept by in heavy curves, he gave directions for getting some tackle rigged to launch the long-boat, which, although it was right in the way, had escaped injury when the foremast fell. At the same time, the mainsail and mizzen staysail were set, and the vessel steered in the direction of that Cape which she seemed destined never to round.

“We’ll run for the Wollaston group,” said the skipper—“that is, if the fire will let us stop aboard till we reach there; and if not, why, the less distance there will be for us to trust ourselves to the boats in this strong sea.”

No time was lost in making preparations to quit the ship, however—provisions and stores being brought up from the steerage by the steward and a couple of seamen who were told off to help him.

In the last few hours the fire had made considerable headway; for thin wreaths of smoke were curling up from the deck forwards, where the pitch had been melted from the seams, and the heat was plainly perceptible on the poop, accompanied as it was by a hot sulphurous smell.

“Be jabers, I fale like a cat on a hot griddle,” said Pat Doolan, as he danced in and out of the galley, engaged in certain cooking operations on a large scale which the skipper had ordered; “I’ll soon have no sowl at all, at all, to me cawbeens!”

The men laughed at this, but there was a good deal of truth in the joking words of the Irishman, as, although washed with water, the deck was quite unbearable to one’s naked foot.

It was now early in the afternoon, and the long-boat and jolly-boat were both launched and loaded with what stores were available, the skipper personally seeing that each was provided with a mast and sails and its proper complement of oars and ballast—barrels and barricoes containing water being utilised to this latter end, thus serving for a double purpose.

Other things and persons were also attended to.

Mr Ohlsen, the second mate, and Harmer, the seaman who had had his leg broken when thrown against the bulwarks—and who, by the way, had the injured limb excellently set by Mr Macdougall, who had passed through a hospital course in “Edinbro’ Toon,” he told us—were brought up from the cabin in their cots, being both invalids. The skipper likewise secured the ship’s papers and removed the compass from the binnacle; while I, of course, did not forget my sextant and a chart or two which Captain Billings told me to take. The foremast hands having also selected a small stock of useful articles, all of us were ready to leave the vessel as soon as she gave us notice to quit.

The fire was waxing hotter and hotter, the curling wreaths of smoke having expanded into dense black columns of vapour, and an occasional tongue of flame was licking the edges of the coamings of the fore hatchway, while sparks every now and then went flying up in the air and were wafted away to leeward by the wind.

“She can’t last much longer now without the flames bursting forth,” said Captain Billings. “The sooner we see about leaving her the better now. Haul up the boats alongside, and prepare to lower down our sick men.”

“Hadn’t we better have a whip rigged from the yard-arm, sir?” suggested Jorrocks. “It’ll get ’em down more comfortable and easy like.”

“Aye, do; I declare I had forgotten that,” said the skipper; “I’m losing my head, I think, at the thought of the loss of my ship!” He spoke these words so sadly that they touched me keenly.

“No, no, Cap’, you haven’t loosed your head yet, so far as thinking about us is concerned,” observed Jorrocks, who was watching the man he had sent out on the mainyard fasten a block and tackle for lowering down the cots of the two invalids. I’m sure we all acquiesced in this hearty expression of the boatswain’s opinion, for no one could have more carefully considered every precaution for our comfort and security than the skipper, when making up his mind to abandon the ship.

No further words were wasted, however, as soon as the boats were hauled alongside.

Mr Ohlsen and Harmer were lowered down carefully into the long-boat, and the provisions, with the captain’s papers and instruments, were subsequently stowed in the stern-sheets by the side of the invalids. A similar procedure was then adopted in reference to the jolly-boat, only that there were no more sick men, fortunately, to go in her; and the skipper was just about mustering the hands on the after part of the main deck, below the break of the poop, when there was a terrible explosion forwards, the whole fore-part of the ship seeming to be rent in twain and hurled heavenward in a sheet of flame as vivid as forked lightning!

I don’t know by what sudden spasm of memory, but at that very instant my thoughts flew back to my boyish days at Beachampton, and my attempt to blow up Dr Hellyer and the whole school with gunpowder on that memorable November day, as I have narrated. The present calamity seemed somehow or other, to my morbid mind, a judgment on my former wicked conduct—the reflection passing through my brain at the instant of the explosion with almost a similar flash.

Chapter Twenty One

Herschel Island

“Maircy on us!” exclaimed Mr Macdougall, who at that moment was just gingerly passing down the standard compass to Jorrocks, the boatswain, standing up in the stern-sheets of the long-boat alongside, and stretching up his hands as carefully to receive the precious instrument; and the sudden blinding flash of the explosion and concussion of the air that it caused, almost made him drop this in his fright. “Whateever on airth ees that noo?”

“Matter?” repeated the skipper after him coolly, taking in cause and effect at a glance. “Why, the gas generated by the heated coal in the hold has blown out the forepeak, that’s all! It is providential, though, that the wrench which the foremast gave to the deck-beams and bulkhead there when it carried away, so far weakened the ship forwards as to enable the gas to find vent in that direction, otherwise the entire deck would probably have been blown up—when it would have been a poor look-out for all of us here aft!”

“Gudeness greecious!” ejaculated the mate again, blinking bewilderedly, like an owl unexpectedly exposed to daylight; but Captain Billings did not waste time in any further explanations or unnecessary words.

“I hope nobody’s hurt! Run forwards, Leigh, and see,” he said to me.

Fortunately, however, all had escaped without a scratch, although fragments of the knees and other heavy portions of the vessel’s timbers had been hurled aloft and scattered in all directions, as if a mine had been sprung below—the woodwork descending afterwards in a regular hailstorm on our heads, blown into small pieces no bigger than matches, and mixed up with a shower of blazing sparks and coal-dust, making us all “as black as nayghurs,” as Pat Doolan said.

The stump of the foremast, in particular, described a graceful parabolic curve in the air, coming down into the water in close proximity to the bows of the long-boat—where, under the supervision of the boatswain, the steward and the carpenter were stowing provisions under the thwarts, making the two almost jump out of their skins. It descended into the sea with the same sort of “whish” which the stick of a signal rocket makes when, the propelling power that had enabled it previously to soar up so majestically into the air above being ultimately exhausted, it is forced to return by its own gravity to its proper level

below, unable to sustain itself unaided by exterior help at the unaccustomed height to which it was temporarily exalted.

And in this respect, it may be observed here, although I do not believe the remark is altogether original, that a good many human rockets may be encountered in our daily life, which exhibit all the characteristic points and weaknesses of the ordinary material model that I have likened them to—composed of gunpowder and other explosive pyrotechnic substances, and familiar to all—for, they go up in the same brilliant and glorious fashion, and are veritable shining lights in the estimation of their friends and the fickle testimony of public opinion; only, alas, to descend to the ordinary level of every-day mortals, like the rocket-stick comes down in the end!

I need hardly say, though, that I had no thought of these reflections now; for, immediately after the explosion forwards, the flames which mounted aloft with it burst forth with full vigour, released from the confined space of the hold to which they had been previously limited, and the entire fore-part of the ship, from the waist to the knight-heads, became a mass of fire, the cavity disclosed by the riven deck adjacent to the fo'c's'le being like a raging volcano, vomiting up clouds of thick yellow smoke from the glowing mass of ignited coal below, which almost suffocated us, as the ship went too slowly through the water for the vapour to trail off to leeward.

The mainmast was still standing, with the mainsail set before the southerly wind, that was blowing in towards the land, the force of the explosion not being vented much further aft than the windlass bitts; but, almost as we looked, tongues of flame began to creep up the main rigging, and the huge sail was presently crackling away like tissue paper to which a lighted match has been applied, large pieces of the burning material being whirled in the air.

The heat now became unbearable, and Captain Billings, much to his grief, saw that the time had come for him to abandon the ship.

"We must leave her, Leigh," said he to me, with as much emotion as another person might have displayed when wishing a last farewell to some dearly-loved friend or relative. "There is no good in stopping by the old barquey any longer, for we can't help her out of her trouble, and the boats may be stove in by the falling mainmast if they remain alongside much longer. Poor old ship! we've sailed many a mile together, she and I; and now, to think that, crippled by that gale and almost having completed her v'yage, she should be burnt like a log of firewood off Cape Horn!"

“Never mind, sir,” said I, sympathisingly. “It has not happened through any fault of yours.”

“No, my lad, I don’t believe it has, for a cargo o’ coal is a ticklish thing to take half round the world; as more vessels are lost in carrying it than folks suppose! However, this is the last we’ll ever see of the old Esmeralda, so far as standing on her deck goes; still, I tell you what, Leigh, you may possibly live to be a much older man than I am, but you’ll never come across a ship easier to handle in a gale, or one that would go better on a bowline!”

“No, sir, I don’t think I shall,” I replied to this panegyric on the doomed vessel, quite appreciating all the skipper’s feelings of regret at her destruction; but just then the flames with a roar rushed up the main hatch, approaching towards the poop every moment nearer and nearer.

This at once recalled Captain Billings from the past to the present.

“Have you got everything aboard the boats?” he sang out in his customary voice to Mr Macdougall, his tones as firm and clear as if he had not been a moment before almost on the point of crying. “Are all the provisions and water in?”

“Aye, aye, an’ stoowed awa’, too, Cap’en,” answered the mate, to whom had been entrusted the execution of all the necessary details. “A very thin’s aboord, and naething forgot, I reecken.”

“Then it’s time we were aboard, too,” said the skipper. “Boatswain, muster the hands!”

Jorrocks didn’t have to tap on the deck with a marlinspike now to call them, in the way he used to summon the watch below to reef topsails in the stormy weather we had off Madeira and elsewhere; for the men were all standing round, ready to start over the side as soon as the skipper gave the word of command to go.

Captain Billings then called over the list of the crew from the muster roll, which he held in his hand along with the rest of the “ship’s papers”—such as theEsmeralda’s certificate of registry, the manifest of the cargo, and her clearance from the custom-house officers at Cardiff; when, all having answered to their names, with the exception of the two invalids, Mr Ohlsen, and Harmer, the seaman, both of whom were already in the long-boat, the skipper gave the word to pass down the gangway, apportioning seven hands in all to the jolly-

boat, under charge of Mr Macdougall, and the remainder of our complement to the long-boat, under his own care.

Including the invalids, we were seven-and-twenty souls in all—now compelled to abandon our good ship, and trust to those two frail boats to take us to the distant coast of Tierra del Fuego, of which we were not yet even in sight; and it was with sad hearts that we went down the side of this poor Esmeralda for the last time, quitting what had been our floating home for the two months that had elapsed since we left England, for the perils we had encountered in her had only endeared her the more to us!

Captain Billings was the last to abandon the ship; lingering not merely until we had descended to the boats, seven in one and nineteen as yet only in the other without him, but waiting while we settled ourselves along the thwarts; when, turning round, he put his feet on the cleats of the side ladder and came down slowly, looking up still at the old vessel, as if loth to leave her in such an extremity.

The jolly-boat had been already veered astern on receiving her allotted number, the long-boat only waiting alongside for the skipper, with a man in the bows and another amidships, fending her off from the ship's side with a couple of boat-hooks, so that the little barque should not dash against the hull of the bigger one, now she was so loaded up—a collision would have insured destruction to all in her, the huge billows of the Southern Ocean rolling in at intervals, and raising her so high aloft as to overtop the ship sometimes, and again carrying her down right under the Esmeralda's counter, thus making her run the risk of being stove in every instant.

It was too perilous a proximity; so, as soon as Captain Billings had got down into the stern-sheets, he gave the order to shove off.

"Easy her away gently, men," he said, as he took up the tiller lines, watching with a critical eye the movements of the men amidships and in the bow, as they poled the boat along the side of the ship until it passed clear of her by the stern. "Be ready there with your oars, sharp!"

In another moment the boat was tossing about in the open sea, the height and force of the waves becoming all the more apparent now that we had lost the protection of the Esmeralda's lee. The flames just then, as if angry at our having escaped them, darted up the mizzen rigging, and presently enveloped

the poop in their blaze, so that the whole ship was now one mass of fire fore and aft, blazing like a tar-barrel.

The skipper would have liked to have lain by and seen the last of the vessel, but there was too much sea on, and the wind seemed getting up again; so, knowing how treacherous the weather was in the vicinity of the Cape of Storms, he determined, for the safety of those under his charge, to make for the land as speedily as possible—an open boat not being the best craft in the world to be in, out on the ocean, when a gale is about!

As Captain Billings could see, the wind was blowing on shore, in the very direction for us to go; and, as the rollers were racing towards the same goal, the only way for us to avoid being swamped by them was to travel at a greater rate forwards than they did, or else we would broach-to in the troughs of the waves, when a boat is apt to get for the moment becalmed, from the intervening wall of water on either side stopping the current of air, and taking the breeze out of her sails.

The long-boat was fitted with a couple of masts, carrying a large mainsail and a mizzen, both of which the skipper now ordered to be set, the former close-reefed to half its size. A bit of a staysail was also hoisted forwards in place of the jib, which was too large for the wind that was on; and then, it was wonderful to see the way the long-boat began to go through the water when the sail was put on her! She fairly raced along, dragging astern the jolly-boat, which we had taken in tow, the little craft leaving a curly wave in front of her cutwater, higher than her bows, and looking as if it were on the point of pouring over on top of those in her.

It was now late in the afternoon of this, our sixty-third day out of port; and, as the sun sank to rest in the west, away in the east, according to our position in the boat, there was another illumination on the horizon.

It was that caused by the burning ship. But it did not last so long: the fire of coals and wood could not vie with that of the celestial orb.

We could still see the blazing hull, as we rose every now and then on the crest of the rollers; while, when we could not perceive it from the subsidence of the waves under the boat's keel, making us sink down, a pillar of smoke, floating in the air high above the Esmeralda in a long fan-like trail, and stretching out to where sky and sea met in the extreme distance, told us where she was without any fear of mistake.

Soon after we had quitted the vessel the mainmast, when half consumed, tumbled over the side; and, presently, the burning mizzen, which had been standing up for some time like a tall fiery pole, disappeared in a shower of sparks.

The end was not far off now.

As we rose on the send of the next sea, Captain Billings, by whose side I was sitting in the stern-sheets of the long-boat, grasped my arm.

“Look!” he said, half turning round and pointing to where the burning ship had last been seen.

She was gone!

The smoke still hung in the air in the distance, like a funeral pall; but the wind was now rapidly dispersing it to leeward, there being no further supply of the columns of cloud-like vapour that had originally composed it.

Soon, too, the smoke had completely disappeared, and the horizon was a blank.

“All’s over!” cried the skipper, with a heavy sigh.

All was over, indeed; for, whatever fragments of the ill-fated Esmeralda the remorseless fire may have spared, were now, without doubt, making their way down to the bottom of that wild ocean on which we poor shipwrecked mariners were tossing in a couple of frail boats—uncertain whether we should ever reach land in safety, or be doomed to follow our vessel’s bones down into the depths of the sea!

Night fell soon after this; but the long-boat still held her way, running before the wind, and steering a nor’-nor’-west course by compass. We had now been going in that direction some two hours or more, and the skipper calculated that we were some thirty miles off the Wollaston Islands, which we ought to fetch by daylight next morning.

Fortunately, it was a bright clear night, although there was no moon, only the stars twinkling aloft in the cloudless azure sky; and, thus, we were able to watch the waves so as to prevent them pooping us when two seas ran foul of each other, which they frequently did, racing against the wind, and eager, apparently, to outstrip it. Still, the most careful steering was necessary, and

Jorrocks had to have out an oar astern, in order to aid the skipper's control of the tiller, when he put the helm up or down suddenly so as to get out of the wash of the breakers.

The jolly-boat, too, occasioned us much uneasiness; for when the tow-rope slackened at these moments of peril, she ran the chance of slewing round broadside on to the sea. However, thanks to the interposing aid of Providence, we got through the dangers of the night, and day dawned at last.

It was a terribly anxious watch, though, for all hands—especially for the skipper and Jorrocks, and the men told off to hold the sheets of the sails; for these latter couldn't be belayed, having to be hauled taut or let go at a moment's notice.

With the advent of day came renewed hope, in spite of our not being able yet to see land—nothing being in sight ahead or astern, to the right or the left, but the same eternal sea and sky, sky and sea, which the rising sun, although it lent a ray of radiance to the scene, only made infinitely more dreary and illimitable.

Towards noon, however, away on the port bow, the peak of a snow-topped mountain was perceived just above the horizon.

"Hurrah!" cried Captain Billings. "There's our old friend Cape Horn! Another couple of hours straight ahead, and we ought to rise those islands I was speaking of. Do you see the Cape?" he shouted out across the little intervening space of water to Mr Macdougall in the jolly-boat.

"Aye, aye—and it's a glad seeght!" replied the mate, to which statement all hands cheered. Some provisions, which, through the thoughtful precaution of the skipper and the assistance of Pat Doolan, had been cooked before being placed on board, were now served out around—the long-boat the while steadily progressing on her course, now hauled a bit more to the westwards of north.

About three o'clock in the afternoon another cheery hail broke the stillness that reigned amongst us; for we were all too anxious to talk, and those of the crew who were not attending to the sheets of the sails had composed themselves to sleep, under the thwarts amidships and on the gratings aft.

"Land, ho!"

The cry came from a man on the look-out in the bows; and the announcement was received with a ringing shout, for the heavens were beginning to get overcast, and the wind was rising, promising that, should we be compelled to remain afloat another night, we should not find it quite so pleasant as our experiences of the past one, in spite of what we then thought the dangerous character of the following waves; and, if it came on to blow in addition, the heavy running sea which we had then to contend with would be mere child's play in comparison with what we might expect would get up in an hour or two.

But, the nearness of the land led us to hope that we should not experience any further risk of being swamped. Long before sunset we approached it close enough to see where we were going.

The nearest shore was that of an island, with high mountain peaks, but of little apparent extent, looking, as we saw it, barely a mile long. Near this were three or four other islands, although further to the northwards; while on the extreme left, some miles to the westwards, was the high snow-white peak which the skipper had said was Cape Horn, standing on a little island of its own that stretched out into the sea to a more southerly point than any of the other islets composing the archipelago.

"Why, sir," said I to Captain Billings, "I always thought that Cape Horn was part of the mainland, jutting out from the end of Tierra del Fuego—that's what my school geography taught, at all events!"

"Oh, no," he replied. "It is on an island, sure enough, as all mariners know, although these chaps that write books for schools may not think it island enough to mention the fact. Where it stands is called Horn Island, and the next large one beyond it Wollaston Island; but I'm going to make for that little one ahead, as it is the nearest."

"And what is that called?" I asked.

"Herschel Island, after the great astronomer," answered the skipper. "I've been here before, my lad, and recognise the whole lot of them, and that is how I come to know about 'em."

"Are any people living there?" said I, presently, the boat nearing the island so quickly that we could see a line of white beach, with the waves breaking on it, lying below the chain of mountain ridges that ran across it "fore and aft," as a sailor would describe it.

“Only cannibals,” replied the skipper, placidly.

“Cannibals on Herschel Island, and we going there!” I exclaimed, half astonished, half frightened.

“Aye, they are there or thereabouts; but, at all events, we’re going to land on Herschel Island, as it’s a case with us of any port in a storm! Look out there, forwards!” he called out a moment or two after to the men. “Be ready to down the mainsail when I give the word. Steady with the sheets. Now!”

And, with a grating noise, the boat’s keel struck the shore, carried forwards on the top of a huge wave, whose backwash, however, dragged us back into the deep the next second, slewing the head of the boat round at the same time, so that she hung broadside on.

“Out oars, men—out oars for your life!” shouted the skipper, seeing the terrible danger that now threatened us in the very moment of safety; but, before the order could be executed, the long-boat was upset, and we were all tumbling about in the surf!

Chapter Twenty Two

An Austral Aurora

A wild cry went up to Heaven as we struggled for dear life in the water, battling with the under-tow of the in-rolling waves, which tried to drag us down in their angry clutches; but first one and then another emerged dripping on the sands, even Mr Ohlsen having saved himself without help, although he had been snugly tucked up in his hammock a moment before, and was lying down in the stern-sheets when the boat capsized.

Poor Harmer, however, whose broken leg was only fresh set, and the bones not united, was unable to put out a hand on his own behalf, and seeing he had not gained the beach with the others, I looked eagerly about for him, knowing that in his crippled state it was almost impossible for him to have got ashore.

Just then, his head appeared some twenty feet out from the land, in the midst of the boiling surf, with his hands stretched out in mute entreaty to us, appealing for succour as he was being carried out rapidly to sea.

Who could refrain from venturing in again to rescue him?

Certainly not I; and, as I dashed in, Pat Doolan followed my example, the cook uttering a wild Irish yell that had the effect of animating several of the rest of the sailors to lend us a helping hand, although they had not the pluck to dash in too.

“Hooroo, boys!” he shouted. “Follow me leader, ye spalpeens, and let us say who’ll raich the poor drowning chap first! Ould Oireland for iver!”

He reached Harmer almost as soon as I, and the two of us took hold of him together—the poor fellow, however, being already insensible, made no effort whatever to keep up and help himself, and was absolutely limp in our grasp.

We managed to swim back in with our burden on the top of a roller, well enough; but when we tried to secure our footing on the shore, the under-tow took us out again, although Pat Doolan flung himself face downwards on the sand, clutching it with one of his hands while he held the half-drowned man with the other in the same way as I did. Once, twice, we made the attempt; and yet, in spite of our desperate struggles, both of us putting forth all our strength, the backwash of the waves laughed at our resistance, floating us back again out into deep water. At our third try, however, and it would have

been the last, for we were both exhausted by this time, the men on the beach—who had formed a line holding on to one another, Jorrocks being foremost and Captain Billings next, wading in up to their necks in the sea—managed to catch hold of us, when we were dragged out by sheer force; Pat and I, with Harmer between us, all lumped together in a confused mass, and the hands hauling us in with a "Yo, heave ho!" as if they were pulling at the topsail halliards or getting the main tack aboard!

My swim after Mr Macdougall was nothing to this, although I had then battled with the sea for over an hour, while now the Irishman and I had not been ten minutes over our fight with the remorseless waves; but it was a terrific contest whilst it lasted, and albeit we had both come off victorious, thanks to the timely assistance of our comrades, we were nearly worsted, and so utterly pumped out that another five minutes of it would have ended the matter very differently. As it was, I had to lie on the sands, whither Jorrocks had lifted me beyond the reach of the tide, for a considerable period before I could either move or speak, while Pat Doolan was in an equally sorry plight.

When I at last gained my voice, I stammered out a question—

"How's Harmer?" I asked, anxiously.

But Captain Billings, who was beside me, lifting up my head tenderly with his arm placed round me, shook his head sadly.

"Poor fellow," he said; "you did your best, but he must have been gone before you reached him. He's quite dead—you were too late to save him!"

I declare this news affected me more than all I had gone through; and, whether from weakness, or from the reaction after such violent exertion producing a feeling of hysteria, I cannot tell; all I know is, that I turned my face away from the kind-hearted skipper who was supporting me, and cried like a child—I, who thought myself then a man!

Meanwhile, as I found out when I had recovered from my emotion and was able to stand up and look about me, my shipmates had not been idle in trying to retrieve the effects of our unfortunate landing; for which the skipper upbraided his own carelessness, laying the blame on himself, and saying that he ought to have known better than to have tried to rush the boat in with such a ground swell on!

The tow-rope of the jolly-boat had been cast-off shortly before we approached the shore, Captain Billings hailing Mr Macdougall and telling him to bring her head to the sea, and lay off until we got ashore; so, there she was, riding in safety, about half a cable's length out, beyond reach of the surf, while we were tumbling about in it after the long-boat had upset us so unexpectedly without ceremony.

Mr Macdougall was about to pull in at once, on seeing the contretemps, but the skipper, the moment he fetched the shore, and before I had gone in after Harmer, had directed him still to keep off and get a line ready to heave in, as by that means those in the jolly-boat would not only be able to land in a better way than ourselves, but, also, some portion of the stores of our boat might be recovered, as well as the craft itself—the long-boat having only turned over, and still floating in the midst of the breakers, bobbing up and down bottom upwards.

This task was now being proceeded with by all hands.

Forming again a line, as when they had dragged Pat Doolan and myself out—the men holding each other's hands, for they had no rope as yet to tackle on to—several articles near in shore had been already picked up; and, now that I was all right again, the skipper at once set about getting the jolly-boat in, besides trying to secure the long-boat.

Each, amongst other necessary parts of his equipment, had been provided with a coil of strong half-inch line, in addition to their proper painters, and on Captain Billings singing out to the first mate, and telling him what to do, the jolly-boat with her six oars manned was backed in just beyond reach of the surf. The end of the line, which Mr Macdougall held ready with a sounding-lead attached to it to make it swing further, was then hove ashore.

It fell short, some ten feet out in the midst of the eddy caused by the backwash, but the leading hand of the long-boat's crew, after one or two dives in the surf, in which he got knocked down and rolled over, succeeded finally in grasping the sounding-lead.

Then, with a loud hurrah, the end of the line was hauled in towards us, communication being thus established with those in the jolly-boat. The stay the rope afforded steadied her in the water, so that she rode more easily, which made the next operation, that of getting hold of the overturned long-boat, more

practicable, and not as likely to jeopardise her safety as would otherwise have been the case.

The coil of rope was fully a hundred feet long, and of sufficient length to pass twice between the jolly-boat ashore and back again, leaving a few spare yards over; so, first throwing over a grapnel to anchor her head out to the sea, the water being only some three fathoms deep where she was riding, and the men in her being now wanted for something else besides rowing to keep her from drifting in, the other end of the line was belayed, and the boat easied in with the utmost care, two of the hands still keeping to their oars, until she reached the wrecked boat.

Then Haxell, the carpenter, pluckily volunteered to jump over the side, and try, by diving underneath, to catch hold of the long-boat's painter or some of her headgear, all attempts to reach such by the aid of a boat-hook being impossible from the motion of the two boats in the restless water. After a bit, the taciturn but useful man obtained the object in view, dragging out from below the long-boat's stern the very tow-rope with which we had been previously pulling the jolly-boat along while sailing towards the land, before casting her off, and our subsequent upset.

This rope was now fastened to the shore-line with a double hitch, and our lot on the beach hauling in, we presently had the satisfaction of seeing the stern of our own craft working in towards us, the jolly-boat still remaining out beyond reach of the rollers, until the long-boat had grounded; when, seeing a proper opportunity, she too was got in safely—without, however, any previous upset, like ours, and indeed without her taking in any perceptible quantity of water so as to damage her cargo or give her crew a ducking, all of whom, with the exception of Haxell, who of course had sought a bath of his own accord, getting to land dry-shod, unlike us, who had been drenched from head to foot, and were now shivering with cold, the temperature of the air being below freezing point.

It was now high-water, as Captain Billings observed from the marks on the shore; so, as nothing more could then be done towards getting the long-boat further in and righting her, and the hands were pretty well tired out with their exertions, he called a rest as soon as the jolly-boat was hauled up well beyond reach of the waves, which still broke threateningly on the beach—impelled by the force of the wind, now blowing a stiff gale from the south-west, and covering the beach with breakers that sent showers of foam over us, even when we had moved many yards away.

“Spell O!” sang out the skipper. “Boatswain, pipe down the men to dinner.”

We had to encroach on the jolly-boat’s stores, the provisions being divided between the two boats although our craft, being the larger of the two, had of course carried the major portion. This could, however, only now be looked upon as lost; for the seawater must have spoilt everything eatable.

However, as the crew had gone through a good deal of hardship, the skipper did not attempt to ration them down to any smaller allowance on this our first evening on Herschel Island; and so, when a fire was built up, and some hot coffee brewed by Jorrocks, who usurped Pat Doolan’s functions on this occasion, the Irishman being still too weak from his efforts to rescue poor Harmer to be of much use yet, we all had a hearty meal, feeling much the better thereby.

After this, the skipper told the men to lie down round the fire, which we found very grateful when the sun had set, besides its enabling us to dry our wet clothes; but the crew were warned that they would have to rouse up about midnight, when Captain Billings expected the tide would have gone down sufficiently to enable us to get the long-boat out of danger, and turn her over on the beach beyond high-water mark.

I confess that I went off to sleep at once; and neither the shaking of Jorrocks, nor the noise the men made in righting the long-boat, served to wake me up till it was broad daylight next morning, when I opened my eyes to find the sun shining down on a calm sea that hardly made a ripple on the beach, with the long-boat upright in her proper position, alongside the jolly-boat, and high and dry ashore.

There was a delicious smell of something cooking in one of Pat Doolan’s galley pots, hung gipsy fashion over a roaring fire, and superintended by the Irishman, now himself again. A large tent had also been rigged up by the aid of the boat sails and tarpaulins, making the place have the appearance of a cosy encampment, and offering a pleasant change to the desolate look it had worn the previous afternoon—when the sea was roaring in, hurling a deluge of foam on the beach, and we, wet and forlorn, were endeavouring to save the flotsam and jetsam of the long-boat’s cargo.

“Sure an’ you’re a foine gintleman, taking it aisy,” said Pat Doolan, when I went up to him. “An’ is it a pannikin o’ coffee you’ll be afther wanting, this watch?”

“I shouldn’t refuse it if you offered it,” said I, with a laugh.

“Be jabers, you’re the bhoy for the coffee!” he replied cheerily. “An’ its meeself that’s moighty proud to sarve you. Sure an’ I don’t forgit how you thried, like a brave gossoon, to save that poor chap last night!”

“Ah!” I ejaculated, feeling melancholy when he thus brought up Harmer’s fate, which had passed out of my mind for the moment. “But you did your best, too, Pat.”

“Bad was the bist then, alannah, bad cess to it!” said he. “There, now, Mister Leigh, dhrink your coffee an’ ha’ done with it. The poor chap’s gone, and we can’t call him back; but have you heard tell of the news? Misther ‘Old-son-of-a-gun’ is moighty bad this morning, too, and the skipper think’s he’s a going too, by the same token!”

“Indeed!” I cried, turning towards the tent, seeing Captain Billings standing close by it. The news was too true. The wetting and shock to the system had completed what a low fever had begun, and Mr Ohlsen’s days—nay, hours—were numbered. Ere the sun had again set, we had to mourn the loss of the second of our shipmates!

Towards evening of this day, the wind got up again even more fiercely than it had done the night before—the heavy southern billows rolling in again upon the beach with a terrible din, although they could do no harm now to either of our boats, both being snugly sheltered beyond their reach.

But when it grew dark, we witnessed a wonderful phenomenon.

It made many of the seamen believe that they were dreaming over again the scene connected with the burning of the Esmeralda; while others went almost wild with terror, fancying that the end of the world was come—or that, at all events, the natural display we saw of the greatest wonder of the arctic and antarctic worlds, was a portent of fresh disasters to us, greater than all we had already passed through!

The heavens were as black as death all around, with no moon. Not a star to be seen; when, all at once, the whole horizon glowed with a living fire, lighting up the ocean in front of us, and reflecting upwards and outwards from the snow-covered peaks on the background of water beyond the beach. The wave-tossed surface of the sea changed to a bright vermilion tint, making it look like a lake of raging flames. Through the crimson sky, streaks of brighter light shot across

at intervals from right to left, and back again from left to right, in coruscations of darting sparks that would ever and anon form themselves into crosses and diamonds of different shapes; while, in the middle of this wonderful transformation scene, the wind blew with immense force, howling over sea and land with a wild shriek and deep diapason, accompanied by blinding showers of hail and sleet and snow, that made us all creep under the folds of the canvas of our tent for shelter.

“What is this? What does it mean?” I asked Captain Billings, who seemed the only one of us unmoved by the unwonted sight, that had as much terror as grandeur about it.

“It is what is called an Austral aurora—the aurora Australis, as scientific men term it; though, how it is caused and what it is occasioned by, I’m sure I can’t explain to you, my lad. All I know is this, that it is never seen in the vicinity of Cape Horn without a stiff gale and rough weather following in its track; so we had better all of us look out for squalls!”

Chapter Twenty Three

"All the Way round"

The skipper was right in his prognostication about the weather; for, during the next few days, we experienced a terrible gale from the south-west, snow falling without intermission all the time, and making huge drifts to the windward of the island, while even in sheltered places it was over four feet deep, with the pile continually increasing as the flakes drove down in one steady stream.

Of course, it was bitterly cold, but, knowing what sort of climate the vicinity of Cape Horn rejoiced in, Captain Billings, before abandoning the ship, had ordered the men to bring all their warm clothes with them, he himself adding to the stock with all the spare blankets he could find in the cabin; and now, although these things were amongst the stores of the long-boat when she capsized, they fortunately escaped being thrown into the sea and lost on her "turning the turtle," for they were securely fastened below the thwarts, so when the boat was recovered they were still to the good all right—with the exception of their being thoroughly soaked in sea water, which an exposure before Pat Doolan's fire, and a hang-out in the fresh breezy air, soon remedied.

It was now the month of August, about the coldest time of the year on the coast of Tierra del Fuego, or "The Land of Fire," as this portion of the South American Continent was somewhat inappropriately christened by its original discoverer, the veteran navigator Magalhaens. He called it so, when he sailed round it in 1520, from the fact of the natives lighting watch-fires in every direction as soon as his ship was perceived nearing any of the channels transecting the archipelago, as if to give warning of his approach, a practice still pursued by the Tierra del Fuegans up to the time present, as all voyagers round Cape Horn well know.

However, in spite of the inclemency of the season, we made ourselves pretty comfortable. We had lost the greater portion of the three months' stock of provisions we had taken with us; but still we had enough to last for three or four weeks, and Captain Billings hoped to spin out our store by the aid of the different species of wild fowl which frequented the islands, in addition to the abundant supply of fish that the southern waters contain—that is, until, as we hoped, some passing ship should pick us up and convey our little party to more civilised regions.

But, while the snowstorm lasted, we all suffered more or less from the severity of the weather, many of the men having their feet and hands frostbitten, and poor Mr Macdougall almost losing his nose!

“I say,” said Sails to Pat Doolan, on seeing that worthy shivering while trying to re-light the fire—which an avalanche of snow, descending from a precipitous rise above the site of our tent, had suddenly buried, along with the cook’s pots and pans, just as he was preparing our morning meal, on the fourth day of the storm—“how about that Manilla guernsey o’ yourn now, old flick? Guess it would come in handy, eh!”

“Be jabers, an’ it would that,” replied the Irishman, with much heartiness; “I only wish I had it across me back now, and I was aboard that schooner ag’in; an’ faix, I’d die happy!”

Pat’s fire was soon lighted again; but the fall of snow from above, without any previous warning, might have caused serious injury to some of us if it had come down in the night. It quite broke down our tent, and it took us some hours’ hard work, using broken oar-blades for shovels, to dig away the immense heap of frozen débris that the unexpected slip of the accumulation on the top of the cliff had caused. Really, if the avalanche had fallen when we were all inside and asleep, perhaps not one of us would have escaped alive, as it must have been many tons in weight!

We thought, from the continuation of the snowstorm, that we would have to endure all the miseries of an antarctic winter; but, towards the evening of the fourth day, the south-westerly gale gradually lost its force, shifting round a bit more to the northwards. Strange to say, although the wind now came from what, in our northern latitudes, we esteem a colder quarter, it was ever so much warmer here, on account of its passing over the warm pampas of the Plate before reaching us, the effect of which soon became apparent in the melting of the snow on the ground as rapidly as when a thaw takes place at home. Properly speaking, however, the snow rather may be said to have dried up than melted, for it was absorbed by the air, which was dry and bracing.

The flakes, that had up to now continued coming down without cessation, also ceased to fall—much to our satisfaction, as I need hardly add; for, albeit it is very nice to look out from a warm, well-furnished room at the beautiful winter garb of Nature, and highly enjoyable to go out snowballing, when you can leave it off and go indoors to a jolly fire when you like, it was a very different matter to us now to experience all the discomforts of those dreadful, icy, spongy, little

feathery nuisances penetrating beneath every loophole they could find entrance to, in the apology for a tent that we had, and to have our clothing sodden by it, our fire put out, and our blood congealed. Perhaps even the most ardent snow-lover would lose his taste for the soft molecules under such circumstances!

On the fifth day, the sun appeared again, when Captain Billings took advantage of the opportunity for getting an observation as to our position, using Mr Macdougall's sextant, his own and mine having gone to the bottom when the long-boat was upset. The skipper, I may add, had also to make use of the mate's watch—the chronometer that had been brought from the ship having shared the fate of the other instruments, standard compass and all having passed into the safe keeping of old Neptune and his Tritons, who, if they cared about the study of meteorology, had a rare haul on this occasion!

The observation he now obtained only confirmed the skipper's previous impression that we were on Herschel Island, one of the Hermite, or Cape Horn group, the mountainous peaks of which are mainly composed of green stone, in which hornblende and feldspar are more or less conspicuous, and the presence of iron very apparent, some of the rocks being intensely magnetic, causing the needle of a little pocket compass I had to execute all sorts of strange freaks.

When the weather got fine, we took a walk round the island as far as the ridge that bisected it would allow, finding the elevated ground clothed with thickly growing trees, principally a species of spruce fir called the antarctic beech, which runs to a height of some thirty or forty feet, with a girth of five or six feet. It is a magnificent evergreen, and would look well on an English lawn, for it has a splendid spreading head.

Beside this beech, there was a pretty little laurel tree, and the arbutus, which one of the sailors, who was from Devonshire, would persist in calling a myrtle bush, although the skipper showed him the berries to convince him to the contrary. There was also a sort of wild strawberry plant plentiful enough about, running like a vine over the rocks under the cliff; but there was nothing like what we call grass to be seen anywhere, only clumps or tussocks of a fibrous material like hemp, with long, ragged, straggling ends.

So much for the botany of the island; as for the living creatures, "barring ourselves," as Pat Doolan would have expressed it, there were "race horses," "steamer" ducks, and penguins, besides a species of wild goose that we had seen off the Falkland Islands, and which Sails described to me as being so tough that a shipmate of his, who was once trying to gnaw through the

drumstick of one when in Stanley Harbour, had his eye knocked out by the bone "fetching back" sharply through the elasticity of the tendon which his teeth missed hold of—a tough morsel to chew away at, if the yarn be true, eh?

But, amongst all these specimens of animated nature, we did not see a trace of any of the natives—a fact which I took care to point out to the skipper, expressing my belief that he had only been romancing about the "cannibals," as he termed them.

He, however, denied this.

"No, my lad," he said. "The natives of this coast are a small, barbarous race of beings, whom one can hardly call men. They go about in the inclement climate without a rag of covering on, save a bit of raw sealskin which they shift from shoulder to shoulder as a protection against the wind, just as we get a vessel's sails round on the port or starboard tack.

"The inhabitants of one island are hostile to those of the next, killing them, and eating them too, whenever they have the chance! They have no sort of government, as most other islanders, even the most savage, have, and, of course, no laws—in which perhaps they are all the better off. They never cultivate the soil, or do anything for a living, as we would say at home; and they mainly occupy the sea-shore, living on whatever mussels they can manage to pick up, and the blubber of any occasional fish they come across. I'm told they also eat that toad-stool we see growing on the beech trees; and if they'd do that, they'd eat anything! Sometimes they venture out long distances to sea in their rude canoes, like catamarans, which they contrive out of a couple of branches of a tree and sealskins sewn together with fish-gut, but they never go without their blessed fire, though—always carrying it along with them wherever they go, up the mountains, on the beach, in their frail boats, the live embers resting always in the latter on a bed of leaves—the reason for this solicitude being, not that they are followers of Zoroaster and worship the god of fire, but because they know the difficulty they would have in rekindling it again if they once allowed it to go out, as Pat Doolan suffered ours to do the other day, when you know the consequences, eh?"

"Yes, I remember well," I said, laughing. "We hadn't another match left, none of us having thought of bringing a supply from the ship, save a box which one of the men in the jolly-boat fortunately had in his pocket that first evening of our landing. Then we wanted a fire badly, and couldn't build one until he got ashore, and this box was expended up to the last match; so, on the second

occasion, Mr Macdougall had to snap off nearly all the caps he had for his gun before he could get a light, the snow having damped them. Oh, yes, I remember Pat's fire going out very well!"

A day or two after this conversation I had the chance of corroborating the skipper's statement about the natives.

We had now been on the island nearly a fortnight, and our stores were becoming rapidly diminished; for we were now only twenty-five in all, since Mr Ohlsen and the seaman Harmer had died, but still this was a large number to provide for out of the scanty stock we had left us through the loss of nearly two-thirds of our provisions by the upsetting of the long-boat—the few perishable articles saved when we righted her again being uneatable from the effects of the salt water, which turned the meat putrid and converted our flour and biscuit into the most unpalatable paste.

Captain Billings had hoped that some of the sealing schooners that rendezvous about the neighbourhood of Cape Horn, in search of the blubber and skins of the marine animals frequenting the shoals there, would have put in ere this and taken us off the inhospitable shore on which we had been forced to take refuge, or else that some passing ship homeward bound or sailing west into the Pacific would have picked us up; but, never a sail hove in sight, and, as our provisions daily grew less, although the men had been rationed down to a couple of biscuits and an ounce of salt pork per day, something had to be done, or else starvation would quickly stare us in the face!

The skipper therefore summoned Mr Macdougall to a consultation, at which I also was allowed to be present, for our sad plight had united us all together on the most brotherly terms, if I may so speak of the relations both the mate and Captain Billings bore towards me—although the skipper had always remembered Sam Pengelly's exhortation on parting with me when he left me in his charge, to "remember the b'y!"

I think, too, I have already mentioned that since I had helped to save his life, Mr Macdougall had not only completely changed in his treatment towards me, but was an altogether different man in every respect. The men used to say, "That bath of salt water washed all the confounded bumptiousness out of him!"

"I have determined—that is, if you agree with me, Macdougall," said the skipper, when we had assembled in the tent, pointing with his ringer to a spot on a chart of the coast that he had brought with him from the Esmeralda, and

which the wetting it had received in our spill among the breakers had not damaged very materially, for it looked right enough now, spread out on top of Mr Macdougall's chest, he being lucky enough to get his safe on shore—"I have determined," repeated Captain Billings—"that is, if you agree with me—to make a tour of inspection of the neighbouring islands, to see if we can get any help or some provisions to keep us going until a ship passes."

"That's weel, vara weel," said Mr Macdougall, with an approving cough.

"And if our quest should be unsuccessful, why, we must proceed to Good Success Bay—that point to the south-east of the mainland, opposite Staten Island—where there'll be more chance of our intercepting a vessel."

"Hech, mon, but it's a gude long deestance, I reecken?" replied the mate, in a questioning way.

"About a hundred miles I make it," said the skipper, measuring the space on his chart with his fingers, for lack of a pair of callipers. "But, with the southerly and westerly wind that we nearly always have here, the boats ought to fetch the place in a couple of days at most."

"Vara weel, Cap'en, I'm ae weelin' to agree to eenything; but I misdoubt tak'ing to the sea since more in yon open boat. 'Twas only the grace o' Proveedence that saved us in landin' here, and we didna get clear off then!"

"No, we didn't," said the skipper, with a chuckle. "But we won't essay that long trip yet awhile—at all events, not until we are forced to. We will try the islands near us first; and then, if we meet with no luck there, why, we'll shape a course for Good Success Bay."

"All richt, I'm agree'ble," answered Mr Macdougall, quite satisfied that we were not going to put to sea again in a hurry in our frail craft, which were indeed not very staunch to brave the perils of the open sea; so it was decided, accordingly, that the jolly-boat, with a picked party, should proceed the next day on a surveying tour amongst the neighbouring islands.

The following morning, therefore, Captain Billings, Jorrocks, and I, with three of the sailors—Mr Macdougall being left behind at his own request in charge of the remainder of the crew—started on the investigating expedition, directing the boat first towards a small island lying-to the westwards, and the closest to us of all that we could distinguish from the beach where our camp was.

This island, however, we found to be uninhabited, and even more bare and sterile than the one we had landed on; so, hoisting the small lugsail which the jolly-boat carried, we made over more to the north-west, towards Wollaston Island, the largest in the archipelago, and about the same distance away from us that the Isle of Wight is from Selsea Bill.

On reaching this we found a couple of native families living on the shore in rude huts, composed of the branches of trees, and with mud and stones heaped over them. The people were the ugliest I had ever seen, being more like baboons than men and women. They were dwarfish in stature, the tallest of the party not exceeding five feet in height, and the majority of the others quite a foot shorter. I noticed also, as the skipper had told me, that their apparel was of the very scantiest possible, consisting only of a piece of sealskin, which was movable, so that it could be placed on the most convenient side for protecting them against the weather.

They were not able to help us much, looking miserably off; but they were hospitable enough, offering us some mussels and fish, and berries similar to those we had seen on the arbutus trees on our own island.

If they could not assist us materially, they put us up to one thing, and that was how to catch fish; for, although we had seen many of them jumping in the water, and swimming about the beach in front of our encampment, we had been unable to capture any, owing to there not being a single hook brought in the boats; and, sailors not being accustomed to use pins about their garments, we could not make use of these for a substitute.

The Tierra del Fuegans had a rare dodge to supply the deficiency. They fastened a limpet to the end of their lines, and, heaving it into deep water, the fish readily gorges it; when, before he can bring it up again, they pull him out, and thus they get their fish without losing their mussel.

“They’re just like Turks!” cried Captain Billings, with a broad grin on his face.

“Why?” asked I, knowing that something funny was coming.

“Because they’re regular musselmen!” said the skipper, laughing out loudly at the old joke, Jorrocks and I, of course, joining in.

The natives spoke some sort of gibberish of a language which we could not understand; nor could we make them comprehend what we wished to learn with reference to the sealing schooners, although the skipper shouted out the

word “ship” to them as loudly as he could bawl, thinking thereby to make himself more intelligible.

Seeing, therefore, that we could do no good by remaining here, we started back for Herschel Island to rejoin our companions, getting there before it was dark—much to our own relief and to that of Mr Macdougall, who was anxiously looking out for us.

For another fortnight we remained here, experiencing the utmost privation, for our stock of provisions gradually dwindled down, our two-biscuit ration being reduced to one, then to half-a-one a day, and then to none at all, when all of us had to eat berries with the little piece of salt pork served out to us, and an occasional fish that we sometimes succeeded in catching in the native fashion.

At last, at the beginning of September, the skipper determined that all hands should put to sea again in the two boats, in order to make our way across the intervening gulf of water to Good Success Bay, at the extreme south-east point of Tierra del Fuego, opposite to Staten Island, on the other side of the Strait of Le Maire.

This plan was adopted, and we launched the boats, now much lighter than when they originally had left the poor Esmeralda, for they had nothing now to carry but ourselves, save water, our provisions being all exhausted.

For three days and nights we suffered terribly from hunger, besides being buffeted about by adverse winds; but, happily, the fourth morning brought us relief, although we had not yet got in sight of Staten Island.

Far away on the horizon, on our starboard hand, Jorrocks saw a ship standing to the westward; so, rigging up the long-boat’s sails again—for the wind was contrary to the course we had been trying to fetch, and we had hauled them down in despair, allowing the boats to drift about on the ocean without heart or energy—we made a board to the south, so as to cut off the vessel as she steered towards Cape Horn, taking the jolly-boat in tow behind us, for she spread such little canvas that she could not keep up with the larger boat.

Fortunately, the wind held, and the ship did not change her course; so, about mid-day, we came up with her.

She was a London vessel, the Iolanthe, bound to Valparaiso; so her captain, seeing that we were shipwrecked mariners in distress, took us on board at

once, and treated us like brothers, without waiting even to hear our story about the loss of the Esmeralda.

In thirty days more we were landed at Valparaiso.

Here, by rights, I ought to finish my yarn, for I said when I began that I was only going to give a full, fair, and truthful statement as to how I came to go to sea, and of my escape, just by "the skin of my teeth," as the saying goes, from the perils of the ocean off Cape Horn on this first voyage; and now, as theEsmeralda got burnt and her keel and bottom timbers are lying beneath the waves—the catastrophe terminating, of course, my voyage in her, to which this story only refers—what relates to myself further on is of no concern to any one!

However, not to leave you in suspense, I'll tell you how I got back home again to old England, although it was by a terribly roundabout route.

When we arrived at the Iolanthe's port, Captain Billings took passage home in the mail-steamer for Mr Macdougall and himself, as well as for three of the hands who wished to return to their native country; but the rest preferred to run the risk of picking up a ship and working their way back in that way, so as to have some little money on the landing, the wages due to them from the Esmeralda ceasing from the day of her loss.

The men of the mercantile marine have to put up with some hardship in this respect, for, when a vessel in which they may have shipped comes to an untimely end, like our unfortunate barque, they not only lose all their traps and personal belongings, but their wages as well—that is, beyond the period at which they actually assisted in working the ship, although they may have signed articles for a three years' voyage.

The skipper offered to take me home, too, but I was of the same opinion as the majority of my late shipmates. I did not desire to go back on Sam Pengelly's hands, like a bad penny, especially as I liked what I had seen of the sea in spite of its perils; so, when I mentioned this to Captain Billings, he said that although he would prefer my coming back to England with him and waiting till he got a fresh ship, he would not interfere with my wishes as to finding another berth at once. Indeed, he added, he already knew of one, as an old friend of his who commanded a ship just leaving Valparaiso for Australia had told him that he wanted a third mate.

“And if you like,” said the skipper, “I’ll recommend you to Captain Giles for the post.”

“I shall be only too glad,” I replied. The skipper did so; and the whole thing was settled off-hand, I signing articles with my new captain the same day, shortly before my late one left in the mail-steamer, which was just on the point of starting.

I took a cordial farewell of Captain Billings, promising that as soon as I got back to England, from the voyage I was just starting on, I would look him up. He promised, likewise, to give me a berth on board any ship he commanded—should the Board of Trade not withhold his certificate after the inquiry that would be held on the loss of the Esmeralda on his arrival home; and I may as well state here, that the officials entirely exonerated him from any blame in the destruction of the ship and cargo, putting the matter down to one of the ordinary risks of commercial life.

The skipper also promised to see Sam Pengelly for me, and to tell him how I was getting on. These mutual engagements being gone into, I and Jorrocks, having shaken hands with Captain Billings and Mr Macdougall, the latter of whom said he would “never forget me as long as he lived,” were both making our way along the front of the one long street that Valparaiso consists of, thinking of taking off a boat soon to our new ship, the Jackmal, lying out in the offing—for Jorrocks, learning that Captain Giles wanted a boatswain, and knowing that I was going with him, agreed to go to sea with him in a moment—when, all at once, who should we come full butt on but the very last person in the world I expected to see here. I thought he was still at Dr Hellyer’s, at Beachampton, cramming for an Oxford scholarship, as far as I knew to the contrary—who but—

Yes!—

Tom Larkyns, my old chum, who acted so wickedly in concert with me, when we blew up the schoolmaster and ran away to sea!

His uncle, he told me, had a foreign agency here; and the old gentleman having written home to his mother offering Tom a situation, he had at once been sent out at his own wish, preferring such a life greatly to that of going to the university and afterwards having to take holy orders, that being the only opening held out to him in England.

Tom also related that the Doctor had become a bankrupt, and the school broken up; but I was unable to hear anything further about the scene of my past misdeeds and experiences of “pandying” and “way of his own” of my former master, for while we were yet chatting together, Captain Giles came up,

saying he was going off to the Jackmal at once, and would like Jorrocks and myself to come on board with him, as he intended sailing that afternoon.
So, wishing Tom good-bye, before many hours were over I was again floating on the deep.
From Valparaiso, we sailed to Sydney; then, taking a cargo of all sorts of "notions," as the Yankees say, we went on to Singapore; going thence to Bombay, in ballast. From India we proceeded back again to Australia, going to Melbourne this time; finally coming home to England, round the Cape of Good Hope—a good two years after I joined my new ship; for it was in October that I landed in Liverpool, while I had started away from Cardiff in the Esmeralda two years and five months previously exactly.
I was, however, all the better for my absence; for I had saved up over a hundred and fifty pounds, and I had grown a big strapping chap, with whiskers and beard in a small way, of which I was very proud.
Need it be asked where I first bent my steps on leaving my ship at Liverpool?
Why, to Plymouth, of course!
I got there early in the morning; and, being acquainted with Sam Pengelly's every-day practice, I knew exactly where to come across him, that is, unless he should happen to be ill; for every morning—except Sunday, when he always went to church, unless he chanced to be on board his little foretopsail schooner, which was not likely at this time of the year—he was invariably to be found on the Hoe, seated on one of the benches in front of Esplanade Terrace, looking over at the vessels out in the Sound, below and beyond.
Here I sought him; and here I found him, sure enough!

He did not see me coming; so, going behind the seat on which he was sitting, I clapped him suddenly on the back, exclaiming at the same time, in slight paraphrase of his old address to me that memorable December day when I first heard his friendly voice—

"Hallo, old cockbird! How are you?"

Gracious me, you should only have seen him jump!

Chapter Twenty Four

At Home Again

Sam Pengelly started up, and looked at me as if he thought I was a ghost.

"What, laddie, is it you really?" he exclaimed, peering into my face with his own, which, usually as florid as a peony, was now all white with emotion; while his lips trembled nervously as he spoke. "Why," he said, after a close inspection to see whether I was actually Martin Leigh or else some base impostor assuming his voice and guise, "it is the young cockbird, by all that's living—ain't I glad!" And, then, throwing his arms round me in a bear-like hug, he almost squeezed every particle of breath out of my body.

"Now, come along," he said presently, when he could speak again, the kind-hearted fellow's joy choking him at first, and preventing him from uttering a syllable; though he sighed, and drew his breath again in a long sigh like a sob, and finally cleared his throat with a cough that might have been heard on Drake Island.

"Where?" I asked.

"Why, to Old Calabar Cottage, in course!" he replied, indignantly. "Do you think Jane won't be glad to see you? Why, she's been fretting her heart into fiddle-strings arter you all these last six months that you never wrote, thinking you was gone down to Davy Jones's locker!"

"I'm very sorry I couldn't write from Melbourne," I said. "We were so hurried that I had hardly time to get once ashore. You got my other letters, though, eh?"

"Oh, aye," replied Sam, as we went along the familiar old Stoke road that I knew so well, although it was now so long since I had seen it. "You've been main good in writin', laddie, an' I don't know what Jane would ha' done without your letters. She thinks you're Teddy still, I believe, and seems to have got fonder than ever of you since you left. Do you know what the woman did when Cap'en Billings came to tell us how he'd seen you, and you was goin' on first-rate?"

"No, I'm sure I can't say," I answered.

“Blest if she didn’t throw her arms round his neck and kiss him—just because he had last seen you!”

I did not laugh at this, as Sam did; I only thought of the great affection, which, so undeserved by me, I had drawn from Jane Pengelly’s great heart!

Presently, we came in sight of the cottage.

There it was, porch, creepers, and all, just as I had left it, only now the glow of the fuchsias had gone, with that of the scarlet geraniums and other flowers of summer; still, the autumn tints of the Virginian creeper, hanging down in festoons of russet and yellow and red from the roof, gave all the colouring that was wanted.

Sam opened the door and walked in, as usual; but it was before his usual time for returning from Plymouth, so Jane came out of the kitchen in surprise—this I could hear, for I remained without in the porch till he had warned her of my coming.

“Deary me, Sam, you are early,” she said. “Why, the pasty won’t be done for an hour and more.”

“What, have you got a Mevagissey pie ag’in for dinner?”

“Yes, Sam,” she replied.

“Now, that’s curious,” Sam said.

I could almost have felt certain that I knew what he was doing when he spoke those words in that way. He must have taken off his hat and begun scratching his head reflectively with the other hand, I’m certain!

“Curious?” repeated Jane. “Why?”

“Why, because we had it for dinner when the poor laddie left us.”

“Deary me!” exclaimed Jane, her voice full of alarm. “There’s no tidings of any harm come to he, surely!”

“No, no, Jane, my woman,” said he, “the lad’s all right; ’fact, I’ve—I’ve seen him this morning.”

“This morning!” cried she, all excitement. “Why, what are you holding the door back for? It’s him—he’s here!”

And, in another moment, my second mother, as I shall always call her, was clinging round my neck with almost more than a mother’s love for me—if that were possible!

“Deary me!” she said a little while after, “isn’t he like Teddy, now?”

Sam burst out laughing.

“Why, Teddy was a slim boy of fourteen, and this laddie here’s a fine strapping fellow, nearly six feet high, and as broad in the beam as a Dutch sloop!”

However, Jane wouldn’t be convinced but that I was the very image of her own lost child; and, as I had all her wealth of affection in consequence, I’m sure I have no reason to complain.

I took up my quarters at “Old Calabar Cottage,” as Sam loved to hear people call it, rolling out the full name himself with great gusto; and, in a little while, as things went on in the old way, I got so accustomed to everything around me that I could almost fancy my first voyage and the burning of the Esmeraldawere a dream, as well as all my later experiences of the sea.

But, after a time, I began to long again to be on the deep, desiring once more to be daring its dangers and glorying in that “life on the ocean wave” which, once tasted by the true-born sailor, can never be given up altogether. I had just begun to deliberate with myself as to what sort of ship I should seek, and whither I would prefer to voyage for my next trip, when Sam came back from Plymouth one morning brimful of news.

“Well, laddie—who d’ye think I met to-day?” he called out to me, almost before he was quite inside the house.

“I’m sure I can’t guess,” I replied. “Who?”

“Why, Cap’en Billings, my cockbird!”

“Captain Billings!” I said, with surprise. “I thought he was in China.”

“No, but he’s going there this voyage.”

“This voyage?” I repeated questioningly, after Sam had said the words.

“Aye, laddie; he’s got a bran’ new ship, which the owners of the Esmeralda have had built, and just made him skipper of. And, what do you think, laddie?”

“I’m sure I can’t tell,” said I.

“He’s going to have a bran’ new second mate, who he hears has just got his certificate from the Trinity House Board—that is, if he’ll accept the berth under his old captain.”

“What!” I exclaimed, breathless with excitement, “does he offer to take me with him as he promised?”

“Aye, laddie, the berth’s open to you if you’ll have it, he says. Will you go?”

“Go?” I repeated, “of course I will!”

And so it came about that I am going to sail under my old skipper again.

The End