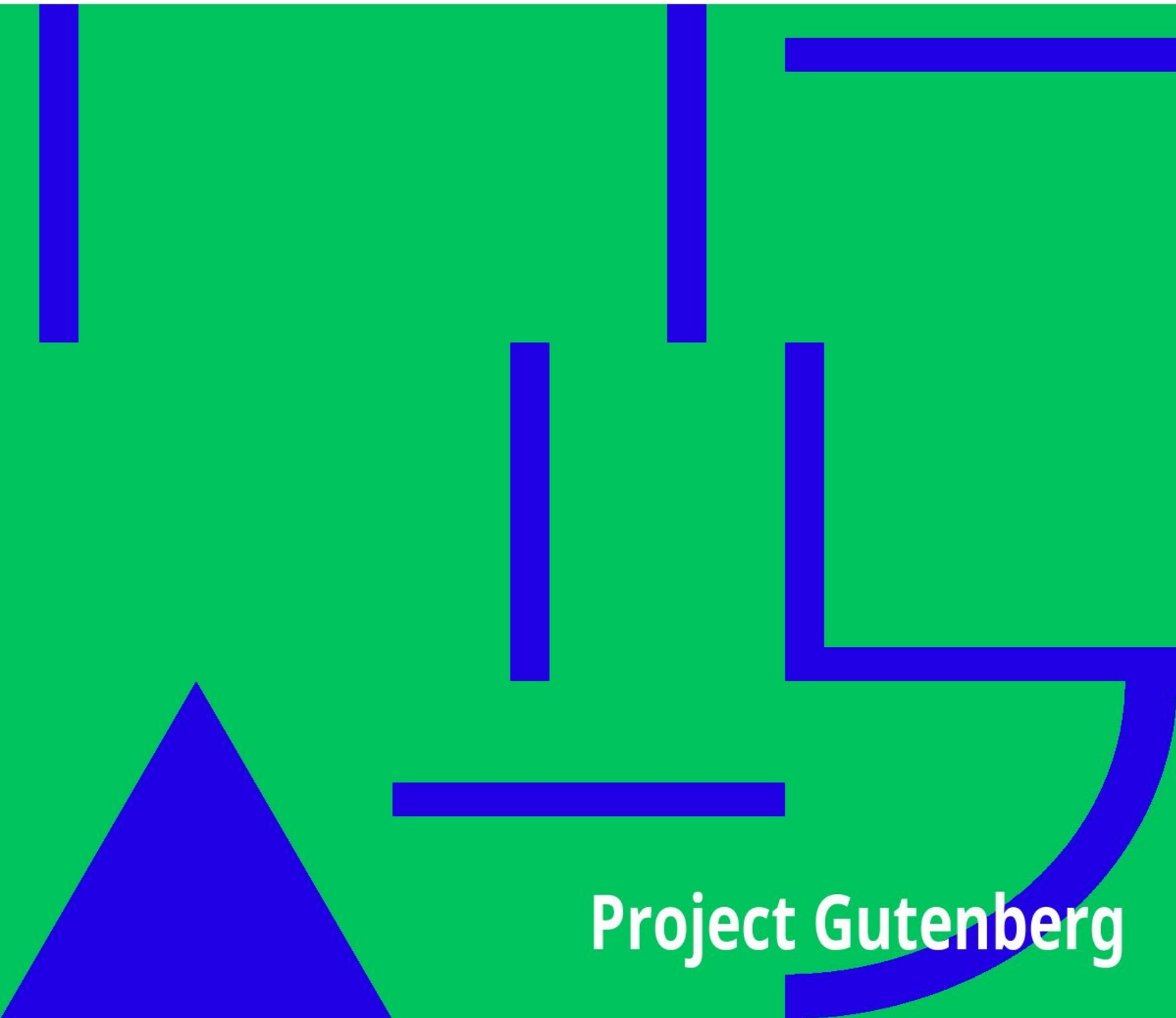
The Black Bar

George Manville Fenn



Title: The Black Bar

Author: George Manville Fenn

Illustrator: M.L.P.

Release Date: May 5, 2007 [EBook #21326]

Language: English

Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

George Manville Fenn

Chapter One.

Two Middies and a Monkey.

“We’ve done wrong, Van. There’ll be a jolly row about it.”

“Get out! What’s the good of talking now? You were as ready to have him as I was. Lie still, will you? or I’ll pitch you overboard.”

Two middies talking in the stern-sheets of the cutter belonging to Her Majesty’s fast little cruiser *Nautilus*, stationed on the west coast of Africa “blackberrying,” so the men called their duty, Tom Fillot, one of their jokers, giving as the reason that the job was “black and berry nasty.” The sun shone as it can shine in the neighbourhood of the equator, and the sea looked like so much glistening oil, as it slowly heaved up and sank with the long ground swell, the light flashing from the surface attacking the eyes with blinding power, bronzing the faces of some, peeling the noses of others.

Setting aside the smart crew of the cutter in their white duck shirts and trousers and straw hats, with faces, necks, and hands of a mahogany brown, the two speakers may be taken as fair samples of what the sun could do with a fresh-coloured English lad of sixteen or seventeen. Mark Vandean, who leaned back and had wrenched himself round to sharply adjure something behind him in the bottom of the boat, was burned of a good warm Russian leather brown, while his companion, Bob Howlett, who held the rudder-lines, displayed in addition to ruddy brown cheeks a nose in a most disreputable state of rag.

The boat went swiftly through the water, as the men bent with regular stroke, and made the tough ash blades of their oars curve ere they rose and scattered the flashing drops, which seemed to brighten the scene where all was flat and monotonous, and the view contracted by a dead silvery haze of heat. Behind them was the low flat shore with a few

scattered white houses and factories behind a rough landing-stage. There were palms of different kinds in a straggling line, and on either side of the opening out of a muddy river, a bordering of dingy green mangroves—tree cripples, Mark Vandean called them, because they all looked as if standing up on crutches. A few boats lay in the mouth of the river, a dissolute-looking brig with its yards unsquared was at anchor higher up, and a sharp eye could detect a figure or two about the beach. On either side, as far as eye could reach, there was a line of surf.

That was all shoreward, while out to sea, a couple of miles or so away, smart and business-like, with her tall spars and carefully squared yards and rigging, cobweb-like in texture at that distance, lay at anchor in the open road-stead HMS *Nautilus* waiting to gather “blackberries” at the first opportunity, and toward which smart little vessel the cutter was being steadily propelled.

The object ordered to lie still under pain of being pitched overboard did not lie, but crouched a little lower, and increased the wrinkles in its deeply lined forehead, above which was a thin fringe of hair, blinked its wondering eyes, and looked piteously at the speaker.

It was the face of an old man with enormous mouth pinched together, and devoid of lips, but giving the idea that it was about to smile; nose there was none, save a little puckering in its place, but as if to make up for the want, the ears were largely developed, rounded, and stood out on either side in a pronounced fashion. For it was the most human of all the apes, being a chimpanzee about as big as a sturdy two-year-old boy.

All at once the stroke oarsman ceased rowing, and began to wipe the perspiration from his open, good-humoured face.

“Hullo!” shouted one of the middies, “what’s that mean? Why are you not pulling?”

“Beg pardon, sir; won’t be none of me left to,” said the man, “I’m trickling all away. Like to put the new hand in my place?”

“New hand?” said the other middy; “what do you mean?”

“Gent as you have behind you there.”

Mark Vandean frowned, and drew himself up, tried to look severe as an officer, but he was confronted by five grinning faces, and the mirth was contagious; he smiled at the idea, and the men roared.

“There, pull away, my lads, and let’s get on board. This is no time for skylarking.”

The men bent to their oars again, and the boat answered to its name, cutting swiftly through the water towards the little man-o’-war.

“But there will be a row about it, old fellow,” whispered Bob Howlett.

“Oh, very well then, they must row,” said Mark Vandean pettishly. “There’s no harm in having a monkey onboard—if we can get it there.”

“Don’t you be uneasy about that, Mr Vandean, sir,” said the stroke oarsman; “me and my mates’ll smuggle the young nigger gent aboard somehow, even if I has to lend him my duds.”

“You leave off cutting jokes, Tom Fillot, and pull hard.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried the man, chuckling, and he and his fellows made the boat skim through the glowing water.

“Perhaps the letter is important,” said the first middy, “and may mean business at last.”

“I hope not,” said the other. “I’m sick of it. Nothing but wild-goose chases after phantom ships. I don’t believe there are any slavers on the coast.”

“Oh, aren’t there, Bob?”

“Don’t seem like it. Where are they, then; and why don’t we catch ’em?”

“I dunno.”

“Fancy going off again to-night sneaking down to another of these rivers all among the mosquitoes and fever mists. Ugh! If I’d known, you wouldn’t have caught me coming to sea.”

“Oh, we shall catch one of ’em yet. A big Yankee schooner full of slaves; and then look at the prize-money.”

“No catchee, no havee, Van. Oh, I say, I am hot. Why, I believe you could fry eggs in the sun.”

“Dare say you might if you could get there, Bob.”

“Oh, my! aren’t we witty this morning! I say, I wonder what old Staples will say to the monkey, Van.”

“So do I,” said the first middy, uneasily. “I half wish we hadn’t bought it. But it seemed such a chance.”

“Well, we’re in for it now. Staples will give it us pretty sharply, and then forget all about it.”

“But then there’s the skipper.”

“Ah,” said the second middy, thoughtfully; “I forgot about him. Bother the monkey! Phew! I am hot. I say, they may well call this Oily Bight. The sea looks just as if it had been greased. Oh, don’t I wish I were in a good wet fog in the Channel. This is a scorcher.”

The lads ceased speaking, and sat back watching the anchored vessel and relieving the tedium of the long row by scratching the monkey’s head and pulling its ears, the animal complacently accepting both operations, and turning its head about so that every portion should receive its share of the scratching, till all at once the boat was run alongside, the coxswain took hold with his boathook, and while the falls were hooked on, an order was given above, and they were run up to the davits.

Directly after, Mark Vandean stepped on deck, touched his cap to a severe-looking officer, and presented a letter.

“Take it in to the captain,” he said; and Mark marched off to the cabin, while the first lieutenant, who had turned toward the boat, out of which the men had sprung, suddenly raised one hand, and pointed at the boat’s side, above which a head had been raised, and its owner was gazing round with wrinkled forehead as if wondering what was going to happen

next.

Bob Howlett saw the first lieutenant's fixed stare and pointing hand, and glancing round, he caught sight of the head with its chin on the gunwale.

"Who's that?" cried the first lieutenant, sharply; and the men screwed up their faces and looked comically solemn on the instant, but no one spoke.

"Mr Howlett," cried the officer again, "I asked you who that was in the boat!"

"Beg pardon, sir; didn't know you were speaking to me. Which, sir?"

The lieutenant's lips were compressed as he took a couple of strides and brought himself alongside of the middy.

"If you are not careful, sir," he said severely, "trouble will follow this. You did know I spoke to you, sir. I said, 'Who is that young black?' Why, it's an ape."

"Yes, sir; chimpanzee, sir."

"How dare you bring a monkey on board, sir?"

"Only a natural history specimen, sir; and I thought—"

"Oh, there you are, Staples," said the captain, coming up. "Look, I think this is right at last;" and he handed the letter to his second in command.

"Looks correct, sir," said the lieutenant, after reading the letter. "Shall you act upon it?"

"Act upon it, man! Of course."

The monkey was forgotten. The boatswain's pipe rang out, the men came tumbling up, and as fast as it could be achieved, the anchor was raised, sail after sail hoisted, and an hour after, with every scrap of canvas that could be set, the *Nautilus* was slowly gliding along right out to sea, with the palm and mangrove-lined shore slowly fading into the haze, while the men collected together in knots and discussed the

possibility of catching a slaver that night.

“What’s it to be, Van,” said Bob Howlett, “fun or flam?”

“Tell you to-morrow morning,” was the reply. “I say, I’ve fed the chim’, and he’s asleep.”

“Wish I was too,” said Bob Howlett, “Oh, I say, ain’t it hot?”

Chapter Two.

Blackberrying at Sea.

That night the *Nautilus* was pretty close inshore, as soon as she could approach without being seen. Every light was out, the sail had been reduced, and they were gliding slowly along, watching the mouth of a river about twenty miles south of Port Goldby. They had been lying off here for days, waiting for the news the British agent had been trying hard to obtain for them, so as to enable the officer in command of her Majesty’s cruiser to strike a severe blow at the horrible traffic being carried on by swift-sailing schooners and barques trading between the West Coast of Africa and the southern ports of the United States.

The *Nautilus* had been for weeks upon the station, and so far all her efforts had proved vain. But now very definite information of the sailing of a large schooner from Palm River had been obtained, and everyone on board was in a most profound state of excitement. The night-glasses were being used, and as the vessel cruised to and fro off the mouth of the river, it did not seem possible for a fishing-boat to get away, leave alone a large schooner. This would be sure not to leave the river till the turn of the tide, two hours after dark, when she was expected to drop down with her cargo of unfortunates, collected at a kind of stockade by a black chief, who was supposed to be working in collusion with a merchant, whose store up the river had been ostensibly started for dealing in palm oil, ivory and gold dust with the above chief, a gentleman rejoicing in the name of Quoshay Dooni.

Captain Maitland’s plan had been well carried out, for the haze had

helped him; and after sailing right away, the vessel had crept close in at dark; and as night fell with all the suddenness of the tropics, she had reached the mouth of the river as aforesaid unseen.

After listening impatiently for some time, orders were given, and a couple of boats were lowered, each furnished with lanterns for signalling, of course kept hidden; and the monkey episode being for the time forgotten, Mark Vandean obtained permission to go in the first cutter, Bob Howlett being sent in the second.

“Whether we catch them or no,” thought Mark, as the boat kissed the water, “it will be a bit of a change.” Then, after a few whispered orders given to the second lieutenant, who was in charge, the two boats pushed off, the men dipping their muffled oars gently, and after separating for a couple of hundred yards, both cutters made their way silently through what appeared to be a wall of blackness, while each ear was alert to catch the slightest sound—the object being to make sure that the slaver did not slip down the river in the darkness, and pass the *Nautilus* unseen.

“Keep that sail well over the lanterns, Dance,” whispered the lieutenant to the coxswain; “don’t show a glimmer, but mind that they are kept burning.”

“Ah, ay, sir.”

“Shall I take them in charge, Mr Russell?” whispered Mark.

“No, my lad; I want you for company. Keep your eyes well skinned, as the Yankees say. If you sight the vessel first I’ll give you a ring.”

“Thankye, sir,” said Mark, and then to himself, “No such luck!”

The next moment he was peering over the heads of the men, and to right and left, straight into the black darkness, as the boat was steered, as nearly as they could guess, right up the river, the only guide they had being the steady rush of the muddy water which they had to stem.

“Seems a Blindman’s Buff sort of game, doesn’t it, Mr Russell?” whispered Mark, at the end of a couple of hours.

“Yes, my lad, it’s all chance work. I only wish, though, that we could blunder on to the abominable craft. They’ll be too sharp for us I’m afraid.”

Another hour passed, and they were still completely shut up in the darkness, with a thick haze overhead; and at last the lieutenant whispered,—“Lucky if we don’t some of us catch fever to-night.”

“Look here, Vandean, if we don’t soon see something I shall signal the ship for a recall. We shall do nothing to-night. Eh? what?”

“I heard voices off to the left,” Mark whispered. “Then it’s the schooner,” said the lieutenant, in a suppressed voice. “Give way, my lads! steady! I shall lay the boat alongside, and you must board her somehow. Coxswain only stay in the boat.”

The men received their orders in silence, but a suppressed sigh told of their eagerness and readiness to act.

A minute later there was a sharp rattling sound, a savage growl, and a loud burst of laughter.

The first cutter had come in contact with the second, and directly after there was a whirring, brushing sound of branches sweeping over the boats, one of which bumped against a root and nearly capsized.

“Tut, tut, tut!” ejaculated the lieutenant; “back water, my lads! We are doing no good here. It is impossible to see where we are going.”

There was a slight splashing, and the boats began to descend the stream, swept along by the tide for a time, till they lay on their oars again.

“What’s that, Mr Russell?” whispered Mark, all at once.

“What? I heard nothing but one of the oars badly muffled.”

“I didn’t near anything. I meant what’s that I can smell?”

The lieutenant started, and just then there was a peculiarly offensive, sickening odour perceptible.

“No mistaking that,” whispered the lieutenant; and, giving orders, a lantern was taken from beneath the sail, and shown above the gunwale of the boat.

Almost immediately a faint star-like light shone out at a distance on their left, and the lantern was hidden and the star disappeared.

“Why’s that?” whispered Mark.

“Let the other boat know the slaver’s dropping down,” was whispered back.

“But is she?” said Mark, excitedly.

“No doubt about that, my lad. Pull steady.”

The men obeyed, and the boat was steered in a zigzag fashion down the river, but there was no sign of the slaver. If she was dropping down it was so silently that her presence was not detected, and at last a fresher feeling in the air warned the occupants of the first cutter that they must be nearing the mouth of the river.

“Light,” whispered Mark, pointing off to his right, where, faintly seen, there was a feeble ray.

“Signal,” whispered the lieutenant. The lantern was shown, and there was an answering light from behind them, proving that the one forward must be at sea.

“It’s a recall,” said the lieutenant, with a sigh of relief; “give way, my lads.” Then to Mark: “The captain must be uneasy about us, or he would never show that light. It’s like letting the slaver know. Bah! what an idiot I am. That’s not our light. Pull, my lads, pull! That must have been shown by the ship we are after.”

As he spoke the light disappeared, and a fresh one appeared from astern.

They showed their own lantern, and their signal was answered, the second cutter running up close to them a few minutes later, while the

lieutenant was boiling over with impatience, for he had been compelled to check his own boat's way.

"What is it?" he said to his second in command.

"See that light ashore, sir?"

"No; I saw one out at sea; it's the slaver. Follow us at once."

"But that light was ashore, sir."

"Mr Ramsay, do you think I'm blind? Mr Howlett, are you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Didn't you see a light off to sea?"

"No, sir; ashore."

"I tell you it was at sea, and it is the craft we are after. Now, my lads, give way."

Crash.

"Why, we're among the trees again."

"Yes, sir; shore's this way," said the coxswain.

"Then where in the name of wonder is the sea?" said the lieutenant, in an angry whisper, as the tide bore them along, with the men's oars rattling among the mangrove stems.

"I think we've got into a side channel," said Mark.

"Rubbish! How could we?"

"Beg pardon, Mr Russell, sir," came from the boat astern; "we've got into a sort of canal place with the tide running like a mill stream. Hadn't we better lie to till daybreak?"

"Better sink ourselves," growled the lieutenant. "Here are we regularly

caught in a maze, and that schooner getting comfortably away to sea."

"'Fraid so, sir," said the boatswain. "That there was a light showed ashore to warn 'em that we were in the river; some of 'em must have heard."

The lieutenant made no answer, but ordered the men to back water, and for the next four hours they were fighting the swift river, trying to extricate themselves from the muddy system of branches into which they had been carried in the darkness, but in vain; and at last, in despair, they made fast to the mangroves, and waited for day.

Light came at last, piercing the white fog in which they lay; and in a short time they were back in the wide river, close to the sea, dejected, weary, and wondering that they could have been so confused in the darkness.

"Nice wigging we shall have, Vandean," said the lieutenant; "the skipper will sarcastically tell me he had better have sent one of the ship's boys in command. But there, I did my best. Ugh! how chilly it feels!"

An hour later they were alongside the *Nautilus*, which lay at the edge of a bank of mist which covered the sea, while shoreward all was now growing clear from a gentle breeze springing up.

The lieutenant was a true prophet, for the captain almost used his officer's words.

"Then you haven't seen a sign of the schooner?"

"No, sir; but we smelt it."

"What!" cried the captain.

"Sail ho!" shouted the man at the look-out, and in a moment all was excitement, for, about a mile away, down what looked like a clear lane through the white fog, was a two-masted vessel, crowded with sail; and as rapidly as possible the boats were hoisted up, and the *Nautilus* was in pursuit.

But hardly had she careened over under the press of sail than the fog shut the vessel from their sight, and for the next two hours she was

invisible, while the captain of the *Nautilus* had to lie to, for fear of some slippery trick on the part of what was undoubtedly the slaver, since she was more likely to make for the shelter of a creek than to risk safety in flight.

But the wind was not favourable for this manoeuvre, and toward mid-day the sea grew clear, and there was the slaver plainly visible miles away, sailing out west, while the *Nautilus* crowded on every stitch of canvas in pursuit.

A stern chase is a long one, says the proverb, and night came with the craft still miles away, but the sky was brilliantly clear, and the moon shone forth, showing the white-sailed schooner in a strangely weird fashion far across the flashing sea.

“We’re gaining on her,” said Bob Howlett, who was as full of excitement as the men, while Mark felt a strange suffocating sensation at the chest as he strained his eyes and watched the swift schooner, whose captain tried every manoeuvre to escape the dogged pursuit of the Queen’s cruiser.

“Hang it all! he’s a plucky one,” said Bob, as the chase went on. “He must be taken, but he won’t own to it.”

“Thought a ship was a she,” said Mark.

“Well, I was talking about the skipper, wasn’t I?”

“A man doesn’t want to lose his ship, of course.”

“Nor his cargo,” cried Bob. “There, give it up, old fellow; we’re overhauling you fast.”

It was a fact: the *Nautilus*, with all her studding sails set, was creeping nearer and nearer, till at last, amid no little excitement on the part of the two midshipmen, a gun was shotted, run out, and a turn or two given to the wheel. Then, as the *Nautilus* swerved a little from her course, the word was given, and a shot went skipping across the moonlit sea, splashing up the water in a thousand scintillations, and taking its final plunge far ahead of the schooner.

Every eye and every glass was fixed upon the slaver, for such she was without a doubt, since she kept on, paying no heed to the shot and its summons to heave to; and after a second had been sent in chase, the captain gave the word, and a steady fire was kept up at the spars and rigging.

“I can’t fire at her hull, Staples,” the captain said.

“No, it would be slaughtering the poor wretches down below; never mind, sir, we’ll capture her directly. She’s ours, safe.”

“Then the sooner the better,” said Bob to his companion.

The firing continued, and the crews of the two guns which sent their shot in chase vied with each other in their efforts to hit a spar and bring down the sails of the schooner; but they tried in vain. Sails were pierced, but no other harm was done, and the slaver kept gallantly on.

But all her efforts were in vain. The *Nautilus* crept on and on, nearer and nearer, till she was only about a quarter of a mile away, and then the slaver altered her course, and gained a little by her quick handling. But the *Nautilus* was after again, and after two or three of these manoeuvres Captain Maitland was able to anticipate her next attempt to escape, and all seemed over.

“I wonder how many poor wretches she has on board?” tried Mark, excitedly, as the word was passed for one of the boat’s crews to be ready for boarding as soon as the slaver captain struck the flag he had run up in defiance.

“Hundreds perhaps,” said Bob, coolly; “but we haven’t got her yet.”

“No; but they’re going to give in now. I can see the captain quite plainly,” said Mark, who was using a glass. “What are they doing? Oh, Bob, look!”

For through the glass he saw what seemed to be a struggle on the moonlit deck, and directly after there was a splash.

“Great heavens!” cried Captain Maitland. “Staples! Look! They’re throwing the poor fellows overboard.”

“No,” said the first lieutenant, with his glass to his eye; “only one.”

A mist came for a moment over Mark Vandean’s sight, but it passed away; and, with the feeling of suffocation at his throat increasing now, he kept his glass upon the black head in the midst of the quivering water, where a man was swimming hard for life. Brought almost close to him by his powerful glass, Mark could nearly make out the agonised look upon the swimmer’s face, as, at every stroke, he made the water shimmer in the moonlight; and every moment as his forehead grew wet and his hands clammy, the midship, man expected to see the waves close over the poor wretch’s head.

Just then his attention was taken up by the voices of the Captain and lieutenant.

“The scoundrel! the fiend!” cried the former, with a stamp of rage upon the deck; “if it were not for those on board I’d sink him.”

“I wish we could, sir,” replied the first lieutenant; “we shall lose him.”

“No,” cried the captain. “He has thrown that poor wretch overboard, believing that we shall heave to and pick him up sooner than let him drown.”

“While he gets a mile away,” said the first lieutenant; “and as soon as we overhaul him again, he’ll throw over another—that is, sir, if we stop to pick the poor creatures up.”

“Help! boat! help!” cried Mark, unable to contain his feelings longer; and lowering his glass, he turned to the captain. “Look, sir, look!” he cried, pointing in the direction of the drowning black; “the poor fellow’s going down.”

Chapter Three.

Saving a Brother’s Life.

There was a moment’s dead silence after Mark had, in his excitement,

cried for help. Then the word “Fire!” was uttered sharply, and there was the deafening report of a gun, whose shot again passed between the schooner’s masts, but without doing the slightest harm. Then, almost mingled with the bass roar of the cannon, the captain’s orders rang out; the boatswain’s pipe sounded shrilly, and as the *Nautilus* was thrown up into the wind, and her sails began to shiver, down went the boat with its crew, Mark, at a sign from the captain, who gave him a friendly smile, having sprung in. Then there was a quick thrust off by the coxswain, the oars fell on either side with a splash, and the young midshipman stood up, balancing himself on the thwart in the stern-sheets, directing the officer who held the rudder-lines how to steer, for far-away on the moonlit water, when the swell rose high, he could still see the dark head and the rippling made by the swimmer struggling for his life.

“Starboard!” shouted Mark. “Pull, my lads, pull. Starboard a little more.”

“Starboard it is,” cried the officer. “See him still?”

“Yes,” cried Mark. “Oh, pull, my lads, pull, or he’ll go down before we get to him. Now port a little: they’re pulling stronger on one side than on the other—not too much. That’s right. Yes, I can—no, he is down in the hollow. There he is again. Pull your hardest,” he cried, excitedly; and the men jerked at their oars as they cheered.

“Hold on; we’re coming,” cried Mark to the drowning man, thoughtless of the fact that the negro would not understand his words, even if he heard them, which was doubtful in the wild agony of his struggle, as with breath growing short, weak as he was from confinement, he struck out more quickly, and fought hard with the waves for his unhappy life.

“See him still?” cried Mark’s companion, as the boat made the water foam.

“Yes—no—no,” said Mark, hoarsely; “he’s down in the hollow again. Straight on. We’re going right for him, and—”

“Don’t say he has gone down,” cried the officer.

“No; I shall see him directly. We must be close to him now. Ready there with the boathook.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried the man in the bows, as he stood up ready to make a snatch at the drowning man. “See him, sir?”

Mark was silent as he strained his eyes over the surface of the sea, looking vainly for the struggling figure which had been making so brave a fight for life. There was a terrible feeling of dread oppressing him, as for the first time he was face to face with death; and in those awful moments he was unconscious of the regular reports of the guns as the *Nautilus* kept up her fire at the flying schooner. He heard nothing, saw nothing but the sea shimmering in the moonbeams. For after a long and desperate fight, with the water rising higher about his lips, the unfortunate black had grown weaker and weaker, and at last had given one tremendous plunge, which raised him high, so that he could glare wildly round for help; then he had ceased his struggle and gone slowly down, the water closing over his staring eyes and glistening teeth; there were a few bubbles, and the sea heaved and fell gently over the spot where he sank.

“I have been close here, sir,” cried the coxswain.

“Easy, my lads,” cried the young lieutenant in command. “Can’t you see him, Van? Oh, hang it, lad, look! We mustn’t let the poor beggar drown, even if he is a nigger.”

Mark uttered a groan. He had come to save a human being—a fellow-creature cast to destruction by the brutal captain of the slaver—and he had failed.

“Got him?” came faintly from the distant ship.

“No, sir,” shouted the second lieutenant, through his hands.

“Oh, look! look!” cried Mark, wildly. “Pull, my lads. Starboard men, back water. He must be somewhere here. He is sure to come up again.”

The men obeyed, and in those terrible moments the silence was appalling. Then came the deafening roar of a gun—the last fired then at the now distant schooner—and Mark sank down from the thwart and was turning away from the men to hide his drawn face, when he uttered a wild cry, flung himself half over the side of the boat, and made a desperate clutch at something which just rose above the water. Then hand grasped

hand, the white holding the black in a desperate clutch, as the lieutenant dropped the rudder-lines, and saved Mark from going overboard by seizing him round the waist.

Then came a little hauling, followed by a cheer, as the nude figure of a stalwart black was dragged in, to sink helpless, perfectly insensible, in the bottom of the boat.

“Now pull, my lads!” shouted the lieutenant; “pull all you know, and let’s get aboard. We’ve got to take that schooner before we’ve done.”

The men cheered, and pulled for the ship, from which came an answering cheer; but as Mark knelt down by the black he felt they had been a little too late, for the man lay there, in the moonlight, apparently quite dead. He had not stirred, neither did there seem to be the slightest pulsation as the boat was pulled alongside the *Nautilus* and run up to the davits, the graceful vessel beginning to glide once more rapidly in pursuit of the schooner, which had by the cruel manoeuvre placed a considerable distance between her and her pursuer.

“The black-hearted scoundrel!” cried the captain, as he stood looking down at the slave. “I’ll follow him to America but what I’ll have him. Well, doctor, all over with the poor fellow?”

“Oh no,” said the gentleman addressed; “he’s coming round.”

Almost as he spoke there was a faint quiver of the black’s eyelid, and a few minutes after he was staring wildly round at the white faces about him. The men set up a cheer, while a feeling of exultation such as he had never before experienced caused a strange thrill in the midshipman’s breast.

“He may thank you for his life, Vandean,” said the second lieutenant, “for we should never have seen him. Now I wonder whether that scoundrel will try the same game over again.”

“Safe to, Russell,” said the first lieutenant, gruffly. “Here, my lads, get the black below; give him a place to lie down. He’ll be all right in the morning, and a free man at any rate.”

“I say, Van,” said Bob Howlett, “aren’t we all making a precious lot of fuss about a nigger? Wonder whether you’d all make as much about me.”

“Go overboard and try,” said Mark.

“Eh? Thankye. Well, not to-night. I say, can’t that schooner sail?”

“So can we—and faster. What a rate we’re going at. Shan’t capsize, shall we?”

“Hope not, because if we did that schooner would escape. Why don’t they fire?”

“Waste of powder and shot, my boy,” said a voice behind them; and, looking sharply round, there stood the first lieutenant with his glass to his eyes, watching the flying boat. “Ha! we’re moving now. Better get on a lifebelt, Mr Vandean, if you feel afraid.”

He walked away, leaving the lad flushed and indignant. “Needn’t catch a fellow up like that,” he muttered. “Who said anything about being afraid?”

Bob Howlett laughed, and then turned his eyes in the direction of the schooner.

Chapter Four.

In Great Jeopardy.

Meanwhile everything possible was being tried to get another half knot of speed out of the *Nautilus*, which glided along under her cloud of sail, sending the water foaming in an ever-widening double line of sparkling water on either side. The hose was got to work, and the sails wetted, sheets were hauled more tightly home, and the captain and officers walked the decks burning with impatience as they scanned the distant schooner.

“If I was the skipper I’d be ready for him this time,” said Mark to his companion.

“How? What would you do?”

“Have the boat’s crew ready to drop down the moment the slaver captain pitched another poor fellow overboard. No, no,” he added, quickly; “he’ll never be such a wretch as to do that again.”

“Oh, won’t he just?” cried Bob, nodding his head, a great many times; “he’ll go on chucking the whole cargo out one by one, just like the man did his gloves and things to the bear, for it to stop and smell them while he escaped. Here, I mean to go and save the next black chap, and then perhaps I shall look as cocky as you do. Oh, what a wonderful chap you are, Van!”

Mark made a quick gesture, as if to hit out at his messmate, and then looked on in wonder as the captain ordered the cutter’s crew back into the boat, and the men to the falls, ready in case the slaver captain should repeat his manoeuvre, while the guns were double-shotted and laid for the moment when the schooner would be once more within range.

“I say,” whispered Bob, “don’t the skipper look savage? I believe he’d send a broadside into the schooner if it wasn’t for the slaves on board.”

“Of course he would; he said so,” replied Mark, and he went forward and then down below to where, by the dim light of a swinging lantern, he could see the wild eyes of the black as he lay in a bunk, ready to start up in dread as the lad approached.

“All right; be still,” said the midshipman, laying his hand upon the man’s shoulder, and pressing him back; “how are you?”

The man glared at him in silence, but made no sound.

“It’s of no use to talk to you, I s’pose,” continued Mark. “There, go to sleep. Perhaps we shall have some companions for you in the morning. Hullo! begun again!”

For at that moment there was a dull roar and the jarring sensation of a gun being fired overhead, making the black start and look wonderingly about him.

“I say, that startled him,” said Bob Howlett, who had stolen down behind his messmate, and had stood in the semi-darkness laughing at the black’s astonishment. “What do you think of that, old chap? That’s some of our private thunder. Large supply kept on the premises. There goes another! Here, Van, we mustn’t stop below.”

For a second report shook the deck, and the black tried to rise, but sank back from sheer weakness.

“Tell him it’s all right, Van, and that he’d better go to sleep.”

“How?” replied Mark.

“Ah, ’tis how! I say, what a shame for us to be sent on the west coast in such a state of ignorance. Here, all right, Massa Sambo. Go to sleep. I say, do come on, Van, or there’ll be a row.”

The next minute the two lads were on deck, to find that they were rapidly overhauling the schooner, and they were just in time to hear the orders given as the boat was ready to be lowered.

“Come, Mr Howlett, where have you been?”

This from the first lieutenant.

Bob murmured some excuse, and sprang into the boat, which dropped out of sight directly, and then darted in again as the men bent to their stout ashen oars, and sent her rapidly in the schooner’s wake, where Mark made out by the troubled water seen through his glass that another poor fellow had been tossed overboard by the slaver captain, for he rightly judged that no English officer would leave the black to drown.

He was quite correct in his judgment, for though Captain Maitland had fumed and declared that he would not give up the chance of capture for the sake of a black, when he felt that he might seize the schooner and put an end to the mischief she was doing probably year after year, he had his vessel’s course stayed, and waited patiently for the return of the boat he had lowered.

The mission of this cutter was almost an exact repetition of the one in

which Mark took part, Bob Howlett having the luck to seize the second drowning man, over whose body the boathook had slipped.

“And no wonder,” growled the coxswain afterwards. “He’d got on no duds, and I didn’t want to stick the hook into his flesh.”

While this was going on, the captain stamped above on one side of the quarter-deck, the first lieutenant on the other. For they kept as far apart as they could, and it was an understood thing amongst the junior officers that it would be to come in for the full force of an explosion to speak to either of them now.

“Pull, men, pull!” roared the first lieutenant through his speaking trumpet. “Mr Russell, do you want to keep us here all night?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” came back from the boat.

“What?”

“No, no, sir; I beg your pardon. We’ve got the man.”

“Got the man!” cried the captain, angrily; “do you think we have no glasses on board? Make haste, sir.”

“Oh!”

“What’s that?” cried the captain, sharply, for there had been the sound of a sharp crack, and Mark had uttered the cry.

“What’s that, sir?” cried the lieutenant in a rage; “why it’s Mr Vandean, sir, getting under my feet like a spaniel dog, and the moment I move he yelps out, sir.”

“It wasn’t your foot, sir,” cried Mark sharply, for his head was stinging with pain. “You swung round your speaking trumpet, sir, and hit me.”

“Silence, sir! how dare you, sir? You should get out of the way, sir,” roared the first lieutenant.

“That will do, Staples,” said the captain, calming down now. “Now, men,

up with that boat."

The cutter was already swinging from the davits, while at a turn of the wheel the *Nautilus* began to forge through the water again, and the men stood ready for another shot at the flying schooner.

Just then the cutter's crew lifted out the black they had rescued, and he too sank down helpless on the deck, half dead from exhaustion.

"That's one to me, Van," whispered Bob. "I saved that chap."

"Then you only half did it, Mr Howlett," said the doctor, who overheard him. "Let me finish."

"I say," whispered Bob, "what a nuisance it's getting, you can't say a word on board without somebody hearing. Hullo! what's the matter with your head?"

"Old Staples was in a passion because you were so long, and hit me over the head with his speaking trumpet."

"Get out—and we weren't so long as you were first time. Russell said so. What was it? He wouldn't dare to hit you."

"But he did; swung round just when I was behind him."

"Serve you right for being behind him."

"What?" cried Mark, furiously.

"No, no, I mean serve him right for being before you."

"Less talking, young gentlemen," cried the officer of whom they were speaking, and he looked round at them so sternly that they separated, each hurrying to his post, and, glass in hand, watching the distant schooner.

"Look here, Mr Russell," said the captain, walking up to that officer, as, once more, they began to near the white-sailed vessel gliding along in the brilliant moonlight. "If that scoundrel tries his cowardly scheme again,

I shall drop you to pick up the poor wretch, and keep on as hard as we can, or we shall lose her. Save the poor fellow, and then pull steadily after us. I think I can overhaul her in less than half-an-hour, and then I shall heave to, and wait for you to come aboard."

The second lieutenant saluted, and the captain went forward to watch the schooner.

"Are you coming with me this time, Vandean?" said the lieutenant.

"Yes, I hope so, sir," said the lad.

"Hope, eh? Humph. You don't know what you are talking about, my lad."

"Please don't speak," said Mark, excitedly. "I've got it just right now. Look sir, look, there's a regular fight going on aboard. They're getting ready to pitch another man overboard."

The lieutenant raised the glass to his eyes, and immediately gave orders to the crew to stand ready. Then, following the midshipman's example, he fixed his glass upon the schooner, and watched her moonlit deck with its busy dark figures, in the full expectation of seeing another heavy splash.

But nothing more disturbed the surface of the water but the rush of the swift schooner, in whose wake lay what looked like an arrow-head of foam, as the lines diverged from each side of her sharp prow; and as they neared her the captain grew excited.

"She's going to heave to," he cried.

Just then a shot went skipping along the water, making the sea flash into silver at every dip, and sped right on in front of the schooner's bows, a messenger sufficiently faithful to warn the Yankee skipper of what would be the fate of his vessel if he did not strike his colours, for the man who aimed that shot could as easily have hulled the swift craft.

At the captain's words every eye was directed to the American flag which the skipper was disgracing, but it remained in its place as both vessels sped on, and a couple more shots were fired and sent through the main and foresails, which showed, with the aid of the glasses, a couple of

black spots.

That was all.

“He’s laughing at us,” growled Mr Staples. “Oh, if we could send a few shots through his wretched craft!”

“And I dare not,” cried the captain.

Just then Mark again caught sight of something which was taking place on the schooner’s deck, not five hundred yards from where they pressed on in pursuit. It was hard to see at that distance, but he made out that a sturdy black was evidently renewing the struggle which had taken place before; but in spite of his efforts, he was being dragged to the side; then, to Mark’s horror, a hand was raised and a blow struck, followed by a splash in the water, which was scattered far and wide, as the young midshipman closed his glass with his wet hands, feeling as if it had revealed horrors which he could not bear.

“First cutters!” rang out, and the lad ran to the boat; the captain repeated his orders to the second lieutenant as the *Nautilus* was run on, so as to get as near as possible to the drowning slave before her speed was checked and her boat lowered. There, all ready in their seats, the boat’s crew waited. The expected moment came as the sails shivered, the boat kissed the water, the falls were unhooked, and in an extremely short space of time the *Nautilus* was gliding on in full chase, and the cutter’s oars were dipping in a quick, regular stroke which took them wide of the vessel’s course, as she literally darted away.

And now, as he stood up once more on the thwart, to try and make out the head of the black cast overboard, it struck Mark for the first time that they were alone upon the wide sea, and that the *Nautilus* was very rapidly increasing her distance, while the schooner, to his excited fancy, already began to look small.

But he had very little time for thinking.

“Be ready with that boathook,” shouted the second lieutenant.

“Ay, ay, sir. Mustn’t miss this one,” muttered the speaker to himself.

“See him, Mr Vandean?”

“No, not yet, sir.”

“You ought to, by now. Watch for the rippled water where he is swimming.”

“That’s what I am doing, sir,” replied Mark, “but I can’t see anything.”

“He’s floating, perhaps. Pull away, my lads. Steady; we don’t want to pass him.”

There was a few minutes’ silence.

“See him now, Mr Vandean?” said the lieutenant again, and Mark was silent for a few moments, as he scanned the surface round from beneath his hand.

“No, sir, no sign of him.”

“Oh, don’t say that, my lad. Look, look. We mustn’t miss the poor fellow. Strikes me that we’re going to pick up the whole cargo this way. Now then, wasn’t that a splash yonder?”

“No, sir, I can’t see anything,” said Mark sadly; and as he still eagerly scanned the surface amidst a breathless silence, only broken by the flapping of the water against the bows of the boat, it again struck Mark with a chill of awe that they were being left alone there; and he asked himself what would happen if the *Nautilus* could not find them again.

This was momentary, for his attention was taken up by his search, and the officer said again, in angry impatience now,—“Come, Mr Vandean, where’s this poor fellow? Here, lie to, my lads.”

The men ceased rowing, and sat with their oars balanced, looking out on either side for some sign of the man overboard but there was none, and Mark heaved a deep sigh.

“Yes,” said the lieutenant, as if that sigh were in words; “it’s a bad case, my lad. I am afraid he’s gone, poor fellow.”

“Someone struck him before he went overboard,” said Mark.

“You saw that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then he has gone. We never saw him swimming. I’m afraid we must begin to row for the ship if we do not see him in a few minutes. She’s leaving us a long way behind.”

“I see him, sir,” cried the coxswain. “Here he is!”

He made a dash with his boathook, but the object he sought to reach was so far out, that he overbalanced himself and went in with a heavy plunge.

“You clumsy dog!” roared the lieutenant. “Back water port, pull starboard. That’s it. Now then, in oars there, and lay hold of him.”

The men on the port side obeyed, and in their excitement, three started up and reached out to seize their struggling comrade, who had hold of a black arm with one hand, and swam with the other.

“Now then, lay hold quick,” roared the lieutenant.

“Mind! Take care!” shouted Mark.

The words were necessary, but useless, for as the men reached over and raised the coxswain and his burden, the gunwale of the boat sank too low, there was a rush of water, and in what seemed like one beat of time the crew were all thrown out, and as they rose to the surface after an unexpected dive, it was to find the oars floating about, with straw hats here and there, and a couple of yards away the cutter lying bottom upwards.

Mark’s first instinct as he caught sight of the glistening keel was to strike out and seize it, his next to look wildly round for help; and now he fully realised the fact that they were alone and in deadly peril, with the help that should have been at hand gliding rapidly away.

“Hi! help! your hand!” cried a choking voice close by; and instinctively

Mark stretched out the asked-for help, to feel one hand seized and the other glide from the slippery keel. The next moment the water was thundering over his head.

Chapter Five.

A Fight with a Boat.

Were you ever nearly drowned? Did you ever feel the sensation of the waves rushing and roaring over you, as if full of triumph at having captured a human being to drag down into their depths and devour?

It is to be hoped not, and that you never will be in such jeopardy as that in which Mark Vandean found himself as the pale, soft moonlight was suddenly shut out from sight, and he went down into the black darkness, too much startled and confused to grasp his position and make a calm, matter-of-fact attempt to save his life. He was conscious of receiving a kick, which sent him lower, and then of rising and striking his head against something hard.

This blow roused him into action, and, realising in a flash that he had knocked his head against some portion of the boat, he struck out strongly, and the next moment was gazing around at the agitated water, and then made out, close at hand, what looked like the glistening back of some sea monster.

It was only the imagination of the moment. Directly after he was swimming for it, seeing that it was the bottom of the capsized boat, about which the crew were clustering.

Then a strong hand was stretched out to him, and he was drawn to the keel, Tom Fillot, who had rowed stroke oar, helping him to a good position.

“Hold on a bit, sir, and we’ll try and right her.”

“Yes,” panted Mark. “Where’s Mr Russell?”

“Here,” came rather faintly from the other side of the boat, accompanied by a fit of gasping and coughing. “All right now; I got under the boat. All here, my lads?”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Then you one and all deserve a flogging,” cried the second lieutenant, angrily. “What were you about to capsize the boat?”

“Dunno, sir,” said Tom Fillot, gruffly. “She went over all of her own sen.”

“Don’t be an idiot, man.”

“Where’s the black?” panted Mark, who had not yet got back to his regular breathing.

“I have him, sir,” said the coxswain, “but I don’t think he’s—”

“Oh, don’t say he’s dead!” cried Mark.

“Course not, sir, if you says I’m not,” muttered the man; “but it strikes me as he was dead before he reached the sea. Some one seems to have hit him on the head.”

The lieutenant changed his position, so as to place himself alongside the coxswain, and then moved away again.

“Dead?” whispered Mark, as he drew himself a little more on the bottom of the boat, and craned his neck towards his brother officer.

Russell did not answer for the moment, but gravely bent his head.

“The brutes!” he then said, softly; “and all this risk for nothing.”

Then aloud—“Now, my lads, quick. Swimmers. The oars.”

These words roused the little crew, which had been clinging to the keel, half lying on either side of the boat, as if there was nothing more to be done but wait for help but now three of the men at once quitted their hold, and began to swim about in search of the oars and other objects floating

about in the glistening moonlight.

“Never mind the hats, man,” shouted the lieutenant. “The oars—the oars.”

This was to one of the sailors who had reached a straw hat and clapped it upon his head as he swam, but the same man recovered one of the oars and brought it alongside.

“Any one seen my hitcher?” shouted the coxswain from where he hung on, supporting the black.

“No.”

“Yes,” came from Mark, who pointed; “there it is, standing up like a great quill float. See it?”

“Yes, sir, I see it,” cried a sailor; and he swam off towards the white-looking pole, while others sought for and recovered the whole of the oars, which floated a short distance away, the men having gained a little more confidence, and freely quitting their hold of the boat, as it slowly rose and fell in the midst of the smooth, heaving sea.

Mark had done nothing but hold on to the keel and try to direct the men, as they swam here and there, giving a longing glance, though, from time to time at the distant *Nautilus*, whose white sails gleamed in the moonlight. Now, as the crew resumed their places, and tried to keep the oars and boathook alongside the keel, he turned to the lieutenant.

“What are you going to do about—about that?” he whispered.

“Get the poor creature on board—if we can,” was the reply; and the young midshipman could not help shuddering. “It is what we were sent to do, Vandean,” continued the officer, “and we must do our duty. Now, my lads,” he cried, “all of you over here, and let’s right the boat.”

The men opposite swam round, and, the oars being left floating, an effort was made to drag the boat over, all hanging on the keel. But, in spite of effort after effort, she refused to right, and Mr Russell gave the word to rest for a few minutes, and collect the floating oars, which were getting

scattered once more.

This being done, Mark turned to his officer, and said in a low voice,—“You want the coxswain to help?”

“I do, my lad,” replied the lieutenant, but he stopped short and looked at his young companion.

“I will not mind,” said Mark. “I’ll try and hold the poor fellow up, and set Joe Dance free.”

Without waiting to be ordered, Mark drew a deep breath, edged himself right astern to where the coxswain held on to the keel with one hand and grasped the black’s wrist with the other.

“Go and take my place,” he said; and making an effort over self, he searched for and found one of the little fenders suspended from the boat’s side, took a firm hold, and then stretched out his right hand to grasp the black’s wrist.

“Mean it, sir?” said the man.

“Yes,” replied Mark, huskily. “Go and help.”

The next minute the lad hung there in the water, with his face kept toward the boat, and his hand retaining that which he could not muster up sufficient courage to turn and gaze at, as it lay calm and stern, looking upward toward the peaceful moonlit skies.

Then began a sturdy effort to right the boat, and Mark’s position grew irksome in the extreme, for at every struggle to drag the keel down toward them, the midshipman was drawn lower, and he felt that if his companions in misfortune succeeded in righting the boat, he would have to let go and try to keep himself afloat for a time.

But in spite of try after try, the boat remained stubbornly bottom upward, and at last, worn out by their exertions, all ceased their efforts, and rested half on the keel which offered a tempting halting place for those who liked to climb upon it, and sit astride.

Just then Dance the coxswain made his way to Mark, and without a word seized the wrist of the black, and in a low growl bade the young officer rest.

“Soon as you can, my lad,” he whispered, “reach down and get hold of one of the rudder-lines. I’ll make him fast to that.”

“But his head—it must be kept above water,” whispered back Mark in a choking voice, for he felt hysterical and strange.

“What for, my lad?” said the coxswain. “It can do no good. Half a million o’ doctors couldn’t save his life. He was done for when they pitched him in, and I should like to have my will o’ them as done it. Precious little marcy they’d get out o’ me.”

“Come along here, Mr Vandean,” cried the lieutenant from the bow end of the boat; and Mark shudderingly left the coxswain making fast the wrist of the dead black to one of the rudder-lines, and joined his brother officer, easily passing from one to the other of the men as they half lay on the bottom, resting and clinging by one hand to the keel.

“Cheer up, my lad!” said the lieutenant. “There’s nothing to mind. The sea couldn’t be smoother, and we can hold on like this for any length of time. The captain is sure to come back soon to pick us up.”

Mark made no answer, but crept into as secure a place as he could beside his officer, gazed away at the dimly-seen vessels, and listened to the dull report of gun after gun.

“Well, you are very quiet,” said the lieutenant after a long pause. “Why don’t you speak?”

“I have only one thing to say,” replied Mark, “and I did not like to say that.”

“Why not? What is it?”

“I wanted to know whether they would ever find us again.”

“Find us? Yes, of course,” cried the lieutenant. “They must find us. There, it’s all right. Never despair. No fear of our being washed off, and we’ve

nothing else to mind."

"Sharks?" said Mark, involuntarily.

"Hush!" whispered the lieutenant, fiercely. And then with his lips to the lad's ear he said, "Never utter a word likely to damp your men's courage at a time like this. Do your duty and hope for the best. Trust in God for the help to come, my lad. That's how a sailor should act."

"I'll try, Mr Russell," whispered back Mark, with a curious choking feeling at his breast as he thought of home in far-away old England, and of the slight chance he had of ever seeing it again.

"Of course you will try, black as it all looks. Now then, we're a bit rested, and going to have another start."

But he gave no orders then, for with his wet hand shading his eyes, he tried to make out what was going on between the *Nautilus* and the schooner, the firing having now ceased.

"I'm afraid the Yankee skipper's carrying on the same manoeuvre," he said at last; "and perhaps we shall have to wait for morning. Now then, I want this boat righted and baled out, but we shall be colder sitting in our wet clothes than we are now. Ready, my lads?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

Still he did not give orders for the men to renew their efforts, but hung there watching the distant vessels, while alone in the great ocean the capsized boat softly heaved and fell on the long smooth rollers.

"Yes," said the lieutenant at last, "he will be obliged to let her escape."

"Not take her?" cried Mark, rousing himself a little at this.

"No, not take her. He must heave to and pick us up. As soon as it is day glasses will be at work in the maintop; and directly they see our plight the *Nautilus* will come down to us with every stitch of canvas set."

"Hooray!" shouted the men as they heard the lieutenant's words; and

when he gave his orders, they set to with a will to drag the keel down toward them. Discipline, training, all was in their favour; but the boat was heavy, and seemed to fight against them. Turning their bodies into weights, they drew it more and more over, till it was so low that the lieutenant bade one man climb up and reach over to get hold of the side.

This was done again and again, but only for the weight to disturb the equilibrium, and send it back, the man in each case going right over with it, to be plunged in, head-first, on the other side.

Sailors are light-hearted fellows, and even in times of peril they soon forget their troubles, and are ready to join in a grin.

It was so here. A roar of laughter saluted each man who went down as soon as he rose again and swam round, taking it all good-humouredly enough, as he resumed his place to renew the struggle, till at last the lieutenant was ready to give up in despair.

“Let me try this time,” said Mark at last. “I’m lighter, and I think I could get hold of the side with the boathook as soon as I am on the keel.”

“Hear that, my lads?” shouted Dance, “and me to have handled a hitcher all these years, and never to have thought of it. Boat’s righted, messmates, now; only, by your leave, sir, if you’d let me try, I think I could do it easier than you.”

“Try then, my lad,” said the lieutenant; and, getting hold of the hook, the coxswain moved into the centre on one side as the crew seized the keel and dragged it down, while the man, boathook in hand, climbed up, finding good foothold on the clinker-built boat, steadying himself with his pole as he worked. At last he stood upright on the side of the keel, reached over and fixed his hook upon one of the rowlocks; then holding on firmly by the pole and pressing his feet against the keel, he hung right away, his body now forming so heavy a balance-weight that upon the men making a simultaneous effort to draw the boat over, she came down more and more. Then with a sudden lurch the resistance against them was overcome, and she came right over to an even keel, plunging Dance into the water, from which he rose spitting and sputtering, to begin swimming back amidst a hearty burst of cheers.

Chapter Six.

Alone on the Ocean.

“All very fine for you, my lads,” grumbled the coxswain, “but see what a wetting I got.”

“Vandean, my lad,” whispered the lieutenant, “that idea of yours saved us,” and he caught and pressed the lad’s cold hand. Then aloud: “Now, my lads, get the oars in under the thwarts, so that they don’t float out, and then you, Dance, and you, Tom Fillot, in over the side and begin baling.”

The boat was floating with its gunwale level with the water, and the two men had only to press the side a bit and literally roll in, to squat down and begin baling; for, to the great delight of all, it was found that the locker in the bows was unopened, though full of water, and a couple of tin balers were fished out from amidst some tackle. Directly after, working with all their might, the men began to make the water fly out in showers.

Meanwhile the oars were collected and thrust down into the boat beneath the thwarts, along with the hitcher, and the rest of the little crew held on by the gunwale outside.

For a time this seemed to remain level with the surface, but the two balers toiled so hard that in a short time the lieutenant turned to Mark, and said shortly—“In with you.”

The lad looked at him in wonder, but junior officers have to obey, and he crept in over the side, and getting right aft, began to scoop out the water with his joined hands.

A quarter of an hour later a fresh order was given, and two more men got into the boat to seat themselves and take the balers, while the pair who had been acting prepared to get out again and hang on.

But a short, sharp order checked them.

“There is no need, my lads,” said the lieutenant. “You can begin scooping out water as soon as you are a bit rested. The boat will hold you now.”

He was quite right, for, though the presence of four men weighed her down heavily, and sent her gunwale once more nearly level with the surface, it soon began to rise again as, pint by pint, the interior was relieved, until another man crept in, and soon after another, till the whole crew were back, and the lieutenant got in last.

Ten minutes later two men forward were steadily baling, whilst two others seized their oars, under the lieutenant’s direction, and getting the boat’s head round as they sat there with the water still well up over their ankles, they began to pull steadily in the direction of the *Nautilus*, now nearly invisible in the distant silvery haze.

They were still so heavily water-logged that progress was very slow, but this was no discouragement, for their position improved minute by minute, and the men were so much cheered that they put plenty of spirit into their work.

But before they had taken many strokes the lieutenant gave the order to stop, and Mark shuddered as he saw the reason. Mr Russell had turned to the rudder-lines, and there was a terrible burden towing astern.

Those were solemn moments which followed. The lieutenant signed to the coxswain to come, and then helped him to draw the lifeless body of the poor fellow over the gunwale, and, as decently as was possible, laid the remains of what had once been a big, strong man in the bottom of the boat. A flag was then taken from the locker and covered over him, just as, by a strange coincidence, and very faintly heard, came the report of a gun.

The coxswain then went forward and helped with the baling, while the men recommenced rowing in silence.

“The lads will think all this unnecessary, Vandean,” said the lieutenant in a low voice, as Mark sat by his side; “but it would be horribly un-English to leave the poor wretch floating at the mercy of the waves. He was free enough, poor fellow, before we shaded him with the British flag. What would you have done?”

“As you have, sir,” replied the lad. “I couldn’t have left him behind, though it seems very horrible to have taken him on board, and to have him here with us in the night.”

“All fanciful sentiment, Van, my lad. What is there in that poor fellow now to excite our fear? Come, you must be more manly than that. Cold?”

“Yes; very, now.”

“So am I, my lad. These wet things are not comfortable. We’ll take to the oars and row for a bit to keep off the chill. Why, Vandean, you ought to be well praised for this night’s work. I feel quite ashamed of myself for letting you suggest a way out of our difficulty with the capsized boat.”

“Oh, it was nothing, sir. It just occurred to me,” replied Mark.

“I wish it had just occurred to me, my lad; and what is more, I wish we could see the *Nautilus* coming towards us with the slave schooner astern, but there is no such good fortune in store for us till morning.”

By this time the water was getting very low in the bottom of the boat, and ordering the coxswain aft to steer, the lieutenant took the oar of Tom Fillot, who was rowing stroke, sent him forward, and then made Mark take the oar of the next man. They both pulled steadily together for the next half hour, Mr Russell telling the coxswain how to steer, so as to keep steadily in the wake of the *Nautilus*, which had now for long enough been out of sight.

The long row thoroughly circulated Mark’s blood, driving away all the feeling of chill, so that it was with a pleasant glowing sensation that the lad took his place once more in the stern-sheets to sit beside the lieutenant, and with him anxiously look-out ahead in the hope of seeing some sign of the ship.

“She may send up a rocket, mayn’t she, Mr Russell?” said Mark, after a long silence, during which the boat had risen and fallen with the swell, and felt beating with a living pulsation as the men toiled steadily on at their oars.

“Rocket? Well, yes, she may, but I doubt whether we could see it at this

distance.”

“Then she is very far-away?”

“Very, my lad. You see that she is out of sight.”

“And suppose we have lost sight of her altogether, sir—what then?”

“What then? Oh, don’t let’s calculate upon things that are barely possible. Captains in Her Majesty’s service are too particular about their juniors and ship’s company to leave a boat’s crew in the lurch.”

“Yes, but Captain Maitland might not be able to find us again, sir.”

“Come, come, my lad, don’t croak like a raven. At your age you ought to be hopeful, and set me an example of high spirits. Don’t begin imagining the worst.”

“Who’s going to be hopeful,” muttered Tom Fillot to the man behind him, “with the body o’ that poor nigger aboard? Strikes me that we’re in for a spell o’ bad luck, mates.”

“What’s that?” cried the lieutenant.

“Only having a bit of a grumble, your honour, about our luck,” said the man, respectfully. “We’re all feeling as if it was time our watch ended, and as though we’d like a bit o’ something to eat and drink. That’s all, sir.”

The man’s oar dipped steadily as he spoke, and after that there was a dead silence on board. The last drop of water had been swabbed up and squeezed overboard, and the exercise had helped to dry the men’s saturated garments. A steady progress was kept up, and after fighting back a heavy, drowsy feeling, Mark sat watching the setting stars away straight before him in the direction in which the *Nautilus* had disappeared. Twenty times over it had seemed to him as if the night would never end, and in spite of his officer’s cheering utterances, his spirits sank very low, as he wondered whether it would not have been better if the boat’s head had been turned, so that they might have rowed due east, to make the land from which they had sailed.

Then the moon began to sink lower, and the sky to grow of a darker slaty colour, while the regular beat of the men's oars sounded distant—then very softly—and then ceased altogether, or so it appeared to Mark Vandean, who suddenly opened his eyes with a start, and gazed wonderingly about him at the sunlit sea, now all orange and gold.

"Have I been to sleep, sir?" he cried apologetically.

"Yes, my lad; sound asleep for hours."

"And the ship, sir—can you see the *Nautilus*?"

"No, my lad," said the lieutenant, in a voice which he tried to make cheerful, but whose tones spoke of the deep despondency in his breast. "She is not in sight yet."

The midshipman glanced sharply at the heavy, saddened countenances of the men, and read there a reflection of his own thoughts, that they were far-away on the wide ocean in an open boat without food or water, exhausted by a long night's rowing, and in an hour the torrid sun would be beating down upon their heads.

Hunger—thirst—heat—all three to fight; but there was a worse enemy still—despair, as a torrent of recollections flashed through the lad's brain, and he felt that unless the *Nautilus* hove in sight, their position was less to be envied than that of the poor negro lying dead beneath the flat which hid his face from their sight.

Chapter Seven.

A Terrible Task.

Hunger at first—a sharp, grinding sensation of hunger attacked Mark Vandean; but as the sun rose higher this was forgotten in the intense thirst. For the heat rapidly grew scorching, and then, as Mark thought, burning, and saving the flag in the stern-sheets there was not a scrap of anything that could be used for an awning.

Every eye was strained westward in search of the returning *Nautilus*, but in the clear morning light there was no sign of her; and as the sun rose higher, the distance became obscured by a hot haze, which grew more dense as the hours went on, till it was impossible to see a mile in any direction, while this thickening of the atmosphere had the effect of heightening the power of the rays of the sun.

“We shall never be able to see the ship, Mr Russell,” said Mark towards mid-day, as they lay there parched beyond endurance, rising slowly and falling upon the smooth Atlantic swell. “Do you think they will fire again?”

“Sure to, my lad,” was the reply. “There, I’m glad you have spoken. This silence was getting unbearable.”

“I couldn’t talk before,” replied Mark; “it all seemed to be so horrible lying here in this scorching heat, and I was so thirsty and faint I felt as if I couldn’t keep up.”

“We all felt the same, my lad, but we must bear it till help comes. There, you are my lieutenant now, and we must have a consultation as to what is best to be done.”

For they had lain there all the fore part of the day watching the west for the return of their vessel. It was madness to order the men to go on rowing, weary and suffering as they were under that burning sun, farther away into the vast ocean in search of the *Nautilus*; and on the other hand, Lieutenant Russell was unwilling to give up the chance of being picked up by turning their backs on help and making for the coast.

But now the time had come for action. The men sat about in the boat looking wild-eyed with thirst and heat, and the chances of being seen by the returning ship were now growing small on account of the haze. So feeling that Captain Maitland would give him the credit of making for Port Goldby or one of the factories on the coast, Lieutenant Russell announced his determination of making for the east.

“But will the men be able to row as far?” said Mark.

“They must be able, with our help, Vandean. To be plain, my lad, it is our only chance.”

“But through this heat?”

“They will suffer less rowing than sitting still;” and giving his orders, the men, accustomed to move smartly at the slightest word, sprang into their places, but directly after there was a low whispering and muttering among them, and they appeared to be making a communication to Dance the coxswain.

“What’s the matter, my lads?” cried the lieutenant sharply; and he forgot his own sufferings now that there was a sudden call made upon his energy.

“Tell the lufftenant, Joe Dance,” said Fillot, who was nearest to where his officers sat, but who preferred to pass task on to the coxswain, who was farthest off.

“Why couldn’t yer tell him yersen?” growled the coxswain.

“Speak out, Dance. No nonsense, my lad. We are in difficulties, and we have to behave like British seamen till we get out of them.”

The coxswain took off his well-dried straw hat and saluted. Then coughed, hesitated, and at last blurted out—“Well, sir, you see it’s like this. The lads says they’re willing enough, and they’ll pull till they drop, but they want to know if you don’t think it’s time something was done about him as we come to pick up.”

“Leave that to me, my lads,” said the lieutenant, gravely. “I shall do my duty by you all, so please to do yours by me. Wait till nightfall and see.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” came huskily, the oars dropped into the water, and to Mark there was quite a feeling of relief in the motion of the boat, and also in the knowledge that they were moving—slowly enough, but surely—toward help. Whether they would live to reach that aid was another thing.

“Shall we take an oar each, Mr Russell?” said Mark after a time, during which he had sat watching the dispirited, weary looks of the men as they dragged more and more slowly at their rowing.

“No, my lad; we can do nothing in this heat. The poor fellows can do very

little good themselves; I am only letting them pull because it keeps them from sinking into a state of despair. They can leave off when they like, and row when they like."

The men heard his words and ceased pulling for a few minutes to gaze blankly round in search of help, but the shining, sunny haze shut them in, and Tom Fillot settled himself in his seat again.

"Better pull, mates," he said, in a harsh, strange voice; "the orficer's right. We're worse off doing nothing." The oars dipped again, and the boat went on slowly eastward toward the distant coast, as the terrible sense of depression and exhaustion increased with Mark, mingled with a strange desire to scoop up some of the clear, glittering, tantalising water, and drink what he knew would be so horribly salt and bitter that his sufferings would be increased.

Now and then a curious sensation of vertigo attacked him, which seemed as if by some means the shining haze had floated right into his brain, dimming his eyesight so that for a time he could not see. Then it lightened up, and he could see ships, and clear bubbling waters, and green trees.

Then there were low, harsh voices speaking, and he was back again, wondering at the curious day-dream he had had, and listening to some remark made by Lieutenant Russell, who, in spite of his own sufferings, strove hard to cheer his companions in the boat.

Now and then a man would start out of a half-drowsy state, and hold up his hand. Dance the coxswain was the first affected in that way, but after a few moments Mark felt that the poor fellow had been suffering in a similar way to himself.

For the man suddenly exclaimed—"There! Did you hear that? A gun, lads. The *Naughtylass* is coming down on us with every stitch o' canvas on her."

Three of the men ceased rowing, and gazed through the haze in full belief that their messmate had heard a signal shot fired, for the man's attitude and tone were so convincing that there could be no doubt.

But there was no sound to break the utter silence till Tom Fillot growled forth—

“Lie down and go to sleep, Joe Dance. You’re only teasing us, and making wuss of it.”

“I tell you I heerd a gun,” cried the coxswain.

“Ay, in your head, mate. I’ve been hearing the skipper giving it to Mr Russell here for keeping the cutter out all night, but it don’t mean nothing, only sort o’ dreams. How could the *Naughtylass* sail to us without a breath o’ wind?”

Dance stared at him wildly, and his face grew convulsed with anger, but the next moment he let his head drop down upon his hands with a groan.

Night seemed as if it would never come to bring a relief from that burning sun, which affected man after man with this curious delirium, the last touched being Mr Russell, who suddenly started up in the boat just about the hottest part of the afternoon; and, his mind still impressed by the coxswain’s words, he exclaimed in a peculiarly angry voice, as he stared straight before him—“I refuse to take the blame, Captain Maitland. I did my duty by you and toward the brave, patient fellows under my charge. If there is any one to blame it is yourself for leaving us behind. Quite right, Vandean. Now, my lad, for a good drink. The water’s deliciously cool and sweet, and what a beautiful river. Ahoy! What ship’s that?”

He lurched forward as he suddenly ceased speaking, uttered a low groan, and but for Tom Fillot’s strong arm he would have gone overboard.

The sailor lowered him down into the bottom of the boat, where he lay back, and Mark took his kerchief from his neck, soaked it in the sea-water, wrung it out, and then laid it over the poor fellow’s brow, ending by gazing inquiringly in the oarsman’s face, as if asking for help.

“That’s all you can do, sir,” said the man, sadly.

“Touch o’ sunstroke, and he’s got it worse than the rest on us.”

“Shall I bathe his face with the water, Tom?”

“No, sir, I don’t know as I would. It might make him thirstier and worse. Better wait for sundown. When the cool time comes he may work round.”

The man ceased speaking, and his companions laid in their oars before sinking down in the bottom of the boat and resting their heavy heads against the sides.

As for Mark, the rest of that afternoon passed as if he were in some fevered dream, during which he was back home at the Devon rectory, telling his father and mother of his adventures with the slaver. Then he was bathing in a beautiful river, whose water suddenly grew painfully hot and scalded him. After that there was a long blank time, and imagination grew busy again, his brain dwelling upon the chase of the slaver, and he saw through his glass the splash in the moonlit water, as one of the poor wretches was thrown overboard to stay the progress of the *Nautilus*.

Soon after some one touched him, and he started up to find that all was dark, and that the edge of a dense cloud was silvered by the moon, while a face was bent down close to his.

“What’s the matter?” he cried, excitedly.

“Things is getting wuss, sir. Mr Russell’s lying there talking like in his sleep, and t’others have got it bad. You and me’s the only two as have any sense left.”

“I—I couldn’t understand for a bit, Tom,” said Mark, making an effort. “It all seemed puzzling, but I think I know now.”

“That’s right, sir; and as your superior officer’s down, you’re in command, and have got to tell me what to do.”

“What can I tell you to do?” cried Mark, in desperation. “You can’t row the boat back to the coast alone.”

“That’s true enough, sir, but there’s one thing you ought to order me to do at once.”

“Yes; what?”

The sailor pointed to the flag spread out behind where the midshipman sat; and Mark shuddered as he grasped his meaning.

“Do you think I ought to, Tom?” whispered the lad at last, in awe-stricken tones.

“What do you think, sir, left in charge as you are?” returned the man. “Seems a terrible thing for a young gent like you to give orders about, but I can’t see no way out of it. We did our best to save him, and now it don’t seem as we can save ourselves. ’Tall events, we can do no good to him, and I think the skipper—beg pardon, sir, no offence meant, the captain—will say you did what was quite right in giving me my orders.”

Mark was silent, and tried to think out the matter calmly and with reason, but his head throbbed and burned, and all kinds of thoughts of other things kept on coming to confuse him and stop the regular flow of his thought, till it was as if he could think of everything else but the subject of such great importance to those on board.

At last, though, he leaned over the side, and bathed his throbbing temples with the comparatively cool water, when, by slow degrees, the beating ceased, and the power to think calmly came back.

“Do you really feel it would be right, Tom Fillot?” he said.

“I’m sure it would, sir.”

“No, no, I couldn’t do it,” cried the boy, excitedly; “it seems too dreadful.”

“More dreadful not to do it, sir, begging your pardon,” said the man, quietly; and Mark gazed at him wonderingly to see how calm, manly, and serious he, the wag of the ship, had grown to be now.

“No, no, I dare not. Here, I’ll speak to Mr Russell.”

“Do, sir; but I’m afraid you won’t make him understand. He’s too far gone for that.”

Mark went down on his knees by his officer and took his hand. Then, placing his lips close to the stricken man’s ear, he asked him again and

again to give him his advice what to do, but elicited nothing but a peevish muttering, as the lieutenant tossed his head from side to side.

“What I told you, sir.”

“Then I’ll ask Dance,” cried Mark. “He is over you men, and I cannot do this without some one to share the responsibility.”

“Try him, sir; but he’s quite off his head, and if he says do, his advice ain’t worth having, for he’ll never know he said it.”

All the same, in his terrible perplexity, Mark crawled over the thwarts and between the men to where the coxswain lay muttering incessantly right forward, with his head resting against the pole of his hitcher; but in spite of appeal after appeal the man lay with his eyes fixed, quite insensible to every word addressed to him, and the midshipman crept back to where Tom Fillot sat.

“I’m nobody, sir, only a common man afore the mast, so it’s like impidence for me to offer to share the responsibility with a young gent like you. But being half as old again, I may say I know a little of what a man ought to do in a case like this; and I say that as you’re now in command, sir, it’s your duty to us, as well as to the dead.”

“No, no,” groaned Mark. “We may be overtaken by the ship at any time.”

“Look here; it’s of no use for you to shrink from it. Recollect where we are. You must.”

But still Mark shook his head.

“It ain’t as if we could do him any good, sir.”

“But without Christian burial, Tom Fillot.”

“He warn’t a Christian, sir,” said the sailor, slowly. “I’m only an ignorant man, but I’ve heerd say that you were a parson’s son, sir, and know what’s right to do at such a time. Mr Vandean, sir, you must.”

Mark heaved a sigh, rose in the boat, and looked round him, trying to

pierce the gloom in search of help out of his difficulty; but the moon was hidden by a black cloud, and look which way he would there was naught but the thick darkness hemming him in. With a piteous sigh he turned back to where the sailor sat waiting, made a sign, and then sank upon his knees in the bottom of the boat, feeling for the first few moments utterly alone.

The next minute the feeling of loneliness had passed away, and firm and strong at heart, he raised his head, and made a fresh sign to his companion, who had followed his example, and who now rose and stepped over to the very stern of the boat, to stand with his back to his young officer. Then as he bent down it seemed to Mark as if the darkness had grown more profound, till there was a faint rustling noise, and a soft plunge in the black water, followed by a faint rippling whisper against the sides. Directly after the moon appeared from behind the thick mass of clouds and shed a path of silver over the sea, till it flooded the part where the cutter lay; and as Mark Vandean knelt there, he saw Tom Fillot standing before him with the Union Jack in his hand.

Chapter Eight.

“Will Morning never come?”

For the full space of an hour there was utter silence in the boat, where the lieutenant and his stricken crew lay as in a stupor. The black clouds had rolled away, and the calm sea was bathed in silvery light. The air was warm, but, by comparison with the scorching day, the temperature was delicious.

Tom Fillot had folded up the flag and laid it back in the locker, after which he had seated himself to wait for orders. At last, after quite an effort, Mark roused himself from his musings, and turned to his companion in distress.

“Tom,” he said, “what ought I to do?”

“Nothing, sir,” said the man, promptly. “There ain’t nothing you can. Someone else must do whatever is to be done for us. We’ve got to wait.”

“But could we row back to the port?”

“Without biscuit or water, sir, and with that sun sure to come up to-morrow ready to ’most scorch out our brains. What do you think?”

“I think it’s impossible, Tom.”

“Don’t say think, sir. It’s what you say without the think, and so I tell you. Impossible, and I don’t say that because I ain’t willing to work. I’ll take an oar, and row till I drop if you like, but what good will one man do, or one man and a young gentleman? You needn’t say you think it’s impossible, sir, for you know it is, and that all we can do is to sit and wait. To-morrow morning, I’ll rig up the flag over an oar, so as to keep the sun off Mr Russell, sir.”

“If the ship hasn’t come and picked us up, Tom.”

The sailor was silent.

“Don’t say you think she will not,” cried the lad.

“Very well, sir, but I’ll say this she can’t sir, till there’s some wind, and that’s why it is. The captain has either took the schooner or give it up; and then, as he was coming back to pick us up, he’s been and got becalmed. When the crew has whistled enough and the wind come, he’ll make all sail, but whether he’ll find any of us left to pick up is more’n I can say.”

The man ceased speaking, and resting his chin upon his hands, sat watching the glittering water stretching right away beneath the moon, a scene of beauty so grand that for the moment it thrilled Mark, but only for that moment; the next he was in utter despair, famished, his mouth dry, and above all, suffering from a terrible feeling of horror which made him shrink within himself, as he knew that he was face to face with a fearful lingering death.

“Beg pardon, sir,” said Tom Fillot, suddenly, their companionship in misfortune having in no wise interfered with the sailor’s respect for his superior, “like to try a bit o’ ’bacco, sir?”

Mark shook his head.

“O’ course not. You ain’t used to it and don’t want it. Try and go to sleep, sir. I’ll keep the watch.”

“Sleep?” cried Mark, bitterly; “what for? to wake up and find it morning with the sun up, ready to scorch us to death?”

“That’s looking at the very worst side of things, sir,” replied the sailor, cheerfully. “There’s always a best side as well as a worst, and we’re as likely to see one side as the other.”

“Don’t, don’t keep on talking,” cried Mark, passionately.

“All right, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “I’ll be as dumb as a ship’s lead.”

“I mean—I didn’t mean to speak roughly to you, Tom Fillot,” cried Mark, eagerly. “I didn’t want to wound you, but I know you were saying all that to try and cheer me.”

“Well, sir, to be downright honest, p’raps it was.”

“Then don’t please. I’m sick and faint, and ready to die.”

“Nay, not you, sir. Too much pluck in you.”

“Pluck!” cried Mark, bitterly. “I’m in despair.”

“Nay, not you, sir. You’re in command here, and as an officer you’ve got to let yourself drift off nowhere, and think about taking care of us. That’s your duty, sir, and you know it. What’s to become o’ us if you cut yourself adrift? That won’t do at all. There, sir, let’s wait for day. We may have quite a breeze come with the sun, and soon after catch sight of the *Naughtylass* bowling down to us. For, trust me, they’ll see us fast enough. Young Mr Bob Howlett’ll be up at the masthead spying out with his glass, see if he ain’t. Better have a sleep, sir.”

“No, man, no; I’m too ill and miserable to sleep.”

“Then if you won’t mind, sir, and’ll give me leave, I will have a snooze.

For I can’t do you no good, and it will rest me, so as I shall be able to do something in the morning.”

“Sleep if you can,” said Mark, bitterly.

“Nay, sir, I can’t sleep if you take it and speak like that. Dessay I shall be just as well awake.”

“No, no, lie down and rest a bit,” cried Mark.

“Mean it, sir?”

“Mean it, man? yes.”

“Then thank ye, sir; and if you want me, just give the word, and I’ll tumble up at once.”

To the lad’s wonder, Tom Fillot lay down in the bottom of the boat, and five minutes after he was breathing deeply and as regularly as if nothing whatever were wrong.

How that night passed Mark Vandean could hardly tell. He crept from place to place in the boat to see how the men were, and then crept back to his old seat close by Mr Russell. Then, with the boat gently rising and falling, he waited for the day, thinking of home, of the possibilities of escape, and above all, of the terrible hunger and fearful thirst which dried him up.

“Will morning never come?” he cried, bitterly, and then prayed that it might not, as he recalled the sufferings of the past day; and now he was content to sit, thankful that the day did not break, for there was rest and less pain in the moonlight.

It was like the delirium of a fever, in which one moment it was all calm, soft light in darkness, the next the sun had rolled above the horizon, and the boy strained his eyes in all directions for the coming ship, but looked in vain. Sea—smooth, slowly-heaving sea—everywhere, all ruddy gold and amber now, and heat once more burning into his brain, till a strange sense of weariness came over him, a feeling as of the beginning of sleep.

He fought against this time after time, and strove to keep to his duty, but it was all-powerful, and at last, feeling that he was sinking into delirium or a deadly sleep, he stretched out his hand to awaken Tom Fillot, but paused so as to give one despairing glance round.

The next instant he had glided down into the bottom of the boat, insensible to everything save his fevered dream, which was of green fields, sparkling waters, and home.

For the cutter was alone on the sun-bright water; and as a great bird slowly floated over them, it looked down with cruel gaze, as if waiting and watching and wondering which would be the first of the insensible men on board to sink into a deeper sleep—one from which there would be no return.

That was just as Mark was dreaming the brightest of his old Devon home, and the sun was turning the sea into paler gold, and then into silvery dazzling white.

Chapter Nine.

Bob Howlett as Nurse.

“Oh, Mr Whitney, sir, don’t say he’s dead.”

“Wasn’t going to, my lad.”

Mark heard those words spoken by familiar voices, but why or about whom he could not tell. All he knew was that he was aboard ship, with the warm air coming in through the port, and the water was splashing and slapping against the side.

Then there was a good deal of buzzing conversation carried on, and the voices all sounded familiar still, but they grew more distant, and next all was dark and comfortable, and Mark felt as if he were very tired and thoroughly enjoying a good sleep.

Then, unknown to him, time went on, and he opened his eyes again, and

lay and listened to some one making a noise—that is to say, the person who made it believed that he was singing, but Mark Vandean did not believe anything of the kind, and lay quite still, and laughed gently as from close to his head there came in a low, harsh, croaking buzz, with the faintest suggestion of a tune—

"And we jolly sailor boys were up, up aloft,
And the landlubbers lying down below, below, below,
And the landlubbers lying down below."

Then there was a pause, and the scratching of a pen as if some one were writing. The noise began again, and Mark, as he lay in his cot, chuckled; but though he did not know it, his silent laugh was in a feeble way.

At last he spoke. "What's the matter, young 'un?"

There was a quick movement, and the light was shut out by Bob Howlett, who rushed to his side and caught him by the shoulders.

"Matter? There's nothing the matter now, old chap. Hip—hip—hip—hurray! You are getting better, then?"

"Better? Have I been ill?"

"Ill? Oh, I suppose you can't call it being ill, because it wasn't Humpty Dums, or Winkey Wanks, or Grim Fever; but I thought you were going to die, old chap, or do some other mean and shabby thing. I say, how do you feel?"

"All right, only I thought you had something the matter with you."

"Me? Why?"

"You were groaning so when I woke up."

"Groaning? Why, I was singing," cried Bob, indignantly.

"Oh, were you? I shouldn't have known if you hadn't told me. But, I say, I wouldn't sing any more if I were you, Bob. It isn't in your way."

“Get out! Sing as well as you can. There, don’t lie shamming being sick any more, because you are quite well thankye, or you wouldn’t begin chaffing.”

“But have I been ill? Why, my voice sounds queer, doesn’t it?”

“Queer? It sounds just like a penny whistle, while mine’s as solid as a big trombone.”

“What?”

“Oh, never mind about that, old chap. We’ll soon feed you up, old Whitney and I. Make you strong as a horse again. Van, old cockalorum, I am glad.”

And to show his delight, Bob Howlett executed a kind of triumphal dance, ending with a stamp.

“Don’t be an idiot, Bob,” said Mark, feebly. “Come close here. I want to know what’s been the matter. Has there been a fight, and was I wounded?”

“No!” cried Bob. “Why, what an old stuffy head you are. Don’t you understand? Can’t you recollect?”

“Recollect what?”

“The going off in the first cutter with poor old Russell to pick up that nigger?”

“No,” said Mark, dreamily. “I don’t recollect any—Yes I do, and we found him, and—I say, Bob, what’s wrong with my head? I can’t think properly.”

“Won’t draw. Chimney wants sweeping, old chap. But don’t you fidget about that,” cried Bob, laying a hand upon his companion’s forehead, and then feeling his pulse with much professional correctness. “Temperature normal, sir; pulse down to one. We must exhibit tonics, sir; sulph quin pulv rhei; liquor diachylon. Great improvement, my dear sir. Allow me your tongue.”

“Don’t be a fool, Bob. Tell me, there’s a good chap.”

“Ah! I remember now,” cried Mark, excitedly. “Tom Fillot let the poor fellow slide overboard, and Mr Russell and the men were all down with the heat, and then—Yes, I recollect now; I went to sleep.”

“Yes, you did, old chap,” said Bob Howlett, holding his messmate’s thin hand in his; “and it seemed such a sound sleep when we picked you up that I began to think you wouldn’t wake again.”

“But do pray tell me,” cried Mark, excitedly. “How was it? We were all dying of hunger and thirst in the boat. Stop, how is Mr Russell?”

“Bad. Can’t rustle a bit; but he’s coming round.”

“And Dance, and Tom Fillot, and the others?”

“Tom Fillot looks cranky, but there isn’t much the matter with him. Coxswain Dance couldn’t jig to save his life. T’others are blue mouldy, and old Whitney talks about ’em as if he was using bricks and mortar. He says he shall build ’em up.”

“But do pray tell me all about it, Bob,” said Mark, querulously.

“I say, don’t cry about it, or I won’t tell you anything.”

“I won’t say a word, only I am so impatient to know.”

“Want to know it all—from the very beginning?”

“Of course. Don’t tease me, Bob, now I’m so *weak*.”

“Oh, won’t I. Got you down flat, old chap. Can’t bounce and bully me now. Give me much of your nonsense, I’ll punch your old head. Now, then, where’ll you have it?”

Bob struck an attitude, and began to square at his messmate playfully; but he sat down again directly.

“Well, I’ll let you off this time, and take pity on you as you’re such a

cripple. Ahem! All in to begin?”

Mark looked at him piteously, and Bob laid his hand upon his arm.

“All right, old chap,” he said, huskily; “I won’t tease you. I feel so jolly to see you open your eyes again, that it made me play the fool.”

Bob choked a little, and said it was because he felt dry. A possible thing, but his eyes looked wet. Then he went on hastily—“Well, it was like this, old chap; as soon as we’d dropped you first cutters, we cracked on after the schooner again as hard as we could go, with Maitland and old Staples, one on each side of the deck, barking and snapping at the lads because we couldn’t get more out of the old girl. We went pretty fast, though; and knowing that the Yank would try it on again, old Ramsey had to pipe himself and the crew ready for the second cutter. Sure enough, there was the same game tried again, and the second cutter was dropped, with old Ram in command, and we left him, too, to pick up the black thrown overboard, while we raced on again, getting close enough to send shot after shot through the schooner’s rigging; but she seemed to be a Flying Dutchman sort of a craft, for we never once hit a spar.”

“But you’ve taken her, Bob?”

“You just lie still and hold your tongue, will you? If you can tell the story better than I can, you don’t want me to speak.”

“I’ll be patient and not say a word,” said Mark, humbly.

“Hit a spar,” continued Bob; “and there is no mistake about the way that Yankee skipper can sail his craft, for he dodged and turned, and kept throwing us off in the most cunning way, trying to show us a clean pair of heels, and over and over again he distanced us. But Maitland and old Staples grew madder and madder, trying all they knew to crowd on sail till once more we got near, and then down went another of the poor blacks. Old Staples regularly jumped off the deck in his rage, for we were obliged to drop the captain’s gig this time to pick up the poor wretch—leastwise, try to, for they didn’t get him, and as we couldn’t spare any more hands we had to wait for the gig to come aboard again.

“That gave old Stars and Stripes a chance to get ever so far-away, and I

tell you it wasn’t safe to go near the skipper. Ah! we may well call him that. He made some of ’em skip, I can tell you, that day.

“‘I’ll sink her,’ I heard him say, ‘I’ll sink her,’ and I expected to hear him order the guns to be depressed next time we got near enough for a shot.”

“But he didn’t do that,” said Mark excitedly.

“Lie down, sir! Quiet, will you?” cried Bob fiercely. “How am I to flow on if you keep stopping me?”

“Go on, please,” said Mark.

“Of course I didn’t let him fire,” continued Bob, importantly. “How could I go plunging round-shot into the miserable schooner and kill no end of niggers? Wasn’t to be thought about. So we crowded on again till they dropped another black overboard, and we had to heave to and pick him up, and then another and another till we had got four. The other two were either hurt, I think, or so weak that they couldn’t swim, and the poor fellows went down before our lads could get to them.”

“How horrible!”

“Yes; it’ll be pretty horrible for Yankee Doodle if old Maitland ever gets his paw on him.”

“If ever—” began Mark.

“Will you lie down?” cried Bob.

“Well, I am lying down,” replied Mark. “I don’t feel as if I could sit up.”

“No, nor you won’t till Whitney and I have bricked and mortared you well.”

“Pray, pray go on, and tell me about capturing the schooner.”

“You won’t let me with your interruptions,” cried Bob. “It’s always the way with you fellows when you’re getting better. You are right down nasty.”

“Go on, Bob.”

“Well, on we went after my gentleman, getting close enough to make his sails ragged, and then being dodged about in every direction as he went through all sorts of manoeuvres to escape. Now we were hove to, to pick up some of his cargo, now in full chase again, till I got sick of it by daylight, and every one else too, and the men so savage that they would have liked to pour in a broadside if it hadn’t been for the poor fellows under hatches. At last it was morning, and the sun up, with the schooner a good mile away, and then came the worst of it.”

“The worst of it?”

“Ay, ay, sir! as we say at sea. No sooner was the sun well up than the sails began to shiver.

“‘Wind’s failing, sir,’ says old Staples.

“‘Bah! nonsense!’ says the skipper, and there came a hot puff and filled the sails again, making us careen over. ‘There, Mr Staples,’ says the skipper, ‘what do you think of that?’

“‘Last puff, sir, for the day,’ says Staples.

“‘Nonsense we shall have her now,’ says the skipper; and then he crossed just in front of me and gave a big stamp, for the sails flopped down all at once, and there we were gliding slowly on for a bit, and then settling on an even keel, while a mile away there was the schooner with a light breeze, going along as easily as could be, and if the Yankee captain didn’t have the cheek directly after to load a little swivel gun he had on board, and fire at us over the stern, as if he were laughing at us.

“Then I saw Maitland give old Staples such a savage look, and go down into his cabin.”

“Well?” said Mark.

“Oh no, it wasn’t, old chap; it was ill. There we were regularly becalmed, and if the wind didn’t keep along astern of the schooner and carry her right away, till she was hull down, and then by degrees we lost sight of her sails, and the game was up.”

“Then you didn’t take her?” cried Mark.

“Take her? How could we take her when we were becalmed?”

“And the Yankee skipper got right away?”

“Right away, a robber; and took the prize-money we had so honestly earned along with him. All that trouble for nothing; and what was worse, we couldn’t come in search of you, for it fell about the deadest calm I ever saw in all my experience at sea, and that isn’t saying much, is it, Van?”

“Oh!” ejaculated Mark, “how horrible! You ought to have caught her, Bob.”

“That’s right jump on me just as if I didn’t do my best.”

“Go on now, and tell me the rest,” said Mark sadly. “Not that it is of much consequence. I know you picked us up.”

“Oh, well, I may as well tell you, though, as you say, it was of no consequence whatever. Government could have afforded a new first and second cutter and tackle; men are plentiful; and as to officers, there’s any number in stock.”

“Don’t chaff, Bob. Tell me, there’s a good chap. You came on then in search of us as soon as you knew that you couldn’t catch the schooner.”

“No, we didn’t. How could we without a breath of wind? All we did was to lie there and roast and roll on the big swell, with Maitland savage at losing the schooner, and fidgeting to death about the two absent boats. I heard him talking to Staples.

“‘A great error, Staples,’ he said. ‘I had no business to leave the poor fellows behind without any provisions in case of accident, and I ought to have known better.’

“All that day we had the horizon swept with glasses in the hope of seeing you fellows come rowing after us, but it was getting close to night before the man at the masthead shouted that a boat was in sight, and I went up aloft to make out if it was you. But it wasn’t, old chap. It was Ramsey with

the second cutter, and the poor chaps' faces were awful as they were hauled up to the davits. They were so hoarse that they couldn't speak, and I felt queer to see their wild-eyed look and the rush they made for the water that was put ready for them.

"Of course they had seen nothing of you, and that night everybody began to look blank and talk in whispers, while I had something for supper, Van, which didn't agree with me, and I never got a wink of sleep all night.

"Next day was calm as ever, and we were slowly rolling on the swell; the hammock rails were as hot as the bell, and the pitch was oozing out everywhere. I quite spoilt a pair of hind leg sleeves with the tar, going up to the masthead. My word, they were gummy."

"What had you been doing? Who mast-headed you?" asked Mark.

"Doing? Nothing. Nobody mast-headed me, only myself."

"What for?"

"Well, you are a lively sort of a chap to have for a messmate, Van. That's gratitude, that is, for going up to look after you with the glass. Now if it had been my case I should have said:— 'Mark Vandean, my most attached friend, I regret extremely that in your anxiety to gain tidings of me and my boat, you should have brought the cloth of your sit-downs into contact with the inspissated juice of the Norwegian fir, to their destruction and conversion into sticking-plaister. My tailors are Burns and Screw, Cork Street, Bond Street, London. Pray allow me to present you with a new pair.'"

"Oh, Bob, what a tongue you have!"

"Lovely. But I say—inspissated juice is good, isn't it?"

"Do go on telling me, Bob. I'm too weak to stand banter. So you went up to the masthead to look for me, old chap?"

"I did, my son, and pretty well lived up there—I mean died—it was so hot. But there was nothing to see eastward but the dim hazy sea and sky, though I watched for days and days."

“Days and days?” said Mark, wonderingly.

“Well, I’m not quite sure about how long it was, for the sun made me so giddy. I had to lash myself to the mast, or I should have taken a dive overboard; and my head grew muddly. But it was an awful long time. My eye! how the men whistled!”

“For wind?”

“Yes; and the more they whistled the more it didn’t come. Old Maitland was in a taking, and it wasn’t safe to speak to Staples. I say, Van, old chap, he came right up to the cross-trees himself and told me I didn’t know how to use a spy-glass. He said the boat with you fellows in lay just due east, and that he could make it out directly.”

“And did he?”

“No; he just didn’t; and then, after trying for half an hour, he said mine was a wretchedly poor weak glass, and came down again. You see, the skipper and old Staples were mad about losing the schooner, and just wild about leaving the boat behind and going on so far before coming back to pick you up.

“Of course, they couldn’t tell that the wind would drop so suddenly,” said Mark. “Well, you caught sight of us at last?”

“Look here, friend of my boyhood, do you want to finish this authentic narrative?”

“No, I don’t. Go on.”

“Then hold your tongue. I do like that, you saying what a tongue I’ve got. Spikes and spun yarn! It’s about nothing to yours. There, I won’t keep you longer in suspense, as my old aunt used to say. After the crew had whistled the air quite full, it all condensed and turned into a breeze—on the third evening, I think it was, and I mast-headed myself again, and there was another man sent up to the fore-masthead.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mark, with a feeble smile upon his thin face.

“I said another man was sent up to look-out. I’m afraid that the exposure and fasting have affected your hearing a little, my son. But to go back to our muttons, as the French say. The breeze came on just right from the south-east, and we soon had plenty of sail on, and made some good big tacks; but it came on dark without our having got a squint of you; and that night once more my supper spoilt my rest, and every one else’s disagreed with him. For the crew were on deck all night, walking about uncomfortable, and the worst of it was old Whitney’s prescriptions didn’t do any one a bit of good.”

“Of course,” said Mark, thoughtfully. “It must have been a terrible time of anxiety for the officers.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bob, coolly. “It was a nuisance, for that first cutter was always considered our fastest boat. Well, to proceed. Next day, when the sun was hot enough to fry salt junk, someone caught sight of the boat lying like a speck on the glittering water.”

“Who did?” cried Mark, eagerly.

“Who did?” replied Bob, thoughtfully. “Let me see. I half— Dear me now, who— How strange! It must have been somebody, because the ship’s head was altered, and— Now how curious it is that I can’t think who it was sighted the boat!”

“I know,” said Mark. “You did, Bob.”

“Oh, I say, doctor!”

“Did I?” said that young gentleman, scratching his head. “Well, now you say so, I think it was Robert Howlett, Esquire, with the spy-glass old Staples abused so, and a pretty row there was went on below on deck. The chaps were half mad, and were dancing about the planks, and all bubbling over with excitement, as they tried to get a peep at you. And when—oh, my!—we did at last come up to you, a nice pretty respectable lot you looked, lying about in the boat, with no more discipline than you’d see in a shoal of seals on a rock. You looked as if you had all been pitched in anyhow, and—*gug*!”

“Why, Bob! what’s the matter, old chap?”

Mark turned to gaze on the convulsed face, and just obtained one glance before it was turned away. For Bob's voice had suddenly changed from its light, half-cynical, playful tone. There was a sudden choking as if something had come in his throat; and as Mark read his feelings thoroughly stole a thin, feeble hand into his, and whispered softly, "Oh, Bob, old chap!" the face was turned sharply back at him, and its owner burst out in a half-whimpering, half-angry way:

"Well, so would you if you'd seen it. Even iron Staples pretty nearly broke down. It was just horrid. Didn't seem to be a bit of life in any one of you but Tom Fillot, and he couldn't have cut a joke to save his life. As for you, I wouldn't have given a penny more for you than the worth of your uniform, and that was all shrunk. You looked—"

"How will he look to-morrow, Mr Howlett?" cried a sharp voice, that of the doctor. "So this is the way you keep watch over a patient, is it, sir? He was getting better, and now my work's all undone again. I expect you've killed him."

"Silence!" cried that gentleman, feeling Mark's pulse. "Yes, of course. Fever greatly increased. Hush, not a word, Vandean. Lie perfectly still. I ought to have been told that you had fully recovered your consciousness. Now, Mr Howlett, you had better be off."

"No, sir; don't send me away. I'll be so careful in future."

"I can't trust you, my lad."

"You may indeed now, sir. It was all with being so glad that poor Vandean's better."

"Glad! Why, you looked sorry. There, then, if you promise to be very quiet, you may stay. Vandean, he must not talk to you, and you must hardly say a word. I'll go and get you a little draught."

The doctor left the midshipman's quarters, and as he departed Bob made a gesture suggestive of kicking him before returning to his seat beside his messmate.

"Tell me, Bob," whispered Mark.

“No; mustn’t speak.”

“Only this. Did everyone—was everyone—”

Mark stopped short.

“You’re not to talk while you’re so weak. Now then, what do you want to know? Did any one die?”

“Yes.”

Bob nodded his head, and a pang shot through Mark as he thought of the handsome young lieutenant, and the frank, manly fellows who had formed their crew.

He closed his eyes, and a feeling of weak misery choked his utterance. He would have given anything for the power to question his companion, and learn for certain who were living of the party; for the idea had in his weakness become now a certainty, that though he had seemed to hear that Mr Russell was recovering, he it was who had died.

At last the power to think returned, and he turned his wan, pain-drawn face to Bob.

“Tell me,” he whispered.

“No, sir, nothing,” cried the doctor. “Here, I have brought you the little draught myself, so as to see that it is taken properly. I don’t know why I should have so much trouble over a pack of lads who are more worry than they are worth. Why, bless my heart, Mr Vandean, you are going backward. Here, Mr Howlett, go to my quarters and send my fellow here.”

Chapter Ten.

In the Doctor's Clutches.

It was the next day, and, in spite of wind-sails and open ports, hotter than ever. The *Nautilus* was back off the Palm River, lying at anchor, waiting as usual for news which might end in a more successful expedition than the last, for the nefarious traffic was still being carried on just under the nose of Her Majesty's little cruiser, in spite of every effort to catch the cunning skippers who set the officers at defiance.

Mark opened his eyes after a long, refreshing sleep, for Bob Howlett had contrived to keep the cabin comparatively cool; and as soon as the lads' eyes met, the sick middy's thoughts went back to the last conversation they had held.

"Bob," he whispered.

That young gentleman held up his hand.

"Only a word or two and I'll be quiet."

"Yes, you'd better. If you say much I'll fetch old Whitney to give you an awful dose."

"Tell me this: is the captain much cut up, and Mr Staples, too?"

"Of course they are, both of them, horribly."

Mark sighed, and was silent for some moments.

"Tell me about Tom Fillot," he said at last. "How is he?"

"Pretty well all right again."

There was another pause, which lasted some minutes, before the sick lad spoke again.

"Couldn't the doctor save them?"

“No; only the two,” replied Bob, coolly. “You see, the starving and heat were too much for them. Whitney did everything he could for them, but, as he said, they died off like flies.”

Mark looked at him in horror.

“How can you be so brutally cynical?” he said, with a shudder.

“Who’s brutally cynical?” cried Bob, indignantly, and forgetting all the doctor’s orders. “I’m very sorry, of course. We did all we could to save the poor fellows, but they died, and there’s an end of them. I don’t feel bound to be miserable because the doctor couldn’t save them.”

Mark’s brow contracted a little. He felt that he did not like Bob Howlett half so well as of old, but that perhaps he had been too hard in calling him brutally cynical, and he spoke more gently now.

“Who were the two that recovered?”

“Eh? I dunno.”

Mark stared.

“Well, how should I know what their names are? Hashy and Quashy, or something of the kind. They’re out and outers to eat, and don’t seem a bit the worse. I called ’em Soup and Taters yesterday after seeing ’em at their feeding.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was answering your questions about the black fellows.”

“I didn’t ask you about the blacks.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I didn’t, stupid,” said Mark, angrily.

“Huh! Ha, ha!” cried Bob. “He’s getting better. Go it, old chap! Call me something else.”

“I asked you about the boat’s crew.”

“No, you didn’t. What about ’em?”

“I asked you about their being saved, and you said all were dead but two.”

“Oh, I say, what a cracker! You are getting better, and no mistake. You asked me about how many of the black fellows the doctor saved, and I told you those two first fellows that we got on board, and the others died.”

“Then Mr Russell and the lads?”

“Oh, they’re all right,” cried Bob; “leastways, not all right, but ever so much better. You’ve been by a long way the worst.”

“Then Mr Russell isn’t dead?” gasped Mark.

“Here, steady, my lad. What’s the matter?”

“Oh, tell me—tell me!” cried Mark, excitedly.

“Why, of course he isn’t. Now, don’t go on like that. Here, I’ll run for old Whitney.”

“No, no,” whispered Mark, clinging to his messmate’s arm. “I’m better now. I thought you told me that he was dead. It has worried me dreadfully.”

“Oh, but you shouldn’t get all sorts of fancies in your head now it’s a bit weak. I don’t know about saying *now* it’s a bit weak,” said Bob, with a comical smile, “because you always were a soft-headed sort of fellow. That’s better. Now you’ve cooled down.”

“Yes,” said Mark, with a smile, “and I shall soon be better now.”

“That’s your style. All my doing. I say, Van, old chap, I’ll take to doctoring you now; so kick old Whitney over, and leave it to me. Russell says he shall come and see you soon—”

“I wish he would,” cried Mark.

“If you don’t soon come and see him.”

“I only wish I could,” said Mark, and he made an effort to rise, but sank back with a piteous look of misery in his face, which made Bob seize his hand.

“Here, I say,” he cried cheerily. “Oh! Don’t look like that. You’re only a bit weak, messmate. Avast there! take a good grip o’ the health tack; haul in your slack, and ahoy! you’ll be full sail again in a week. I say, what do you think of that? I’m getting on with my nautical lingo, ain’t I?”

Mark smiled feebly—just a wan, sickly smile, like a bit of sunshine on a wintry day.

“Avast there! none of your grinning,” cried Bob. “Better than you could do it, old chap. That’s your sort. Cheer up. I must be off now. I’ll come back and talk to you as soon as I can, and if you behave yourself I’ll sing you a song.”

There was a genuine smile on Mark Vandean’s face now, as he heard these words delivered with utmost seriousness.

“No, no, don’t, Bob,” he said, feebly. “I am getting better, really, now. Don’t do that. It would be more than I could stand.”

Bob Howlett uttered a peculiar sound, half-angry cry, half growl, caught up his cap, and marched out, as if in high dudgeon, while Mark lay back, staring at the open port-hole, through which came the warm glowing light of the tropic sunshine.

“Poor old Bob!” he muttered; “he thinks he can sing, and of all the dreadful noises ever made.—Ha, ha, ha!”

He laughed merrily at the recollection of some of his messmate’s vocal efforts, and his face was lit up as if with inward sunshine, till he heard a voice and looked round in wonder, to see that Captain Maitland, Mr Staples, and the doctor were at the doorway watching him.

“Humph!” cried the captain; “not much cause for anxiety here.”

“No,” said the first lieutenant: “he’s what the men call miching. Here, Vandean, when are you coming on deck? Can’t have you lying here with half a dozen people to wait upon you.”

“I don’t want to, sir,” said Mark, in a piping voice. “Mr Whitney knows.”

“Yes, I know,” said the doctor. “There,” he continued, turning to the two officers; “you don’t think much of your doctor, but what do you say to that?”

He patted Mark’s head as he spoke.

“I believe half the surgeons in the navy would have let the poor fellows slip through their fingers. I saved them all when they were in the most hopeless state.”

“Not all,” said Mr Staples, with a sharp look at the captain. “What about the poor niggers?”

“Well, I saved two of them, sir. The others were as good as dead when you called me to them. Humph! did my part better than you did yours. Why didn’t you take the schooner?”

The captain laughed.

“He has us there, Staples,” he said. “Let the doctors alone; they are a bad set of people to play with. Only serve you out when you come into their hands. Don’t take any notice of him, Whitney. Well, Vandean, I’m very glad to see you so cheerful, but don’t presume upon it. You must take it quietly, and be patient. I want to see you on deck again.”

“Quite out of the question yet,” said the doctor, sharply.

“I don’t mean on duty, Whitney,” said the captain smiling, “but in a cane seat under the awning. It would be brighter and better for him to see the men about.”

“Thank you, sir,” cried Mark, with a smile full of gratitude.

“Oh, that’s different,” said the doctor. “Well, after a few days I’ll have him carried up.”

“Yes,” said the first lieutenant, “and he can lie there and hatch mischief along with Mr Howlett, and play with the monkey. Nice trio.”

“Eh? Oh, yes, by the way, I cannot allow you young gentlemen to have pets of that class on board my ship. You are not schoolboys now. Why, you will be wanting white mice and guinea-pigs next!”

“Shall I have the animal thrown overboard?” said Mr Staples.

“Hump! Well—er—not till Mr Vandean is better. You’d like to keep it a little longer, eh?” said the captain, turning to the young invalid.

“Very much,” cried Mark, as he thought of the quaint little old man he and Bob Howlett had bought.

“Very well, you can for the present.”

“And now, gentlemen,” interposed the doctor, “my patient requires rest and cool air. You are fidgeting him and making the place hot.”

“That means go. Well, Staples, we must give way, I suppose. The doctor is always above the admiral. Make haste and get well, Vandean. Good-bye.”

He shook hands warmly and turned to leave the cabin, the first lieutenant following his example, and turning to give the midshipman a friendly nod.

“Hah!” said the doctor, as soon as they were alone; “they want to go too fast, and undo my work. I shall not have done with you yet awhile, Vandean, and you’ll have to attend very strictly to my orders if I’m to make a man of you. Did you take my medicine?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure?”

Mark coloured.

“Yes, sir, I told you.”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” cried the doctor. “Dear me, how bumptious we are, young fellow. There, I believe you, but that’s more than I’d do for some of your tribe. There’s Mr Bob Howlett, for instance. If he had to take a dose, I should not only stop till he had emptied the glass, but I should pinch his nose till I was sure he had swallowed it. There, I will not give you more than is good for you, my lad. You think I’m glad to get hold of a job, and will not leave it till I’m obliged; but don’t you fall into an error about that, my dear sir. I’m too fond of ease.”

“I’m sure you will do the best you can for me,” said Mark; “and I want to be grateful.”

“Ah! Then you’re an exception, my lad.”

“How is Mr Russell, sir?”

“Getting on, but obstinate; wants to be well all at once, and get to his duties. I must go and see him now. Mind and take your stuff regularly. Morning.”

The cabin was empty once more, save for the patient, who uttered a sigh of relief, and lay listening to the soft *pad*, *pad* of the sailors’ bare feet on the deck, and the voices of the officers giving their orders, all sounding pleasantly familiar as he lay back there feeling that he must be better from the interest he took in all that was going on, and the pleasant clearness of his head.

“I wonder how long it will be before they have me on deck,” he said to himself.

Chapter Eleven.

“Soup” And “Taters.”

“Hooray!” cried Bob Howlett, about a week later, as he burst into the cabin.

“What is it?” cried Mark, excitedly. “Why are they getting the anchor up?”

“Don’t know. Nobody knows but the skipper, but we’re off somewhere, thank goodness, and you’re to come on deck to-day, and old Russell too.”

“That is good news.”

“Yes, I shall have you all right now, in no time, getting the breeze away from this dismal shore. Here, I’ve told your lady’s-maid—

> “Hoozoar we’re off to sea—he—he,
> Hoozoar we’re off to sea.”

Mark thrust his fingers into his ears till the last word was sung, and then withdrew them.

“Here, what do you mean about the lady’s-maid?”

“I’ve told Tom Fillot to come. He’s to attend to you down here. I’ve got some one else for you on deck.”

“Tell him to make haste, then.”

“Come in,” cried Bob; and Tom Fillot came in, pulled his forelock, and kicked out one leg behind, as he stood grinning, but looking rather white and pulled down.

“Ah, Tom,” cried Mark, “glad you have got well again. Coming to help me?”

“Yes, sir! Mr Howlett said I was to come and wally de sham you, as he calls washing yer down and dressing of yer up. Same to you, sir, only you don’t look quite as I should like to see yer.”

Half an hour later Mark was on deck in a long cane chair, the awning above his head, the monotonous-looking coast off astern, and forward and to right and left the blue dancing water, rippled by a light breeze which made the *Nautilus* careen over and glide through the little waves.

“And how beautiful it all looks!” sighed the lad. “I never thought the ship so delightful, nor the sea so bright before.”

Just then, Dance the coxswain came by, and saluted, Bob Howlett passing them the same moment.

“Here you are, then, skipper,” he said. “What do you think of Joe Dance? Looks yellow about the gills, don’t he? Here comes the captain. Can I do anything for you, Vandean?”

“Morning, Mr Vandean,” said the captain. “Come, that’s better. Now then, be smart and get well.”

“I almost think I am well, sir,” replied Mark, “and feel ashamed of being so idle.”

“Humph!” said Mr Staples, from behind him, “first midshipman I ever knew with so fine a conscience. But come, he does look better, sir.”

“Oh yes. Only wants time,” said the captain. “You’ll be ready to help take the next slaver, Vandean—eh?”—this to the lieutenant; “well, say the next but one. By the way, Mr Vandean, you can send your attendant to the cabin for any books you like to read. Look here, Staples.”

They went aft together talking, and then descended to the cabin, when Bob Howlett hurried up.

“Why, you’re holding quite a levee, old chap. I want to introduce two gentlemen to you, only I don’t know about bringing them on the quarter-deck. All right, I will. It can be to move your chair.”

Before Mark could say a word, the lad was off, and a minute later he returned with a couple of black sailors in white duck shirt and trousers—big built, fierce-looking fellows, whose black faces, hands, and feet showed strangely in contact with their snowy clothes.

They followed Bob Howlett on deck and to the chair occupied by Mark, stopping at a sign given by the midshipman who led them up.

“Here we are,” he said. “You two don’t understand a word I say, and I

can’t make out a word of yours, so we’re free and equal there. Now, look here, this is Captain Vandean, and I’m Captain Howlett. That is, we shall be some day. Now then, listen.”

The two blacks gazed at him intently, as if trying hard to understand him.

“This, I say, is Captain Vandean, and I’m Captain Howlett, and we came in the boat and saved your lives when you were pitched overboard out of the slaver.”

“Are these the two men?” said Mark, eagerly.

“Right, my lord. These are they. I’ve had ’em holy-stoned and fresh painted. They seemed to want to stay, and the skipper said as he was short-handed he’d give ’em a trial. Of course, I took their parts; and I said to Maitland—”

“Yes, what did you say to Maitland, Mr Howlett?” said the captain, who had returned unobserved.

Bob’s jaw dropped. He was as a rule ready enough, but he was so completely taken aback that he was now speechless.

“Ah,” said the captain, “your memory is so short that you cannot recollect. But try and bear this in mind, Mr Howlett. Don’t vapour and don’t brag. These things are not becoming to an officer and a gentleman.”

He passed on, and Bob’s face was a study.

“There, it’s all over,” he said, dismally. “Don’t laugh at a fellow. You might have said he was coming up.”

“I can’t help laughing, and I didn’t know, Bob, really,” said Mark, merrily, “Oh, I say, you did look a muff.”

“So would you,” said Bob, angrily. “There, I can’t say what I was going to say to you, only that their names are Soup and Taters. This is the one you brought aboard—Soup. And this is my one—Taters. Soup—Taters,” he said again, and he touched the two men on the shoulders as he spoke, both smiling faintly as they heard his words, and gazing from one

to the other as if striving hard to catch the meaning. “Now then, what do you think of them?”

“They both seem to be big, strong, healthy fellows.”

“Yes, and I shall make first-class seamen of them.”

“I suppose so,” said Mark, smiling.

“There you go again—chaffing. Ah, you’re ever so much better,” grumbled Bob. Then turning to the two blacks—“Now then, you may both go below, only recollect that we’ve got a sort of right in you, because Mr Van here saved one of you, and I saved the other.”

The two blacks gazed hard at the speaker, the man who had been dragged into the first cutter through Mark, bending forward a little, with his soft opal eyeballs gleaming and a wonderful intense look in his swart face. There was a twitching about the temples, and his lower lip trembled a little, while one hand was raised; but as Bob Howlett finished, he uttered a low sigh, muttered a few words to his companion, and drew himself up, folding his arms across his broad chest.

“Well done, noble savage,” said Bob. “We very nearly understand each other. Here, Soup.”

The black started at the word, and looked inquiringly at the speaker.

“Don’t worry the poor fellows,” said Mark.

“Who’s going to worry them? Look here, Soup, you’re going to serve the Queen, and the sooner you understand the Queen’s English the better. I’m going to suit the action to the word. Now then, see here.”

Bob glanced sharply round, to see that only the officer of the watch was on deck, and then, going through a kind of pantomime with great rapidity, he made believe to be struggling with an assailant toward the bulwarks, and being pitched overboard, while the blacks looked on in astonishment.

“Here, they think you’re going mad, Bob,” cried Mark. “Drop it.”

“Sha’n’t! Look at ’em! They understand. Look here, Soup. Now then, Taters, I’m swimming for my life.”

He struck out and swam drily, going through all the actions till he pretended to grow weak, threw up his hands, made believe to splash, and then let his head droop as he reached Mark’s chair.

“Now then,” he said, “pretend to pull me into the boat.”

Mark laughed and obeyed, helping to finish the pantomime, which was quite comprehended by the two blacks, when Bob pointed to his messmate, and said:

“Here, Soup, this is the noble being who saved you.”

The man uttered a few softly liquid words, smiled, and with his eyes full of thankfulness he took a step forward, his companion imitating his acts, and dropped down on his knees before Mark’s chair.

“There,” cried Bob, “what do you say to— Oh, I say, stow that, Taters; not to him. I saved you. Don’t give him all the honour and glory.”

But his explanation was in vain. Both the poor fellows had interpreted his words to mean that Mark had saved them both, and they crouched before him, making signs that he was their lord and they his humblest slaves.

“Well! I do call this sickening,” cried Bob. “That’s just my luck. Look here, Taters. I should just like to peel you and give you three dozen, you nasty black-looking, ungrateful swab. Hi! jump up! Here comes old Staples. Now then, both of you, come along.”

He seized one with each hand by the sleeves of their duck frocks, and dragged them forward; but in an instant, they had snatched themselves free, and returned to Mark, speaking softly in their own tongue, and with a good deal of gesticulation, till Mark ended Bob’s perplexity by pointing to the lower deck, when they walked obediently after the midshipman right away to the forecastle hatch, and went below.

Five minutes later Bob was back again by his messmate’s side.

“That’s just my luck,” he said, sourly. “I beat the bush and somebody else catches the bird. Oh, here’s Mr Russell coming; we shall have the whole quarter-deck on the sick list directly.”

But all the same Bob ran across to offer the second lieutenant his arm, as he walked feebly toward where Mark was seated, and eagerly stretched out his hand to grasp that of the young brother officer who had shared the peril of what had so nearly been their last adventure.

Mark heaved a sigh, but it was one full of satisfaction as they two sat quietly talking together, with first one and then another to come up and utter a few words of congratulation; and when sailors and marines passed and saluted with a friendly smile, there was no mistaking the popularity of the two convalescents.

Meanwhile the *Nautilus* glided along due south, and there was a good deal of speculation as to her next destination, till Mr Staples came up, and in the conversation which ensued, announced that they were to search for a river about sixty miles along the coast, one which was not marked down in any chart, but was supposed to exist, and to be a stronghold of those engaged in the slave trade.

It was getting toward evening, and the two invalids had pleaded for the doctor’s permission to stay longer on deck, for the soft air was delicious, and gave them fresh strength at every breath. They were very silent as they sat watching with keen delight the varied business of the ship, doubly interesting to them now that they could not take part in it, when the wind began to drop, and the course of the vessel to grow more sluggish.

There was nothing for the men to do, and permission had been given to a party of them, just towards sundown, to take the grains forward and try to harpoon some of the swift fish playing about their bows in the golden water; but instead of going and perching himself somewhere to take part in the sport, Bob Howlett hung about the chair of his brother middy.

“Why don’t you go and join in the fishing, Howlett?” said Mr Russell.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “It’ll be quite dark directly, and I was wishing, sir, for something to happen to make me an invalid.”

“Because you have such an affection for Doctor Whitney’s doses?” said Mark, laughing.

“No, so you needn’t make nasty remarks,” replied Bob. “I thought so, because middies who have been a little out of sorts get all kinds of attentions, and those who are quite well get bullied by first lieutenants, and are spoken to by captains as if they weren’t worth their salt, as Mr Staples calls it.”

“I shall have to report Mr Robert Howlett’s insubordinate language,” said Mark’s fellow-invalid, when all at once there came a cry of rage, followed by a loud shouting somewhere forward. Then more cries, and confusion, and directly after there was a desperate scuffle going on by the forecastle hatch.

“What’s that?” cried the first lieutenant; and in a few minutes, after a desperate fight, the two blacks were dragged forward, pushed by four of the men, and held by main force while the captain, who had hurried on deck, called for an explanation.

This was given by a dozen voices at once, but in obedience to a command there was silence, in which the heavy panting breathing of the blacks could be plainly heard.

“Now then,” said the captain, “one man speak. You, Dance, step forward. What does this mean?”

“Beg pardon, sir,” said the coxswain of the first cutter; “some of the lads got skylarking and playing tricks with the two black hands.”

“*Who* did?” said the captain, sternly.

“Beg pardon, sir, didn’t see, sir, but it made the two niggers wild, and one got a knife and the other a marlin-spike; and if they hadn’t been held there’d ha’ been murder done, and—”

“Man overboard!” was yelled from right forward where the fishing had been going on, and following a loud splashing from just beneath the ship’s counter came that most thrilling of cries to send the blood coursing back even from the strongest man’s cheek.

“Boat, boat—Help—help!”

In tropic waters just as the sun had sunk below the horizon, and the rapid darkness was coming on.

Chapter Twelve.

Dance makes Mistakes.

“He’s tangled with the line,” came in a clear voice, which Mark recognised as Bob’s, and a shudder ran through him.

It needs all the strict discipline and long training to prevent confusion even on board a man-of-war, in a time of emergency. Here the disposition of the men was to run to the ship’s side, and shout words of advice, but a sharp command or two brought the crew back to order, and the men rushed to the boat nearest to the spot where the man was struggling in the water.

It was a fine, smart young sailor, who had been standing on a stay below the bowsprit, holding on with one hand, and straining out to aim a good throw at a large fish gliding beneath the bows. He had darted the harpooning “grains” or trident, struck the fish deeply, but from inexperience he had not carefully arranged the line attached to the staff. The result being that there was a sudden rush on the part of the fish as soon as it was struck, a ring of the line was tightened round the man’s arm in a firm tangled knot, and he was jerked from his hold and dragged down into the deep water for some distance before he rose again, struggling wildly and calling for help. He would get his lips above water for a moment or two, and then be dragged under again. Then he would rise to the surface and shriek for help in tones which thrilled his hearers.

“Quick, my lads!” roared the first lieutenant. “Bless the man! Why can’t he cut himself loose?”

There was a gurgling cry and silence, as the wheels of the falls chirruped and the boat began to descend; but at that moment there was a fresh excitement plainly seen from where Mark had tottered to the bulwark, and

stood looking over the side at what seemed to be a moving shadow, far down under the surface, jerked about in a most extraordinary manner.

He looked round sharply, for there was a loud cry, a babble of tongues, and the shouting of fresh orders, and simultaneously a life-buoy splashed in the sea, near where the man had been dragged down; the boat was descending and a white figure was seen to leap on to the bulwarks after a desperate struggle to free itself from those who had held it, and plunge head-first into the darkening waters.

It was the bigger of the two blacks, who had in his insane rage taken advantage of the confusion and excitement to escape from those who held him prisoner and leap overboard, to swim for his liberty.

The loud cries of excitement increased at this fresh development of the trouble. Two were overboard now; and one of the men who had held the black had been hurled upon the deck, rose to his knees holding a wrenched arm.

“He’ll be drowned now,” growled the man; “and sarve him right. He’s as strong as a hox.”

Mark saw the white-clothed figure strike the surface with a heavy plunge, and go down, make a carve of light beneath the water, and rise again to shake his black head and strike out for the open sea before him, insensible for the moment to everything but the idea of getting away. He, poor fellow, in his blind ignorance, knew no more, but before he had taken many strokes there was a wild gurgling shriek behind him, as the sailor’s head appeared, and the black stopped, turned, and swam back in time to seize the drowning man and hold him up just as he was dragged under again, the boat which had just kissed the water being still far-away, the *Nautilus* having glided on.

The natural result was that as the fish gave its fierce jerking tug, and the black held on to the sailor, both were dragged under; but grasping the difficulty, the black seized the line and made a desperate snatch at it, with sufficient strength to detach the grains, and they both rose again, with the rescuer swimming strongly, the rescued half drowned, helpless and unable to raise a hand to save himself.

“Hold on! Coming! Swim this way,” shouted the officer in charge of the boat; and as Mark looked aft at the actors in this scene, all growing more distant moment by moment, he heard Bob Howlett’s shrill voice plainly in spite of the distance,—“Hold on, Soup. Coming.”

The words sounded incongruous—ridiculous—but the voice influenced the black, who turned and swam slowly toward them, trying to support his charge.

“Can you see, Vandean?” said Mr Russell, who had crept to the bulwarks and stood beside the midshipman.

“Yes, but how slow the boat is.”

“They are keeping afloat, then—swimming?”

“I think one of them is,” said Mark in a whisper.

“Hah!” sighed the young lieutenant, “my eyes are dim and weak. How near is the boat now?”

“Oh, it must be fifty yards away, and they’re going down. The men don’t try.”

“It seems so to us, but they must be rowing their best. Are they getting near now?”

“I don’t think so, and—and I can’t see anybody. Oh! how horrible. Pull, pull!”

“Hush?” said Russell. “I can’t see, but the boat must be between us and the men. How was it all?”

“I don’t quite understand, but the black seemed to try and save the man overboard. Don’t—don’t speak! I want to see. Oh, if I only had a glass. Mine’s below.”

“Can you see them now?” said Russell, in a faint whisper.

“No, no, this is dreadful,” groaned Mark; “they are so far-off, but I can see

the boat. Yes, they are pulling hard now. No; they have ceased rowing, and two men are standing up now, and—too late—too late."

"Hurray!" came faintly from the distance, where the shades of the fast-falling tropical night had rendered the boat nearly invisible. The cheer was echoed from on board with a tremendous shout, as the distant cry rose again.

"There, they have saved them, Mr Russell," cried Mark excitedly.

"Hah!" came in a low, deep sigh, as the lieutenant's legs gave way beneath him, and he would have fallen if it had not been for the sudden action of Mark, who held the poor fellow's arms pressed down over the rail as he called for help.

"What is it?" cried a firm voice from close at hand, and the captain strode up. "Ah! Mr Russell fainting. Let him go, Mr Vandean. I'll drop him into this seat."

The captain dragged a cane reclining-chair forward, and lowered the feeble man gently down.

"There, he will soon come to," said the captain. "He is too weak to be on deck."

"The sight of the men drowning upset him, sir."

"Of course, Mr Vandean. It nearly upset me, who have not been ill. Not a pleasant sight to see our fellow-creatures losing their lives, and not to be able to help them. Come, Russell, man, this will not do."

The lieutenant looked up at him wonderingly, as he unclosed his eyes.

"Are they saved!" he said, faintly.

"Thank God! Yes," replied the captain; and just then a fresh cheer arose from the cutter, which was being pulled steadily back; the cheer was answered, and soon after the boat hung from the davits, and Bob cried up excitedly to Mark,—"I say, I saved him this time, old chap."

Then followed a few stern words from the captain, strictly forbidding further fishing except by the older and more experienced hands.

Turning to the first lieutenant, he said in Mark's hearing,—"Now comes the difficulty. How am I to punish this black for the knife business? He cannot understand a word that is said."

"No; it is difficult," replied the first lieutenant; "but it cannot be passed over."

"The man evidently meant to escape, but repented on seeing a fellow-creature drowning, and saved his life. Well, that's a good trait in his character, Staples. Black and savage though he is, the man must have good qualities. I'm afraid it was a mistake to keep the two poor fellows on board."

"Hasn't turned out well so far, sir," said the first lieutenant, gruffly. "There, sir, it's for you to settle about the punishment. Something must be done."

"The plus seems to me to balance the minus, Staples," said the captain. "I want to do something, but these poor savages cannot understand." Then to the men gathered below, "Look here, my lads, with respect to this affray—"

"Beg pardon, sir," came from forward.

"Who's that?" said the captain, sternly. "How dare you interrupt!"

"Axing your pardon, sir, Joe Dance, sir, coxswain fust cutter."

"Well, what is it, sir?"

"I only wanted to say, sir, as I was down below, and I kep' on saying to the lads, sir, as was a teasing the niggers—"

"The blacks, my man," said the captain, sharply.

"Yes, your honour, the black niggers, sir. 'Let 'em bide,' I says; 'what's the good o' teasing 'em? You'll only make 'em want to bite.' But they wouldn't take no notice o' what I said, sir, and kep' it up till the poor chaps turned

savage like, and it was hooroar, and all the fat in the fire."

"Stop, sir!" cried the captain, sternly. "Speak plain English, sir."

"Yes, sir; that's what I'm a-trying to do, sir."

"You say that the men were teasing and baiting the two black hands, and you advised them not to?"

"Well, your honour, it was hardly adwice, because I said I'd shove my fist in someone's eye if he didn't let the poor beggars bide."

Mr Staples uttered a curious sound, and the captain coughed.

"Ah, well, you tried to make them stop their cowardly, unmanly tricks."

"That's it, your honour."

"Then now give me the names of the men who were guilty, and as each man's name is called let him stand out three paces to the front. Go on."

Joe Dance scratched his head, but did not speak.

"Now, coxswain, speak out. The first man?"

"Adam," whispered Bob to Mark, at whose elbow he now stood, and Mark jerked back his elbow into the boy's chest.

"Well, sir, who was the first man?" cried the captain. "Beg pardon, your honour," said Joe Dance, gruffly; "it was down in the fo'c'sle."

"I know that, sir, but I want to know the names."

A faint sound arose as if several men had drawn a deep breath.

"Do you hear me, Dance?" cried the captain.

"Oh yes, your honour."

"He won't tell tales of his messmates," said Bob, with his lips close to Mark's ear.

“Silence, Mr Howlett!” cried the captain, sternly. “Now, Dance, the names?”

“Beg pardon, your honour, but there was only one dip a-going in the lantern, and it didn’t give light enough to tell which was your right hand and which was your left.”

“The names, sir!” cried the captain, as once more there was the sound of a deep breath.

“Couldn’t give yer one of ’em, sir, unless it was Tom Fillot.”

“Hah! Stand out, sir.”

“Why, I was taking my trick at the wheel, your honour,” cried Tom Fillot, in tones of protest.

“So you was, messmet,” growled Dance; “so you was. There, your honour,” he continued, turning to the captain, “you see how dark it were.”

“Try again, sir,” said the captain, sternly.

“Dick Bannock,” said Dance.

“Which I were o’ dooty in my watch, mate,” cried the man.

“Ay, so you was, messmet. No, your honour, it were too dark. P’r’aps,” he added, cunningly, “one o’ the blacks knows.”

Here there was a murmur.

“Silence!” cried the captain, sternly. “I’m afraid I shall have to recall this as a mark against you, Dance, when the time comes for promotion. It is very plain, sir, that you do know, and will not speak. Hark here, my lads, I am going to pass this over. I cannot punish two ignorant, half-savage men for resenting a cruel attack upon them—cruel and cowardly. Go below now, and show me in the future that you have too much common sense to play such boys’ tricks again. Let the two blacks step out.”

Efforts were made to induce the two Africans to advance, but without

avail.

“Now, are those men coming aft?” said the captain, sternly; but there was only a buzzing sound below, and something extremely like a scuffle.

“Beg pardon, sir; they don’t understand,” said Bob Howlett. “They’d come up if I spoke to ’em.”

“Then go down and send them aft—or no,” said the captain, impatiently. “I want them to understand that they are pardoned, but that there must be no violence again. There, that’s enough, Mr Staples. Pipe the men below.”

“And that’s an end of it,” whispered Bob Howlett, as soon as the captain was out of hearing. “I say, Van, wasn’t old Joe Dance a trump?”

Chapter Thirteen.

The Enemy once more.

“All this time sailing here and there,” said Mark one day, “and not done a bit of good.”

“Do you hear that, Mr Whitney?” cried Bob. “There’s gratitude, when it has been just as if we were under orders to keep at sea so as to get him and Mr Russell well again; and look at ’em now. Why, it has quite cured ’em both.”

“And their doctor has done nothing, Mr Bob Howlett?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that, sir, exactly,” said that gentleman, colouring a little. “Of course you have done them a lot of good, sir, and—”

“There, you are only floundering about, young gentleman, and making worse of it,” said the doctor, gruffly.

“Wait a bit; you will be laid by the heels one of these days, and then you will sing a very different song. But you are a wonderful deal better,

Vandean, and I congratulate you. I shall not have to ask for you to be sent home."

"Oh yes, I'm much better, sir," cried Mark.

"Well, don't talk as if you were afraid I was going to order you pills and draught. I've done with you, but you had better be careful Mr Russell can go on without me now. As for Mr Howlett here—well, we'll wait for that."

He gave Bob a curious look and strolled away, leaving that gentleman with his face screwed up in a way which made Mark burst out laughing.

"Oh yes, it's all very well for you to grin," grumbled Bob; "you're out of the wood. He don't like me, and you see if he doesn't serve me out first chance he gets."

"Then you should have been more careful about what you said."

"Well, I was. I do believe he'd like to have me down in his cabin to cut up for experiment, and to practise physic on. Ugh! the old wretch!" he continued, with a shudder.

"Hallo! what's the matter now?" he added, as the man up aloft shouted "Sail ho!" and glasses were rapidly brought to bear upon a point miles away down south, where a few palm trees were dimly-seen through the hot haze.

"What do you make of her, Mr Russell?" said the captain to the young officer, who had gone aloft.

"Barque, sir. Small. Heavily-rigged. She's going right in. There must be either a bay there, or a large river."

"No mention of any bay or harbour there," said the captain. "Looks bad—or good," he added. "What else can you make out?"

"Nothing, sir. The trees hide her now completely."

"Slaver, then, without a doubt. Now, gentlemen, she has gone in without seeing us, and it will be our fault if she gets away. We must have no

mistake this time.”

“Hurray!” whispered Bob to his companion. “Prize-money at last.”

“Chickens,” said Mark.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t count ’em till they’re hatched.”

“Get out, croaker!”

Just then the two blacks came along the deck, looking very smart in their white sailor trousers, and not a little proud of their straw hats. Each man brightened up and displayed his teeth, as he saw the midshipmen, muttering something incomprehensible in reply to Bob’s “How do, Soup? How are you, Taters?” and passing on.

“I say,” said Mark, “it’s too bad to nickname the poor fellows like that.”

“Not a bit of it. What’s in a name? They answer to ’em right enough, and the men like ’em.”

“Yes, of course they do. Whoever heard of a sailor who didn’t like a bit of fun of that kind?”

“Oh, then you call it fun?”

“Yes—ill-natured fun.”

“Bother! Here’s the skipper. Let’s seem to be doing something, or we shall be lectured.”

But Captain Maitland was too eager about the sailing of his ship, and paid no heed to the midshipmen’s idleness, only thinking as he was of getting round the land in front, and overhauling the stranger, who was now quite out of sight beyond the point, and it took two hours to get within sight again. But they found that, instead of there being a river, the coast turned sharply to the east, and the barque, in place of being close to them, was sailing steadily away east and south, and farther from them

than ever.

“Bah! another false alarm,” cried Mr Staples; “are we never to capture one of the scoundrels?”

Just then Mark touched his elbow, and pointed to a vessel which had been unnoticed before, lying as it did close under the shore, with bare poles raked well back, and the whole of the long, low, schooner-rigged vessel wearing a look of having been built for swift-sailing more than for any ordinary trading purpose.

“Well done, sharp eyes!” cried the lieutenant; “that’s one of the scoundrels;” and the course of the *Nautilus* was changed directly with a peculiar result.

The minute before not a soul was to be seen on board the schooner, which might have been absolutely deserted; but, as soon as the course of the *Nautilus* was changed and those on board saw that, in spite of lying close up under the trees of the muddy shore of what appeared to be a creek, they had been observed, sails were rapidly hoisted, and the slight, graceful vessel began to glide so swiftly through the water that it was evidently no slow ship that would catch her should she once get into the offing.

She was about a mile away and promised to escape, but Captain Maitland did not mean to be out-manoeuvred this time. The crew were beat to quarters, a gun fired, and the colours run up as the course of the *Nautilus* was again altered so as to cut the schooner off, and in due time a second gun gave out its puff of smoke.

But no heed was taken, and the schooner kept along close in shore till her captain saw that escape was impossible in the direction he was taking, and altering his helm, the swift vessel glided round and made off in the opposite direction.

But the *Nautilus* was again too quick for her, and in a few minutes was once more hard in chase and sending shot after shot, till one better directed than the rest went through her maintopmast.

The crew of the *Nautilus* sent up a tremendous cheer as the great spar

came down with its gaff sail, leaving the schooner for the time like a bird with a broken wing.

“We shall have her now for certain,” said Bob Howlett.

“Yes; and she has shown no colours,” replied Mark; “but suppose she does not turn out to be a slaver, after all.”

“Suppose pigs were to fly,” cried Bob. “She’s a slaver for certain, and we’ve got her.”

“Doesn’t look like it,” replied his companion; “where’s she making for now? Why, she sails as well as ever.”

This was a slight exaggeration, but all the same the vessel glided along rapidly, and through the glasses the crew could be seen rapidly cutting away the damaged rigging, while her helm was manipulated so that she appeared to be sailing right for the shore.

Another shot and another was fired, but not the slightest heed was paid; and as the *Nautilus* went swiftly on, it was noted that, unseen before, there was a narrow river running up through the trees, with its regular fringe of mangroves, and the schooner was being steered for this.

“She’ll get right up that river, after all,” said Mark, who in the excitement had forgotten all his past illness, and appeared to be as strong as ever.

“Not she. We shall have her first, my lad. Hurray! look, she has given in. They’ve stopped and surrendered.”

“She has struck on one of the banks, sir,” cried Lieutenant Staples, excitedly, for the schooner’s way through the water had suddenly ceased, and she slowly swung round broadside on, with her sails shivering and flapping.

“A prize at last!” cried Mark, as the men cheered, and the *Nautilus* glided on, till, when they were about a quarter of a mile away, Mr Russell announced that a couple of boats were leaving the schooner, and it was seen that her captain and crew were making for the shore.

“No doubt now about what she is, gentlemen,” said the captain. “Pipe away the cutter’s crew. Mr Russell, you would like to begin work again. Jump in, sir, and go and take possession.”

“And pursue the boats, sir?”

“Bah! no! They are not worth the labour. You can take one of the young gentlemen with you.”

Bob took a step forward, but Mr Russell turned to Mark.

“You’ll come, Vandean,” he said; and the lad leaped into the cutter, which was rapidly rowed away through the muddy water, just as the schooner’s boats disappeared round a headland covered with trees, which screened the outlet of a stream far larger than had been imagined, and for which without doubt now the schooner’s captain had been making.

“A splendid prize, Vandean,” said Mr Russell, as they drew near and saw the admirable build of the vessel, which looked nearly new. “She was evidently on her way for a cargo of the poor wretches. We ought to have taken her afterwards, when she was laden.”

“Yes, we should have done more good then. But if they had no slaves on board, why did they run? Oh!”

The midshipman uttered an ejaculation expressive of the utter disgust which he felt as they neared the schooner’s side.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” cried the lieutenant; and then his countenance changed. “Back water!” he exclaimed, as he turned away his head. “How horrible!”

Then, altering his order, he cried, “Row—row, my lads—pull!”

For from somewhere on board, now not a dozen yards from them, there rang out in smothered tones a piteous cry of despair.

Chapter Fourteen.

In the Schooner's Hold.

It was undoubtedly a terrible cry of despair from a human being in deadly peril, and with all the force of Englishmen sent to answer such a call for aid, the boat was rushed through the water, the coxswain hooked on, and setting at defiance that which had horrified and disgusted them, the two officers, followed by all their men but the boat-keeper, sprang on board the beautifully clean, trim-looking schooner, where the remains of the broken spar, axes that had been hastily thrown down, and a tangle of cordage and canvas cumbered the deck.

"What is it?" cried Mark, excitedly. "Is someone being killed?"

"Some dozens," cried Russell, fiercely, as the cry was repeated from beneath their feet, followed by a horrible scuffling sound mingled with groans. "The wretches have battened down the hatches, and the poor creatures below are suffocating."

As he spoke, he caught up one of the axes from where it lay, an example followed by Mark, and they struck off the fastenings which held down the hatches close by where they stood.

The horrible sounds ceased at the first blow of the axe, and a deathly silence succeeded, followed by a low, deep, murmuring roar.

"Stop!" cried Mr Russell. "Stand by, lads, and be prepared. The poor wretches may not know friends from foes."

The next minute the hatch was thrown up, and there was a fearful rush, not that for which they had prepared, but one perhaps worse. The wretched blacks crowded down in the stifling hold were too much cowed by the brutality from which they had suffered to dare then to raise a hand; and, instead of making a dash for liberty as anticipated, they waited in expectation of death being the portion of the man who first reached the opening.

The boat's crew shrank away from the hatch, driven back by the rush of poisonous air of so fearful an odour that the lieutenant turned ghastly as he cried,—"Oh, horror! how can the poor creatures exist?" How indeed?

Relief had only come in time. The captain of the schooner had probably intended to pretend that he had no slaves on board, but had altered his mind and fled after the poor wretches had been shut down; and, without doubt, if they had been unable to break out to the deck, in less than an hour not a soul would have been left alive.

“Here, Vandean,” cried Mr Russell, “we must risk their attacking us, and have them on deck. How are we to make them understand? Hi! below there! Come up into the fresh air.”

But there was no reply, save a stifled moan or two.

“Volunteers,” cried the lieutenant. “Two men to go down and bring one of the poor wretches up. We can show him that we mean well, and then he can act as interpreter.”

For a few moments no one spoke, and Mr Russell cried:—“I know it’s a terrible task, my lads. Who’ll come with me?”

“No, with me,” said Mark, quickly; and he stepped to the mouth of the noisome pit.

“Oh, I’ll go with you, Mr Vandean, sir,” cried Tom Fillot; and without a word Mark drew a deep breath, stepped in on the ladder, and descended, the light being shut out directly by the sailor.

The heat was awful, and after holding his breath till he reached the bottom, at the first inspiration Mark felt giddy and sick; but making a brave effort, he took a step forward, trying to pierce the darkness around —black darkness to one who had just come out of the blazing sunshine— and made a snatch at the arm of the man nearest to him in the crowd.

He only held on for a moment, and then the arm was wrested free. He seized another, speaking gently the while. The man uttered a yell of horror, and struggled so fiercely, that Mark was fain to let go.

“We must get one on deck, Tom,” cried Mark. “Lay hold of one as gently as you can, and let’s pull him up.”

Tom Fillot seized the first he could distinguish in the herd of poor

cowering wretches, but this one, too, filled the foul air with his piercing yells, and fought so hard to free himself, that Tom let go, and stepped back below the hatch.

“They think we want to chuck ’em overboard, Mr Vandean, sir. I don’t know what to say to ’em. No good to tell ’em that under the British flag they’re free.”

“Let’s go and breathe for a few moments, Tom,” said Mark, his voice sounding as if he were half-stifled.

“I’d rather do that, sir, than have the best glass o’ grog ever mixed,” said the man.

“Now below there!” came from the hatch; “how are you getting on?”

Mark answered the question by stumbling up the ladder till he could put his face over the combings of the hatch, and breathe the air blowing over the vessel, Tom Fillot following suit.

“You look white as ashes, Vandean,” said the lieutenant. “I had no business to let you go down. But the men are not dangerous?”

“Like so many sheep,” replied Mark, rather faintly; “but we could not get one to come.”

“Come out, and I’ll go myself.”

“No,” said Mark, stoutly. “I have only half done my work. Come along, Tom Fillot.”

Before he could be stayed, he stepped down once more into the terrible hold, where, his eyes growing now more accustomed to the darkness, he began to make out eyes everywhere—glistening, starting eyes—all apparently staring fiercely, and in a threatening way.

The whole scene was horrible, every surrounding was sickening. The poor creatures had been herded together down in the foul place, with less care for their health than if they had been cattle, while in the emergency of the slave captain’s escape, they had been left to die. But,

horrible as the place was, Mark made a brave effort to master his dread and compunction. Risking attack from some one or other of the men who might very well have been infuriated by his wrongs, the young midshipman once more made an effort to seize one of the blacks and get him on deck. Watching his opportunity, he stepped boldly forward to where the crowd had shrunk back together, and again caught a man by the arm.

“Now, Tom Fillot,” he cried, “help me.”

The sailor seconded him well, but the poor wretch, in an agony of fear, made a desperate plunge, got free again; and at that moment, in alarm about his young officer’s safety, Mr Russell sternly ordered him to come back on deck.

It was with a mingling of satisfaction and disinclination that the lad obeyed; and as they stood about the open hatch, Mr Russell said,—“We must give them time to find out that we are friends. This is my first experience, in spite of all our chasing, Vandean, and it is worse than I could have believed.”

“Signal from the *Naughtylass*, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “Yes; the captain is getting anxious. Here, Vandean, go back in the boat, and tell them the state of affairs.”

“And leave you alone with these people? There must be fifty or a hundred down below.”

“I shall have four defenders with me,” said the lieutenant, quietly, “and you will be back soon with a reinforcement. We must get the poor wretches on deck, out of that loathsome den, or they will half of them be dead of fever in four and twenty hours.”

“You wish me to go?” said Mark, hesitating.

“I order you to go, my lad,” said the lieutenant, speaking sternly, but with a friendly light in his eye. “There, off at once.”

Mark passed over the side with half the boat’s crew, and, feeling extremely uneasy about his officer’s fate, had himself rowed back, and

stated the case to the captain.

“Horrible!” he said. “Well, the men must be brought on board if the schooner is a fixture. Take back ten men with you, and tell Mr Russell to get out an anchor and see if he cannot haul off the vessel. If he cannot, the slaves must be brought on board, and the schooner burned.”

“But how are we to get the men out of the hold, sir? They are frightened to death of us,” said Mark.

“To be sure, yes. Try fair means, and if they do not answer, the poor wretches must be hoisted on deck with ropes. They will soon grow satisfied when they feel that we mean them no harm.”

“But—I beg your pardon, sir,” faltered Mark; “we cannot make them understand that we are friends.”

“May I speak, sir?” cried Bob Howlett.

“Silence, sir; don’t interfere,” said Mr Staples, sternly.

“Oh, you lucky beggar,” whispered Bob; “you get all the fun.”

“Go back at once, Mr Vandean,” said the captain. “You understand. Get the schooner off if possible. If not, bring the slaves on board, and the vessel is to be set on fire. Well, Mr Howlett, why are you making signs?”

“I beg pardon, sir, but I could make the slaves understand.”

“*You*?”

“Yes, sir; I should take Soup and—I mean the two black fellows—and make them interpret.”

“Of course; a capital idea, my lad; but—stop. How are you going to understand the men you would take?”

“Oh, I think I could manage that, sir,” said Bob, importantly.

“Indeed?”

“Yes, sir. I am making a study of their language, and I’ve learned a few words and taught them.”

“Take them with you in the boat, then, sir, by all means;” and Bob darted a triumphant glance at the first lieutenant, in ignorance of the fact that this gentleman was watching him, and met his look in a terribly stony fashion, which made Bob’s face turn blank in the extreme.

To hide his confusion, he ran off forward, and, partly by signs, partly by hauling, he drew the two blacks to the waiting boat, into which they stepped willingly enough, and five minutes later the little party were on their way back to the schooner.

Chapter Fifteen.

A Difficult Task.

“Old Staples’ll serve me out for this,” cried Bob, merrily.

“Hallo! What’s the matter? Don’t stare in that solemn fashion.”

“I was looking at the schooner,” said Mark. “Mr Russell has so few men with him in case of a rising on the part of the blacks. He would be as good as helpless.”

“As bad, you mean,” cried Bob. “Oh, it’s all right. The niggers won’t rise. They’d better!”

This was said so importantly that the men began to laugh; and as Bob turned upon them sharply, they grew preternaturally serious.

“I say, look at Soup and Taters,” whispered Bob; “they’re as pleased as children to have a ride. I shall make two clever sailors out of them before I’ve done.”

Mark glanced at the two blacks, and saw that their faces were lit up as they rode over the glancing waters. Then turning to Bob,—

“That was a good idea of yours to bring them.”

“Yes, I reckon that was a bright notion.”

“Only you’ve spoiled it by being so cocky. I say, Bob, what a conceited chap you are.”

“Oh, am I? Pity you aren’t a little more so, too. Hallo! what’s the matter with Soup?”

Mark looked at the black sharply, half expecting that he was again going to leap overboard and swim for his liberty, for the man was glaring at the schooner they were approaching fast, his nostrils distended, and there was a curious lurid light in his eyes as if he were suddenly enraged.

“Why, Taters has got it too. Look at him.”

The bigger of the two blacks had muttered something to his companion as they sat together forward, and they both turned to Mark now as they started up in the boat and pointed to the schooner, uttering a low guttural cry.

“Sit down both of you; do you hear?” cried Bob.

“I see,” cried Mark, excitedly. “They know that it is a slaver, and they think we are going to take them off in it.”

“No, no!” growled the bigger black, fiercely.

“Yes; that’s what they think,” cried Mark.

“Then they’re a pair of black-looking old noodles,” said Bob. “Here, hi! sit down, or you’ll be overboard.”

“Yes; sit down,” said Mark, rising, and speaking authoritatively as he pointed downward.

“Yes, sir, begging your pardon, that’s what it is; they think you’re going to sell ’em, sir.”

“I wish to goodness they could understand English,” said Mark, impatiently. “How am I to explain?”

“Oh, they know a lot,” said Bob. “Here, I’ll show you. Hi, Soup! Taters, ahoy!”

The two blacks looked at him excitedly.

“It’s all right.”

“All—righ?” said Soup.

“Yes, all right.”

The man turned to Mark and looked at him inquiringly. “All righ?” he said.

“Yes; all right,” cried Mark, with a look which gave the men some confidence, and they sat down.

“That’s right, my dark-skinned messmate,” growled Tom Fillot, “Why don’t you larn to understand that you’re a free nigger now?”

They were close alongside of the schooner; and the blacks’ nostrils began to quiver and their excitement increase as they caught the horrible, sickening effluvium which was wafted from the hold. Starting up, they made as if they were about to jump overboard, in the full belief that they were once more about to be entrapped into the hold of a slaver; but dropping the rudder-lines, Mark sprang to them, and laid his hands upon their shoulders.

“I tell you it is all right,” he said. “Won’t you believe me?”

The men could not understand his words, but the open countenance and frank manner of the midshipman inspired confidence, and they sank down, stretched out their hands to him, took his, and held it against their foreheads in turn.

“Come, that’s right, my lads,” continued Mark, smiling. “There, don’t think we English folk could be so treacherous. You’ll see directly what we want of you. Come along.”

“Well, I’m blest!” cried Bob. “I say, play fair, Van. You’re taking my job out of my hands. I’m showman here. Stow that.”

“Show up, then,” cried Mark, merrily. “There, up with you.”

He sprang on board, to find that there had been no change in the state of affairs, but that Mr Russell had been anxiously awaiting his coming.

The men followed, till only the coxswain and the two blacks remained hanging back, for once more the feeling of mistrust had come uppermost, and they were muttering together and looking wildly round.

“Here, I say,” cried Bob; “there’s sharks enough about here to make any man sorry who begins to swim. Come on board. D’ye hear?”

“What is it?” said the lieutenant.

“The two blacks are suspicious; they don’t understand why we want to bring them aboard this schooner. They think we mean mischief to them.”

“Poor fellows! No wonder,” said the lieutenant. “We must be careful, or we shall scare them, and they’ll try to swim ashore.”

“Well, wouldn’t that be best for them?”

“No, Vandean; they’d only be captured and sold again. You must coax them aboard.”

“Are you two coming?” cried Bob, looking as fierce as he could—“fierce as a maggot,” Tom Fillot said. “Because if you’re not, I’m coming to fetch you.”

The men joined hands and stood back.

“Come,” said Mark, quietly, as he stepped to the gangway and held out his hand; “it is all right.”

“No all righ,” cried the big black, fiercely, as he pointed to the vessel’s side and listened to the peculiar dull humming sound which came from the hold.

“Yes—I—tell—you—it—is—all—right,” said Mark, quietly. “You hardly understand me, but you may believe.”

The big black turned to his fellow, and said something, and then without a word they came on board, with their nostrils working, and the big black’s eyes flashed as he pointed to the way down into the vessel’s hold, as much as to say, “There, you are deceiving me.”

“Yes, I know,” said Mark, quietly; and the man looked more at ease, but still terribly suspicious.

“There,” cried Bob; “now you see what a pair of black fools you were.”

“That will do, Mr Howlett,” said the lieutenant sternly; “let Mr Vandean

manage them. He can do it better than you."

"Well, I am blest!" muttered Bob, turning scarlet.

"That was a capital thought of yours, Mr Vandean. You brought these men to interpret."

"Well, I *am* blest, and no mistake," muttered Bob, "and him going to take all the *kudos*. It's too—"

He had no time to say *bad*, for Mark spoke out,—

"No, sir; it was Bob Howlett's idea."

"Oh, was it?" said Mr Russell. "Well, never mind; they seem to trust you. Go on and see what you can do."

"It's so difficult, because they cannot understand, sir," replied Mark; "but I think I can show them what we want. Shall I try?"

"Yes, of course," said the lieutenant, to whom Mark had already given his message. "The schooner is too fast on the bank here for us to get her off, so the blacks must be taken to the *Nautilus*, and then we'll fire her at once. Pity too—such a fine boat. There, try and get the poor wretches on deck, and let's see how many there are. I'm afraid that some are dead."

Mark shuddered and turned to the blacks, who were watching him eagerly. Signing to them to pick up a couple of buckets, he led them to the fresh-water tub, made them fill them, and then, taking up a couple of pannikins, he led the way to the mouth of the noisome hold, from which low moans were now issuing.

They followed him, and he pointed down, but they shrank away wildly, their eyes rolling, and the fear of treachery still in their breasts.

"Very well, then," said Mark, quietly, while the officers and boat's crew looked on. "We are going to give those poor creatures some water;" and he stepped through the hatch to the ladder, and once more began to descend.

That was enough. The two blacks carefully raised their buckets of water and followed him down, to the satisfaction of every one save Bob Howlett, who felt horribly aggrieved.

“Hadn’t I better go too, Mr Russell?” he said. “I understand those two blacks.”

“Perhaps you had,” said the lieutenant, drily. “By all means go.”

“Thankye, sir,” cried Bob; and he stepped toward the hatch, where, as Mr Russell turned away, he found Tom Fillot looking at him with his face puckering up into a broad grin.

Meanwhile Bob had reached the hatch and bent over it prior to stepping down, but instead of raising his foot for that step, he started back, his hand to his face, and a look of the most intense horror and disgust overspreading his merry countenance.

“Oh!” he ejaculated; and then again, “Oh!”

“What is the matter, Mr Howlett?” said the lieutenant, quietly.

“Oh, just you go there, sir. ’Pon my word! it’s just awful.”

“Ah, yes, I know,” said the lieutenant, quietly. “The hold is bad with the poor creatures being shut up there. That is why I want to get them on deck;” and he walked to the hatch.

“You beggars! I’ll serve some of you out for this,” said Bob to himself, as he saw several of the men grinning hugely at his discomfort.

He turned away and found himself face to face with Tom Fillot, who looked at him with a preternaturally solemn aspect.

“Find it a bit strong, sir?”

“What?” cried Bob, haughtily.

“I said find it a bit strong, sir? I did at first when I went down; but, bless your ’art, sir, after the first few sniffs you don’t mind it a bit, you rather

likes it."

"Then you'd better go down, sir," said Bob, sharply.

"Yes, sir, soon as I'm wanted, sir. I did go down before with Mr Vandean."

"Did he go down, then?"

"Oh yes, sir. We was there ever so long. Just you go down and see, sir; it's very interesting. Never was in the hold of a slave ship, sir, I s'pose? It's something to talk about, I can tell you. Wonderful dark, and all you can see is the niggers' eyes. You see, them being black, they fits in with the darkness, and as they never laughs you don't see their teeth. I'd go if I was you."

Bob hesitated. It would never do for him to show the white feather before the man, and if he did not go Mark Vandean was taking all the credit. Tom Fillot was right, it would be something to talk about, and after another moment's hesitation, he turned to the sailor.

"I say, Tom Fillot," he whispered, "is it very bad?"

"What, down there, sir?"

"Yes; I mean can a fellow bear it?"

"Bear it, sir? Oh yes, if it comes to that; you see, Mr Vandean and me bore it ever so long. You'd stand it, I should say. Oh yes, you've got so much pluck in you, sir, you'd stand it right enough. There, sir, if I was you I'd go. You could but come up again."

"Yes, of course," said Bob, cavalierly. "I could come up again."

"Of course, sir, if you could stand it, and didn't faint right away."

Bob turned upon him sharply, with the fact dawning upon him that Tom Fillot, the most impudent joker on board the *Nautilus*, was laughing in his sleeve at his expense; but before he could make quite sure, a thrill ran through all on deck, and a rush was made for the hatchway.

The moment before, Mr Russell was peering down uneasily, and his conscience was smiting him for allowing so young an officer to undertake the onerous task of descending into that loathsome den. For strange noises—low mutterings, and harsh whisperings—were going on; and directly after, to his horror, Mark's voice rang out in wildly excited tones, just as there were the sounds of a struggle going on.

"Here, men—Mr Russell! Help—quick!" shouted Mark; and in response thereto the lieutenant shouted to the boat's crew to come on, took a step downward to lead the way, and then stepped back as the lesser of the two black sailors suddenly appeared at the hatchway with his face wild with excitement, and his white duck frock and trousers horribly stained with blood.

Chapter Sixteen.

Interpreting under Difficulties.

"Come *on*!"

Bravery or determination, whichever you please, say both, were displayed by Mark Vandean as he fought horror and disgust in his effort to do his duty and master self.

Stepping quickly down, he stood at the bottom of the ladder in utter darkness once more, listening to the strange whispering, thrilling noise about him, while first one and then the other black cautiously descended with the bucket of water he bore.

By the time they were in the hold his sight was beginning to grow accustomed to the change from the bright glare of sunshine on deck, and once more there were faint suggestions of glistening eyes watching him out of the cave-like darkness, as if so many savage beasts were about to spring.

But he had no time to think of his own feelings, for the two blacks now stood gazing at him inquiringly, and with some trace of their old suspicious aspect lingering still.

“Water—to drink,” said Mark: and he pointed away into the darkness.

They understood him, and dipping the pannikins full, they took each a step into the darkness, and held out the precious fluid toward those who must have been suffering agonies for its want. But no one stirred—not an advance was made, to Mark’s great surprise, for he had anticipated that the black faces of his ambassadors would have been sufficient to make the prisoners feel confidence that no harm was intended.

“Go closer,” said Mark; and the two blacks looked back at him inquiringly, but obeyed as soon as he laid his hand upon their shoulders and pressed them forward.

Then a voice broke the silence, the big black saying a few words in his own tongue, their effect being magical. A low murmur ran through the hold, and a harsh voice croaked out what was evidently a question, for the big black answered in a hesitating way, saying a few words, and then sharply one in a questioning tone, as if he had not understood.

The harsh, croaking voice was heard again, speaking angrily, and there were several interchanges of question and answer, as if between two men who did not quite understand each other’s dialect.

And now Mark’s eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness that he could dimly see that the place was full of a steamy mist, through which horrible-looking, ill-defined figures were moving, wild-eyed and strange. Some were tossing their arms about, others were stretching out their hands supplicatingly toward the water pannikins, which the two blacks kept dipping full and handing to those who pressed toward them; but there was no scuffling or fighting for the water, as might have been expected under the circumstances. The wretched prisoners seemed gentle and tolerant to each other, drinking and making way for companion sufferers.

As this went on, and Mark was able to search the horrible gloom more and more, he shuddered; and, suffering as he was from the effects of the deadly mephitic air, the whole scene preyed upon his mind until he could hardly believe that he was gazing at reality, the whole tragedy before him resembling the dream accompanying some fever, and it was only by an

effort that he could master the intense desire to struggle up the ladder and escape into the light and the free fresh air.

The buckets were nearly empty, and he felt that it would be better for what was left in one to be poured into the other, so that the supplying might still go on while more was fetched, when it suddenly struck him that there was something wrong. In the darkness he could dimly make out two or three tall blacks pressing forward toward where the white-clothed sailors were dispensing the precious fluid, and it struck him that their aspect was threatening. The next moment he set the idea down as being imaginative, and the result of the unreal-looking, dreamy scene before him. For it was impossible, he argued, for the slaves to be about to resent the treatment they were receiving.

“It’s my head all in a whirl,” he said to himself; “and it’s just like I used to feel when I was ill and half dead in the boat.”

But the next minute he felt that the first idea was correct; something was wrong, and it struck him that the prisoners were going to make an attack. But he could not be sure; the darkness was too thick, and the excitement and horror of the whole scene made his imagination play strange pranks. At one moment he could see right back into the fore part of the hold where it was crowded with writhing, struggling beings; the next the mist closed over it apparently, and he could only make out gleaming eyes and shadows sweeping toward him and fading away, to appear at the side or hovering over his head.

“Yes; it’s all from a disordered imagination,” he said to himself; and he had hardly come to this conclusion, when he knew that he was gazing at the real, for dimly-seen, there before him was a crowd of figures surrounding the two black sailors. A harsh sound arose—a mingling of muttered cries and savage growlings as of wild beasts; there was the noise of the buckets being knocked over, of a fierce struggle and heavy blows, and a hot, sickening wave of mephitic air was driven outward. Thoroughly alarmed now, Mark shouted for help, and was then thrust aside as one of the blacks whom he had brought down made for the hatchway, and in the brief glance he obtained in the light which shone down from above, he saw that the man was covered with blood.

For a moment or two, weak still from his late illness, Mark felt completely prostrate and unable to act; but he recovered himself as quickly, and started forward to grasp the black's arm.

"Hurt?" he cried.

The man dropped back from the ladder to gaze at him, and then uttered a few words excitedly as he pointed back into the forward part of the dark hold.

"Here, stand aside!" cried the lieutenant, as he stepped down into the noisome hold, followed by Tom Fillot and a couple of the crew, each man with sword or cutlass in hand. "Now, Mr Vandean, quick; an attack?"

"Yes, sir; the slaves attacked our two men. One of them's badly wounded."

At that moment a dead silence fell, and the big black's white shirt and trousers were visible, and he, too, now stepped forward into the light, while before he could speak a low groan came out from the darkness.

"I thought he was killed," cried Mark, and the man began to speak volubly and gesticulate, pointing back.

"Bah!" exclaimed Mr Russell. "We ought not to be here without an interpreter. He is not hurt; it is the other black. Stand fast, my lads, in case the poor wretches attack. Now, then, where are you hurt?"

This was to the second black sailor, whose white duck shirt was horrible with stains of blood, as he began to talk fast now and point forward.

"Wounds must be slight," cried the lieutenant. "Can you make out a word of what he says, Vandean?"

"No, sir; but let me try."

Mark pointed forward, and without a moment's hesitation the two black sailors plunged into the darkness and returned, half dragging, half carrying a ghastly-looking object into the square of light shed from above.

“Oh, here’s the wounded man, then,” cried the lieutenant. “Let’s get him up into the daylight.”

Mark pointed down at the slave, who was bleeding freely, and the big sailor now spoke out a few words fiercely, with the result that half a dozen nude slaves came shrinkingly forward, and in obedience to a gesture, lifted the wounded man and carried him up to the deck.

The officers and men followed, and the two black sailors came last, to pay no heed to the wounded man, but proceed at once to refill the buckets, and carry them down into the hold past the guard set over the hatchway. Then after bidding Bob Howlett to hoist a signal for the surgeon to come aboard, Mr Russell roughly bandaged the terrible wound the slave had upon his head, the others who had carried up the sufferer looking stupidly on, blinking and troubled by the sunlight, to which they had evidently been strangers for some time.

“Now,” said Mr Russell, as he rose, “we are in the dark as much as ever. Can’t you explain what was wrong, Mr Vandean?”

“No, sir; I saw a struggle, and one man seemed wounded.”

“And it was someone else. Tut—tut—tut! and we can’t understand a word. What a useful thing speech is, after all.”

Just then the two blacks came up for more water, and Mark tried to communicate with them, but only with the result that they looked puzzled till the midshipman pointed to the wounded man.

“How did it happen?” he said; and the big black looked at him heavily. Then he seemed to grasp the meaning of the question, and laughed excitedly.

Pointing to the wounded man lying on the deck, he ran to the group of slaves standing staring at him, with their foreheads wrinkled up and their eyes full of despair; he seized one, whose countenance assumed a stern look of anger as the black sailor pointed to him, and made the sign of striking a blow, pointing again at the wounded man.

“He evidently means that the man was wounded by his fellow-slave,” said

Mr Russell.

The black sailor watched the officer, and then thrust his hand behind the slave to take a short, flat piece of wood from the poor wretch's waistband —a piece of heavy wood, shaped something like a willow leaf.

"The weapon evidently," said Mr Russell; "but I don't see why he should wound his fellow-sufferer."

But the black sailor had not done with his explanation. He looked to see that the officers were watching him, and then placed the weapon in its owner's hand, which he raised, and said a few words to his fellow black with the blood-stained garb.

This man waited a moment to assist in the pantomimic explanation, and then, as his companion brought down the weapon towards his own head, he rushed up between them and received the blow, staggered away as if very much hurt, and, still acting, reeled and fell down beside the wounded man, pointing to him as he half rose, and then at the stains upon his own shirt.

"Well, what do you make of it?" said Mr Russell.

"I know, sir," cried Bob Howlett; "he wants you to understand that if we take them and make sailors of them, they'll kill all the slavers."

"Thank you, Mr Howlett. Now, then, Mr Vandean, what do you say?"

"I see now," cried Mark, eagerly. "What happened below helps me. That big fellow thought our man Taters was an enemy, and he tried to cut him down, but this poor fellow knew better, rushed between and received the blow."

"I'm inclined to think you are right," said Mr Russell. "Ah, here comes the doctor. Now, then, about getting these poor wretches up. Perhaps they'll come now."

He was right, for the task was easy. The blacks on deck, apathetic as they were, gradually comprehended that they had fallen into hands where they would be well treated, and after a few gestures and orders given by

Mark, the two black sailors turned to the slaves and spoke. The result was that the big, fierce-looking black who was answerable for the injury done to his fellow-prisoner went down on his knees before Soup, and touched the deck with his forehead before rising with some show of animation, and then going to the hatch, descended in a half-crippled way, and they heard his voice directly after.

By this time the doctor was on board, sniffing about with an air of the most intense disgust.

“Faugh!” he ejaculated; “how horrible! And no disinfectants. Hallo! wounded man, eh? Humph!”

He forgot everything else in the interest he took in his fresh case, while now, slowly and shrinkingly, the slaves began to come up from below, foul, weak from injuries, and suffering from the dreadful air that they had been forced to breathe. They were a terrible crowd to gaze upon. Men, women, and children, all herded together like cattle, and flinching away whenever a sailor went near, as if expecting a blow.

There were nearly a hundred when all were on deck, and the first thing done was to distribute food and water. The next, to arrange about their being rowed on board the *Nautilus*, while the schooner was burned.

“And the best thing too,” said the doctor. “Faugh! the vessel’s loathsome. Nothing like fire for purifying.”

“But we have to try first if we can get her off,” said the lieutenant.

“Then all I can say is I hope you will not,” said the doctor.

“But if we get her off,” said Mark, smiling, “it means that the slaves will stay on board here.”

“Eh? Does it? Oh, well then, I hope you will,” cried the doctor. “Now, Russell, have me rowed back. That fellow’s badly wounded, but he’ll soon get well.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Mark’s Rest is Disturbed.

The boat started back with the doctor, while the other took out an anchor right astern, the capstan was rigged, a good strain got upon the cable, and after a great deal of tugging with the handspikes the men gave a hearty cheer and began to strain harder, for the tide had risen a little, and the schooner gradually glided off into deeper water.

An answering cheer came back from the *Nautilus*, and a signal was hoisted, which Mr Russell read to mean, “Well done!”

Five minutes after they were lying at anchor, and Tom Fillot took the opportunity of passing to whisper to Mark,—

“We did tug at them bars, sir. It means no end o’ prize-money—the saving of a smart craft like this; but, beg pardon, sir, ain’t we going to have a bit of a wash and swab?”

“More signals, sir,” cried Bob, who was watching the *Nautilus* and the flags being run up.

“Yes, I see,” said the lieutenant. “Take the boat, Mr Howlett, and ask for stores to be sent on board here. We are to remain.”

Bob looked disappointed, and then pleased.

“You’re in for it, Van,” he whispered, as they walked to the gangway. “I say, shall I send you a bottle of eau-de-cologne with the stores?”

Mark made a gesture as if to kick him, but Bob dropped down into the boat, was rowed off, and in due time the supplies arrived.

“Not quite the sort of duty we expected, Vandean,” said the lieutenant, “but we must take the rough with the smooth, I suppose.”

“Shall we have to stop on board here?”

“Not a doubt about it, my lad; but she’s a valuable prize, and by to-morrow we’ll have her different from this, or know the reason why.”

He set to work giving orders after the men had been refreshed; and, now that the two black sailors grasped the object of the taking of the schooner, and comprehended that the slaves were to be set free, they began to work with tremendous energy. Though speaking a dialect somewhat different from that of the poor creatures on board, they made them understand that their lot had been bettered, and, as soon as this was understood, a complete change came over the scene. The women laughed and cried, and the men evinced a desire to help, so that before night the hold had been cleansed and ventilated, and the deck opened to let in light, till, though still far from being pure, the place began to be bearable.

The task had not been completed, though, without attendant horrors, for upon the first steps being taken to examine the hold, no less than six poor creatures, victims to the hideous traffic, were found lying where they had fallen—dead.

It was horrible in the extreme, Mark felt, but nothing else could be done, and the sufferers were committed to the deep by their more fortunate companions, with a few wails of grief and beatings of the breast. Then all was over, and the cleansing went on, till Mr Russell gave orders for the men to cease.

“And pretty well time,” grumbled Tom Fillot. “There’s been some hundred millions o’ buckets o’ water slooshed about this here schooner.”

“More or less, Tom,” said Mark, laughing.

“Well, sir, I dessay you’re right,” said the man, “for I didn’t count; but I’ve been hauling up buckets and swabbing till I don’t seem to have no arms. Howsoever, we are a little bit more decent, and I don’t think we shall have anything on our consciences to-night.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think any niggers’ll die ’cause of our not taking care on ’em, sir, that’s all.”

Just before dark, Bob Howlett was back on board with a despatch for the lieutenant, and soon after he had gone Mr Russell told Mark the contents.

“We’re to make sail as soon as there’s a breath of wind,” he said, “and steer for Port Goldby, so as to get the blacks ashore and in charge of the authorities as quickly as possible. But there will be no wind to-night, my lad, and I shouldn’t be surprised if it was calm all day to-morrow. Still, there, one never knows what the weather is likely to be.”

“It’s calm enough now,” said Mark, as he looked shoreward over the glassy sea to where a thin haze veiled the shore. “How hot it is!”

“Yes; Africa deserves its character,” said the lieutenant, smiling. Then, as he looked toward the groups of blacks—slaves no longer—lying about the deck in comparative bliss, after what they had gone through—“I must send those poor creatures below,” he said. “I don’t think there is the most remote idea among them of an attempt to turn against us, but the land is near, and they might think they would like to strike off for liberty, and it would be a cruelty to let them go back to slavery, as they would if they got ashore.”

“It does seem hard to send them down into that stifling hold,” said Mark; “but I suppose it must be done.”

“Yes, and at once,” said Mr Russell, firmly. “Call that big black.”

Mark went forward and summoned Soup, who came smiling, to look from one to the other inquiringly.

With some difficulty he was made to understand what was wanted; and as soon as he did he called his companion, and in a very few minutes they had cleared the deck, the women and children going below docilely enough, and the men making not the slightest opposition, though giving a longing look round at the soft evening sky.

“No trouble there,” said Mr Russell. “Now, Vandean, I propose that we divide the night. I’ll take the watch, and will call you for the next, unless the wind springs up, and then of course it will be all hands on deck. Who will you have in your watch—Dance, or Fillot?”

“Fillot,” said Mark, promptly.

“Most amusing companion, but Dance is the better seaman.”

“Shall I have Dance, then, sir?”

“I would rather you did, my lad, as the responsibility is great, and I should lie down to rest with more confidence. Not that I doubt you,” he hastened to add. “There, I’ll join you at a bit of supper at once. Things seem pretty comfortable in the cabin, and, as it is our prize, we may make free with what we like. Come along.”

Mark gave a sharp look round as they walked toward the cabin-hatch, to see through the hot glow the *Nautilus* at anchor, looking trim, and with every yard squared. She seemed to stand up out of the water in the transparent atmosphere, with every rope clearly seen, but there was a peculiar look seaward, as if the transparent darkness were sweeping over the ocean to shut her in. He looked shoreward to faintly discern the tops of some palms, but all below these was shut in by haze which rose from the mouth of the river.

“Doesn’t look a healthy place, and this can’t be a healthy ship, Vandean, but we must make the best of it, and be off to sea at the first chance.”

They both stood at the head of the cabin stairs, and took another look round, to see if anything had been left undone; and just then Dance the coxswain came up and touched his hat.

“Shall I hoist an anchor-light, sir, as soon as it’s dark?” said the man, respectfully.

“No,” replied the lieutenant, decisively. “No one is likely to run us down, here. Now, Vandean.”

He led the way into the cabin, saying, “We don’t want to show people ashore where we are. Hah! that’s right. This is Tom Fillot’s doing. He’s a handy fellow.”

He pointed to the preparations for a meal of no mean proportions, for the skipper of the schooner and his crew had been liberally provided for by their owners; and now, feeling hungry for the first time that day, Mark ate a hearty supper. After a little chat they went on deck again, to find that the sky was now literally black, and the only thing visible as they lay there in the utter silence was a star-like light lying apparently close by—a light

which Mark knew at once must be that of the *Nautilus*.

“Why, she has come in closer while we’ve been below,” he said.

“On the contrary, she has run out with the tide, and is a good two miles away. Let’s have a look round.”

The first movement was to the sentry on guard over the hatch, from which came the sounds of heavy breathing, and the man reported in a whisper that the blacks had not made another sound.

The rest of the watch were next visited, and there was nothing to report.

“There,” said the lieutenant, “all’s well. Go and sleep, my lad. I’ll keep a faithful watch over you; when your turn comes do the same for me. Good-night.”

“Good-night, sir,” said Mark, eagerly taking the hand extended to him, and gripping it firmly. Then going below, feeling weary, but unwilling to leave the deck, he crept into the skipper’s comfortable bunk to rest himself, feeling certain that he would not sleep. For it was very hot down there, in spite of the open cabin window; the mosquitoes were uttering their tiresome fine-drawn hum, and he was excited by the events of the day.

“It’s like going to sleep on the edge of a volcano,” he thought. “Suppose the blacks do rise, and, led by our two fellows, attack us. We should be taken by surprise, and it would be all over in a minute. I can’t go to sleep. I’ll lie still a bit, and then go on deck.”

Mark lay still a bit, but did not go on deck, for he dropped off into a deep sleep, which seemed only to have lasted five minutes when Mr Russell came and roughly told him to turn out, flashing the lanthorn in his eyes as he awoke, puzzled and confused at the rough way in which his fellow-officer spoke. Then with a start he grasped the reality.

It was not the lieutenant holding the light, but someone else, who growled,—“Make so much as a sound and it will be your last—all but the splash going overboard. D’yer see this? Guess you do. Mind it don’t go off.”

There was no need for guessing; the object named was plain enough in the light of the lanthorn, being a pistol barrel, whose muzzle was about two feet from the lad's head.

Chapter Eighteen.

A Confused Awakening.

"Now then, out you come."

Mark Vandean did come out of the bunk in remarkably quick time, but he was still confused, and his brain refused to solve the puzzle before him, so he, to use a familiar expression, pulled himself together. The young officer resented being spoken to in this rough manner and threatened by a stranger with an American accent, and in as haughty a tone as he could assume he cried,—

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Come, I like that. Hear him. Oh, all right," cried the man, as there was a hoarse chorus of laughter. "Who'm I, eh, my bantam cock? Waal, I'm Cap'n Ephrum Bynes, o' Charleston, South Car'lina. That's who I am. And what am I doing here? I'm kicking a set o' sarcy Britishers out o' my ship. Now you know that."

"Where's Lieutenant Russell?"

"Down in the boat, my sarcy Tom chicken; and that's all you've got to know. Say another word, and I'll have you pitched into the sea among the sharks instead of into the boat. So mind that. Bring him on deck."

Rough hands seized Mark on the instant, and as a man carrying the lanthorn stepped back, Mark saw the legs of the Yankee skipper ascending the companion ladder, and a minute later he was rudely dragged on deck, his heart beating wildly as he tried to pierce the darkness around in search of his companions. But all was pitchy black, and though his eyes wandered in search of the bright star-like lamp of the *Nautilus*, it was not to be seen. The next moment he knew why; a

pleasant breeze was blowing off shore, hot but powerful enough to be acted upon, and in those brief moments he knew that the vessel must have sailed.

He had little time for thought. He was suddenly lifted from the deck, and he began to struggle wildly, striking out with his fists, but all in vain.

“Over with him!” cried the Yankee skipper, and a cry escaped from Mark’s lips as he felt himself swung out over the side of the schooner, to fall, he expected, splash into the sea. He had time to think all this, for thought flies fast in emergencies, but his fall was partly upon someone below, partly upon the thwart of a boat, and a deep groan came from close to his ear as he looked up and saw the lanthorn resting on the schooner’s bulwark, and several faces staring down.

“My compliments to your skipper,” said a mocking voice, “if you ever ketch him, and tell him he’s welkim to my boat. I’ll take a glass o’ liquor with him if ever he comes our way.—Now then, shove off, you there forward. If you stop another minute, I’ll send a pig o’ ballast through your bottom.”

This was said with a savage snarl, and as Mark struggled up into a sitting position, he felt the boat begin to move.

“Here, ahoy, below there! You’d best lay your head to the north,” came the voice again, as the light was suddenly hidden or put out. “Your skipper made signals when the wind rose, and we answered ’em for you. Get your oars out sharp, or you won’t overtake them this year.”

Then all was silence and darkness save where the movement of an oar sculling over the stern made the water flash and gleam with phosphorescence, and raised up ripples of pale lambent, golden light.

“Who’s that?” said Mark, in a whisper.

“On’y me, sir,” replied a familiar voice, in company with a smothered groan.

“Tom Fillot?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” came back dismally. “I’ve got us out o’ reach o’ that pig o’ ballast.”

“But, Tom,” cried Mark, excitedly, “what does it mean? Where’s Mr Russell?”

“Somewheres underneath you, sir. I think you’re a-sitting on him.”

“There’s someone lying here,” cried Mark.

“Yes, sir, several someuns,” said Tom Fillot. “Oh, my poor head!”

“But you don’t tell me what it all means,” cried Mark, angrily.

“Didn’t know as it wanted no telling on, sir. Thought you knowed.”

“But I know nothing. I was roused up, dragged out of the cabin, and thrown down into the boat.”

“Yes, sir; so was we, and not very gently, nayther.”

“Then the—” began Mark, but he did not finish. “That’s it, sir. You’ve hit it. The Yankee captain come back from up the river somewhere in his boat as quiet as you please, and the first I knowed on it was that it was dark as pitch as I leaned my back against the bulwarks, and stood whistling softly, when—*bang*, I got it on the head, and as I went down three or four of ’em climbed aboard. ‘What’s that? You there, Fillot?’ I heered in a dull sort o’ way, and then the poor lufftenant went down with a groan, and same moment I hears a scrufflin’ forrard and aft, cracks o’ the head, and falls. Minute arter there was a row going on in the fo’c’s’le. I heered that plain, sir, and wanted to go and help my mates, but when I was half up, seemed as if my head begun to spin like a top, and down I went again, and lay listening to the row below. There was some fighting, and I heered Joe Dance letting go awful. My, he did swear for a minute, and then he was quiet, and there was a bit o’ rustling, and I hears a voice say, ‘Guess that’s all. Show the light.’ Then there seemed to me to be a light walking about the deck with a lot o’ legs, and I knowed that they were coming round picking up the pieces. Sure enough they was, sir, and they pitched all the bits of us overboard into a boat alongside; and I knowed we hadn’t half kept our watch, and the Yankee skipper had come back and took his

schooner.”

“Oh, Tom Fillot!” groaned Mark. “And was that all?”

“No, sir; for I heered the skipper say, ‘Anyone been in the cabin?’ And when no one spoke he began to cuss ’em for a set o’ idgits, and they all went below with the lanthorn, and come up again along o’ you. My word, Mr Vandean, sir, how you must have slep’!”

“Oh, Tom Fillot!” cried Mark again.

“Yes, and it is ‘Oh, Tom Fillot,’ sir,” groaned the poor fellow. “My skull’s cracked in three or four places sure as a gun.”

“And the others. Oh! the others. Are they killed?”

“I dunno, sir. I ain’t—not quite. Sims to me that they’d got bats, and they hit us with ’em like they do the pigs in the north country, or the cod-fish aboard the fishing smacks. My poor head feels as if it’s opening and shutting like a fish’s gills every time I moves my mouth.”

“Are all the men here, Tom?”

“Yes, sir; I think so. If they’re not, it’s ’cause they’re dead.”

“This is Mr Russell; I can feel his uniform,” whispered Mark; “and he’s dead—no, I can feel his heart beating. Come here, Tom, and help me.”

“I’ll come, sir; but I can’t help you, and it don’t seem no use for me to be waggling this ’ere oar about. Just as well let the tide send us along.”

There was the sound of the oar being laid along the thwart, and then of someone stumbling.

“That was most nigh overboard, sir. Wish it warn’t so dark. Why, it’s black. What’s that?”

There was a creaking sound from a little distance, and the man whispered,—

“They’re making sail, sir, and they’ll creep out afore morning, and get right away.”

“With those poor creatures on board.”

“Just as we’d made ’em clean and comf’able, sir. Oh, my poor head!”

“Let’s see to Mr Russell first, and then I’ll bind up your head as well as I can.”

“How’s one to see to Mr Russell, sir? Why, plagues o’ Egypt’s nothing to darkness like this.”

Mark bent over his brother officer, and passed his hand over his face and head.

“He’s not bleeding,” he whispered, impressed as he was by the darkness and their terrible position.

“More am I, sir, but I’m precious bad all the same. Don’t s’pose any one’s bleeding, but they got it hard same as I did. Wood out here ain’t like wood at home. Oak’s hard enough, but iron-wood’s like what they call it.”

“Who is this?” said Mark, as, after gently letting Mr Russell’s head sink back, his hands encountered another face.

“I dunno, sir. It was every man for hisself, and I was thinking about Tom Fillot, AB, and no one else. What’s he feel like?”

“Like one of our men.”

“But is it a hugly one with very stiff whiskers? If so be it is, you may take your davy it’s Joe Dance.”

“How am I to know whether he’s ugly?” cried Mark, petulantly.

“By the feel, sir. Try his nose. Joe Dance’s nose hangs a bit over to starboard, and there’s a dent in it just about the end where he chipped it agin a shot case.”

“Oh, I can’t tell all that,” cried Mark—“Yes, his nose has a little dent in it, and his whiskers are stiff.”

“Then that’s Joe Dance, sir.”

“Avast there! Let my head alone, will yer?” came in a low, deep growl.

“That’s Joe, sir, safe enough. Harkee there! Hear ’em?”

Sundry creaking sounds came out of the darkness some distance away now, and Tom Fillot continued in a whisper,—

“They’re hysting all the sail they can, sir. Look! you can see the water briming as she sails. They’re going same way as we. Tide’s taking us.”

“Oh, Tom Fillot, I oughtn’t to have gone to sleep. I ought to have stopped on deck.”

“No yer oughtn’t, sir. Your orders was to take your watch below, and that was enough for you. Dooty is dooty, sir, be it never so dootiful, as the proverb says.”

“But if I had been on deck I might have heard them coming, Tom.”

“And got a rap o’ the head like the pore fellows did, sir.”

“Well, perhaps so, Tom. I wonder why they didn’t strike me as they did you.”

“’Cause you’re a boy, sir, though you are a young gentleman, and a orficer. Fine thing to be a boy, sir. I was one once upon a time. Wish I was a boy at home now, instead o’ having a head like this here.”

“I’m thinking of what the captain will say,” muttered Mark, despondently, as he ignored the man’s remark.

“Say, sir? Why, what such a British officer as Cap’n Maitland’s sure to say, sir, as he won’t rest till he’s blown that there schooner right out of the water.”

“And those poor blacks,” sighed Mark.

“Ah, it’s hard lines for them poor chaps, and the women and bairns too, even if they are niggers. Oh, if I’d only got that there skipper by the scruff of his neck and the waistband of his breeches! Sharks might have him for all I should care. In he’d go. Hookey Walker, how my head do ache all round!”

“I’m very sorry, Tom Fillot.”

“Which I knows you are, sir; and it ain’t the first trouble as we two’s been in together, so cheer up, sir. Daylight’ll come some time, and then we’ll heave to and repair damages.”

Just then there was a low groan from forward.

“That’s one of our blacky-toppers, sir. ’Tarn’t a English groan. You feel; you’ll know him by his woolly head, and nose. If he’s got a nose hooked one way, it’s Soup. If it’s hooked t’other way—cocks up—it’s Taters.”

“The hair is curly,” said Mark, who was investigating.

“P’raps it’s Dick Bannock, sir. There, I said it warn’t an English groan.”

By this time some of the men were recovering from the stunning effect of the blows they had all received, and there were sounds of rustling and scuffles.

“Steady there, mate,” growled one man. “What yer doing on?”

“Well, get off o’ me, then,” said another.

“Here, hi! What are you doing in my bunk? Hullo! Ahoy there! where are we now?”

“Steady there, and don’t shout, my lads.”

“All right, sir,” growled a voice. “I was a bit confoosed like! Oh, my head!”

“Ay, mate,” said Tom Fillot, “and it’s oh, my, all our heads. Beg pardon,

sir, for the liberty, but if you'd do it for me, I should know the worst, and I could get on then. I'm all nohow just now, and it worries me."

"Do what, Tom?" said Mark.

"Just pass your finger round my head, and tell me for sartin whether it's broke or no. It feels all opening and shutting like. Go it, sir; don't you be feared. I won't holler."

Mark leaned forward and felt the man's head.

"It's not fractured, Tom," he said. "If it had been it would have made you feel very different from this. You would have been insensible."

"Well, that what's I am, sir, and always have been. I never was a sensible chap. But are you sure as it ain't broke, sir?"

"Certain, Tom."

"Then who cares? I don't mind a bit o' aching, and I'm ready for any game you like. What do you say, sir, to trying to captivate the schooner again?"

"You and I, Tom?"

"Well, it ain't a very strong force, sir, be it?"

"We must wait for daylight, Tom, and I hope by then some of the lads will be able to pull an oar."

"Ay, ay, sir, o' course."

"I'm ready now," said Dick Bannock, with his voice sounding husky out of the darkness; and there was silence, broken only by a groan or two for a few minutes, during which Mark, feeling the terrible responsibility of his position, tried to make some plan as to his future proceedings, but only to be compelled to come back to the conclusion that there was nothing to be done but wait for morning.

At one moment insane ideas as to the recapture of the schooner came to

trouble him, and this brought to mind what ought to have been his first duty as the officer upon whom the command had suddenly fallen.

“Tom Fillot,” he cried, excitedly, “go round the boat as carefully as you can, and count the men, ourselves included. We ought to be eleven, ought we not?”

“Let’s see, sir. Two orficers is two; six AB’s and coxswain seven, and seven and two’s nine; and the two nig— blacks, sir; nine and two’s ’leven. That’s right, sir ’leven.”

“Go round then, and count.”

“I think they could all answer to their names, sir, now, if I might be so bold.”

“Call them over, then.”

“Ay, ay, sir. Here goes, then, lads. First orficer, Mr Russell, sir, and you, sir’s, two as we needn’t count. Joe Dance, answer to your name.”

“Ay, ay,” came in a growl.

“Dick Bannock.”

“Here.”

“Bill Billings.”

“What’s left on me, mate.”

“Sam Grote.”

“Here, but ain’t got no head.”

“Bob Stepney.”

“Here; and wish I warn’t,” came surlily out of the darkness.

“Don’t you be sarcy ’fore your orficers, Bob, or there may be a row,” said Tom Fillot, sharply.

“I can’t see no orficers, messmate,” said the same voice.

“That’ll do, Bob Stepney. That’s cheek. Tim Dunning.”

“That’s me.”

“All here, sir, and able to use their tongues. Fisties, too, I dessay.”

“The two blacks!” said Mark, quickly, and with a feeling of thankfulness to find matters so far well.

“Ay, ay, sir. Thought I’d give the white uns a chance first,” said Tom Fillot. “Now, you two, try and understand plain English. Answer to your names. Soup.”

There was no reply.

“Taters.”

Still no reply.

“Not here?” said Mark, anxiously.

“Don’t sabbee, p’raps, sir. I’ll try again.”

“Taters.”

No answer.

“Soup.”

No reply.

“Soup and Taters.”

“Aren’t aboard,” growled several voices in chorus. “I’m ’fraid the Soup and Taters is done, sir,” said Tom Fillot in a low voice.

“Oh, man, man, how can you try to joke at a time like this!” cried Mark, angrily.

“’Tarn’t no joke, sir,” cried Tom Fillot. “I’m sorry as you are, for they were getting to be two good messmates. They’d on’y got minds like a couple o’ boys, but the way in which they took to their chew o’ ’baccy was wonderful to behold.”

“The men must have overlooked them,” cried Mark. “They were below asleep.”

“Nay, sir, they didn’t care to go below. They was both asleep curled up forrard under the bulwarks. They’d had so much being below, that they shied at going down a hatchway.”

“Then what do you think about them, Tom?” cried Mark, excitedly.

There was no reply.

“Why don’t you answer, man?”

“Didn’t like to tell you, sir,” said Tom Fillot, quietly.

“Tell me what you are thinking at once.”

“Well, sir, I thinks same as my mates do here. Them piratical sharks o’ slavers didn’t dare to be too hard on us because they knowed if they was ketched arterwards it meant a bit o’ hemp round the neck, and a dance on nothing at all in the air; but when it comes to blacks, they’re no more account to them than blackberries as grows on brambles. Strikes me they give them poor chaps a crack o’ the head apiece, and knocked ’em down, same as they did we, but they wouldn’t take the trouble to carry them and pitch them into a boat. They just chucked them overboard at once.”

“Oh, impossible!” cried Mark, excitedly. “They could not be such brutes.”

“What! not them, sir?” cried Tom Fillot, indignantly. “Harkye here, messmates; I says as chaps as’d half kill such a orficer as Mr Russell, who’s as fine a gen’leman as ever stepped, ’d murder a King as soon as look at him.”

“Ay, ay,” came in a low growl.

“And if any o’ you thinks different to my sentiments, let him speak out like a man.”

“That’s what we all think, messmet,” came in another growl.

“And there you are, sir, and them’s fax. They chucked them two pore chaps overboard, and, speaking up for my messmates and self, I says we don’t hold with killing nobody ’cept in the name of dooty; but here’s a set o’ miserable beggars as goes about buying and selling the pore niggers, and treating ’em worse than they would a box o’ worms to go fishing with. Why, it’s murder, sir, wholesale, retail, and for exportation, as the man said over his shop door in our town o’ Bristol, and if we can only get at ’em—well, I won’t say what we’ll do, but if there ain’t some fatal accidents that day, my name ain’t Tom.”

“That’s so, messmet—that’s so,” came in another deep growl.

“It’s horrible, horrible,” groaned Mark; and he bent over Mr Russell’s face, and tried to make out whether there was any sign of returning consciousness.

“At a time like this, messmets,” whispered Tom Fillot to those nearest to him, “I’d be quiet. Mr Vandean’s in a deal of trouble about the lufftenant.”

“Hi! all on you,” came sharply from the forward part of the boat, which rocked a little from some one changing his position; and as it rocked tiny waves of light like liquid moonbeams flowed away to starboard and port, while dull sparks of light appeared in the water down below.

“What’s the matter there?” said Mark, rousing himself up to speak. “Be silent, and keep the boat still.”

“Ay, ay,” growled Tom Fillot, but the boat still swayed.

“Do you hear there?” cried Mark, sharply. “Who’s that?”

“Hi! all on you!” came again.

“Did you hear my order, Dance?” cried Mark. “Sit down, man. Do you want to capsize the boat?”

“I want my hitcher,” said the man, sharply. “Who’s been a-meddling with my boathook? it ain’t in its place.”

“Sit down, man. This is not the first cutter, but one of the schooner’s boats. Your boathook is not here.”

“Do you hear, all on you? I want my hitcher. Some on you’s been and hidden it for a lark. Give it here.”

“Are you deaf, Dance?” cried Mark, angrily. “How dare you, sir! Sit down.”

“I know,” continued the man, who was tumbling about forward. “Some on you’s took it for a game, and Lufftenant Staples ain’t the man to stand no larks. ‘Where’s that there boathook, Joe Dance?’ he says. ‘Produce it ’twonce, sir, or—’ ‘Ay, ay, sir. Starn all it is. Where are you coming? Pull. Starboard there—On Portsmouth hard in Portsmouth town. Three cheers, my merry lads—Now then, pull—pull hard—Ay, ay, sir—Now all together, my lads!’”

As the coxswain was speaking from out of the darkness, to the wonderment of all, Tom Fillot whispered quickly to his young officer,—

“It’s the crack he got, sir. He’ll be overboard if we don’t mind. Poor chap, he has gone right off his nut.”

Creeping forward past the men, Tom made for where Joe Dance was speaking loudly, evidently under the belief that he was talking to a number of people around. Then, stamping about in the boat, his words came forth more rapidly, but in quite a confused gabble, of which hardly a single word was comprehensible. Invisible though he was, it was evident that he was growing more and more excited, for his words flowed strangely, swiftly, and then became a mere babble, as, with a shout, he rushed aft at the touch of Tom Fillot.

“Stop him, some on you; he’s mad!” roared Tom Fillot; and as instinctively Mark started up, it was to be seized by the poor wretch in his delirium, and held back, in spite of his struggles, more and more over the side of the boat toward the sea.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Disabled Crew.

“I thought it was all over with you, sir,” said Tom Fillot, who, regardless of those over whom he had passed, had plunged aft and thrown himself upon the coxswain, bearing him and the young midshipman down into the stern-sheets of the boat, and holding the former till he was dragged away, laid in the bottom, and held down forward, in spite of his struggles and cries.

“I thought so, too, Tom. Ugh! how horrible! As if our position was not bad enough before; it is too hard to have a madman on board.”

“’Tis, sir; but I wonder we ain’t all mad. My head’s bad enough for me to be. Are you much hurt, sir?”

“More frightened than hurt. I thought we should have been over into the black water.”

“And it you had been, he’d ha’ drowned you, as sure as sure, sir, for we couldn’t ha’ found you in the darkness.”

“And the worst of it is, I don’t know what to do,” said Mark. “If Dr Whitney were only here.”

“No use to wish, sir. If it was, I’d wish the *Naughtylass* was here to try and catch the schooner and her crew. There is one thing to wish for, though, and that’s for to-morrow morning to come instead of to-night, sir.”

“Yes, and I’m afraid it’s a long way off yet,” said Mark, with a sigh, as he looked round at the veil of black darkness which shut them in, and then sat listening to the struggles and cries of the unfortunate coxswain, till by degrees they grew weaker and weaker, and the men who had been holding him relaxed their efforts, for their prisoner sank into a heavy stupor.

Startling and painful as this episode in their night’s adventures had been,

it had had one advantage, that of making the time pass more swiftly; and in consequence it was with a feeling of wonder that the young officer turned sharply round as Tom Fillot said drily,—

“Good morning, sir.”

“What! What do you mean?”

“First signs of it, sir. Listen! you can hear the birds beginning to pipe.”

“Yes; that’s a bird’s whistle,” said Mark. “Then we can’t be so very far from the shore.”

“That’s right, sir, and what I hope is that we’re not very far from the *Naughtylass*, and that they’ll be at work with the spy-glasses to see where we are.”

“And I’ve got to face the captain,” thought Mark, “and give him an account of our night’s work. How shall I do it? It’s horrible to go back like this.”

As the time glided on, the sounds grew more frequent from the shore, and by degrees there was a lightening around them, and they made out that they were slowly gliding along over the calm sea beneath a thick canopy of mist, some eight or ten feet above their head; and this was gradually growing opalescent, and shot with bright tints, till all beneath was fairly light, and the midshipman looked round for the *Nautilus* and the schooner.

But there were no signs of either, perhaps because the mist prevented them from seeing fifty yards in any direction.

There was plenty to see, however, inboard, and at the first glance round, before his gaze was concentrated upon his officer, Mark Vandean’s heart sank within him at the sight of the wretched, dilapidated men, whom he had seen on the previous evening looking so smart and active. To a man they were battered, bruised, and bore traces of the terrible struggle through which they had passed. The coxswain lay asleep, and, upon examining him, he seemed cool, and with the hope that he might wake up calm and collected, Mark gave one look at Tom Fillot—who was the most disfigured of all, the blows he had received having caused his face

to swell up till he was hardly recognisable—and then devoted his attention to Mr Russell, who lay senseless.

It seemed terrible to have him once more lying helpless in the bottom of the boat, and as the lad gazed at his companion, he began to think it would be wise to study surgery, ready for acting in an emergency like this.

Mark did what he could with Tom Fillot's help, doubling up a jacket for a pillow, and laying the lieutenant at his ease, before taking advantage of the mist beginning to disappear beneath the powerful rays of the morning sun to try and make out their position.

This was soon done. They were about a couple of miles from the shore, and the tide was carrying them southward right away from the river at whose mouth the schooner had been ashore, for the water was perfectly clear here, while there it had been muddy and discoloured.

Getting a clear view northward as the sun rose higher, both Mark and Tom Fillot carefully scanned the horizon in search of the *Nautilus*, but she was not in view. There was a possibility of her being round a headland which stretched out some ten miles away, but that was all.

The next search was for the schooner; and, as she was nowhere in sight seaward, they had to content themselves with the possibility of her having taken refuge in some river or creek, such as were plentiful enough on the low-lying shore.

Mark thought of his previous experience in an open boat, as he looked at their position, lying there with a crew suffering from the effects of their encounter—two men seriously injured, and neither provisions nor water. As to weapons, some of the men had preserved theirs, but others were unarmed.

Tom Fillot watched his officer as he looked round, and then ventured an observation.

"Looks lively, sir, don't it?"

"It's horrible, Tom; but we must act, and at once."

“Right, sir, and we’re ready. Four on us can take an oar well enough, if you’ll give the word.”

“We must row in shore and coast along till we come to a stream.”

“Not row out after the ship, sir?”

“Without food or water? Have you forgotten our last trip?” cried Mark.

“No, sir, and never shall forget it,” said the man, with a shiver. “You’re right, sir, of course. Water we must have, victuals if we can get any. Nothing like having an officer with you, clever as you may think yourself.”

Five minutes later the men were rowing steadily toward the land, while Mark rejoiced at the only piece of good fortune he had encountered since the previous night when he lay down, and that was in the fact that to get rid of the party who had captured the schooner, the slaver captain had not scrupled to send them adrift in his own boat, one which proved to be light, swift, strong, and admirably adapted for facing the heavy swell that deluged the shore.

Mark’s time was pretty well divided between steering, watching his patients, and keeping a look-out for an inlet into which the boat could be run. So as not to weary the men, he made them row with the tide until they had gone south some miles, and he was hesitating as to whether he ought not to turn back, when there were signs ahead of the mouth of a river whose banks were heavily timbered. These signs proved to be correct, and in half an hour the boat was steered into a narrow canal-like channel among the mangrove growth, made fast to a stem, and the men, feverish—hot and suffering, drank eagerly of the swiftly rushing water, forgetting its muddiness in the delicious coolness it imparted to their burning throats; while Fillot and his young officer busied themselves, as they lay in the shade of the overhanging trees, in bathing the heads of the two sufferers, in each case winning for reward sighs of satisfaction and content.

“Hah!” ejaculated Tom Fillot, when, after holding down his face close to the water, and drinking for some time like a horse, he sat up with a tin baler in his hands, sipping from the full vessel, enjoying himself, and making comments for his comrades to hear.

He had tried to smile, but the effort consequent upon the state of his swollen face was too painful, and he gave that up.

“Yer health, messmets,” he said, raising the baler, “and wishing us all out of our difficulties.”

He took another sip of the muddy fluid, and nodded as he passed the tin to the next man.

“Drink hearty, messmet,” he said, “and pass it on. This is something like water. Reg’lar strong slab stuff as has got plenty o’ victuals in it as well as drink. Reg’lar meaty water, like soup.”

“Why, it’s on’y mud, mate,” said the man who held the tin; “hadn’t we better let it settle?”

“What for? Drink, my hearty. What’s mud but dust o’ the earth made wet? Well, we’re all made o’ the dust o’ the earth, ain’t we, and consequently wet dust’s just the stuff to make yer grow strong again. Deal better than salt junk and pickled pig and biscuit, I can tell yer. There, tip it up. It’s wonderful filling at the price.”

The man laughed, and emptied the baler.

“’Tarn’t bad, mate,” he said, as he leaned over the side to refill the tin.

“Bad? I should think not. I feel like a noo man.”

“And you looks it, too, matey,” said the other grinning. “I shouldn’t ha’ knowed you with that boiled duff fizz-mahogany o’ yourn. How much bigger’s it going to get?”

“Well, of all the pot calling kettle black as ever I knowed on,” said Tom Fillot, “that’s about the rummest. Why, your head’s all o’ one side like an ugly turmut, and your eyes is on’y two slits.”

“We ain’t none on us got much to boast on, ’cept our orficer,” said Dick Bannock. “Pass that there tin.”

“To be sure,” said Tom Fillot, “and handsome is as handsome does. Might

be a deal worse off, mates. Drink away; the mud won't hurt us. We're in the shade and got plenty o' water. Different to being right out at sea in a calm, eh, Mr Vandean, sir?"

"Don't talk about it, my lad," said Mark. "But look, Joe Dance is getting up. Pray don't let him break loose again."

For the coxswain suddenly sat up and stared about him wildly. Then calming down, he cried,—

"Got a drink o' water, messmets?"

"Plenty, my lad," said Tom Fillot, passing the tin. "How's your head this morning?"

"Bit achey," said the coxswain, who took the tin and drained it.

"Hah!" he ejaculated, as he drew a long, deep breath, "that's good, but you forgot to send it through the skipper's pilfer."

"Warn't time, matey," said Tom watching him curiously. "'Sides, pilfered water ain't good for you."

"Feel better this morning, Dance?" said Mark.

"Yes, sir, thankye sir. Head aches a deal and feels muzzy like, and I didn't sleep quite as I should like. Too much bad dream to please me."

"No wonder, mate," struck in Tom Fillot. "Having your head rubbed so hard with a big bat ain't good for no one."

Mark sat by his brother officer in the comparative coolness trying to think out some plan to adopt, for though they were resting in the shade, and the agonies of thirst were assuaged, he knew that it would not be long before they were all suffering from hunger, and he shuddered as he thought of the tales he had heard respecting the straits men had been driven to when perishing for want of food in an open boat.

But though he thought long and patiently, no idea came to him better than for them to coast along till they came abreast of some village, though he

felt very little hope of meeting with such good fortune upon that sparsely inhabited shore. Further north there were towns and villages, but these were hundreds of miles away.

There was a possibility of their finding a native village, the home of some black chief, if they proceeded up the river; but it was chance work, and, unless compelled, Mark shrank from leaving the coast and cutting himself off from the chance of being seen by the *Nautilus* if she came back in search of them. So he decided to keep along the shore.

And now he blamed himself bitterly for his ignorance. For if he had devoted a little time to studying the charts, he might have had a fair knowledge of the coast, and the chance of finding some trading settlement north or south; while now, as he told himself, here he was in command of a boat, and, boy as he was, answerable to his superior officer for the lives of the men. Accident had placed him in his present position, but then officers had, as he knew, to be prepared for such emergencies, and he was not ready in the slightest degree.

He made a vow to make up for lost time if the opportunity occurred again, and began once more to examine Mr Russell's state.

The insensibility continued still, and the faint hope he had nursed of the lieutenant recovering sufficiently to relieve him of his responsibility died away, so he landed with Fillot and began to look about him.

The place he had selected at the river's mouth, for the sake of the shade and water, was hidden from any vessel passing, but it was so suited for their purpose that he felt it would be unwise to change it, as they could row out if a vessel hove in sight, and a good watch would be kept. Anything was better than exposing the men to the broiling sun, weak as they were with their injuries, and he felt that such a course would be fatal to Mr Russell, so he determined to stay, at all events till the heat of the day had passed, and then make the men row steadily north.

He had just come to this conclusion, when he caught sight of Tom Fillot's occupation, which was the unravelling of the boat's painter.

"What's that for, Fillot?" he asked, sharply.

“Well, sir, I couldn’t see no fruit trees nor no fields o’ corn ashore, so I thought the best thing to do would be to have a try at ketching a fish.”

Chapter Twenty.

What Mark said to the Crew.

The position of the men would have been delightful if they had had a fair stock of provisions. For the cool water rippled by their boat, there was a refreshing breeze in the shady trees, and a pleasant sensation of dreamy repose and restfulness came over all as they lay about watching the dazzling sea and beautiful verdant tropic shore.

And as he gazed, Mark felt that undoubtedly fruit of some kind could be found sufficient to sustain life; and, with the determination to wait till another day, when the men would be better able to act, forgetful of the fact that fasting would make them more unfit, he thought of landing again directly after daylight, for a search, and then went to the boat and sat back to gaze out at sea.

“Mr Vandean, sir! Mr Vandean!”

“Eh? Yes! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing sir, only I couldn’t wake you up.”

“Was I asleep?”

“Yes, sir; we’ve all been asleep, more shame for me to say so, and the lads have only just woke me up.”

“Oh, it’s horrible!” cried Mark; “how can I ever trust myself again?”

“Oh, don’t you take on about that, sir: human natur’s human natur. Everybody’s weak and queer with the knocking about we had, and the proper thing for us was to have a good snooze, and we’ve only been getting ready to do a good night’s work.”

Mark looked at Mr Russell, who lay breathing comfortably enough, and then, in a stern way, he gave orders for the boat to be unmoored, and Dance rose at once, seeming feeble, but quite in his right mind, and ready to resent an attempt on the part of Fillot to relieve him of the task. A good thrust was given to the boat out into the rushing stream, oars fell on either side, and the men began to row, so as to get out of the mouth of the river and begin making their way north.

But in a very few minutes Mark was enlightened as to the state of affairs. While they slept the tide had turned, and in place of a swift stream of fresh water running out, they were in the rapid tidal current running in, any doubt he might have had on the subject being set at rest by scooping up a little water with his hand, to taste it, and find it salt.

The men were pulling steadily, but with a feeble, slow stroke, which at first kept them about stationary. Then by slow degrees the boat gave a little and a little more, till in the waning light Mark saw a cluster of trees ashore, by which they had been passing, begin to glide the other way.

“Pull, my lads, pull!” he cried, and the men tugged again for a few minutes, and managed to keep abreast of the trees, but their strokes again grew more feeble, and, in spite of spurt after spurt, it was evident enough that the tide was too strong for men suffering from injuries, and famishing with hunger, nothing having passed their lips save water for many hours.

“Here,” cried Tom Fillot, “you don’t half pull. Let me come. We’ll soon get outside, where the current won’t be so strong.”

“It’s o’ no use, mate,” said Dick Bannock. “She’s too much for us. You can’t do no good. After getting well, and a lot o’ beef and biscuit, we might do it, but there’s no pulling agin that ’ere.”

“You don’t half try,” said Tom Fillot, sitting down and getting an oar over the side to add his strength, when all pulled again, working hard for quite half an hour, when Mark called to them to stop.

“Waste of strength, my lads,” he said; “we’ve been drifting all the time.”

“Yes, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “I knowed it and was only waiting for you to

speak. Most too dark to see, but I'm 'bout sure."

"We must let her go up with the tide, Tom, or else moor her again by the trees."

"Well, we should be brought back again, sir; but I think it would be best to make fast."

"Steadily, my lads," said Mark; "let's pull in shore with the tide till I see a good place."

"Or, feel it, sir," whispered Tom Fillot.

"Yes, or feel it, Tom," said Mark. "How dark it's getting. Easy—easy there; just dip so as to get nearer the shore. The current's so swift we may be capsized."

"Easy it is, sir," said Tom, and they rowed gently on with the current, getting nearer and nearer the shore with its heavy fringe of verdure, Mark watching eagerly in the gathering blackness for a big tree with overhanging boughs, but all in vain.

It was so dark now that they seemed to be gliding along right in the shadow, while more out towards the middle of what was evidently a broad river—the stream widening above the mouth—it was comparatively light, sufficiently so for them to see any object afloat.

"Can't you make anything we can hook on to, sir?" said Tom Fillot.

"No, my lad, not yet. But I shall directly. You be ready."

"Ready it is, sir. If I see a chance, shall I ketch hold?"

"*Hist*!"

"What's the matter, sir?"

"Talk lower. What's that? It may be enemies."

"Phew!" whistled Tom Fillot, softly. "It was behind me. I didn't see that.

There, you have it."

He caught hold of the overhanging bough of a tree and brought the boat up as they both stood there watching a gleaming light at a little distance, which gradually was made out to be a lanthorn carried by someone here and there.

"Ashore," whispered Mark.

"Afloat," said Tom. "It's somebody aboard ship. Hark at that!"

There was the rattle of a chain, apparently being let out through the hawse-holes of a vessel, then a little more rattling, followed by the disappearance of the light, and silence once more.

"What do you make of it, sir?" whispered Tom.

As he spoke there came a strange, plaintive, smothered sound, so full of agony that Mark shuddered.

"I can hardly tell," he said. "I thought at first it was the *Nautilus*."

"No, sir; people on board the *Naughtylass* don't howl like that."

"Then—no: it can't be! Is it the slaver?" faltered Mark, as his heart beat rapidly with excitement.

"It's she or another on the cowardly beggars," whispered Tom Fillot, hoarsely. "Don't make a sound, my lads."

"But oh, it can't be," cried Mark, trembling now with eagerness.

"Don't see why not, sir. She was bound to go into hiding a bit till our ship had gone, and she's crept in here to lie by, and sail perhaps when the tide turns."

"Take a turn with a rope round that branch, Tom," whispered Mark; "and not a sound."

"Trust me, sir, for that," was whispered back; and there was a little

rustling heard as Mark carefully made his way in the darkness to where Tom Fillot stood.

“Sit down,” whispered Mark. “I want all the men to hear. Lean this way, all of you.”

There was another rustling sound, and a certain amount of deep breathing as Mark whispered softly,—

“Mind, not a word when I’ve done, or we shall be heard aboard that vessel. She’s not two hundred yards away.”

There was not a sound, and after waiting a few moments to command his voice and to try and stay the tumultuous beating of his heart, Mark went on,—

“My lads, that must be the schooner waiting, as Tom Fillot said.”

He paused again, for his words would hardly come. Then, more and more huskily from his emotion:

“My lads, I know you’re weak, but you’ve got the pluck. The crew of that schooner stole upon us in the night, struck you all down, and pitched us into the boat.”

There was another pause—a longer one, for it required a desperate effort to get out the words. Then, so faintly as to be hardly heard, but with a strength in them which electrified the listeners, Mark Vandean, midshipman and mere boy, said to the stout men around him,—

“It’s dark as pitch now, lads, so couldn’t we steal aboard and serve them the same?”

Chapter Twenty One.

A Desperate Attempt.

For the boat quivered as to a man all sprang up, and forgetting

everything in their excitement, the men were about to cheer, but were brought back to a knowledge of their position by that softly-uttered warning sound just as a lanthorn was seen moving at a distance once more, followed by a sharp sound like the closing of a hatch.

The boat rocked a little again as the men sank back in their places, while Mark felt as if he were being suffocated, as he trembled, and felt the perspiration stand in big drops upon his forehead.

For he was startled at his venturesome plan, knowing that such a task would be that of a strong, experienced, determined man, and now that he had made the proposal he felt as if he must have been mad.

To carry out such a venture needed quite fresh, active men. Those to whom he had proposed the attempt were in no wise fit, and to induce them to try and recapture the schooner was like tempting them to their death.

“It is all foolishness,” he said to himself in the brief instants during which these thoughts flashed through his brain, but the next moment he awoke to the fact that he had set a spark in contact with a train of human gunpowder, that the spark had caught, and that it was impossible now to stop.

“Heads close together, mates,” whispered Tom Fillot. “Not a sound on your lives. Come, Mr Vandean, sir, say the word—when. Now? At once?”

“No, no,” whispered back Mark; “you are all weak and ill. I’ve been thinking about it since I spoke, and it is too much for you to do.”

A low, angry murmur arose, and Tom Fillot chuckled.

“Too much for us, sir? Not it. You’ve only got to give the word, and there’s that in us now as’ll carry us through anything. Only you lead us, sir, and we’ll do all the work. Is that the right word, maties?”

“Yes,” came like a hiss from the whole party.

“There, sir. You hear. Don’t you be afraid as we won’t do our duty by you.”

“No, no, Tom Fillot, I’m not a bit afraid of that, but the venture seems too wild.”

“Not it, sir. Why, we’re all red hot to be let go; so now then, what about the plans?”

“I have none, and we had better give up the business.”

“You’re saying that to save us, sir, but we don’t want to be saved the trouble. We want to get that schooner back, and serve out the rough ’uns who half killed all on us. And what’s more, me and my mates liked the taste o’ the prize-money we had got to our mouths afore it were snatched away, so we want to get it back again. That’s so, ain’t it, lads?”

“Ay, ay,” was whispered so deeply that it hardly reached Mark’s ears; but there was a fierce earnestness in it that told how strong was the determination on the part of the men to try and wipe out the past night’s disgrace, while, just as he thought this, by a strange coincidence, Tom Fillot whispered,—

“We must take her, sir. You can’t go back and meet the skipper without the schooner.”

The most cunningly contrived advice could not have affected Mark more powerfully. His heart beat rapidly, and, carried away now by the contagious enthusiasm of the men, he said,—

“Right; then we will take her.”

A low humming buzz went up at this, and Mark went on,—

“We shall wait till everything is quite still on board, and then let the boat drift alongside. Dance will hold on with the hook; we shall board her and take them by surprise as they did us, unless their watch is sharper than ours.”

“You trust us, sir. We’ll have her,” whispered Tom Fillot. “We must.”

“Then, now—silence. We must wait for a time, the later the better. When I give the word, Tom Fillot will let the boat drift, two men will give a few dips

with oars, and I shall steer her alongside; then Dance will hook on. You will all follow me—”

“And the schooner’s ours once more.”

“If it is the schooner,” said Mark, dubiously.

“If she ain’t, she’s a slaver, sir,” replied Tom Fillot, “and that’s enough for we.”

They waited in the silence and darkness, listening intently for every sound, but very little was heard from the vessel. Once there were footsteps, and later on they made out a glow of light upon the water, which they judged rightly to be the reflection from the cabin windows, which of course was farthest from them, the vessel being moored from the stem.

Then they sat listening to the rippling of the swiftly-running water, and the peculiarly weird cries and other sounds which came from the shore, terribly suggestive of prowling beasts seeking their nightly food.

It must have been getting toward two bells when Mark, who had been bending over Mr Russell, to try and make out by touch how he was, started up in horror, for, from the direction of the moored vessel, there came a burst of cries, as if someone was being tortured in a terrible way.

“What’s that?” cried Mark, in an excited whisper.

“What I wanted to hear, sir,” replied Tom Fillot in the same tone. “It might ha’ been as that warn’t a slaver, after all; but that there noise settles it.”

“Then you think it was the poor wretches crying out?”

“Sure on it, sir; as sure as I am that there’s somebody going to shout at ’em to be quiet, or he’ll come and chuck some of ’em overboard.”

Even as the man spoke, footsteps were heard, and then there was a sharp sound like the banging of the top of the hatch with a capstan bar, followed by a fierce shout delivered in a threatening way.

Then came a low, piteous moaning and sobbing, mingled with the crying of children, and once more the top of the hatch was banged.

“Guess I’m coming down to give it to some of you. Stop that! Do yer hear?”

These words came clearly enough over the water in the silence of the tropic night, and once more all was still again, and there was a low whistling, as if someone were walking back to the cabin-hatch, where he stood for a few minutes, and then went below.

“Tom,” said Mark, “that’s the slaver skipper.”

“Yes, sir, so I s’pose. Nobody else wouldn’t bully like that.”

“I mean the skipper of the schooner we took.”

“Think so, sir?” cried the man, excitedly.

“I’m sure of it. I know his voice again. That’s the man who had me thrown into the boat.”

“That’s right, then, sir. I couldn’t tell, because my head was all dumb with the crack I got; but you weren’t hit, and of course you’d know.”

Just then there came a low, piteous, half-stifled wail from the vessel, which went so home to Mark’s feelings, that his voice sounded changed and suffocated, as he whispered,—

“I’ve often said that I was sorry I came to sea, Tom Fillot, so as to be sent on this horrible slavery business, but I’m glad now.”

“That’s right, sir.”

“And we’ll have that schooner back, and set those poor creatures free if I die for it.”

“That you shall, sir,” cried Tom Fillot. “No, no, that you shan’t, I mean.”

“Not take her?” said Mark, half aloud in his surprise.

“Hist! No, no, sir. I didn’t mean that; I mean not die for it.”

“Oh, I see.”

“You shall take her, sir, as soon as you give the word; but, begging your pardon, sir, if I might ask a favour for me and the men—”

“Yes; what is it?”

“Don’t be too hard on us, sir, in the way of orders.”

“What do you mean? I won’t ask you to do anything I shall not try to do myself.”

“Oh, it ain’t that, Mr Vandean, sir. We know you for a fine, plucky young gent, as we’d follow anywhere. What I meant was, don’t be too stiff with the men in the way o’ stopping ’em. We don’t want to kill any of the beggars, but we should like to give it ’em as hard as we can.”

“Do, Tom,” whispered Mark, excitedly. “The beasts! the wretches! the unmanly brutes! Oh, how can those poor blacks be such pitiful, miserable cowards, and not rise up and kill the villains who seize them and treat them in such a way!”

“I’ll tell you, sir. It’s because they’ve been beaten. I don’t mean larruped with a stick, but beaten in some fight, and made prisoners up the country. Since then they’ve been chained and driven and starved and knocked about till all the man’s gone out of ’em, and made ’em so that they haven’t got a spark o’ pluck left. You take ’em and treat ’em well, and it all comes back, like it did to poor old Soup and poor old Taters. They was fast growing into good, stiff, manly sort o’ messmates, with nothing wrong in ’em but their black skins, and I don’t see as that’s anything agin a man. All a matter o’ taste, sir. Dessay the black ladies thinks they’re reg’lar han’some, and us and our white skins ugly as sin.”

“We must have that schooner, Tom Fillot,” said Mark, after a short pause.

“You’ve got it, sir, and we’ll sail her up to the port with flying colours. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’ll turn out a true prophet, Tom.”

“So do I, sir, and I’m just going to whisper to the boys what you say, and then I’m thinking it’ll soon be time to go on board and kick those chaps over the side.”

“No killing, Tom.”

“No, sir. You trust us. We won’t go quite so far as that,” said the sailor grimly; and he crept away to begin whispering to his messmates, while Mark sat straining his eyes in the direction of the schooner, hot, excited, but without the slightest sensation of shrinking. This had given place to an intense longing for action, which made his heart beat with a heavy throb, while, from time to time, there was a strange swelling in his throat, as he thought of the agony of the poor creatures pent-up in the stifling heat of the schooner’s hold, some of them, perhaps, dying, others dead, and waiting to join their fellows in the silent waters, happily released from their pain.

He was so deeply plunged in thought that he did not notice Tom Fillot’s return, and he gave quite a start as the man laid a hand upon his knee.

“Look there, sir,” he whispered.

“Eh? where?”

“Over the trees, behind me.”

“Fire?” whispered Mark, excitedly, as he gazed at a warm glow away beyond the forest.

“No, sir; the moon. She’ll soon be up, and we must have that schooner in the dark.”

“Then we’ll begin at once,” said Mark, decisively.

“Right, sir. The lads have some of ’em got their cutlashes, and them as ain’t have each got two good hard fists; and it strikes me as they’ll use ’em too. So when you’re ready, sir, give the word.”

Mark felt for his dirk, which was safe in his belt, and then thought of the quiet little parsonage at home, and of the horror that would assail his mother if she could know of the perilous enterprise upon which he was bound. Then came the recollection of his grave, stern-looking father, and of what would be his feelings.

“Would he say don’t go?” thought Mark.

The answer seemed to come at once.

“No; he’d say, ‘It’s your duty, boy. In God’s name go and do your best.’”

“I’m ready, Tom Fillot,” he said half aloud, as he felt for and seized the rudder-lines. “Now, my lads.”

There was a low buzz of excitement, and then, in obedience to an order, a couple of oars were softly thrust into the water. Dance stood ready, but there was no boathook, and he fretfully asked what he was to do.

“Hold on by the chains, mate,” whispered Tom Fillot, “and I’ll help you. Dessay we can make the painter fast afore we get aboard.”

As he spoke, he was busily loosening the rope which held them to the tree, and then stood holding the end just round the bough.

“Ready, sir, when you like to say ‘Let go!’”

Mark paused a moment or two, breathing hard, and tried to think of anything that had been left undone, knowing as he did that the slightest hitch in the proceedings might mean failure; but he could think of nothing, and leaning forward, he whispered,—

“You understand, my lads? Drop down, make fast, all in silence. Then follow me aboard, make for the cabin, and knock down every man who tries to get on deck.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” came in a whisper that was terribly impressive in its earnestness.

Nothing then remained but for him to say “Let go!” But he hesitated yet,

and looked about him, to see that in a very few minutes the moon's edge would be rising above the forest, flooding the river with its silvery light. If a watch was kept, which seemed to be certain, they would be seen, the captain and crew alarmed before they could get aboard, and, with so weak an attacking party, they would be at a terrible disadvantage. So hesitating no longer than to give himself time to loosen his dirk in its sheath, he leaned forward once more, and in a low, earnest whisper gave the order,—

"Go!"

There was a faint rustle as the rope passed over the bough, a little splash as it struck the water, the two oars dipped without a sound, as the boat swung round, and they glided rapidly up the river with the tide.

The distance, at the rate of speed at which they were going, was extremely short, and Mark had to whisper to the men to pull harder, so as to make the boat answer to the rudder: while the moon rose higher, and though still invisible above the horizon, sent upward so warm a glow that the topmasts of the schooner became visible, and Mark was able to steer right for her bows.

"Now!" he whispered, "in with your oars."

He was obeyed, and the men laid them in, but made a slight noise—a mere trifle of sound, but it was sufficient to alarm the man forward, who was keeping watch; and to Mark's horror, he heard a quick movement, followed by a shout of alarm.

But it was just as the boat grazed up against the schooner's side, glided along, and Tom Fillot gripped the chains, stopped her course, and made fast the painter.

"What's the matter? Are they getting out?" cried the skipper, hurrying on deck, and of course upsetting the plan of keeping him and his men below.

But before he had quite finished his question, Mark's voice rang out, —"Forward!" and he sprang up in the chains, followed by his men, leaped on deck, and directly after there was aflash and the report of a pistol, but the man who fired it was driven headlong down upon the deck, to roll

over and over until stopped by the bulwark.

It was the skipper who fired, and then went down with a fierce cry of rage, for Tom Fillot had rushed at him, striking him in violent collision, the weight of the running sailor being sufficient to send him flying. But he struggled up in a moment, and using his pistol as a club, struck with it fiercely in all directions as he cheered on his men, and bravely resisted the attempt to drive him and his followers below.

It was still very dark; the schooner's crew had rushed up at the first alarm, and as fast as they cleared the combings of the hatch, they dashed at their assailants, with the consequence that in a very few seconds the deck was a confusion of struggling, yelling, and cursing men, the two parties fighting hard for their different aims, to beat the defenders below—to drive the attacking party overboard into their boat or into the river—anywhere to clear the deck.

It was a wild and savage affair, the energy of desperation being fully developed on either side. Weapons were little used, for the two parties closed in a fierce struggle, or else struck out with their fists; and as the two parties were pretty well balanced for numbers, the fight was obstinate to a degree.

Cheering on his men, Mark had been one of the first to leap on deck, and, once there, he had dashed, dirk in hand, at the first sailor he encountered, and immediately found out that even if armed with a dirk, a middy of seventeen is no match for a sturdy, well-built fellow of thirty; and though he caught his adversary by the throat with one hand, and pointed his dirk with the other, as he bade the man surrender, matters went badly for him.

For the man, who knew that the capture of the vessel meant endless trouble and loss to him, had not the slightest intention of surrendering to a mere boy, and in two vigorous efforts he sent Mark's dirk flying in one direction, and hurled him in another so violently that the lad fell heavily on his head and shoulder, and for the space of two minutes there was no one to hold the command.

But Mark's semi-insensibility only lasted those two minutes; then he was

fully awake to the shouting and struggling going on around and over him. Naturally objecting to be trampled, jumped upon, and used as a stumbling-block for friends and enemies to fall over, he exerted himself to get out of the way, rolled over and found his dirk beneath him, rose to his feet, aching, half-stunned, and, in pain intense enough to enrage him, he once more rushed at the nearest man, roaring to his followers to come on.

The orders were unnecessary, for the men had come on, and were locked in the embrace of their enemies, but the cry stimulated the brave fellows to fresh exertion, and to the rage and mortification of the Yankee skipper, the schooner's crew were driven back step by step aft, till the next thing seemed to be that they would be forced below, the hatch clapped on, and the Englishmen be masters of the slaver.

But it was not so. Load a gun with powder, fire it, and the force of the preparation will drive the bullet a certain distance. But then the powder has exploded, and its force is at an end. So it was with Mark's followers; the force in them was expended and sent the slavers right aft, but there was no more power left. They were all weak and suffering, and in obeying Mark's last cry they were completely spent, while their enemies were vigorous and strong.

Finding out the weakness of the attacking party, the slavers ceased giving way, rebounded, and the tables were rapidly turned, Mark's men being driven back step by step, forward and to the side over which they had come to the attack. It was in vain that they shouted to one another to stand by and come on, and that Tom Fillot bounded about, making his fists fly like windmill sails, while Mark's voice was heard above the din: they were thoroughly beaten. It was weak and injured men fighting against the well-fed, strong and hearty, and in spite of true British pluck and determination, the former gave way more and more, till the fight resolved itself into assault against stubborn resistance, the men seeming to say by their acts, "Well, if you are to pitch us overboard, you shall have as much trouble as we can give you."

"Ah, would yer!" roared Tom Fillot, making one of his rushes in time to upset a couple of the schooner's men, who had seized Mark in spite of his struggles, and were about to throw him over the side.

As the men went down Mark had another fall, but he gathered himself up, looking extremely vicious now, and while Tom Fillot was still struggling with the slavers, one of whom had got hold of his leg, another man made at the midshipman, and drove at him with a capstan bar, not striking, but thrusting fiercely at his face with the end.

Mark ducked, avoided the blow, and naturally sought to make reprisal with the ineffective little weapon he held, lunging out so sharply that it went home in the man's shoulder, and he yelled out, dropped the bar, and fled.

"Why didn't you do that before, ten times over, sir?" cried Tom Fillot, kicking himself free. "It's too late now, sir. I'm afraid we're beat this time."

"No, no, no," cried Mark, angrily. "Come on, my lads!" and he made a rush, which must have resulted in his being struck down, for he advanced quite alone, Tom Fillot, who would have followed, being beaten back along with the rest, till they stood against the bulwarks—that is, those who could stand, three being down on their knees.

"Mr Vandean, sir—help! help!" roared Tom Fillot just in the nick of time; and, striking out fiercely with his dirk, Mark returned to his men and released poor Dance, who was one of the weakest, by giving his assailant a sharp dig with the steel.

"Now, my lads, never mind the boy," cried the Yankee skipper; "over with them."

The men, who had drawn back for the moment, made a rush at Tom Fillot, seized him, there was a short struggle, a loud splash, and the schooners men had got rid of the most vigorous of their assailants.

A shout and another heave, and Dance had gone. Then Dick Bannock, who kicked and cursed like a madman, was swung up and tossed over. The rest followed, and, with his back to the bulwarks and his dirk advanced, Mark stood alone upon the deck, last of the gallant little crew, knowing that his turn had come, but ready to make whoever seized him smart for the indignity about to be put upon a British officer, even if he were a boy.

“Bah! rush him,” roared the captain, and Mark had time for two blows at his assailants, whom he could now see clearly from where he had run right to the bows, for a flood of moonlight softly swept over the scene.

Then as he struggled hard with the men cursing and buffeting him with their fists, there came a loud, wildly appealing cry, as it seemed to him, from the hold where the poor blacks were confined; and it was with a bitter feeling of despair at his being unable to help them, that Mark made his last effort to free himself. The next moment he was jerked out from the side of the schooner, fell with a tremendous splash in the swiftly-running tide; there was a flashing as of silver in the moonbeams, then black darkness, and the thunder of the rushing waters in his ears.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Unexpected Allies.

“Here, hi! Look-out, lads! Where’s our orficer?”

These words greeted Mark Vandean as, after a few struggles, his head shot up from the black water into the bright moonlight, and, giving it a good shake, he struck out for the boat.

The cold plunge had braced him up, clearing away the brain mists caused by exhaustion in the fight; and now once more he was himself, ready to save his own life, and think, as an officer should, about his men. Of course his first thoughts ought to have been about saving his men, and self afterwards; but he followed the natural instinct, and strove to reach the boat.

“Here I am,” he shouted, as soon as he could get his breath; “shove out an oar.”

Tom Fillot had already caught sight of his wet face shining in the moonlight, and thrusting an oar over the stern, began to paddle to turn the boat, but was checked directly by the painter, which he had made fast to the chains when they boarded the schooner.

To have stopped to unfasten it would have meant too much loss of time, so throwing himself on his chest, he reached out as far as he could with the oar toward Mark, who had been borne down from where he was plunged in at the bows toward the boat.

“Lay hold, sir!” cried Tom, excitedly.

“Yah! Cowards! Look-out!” was yelled behind Tom; the boat received a violent jerk as Dick Bannock gave it a thrust right away from the schooner, and simultaneously the men were deluged with water by a tremendous splash close to their side. Then a big wave rose and lapped over into the boat, striking Mark just as his fingers touched the tip of the oar blade, and the next moment he was swept on by the tide up the river.

“All right, sir!” cried Tom Fillot, loudly; “swim steady. We’ll have you directly. You, Dick Bannock, cut that painter. Now, then: oars!”

He dropped down into a seat, and pulled a big stroke to send the boat’s head round.

“Here, help me aboard, mate,” cried a voice.

“And me, messmet,” cried another, the two speakers holding on by the side which they had reached after being thrown from the schooner.

“No, no, hold on, mates,” cried Tom. “Let’s get Mr Vandean first. What was that ’ere?”

“Pig o’ ballast they chucked over to stave the bottom,” growled Dick Bannock, beginning to row. “If I hadn’t shoved her off, they’d ha’ sunk us.”

“We’ll sink them yet,” growled Tom Fillot. “Coming, Mr Van, sir. We’ll have you directly. Easy, mates,” he cried, throwing in his oar, and leaning over again toward where Mark was swimming steadily facing the tide, but letting himself drift, content to keep afloat.

“Can you reach him, mate?” growled Dick.

“Not quite; pull your oar,” cried Tom. “That’s right. Hooray! Got him!”

This last was given with a yell of triumph, as he made a snatch at Mark's wrist, caught it firmly, and hauled the dripping lad over into the boat.

"Thankye," said Mark, panting. "I'm all right. Now then, help these two fellows in.—Well done!"

He said this breathlessly as he stood up and gave himself a shake, and then as the two men who had held on went to their places, he resumed his seat and looked round.

"Who's missing?" he cried.

"All here, sir, 'cept poor Joe Dance. I ain't seen him."

"Ain't looked," said a faint voice from under the men's legs. "They chucked me over, and I'm afeard I've squashed poor Mr Russell, for I come right down upon him."

"Then nobody's missing," cried Mark, joyously. "Look here, my lads; oars out—pull! pull!"

The men obeyed as vigorously as they could, rowing back toward the schooner, but slowly, for the tide was running sharply still, and the fight was hard.

"What yer going to do, sir?" said Tom Fillot, in a low tone.

"Do?" cried Mark, excitedly, for his blood was regularly up; "why, have another try, of course."

"Well done us!" said Dick Bannock, thickly. "I'm ready. We ain't beat."

"No good, sir," growled Tom Fillot, in a low, deep voice. "We ain't beat, but we can't do it, sir, for want o' strength."

"What?" cried Mark, who was determined upon his mad project—mad now in the face of so many difficulties. "There isn't a man here who will not follow me, and I'm sure you won't turn tail, Tom Fillot."

"Not me, sir," said the man; "you're orficer, and where you goes I follows.

It’s hard lines to let go of a prize like that. Lay her close alongside, sir?”

“Yes, of course,” cried Mark, standing up as they began to near the schooner once more. “Why, there’s something the matter on board—they’re fighting—they’re killing the blacks. Here, pull, men, pull. Quick! Don’t you see? The blacks have got loose, and are fighting for their liberty; pull!”

The men forgot their pains and weakness once more as a fierce yelling, shouting, and shrieking arose from the deck of the schooner. Then shots were fired, and as the boat approached, now unobserved, they could see that the crew were driving back quite a little crowd of naked blacks, who seemed helpless before the attack of the armed men, but still in their desperation they gave way slowly, uttering fierce cries of rage and despair.

It was all plain in the bright moonlight which flooded the scene, and Mark could see the slaver captain making a rush here and a rush there, and at each effort he struck down some poor wretch with a heavy bludgeon he wielded with terrible force.

Then, as the boat glided in close under the stern, all this was shut out, but the noise increased.

“Now, my lads!” whispered Mark, “we shall take ’em between two fires. As soon as the blacks see us come they’ll fight like fury, and we shall win. Do you see, Tom Fillot?”

“See, sir? yes. It’s all right. We’ll have ’em yet. I’ll make fast to the main chains, and then up we go. But don’t give the word till I’m ready, sir. I can fight now.”

The preparations took almost less time than the talking, and then, freshly nerved by the exciting scene on deck, Mark Vandean and his men climbed on board to collect for a rush, just as the blacks were making a desperate stand. There in the front were two of the stoutest armed with capstan bars, and as the crew of the boat were about to dash forward, these two blacks yelled together and charged at the schooner’s men, striking out so savagely that two of their adversaries went down, and the next they attacked shrank back.

“Stand aside!” roared the slaver skipper, raising a pistol, but it was not fired, for as the two blacks whirled their bars about and fought on, Mark gave a cheer, his men followed suit, and, taking the schooner’s crew in the rear, they were scattered at the first charge.

What followed was a series of furious, short hand-to-hand conflicts, men being driven in among the blacks, who came on now wild with excitement. They seized their enemies and, in spite of their struggles, hurled them overboard to swim for the shore, till only the skipper was left, and he was being hunted from place of vantage to place of vantage, till he made a dash and ran down into the cabin. But the biggest of the blacks, one of the two armed with capstan bars, rushed down after him, followed by his brave companion, and the next minute there was the sound of a plunge, evidently from the cabin window.

Mark and Tom Fillot rushed to the stern together, and looked over.

“Have they killed him?” said the midshipman, hoarsely.

“No, sir; he’s swimming like a seal—the warmint. He’ll reach the shore. But hadn’t you better get us together, sir? The niggers may have a turn at us now. P’r’aps they don’t know we’re friends.”

“Oh yes they do, Tom; they must have seen how we fought for them.” But all the same the lad gave a long piercing whistle, and his men clustered about him, ready for the blacks, who were now coming aft in a body.

“It means another fight, sir,” whispered Tom. “Can’t anybody say in nigger lingo as we’re friends?”

“Yes, friends; all friends,” cried a harsh voice, as the great, perfectly nude, black sprang up out of the hatchway, and threw down his heavy wooden bar, an example followed by the other, while, as the moon now shone full upon their convulsed and excited faces, Tom Fillot burst into a roar of laughter, rushed forward, and slapped first one and then the other on the bare shoulder, yelling out,—

“Here’s a game, mates; why, it’s old Soup and Taters. Why, my black-mugged messmates, we thought you was both on you drowned. What’s become of your *tog-a-ree*?”

The blacks' faces relaxed into a broad smile, as, led by Mark, the men crowded round to shake hands warmly, while the crowd of slaves set up a peculiar cry, and danced about them, waving their arms, ending by going down upon their knees about Mark and laying their foreheads on the deck, while the women in the background set up a strangely wild wail.

"Then you two escaped," cried Mark, as soon as the excitement had subsided a little; and the big black tried to explain, but could only get out the words, "All right, messmate," and then spoke volubly in his own tongue.

"Never mind, sir; they did get off," cried Tom Fillot. "They must have been chucked below along with the rest, and then kep' prisoners."

"And a good job for us, Tom," said Mark.

"Ay, ay, sir, and no mistake, for we couldn't have took the schooner again without them."

"There, silence!" cried Mark. "These men must keep the blacks in order, while you, my lads, get the arms together. We must have a strong watch kept. The scoundrels may try to retake the schooner."

"They'd better, sir," growled Tom, who was in the act of restoring his cutlass to its sheath. "I didn't use this," he muttered, "but if they came again I'm sorry for the chap as hits at me."

The watch was set, and when Mark could extricate himself from the crowd of blacks who pressed about him, he looked round for Soup and Taters, even going so far as to ask for them, rather unwillingly, by these names, but they were missing.

He forgot all about them directly in the business and excitement which followed, for there was much to be done. One of his first tasks was to have the schooner's boat run up to the davits, and Mr Russell carefully lifted out, and borne down into the Yankee skipper's comfortable cabin. Then he found out more and more how multitudinous are the demands made upon an officer. In this case he had to play the part of surgeon as well, for many of the blacks were, like his own men, suffering from contusions, though fortunately no one seemed to be seriously injured;

and the brilliant moonlight was a great aid in his endeavour to restore something like order on board.

“I want those two fellows,” cried Mark at last, angrily; “they could be of so much use in managing the blacks.”

“Here they are, sir,” cried one of the men. “They’ve been below.”

“What have they been doing below—getting at the provisions?”

He asked no more, for at that moment the two men came forward, smiling, in their neat white man-o’-war garments, which had been confiscated by the slaver captain when he turned them below into the hold with the rest of the blacks, little thinking that by this act he was contriving the means of restoring them all to liberty.

“Hah! that’s better!” cried Mark smiling. “Now then see to these poor creatures. I’m going to serve out something for them to eat and drink.”

With the help of a little pantomime he made them readily understand, and they went forward to the blacks, who at once sat down quietly on the deck and waited.

At the words eating and drinking, Tom Fillot had gone below, and by the time his officer was ready to show the way to the stores, biscuit and water were being served out and eagerly attacked by all.

“And now I think it’s our turn,” said Mark, who had become conscious of a peculiar sensation of faintness.

“I’ve put something ready for you in the cabin, sir,” whispered Tom Fillot.

But Mark was too sensible of his responsibility to go below to eat and rest, and his refreshment consisted of the same food as was partaken of by the rest—to wit, biscuit moistened with water.

For there was the watch to visit, the tide to be examined for the hour of its change, and a score of other little matters to attend to, in addition to noting Mr Russell’s condition from to time.

“How soon will it be high water?” asked Mark at last, after wearily watching the constant flow.

“Must be soon, sir,” said Tom Fillot, who seemed to have dropped into the position of first lieutenant. “Beg pardon, sir, you mean to sail with the ebb?”

“Certainly. We must not stay here. That scoundrel may return with help.”

“You’re right, sir. Sooner we’re out at sea the better I shall like it.”

“Exactly. I want the men to go below and have a good rest. Poor lads! they have been slaves.”

“To save slaves, sir; but beg pardon, sir; you won’ be offended?”

“Offended? No, Tom Fillot; you’ve been too good a friend,” cried the midshipman, eagerly. “What were you going to say?”

“Only this, sir. What we’re most feared of is the Yankee skipper coming back!”

“Of course.”

“Then why not strengthen the watch, sir?”

“How? I wish I could.”

“Oh, I’ll soon show you how, sir. You get Soup and Taters, and make ’em understand what you want, and it will be all right.”

“But what do I want, Tom?”

“I’ll show you, sir, and I think you can make ’em understand. Tell ’em to pick out half-a-dozen of the strongest young blacks, and we’ll give ’em a cutlash and a belt apiece, and set ’em to keep guard by the schooner’s side.”

“But would it be safe, Tom?” cried Mark eagerly.

“Not very, sir, for the skipper and his men. Soup’ll explain it to ’em, and

once they know, you see if they don’t do all that dooty splendid, and leave us free to navigate the schooner.”

“Navigate the schooner, Tom?” said Mark, rather dolefully, as he thought of his shortcomings in that direction.

“Oh, it’ll be easy enough, sir. All we’ve got to do is to sail doo north and hug the shore. We can’t go wrong.”

Soup and Taters were summoned, and grasped the idea readily enough, with the result that in a very short time they had under their command six of the blacks keeping watch and ward against surprise, leaving the weary crew opportunity for getting up the anchor when the tide turned. Then a sail was hoisted for steering purposes, and the men gave a hearty cheer as they began to drop down the river with their prize.

“Lor’, mates!” said Dick Bannock, “who’d ha’ thought of our getting of her after all. Shows as it never does to say die. ‘Persewere,’ says you, ‘and never mind the difficoolties.’ What yer larfin’ for, Tom Fillot? Don’t I say what’s true?”

“I warn’t laughing at you, messmate, but at the niggers keeping watch.”

“Ay, they do look rum,” said Dick, smiling; “but they do splendid. Seem proud o’ their uniform too, eh?”

“Yes,” said Joe Dance, who was leaning his back against the bulwark, “but you might give ’em a bit of something else to put on.”

“Well, yes, I might—a sword-belt ain’t much for a man to wear, and his legs would be very thin to get ’em hid behind a scabbard. But we shall see, my lad, we shall see.”

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Strange Awakening.

“What’s a wonder to me, sir,” said Tom Fillot, respectfully, “is as no one seems to have been killed.”

“But we don’t know that,” said Mark, sharply. “Tired as I was when I lay down last night, I couldn’t sleep for thinking of those men. Do you think they could reach the shore?”

“Reach the shore, sir! Why not? What was to prevent ’em?”

“Some of them were half-stunned when they were dashed overboard.”

“Then the water would make ’em come to, sir, and freshen ’em up. Don’t you wherrit yourself about that, sir. I saw ’em all swimming for the bank, and they’d get there before the crocks woke up to try for ’em.”

“Crocodiles?”

“Oh yes, sir, I should think there’d be plenty of them in the river: sure to be in a hot country like this.”

“I wish I could feel sure they were safe.”

Tom Fillot’s look at the young officer was a mingling of admiration and contempt.

“It’s very nyste of you, sir, to think so much about the enemies as nearly killed our Mr Russell, I didn’t think nothing o’ them. I was hard at it about our poor chaps as has been knocked about, and the way they bear it all without hollering is, I says, sir, a credit to a Englishman, let alone a Scotchman such as Dick Bannock is. As I says afore, it’s wonderful as none of us was killed, being whacked over the head as we was, ’sides being nigh drownded.”

“It was wonderful, Tom, and if only poor Mr Russell would come round, I

should be as happy as could be. But he doesn't show a sign of recovery."

"No, sir, he don't, but there's the t'other side o' the book in keeping account like—he don't show no sign o' getting worse and dying. You know what's the matter with him, o' course?"

"Matter?" said Mark, looking at the man wonderingly, as the schooner glided along, a mile away from the coast, the evening after their struggle in the river. "Of course I do. He was beaten about the head worse than any of us."

"'Zactly, sir; but did you examine on him?"

"Yes, and retied the bandage about his head."

"That's good, sir; but you didn't find out quite what was the matter."

"I thought I knew enough."

"Yes, sir, but I did examine him when you sent me below to see how he was, and I found out."

"What?" cried Mark, eagerly.

"Well, sir, he's got the same as an old messmate o' mine had in my last ship—the *Foogoose*."

"The what?"

"*Foogoose*, sir."

"Oh, the *Fougueux*."

"That's her, sir. Well, we was up aloft shortening sail on a rough day, and Micky missed the stirrup just as the ship give a regular pitch. 'I'm off, Tommy,' he shouts, and down he went head fust on to the yard below, and then Snoots off on to one of the stays, and from there on to the deck, where every one thought he was killed. But he warn't, only onsensible because his skull was dinted in, and the doctor said it rested on his brain; and that's what's the matter with our lufftenant, for I felt his head."

“And did the man die?” cried Mark.

“No, sir; the doctor tackled him, and lifted up the bit o’ broken bone, and made him a better man than ever; and that’s what Mr Whitney’ll do with Mr Russell, sir, as soon as we get back to the *Naughtylass*.”

“Oh, if we only could get back, Tom!”

“All right, sir; give us time; and the longer the better, I say, sir, for if you goes aboard with us lads looking all chipped and knocked about like we are, Cap’en Maitland’ll be arksing you why you ain’t took better care of your men.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that, Tom,” cried Mark, triumphantly; “I’ve got the schooner, and the slaves.”

“You have, sir, and it’s such a splendid job for a young orficer like you to have done, that Mr Howlett’ll be ready to eat his head off like with disappyntment because he warn’t in the game. You’ve done it this time, sir. Why, our skipper ought to put you down for a swab on your shoulder as soon as you’ve got one big enough to carry it.”

“Now, no joking, Tom Fillot, because I’m friendly with you. Recollect I’m your officer.”

“Right, sir, I will. I didn’t mean no harm. It’s only a way my tongue’s got o’ saying things. I say, sir, just look at them poor half-starved blacks. ’Most makes me feel like a girl, sir, and soft, to see how happy they are.”

“Yes, poor creatures. But tell me, Tom. It’s a terrible responsibility for me with this vessel and all those people. Are they likely to make a fight for their liberty?”

“Why, they’ve got it, ain’t they, sir?”

“Yes, but they don’t understand it. They may think it’s only a change of masters, and rise against us.”

“Not they, sir. Why, see how they looks at us, sir. They’d lay down and let you walk over ’em, sir. Why, I’ve seen all them poor women look as if

they could eat you, sir. I don't mean with their teeth, but with their eyes. They're safe enough, sir. They've been well-fed on Soup and Taters—I mean them two black messmates of ourn's talked to 'em till they understands about being under the Union Jack, and all that sort o' thing."

"I hope they do, Tom, for it makes me very uneasy."

"Course it do, sir. But now just look here, sir; there's nothing for you to fear, so if you'll take my advice, you'll go and have three or four hours' sleep below."

"What?"

"I mean it, sir. You can't keep on without rest, so go and have it. Joe Dance and me'll keep the schooner steady on her course till you've had your dowse, and then you come up and give us a turn below."

"I can't leave the deck, Tom."

"Yes you can, sir, and you must. What are we going to do if you run yourself aground and break up? Orficers want rest like other folk. Look here, sir; you're dead beat. Out, ain't you? Why, you warn't down below an hour."

"Yes, I feel done up, Tom, but—"

"You can't do everything yourself, sir, and must get yourself fit to keep going. Now look round, sir. There's Soup and Taters keeping guard; shore's a mile away; light breeze sending us norrard; Joe Dance at the wheel. Could you find a better time for a snooze?"

Mark hesitated. He knew that he could not hold out. It was within an hour of sundown, and the blacks were lying about forward in restful content; the schooner's sails were gently filled, and there was not a cloud in the sky. No better opportunity could be found for a rest, and, after giving strict commands to Tom Fillot to call him at eight bells, he went below, bent over Mr Russell, and shudderingly satisfied himself that Tom Fillot was right.

"It's horrible," he muttered; "but it may not mean death;" and, throwing

himself on a locker, he dropped off into a deep sleep almost instantly, and then sprang to his feet directly after, as he imagined, roused up by a tremendous shock, followed by a heavy thud; and he knew what was coming then—to wit, the rush of water, as a wave deluged the schooner from stem to stern, while all was so pitchy dark that he could not for the moment make out where the door of the cabin lay.

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Responsible Position.

Confused and still half-steeped in sleep, Mark blundered about for a few moments before he reached the door, and was then thrown back, for the schooner heeled over, and then there was a tremendous bump, which made her shiver.

“Mr Vandean, sir, quick! All hands on deck!” came in familiar tones, as the lad struggled to the door once more, and then up through the hatchway, to find the schooner on her beam ends rushing through the water, which was foaming around them. Then a wave once more struck her, deluging the deck, and making her shiver as she rose again upon an even keel.

“Where are you, Tom Fillot?” shouted the midshipman.

“Here, sir. Wheel,” came back; and the next minute he was beside Tom Fillot and Joe Dance, who were trying to steady the vessel as she rode on through the surf.

“Where are we?” shouted Mark, his voice sounding pitifully small amidst the roar of the waves.

“Ashore, ’mong the breakers,” cried Tom with a groan. “But I think we’re ’most through ’em, sir.”

Just then, dimly-seen by its white crest, a huge billow rose up before them, as if to crush the little vessel into matchwood, but she lifted and passed right over it, and then over another and another, for there was a brisk breeze from off the shore; and after a few minutes of terrible peril

the beautifully built vessel glided into smooth water, rapidly leaving the roaring surf behind, though the rollers extended far enough out, and the schooner rose and fell as she sailed away north-west at a rapid rate.

Not another word had been spoken, though all the men were on deck clinging to the bulwarks, and in the full expectation that the vessel would go to pieces next time she struck; but, now that the peril was past, Dick Bannock was sent below to report on the water, while the rest rapidly rigged the pump ready for use.

To their great relief, though, the young sailor came on deck to declare the schooner dry as a bone; and now to hide his own self-reproach, Mark turned to the men for an explanation.

“I had no business to go below,” he said to himself; land then aloud, “How was this, Fillot? Who was at the wheel?”

“Me, sir,” said the cutter’s coxswain. “Me it were, and I don’t want no one else to be blamed. Tom Fillot was forrard seeing to the watch, and that them blacks was—them blacks was—them blacks was—”

“Well, what?” cried Mark, angrily. “What do you mean, man?”

“Dunno, sir—dunno, I’m sure,” said the coxswain, humbly. “It’s my head won’t go proper, sir. I was standing there by the wheel one minute, sending her along right enough, and the next minute was—was—was—was ashore with the breakers all around.”

“Why, you went to sleep!” roared Mark. “*You*! in charge of the wheel, went to sleep!”

“Nay, sir. I never went to sleep. I was steering, and them blacks was—them blacks was—them blacks was—say, Tom Fillot, what was that along o’ them blacks?”

“Oh, they’re all right, messmate,” growled Tom Fillot. “Fact is, sir, he ain’t quite right about his main truck yet, and I oughtn’t to ha’ let him take his trick at the wheel.”

“I ought not, you mean, Tom,” said Mark, bitterly. “I had no business to go

below.”

“Nay, don’t say that, sir, ’cause it was your dooty to. Fact is, sir, we was all so knocked about in the upper works that there ain’t a man on us good for much; and you see poor old Joe Dance’s got it bad next to Mr Russell, sir, only we thought him so much better.”

“Yes, I’m better,” said the coxswain. “All right again, mate, but I can’t get over it about them blacks. What was it as—”

“Here, what are you doing with that there wheel?” cried Tom Fillot, rushing at the man, and thrusting him aside. For Dance had suddenly grown excited, and was turning the spokes first in one direction and then in another in a most reckless way, while as he was thrust off, he staggered for a few steps, and then sat down on the wet deck to hold his head with both hands and rock it to and fro.

“Want to send us ashore among the breakers again?” growled Fillot.

“Nay, my lad, nay. There’s something wrong in my head, and it wants fishing or splicing, sir. It won’t go. Them blacks has got in it somehow, and I can’t get ’em out.”

“Go below and lie down, Dance,” said Mark, gently. “You’ll be better after a good long sleep.”

“Sleep, sir? No, I can’t sleep. Who’s to take my trick at the wheel? Point or two more, sir; and, Tom Fillot lad, what was it about them blacks?”

“Help him down below,” said Mark, and two of the men lifted the poor fellow to his feet and then helped him down to the place prepared for the crew close to the skipper’s cabin.

“He’ll come round again, sir,” said Tom from the wheel. “Spoke or two loose in his steering gear, that’s all. Lucky I got to him in time, or we should have been ashore hard and fast.”

“Was that on a sandbank we struck?” said Mark.

“Yes, sir, twice over; and if the masts had gone it would have been all

over with us. But plenty of sail on and a nice breeze helped us to scrape off, though my heart was in my mouth all the time."

"The schooner must be wonderfully well-built, Tom."

"Well-built and ill built, sir. First as to timbers, second as to use, sir. Why, some of our merchant craft would have been shook to pieces like one o' them card houses as we used to build when we was little ones."

That morning, as they were sailing on over the calm waters, rising and falling slowly to the gentle Atlantic swell, it seemed hard to believe that they had been so near wreck only a few hours before. But Mark had only to turn his eyes eastward to where the great billows broke upon the shore, making a chaos of foaming, tumbling waters, to be convinced of the danger they had escaped.

The blacks soon forgot the scare, and lay basking about on deck perfectly happy, and ready to smile at the crew; and, saving a few cuts and bruises, which did not show, apparently very little the worse for their encounters. The swellings, too, on board the prize crew, to use Tom Fillot's way of expressing it, had diminished rapidly. A little too rapidly, Tom said.

"You see if we've got no marks to show the officers and men, they won't believe we've been in so much trouble, sir. My heye! wouldn't the skipper have given it to you, Mr Vandean, if you'd took us back without this craft."

Mark had plenty of anxieties to cope with. So long as the weather kept fine, he had no great difficulty about the navigation. There was the low-lying shore, two or three miles on their starboard bow, and as far as was possible this distance was kept to. Provision on board was ample; the water-casks had been well filled, and even if the store of this prime necessity had failed there would have been no great difficulty in running up one or other of the rivers for a fresh supply.

As to the blacks, the hours glided on, and there was very little to disturb Mark's confidence. The two sailors—Soup and Taters—paraded the deck forward with a great show of authority, to which their unclothed fellow-countrymen submitted with a very excellent grace; and it was evident that there was nothing to fear from them.

“They’re rum sort of beggars, sir,” Tom said.

“Why, Tom?”

“Well, sir, I ain’t good at explaining what I mean, but it seems to me like this:— Give them enough to eat and drink, and plenty of sunshine to lie about in, that’s about all they want.”

“Yes, Tom, they’re soon satisfied.”

“That’s so, sir, and they don’t seem to have no memories. You’d think they’d all be fretting to get away ashore, and back home; but look at ’em: they don’t, and it seems to me that they’re not troubling themselves much about to-morrow or next day neither.”

The young sailor appeared to be quite right, for hour by hour as the horrors of the slaver’s hold grew more remote, the little crowd of blacks forward appeared to be more cheerful.

Mark’s great trouble was the state of Mr Russell, who still lay calmly enough either below in the Yankee skipper’s cot, or under an awning the sailors had rigged up on the deck. He ate and drank mechanically, but made not the slightest sign when spoken to, and for his sake Mark kept every stitch of sail on that the schooner could bear, so as to reach medical assistance as soon as possible.

Dance was decidedly better, but subject to fits of absence; and on these occasions Tom Fillot said he was mad as a hatter.

But in spite of the anxieties and the terrible feeling of responsibility, Mark found something very delightful in being the captain for the time being of the smart schooner which sailed swiftly along at the slightest breath of wind. There was the hot, hazy shore on his right, and the glistening sea on his left, an ample crew which he could recruit if he liked from the blacks, and all ready to obey his slightest order with the greatest alacrity. He felt at times as if he would be glad to sight the *Nautilus*, and so be relieved of all his cares; but, on the other hand, he could not help feeling that he would be sorry to give up and return to the midshipman’s berth.

“I wish, though, that Bob Howlett was here,” he said to himself, as he

longed for a companion of his own age and position.

“I don’t know, though,” he said, directly after. “If Bob were here, he would not like to knuckle under and play second fiddle. Well, I shouldn’t either. Perhaps it’s best is it is, I’m captain, and can do as I like, only it isn’t always nice to do as one likes, and I often feel as if it would be much nicer to have some one to order me.”

But there was no one to order him, and with the whole responsibility upon his shoulders, he for the first time in his life began to realise what it meant to be the captain of a ship, answerable for everything thereon.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Horrible Thought.

Two days glided by, during which Tom Fillot proved himself to be invaluable. The merry joker of the ship’s company showed that he possessed plenty of sound common sense, and that he was an excellent seaman. Thrown, too, as he was, along with his young officer, he never presumed thereon, but, evidently feeling how great a burden there was on the lad’s shoulders, he did all he could to lighten the load, by setting a capital example to his messmates of quick obedience, and was always suggesting little bits of seamanship, and making them seem to emanate from Mark himself. The consequence was that matters went in the most orderly way on board, and they steadily kept on north, north-west, or sometimes due west, according to the trend of the land.

“Easy enough thing, sir, navigation,” Tom said, merrily, “if you’ve got nice calm weather, no rocks or shoals, and a fair line of coast to steer by.”

“Yes, it’s easy enough now, Tom,” replied Mark.

“’Tis, sir; only I should like it better if it was right up in the north, where the sun don’t set. One can’t help feeling a bit scared sometimes when it’s very dark. I was nearly coming las’ night and asking leave to let go the anchor.”

“If I get well out of this, Tom,” said Mark, “I mean to study up my navigation. It’s horrible to be so helpless. I’m ashamed, too, being in charge here, and obliged to trust to seeing the shore for a guide.”

“Oh, that’ll all come, sir, but it strikes me that as soon as the captain finds we don’t get into port, he’ll be sailing down after us.”

“The sooner the better, Tom,” said Mark. “But now then, tell me: how are we off for water?”

“Plenty yet, sir, and there’s enough prog—beg pardon, sir, wictuals—to last us for some days; and—look, sir, look. Here’s a chance.”

“What? Where?” cried Mark, startled by the man’s excitement.

“Another slaver coming round the point there. You must take that one too, sir, and then you can go into port with flying colours. Double flying colours, sir!”

Mark looked eagerly at the long, low vessel just creeping into sight in the distance, and his follower’s words inspired him with an intense desire to act and make a second seizure. It was very tempting, but—Yes, there was a but, a big but, and a suppose in the way. His men were still anything but strong; and though the blacks were willing enough, it would not be wise to trust to them for help in an attack upon a vessel with possibly a strong crew.

His musings were interrupted by the sailor.

“Shall I alter our course, sir?” he said.

“No, Tom. Better not,” replied Mark. “I was thinking.”

“What about, sir—our being able to catch her?”

“No; about the dog and the shadow.”

“What about him, sir? Was he in the sun?”

“You know the old fable about the dog with the piece of meat in his

mouth, seeing his reflection in the stream and thinking it was another dog with a piece of meat."

"I did once, sir, but I've forgot," said Tom.

"Well, in his greediness he snapped at his shadow to get the other piece of meat, and dropped his own. Suppose I try to catch that other vessel and the crew prove too strong for me, and I lose this one?"

"Mr Vandean, sir! You a British orficer, and talk like that? It ain't greediness, sir, but you a-trying to do your dooty as the orficer as has succeeded Mr Russell, I know what you feel, sir—all the 'sponsibility."

"Yes, Tom; and that we are not strong enough to try experiments."

"Strong enough, sir? Why, there's that in our chaps now as'll make 'em go through anything. You say slaver to 'em, and it'll be like saying 'rats' to a dog. They'll be vicious to attack; and old Soup and Taters'll be as good as four strong men. You see if they ain't."

"It's very tempting, Tom, but—"

"Don't say but, sir. You make up your mind to take that vessel; give your orders; and we'll do it."

Mark shook his head.

"Oh, Mr Vandean, sir, look at her. She's another schooner about the same cut as this, and though she can see us, she isn't showing us her heels, for she don't know there's a man-o'-war's crew aboard, headed by the smartest young midshipman in the ryle navy."

"That'll do, Tom Fillot. No gammon, please."

"It ain't gammon, sir," cried Tom, sturdily, "but the solid truth. Think I'd come and ask you to do this if I didn't feel what a plucky young orficer you are? Why, the lads'll follow you anywheres. They like Mr Howlett, too, but do you think they'd follow him like they do you? Not they, sir."

"It's very tempting," said Mark, hesitating.

“Tempting, sir? Why, Captain Maitland and Mr Staples’d both go wild with delight if they got such a chance as has come right to you.”

“And she isn’t running away, Tom?”

“No, sir, but just quietly going on her course, and if you do the same it will bring you both close together, and like enough she’ll try to speak you.”

“Yes, Tom, it is very tempting, and if I could feel sure of taking her, I’d try.”

“Don’t you think anything about it, sir. You make up your mind to take her, and send me aboard, or go yourself, and she’s yourn.”

“If she’s a slaver, Tom.”

“Well, sir, what else can she be?”

“Trading vessel.”

“Likely, sir!” cried Tom, with a laugh. “Trading schooner with masts and booms like that! She’s made to sail, sir, and her cargo’s contraband.”

“I can’t help feeling tempted, Tom.”

“That’s right, sir.”

“I’ll go below and see if Mr Russell can understand me this morning. I should like his advice at a time like this.”

“Course you would, sir; and if he could give it, he’d say go in and win.”

Mark went below, to find his officer lying perfectly still, with his eyes closed, and breathing easily, but there was no response to his words, and, hesitating still, and excited, he went back on deck, to find the schooner still gliding on her course, and the stranger well out now from the point.

“What did Mr Russell say, sir?” asked Tom.

Mark shook his head, and raising his glass, carefully inspected the distant vessel.

“Yes,” he said at last; “she looks too smart fer a trader.”

“She do, sir.”

“And I don’t like to run any risks, Tom Fillot.”

“Oh Mr Vandean, sir!”

“But we’re out here to deal a deathblow at the slavery traffic.”

“To be sure we are, sir,” cried Tom Fillot, excitedly.

“And it would be cowardly to give up such a chance.”

“Cowardly—begging your pardon, sir—ain’t half bad enough word for it, Mr Vandean? sir.”

“One moment I feel that I ought not to risk it, and the next I feel that I ought, Tom,” said Mark, slowly. “Safe and sure is the motto to go upon, but—Oh, I can’t, as I am officer in command, stand still here and see that vessel go away, perhaps loaded with slaves, Tom Fillot. Wrong or right, I must do it.”

“Three cheers for you, sir!” cried Tom, excitedly; “and there ain’t no wrong in it, for if you made a mess of it you would still be doing right. Then now, sir, shall I have a little more canvas shook out, and alter her course, sir?”

“No,” cried Mark, firmly.

“You won’t try and take her, sir?” said the sailor, despondently.

“Indeed, but I will, Tom Fillot,” cried Mark; “but if we begin to chase her, she’ll be off, and sail perhaps as quickly as we do. We must trap her, Tom, by pretending to take no notice, and then be ready to go aboard.”

“Why, of course, sir. My, what a dunder-headed beetle of a fellow I am. Cunning’s the word.”

“Yes,” said Mark, decisively now. “Now, my lads, quick. Off with those duck frocks, all of you, and make yourselves untidy-looking. Tom Fillot,

get that American flag ready to hoist if she signals us, and send the blacks below, all but our two and their gang. Let them lie down on the deck."

The blacks looked surprised at being sent down into the stifling hold, but Soup seemed to have some inkling of what was intended, and he spoke eagerly to his companion before talking very earnestly, and with a good deal of gesticulation, to the men whom he had selected for his followers. These appeared to understand what was on the way, looking earnestly at the distant vessel, and then taking the positions assigned to them when all was ready, and Tom Fillot burst into a hearty laugh.

"They'll walk into the trap beautiful, sir, see if they don't," he said. "Lor', sir, if you only could make yourself look like the Yankee skipper, we should be lovely."

Mark said nothing, but quietly went on with his preparations. He made the man at the wheel look as much as possible like an ordinary sailor, and transformed another in the same way. Then, counter-ordering his instructions about the men's duck frocks, he partly lowered down the boat with an armed crew, including Tom Fillot, with instructions to keep out of sight, and ready for him to drop and board the stranger later on.

Then, going below, he made a few alterations in his own dress, so as to conceal the fact that he was in uniform; threw his belt, dirk, jacket, and cap into the stern-sheets of the boat, and clapped a Panama hat, which he found in the cabin, upon his head. Then he walked about the deck in shirt and trousers, and with the Yankee skipper's big spy-glass under his arm.

The last thing he did was to plant two of the men forward, where they readily played their parts of standing looking over the bulwarks, and watching the coming vessel.

For she had altered her course and came steadily toward them, after hoisting her colours—the Stars and Stripes—the same flag being sent aloft by Dick Bannock at a word from Mark.

"Now, my lads," he said, "whatever you do in the boat, keep out of sight. If they catch a glimpse of you they'll be off, and we may never get

alongside."

"Ay, ay, sir," came eagerly from the boat in which the two black sailors had also been stowed, each looking eager and excited about the work to come.

The wind was light, and a couple of hours passed, with Mark's steersman gradually edging the schooner nearer to the stranger, which, having the advantage of the wind, glided down to them, evidently meaning to speak them, and ask for news.

"It couldn't be better, sir," said Tom Fillot; "only if you would get one of the skipper's big cigars and smoke it as you walk about, they're sure to be using a spy-glass now and then."

"But I can't smoke, Tom."

"Then light it, sir, and only blow at it so as to make the smoke show now and again. Have a lighted lanthorn under the bulwarks, and shove the end in now and then. It'll make it all look so quiet and safe aboard that they'll walk right into the trap."

Mark did as he was requested, but with a good deal of discomfort; and then waited with a throbbing heart, and a strong desire to cough and sneeze from time to time as he marched about the deck, stopping to use his glass, and making out a tall, thin man similarly armed with a glass, and wearing a Panama hat as well.

But there was no sign of a black on board. Some half-dozen ordinary-looking sailors lounged about the deck, and save that it was such a smartly-built heavily-rigged craft, there was not a trace of her being anything but an ordinary trader.

Matters went exactly as Mark desired, the stranger schooner gliding nearer and nearer, while the midshipman's heart beat faster, and he trembled lest a glimpse should be caught of the armed boat hanging from the davits, with her keel just dipping into the water from time to time.

But by clever steering it was kept out of sight, and when the right moment came a turn or two of the wheel sent the schooner a little way ahead, and

then another turn, and she swept round a little, her sails shivered, and she lost way, while the stranger hailed them as she came closer, and was thrown up head to wind.

By this time the two schooners were not above fifty yards apart, and a hail came in decidedly American tones,—

“I’ll send a boat aboard.”

There was a little movement, and Mark lay waiting for his time, for this action on the part of the stranger was thoroughly playing into his hands.

The American’s boat was lowered down on the side farthest from them, with the skipper sitting aft with four men to row; and as her head appeared round the stern, Mark dropped over into his own boat. The falls were cast off as she dropped into the water, and bidding the men give way, she shot off round the schooner’s bows, the Panama hat gave place to the naval cap, the jacket was hurried on, and away they went for the stranger, whose crew on board stared in astonishment over the bulwarks at the man-of-war’s men, while a horrible thought struck the young officer.

He was going to seize the stranger vessel, but he had left his own almost unprotected, and the Yankee skipper was being rowed to her.

“I’m playing dog and the shadow, after all, Tom,” he whispered, excitedly.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Suppose the Yankee seizes our prize while we try to take his schooner.”

“Murder!” exclaimed Tom Fillot, leaping up in the stern-sheets. “I never thought of that.”

Chapter Twenty Six.

Trading with the American.

For a few brief moments Mark was ready to turn back and make sure of

his prize, but every stroke was carrying him nearer to the stranger, and in less time than it takes to describe it, he found out that he had alarmed himself with his own bugbear.

For the Yankee skipper, apparently taken quite aback at the sight of the armed boat's crew, began by ordering his men to stop, and then turned and had himself rowed back as swiftly as possible, with the result that the boats reached the two sides of the second schooner nearly together. And as Mark scrambled up and over the stern, in spite of the menacing looks of three men at the side, who, however, fell back before Tom Fillot and those who followed, the Yankee master stepped over the bulwarks too, and advanced to meet Mark.

"How are yew?" he said, coolly. "Didn't know yew was coming aboard. Can yew trade me a barrel or two o' good whites flour? I'm running raythe short."

"Perhaps I can," said Mark, sharply, as he cast an eye over the deck. "What ship's this?"

"Ef yew'd looked at her starnboard yew'd hev seen, mister. She's the *Mariar B Peasgood*, o' Charleston, South Carlinar, trading in notions. What's yourn?"

"Prize to her Britannic Majesty's ship *Nautilus*."

"Prize schooner, eh?" said the American, coolly, gazing over Mark's shoulder at the graceful little vessel. "Wal, I am surprised. I said as she looked a clipper as could sail a few."

"Your papers, please."

"Eh? Oh, suttunly. Air yew an officer?"

"Yes," replied Mark, shortly. "Your papers, please."

"Wall, I thowt *we* was pretty smart, and made skippers of our boys in mighty good time, but you beat us. I give in. Ephrim, fetch up them thar papers outer my cabin."

A sour-looking fellow with a villainous grin slouched to the little cabin-hatch; and by this time the whole of the boat's crew, including the two blacks, and saving the coxswain, who held on to the chains, were aboard, Tom Fillot scanning the deck eagerly for some sign of the nefarious traffic, but none was visible.

"Guessed yew was pirates for a moment, mister," said the skipper. "Yew quite scarred me, and I kim back in a hurry, thinking yew meant robbery on the high seas. Hev a cigar?"

He held out a handful, which he had taken from his pocket, and all in the coolest, most matter-of-fact way.

"Thanks, no," said Mark. "I don't smoke."

"He—he!" laughed the American; "yew needn't be shamed on it. Yewr cap'en don't like it, p'r'aps; but I see yew pulling away at a cigar threw my glass."

Mark turned crimson.

"Needn't tell a cracker about it, squaire. Here we are," he continued, taking the papers from Ephraim—evidently his mate. "Hev a look at 'em, squaire; but I reckon if one of our officers was to board one of your traders, and ask for 'em, yewr folk'd make no end of a fizzle about it."

Mark felt uncomfortable as he took and glanced through the papers, which were all in the most correct style. There was not a point upon which he could seize; and without some grounds he had no right to search the vessel, whose hold looked to be closely battened down, while there was not a sound to suggest that there were slaves on board.

"We've made a mistake," he thought, as the writing on the papers seemed to dance before his eyes; "and yet I could have sworn she was a slaver."

"Find 'em all right and squaire?" said the American, with his little grey eyes twinkling; and he held out his hand for the papers.

"Yes," said Mark, returning them reluctantly, and then glancing at Tom

Elliot, whose countenance was a puzzle.

“That’s right, squaire; that’s right. Theer, I shan’t cut up rusty, though I might, of course. It was yewr dewty, I s’pose.”

“Yes, of course,” said Mark.

“That’s right, squaire. Allus dew yewr dewty. I ain’t riled. But yew’ll trade that barl or tew o’ whites flour with me, I reckon, and anything I’ve got you shall hev. What dew yew say to some Chicago pork? Rale good.”

“I—a—thank—you, no,” said Mark, looking wildly round in the hope of finding some excuse for ordering his men to search the vessel; “but you shall have the flour if I can find it.”

“That’s what I call real civil, mister,” said the American, advancing, and backing Mark toward the side, for the lad gave way, feeling that he had no excuse for staying. “Smart schooner that o’ yewrn. Guess yew could sail round my old tub. Won’t take a cigar?”

“No, no: thanks,” cried Mark, turning to Tom Fillot. “We can do nothing more,” he whispered.

“No, sir,” said Tom, saluting. “He’s too many for us. And yet I could swear to it.”

Disappointed, confused, and angry at his position, Mark felt that he must give up, and that a far more experienced officer would have done the same. Turning to his men, he gave orders for them to go down into the boat, and then, telling the skipper to come on board the schooner, he gave another glance forward at the hatches, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound, meaning, if he heard either groan or cry, to seize the vessel at once and search. Without such a sign or sound he dared not. It would have been overstepping his authority.

“Ready, mister? Guess I’ll come in my own boat,” said the American; and he backed Mark farther to the side.

“Look at old Soup, sir,” whispered Tom, excitedly. “Yes; and Taters has got it too.”

“Here, hi!” shouted the American. “Whare air yew going?”

For Soup had taken a step or two forward, after looking wildly and in a puzzled way at Mark, as if wondering that he did not act, and then throwing back his head, he stood with his eyes rolling and his broad nostrils inflated, snuffling like a horse over some doubtful hay.

The next moment his fellow was following his example, and uttering something in a low, deep whisper in his own tongue.

“Guess them two niggers o’ yewrn hev got the megrims, squaire. Get ’em both aboard, lay ’em down, and hev ’em dowsed with buckets o’ water.”

“Stop!” cried Mark, excitedly, as he thrust back the American. “Here, my lads, what is it?”

The two blacks did not understand his words, but they did his gesture, and Soup made a bound forward to the main hatchway, uttered a low, deep roar, and stooped, pointing down.

“It ain’t megrims; it’s hyderyphoby,” cried the American, quickly. “He’s dangerous. Get him aboard;” and as he spoke he drew a pistol from his breast, cocked it, and took aim at the black.

But with one motion Tom Fillot whipped out his cutlass, giving it so broad a sweep that the flat of the weapon struck the American’s wrist, and the pistol flew out of his hand.

At that moment, in answer to a loud cry from Soup, there came a wild, excited, smothered clamour from below the hatch; and with a cry of rage, the American stooped to pick up his pistol, while his men rushed to seize hatchet and capstan bar.

Mark’s dirk was out now, and he presented it at the American skipper.

“Surrender, sir!” he cried; “the game’s up. Draw, my lads, and cut them down if they resist. Fillot, have off that hatch.”

At a sign, the two blacks tore it open: and with the horrible vapour that arose came a wild, piteous clamour from the imprisoned slaves below.

“Guess yew’re right, curse you!” said the American, in an angry snarl. “Drop it, boys; they’re too many for us this time. We’re done, and it’s of no use to be ugly.”

“Hurray!” shouted Mark’s little party, as they drove the crew below in the forecastle; and after a guard was set, Tom Fillot came back to his officer, who stood talking to the American, while that worthy lit himself a cigar.

“This is some dollars out o’ my pocket, mister,” he said. “Guess I wish that thar nigger had been drowned afore you brought him here. What air yew going to dew now?”

That was a question Mark was not prepared to answer, with two prizes on his hands.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

“A Last Resource.”

But Mark Vandean soon began to show the American slaving skipper what he meant to “dew now,” and that in times of emergency he did not mean to talk much. For turning to Tom Fillot, he gave his orders respecting the slaver’s crew.

“Keep them below in the forecastle,” he said; “and place the second black over them as guard.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” cried Tom, and he proceeded to plant Taters on guard over the hatch, armed with a drawn cutlass, to the black’s intense satisfaction.

“Here, I say, mister,” cried the skipper, “yew ain’t going to put a nigger as sentry over a crew o’ white men, air yew?”

“I have done it,” said Mark, sharply.

“What! going to keep them free American citizens prisoners below like a pack o’ niggers?”

“Why not?” said Mark. “Do you think I’m going to let you and your men hatch up a scheme to retake this schooner?”

The man laughed.

“Guess yew’re a sharp one, squaire. Wall, what are you going to do with me?”

“Take you aboard my ship, sir.”

“And hang me at the yardarm, squaire?” said the skipper, with a grin.

“Not if you behave yourself,” said Mark; “but I warn you not to try any tricks, sir, or matters may turn out unpleasantly. Here, Soup!”

He made a sign, and the great broad-shouldered black ran up to him eagerly.

“Here, my lad,” said Mark, signing to the man what to do; “draw your cutlass and take this gentleman on board the other schooner. You’ll keep guard over him till I come.”

Soup whipped out his cutlass, caught the American skipper by the arm, and there was a tremendous yell.

“Say, mister, yew didn’t tell him to kill me.”

“No, no, Soup, you don’t understand,” cried Mark, arresting the man, for he had evidently taken it that he was to play the part of executioner upon the white skipper; while to judge from his aspect, he was prepared to perform his part with great gusto. Then making the men understand, he was about to despatch them over the side in one of the boats, when the American turned obstinate.

“Look here, squaire,” he said, “I give in, but yew’re an officer and I’m an officer. Play fair with a man. That nigger’ll kill me sure as a gun if I go along with him. Seems to me I shan’t be safe ’less I’m along o’ you, so I guess I’ll stop here.”

Mark was about to insist, but a glance at Soup was sufficient to alter his

mind.

“Very well, stop for the present, sir, till I go back aboard.”

“Yew’re going back, then?” said the American, with a flash of the eye.

“I am, sir,” said Mark, sharply, “but I’m going to leave a strong prize crew here on board, and I wouldn’t advise you or your men to make any attempt at recapture. Matters might turn out, as you call it, ‘ugly.’”

“All right, squaire, but I don’t see where your strong prize crew is coming from,” said the man, drily.

“Indeed!” said Mark. “I shall be able to show you. I can pick out half-a-dozen blacks from the other schooner who will help the man forward to keep pretty good watch over your crew, and who will not be over particular if there are any tricks.”

“Oh! slaves!” said the man, with a sneer.

“There are no slaves here, sir, now. Under the British flag all men are free.”

“Oh, if yew’re going to talk Buncombe, squaire, I’ve done.”

“And so have I, sir,” said Mark, “for there is plenty of work wanting me.”

Leaving the American in charge of the big black, Mark set to at once to make his arrangements, after the poor creatures had been let out of the hold, where they had been nearly suffocated, and now huddled together on deck, trembling and wondering what was to be their fate.

“I don’t like parting with you, Tom Fillot,” said Mark, “but I must. You will take charge here with Billings, Dance, Potatoes, and three of the blacks Soup drilled as his guard. It’s a poor crew for you.”

“Best we can do, sir,” said Tom Fillot, cheerily.

“I’ll have half the Americans on board with me.”

“Beg pardon, sir, don’t.”

“But they are too many for you to have with your weak force.”

“Well, sir, quite enough, but you keep the skipper on one schooner, and the men on the other. They’re best apart, sir.”

“But you cannot manage.”

“Lookye here, sir, I’m going to have a talk to old Taters, and I shall give him a capstan bar to use, instead of the cutlash. I don’t understand his lingo, but him and me can get on, and I can make him see what I want; and after that it won’t be safe for any man o’ the Yankee crew to put his head above the combings of that hatch. You trust me, sir, to manage. Dick Bannock’ll be quite as good as me if you appynt him mate. Get back aboard, and make sail, and we’ll follow steady like in your wake.”

“But the blacks we have set free?”

“Taters and me’ll manage them, sir, and ’fore many hours are up, we’ll have two or three on ’em good at pulling a rope. You won’t make much sail, sir, of course, now?”

“As little as I can, Tom; just as much as we can manage. Then now I’ll get back, and the sooner we can set eyes on the *Nautilus* the better.”

“So say I, sir. But you keep a good heart, sir, and above all things don’t you trust Mr Yankee Skipper, sir.”

Mark gave the sailor a meaning look.

“That’s right, sir, and above all things mind he don’t get hold o’ no pistols.”

Mark laughed, and after a few instructions he ordered the American into the boat; his men followed, and he was about to step down too, when there was a yell forward, and the sound of a heavy blow or chop.

Mark faced round in time to see that Taters had struck at one of the American sailors, but missed him, his cutlass coming in contact with the edge of the hatch, and the next moment there was a desperate struggle

going on. The second schooner's crew were forcing their way up on deck, and as Mark called up the men from the boat to help quell the attempt, the American skipper took advantage of his being for the moment unwatched, and climbed on deck once more to make a rush to help his men.

But quick as he was, Tom Fillot was quicker; and turning sharply round, he struck out with his double fist, catching the American right in the centre of his forehead, with the result mathematical that two moving bodies meeting fly off at a tangent.

The American skipper's head flew off at a tangent, and then he rolled heavily on the deck, while in less than five minutes, with the help of Soup and Taters, who fought fiercely, the American crew were beaten back, and driven or tumbled down into the forecastle one after the other.

"Hi! yew, don't shut down that there hatch," cried one of the men; "yew'll smother us."

"And a good job too," panted Tom Fillot, as he banged down the square covering. "Here, you Taters, sit down on this, will you?"

The black understood his sign, and squatted upon it, sitting upon his heels with a grin of satisfaction.

While this struggle was going on, the freed slaves huddled together helplessly, seeming more bent on getting out of the way of the combatants than on joining in, though some of the men, warriors perhaps in their own country before they had been crushed down by conquest, imprisonment, and starvation, did once or twice evince a disposition to seek some weapon and strike a blow. But they soon subsided into an apathetic state, and watched.

"Hurt much, Tom Fillot?" said Mark, as soon as excitement would let him speak.

"Well, sir, tidy—tidy. I was just thinking about some of our chaps aboard the *Naughtylass*, growling and grumbling at her for being an unlucky ship, and no fighting to be had. They wouldn't find fault if they was out here, sir, eh?"

“No, Tom; we’re getting our share of it. I wouldn’t mind if Mr Howlett was here to have his taste.”

“My! how you can crow over him, sir, when we get back, eh?”

“Let’s get back first, Tom.”

“Oh, we’ll do that, sir, never you fear. That ain’t what I’m scared about.”

“Then what is?”

“Well, sir, I want to get back without killing anybody if I can, but when they come these games with us and hit hard as they do, it’s ’most more than flesh and blood can bear to have a cutlash and not use it. I know I shall make someone bleed with a cut finger ’fore I’ve done.”

There was so much meaning in the sailor’s words, and at the same time so droll a look in his eyes, that Mark could not forbear a smile.

“If it’s only a cut finger, Tom, I shan’t mind,” he said.

“That’s right, sir. Well, I think you might start back now, and we’ll get sail on. Sooner we’ve got these two into port the better I shall like it. I think I can manage, sir.”

“But I’ve altered my plans,” said Mark, thoughtfully.

“Yes, sir? What do you mean to do now?”

“I’ll tell you. It seems to me madness, after this lesson in the American’s intentions, to divide my little crew. I want them altogether, and we’re weak enough then.”

“Don’t say you mean to give up the prize, sir,” cried Tom Fillot, appealingly.

“Not while I can lift a hand, Tom. We’ll try another plan. I’ll get the skipper on board the other schooner. Then we’ll have the crew down in our forecastle.”

“And leave me to navigate this one, sir? No, that won’t do, sir. What isn’t safe for me, isn’t safe for you.”

“No, I felt that. My plan’s a different one. We’ll have a hawser from our schooner to this one, after you’ve made all snug aloft, and tow her while the weather keeps fair.”

“Well, sir, I don’t see why not,” said Tom, thoughtfully.

“We can leave the blacks on board; and then we shall have plenty of force to meet the Yankees if they try to master us again.”

“That’s right, sir; and as long as the weather holds good, we may do, though I think we shall have our hands full. But look here, sir; why not—”

“Why not what?”

“There’s lots o’ irons below, such as they used for the poor niggers. Why shouldn’t we couple a lot of the prisoners together, and make ’em safe?”

“Put them in irons, Tom? No, I don’t like to do that—only as a last resource.”

“Very well, sir,” said Tom, rubbing his head where he had received a heavy blow, “only if you wouldn’t mind telling on me, sir, I should like to know what you calls a last resource.”

“I will, Tom, when I know,” said Mark, smiling. “Hail our schooner, and tell them to come aboard in the other boat.”

Tom turned away and obeyed the order, passing the American skipper, who was leaning on the bulwark looking sick, and as the sailor came up he turned to him with an ugly leer.

“Guess I’m going to pay yew for that, young man,” he said. “I don’t let a chap hit me twice for nothing.”

“Like to do it now?” said Tom, sharply.

“No; I’m not quite ready, mister. Yew’ll know when I am.”

“Thankye,” said Tom Fillot. “Then now look here; just you let me give you a hint, too. I’m acting as mate to my young officer here, and he takes a good deal o’ notice o’ what I say. If you don’t keep a civil tongue in your head, I’ll tell him as you’re real dangerous, and that the best thing he can do is to have some o’ them irons clapped on your arms and legs, and then shove you below along with your men.”

“What!” cried the skipper, fiercely; “put me in irons! Me, an Amurrican citizen. I should like to see him do it!”

“You soon shall,” said Tom, “if you don’t mind. Now then, get down into that boat.”

“Who are yew ordering about, sir?”

“You,” cried Tom. “Now then, once more, get down into that boat.”

The skipper turned to walk away, but Tom’s temper was getting hot, and without a moment’s hesitation he seized the man by the collar and waistband, thrust him to the side, and jerked him out of the gangway.

“Ketch hold!” he shouted, and the man in charge of the boat caught hold and dragged the skipper down into the boat just as the other was rowed alongside.

The skipper started up to revenge himself, and then sat down again to brood over the affront, while, as rapidly as they could be transferred, two more men were thrust into the same boat with him, and the rest into the other boat, the fellows looking fierce, and ready for a fresh attempt to recapture their schooner. But the arms of the English sailors, and the fierce readiness of the blacks, Soup and Taters, awed them, especially as their skipper made no sign, and a quarter of an hour later captain and men were safely fastened in the forecastle, with Soup now as sentry—Taters having been sent on board the second schooner to see to the freed slaves, with another man to help him. Then a hawser was made fast and sail set, the first schooner towing the second fairly well, and some knots were sailed toward the north before the position of the sun suggested to Mark that an anxious time was coming. For if an attempt were made to turn the tables upon them, it would for certain be that night.

However, Mark went on with his preparations. The blacks on both ships were fed, every precaution taken, and, giving up all idea of sleep for that night, a well-armed watch was set, and he paced the deck, feeling quite an old man with his responsibility. He asked himself whether there was anything he had left undone, whether the tow-line would hold, and a score of other questions, while all above was calmness, and the great stars glittered and shone down from the purply black sky.

“Are we to have a peaceful night?” he thought, as he looked over the schooner’s counter at the dark silent vessel towed behind.

Tom Fillot gave him the answer, by running aft to him, his bare feet making a soft *pad pad* upon the deck.

“Got your shooter, sir?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“Loaded?”

“Of course; but why do you ask?” cried Mark, excitedly.

“The game has begun, sir. It will have to be the irons, after all.”

Almost as he spoke there was a flash and the report of a pistol, fired from the forecastle hatch.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Tom Fillot advises.

There was a fierce howl of rage and a heavy crash from forward as Mark drew and cocked his pistol, running toward the hatch with Tom Fillot into the foul smelling smoke that hung around, in the midst of which stood the great black, whirling the capstan bar with which he was armed about his head, after delivering a crushing blow at someone who had tried to climb out, and then dropped back groaning, but not much injured, fortunately for him, the principal force of the blow having fallen upon the woodwork of the hatchway.

As the black saw them he uttered a low, savage roar, and pointed to his shoulder, which had been grazed by a pistol ball, the smarting making the great fellow grin with rage and roll his eyes.

“Hi, below there!” cried Mark, the excitement making him forget all danger. “Hand up that pistol and any other weapons you have, or we’ll fire down among you.”

The answer was a flash, a sharp report, and a puff of smoke, Mark being conscious of a whizzing sound close by one ear.

“You scoundrels!” he cried, passionately. “Surrender; do you hear?”

“Not we,” came in a familiar voice. “S’render yourselves. You’re not Queen’s officers, only pirates, and I’m going to retake my ship.”

“If that pistol is not thrown out on the deck, sir, I give the orders to fire,” cried Mark.

“That’s jist what you darn’t do, mister,” said the American skipper.

“Let ’em have it, sir,” whispered Tom Fillot, excitedly.

But Mark felt as if the skipper’s words were correct, and that he dare not fire down into that cabin to the destruction of some poor wretch’s life, so

he did not—to use Tom Fillot's expression—"Let 'em have it," but gave orders sharply in the way of defence, and not attack.

"Clap on the hatch, Tom," he shouted; and the covering, which had been forced off in some way, was thrust back and held down for a moment or two, before Tom leaped away as a shot crashed through, and the hatch was driven off once more.

By this time the rest of the men were gathered round, and it was just as well, for a daring attempt was made to climb on deck, but only for each man who attempted the feat to be sent down again by a blow on head or shoulder.

"If you'd give orders, sir," said Tom, "we'd soon have that hatch over again, and fifty fathom o' chain cable piled atop."

"I don't like risking you men's lives," said Mark; "but there's no going back now; it must be done."

"Come on, Dick Bannock," cried Tom Fillot, rolling up his sleeves. "You chaps stand by with the end of that cable."

Another shot was fired from the forecastle, and directly after the muzzle of a pistol appeared over the side with a hand directing it, when *bang*, *crash*—down came Soup's capstan bar, striking pistol and hand with such good effect that they were snatched back, and a burst of fierce oaths came up.

"Well done, my lad!" cried Mark; and the black looked at him and showed his white teeth as he stood watchful, and ready, with the bar raised for another blow.

By this time the men had laid hold of the end of the cable and drawn some two or three fathoms up from the little forward compartment, while Tom Fillot and Bannock seized the loose hatch ready to clap on.

"No, no," cried Mark, hastily; "don't expose yourselves needlessly, my lads. Lie down and crawl toward the hatchway, pushing the cable before you."

“Thought you’d fancy we were cowardly, sir,” said Tom, obeying his orders.

“Then don’t think so again, sir,” cried Mark, who wondered at his own sharpness and authoritative way. “Now then, stand by all. Ready?”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Hah! look-out!”

Crash.

“Well done, my lad.”

This was as a pistol was once more thrust out, and the hand which held it appeared ready for Soup to hit at, which he did, and missed. But, all the same, the hand and pistol disappeared, and the next minute Tom and Dick, one on each side, thrust the cover over the hatch as they crawled forward, Tom flinging himself across it, while the rest of the men hauled away, and began to pile on the chain cable.

Bang again—a pistol-shot fired up through the hatchway lid, and Tom gave a sharp start.

“Ah! Hurt?” cried Mark, excitedly, as the sailor rolled over, while as quickly as possible more of the cable was piled up where he had lain.

“Dunno yet, sir,” said Tom, rising up and feeling his side. “Something give me an awful whack on the ribs. Don’t look like a dead ’un, do I?”

“Don’t say you’re wounded, Tom,” said Mark, in a hoarse whisper.

“Wasn’t going to, sir,” replied the man, whose hands were still busy feeling his side. “No, I don’t think I’m wounded; don’t feel like it—only savage, and as if I should like to drop on to the chap as fired that shot. I know: I have it. The bullet must have hit the chain, and drove it against my ribs. I’m all right, sir. Deal o’ fight in me yet.”

“Thank Heaven!” said Mark to himself, as he thought of how helpless he would have been without the frank young sailor who was completely his

strong right hand.

By this time the hatch was loaded with coil upon coil of the strong chain, and, though a couple more shots were fired, the bullets were only flattened against the iron links.

“Hah, that gives us breathing time, my lads,” cried Mark. “Now then, what next?”

“Daylight’d be the best thing, sir,” said Dance; “and then I should be able to see about—”

He stopped short, put his hand to his head, and looked around vacantly.

“What was it I wanted to see about?”

“It’s all right, messmate; don’t you worry about that,” cried Tom, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Eh? No, I won’t, Tom,” said Dance, thoughtfully. “It’s my head goes all foggy sometimes, and then I can’t think; but I’m all right again, ain’t I, mate? Not going to be like the lufftenant, eh?”

“Not you,” said Tom Fillot.

The coxswain laughed.

“Yes, I’m coming round,” he said. “Head’s a bit soft, that’s all; but I’m coming round.”

While this was going on, Mark had turned to the black, whose shirt was wet with the blood which oozed from the score made in his shoulder by the bullet fired at him when first the attempt was made to escape, and then by the light of a lantern, while the man knelt down, the wound was bound up, the black smiling and making very light of it the while.

As Mark busied himself, he could not help thinking of how much demand there was made upon an officer in command, with the result that his respect for those over him was wonderfully increased.

All further thought of rest for the men was given up, and the remainder of the night was devoted to keeping a careful watch, Mark pacing the deck and stopping to have a quiet consultation now and then with his mate.

“I can’t think where they obtained their arms, Tom,” he said on one occasion.

“Oh, you needn’t wonder at that, sir,” replied the man, with a laugh. “’Mericans ain’t like Englishmen, and pretty well every man jack of ’em’s got a pistol hid somewhere about him. It ain’t to be wondered at, sir,” continued the man, stretching out and clenching his big hand. “I never see a ’Merican yet with a good fist like that, and a man must have something to fight with when he goes knocking about in the world. Well, sir, as you say I’m to be mate while we’re on this expedition, p’r’aps you won’t mind me asking what you’re going to do next ’bout the prisoners. Is it to be irons?”

“No,” said Mark, firmly. “I can’t do that.”

“Then if I were you, sir, I’d risk them trying to take the schooner again, and send ’em adrift first thing in one of the boats.”

“On an uninhabited shore? Why, it would be like murdering them, man.”

“Well, hardly, sir, because you give ’em all a chansh for their lives, though it ain’t lively for a look-out to be cast ashore where there’s only palm trees and nothing else ’cept the niggers, who might want to serve you out for captering their brothers and sisters for slaves.”

“No, Tom, it will not do. We must keep the men prisoners, and make the best of our way north, to where we can hand them over to the officers of the law.”

“Very good, sir,” said Tom Fillot, “only either o’ my ways would be easier.”

“Do you think Mr Russell would act as you propose?” said Mark, sharply.

Tom Fillot screwed up his face, and shook his head.

“No, sir. He’d do as you’re going to. But we must keep a sharp eye on

’em, or they’ll be too many for us, I’m afraid. They’re the sort as it don’t do to be easy with, sir, because if you are, they only think you’re feared on ’em.”

“There shan’t be much easiness with them, Tom,” said Mark, firmly. “They’re prisoners, and prisoners they shall stay.”

“If they don’t circumwent us, sir, and get out,” said Tom; and the discussion closed.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Difficult Prisoners.

Never was morning greeted with greater joy than by the crew of the *Nautilus’* first cutter. For with the darkness half the troubles to which they were exposed faded away; and though tired out from long watching, excitement, and loss of sleep, the bright sunshine made things look quite hopeful. So when the midshipman had partaken of a good breakfast and attended to Mr Russell’s wants, he felt ready to believe that his brother officer was a little better, and had understood him when he spoke, for there was a look of intensity in his countenance widely different from the vacant, drowsy aspect which had been so marked ever since the hour when he was struck down.

On deck there was so much to see to that weariness was soon forgotten. There were the unfortunate blacks to feed on both vessels, though this had already grown into a much simpler task, Soup and Taters giving orders to the men they had selected to help them; and these latter, now that they had thoroughly grasped the fact that nothing but good was intended by their fresh captors, eagerly devoting themselves to the task of distributing the rations amongst their unfortunate fellow-country folk, and watching Mark and his men with the greatest intentness as they strove to comprehend their wishes.

That morning, as soon as the party on board the first schooner was provisioned, the boat was manned, and Fillot, accompanied by Soup, went aboard the second schooner, where all proved to be satisfactory,

Taters greeting them smilingly, while the emancipated slaves were ready to lie down on the deck.

“To make it soft for us to walk upon,” Tom said on his return.

This was eagerly looked for by Mark, who had spent his time watching the schooner astern, and the shore a couple of miles away, in the hope of their coming upon a town where he could land his prisoners, their presence on board being risky in the extreme.

Tom Fillot’s return was looked for so eagerly on account of the action of the prisoners, who had begun to clamour for the hatch to be opened, and after several orders to be silent had been disregarded, now beat heavily on the hatchway cover, and shouted to be let out.

Mark had deferred taking any action while his right-hand man was absent; but the uproar became at last so obstreperous that he walked to the cable-covered hatchway and struck heavily upon the deck.

“Now,” he said, sharply, “what is it?”

“Look here, squaire,” came in the skipper’s muffled tones, “guess yew don’t want to kill us?”

“Then have off that there hatch. We’re being smothered: that’s so.”

“It’s not true,” said Mark, firmly. “The ventilator’s open.”

“Wal, that say gives ’bout air enough for one man to drink in. We want more.”

“You’re getting more now than you considered enough for those unfortunate blacks, sir. So be silent, or I’ll have you all in irons.”

“Don’t you try it, mister,” cried the skipper. “But look here, squaire, we want our breakfast.”

“Your rations shall be served out to you all in good time,” replied Mark.

“But we want ’em now, mister; my lads are half famished.”

“I tell you that you shall have them soon, so wait patiently.”

“Wall, don’t be ugly about it, squaire. We’re not ugly now. Look here, it’s hot and smothering down here. Let us come up on deck and have a confab about this business. It’s of no use for us to quarrel about it, so let’s square matters.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Yew don’t? Wall, look here; yew’ve took the schooner, and I s’pose she’s your prize if yew say yew ain’t pirates. ’Scuse me for thinking yew was, seeing as yew came in a schooner as don’t look a bit like a Britannic Majesty’s ship o’ war.”

“I told you that was a prize to her Majesty’s ship.”

“Ah, so yew did, and now yew’ve got another, but yew don’t want a lot o’ Murrican corpses aboard, squaire, so let us out, so as we can breathe. We’ll make a truce with yew.”

The boat had come back from the second prize, and Tom Fillot walked up to look on, listening and wondering.

“You mean to say that if I let you come on deck—you and your men—you will not attempt to escape or recapture the schooner?”

“That’s so, captain.”

Tom made an angry gesticulation, and took a step nearer to his young officer.

“Then to show your good faith,” cried Mark, “hand up all your pistols through the ventilator.”

There was a few moments’ silence, and Tom slapped his knee softly.

“Well, do you hear?” cried Mark.

“Wall, captain, I’m willing,” said the skipper, “but my lads here say air yew to be trusted? and what’s to become o’ them if they come up and yew

and yewr men turn nasty, and them without weepons?”

“You heard what I said, sir; hand up your pistols,” said Mark, firmly.

“Guess we can’t do that, squaire. But look here, captain.”

The complimentary title did no good, for Mark turned sharply away.

“See that some biscuit and water are lowered down to these people, Fillot,” he cried.

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Biscuit—water?” roared the American skipper, his voice coming up through the ventilator with a yell. “Yew don’t mean to say—”

He stopped short to listen to Tom Fillot’s next words.

“Shall we open the hatch, sir?”

“No; lower all down through the ventilator,” cried Mark, from where he had walked.

Tom Fillot joined him, with a grim smile on his countenance, soon after.

“Hear the skipper, sir?” he said.

“No; what did he say?”

Tom Fillot gave the midshipman a comical look.

“I don’t think you’d care to hear what he said, sir. But my word, he is in a snag. Swears he’ll be even with you yet, sir, and that we’re a set of thieves and pirates, and not British sailors at all.”

“I thought you were not going to tell me what he said, Tom.”

“I ain’t, sir. That was only some of the nice innercent bits. You’ll excuse me, sir, won’t you?”

“Excuse what?”

“Just hinting again about the irons, or setting of ’em afloat near the shore.”

“I’ll excuse you, Tom Fillot, but I shall not do it.”

“Very good, sir; you’re officer, I’m only man; but I’m afeared of ’em.”

“I don’t believe it, Tom.”

“Well, sir, I don’t mean feared in one way, but in the t’other. I mean I’m feared they’ll get out, and if they do, and we surwive, they’ll either put us in irons or set us ashore.”

“They’ve got to get out yet, Tom. That cable’s heavy enough to keep them from opening the hatch.”

“Yes, sir; it’s heavy enough, but I can’t feel sure of ’em. These Yankees are such clever chaps. It’s wonderful what dodges and tricks they can think of. I only wish the *Naughtylass* would heave in sight, and take charge of both schooners. The blacks are enough to take care on without a gang o’ savage chaps like them below.”

Chapter Thirty.

A Joint Watch.

That day passed quietly enough. The weather was hot, but tempered by a gentle gale, which wafted them on their way; and, as Mark gazed at the verdant shore through a glass and then at the glistening sea, it seemed to him as if Heaven was smiling upon their efforts to save the poor weak, trembling creatures, who were ready to wince and shrink away every time he marched forward to where their part of the deck was shut off by a rope stretched taut from side to side. But as soon as he put off the stern official look he wore—an unconscious copy of Captain Maitland’s quarter-deck manner—and smiled at them, their faces lit up, and he felt as if they would go down upon their knees to him and kiss his feet, if he would permit it.

Already they looked better, and, like those in the second prize, basked in the sunshine, and talked together in a low, soft, pleasantly-sounding tongue.

The second prize was visited twice, and in addition to Taters, Grote and Dance were left on board, to take it in turns at the wheel and manage the little sail, hoisted now to help the steering and ease the strain on the tow-rope.

So everything went well that day: the Americans were quiet down below, and though the progress made was only slow, Mark felt hopeful, as he swept the horizon with his glass, of seeing the *Nautilus* come round some point, or appear in the offing at any time.

That night, so as to guard against their being passed by their friends in the darkness, lights were hoisted as a signal that would be pretty sure to bring them help; and this being done, Tom Fillot approached his superior respectfully, to speak him, as he called it, about the division of the watches.

“You’ll let me take the first, sir, while you’ll go below and have a good sleep, sir, won’t you?” he said.

“Certainly not,” said Mark, shortly. “So sure as I go to sleep, something happens.”

“But you can’t do without sleep, sir,” said the man.

“I can to-night, Tom. I’ve been resting and having little naps of a few minutes at a time all day.”

“Well, sir, begging your pardon, it’s the rummest sort o’ rest I ever see. Take my word for it, sir, you can’t hold up.”

“I must somehow, Tom; so no more words. Look here, we’ll seep watch together, and the one who feels drowsy can take a nap now and then, ready to start up at the slightest alarm.”

“Very well, sir, if you won’t sleep reg’lar, so be it.”

But it proved to be hard work. Nature is a terrible tyrant to those who try to break her laws, and after about an hour's duty on deck, when the clustering stars had been watched, and their reflections in the sea, the wheel visited again and again, an ear given from time to time at the forecastle hatch and ventilator, where everything was silent as the grave, all of a sudden Mark would find himself at home, talking to his father and mother, or on board the *Nautilus*, listening to Mr Whitney, the doctor, or to the captain, and then start up with a jerk to find he had been asleep.

"How long was I off, Tom?" he would whisper, angry with himself.

"'Bout five minutes, sir."

"Not more?"

"No, sir."

"That's right. All quiet?"

"Yes, sir. Have another."

"Nonsense! I'm better now."

Mark took a turn to the wheel, said a few words to the steersman, and returned to his seat, to find that in those brief minutes Tom Fillot had gone off too, but only to start up, fully awake, at the moment his young officer sat down.

"Look here, sir," he said; "mortal natur' won't bear it. I'll take a trot up and down now while you sleep."

"I'm not going to sleep," said Mark, shortly.

"Begging your pardon, sir, you are," said Tom; and he took a few turns up and down, to return at last and find Mark quite fast.

"I knowed it," he said to himself, but he had hardly thought this when Mark started up again, vexed with himself, but unable to control the desire for rest.

The consequence was that during the next two hours this natural process went on, the one who sat down going off instantly to sleep, while the other kept up his sentry-like walk, and no more words were uttered respecting it. They felt that it was nature's work and accepted their position till toward midnight, when Mark was resting with his back to the bulwark, and his chin upon his breast, sleeping heavily, as he had been for about a minute. Tom Fillot stepped up lightly to his side and touched him.

"Yes? What?" cried Mark, starting up in alarm.

"Hist, sir! Steady! They're a-breaking out."

"What!" said Mark, in an awe-stricken whisper, as his hands involuntarily sought pistol and dirk.

"Hark!" came in a whisper to his ear; and leaning forward and peering into the darkness, he distinctly heard at intervals a faint, dull clink, as if some one were very carefully and slowly moving pieces of iron.

For the moment, half drowsed still by his desire for sleep, Mark could not make out what it meant. Then he grasped the meaning of the sound.

"Why, Tom Fillot," he whispered, "they're getting off the chain cable from the hatch."

"That's it, sir; link by link."

Chapter Thirty One.

A Novel Fastening.

"Come on!" whispered Mark; "we must stop that game. Who's on the watch at the hatch?"

"Sam Grote, sir; but, poor lad, he can't keep awake."

"A lantern," said Mark, laconically; and Tom Fillot trotted aft to the cabin,

and came back in five minutes with a light half hidden in his breast.

During his absence, Mark had stood there listening in the darkness with a peculiar shuddering sensation to the soft clinking as link passed over link; and in imagination, while he peered through the transparent darkness, he saw a hand, which had been thrust out after the hatch had been raised a little, softly lifting and passing the cable off to the deck.

Tom came back so silently that Mark was half startled. Then together they went on tiptoe in the direction of the sound, the lantern being carefully screened, and then only just a ray of light allowed to shine out forward.

It fell upon the figure of the sailor Grote in a very peculiar attitude; for the poor fellow, unable to keep awake, had knelt close by the hatch, with his drawn cutlass point downward, resting on the cover, his two hands upon the hilt, and his forehead upon his hands—fast asleep.

It was a dire offence against discipline, and a hot feeling of indignation swelled in Mark's breast against the man.

But it died out as quickly as it had come. The man had done his best to guard against the cover of the hatch being moved, feeling certain that any attempt to stir it must be communicated to his brain by the cutlass; and so no doubt it would have been later on. He was fast asleep, but for the last two nights he had hardly closed his eyes, though utterly worn out by the day's exertion, while still suffering from his injuries.

Greater reason still why Mark could not sit in judgment upon his man; he himself had been utterly unable to keep awake.

These thoughts passed as the ray of light was shifted by Tom Fillot's manipulation of the lantern, which shone directly after upon the clean white planks, with their black, well-caulked seams. Then, very slowly and cautiously, Tom Fillot guided the little patch of light along the boards till it fell upon a big heap of rusty chain between them and the hatch, showing how long and patiently someone must have been at work, and also the terrible fact that before long every link would have been removed, and in all probability the crew would have been taken by surprise.

For now, as Tom still guided on the little patch of light, it fell upon a red hand visible as far as the wrist. This had been thrust out beside the edge of the cover after a portion had been hacked away with a knife, and the fingers, rust covered and strange looking, were working away, industriously easing down link after link on to the deck, their weight helping the worker, while the heap on the hatch was steadily, as it were, melting away.

They stood watching this for a few moments, and then steadying the lantern with one hand, Tom slowly raised his cutlass with the other. A slight alteration of the rays of light must have flashed in the signal *Danger*! to the man at work, for the strange dull clinking of the links finished suddenly with one louder clink than the rest. The chain had been dropped as the hand darted in.

Grote started back into wakefulness at the sound and sprang to his feet, on guard with his cutlass, while Tom Fillot fully uncovered the lantern, and held it up right in the man's face, the light gleaming on the weapons they held.

"Yes, you're a nice 'un, you are," growled Tom Fillot, "Look at that. Where should we have been in another hour if we'd trusted to you?"

The man stared at the two heaps of chain, then at Tom Fillot, and then at his young officer, as he uttered a low groan.

"I've done it now, sir," he faltered, in his deep bass. "I did try so hard, sir; oh, so hard, but it come over me like all of a sudden, and walking up and down warn't no good. I was asleep as I walked, and at last I thought if I shut my eyes a moment—"

Bang!

A sharp flash and a report made all three start back, and spread the alarm, one of the first to run up being the great black, bar in hand, his eyes flashing, his teeth gleaming, and all eager to join in any fray on behalf of those who had saved his life.

"Wish my cutlash had come down heavy on the hand as fired that shot," muttered Tom Fillot.

“Put out the light,” said Mark sharply.

Tom Fillot drew his jacket over the lantern, and they all stood round ready for the next order.

“Haul back the chain,” said Mark, in a low voice. “Fillot, stand by, ready to cut at the first hand which thrusts out a pistol.” Then going close to the ventilator, he shouted down, “Below there you heard my orders. We shall show no mercy now.”

A shout of defiance came up, followed by another shot, as the chain began to clink and chink while being hauled back and piled round and round from the edge toward the centre.

“Stop!” cried Mark, as a thought struck him. Then in a whisper, “I’ll have an anchor laid on instead of the cable, and then I’ll have that run back into the tier. No: better still. Get up the biggest water cask we have.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried Tom; and, with all the alacrity of man-o’-war’s men, he and his fellows went off with the lantern, and before long had a cask on deck and rolled it up to the hatchway.

“But what for I dunno,” muttered Tom, “unless it’s for a sentry box.”

He soon learned.

“Buckets,” said Mark, laconically; and as soon as these were obtained, though in full expectation of shots being fired through the wooden cover at them, he gave his orders and the chain was rapidly hauled to the deck.

But no shot was fired from below, the Americans evidently expecting that they would be attacked, and reserving their fire for the moment when the chain was all off, and the hatch thrown open.

But as the last link fell off upon the deck two men who were standing ready lifted and banged the empty cask down heavily upon the hatch, a couple of buckets of water were splashed in directly, and then as rapidly as they could be drawn from over the side, others followed and were poured in.

Those below were so puzzled that for a time they remained utterly without movement. Then as the water poured in there was a low whispering, and soon after a heaving up of the hatch a little way, but a man held on to the top of the cask on either side, and their weight proved to be too much for those who tried to heave up the hatch. Ten minutes after, the addition of many buckets of water turned the cask into a ponderous object beyond their strength.

“Right to the brim,” said Mark; and the cask was filled.

“There,” cried Tom; “it would puzzle them to move that.”

The men below evidently thought so too, for they made no further effort, and subsided into a sulky kind of silence, while the chain was run back into the cable tier, and the watch resumed without fresh alarm till morning.

Chapter Thirty Two.

“Hatching Mischief.”

A long, busy day similar to the last, as they slowly crept along by the coast. The weather glorious, the blacks docile to a degree, and the Americans perfectly silent in their prison.

Provisions and bottles of water were lowered down to them by means of a line through the ventilator; but the prisoners made no sign.

“My!” said Tom, with a laugh, as he fastened a string round the neck of a well-corked bottle to lower it down, “won’t the Yankee skipper be mad when he puts that to his lips. Being a bottle, he’ll think it’s rum. Some folks can’t think as a bottle would hold anything else.”

But no sound came even then, and Mark began to feel anxious.

“We haven’t suffocated them, have we?” he said in a low voice. “They are so very quiet.”

“Not we, sir. They aren’t the chaps to lie down and die without making a pretty good flurry over it fust. No sir; they’re a-settin’.”

“Sitting, Tom,” said Mark, wonderingly.

“No, sir; setting. Hatching mischief. They’ll give us another of their chickens after dark, and you and I must have a sleep apiece, so as to be ready for ’em to-night.”

“Yes. We must,” said Mark; and after leaving the deck in charge of Stepney and Grote, of the latter especially, as Mark felt sure that he could be trusted now, he and Tom Fillot lay down under an awning they had rigged up, and in less than a moment they were both sleeping heavily.

It was nearly sundown when Mark awoke with a start from an uneasy dream, in which he fancied that he had been neglecting his duty.

Tom Fillot was standing over him, and the lad’s first words were,—

“What’s the matter?”

Tom Fillot hastened to reply.

“Nothing, sir, I’ve been all round. Prisoners safe, rations been issued, blacks all quiet, shore three miles off, and nice wind from the sou’-west.”

“Ah!” sighed Mark, with a feeling of relief stealing over him. “I thought something was wrong, and that I had slept too much. How is Mr Russell?”

“Just as he was, sir; lying as quiet as a babby.” Mark crossed to where a bucket of water stood on the deck, signed to one of the men to empty it and draw another, and into this he plunged his face, bathing it for a few minutes to get rid of the remains of his drowsiness, while Tom Fillot fetched him a towel from the cabin.

“You haven’t had half enough snooze, sir, but I thought I had better rouse you up,” he said.

“Sleep? We mustn’t think of any more for a couple of nights, Fillot. Now

what is the next thing to be done?”

“Nothing, sir, but wait.”

“Nothing?”

“I dunno of anything, sir. Sails all right, and unless you set us to scrape the chain cable, I can’t think of a job.”

“Job? There is only one, and that is to get these two schooners safe alongside of the *Nautilus*. We must not lose them now.”

“Course not, sir. We won’t.”

“How are the men?”

“Well, sir, you’ve been asleep about five hours, so they aren’t had time to change much, but they’ve mended as much as they could in that little time.”

“Of course. It was a stupid question, Tom. But about the prisoners?”

“Oh, they’re quiet enough, sir. That cask o’ water settled ’em.”

“But are they not too quiet, Tom? I mean there is no danger of their suffering from the hatch being closed?”

“Now look here, Mr Vandean, sir; ’scuse me, but you’re too easy and soft over ’em. I don’t say they’re comfortable, for I wouldn’t like to sleep down there without having the hatch opened, but the air they’ve got’s quite good enough for such as them.”

“But you said they were very quiet, and it is startling.”

“As I told you afore, sir, they won’t die without hollering; so make your mind easy, and go below, and have something to eat. I’ve had some coffee made, and it’s all ready. Sort o’ breakfast upside down. Go and eat and drink well, and then you’ll feel ready for anything, sir.”

“Yes. I’ll go forward, though, first.”

Mark smiled and felt brightened directly as a low murmured chorus of sound arose from the blacks, the men showing their teeth and the women smiling at him.

He stopped by the forecastle hatch, and listened, but there was not a sound to be heard, and feeling startled, in spite of Tom Fillot's words, he cautiously approached the ventilator, and listened there.

The silence was ominous, and a chill of horror came over him as he turned his eyes upon his companion, while his active brain pictured before him the bottom of the forecastle, with a party of suffocated men lying one over the other, just as they had fallen in their last struggle for air.

Tom smiled encouragement, but an angry frown made the lad's brow look rugged, and he was about to give orders for the hatch to be removed, when there was a yawn, and a smothered voice said,—

"Guess it's hot enough down here."

Mark gave vent to a sigh of relief as he turned away, went aft, and below into the cabin to bend over Mr Russell, who, still perfectly insensible, was sleeping, as Tom Fillot said, "as quiet as a babby."

Mark sighed, and the sight of his brother officer took away his appetite; but feeling the necessity of eating and drinking to keep up his strength, he sat down and began, and after the first few mouthfuls felt better, and made a hearty meal.

There's something wonderfully cheering in a good meal, and though only a boy, still the midshipman felt like a new man as he went on deck, ready for anything now, and determined to make a brave fight against any odds of enemy or weather to get his prizes under the wing of the *Nautilus*, or into port.

Everything on deck looked cheery and encouraging. The men were in excellent spirits, and ready to salute him. Their hurts were better, and though the bruises visible did not improve their personal appearance, they looked in working or fighting trim, and ready for anything if he gave the word.

Mark's heart swelled with elation, and he was ready to give the big black, whose absurd name of Soup had already ceased to sound nonsensical, a friendly nod, to which the great fellow responded with a regular man-o'-war's man's bow and scrape.

"How's the wound, Soup?" cried Mark, touching the bandage.

"All righ'!" was the reply, with a laugh, for nearly everything was all right with the freed slave now.

"And how are the people?"

"All righ'!" he cried again, as Mark waved his hand towards the negroes. Then, as the young officer moved forward, the black drew the cutlass he wore, shouldered arms, and began to march behind his leader, as if ready to use the blade when ordered.

The men laughed, and Soup looked round sharply and wonderingly.

"No, no," cried Mark, "I don't want you yet. Go back to the others."

He pointed, and the man obeyed on the instant, while Mark used his glass to have a good long look-out for help, but only closed it again with a shake of the head; for there was the far-stretching sea and the long line of coast without sign of human habitation. Nothing more, save that the sun was sinking, with its lower edge close to the horizon, while the sea and sky were glorified by the wonderful colours that spread far and wide.

Mark walked right aft now, and hailed Dance on board the other schooner to find that there were cheery answers, and all appeared to be right there, the blacks crowding into the bows to shout and wave their hands to him whom they looked upon as their preserver.

"I'm glad, after all, that Bob isn't here," thought Mark; "he'd be as jealous as could be, and say I was as cocky as a lieutenant who had just received his promotion. Am I? One can't help feeling a bit proud, but it was as much Tom Fillot and the boys as it was I, and they got all the hard knocks."

"Any orders about the watch, sir, or making or taking in sail?" said Tom

Fillot, meeting him as he turned, and touching his hat respectfully.

“N–no,” said Mark, giving a quick look round aloft and slow. “Everything seems to be right.”

“Did what I thought was best, sir.”

“You say the men below have had their rations?”

“Yes, sir; and I lowered ’em down some meat as well, but they never said thankye, sir.”

“I suppose not,” muttered Mark. “But now about the watch over the prisoners.”

“Can’t do better than let Soup and one of the blacks do that, sir. They’ve had a good long snooze in the sun. And if they watch, and you or me give an eye to ’em now and then, we can’t do better.”

“No, I suppose not, Tom. That will do, and we’ll be on deck all night. I don’t see that we can do anything more to make the hatch safe.”

“No, sir, nothing. That cask’s a puzzle for ’em. We’ve got ’em safe now.”

“Yes, Tom, and they’re having a taste of what it means to coop up fellow-creatures below hatches like cattle.”

Then came the tropic darkness, as if a heavy veil were drawn slowly over the sky. Lanterns were lit, the blacks went below without being told, and the business of the schooner already began to work as orderly as if it had been turned into a man-o’-war. The men examined their arms, Mark and Tom Fillot looked to their pistols, and the darkness was met with every precaution for the safety of the ships and crew.

Then came a long interval of solemn silence, with the light on the schooner they were towing rising and falling slowly on the long heaving swell, and both vessels gliding gently along toward the north.

The night was once more grand, with the great soft stars illuminating sea and sky; but, in his anxiety, Mark could not study their beauty, nor that of

the myriads of phosphorescent creatures softly emitting flash and spark, fathoms below in the clear water.

These were not the stars or sparks that had any interest for the midshipman now. He watched with interest the lantern in the bows of the schooner they were towing astern, and then from time to time walked forward in the solemn silence, only broken by a sigh from the hold uttered by some black sleeper, dreaming, perhaps, of the village far-away in his own land; then laying the glass on the bulwark, Mark carefully swept the horizon—astronomer like—in search of the star that would send hope and delight into his breast—the lamp shown by the *Nautilus* coming down to their aid.

All this was done again and again, but there was no sign of that help, and he felt angry with Captain Maitland and the lieutenant for forgetting them, or leaving them to their fate.

“But of course they could not know what a pickle we are in,” he said to himself the next moment, as he resumed his patient watch, going to and fro, noting that steersman and blacks were all intent upon their duty, while Tom Fillot was forward keeping a bright look-out.

And so hours passed, and then an intense feeling of drowsiness came for him to combat.

It made Mark angry with nature, for it seemed to be so absurd that after taking a good mid-day rest he could not go through a night without feeling so wretchedly sleepy. But after a good sluice in a fresh bucket of water he felt better, and getting a biscuit, began to nibble that and walked forward again. Then back to the cabin, and grew melancholy to see his brother officer lying there so utterly helpless, just when he wanted his aid so badly.

Once more in the bows he stood using his glass in vain, and then telling himself that it was not to be expected, he turned to Tom Fillot.

“I suppose we shall not sight the *Nautilus*,” he said.

“No, sir, I don’t expect it. Two or three days more like this, though, and we shall be in port without her help.”

“I hope we shall,” said Mark, rather despondently; and, tucking his glass under his arm, he went aft again toward where he could see the faint glow from the binnacle light shining up in the steersman’s face.

He spoke to the man at the wheel.

“Quite an easy job,” he said.

“Ay, ay, sir: easy enough. Wish it was a little rougher, for everything’s so quiet that it’s sleepy work.”

“For all of us, my lad,” said Mark, quickly, and he walked forward again, half amused at his own importance, and thinking of how only the other day he was at school, and captain of the second cricket eleven, instead of commodore of two schooners.

As he reached the forecastle hatch he stopped short, for a heavier breathing than usual caught his ear, and, peering forward, it was to see that Soup and the naked black who shared his watch were both fast asleep.

Flushing up with anger, the midshipman took his heavy glass from under his arm to tap both blacks on the head: but second thoughts stayed his hand, and he glanced forward to see Tom Fillot’s figure dimly as he leaned over the bulwark staring away ahead.

“They ought to be punished,” he thought; “but, poor fellows, they’re tired out. I will not be hard on them.”

Stepping to the back of the cask, he reached over to scoop up some of the water with his right hand to splash over them, and wake them up unseen, and then he felt quite a shock, for his hand did not touch water.

He thought the cask was filled right up. Then he was sure of it. Yes, filled quite full. Softly reaching over a little more, he tried again, but still could not reach.

“It’s more than half empty,” he said to himself; and, listening intently, he could hear a trickling sound, and then a faint splash somewhere below.

The lad’s heart began to throb heavily, and stepping away from the hatch, he walked on tiptoe to where Tom Fillot stood close to the bowsprit, and laid his hand upon the man’s shoulder.

Tom Fillot started round fiercely.

“Oh! you, sir,” he said in a tone of relief. “I thought—”

“Hist! Fetch up the other fellows quietly-armed.”

“What’s up, sir?”

“The Yanks have bored a hole through into the bottom of the cask, and the water’s nearly out.”

Tom ran aft, barefooted, and without a sound, while Mark stepped back to the hatch, and reached over to feel for the water once more.

As he did so, and was straining over, with the edge of the cask against his armpit, he distinctly felt it heave up, as if men were busy raising it from below.

Chapter Thirty Three.

Methodical Madness.

Those were thrilling moments in the darkness, as one side of the cask was heaved up and let down again, probably to try its weight, for it was by no means empty, and the water within washed to and fro, and then made whispering noises as it subsided, but the trickling sound went on.

Then came, faintly heard, a whispering, as of orders what to do; and Mark drew his dirk in an agony of desperation, wondering the while why he did not rouse up the blacks to help him.

The moments seemed to be drawn out into minutes, the minutes to hours, before he heard the soft patting of the men’s bare feet over the deck.

Then they were about him, each seizing the side of the cask to hold it down, and the blacks sprang up, ready to strike at those around.

“Yah!” growled Tom Fillot, fiercely; “it’s court-martial for you.”

At that moment there was a strong heave up of the hatch, but the attempt was vain; and knowing that all had been discovered, a low growl arose, and then, as if enraged beyond bearing at their failure, one of the men below fired a shot upwards, one which passed through the bottom of the cask, but did no harm to its holders, the only effect produced being the trickling out of the water through a second hole.

“Shall we have it off now, sir, and nail down the hatch?”

“No,” said Mark; “two of you open the cable tier, and hand out the chain.”

“Again, sir?” whispered Tom.

“Yes, man, quick!”

Fillot and Stepney seized the chain and brought the end forward.

“Ready, sir,” cried the former, as the links rattled and clinked over the deck; and they stood waiting for the cask to be removed for the chain to be laid down in its place.

“Now then, in with it!” cried Mark.

“In with it, sir?”

“Yes; into the cask.”

“Oh!” cried Tom Fillot, with an exultant cry, and the next moment the chain was being rattled into the empty cask at a rapid rate, and in very short time, a quarter of a ton was occupying the place of the water.

“I think that’ll puzzle ’em now, sir,” cried Tom; and Mark Vandean breathed freely once again.

But there were the blacks to punish, and the men fell back while Mark

turned angrily upon the two culprits, who stood trembling before him with the light from a lantern one of the men had fetched thrown full upon their faces.

Only a short time before the big black had been an utter savage, but now in this very brief space, though unable fully to comprehend the words and ways of the English officers, he had grown to realise what discipline and authority meant; and as he stood there before Mark, who looked frowning and stern, he literally shivered, his eyes dropped, and he stooped before the midshipman, as if expecting a blow. For he knew that he had betrayed his trust, and that some punishment was about to be inflicted upon him for his lapse from duty.

The men looked on eagerly, and thoughts of flogging, putting in irons, even of hanging, flashed across their minds, as they gazed in their young officer's face.

Mark did not speak for a few moments, and then drawing a long breath, and forgetting his youthfulness, everything in the fact that he was in supreme authority as a British officer there, he spoke out firmly.

"It is of no use to waste words with you, my man," he said. "I was ready to trust you and treat you as a British sailor, but you have broken faith. You cannot understand my words, but your own heart tells you that you have done wrong. There—I cannot punish you for being neglectful and ignorant, but in future you will be only one of the blacks."

He turned his back upon the great fellow, who shivered at the lad's words, and then, with a cry of despair, ran after his officer, flung himself down on the deck at his feet, and held up the cutlass he had drawn when he went on duty and had held ever since. He held it up by the blade, and made signs for Mark to take it and use it upon him.

"There is no need to punish you," said Mark, quietly; "you feel your position quite bitterly enough. There, get up, man, and go to your duty. I ought to have known better than to trust you. Get up."

As the black still grovelled at his feet, Mark stooped down and caught hold of his collar, giving it a drag, and the man rose to his knees.

“No,” said Mark, making signs; “sheathe your cutlass. I am not a West-coast tyrant, ready to take off your head. Get them away, Bannock, I want to think of what is to be done next.”

The sailor stepped forward, and clapped the big black on the shoulder.

“Come along, my hearty. You’ve got off wonderfully easy. No cat for you to-day. It’s all right.”

“All righ’?” cried the black, eagerly.

“Yes.”

“No all righ’,” he continued, mournfully, as he shook his head and rose to follow the sailor; but he turned directly and ran to Mark’s side, sank on one knee, and kissed his hand. Then he rose, and hurried off with his fellow sleeper.

“You’re a rum ’un, Soup,” growled the sailor. “Who’d have thought it of a savage? Why, it was reg’lar polite and genteel. I couldn’t ha’ done that. Who’d ha’ expected it of a chap who dresses in an orstridge feather and a wisp o’ grass when he’s at home?”

The black gazed at him inquiringly, striving hard to make out his meaning, the poor fellow’s face growing more puckered every moment.

“Dessay you were a prince when you was over yonder; now you’re a foremast man. Well, ups and downs in life we see, Soup old chap. Mebbe I shall be a prince some day. Ah, well, you’re not a bad sort, and I’m glad you haven’t got flogged.”

Meanwhile Mark was talking to Tom Fillot about the culprits.

“Then you think I ought to have punished them, Tom?” said Mark.

“Well, sir,” said Tom, rubbing one ear, “I do and don’t, sir. What’s to be done with chaps like that, as don’t know no better?”

“Exactly,” cried Mark. “They fought for us as well as they could.”

“They have, sir, and it ain’t as if they’d had a twelvemonth of the first luff to drill ’em into shape. But, bless your ’art, sir, if they had they mightn’t have been able to fight agin sleep. Able seamen can’t always do it, so what’s to be expected of a regular black just picked out of a slaver’s hold?”

“That will do, then,” said Mark. “You have helped me so that I didn’t like you to think I went against your advice.”

“Don’t you be afeared of that, sir,” cried Tom. “I give you my bit of advice for you as a gentleman and a scholard, to see if it’s worth taking. Well, sir, what about the prisoners now?”

“I think they must be safe this time, Tom,” said Mark, walking back to the cask, and giving a pull at it, to find it as solid as so much iron.

“Well, sir, that’s what I think; but don’t you trust ’em. They mean to get out and take the schooner again.”

“And we mean that they shan’t, Tom,” said Mark, merrily; “and as we have the strongest position, we must win.”

“That’s it, sir; so if you’ll give me the watch there by the fo’c’sle hatch, I’ll promise you I won’t go to sleep.”

“Take the watch, then,” said Mark; and then suddenly, “Why, what does that mean?”

For just then the prisoners began in chorus to whistle an American air, accompanying it with a rhythmic clapping of hands.

Then the sound ended as quickly as it had begun, and there was a hearty burst of laughter.

“Merry, eh?” said Tom Fillot. “Well, there’s no harm in that.”

They listened in the darkness, and one man with a musical voice began a plantation ditty, his companions breaking in with a roaring chorus at the end of every verse, clapping their hands and stamping their feet, ending by one of the party starting up and breaking into a kind of jig or hornpipe,

evidently keeping it up till he was tired, when, with a shout, another man took his place and danced with all his might.

The listeners had to trust to their ears for all this, but it was perfectly plain, and it seemed to Mark that in despair of escaping the Americans had determined to make the best of their position.

This went on for some time with great spirit and a tremendous amount of noise, sufficient to make the slaves in the hold uneasy, and a good deal of murmuring and talking went on.

The sounds ceased, and there was a hail from the forecastle.

“Hey, there, yew, on the watch!”

“Hullo! What is it?” cried Tom Fillot.

“Ask yewr young skipper to pitch us down a little ’bacco, will you, mister? My lads here is out, and they want to make their miserable lives happy.”

“I oughtn’t to let them have any,” thought Mark; “but it may keep them quiet. I hope they will not set the ship on fire.”

So a roll of tobacco was thrown down to them through the ventilator, pipes were evidently lit, for the strong fumes came up, and the singing and dancing went on again more uproariously than ever, till Mark began to feel annoyed.

“The brutes!” he said to himself; “they’ve been asleep all day and can sit up all night. Ah, well, they’re prisoners, so I will not be too hard upon them.”

Just then Tom Fillot left his post for a moment.

“They must have got some grog below, sir, or they wouldn’t keep on dancing like that. Nuff to tire anyone.”

“Oh, let them enjoy themselves,” said Mark; “it’s better than hatching plans to attack us.”

It was now within about an hour of daybreak, and Mark kept on looking longingly away over the mist eastward, in hopes of seeing the stars begin to grow pale. But all was deep, dark night at present, and he paced the deck, going from place to place, listening to the uproar made by the Americans, which was as loud as ever.

“Yes,” said Mark at last. “They must have got some spirits down below, Tom, or they would never keep up noise like that.”

Just as he was speaking one of the prisoners finished off a dance with a tremendous stamp, stamp, stamp, and the others began to applaud and cheer vociferously. Then all was silent, and Mark exclaimed,—

“At last!”

“Perhaps they’ll go to sleep now, sir, and I hope they won’t wake again for a week.”

“Why, what’s the matter now?” cried Mark. “I’m not going to have the blacks begin. Here, pass the word for Soup—Pish! I mean for the big black.”

“Ay, ay, sir;” and Soup came up quickly, all excitement at the noise going on in the hold.

“Why, they’re quarrelling and getting up a fight,” cried Mark, as the noise increased; and there was evidently a struggle, while blows were being struck and savage cries arose.

“Go down and stop it,” cried Mark. “Stupid idiots! Why can’t they be still?”

Soup ran to the hold hatch and lowered himself rapidly down, just as the noise below culminated in shrieks and yells, while the fighting was rapidly growing desperate.

“We must go down and stop it,” said Mark.

“Shall I pipe all hands on deck, sir?” cried Tom.

“No, no; we can quiet them. Get a light. They’ll settle down as soon as

they see me.”

Tom Fillot fetched a lantern, and two men who had heard the fierce yelling came up to see just as Mark reached the ladder, and was about to descend, when, to his astonishment, Soup came rushing up, and fell heavily upon the deck.

“Why, Soup, my lad, have they attacked you?” cried Mark, taking the lantern to hold over the prostrate black.

“Hi! Look-out, sir!” roared Tom Fillot, blowing a whistle with all his might, as he drew his cutlass, and made a cut at a dark shadow which leaped on deck; and before Mark could grasp what it all meant, other shadowy figures rushed up from below, made a desperate charge, and a moment later he, Tom Fillot, and Dick Bannock, with Stepney, were driven down into the cabin, while the body of the big black was hurled upon them, and the hatchway doors banged to.

For a few moments Mark could neither get his breath nor speak. Then wriggling himself out from beneath poor Soup, he cried angrily,—

“The treacherous brutes! This is setting blacks free, so that they may turn against us. Why, they’ve half killed him.”

“And us, too, sir,” groaned Tom Fillot. “I always thought they’d be too many for us.”

“What do you mean?” cried Mark.

“Why, sir, all that caterwauling and stamping was to hide what they were about.”

“Who were about?” cried Mark.

“Them Yankees, sir. They’ve done us this time. I thought they would.”

Chapter Thirty Four.

In Desperation.

“In the name of common sense, Tom Fillot, what are you talking about?” cried Mark, angrily.

“The Yanks, sir.”

“But what have they to do with it? Oh, my arm! It’s nearly dragged out of the socket. Here, speak out. What do you mean?”

“Only this, sir: they were too cunning for us. They cheated us with that row they made.”

“Look here,” cried Mark, pettishly, for he was in great pain, “I’m in no humour for listening to your rigmaroles. Help me to get this hatch undone, and then we must make a rush at them and drive them below. Nice state of affairs to beat the Americans, and all the time leave the way open for those wretched blacks to take us in the rear.”

“You don’t see the rights of it, sir,” said Tom Fillot, dismally.

“Yes, I do. The blacks thought they had a good chance of getting their own way, and they took it.”

“Ah, you think it was the niggers, then?”

“Why, of course. Bah! how stupid of me. They made that noise below in the forecastle—the Yankees, I mean.”

“Yes, sir, you’ve got the right pig by the ear now,” said Tom Fillot. “They kicked up that row to cover the noise they made breaking through the bulk-heading, so as to get into the hold where the blacks are.”

“Yes,” cried Mark, excitedly, “and the slaves fought and tried to keep them back. Of course; and we thought it was those poor fellows. Well, it was a cunning trick. A ship makes a bad prison for one’s enemies.”

“Yes, sir; they’ve been one too many for us this time,” said Tom Fillot. “The Yankees are sharp, and no mistake.”

“Do you mean to say, mate,” growled Dick Bannock, “that the Yanks got out through the hold where the niggers was?”

“Yes; that’s it.”

“Oh, very well; that’s it, then. Stow all that talking, mate, and let’s have a go at ’em again. Strikes me we’d better drive ’em overboard this time.”

“Ay, but then they’d come up through the keel or in at the hawse-holes,” growled Tom Fillot.

“Silence!” said Mark, sharply. “Who else is down here?”

“There’s me,” said Stepney.

“Fillot, Stepney, Bannock, and the black, isn’t it?”

“Ay, ay, sir. You’re here, Soup?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” came in the negro’s familiar voice.

“Anybody wounded?” asked Mark, anxiously.

“Too dark to see, sir,” growled Stepney. “I feel as if I’d got only one leg.”

“Ah! your leg not broken?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so. I’m a-feeling for it. It’s all right, sir; it’s here, only got it doubled under me when I fell. Aren’t we going to make someone’s head ache, sir, for this?”

“We’re going to make a dash for them directly,” said Mark, in a voice full of suppressed excitement. “Ah! the light at last. Now we shall be able to see what we are going to do. Hush! what’s that?”

For there was a loud rattling of chain forward, and Mark looked inquiringly at the face of Tom Fillot, which was gradually growing plainer in the coming light.

“They’re a-hauling the chain cable out o’ the cask, sir, and running it back into the tier. Hadn’t we better make a try, sir, now they’re busy?”

“Yes. Now then, Fillot—Bannock, open that hatch, and then follow me.”

“Better let me go first, sir,” growled Tom. “I’m harder than you, and had better take the first hits.”

“Don’t talk,” cried Mark, snappishly. “Now then, can you get it open?”

“No, sir,” grumbled Tom, after a good deal of trying, thrusting and dragging at it. “Tight as a hoyster.”

As he spoke, he and Bannock heaved and thrust at the door, and a heavy blow was struck upon it outside.

“Keep below there, dew yew hear?” came in an unmistakable voice.

“You might as well mind your own business,” growled Tom Fillot.

“D’yer hear? Keep below.”

The door cracked again with Tom Fillot’s efforts, and the next moment there was a sharp report, and a bullet crashed through.

“Guess yew’d best keep from ahind that theer hatchway, strangers, for I’m out o’ practyse, and I’m going to make a target o’ that theer door.”

“Stand down, Tom,” said Mark.

“Oh, I ain’t feared, sir, if you like to say keep on,” cried Tom Fillot.

“I know that, my lad; but I’m not going to run foolish risks.”

The man came down, and the little party stood gazing at each other in the low ceiled cabin, as the first rays of the rising sun flooded the place, and they could see the schooner astern, with Joe Dance, and Taters the black, looking over the bows eagerly, as if wondering what had taken place.

Mark turned to where Mr Russell lay, in the same calm state of stupor,

and the sun lit up his face.

“Don’t look like dying, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “Strikes me, sir, as he’s getting all the best of it.”

Mark turned upon him angrily, and Tom Fillot gave him a deprecating look.

“Beg pardon, sir. It’s my tongue, not me. It will talk.”

“I suppose the others are imprisoned in the forecastle,” said Mark, ignoring his remark.

“Dessay, sir. That’s why they were getting the chain out of the cask.”

“I hope they are not much hurt.”

“Oh, I don’t suppose they are, sir. We Naughtylasses are all about as hard a lot as the captain could pick out.”

“Ay, ay,” said Dick Bannock, “they’re knocked about, same as we.”

Just then there reached them a savage yell; the report of a pistol, and then another; and it was evident from the sounds that a fierce conflict was going on, exciting the men so that they made another desperate effort to get out; but the cabin entrance was too strong, and Mark ran to the window.

“Can we reach the deck from here?” he cried in his excitement, feeling as he did that the cause of the sounds was that the blacks were making an effort on their behalf against their old enslavers, and that at any cost they must get on deck and help.

Dragging open the cabin light, Mark began to climb out, but had just time to avoid a blow from a heavy bar, struck at him by someone looking over the poop, and evidently on guard there to keep them from reaching the deck in that direction.

“Let me try, sir,” said Tom. “I can dodge him, perhaps, and get up.”

“Let’s try together,” said Mark; and looking up again, he could see that there was only one man, a sour, sinister-looking fellow, who seemed to take intense delight in his task.

“Wall,” he shouted to them, “come on. Sharks is getting hungry, I dessay.”

His words sent a chill through Mark, and he hesitated as he thought of the consequences of receiving a blow, losing his hold, and falling under the schooner’s stern, where, in all probability, one or two of the savage fish were waiting for the unfortunate slaves who died and were thrown out of such vessels from time to time.

This idea did not strike Tom Fillot, who got well out and was about to climb up, when a blow came with a *whish* within an inch of his head.

“Miss is as good as a mile,” he said, coolly. “Here you, sir; it’s rank mutiny to resist the Queen’s men. Put down that capstan bar and surrender.”

“Come up and take it away from me, mister,” said the American, with a laugh. “Wall, why don’t you come on?”

“I’m a-coming,” said Tom Fillot, “only that bar’s a bit in my way. Better lay it down, mate, for I get a bit nasty if I’m hurt, and if you let me run my head again it, I might be in a passion, and chuck you overboard.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t mind,” said the American, laughing. “Come on.”

Tom made a feint of climbing up, but there was another fierce blow at him, and all the while quite a battle was raging somewhere on deck, the sounds of blows and firing, with yells, oaths, and shrieks of agony reaching their ears in a confused murmur.

“Come on, Tom,” cried Mark, who was completely carried away by the excitement, and half maddened by the knowledge that if they could make a diversion, the schooner and its cargo might yet be saved.

“Right, sir,” cried Tom.

“Forward, then!”

Mark reached up, caught at the ornamental work of the stern, and in another moment would have drawn himself on deck, but the man struck a savage blow at him, and, as Mark threw himself sidewise to avoid the bar, one hand gave way, and in his efforts to save himself, the other followed, his feet seemed to be dragged from the ledge of the window upon which he stood, and he fell headlong. But he was checked, and the next moment found himself hanging head downwards, with his face pretty close to the murky water, in which he fancied he could see the broad shovel nose of a shark.

He fell no farther, for, quick as light, Tom had made a dash at him as he slipped, and managed to grasp one leg, which glided through his great, strong hand till he gripped it fast by the ankle.

“Hold on tight to me,” cried Tom, excitedly; and two men grasped him firmly as he hung over the window-ledge, supporting Mark suspended there, face downward, and just above the level of the sea.

Chapter Thirty Five.

History Repeating Itself.

“How do you like that?” cried the man, leaning over the poop.

“I’ll tell you bime by,” said Tom Fillot beneath his breath. Then aloud, “All right, my lad. I’ve got you, you know that.”

Mark did know it as he hung there with his teeth set fast, for Tom Fillot’s fingers pressed into his flesh, and seemed to be crushing it against the bones of his ankle.

“Hi, some on you, get more grip o’ me,” shouted Tom. “Get well hold, Dick. You, too, Bob. Now, then, haul away, and have us both in together.”

This was as he hung out of the window from the waist, holding Mark Vandean; and exerting their great strength, the two sailors—for Tom was helpless—drew him right back and inward till Bannock could seize Mark’s other leg.

As they drew him in the man overhead made a savage blow at the boy with the bar he held, but it fell short.

“All right, sir, we’ll pay all that back,” said Tom, as Mark stood on the cabin floor once more, looking rather white, and listening to the smothered cries and yells still coming from the deck, while the big black’s face was a study to see in his wild excitement.

He had hardly noted Mark’s adventure, being all the time close up by the cabin door, listening to the brave fight made by his compatriots; and now, as a fresh pistol-shot was heard, he came from the door.

“All righ’!” he cried. “No, no. Come. Fight.”

There was an ominous silence on deck succeeding his words, then a murmur of voices and the banging down of a hatch. Next came a loud splash, and Mark dashed to the cabin window to look-out for that which he felt sure he would see. And there it was—the body of a man floating slowly by, and then on backward in the schooner’s wake, the body of one of the blacks, with wild upturned eyes set in death, and, as it seemed to Mark, a look of horror and appeal in the stern, staring face, gazing heavenward, as if asking why such things should be.

A low, deep sigh made the young officer start and look round from the dead figure which fascinated him, to see the big black, whose face was working, and he looked hard now at the young officer, and pointed back at the cabin door, as if asking to be led on deck to avenge his fellow-countryman who had passed before them, another victim to the hated slaving—a black bar across a grand nation’s fair fame.

“Yes,” said Mark, slowly, as he looked at the negro, and met his appealing eyes, and spoke as if the man could comprehend every word, “we will punish them for this. The wretches deserve no mercy at our hands.”

The great black could hardly grasp a word, but he smiled, as if a great satisfaction had filled his breast. For the tones in which the boy officer spoke and his manner were sufficient to make him stand back against the bulkhead with his arms folded, as if waiting for his superior’s orders, and patiently watching as Mark called what may be dubbed a council of war.

The difficulty was to propose a plan of action, but Tom Fillot said cheerily:

“Don’t know that there’s much difficulty about it, sir. Them Yankees have shown us the way. All we’ve got to do is to follow their lead. Why not?”

“’Cause they’ll take jolly good care we don’t, messmate,” said Dick Bannock, wagging his head. “We’ve guv ’em a lesson in taking care of prisoners, and take my word on it, Tom Fillot, they’ve larnt it by heart.”

“Hark!” cried Tom Fillot; “they’re a-lowering down the boat.”

For the chirruping of the little wheels of the falls sounded familiarly on their ears.

“It’s to go to the other schooner,” cried Mark, excitedly. “They’ll take Dance and Grote prisoners too. Do you think you could reach the tow-rope, Tom?”

The sailor looked out from the little window and upward.

“No, sir,” he said, despondently. “Too high up, and that chap’s waiting to give me one on the head.”

“Yes; that will not do,” cried Mark, as the splash of the schooner’s boat in the water was heard, and the voice of the skipper shouting some directions.

Mark stood hesitating for a few moments, and then, acting upon a sudden thought, he placed his hands to his mouth, reached out of the cabin window, and shouted with all his might:

“Schooner ahoy! Coxswain!”

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried Dance from the bows of the towed vessel, just as the boat with five men in glided into sight close to her right.

“Danger! Prisoners!”

“Hi! yew stop that!” cried a voice from the boat, and a man stood up and pointed a pistol at the midshipman.

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried Dance.

“Keep the schooner off, and follow at a distance,” roared Mark.

Bang!

There was a puff of smoke, the dull thud of a bullet striking the side of the cabin window, and, directly following, the sharp report.

“Loose the schooner,” yelled Mark, between his hands.

“Go in, yew,” roared the man in the boat, presenting his pistol again; but at that moment Tom Fillot took aim with an empty bottle he had kicked from out of a locker, and hurled it over Mark’s head with all his might.

So true was Tom’s aim, and so swiftly was the bottle sent, that the American had not time to avoid it, and received a heavy blow in the chest, sufficient to disorder his aim as he fired again.

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried Dance, who seemed quite clear again in his head.

“Quick, then,” cried Mark, excitedly. “Cut the tow-rope and stand off.”

“Yah!” came in a roar from the boat, as the man suddenly sat down, “give way—pull, boys—pull like steam!”

The men began to send the boat through the water, making it foam, and they had but a cable’s length to go, but the moments were lengthened out by excitement, and it seemed to Mark as if Joe Dance would never get the cable cut in time.

For while the oars splashed and the men pulled, the coxswain tried to get out his knife, and as Mark and the others watched him, he was evidently nervous, and fumbled. Then he tried to open it with his teeth, but the spring was strong, and he had to alter his tactics and begin to open it with his forefinger and thumb nail, and still it seemed as if he could not get it open; and all the time the boat was rapidly setting nearer. In another few seconds it would be alongside, and the Americans would be on board, five against two, unless Taters made a brave defence. There were a couple of dozen blacks on deck, but they were only staring stupidly at the

approaching boat, and Joe Dance was still fumbling with his knife, while Grote had disappeared.

“Oh, if I was only there!” cried Tom Fillot.

“They might have saved that schooner,” groaned Mark. “Oh, Tom, Tom, is there nothing we can do?”

“No, sir; only look on. Hah! at last.”

“Yes, he’s sawing at the cable with his knife.”

“And it’s blunt as hoop iron,” groaned Tom.

“They’re alongside. It’s all over. Was there ever such luck?”

“Cut, you beggar, cut!” yelled Tom Fillot.

“Too late—too late!” said Mark bitterly, as he saw Dance still hacking at the cable, and the boat pulled alongside, while the bow man threw in his oar, and seized a boathook as he rose in his place.

In another minute the Americans would have been on deck, and the schooner taken; but, just as Mark Vandean’s heart sank heavy as lead, Grote suddenly appeared with an axe in his hand, while his words of warning came clearly to where they stood looking on.

“Stand aside!”

Then—*Chop*!

One dull, heavy blow, and the hawser, cut closely through where it passed over the bows, dropped with a splash into the water and disappeared.

The little party at the cabin window sent out a cheer and then a groan, for the bow man had hooked on, and the Americans began to climb up, their leader having his hands on the bulwarks, and sprang aboard, when something black, which proved to be Taters’ fist, struck him in the face, and he fell back.

Another’s head appeared above the side, and there was another blow and a splash.

Almost simultaneously Grote struck at another man with a capstan bar, and to avoid the blow, the man ducked his head, lost his hold, and, less fortunate than Mark had been, was hurled with a tremendous splash into the water, in company with the second man, while another got his head up in time to receive a crack which sent him also backward into the sea.

The man holding on loosed his hold to save his companions, who were swimming; and as the Nautiluses at the cabin window breathlessly watched and saw them picked up, they became as much interested in the fate of one of the party as if he had been a friend.

“Get an oar over,” cried Mark. “Scull your boat to that man; he’s going down.”

“The muddle-head!” cried Tom Fillot. “Can’t he scull?”

No doubt they were hard upon the man, who was doing his best. He had helped two men into the boat—no easy task when they are half-stunned, and by consequence comparatively helpless—and he had been doing his best to get to the others, who had paddled feebly and then thrown up their hands to grasp wildly at vacancy, so that the case began to look hopeless indeed.

For, failing in his efforts to scull the boat along with one oar, and evidently getting confused in his excitement, the uninjured man now sat down on a thwart and got two oars over the side to begin to row to where a drowning man lay, fully a dozen yards from him.

“Gone!” cried Tom Fillot, excitedly, as the boat was pulled to the place where the man had made a last feeble struggle and then sunk.

Mark drew a deep breath, and uttered a faint groan, as the sailor stood up in the boat, hitcher in hand, looking wildly about.

A volley of cries now came from the poop, just over where the prisoners were watching. Words of advice, orders, abuse, were hurled at the man’s head, and Mark, as he watched, thought of his efforts in the cutter to

save the blacks' lives, and it seemed to him like a natural form of retaliation coming upon the slavers' heads, as history almost repeated itself, with a difference.

He was, he felt, spectator of a tragedy, and a cold sensation of horror almost paralysed him, but passed away instantly as he saw the man standing in the boat suddenly make a dash with the hook and draw something toward him.

There was a cheer from the cabin window, as the boat careened over, and the nearly drowned man was dragged in.

"Say, messmates," said Tom Fillot, rubbing one ear, "that can't be right."

"What, Tom?" cried Mark, excitedly.

"Why, sir, our cheering at an enemy being saved. We ought to be glad to see him drown, oughtn't we?"

"It was the man, not the enemy, Tom," said Mark.

"Course, sir. I see now; I couldn't make out why we cheered."

And now the little party noted for the first time that the vessel they were in had been gliding steadily on, trailing the divided tow-rope, and being lightened of her burden, was now far-away from the boat, while the second schooner, having one sail set, had also glided away. Then a second sail was hoisted a little, and the helm being seized, her course was altered so as to send her to the west.

"Hurrah!" cried Mark, forgetting the officer in the elation of the boy. "Joe Dance will not let the Yankees overhaul him now. Look, he's getting the blacks to help haul up the mainsail. Then that prize is all right," he added, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Hope so, sir," said Tom. "I should feel better satisfied, though, if we were aboard too. My, how we could stick to the ribs of this boat here, and lay her aboard some day, and take her again. Ah, here comes the boat."

In effect the boat was slowly pulled alongside, and amidst a great deal of

shouting and noise, the prisoners could hear the men helped on board, and the boat hoisted into its place.

Chapter Thirty Six.

After a Rest.

“I wish I knew what was best to do,” said Mark Vandean. It was not long before he had to come to the conclusion that unless accident favoured them there was very little chance of escaping from the cabin, and he sat at the window at last, fretting with impatience, trying to master his disappointment, and comparing his fate with that of Bob Howlett, who was doubtless quietly going on with his duties, and amusing himself in his leisure teaching the chimpanzee to chew tobacco.

“I wish I knew what was best to do,” Mark said to himself again.

“See that, sir?”

Mark looked round sharply.

“See what?”

“They’ve altered her course, sir, and are going after the other schooner.”

It was plain enough, now that his attention was drawn to the fact. The coast which had been on the starboard side was now on the port, and there, about a mile away was the other schooner just gliding round, and with her sails filling for the other tack.

“Joe Dance sees what they’re up to, sir, but he’ll never get away. Too short-handed.”

“But he and Grote mean to try for it. Look, Tom.”

“Ay, well done, my lads,” cried Tom Fillot, slapping his leg and then wincing. “Oh, how sore I am! He has the niggers hauling. Pull away, my lads, up with her. Go on, altogether—another pull. That’s her. Now then,

sheet her home. My wig, look at her now, sir. She can sail."

"Yes, like a yacht," cried Mark, as the great mainsail, which had been only half hoisted in a slovenly way, now spread its broad canvas to the light breeze, and the graceful vessel sped rapidly through the calm sea, and passed out of their sight. "Why, Tom, this boat will have to sail well to catch her."

"They won't catch her, sir, by fair means. If they do, it will be by seamanship, and having plenty of hands to manoeuvre."

"Well, Tom, it seems as if we can do nothing?" said Mark.

"No, sir, 'cept sit on the deck and growl, and that won't do no good, will it? Wish we could see how Joe Dance is getting on."

"I've thought every way I can," continued Mark, "but I can find no means of escape."

"Might perhaps get on deck when it's dark, sir. Dessay I could manage to get up enough to make a jump on to the chap on the watch, and hold him till you were all alongside."

"A desperate venture, Tom."

"Yes, sir, and we're all desperate now, I can tell you."

No more was said then, and after making a hearty meal from the provisions in the cabin, the men sat about and went off fast asleep, worn out as they were with watching and exertion.

But Mark could not sleep. There was the great sense of responsibility to keep him awake, and the question always troubling him: Had he done the best as an officer who had succeeded to so important a charge?

He went to where Mr Russell lay in his berth, and bent over him for a few minutes, but only to go away again with his feeling of misery increased, and seat himself once more at the cabin window in the hope of catching a glimpse of the other schooner when a tack was made; but fate did not favour him. All he could make out was that the vessel must be sailing

south and south-west, and the one they were in keeping on in full pursuit.

“I don’t wonder,” he thought. “It means a splendid profit for them to take her and her living freight.”

It was terribly hot down in that cabin, and an intense longing came over the lad to get on deck in the fresh air. Then he looked longingly down into the clear sparkling water through which they were rushing, and thought of how delightful it would be to plunge down and swim.

“Right into the jaws of some shark,” he muttered, bitterly, and then, “Oh, Bob Howlett, I wish you were here to take your share of the worry.”

The heat and anxiety seemed too much for him, and despair made everything now look black; he could see no ray of light.

But nature is very kind, and she came to the sufferer’s help, for as he looked round sourly at those in the cabin, Mr Russell in his stupor-like slumber, and the rest breathing heavily in perfect repose, he muttered:

“Not one of them seems to care a bit. Even Tom Fillot and that black asleep, and at a time like this!”

It is a bad thing to set up as a judge without a plentiful stock of profundity. Mark scowled angrily at the sleepers, and turned away in disgust to gaze out of the cabin window at the flashing sea and try in vain to catch sight of some sail, that might bring help.

The next minute he, too, was sleeping heavily, for nature was building them all up again ready for the struggles yet to come.

A heavy bang as of a closing door made Mark Vandean start up and strike his head against a piece of wood—a blow which for the moment increased his confusion.

Where was he? What had happened?

No answer came, but there was a question from out of the darkness.

“Say, messmates, hear that?”

“Tom Fillot.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Where are we?”

“Dunno, sir. Here, I think.”

“But where is here, stupid?”

“That’s a true word, sir. I am stupid—who’s this?”

“Dick Bannock, AB, it is,” said the familiar voice of that seaman.

“Know where we are, mate?”

“No. Awake, I think.”

“Well, we know that,” cried Mark, pettishly. “Yes, I remember now. I must have gone to sleep.”

“That’s about as near as we shall get to it, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “This here’s the cabin, and there ought to be a locker here, with matches in it, and a lamp. Wait a moment.”

There was a rustling as Mark listened, and the rush of the water came up from below, and he could feel that the schooner was gently careening over as she glided on through the calm sea.

“Hooroar!” said Tom; and the next moment there was the scratch of a match, and the little cabin was illumined, showing Tom Fillot learning over a lamp, which directly after burned up, and showed that the cabin door must have been opened while they slept, for a tub of water and a bucketful of biscuits had been thrust in.

“Look at that,” cried Dick Bannock. “Now, if we’d been awake, some of us might have got out and took the schooner again.”

“Not much chance o’ that, messmate,” said Tom Fillot. “They’re too cunning not to have taken care. Don’t mean to starve us, seemingly.”

“Put out the light,” said Mark, after a glance round, to see that Mr Russell was unchanged, and the next moment the cabin was in darkness.

“Have your arms ready,” he whispered, “and keep silence. Perhaps—”

He did not finish speaking, for a faint shadow lay across the cabin skylight, and he was aware of the fact that some one must have been watching, probably listening as well.

The shadow passed away; and mounting on the cabin table by the midshipman’s orders, one of the men tried hard to find some way of opening the light, but short of breaking it open with sturdy blows of a sledge-hammer, there was no possibility of escape that way.

After a time Mark whispered with Tom Fillot as to the renewal of an ascent through the cabin window and over the poop.

“Proof o’ the puddin’s in the eatin’, sir,” said the sailor. “Only way is to try.”

“Yes, by-and-by,” said Mark, “when all is quiet. Some of them are sure to go to sleep.”

For there was a good deal of talking going on upon deck, and they could smell tobacco, and once there came down the rattle of a bottle neck against a glass.

So the prisoners waited patiently in the darkness, Mark discussing from time to time the possibility of the second schooner having been captured, but they had no means of knowing. One thing was, however, certain—they were sailing very gently, evidently not in pursuit, and, judging by the stars, they were going south, and thus farther away from aid.

Making a guess at its being about midnight, and when all was wonderfully still, Mark whispered his plans to the men. They were simple enough.

He told them that he should climb up over the poop, and do so without exciting the attention of the hand at the helm, for it was possible, though doubtful, that the man set as sentry over them would be asleep. He had no reason to expect this, but it was probable, and he was going to try it.

“Best let me go first, sir,” said Tom Fillot. “You might be knocked over at once, and dropped into the sea.”

“If I am, you must haul me out again,” said the lad, coolly. “There’s a coil of signal or fishing line there, strong enough to hold me—there, in that locker. I shall make it fast round my waist, and if I get up in safety, I shall secure it to a belaying-pin, so that it will be handy for you who follow. Mind, as silently as cats. Get it out, and make it fast. Two of you can hold the end.”

There was a slight rustling sound as Tom obeyed; the line was declared to be quite new, and kept there in store; and at last, amidst the deep breathing of the excited men, Mark prepared to climb out, while his followers in this forlorn hope were eager and waiting for their turn.

The recollection of the last attempt would trouble the lad, try as he would to be calm and firm.

“I can do it in less than a minute,” he said to himself; “but I wish that my heart would not beat quite so hard.”

But it would beat all the same, and at a tremendous rate, as he, in imagination, saw the sentry ready to strike him down.

“Ready, sir?” whispered Tom.

“Yes. Got the line?”

“Right, sir; and we’ll just keep touch of you, and pay it out. Moment you’ve made it fast.”

“If I do,” whispered Mark.

“You will, sir,” said the man, confidently. “Give four jigs, and up we come. Got your dirk?”

“Yes.”

“Draw it, sir; hold it in your teeth, to leave your hands free, and if any one comes at you use it. That thing can’t kill.”

Mark drew a deep breath, thrust himself half out of the window, turned, and gazed up.

All was perfectly silent—not a suggestion of an enemy above; and getting right out, the boy seized the carved ornamentation of the stern above the window, raised one foot, to find a resting-place on a kind of broad beading or streak, and began to climb.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

On Deck again.

Nothing of a climb up over the stern of that schooner, a trifle compared to the same task on the *Nautilus*; but it was hard work to Mark Vandean, who had to move by inches, getting well hold and drawing himself up till he was about to reach his hand over the top, when he felt one foot gliding from its support, and thought that he was gone. But a spasmodic clutch saved him, and after clinging there motionless and in a terribly constrained attitude for a time, he drew a long breath once more, reached up suddenly, got a secure hold, and then hung for a few moments before seeking about with his foot for a fresh resting-place.

To his great delight, he found one directly; and, slight as it was, it was sufficient to enable him to raise his head very slowly till his eyes were level with the edge, and he could peer over the stern rail.

That which he saw paralysed him, and he remained perfectly motionless, gazing at the black silhouette of the man at the helm seen against the dull, soft light shed by the binnacle lamp.

This man was motionless, leaning on the wheel with his back to the spectator, but the light shone softly upon the forehead of another, seated on a coil of rope not six feet from Mark, and a little to his left.

This man, whom he recognised at once as the fellow who had struck at him, was intent upon the task of shredding some tobacco up finely, and tucking it into the bowl of a pipe, dimly-seen below where the light from the lamp struck; and as Mark watched him, not daring to move for fear of

being heard, the slaver finished his task.

“Open that lantern,” he said shortly to the other; and, rising, he took a step forward, Mark taking advantage of the noise he made to lower his head and listen.

The next moment the man altered his mind, as he stuck his pipe between his teeth, and turning and stepping aft, he came to the stern and looked over on the port side, Mark being more to starboard.

Thump—thump—thump went the lad’s heart in those perilous moments, as he clung there close to the stern, preparing to drop the moment the man made a step to knock him off into the sea, and consoling himself with the knowledge that the line was tight round his waist, and that his friends had the other end ready to haul him into safety.

They certainly were agonising moments, and yet the man did not stir, only seemed to gaze out over the sea, then downward; and at last he turned away from Mark and walked back to his companion.

“Why didn’t you open the lantern?” he said, sourly.

“Hands full,” came to Mark’s ears, as, unable to restrain his curiosity, the lad raised his head slightly and peered over again to see the lamp opened and the glare of light fall on the thin, sharp features of the smoker, as he drew the flame into the bowl of his pipe till the tobacco was glowing. Then the lantern was closed again with a snap, and the light was softened to a faint glow, shining on the binnacle and the black, shadowy figures before it.

“Keep a sharp look-out,” said the man at the helm in a harsh growl; “don’t want them fellows to come up and break my head while I’m not looking.”

“Not likely to. They’d better. Make out anything of the little schooner?”

“Not since I saw her light. She’s ten mile away by now.”

“She’ll be a cable’s length astern to-morrow,” said the man, significantly.

“Will she?” thought Mark, but he felt directly after that he had made a slip,

for he could see no way of carrying out the plans they had hatched below, and a miserable feeling of despondency came over him. For he knew that if he stirred and made the slightest noise, he must be heard by the man posted to guard against attack. To get on deck was next to impossible, and even if he did he would not be able to make the line fast unless—Mark shuddered and set aside the horrible thought, which was in full—unless he used his dirk.

In open fight it would have been terrible enough, but then it would have been in self-defence, and for the sake of the poor enslaved creatures they were trying to save; but to wait there for an opportunity to strike would be like playing the assassin, and he felt that he would rather jump back into the sea and risk the sharks.

It was hard work hanging there. His arms and wrists ached, his legs felt cramped, and a peculiar tingling numbness began to assail him, as more and more he was forced to the conclusion that there was only one way out of the difficulty, and that was to descend—if he could, for he knew that this would be as difficult a task again.

There was a slight rustling, and raising his head once more very slowly, he looked over to dimly make out the figure of the man who was on guard leaning over the same part of the stern as before, and smoking, a faint glow arising from his pipe at every puff.

“It’s all over,” thought Mark. “I shall have to drop into the water and let them haul me in. I can’t get down. If I move, he’ll come and break my head or smash my fingers.”

In this spirit he turned his head a little to try and look downward, but it was too dark to see anything, and if it had been otherwise, he could at the most have seen his shoulder, in the cramped attitude he occupied.

He had some idea of signalling by tugging at the cord, but he found that he could not get at it without loosening one hand, which was not to be thought of; besides, if he had tugged, in all probability Tom Fillot would have believed that it was the signal that the cord was made fast, tighten it, and drag him off. So at last he said to himself, “Now for it,” and prepared to drop.

But he hesitated. Who would not under the circumstances? It was not many feet down, but the water was black, and there was the thought of the sharks.

He tried to make up his mind for the bold plunge, but still he could not. The perspiration stood out on his forehead, his hands grew wet, and his breath came short; but at last, when feeling that his task must be done, for if he did not drop, Tom Fillot would begin to climb up, only to be struck back, he drew a long breath, and pressing his feet hard against the stern, instead of descending he began to draw himself up. Striving gently he glided on to the rail, and from there, as softly as a serpent, lowered himself to the deck, crept along for a few feet and then began to unfasten the line about his chest, and secured it to the stout iron upon which the block ran from side to side, and held down the heavy boom of the fore and aft mainsail.

For all at once, when he was at his worst pitch of agony and despair at his failure, a familiar voice from somewhere forward cried sharply:

“Jeffs.”

“Hello,” said the man close by him, softly.

“Forward!”

The man went away, and Mark felt that his time had come. He might be able to make the rope fast after all, without being heard by the man at the wheel.

He could hardly believe in his good fortune, for just as the fellow Jeffs went forward, the helmsman began to hum over some sea-song, pretty loudly, to amuse himself; while he held his hand below his eyes and gazed over it forward, to see what was going on, and why his companion had been summoned.

He was still occupied in this way when Mark gave the line the signal tugs, and crept sidewise into the shelter of the bulwark, where all was perfectly black.

There he crouched dirk in hand, listening to the beating of his heart, and

the peculiar dull sound made by the line as it tightened, and this was supplemented by a crack or two as it gave over the wood across which it was strained.

The man at the wheel was so intent upon his song, and that which was going on forward, that he did not notice the sounds which were terribly loud to the midshipman's ear, till Tom Fillot had climbed up, was about to throw his legs over, but slipped.

The noise he made in his slip was slight in the extreme, but unfortunately he uttered a sharp ejaculation as he saved himself from going down. The helmsman looked round, uttered a shout of warning, and picked up a heavy cudgel lying by him on the deck.

Tom Fillot leaped forward, then back, and shouted:

"Up with you, lads!" and then made a rush at the helmsman, avoided a blow aimed at him, and retaliated with a thrust which sent the man staggering back against the next corner, checking him for the moment, and giving Dick Bannock time to get over on to the poop.

But before the others could mount, the schooner's crew came with so fierce a rush that, being in the forefront boldly heading his little party of two, Mark was driven back to the rail, and tossed over, but made a desperate clutch to save himself, and caught at the line he had secured.

It was a terrible scrape for his hands, but he held on, came with a heavy bang against the stern, and feeling as if his arms had been jerked from his shoulders, he hung there for a moment, and was then helped into the cabin by the black and Stepney, who had been stopped from climbing up by the strength of the defence. Then after a sturdy struggle there were a couple of heavy splashes in the dark water below, while from overhead came a jeering series of cheers.

Fortunately, when the man left the wheel, the way of the schooner was to some extent stopped, or Tom Fillot and Bannock would have been hopelessly left behind, the slavers not having the slightest intention of lowering a boat to pick up their enemies; but under the circumstances, as the vessel rolled in the hollow with her sails flapping and the great booms swaying to and fro, the men rose and swam close under the stern, Dick

Bannock getting hold of a ring-bolt, and holding on in the darkness, while Tom Fillot swam with all his strength to keep up.

“Can’t lend you a hand, mate,” growled Dick, “or I would. Take a grip of me with your teeth—oh!”

Dick uttered a yell, so firmly had Tom Fillot followed out his instructions, and there the pair hung as the wheel was seized once more, and the schooner began to glide rapidly through the water.

“How long can you hold on?” cried Mark, whose hands were busy the while.

No answer came, but by this time he had reached up as high as he could, and cut the line, at which the men on deck were jerking and tugging. There was enough for his purpose, and rapidly making a loop, he threw it down.

“Get an arm through that, Tom, and we’ll haul you up,” cried Mark. “Got it!”

There was a peculiar sound from Tom Fillot, and then a cheery “All right, sir,” as the line tightened. For his first utterance had been when his teeth were set fast in Dick Bannock’s trousers and leg, the second when he had quitted his hold.

With four in the cabin to haul, and Tom Fillot’s activity to help, it was not long before he was up and in at the window, getting the noose of the line off his arm.

“Hold on, Dick,” cried Mark, leaning out as far as he could.

“Can’t, sir,” came like a groan. “There’s so little to hold on by.”

“Here, quick! the line!” cried Mark, dragging it to him in loops, and, leaning out, he dropped it right on to the man, who made a desperate snatch at it, and twisted it round his wrist as the swift current seemed to snatch him from his hold.

The lad’s heart felt as if it had stopped in those brief moments when he

gazed down at the dimly-seen figure in the agitated water.

“Right!” came the next moment; and then the word, “Haul.”

In another minute Dick lay panting on the cabin floor, breathless and trembling, so that for a time he could not speak.

“Better now?” said Mark, sympathetically.

“Yes, sir,” said the man, faintly. “I’m a-coming round, sir, but that there was very near.”

“Near?”

“Yes, sir; I thought I was gone.”

“But you warn’t, mate,” said Tom Fillot; “and you and me’s got to pollergise for making the cabin floor so wet.”

“Never mind the cabin floor,” said Mark.

“You dunno how juicy I am, sir, or you wouldn’t talk like that,” said Tom.

“Are either of you much hurt?” said Mark. “Can’t tell yet, sir; haven’t had time to think. Pretty tidy, though, I should say.”

“Let’s have a light and see.”

“Oh, never mind about that, sir. We shan’t hurt, Dick and me. It was all wrastling, and no knives or pistols. We shall do. Sorry we didn’t get up quicker.”

“It was a failure, Tom, but only the first time. They tried till they took the schooner; we’re going to try the same.”

“That’s the way to take it, sir. Won’t try again to-night, I suppose?”

“Of course not, nor yet that way, Tom. We’ll wait for morning now.”

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Tom makes a Suggestion.

Morning was a long time coming to the prisoners, but at last the bright light of day shed hope into all their hearts, and, forgetful of the sufferings of the night, Mark's eyes were strained as far as the cabin window would admit in search of their prize.

It was nowhere in sight. Dance's head had evidently proved sufficiently clear to enable him to sail the craft well enough to keep out of the would-be captor's reach, unless she were somewhere in sight forward and the American captain was in pursuit.

Whenever any tack was made, eyes were strained to try and catch a glimpse of her, but all in vain, and the prisoners sat about avoiding each other's eyes, for, in spite of all determination to be patient and try and think out some plan, a hopeless state of despondency would creep over them.

Their captors, following their own example, flung them some biscuit through the cabin skylight, and lowered a bucket of fresh water, the American skipper shouting down in a fierce snarl that if they made any further attempt to escape he would have them shot like mad dogs.

"If you can," cried Mark, defiantly, and then he shrank and gave an uneasy glance round at his men to see what effect the American's words had upon them. For with a contemptuous laugh the Yankee uttered the one word "cockerel," and slammed down and fastened the light.

"Never you mind, sir," whispered Tom Fillot at the first opportunity; "cockerels is young game cocks, and we know as you're game to the backbone. You'll give him one p'r'aps 'fore he knows where he is."

It was weary work in that breathlessly hot cabin, but no one murmured, and Mark sat gazing out of the window and wondering why their captors did not set them adrift in a boat, the simple explanation being that they would have done so had they not dreaded being followed and caught when becalmed, and then surprised. For it was evident that, for reasons

of his own, the American skipper shrank from leaving the coast, with its many creeks and rivers, where he could hide or run from pursuit.

It soon became evident that either the other prize had been taken and sent off, or Dance had managed to effect his escape, for there was no further sign of her.

Tom Fillot felt bitterly aggrieved.

“He must ha’ been a bit flighty still, sir, or he wouldn’t ha’ done it. He’s gone off with that there craft. I would ha’ stood by my messmates if it had been me.”

Night came, with the position unaltered. They were still coasting along south, and they had full testimony of the fact that their captors did not mean to give them the slightest chance to escape.

The skylight was tried and the door. There was a discussion as to the possibility of getting through the bulkhead forward, and one or two attempts were made, but each time, at the first crack made by the wood, there was the report of a pistol, and the shattering of the bulkhead above their heads, plain proof that they were strictly watched by one who had had orders to fire at the first attempt.

“P’raps we’d best take it coolly, sir,” said Tom Fillot, the second time, “or else put it off till after dark.”

Mark nodded, and sat listening to some cries which made their black companion begin to pant and glare at the cabin-hatch; and Mark himself felt as if he could have enjoyed lashing with wires the backs of the scoundrels who treated their black fellows worse than they would have treated dogs.

Then night came once more, with the resolve to make another attempt to get on deck; but to their disgust and misery, they found that a lanthorn was placed upon the skylight, where it would cast down its rays and show what they were about, and once more when a movement was made to make an attack upon the door, there came the splintering of glass, a bullet struck down into the floor, and a sharp report told them how well their captors were upon the *qui vive*.

“Look here,” shouted Tom Fillot, “I know who you are, Mr Skipper. You’ll be hitting some one if you don’t mind, and it may be murder.”

There was no response, and the little party subsided into a state of despair.

Excepting Mark.

He was as determined as ever to escape, and felt that there must be a way if he could only hit upon it.

His last idea was to raise some of the cabin floor boards and get down below, where they might reach a hatchway; but there was no chance of doing this while a man was watching them, armed with a pistol. Nothing could be done but wait.

Mark sat back against the bulkhead, with his hand playing with the hilt of his midshipman’s dirk, which he had managed to retain all through his various struggles, from the habit of thrusting it into its sheath the moment opportunity served; and as he sat he glared up at the skylight feeling as if he would give anything to have a fair chance on deck, his men against the American skipper’s, and the victory to the bravest and most strong. He was ready, boy as he was, to lead them on, being wound up to a pitch of utter recklessness.

Almost, for he had sense enough and teaching enough to know that it would be an act of cruel madness to his men to force them to squeeze themselves, one by one, up through that light, ready to be knocked back helpless into the cabin.

He glanced at Mr Russell, where he lay in his stupor, and recalled some words that officer had once said to him respecting the management of his followers:— “Always use them as if their lives were of greater value than your own, Vandean,” he said. “Never risk them recklessly.”

“And that would be recklessly,” Mark said, half aloud.

“You speak to me, sir?” said Tom Fillot.

“Eh? No, Tom; I was only thinking.”

“Of how to get out of this place, sir, and dropping on to them beggars up above?”

Mark shook his head.

“Don’t say that, sir. Do think o’ some way. It’s ’orrid, and I feel ’shamed o’ myself. I’d sooner have a fight for it, and be down in hospital six months arter, than be beaten like this here.”

“So would I, Tom; but what can be done?”

“Why, here’s five on us, sir, and you to lead us, all ready to make a rush for it. We’re a bit knocked about, but full of fight. It’s only for you to say the word.”

“I’m ready to say the word, man, but how can I?” cried Mark, eagerly. “Can we get out on deck through that light?”

“Well, I’m feared as only ’bout a couple on us would, sir.”

“Right, even if we could manage that; and the survivors would be thrown back, worse off than we are now.”

“That’s a true word, sir.”

“Well, you know what happened trying the cabin window?”

“Yes, sir, I just do,” said Tom, dolefully. “I thought Fillot AB’s kit was for sale aboard the *Naughtylass*.”

“Then the door—the hatch; what about that?”

“Ah,” said Tom, thoughtfully, “what about that?”

“Why, it’s wedged and barricaded up, and exit that way is impossible.”

“Hah! Exit that way’s impossible,” said Tom, after a deep breath. “Exit that way’s impossible.”

“We could not batter it open, but if we did, the whole gang would be waiting for us, ready to beat us back as we crept through, one at a time.

Our only chance is to take them by surprise."

"Only charnsh is to take 'em by surprise," said Tom, thoughtfully —"surprise—surprise. Look ye here, sir," he suddenly cried, eagerly, "why not take 'em then by surprise?"

"How?"

"Powder, sir, out o' that there locker."

"What! and blow them up?"

"O' course, sir," whispered Tom, "sky high."

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Desperate Measures.

“Powder? An explosion?”

“Yes, sir; blow the whole thing out just when they didn’t expect it.”

“The powder?” cried Mark, excitedly. “Yes, of course. Why, Tom, I *never* thought of that. We will in the morning, when they are not so strictly on the watch.”

He looked excitedly at Tom Fillot for a few moments, and then his countenance changed.

“No,” he said; “it is impossible.”

“Not it, sir. Lay the powder snug again the door, make a train, fire it, get out of the way. Then *bang* it goes; smash tumbles the door and hatch and all the rest of it, and then out we rushes, knocks ’em over one at a time, and the schooner’s ours.”

“Man, man, can’t you see that if we did that we should blow ourselves up as well?”

“No, we wouldn’t sir, because we’d lie down.”

“Well, what difference would that make?”

“All on it, sir. Powder flies up, and it wouldn’t hurt us.”

“Think not?”

“Sure on it, sir.”

“Tom, I’m not sure; but dare we risk—”

“O’ course, sir.”

Mark sat thinking for a few moments.

“We might try it with a little.”

“It must be a big dose or none at all, sir.”

“Yes, and we must risk it,” said Mark. “Now, then, it must be done quietly, for depend upon it that scoundrel is watching us.”

“Then I tell you what,” said Tom, “as now it’s dark he can see us, and we can’t see him, I say, sir, let’s all have a nap, and directly after the sun’s up get ready.”

“That’s good advice, Tom. We can sleep in peace with the way of escape open to us—that is, *if* we can.”

“T’others can, sir,” said Tom; “they’re all sound enough.”

Mark glanced at their companions, who had been unheeded during their earnest conversation, and could see that his lieutenant’s words were correct.

“Let’s lie down, then;” and, setting the example, his mind was so utterly weary, and yet so much at peace, that he was soundly asleep in less than five minutes, Tom Fillot in two.

Meanwhile on deck, after a bit of a consultation, the American skipper had determined to get rid of his dangerous prisoners; and to this end he had had the worst boat slightly provisioned with biscuit and water, and she hung at the davits, ready for the midshipman and his followers to be had up one by one, soon after daylight, and disarmed and bundled into the boat to make for the shore.

“We’ll get too far out for ’em to nab us again,” the skipper said, as he glanced shoreward through his night-glass, where the coast lay some seven or eight miles away.

In profound ignorance of all this, Mark slept on till he was awakened by Tom Fillot, and started up, staring and wondering, till he recalled that which was before him.

Then he felt a chill of dread, for it would be a terrible thing to do—that firing off a sufficient charge of powder to blow out the door and yet leave the occupants of the cabin uninjured.

Tom Fillot had no such dread, and after trying to make out whether they were watched, he quietly thrust an arm beneath the lid of the locker and drew out a tin of powder, which he carried across, and placed with the neck opened and on its side, so that a little of the contents ran out close by the cabin entrance.

This he did three more times, laying the tins neck to neck, each open, and helping to make a little hill of black grains, while his comrades looked gloomily on. Then, fetching a fifth, he opened it, and laid a zigzag train completely along the cabin floor right to beneath the window, and returned carefully to empty the remainder on the little heap and about the necks of the other tins.

Five pounds of gunpowder! Plenty to bring destruction upon all within the cabin, as well as knock out the door and hatch beyond.

“There we are, sir,” said Tom Fillot, seeking for a box of matches and coolly taking one out. “Now we’ll all lie down together when you think it’s a good time, and keep our heads close to the floor. The blaze’ll go right over us, and you understand, lads, as soon as the blow up comes, we shall all rush out, take ’em by surprise, and capter the schooner. That’s right, sir, ain’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right, Tom. Be ready, my lads.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” said the men, coolly; and the black grasped a cutlass as well, looking prepared for anything.

“It’ll be sharp work, my lads, but we must win.”

“And we will,” said Tom, grimly. “Think I can do better with the powder, sir?”

“No; that will be excellent for the purpose,” said Mark. “Now give me the box and lie down.”

“Give you—the box o’ matches, sir?” stammered Tom Fillot.

“Yes. I shall fire the train.”

Tom handed over the box unwillingly.

“Hadn’t I better, sir? You might be burnt.”

“Well, if I am, what then? Ready, my lads?” whispered Mark. “All is quiet now.”

“Ay, ay, sir, ready,” said the men, as they pressed closely to the floor, holding down their heads for the most part; but Tom Fillot with a face full of anxiety watched.

“Then the moment after the explosion spring up and follow me.”

As Mark spoke he lay down close to the end of the train right beneath the open window, took a match from the box, struck it, and, as it burst into flame, touched the powder, which began to burn along the zigzag train with a peculiar rushing hiss.

Chapter Forty.

Firing a Train.

A sound like a sigh or the escape of some pent-up emotion came from the little group of prostrate men, all of whom, save the black, knew that the powder might after all, while driving out the cabin door and its barricading, injure, perhaps kill them, in its explosion.

But no one flinched, as the schooner careened over in obedience to a turn or two of the wheel, and glided rapidly off on a fresh tack, while the flame of the heavy train ran here and there over the cabin floor, its peculiar hiss suggesting to Mark the idea of a fiery reptile, and the strain of those exciting moments growing till they appeared to be minutes.

Away it sped in its serpent-like trail, for Tom had made liberal sweeps of

the powder, and the whole course was marked by an ever-increasing cloud of white smoke, which rapidly filled the cabin, till only about four of the bends remained between the fire and the heap of powder, when with a suddenness that sent a thrill through all, there was a tremendous crash, followed by a heavy, dull jar which shook the vessel from stem to stern. Mark Vandean sprang up, gave one glance toward the stern window as if he were going to spring out, and then flung himself between the burning train and the powder tins, rolling himself over and over in the hissing flame, and at the same time sweeping the powder, so carefully laid in zigzag curves, right and left and away toward the cabin window, where it sputtered and flashed innocuously.

“Quick, Tom!” he panted; “sweep away. Mind it don’t go off.”

“Why, it has gone off,” cried Tom, rising up on his knees and speaking from out of the dense white smoke, which now completely filled the cabin and rendered the men invisible to each other.

He was making for the cabin door, when Mark seized and clung to him.

“Come on, my lads,” cried Tom. And then, “All right, sir; you lead them.”

“Don’t—don’t you see?” panted Mark.

“No, sir; who is to see in this blessed smoke? But you’re losing time. Come on.”

“The door isn’t open.”

“What? It must be. Come on.”

“I mustn’t go near,” cried Mark. “Look. These sparks.”

“Ay, you’re all afire, sir. What made you go so soon? You ought to have waited.”

“You don’t understand,” cried Mark, who could hardly sneak for trembling. “That was not the explosion. I—I stopped it.”

“You stopped it, sir,” cried Tom Fillot, as he kept on passing his hands

over Mark’s garments to press out a few sparks which lingered there.

“Yes, of course. Didn’t you hear what that was?”

“Course I did, sir, though I was down on my face with my fingers in my ears. It went off well. Come on, the door must be down.”

Another heavy report seemed to strike the schooner again, as the smoke curled rapidly out of the cabin window, and Mark pressed to it, thrust out his head, and uttered a loud cheer.

“Why—no—yes—hooray!” roared Tom Fillot, as he caught a glimpse of something half a mile away, seen through the thick white smoke. “Cheer, lads, cheer! It’s the *Naughtylass* just astarn.”

“I—I knew it,” panted Mark, “and stopped the train just in time. Look at the floor and sweep away any sparks that are left. I—I can’t now. Mind the powder doesn’t go off.”

The smoke in the cabin was less dense now, and, awakening fully to the fact that there were sparks here and there where the train had ignited a few tindery spots between the boards, Tom Fillot and Bannock carefully trampled them out and swept away with their caps any portions of the loose powder which might communicate with the heap by the cabin door.

“That’s about right now, sir,” said Tom; “and that’s about safe, but I’m blessed if I didn’t think it had all gone off.”

Bang! went another gun.

“Go it, old gal,” cried Tom. “I say, sir, that first shot must have hit us somewheres forrard. Oughtn’t we to give ’em a cheer?”

“Yes,” cried Mark; and the men pressed to the cabin window, but before they could shout there was the smashing of glass overhead, and the barrel of a pistol was thrust down.

“Say, there,” came in the skipper’s voice. “Just yew all lie down. Yew show yewrselves at that winder any one of yew and I’ll send a bullet through the fire that signals.”

Mark's first idea was to commence war on their side, but he waited his time, and sat down smarting and throbbing, as the black came across to him and laid a hand upon his knee, looking commiseratingly in his face.

"Oh, it's nothing much," said Mark, hastily, though he was quivering with pain.

"But it is much, sir," said Tom Fillot, who, at a sign from Mark, had drawn back and now stood gazing at his young leader.

"Does it show, Tom?"

"Want me to tell you the hull truth, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hair's all singed off, sir, and you ain't got a bit a' eyebrow or eyelash left."

Mark groaned.

"But they'll all grow again, sir," cried the sailor, eagerly, "and it might ha' been worse."

"Couldn't, Tom. It does smart so."

"But s'pose your whiskers had growed, sir. Why, it would ha' took all them off too."

"Don't—don't talk, man," cried Mark impatiently. "Only try if you can see what's going on. How was it we didn't see the *Nautilus* before?"

"She must ha' come round some pynte sudden-like, and took 'em on the hop, sir. We couldn't make her because we can only see just astarn. They're luffing a bit aboard the *Naughtylass* to fire. There she goes."

Almost as he spoke there was a white puff of smoke, a shot came skipping along the surface and then went right over the schooner, and splashed in the sea beyond.

“Hadn’t we better hyste them colours out o’ winder?” said Tom.

“What for?” said Mark, trying to suppress the manifestations of pain which would keep showing.

“They’ll think we’ve surrendered and cease firing.”

“But that would be helping the schooner to escape.”

“Why, of course, sir,” cried Tom, slapping his leg; “that wouldn’t do no good. I was only thinking of its being onpleasant to sit here and be shot at by one’s own messmates. But it don’t matter; they can’t hit very often.”

Mark glanced up at the skylight, to see if they were being watched, and had ample proof of that being the case, for he could see the skipper looking down at him.

Directly after the man walked away, and they heard him giving some orders, which were followed by a quick trampling, and directly after, to the lad’s annoyance and disgust, the cabin was partially darkened by a sail being hung down over the stern.

“To keep us from seeing what is going on,” grumbled Dick Bannock.

“No,” said Mark; “to keep us from signalling.”

But though they could not see, they could hear, and they all sat listening with intense excitement as shot followed shot, and the schooner lay so much over to one side that it was evident that she was carrying a very heavy press of sail, and that the slaver captain was straining every nerve to escape.

“Now, then,” cried Mark, “be ready for a rush either at the door or up through the skylight, in case the boats board. We can then take the Yankee between two fires.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” cried Tom; “strikes me, begging your pardon, sir, as some of us aboard the *Naughtylass* is terrible bad shots. I want ’em to hit us—forrard, o’ course; not here.”

“They could hit fast enough,” said Mark, petulantly, for he was in great pain, “only they are firing at the rigging, so as not to injure the slaves.”

“Course. I forget that, sir; only if they don’t bring down a spar, and the beggars escape again, where are we?”

Just at that moment there was a rattling and thumping at the cabin door, as if something was being removed; and as the prisoners listened, the skipper’s voice was heard at the skylight.

“Below there!” he cried. “Ah, it’s of no use. I’m covering yew with this pistol. Look here, I’ve got a boat alongside ready; that door’s a-going to be opened, and one of yew will come out a time, and tumble into the boat. One at a time, mind; and if there’s any show o’ fighting, we’ll shoot you down without mercy. Do yew hear?”

“Yes, I hear,” said Mark bitterly.

“Soon as yew’re all over the side, we’ll cut yew adrift; and when yew’re skipper picks yew up, yew may tell him that I’ll throw every nigger overboard before he shall take us, and run the schooner aground and blow her up this time.”

“You can give your message when Captain Maitland has you safely in irons, sir,” said Mark, stoutly.

“Thankye,” said the skipper; and at that moment, in obedience to an order previously given, the cabin door was dragged open.

“What d’yer say to a rush, sir?” whispered Tom Fillot.

He had hardly uttered the words, when there was a fresh crashing noise, a heavy report, and a splintering of wood, accompanied by a strange rustling sound. The door was clapped to again and fastened, and as there was a rush of feet, a shouting of orders, and the sound of axes being used, the schooner swung round, stopped, and the prisoners set up a cheer.

“Mainmast down by the board,” cried Tom Fillot, slapping his leg. “We can aim straight, sir, arter all.”

Mark forgot the smarting and throbbing from his burns on the instant, as he snatched out his dirk, for knowing as well as if he could see everything that the whole of the after-rigging was lying across the deck and dragging at the side, so that the schooner lay on the water like a gull with a broken wing, he felt that in a few minutes a couple of boats' crews from the *Nautilus* would be aboard; and if there was to be any resistance, now was the time to make a diversion.

"Make ready, my lads," he cried. "Cutlasses only. Quick!"

Just then there was a fresh crackling and breaking sound, and the skylight, through which he had meant to lead his men, was also darkened by the falling over it of a part of the great sail and the gaff; so that they were in twilight.

"Better try the door, sir," cried Tom Fillot. "We'll kick it out now, sir; there's nothing behind."

"Quick, then, quick!" cried Mark, excitedly; and the men went at it with a cheer, while the shouting of orders on deck grew more loud and angry.

"We must get out, Tom," cried Mark, "and make a desperate effort ourselves. If the boats get here first, they will claim to have taken the schooner, and rob us of all the honour."

"We'll try, sir," cried Tom. "Go it, my lads! Lay your backs into it. Soup, heave!"

But the door resisted all their efforts, and it was evident that the Americans had wedged it with a couple of pieces of wood.

"Oh, this is maddening," cried Mark. "They mustn't find us prisoners here below."

"Let's try the skylight, sir," cried Tom Fillot; and at a word from Mark, he mounted the little table, and began to drag at the heavy canvas, so as to get it aside, but came down with a crash, as there was a flash and the report of a pistol.

"Hurt, Tom?" cried Mark, in agony, as he went down on one knee in the

dim cabin, and caught at the sailor's arm.

"Hurt, sir!" grumbled the man. "Just you lose your footing, and come down with your ribs on the edge of that table, and see if you wouldn't be hurt."

"But I mean shot—wounded."

"Yah! no. He couldn't hit a hay-stack, sir. I'm all right."

"Let me try," said Dick Bannock, "while he's loading his pea-shooter."

The man mounted the table, and began to drag at the canvas and tangle of rope, and blocks, but there was no attack made upon him, and he struggled on till he was obliged to give up with a sigh of despair.

"Can't you do it?" cried Mark.

"No, sir, nohow. Wants someone on deck with a hax."

"Let's try the window again," cried Mark; but a few minutes decided that. Hampered by the great sail hanging down, there was no exit there without cutting a way through, while those who tried would have been quite at the mercy of the men on deck.

Back at the door, they hammered and beat and thrust, trying all they knew without avail, till suddenly, as a cheer was heard alongside, one of the pieces of wood which wedged them in so securely gave way a little, then a little more, and with the tramping of feet increasing overhead, the door flew open.

Mark bounded out, but was driven back into the cabin by Bob Howlett, who forced his way in with his men, his first words shouted in the dark cabin—doubly dark to those who entered from the glaring Afric sunshine—silencing Tom Fillot and his comrades, who shrank back puzzled at first, then full of mirth and enjoyment at the midshipman's mistake.

For, seeing in the blackened object whom he had helped to drive back into the cabin a foe of a calibre suited to his size, and one whom he could tackle, Bob Howlett shouted to his men—"Cut 'em down if they resist,"

and then to Mark. “Now you slave-catching dog, surrender, or this goes through you like a spit.”

Chapter Forty One.

Fun!

“This” was, of course, Bob Howlett’s little midshipman’s dirk, a weapon worn more for ornament than use. But the boy looked as if he meant to use it, for, according to his own way of expressing himself, his monkey was up, he was bubbling over with excitement, and ready for anything. As it happened, he was exceeding his duty, for the officer in command would never have given a mere lad charge of men to make a desperate attack upon enemies who had apparently taken refuge below. But without a moment’s hesitation he bore Mark back against the bulkhead, gripping him with one hand and with the other holding the point of his dirk against the lad’s throat.

“Here, do as I do, my lads,” he shouted; and then to Mark:

“Yield, you miserable Yankee hound, or I’ll run you through.”

Excitement, the emotion and relief at finding himself among friends once more, and the prize safe, robbed Mark for a few moments of all power of speech or action; and then the absurdity of the position tickled him into the determination to hold his peace for a few minutes, and keep up the joke.

“Here,” he cried, imitating the Yankee captain’s drawl, and speaking in a husky, disguised voice, “just mind what yew’re about with that there toothpick, or yew’ll be hurting somebody if yew don’t cut yewrself.”

“Silence, you dog!” cried Bob, fiercely. “Do you surrender?”

“Eh? Dew yew mean give myself up as a prisoner?”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Then why didn’t yew say so, mister, and not talk in that windy-bag way?”

“Disarm the others, my lads,” cried Bob. “Now you sir,” he continued to Mark, “give up your sword.”

“Shan’t.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to give it up to yew. Tell ’em to send an orfycer, not one of the ship’s boys.”

“You insolent hound!”

“If yew call me a hound again, squaire, I’ll kinder punch your head,” said Mark, quietly.

“What!” cried Bob, trying to give his prisoner a shake, but shaking himself instead. “If you dare to say that again, sir, I’ll have you clapped in irons. Here, my lads, bring ’em all out, and let’s have a look at the hang-dog scoundrels.”

“Cock-a-doodle-do!”

Mark gave a fair imitation of the crowing of a cock, and Bob was furious.

“How dare you, sir!” he cried. “Recollect you are prisoner to Her Majesty’s ship *Nautilus*.”

“Commanded by Bob Howlett, Esquire,” said Mark, in his natural tones, “Oh, I say, Bob, how you can bully and bounce!”

Bob’s hands dropped to his side, and just then a familiar voice shouted, —

“Where’s Mr Howlett?”

“Here, sir,” said Bob, dismally.

“Ah, that’s right. Nobody there, I suppose?” The voice was quite close to the door now, and a shadow was cast down into the darkened cabin.

“Oh yes, sir, there’s some one down here,” said Bob. “We haven’t taken the schooner after all.”

“What!”

“It’s all right, sir,” said Mark, stepping out on to the deck to face Mr Staples. “We took the schooner.”

“Mr Vandean! Bless me, my dear boy, I am glad to see you again. We thought you were gone. But in the name of all that’s horrible, how did you come in this state?”

“State, sir?” said Mark, who had for the moment forgotten his injuries.

“My dear boy, yes; why, you haven’t a bit of hair on face or head, and you’re black as a negro.”

“I’d forgotten, sir. It was the powder.”

“Powder! an explosion?”

“Yes, sir; no, sir.”

“Mr Vandean,” cried the lieutenant, “do you want to aggravate me?”

“No, sir,” cried Mark; and he told him hastily what had taken place.

“Lucky for you that you did stop the train,” cried the lieutenant; “why, my good sir, it was too desperate; not one of you would have been left alive. But where is Mr Russell?”

“In the cabin, sir, wounded.”

“Tut—tut—tut! Signal for the surgeon, Mr Howlett,” he cried; and Bob went off, while the lieutenant looked sharply around.

“Where are the rest of your men?”

“Dance and Grote are in the other schooner we took, sir.”

“Another? Well, this is a curious state of affairs. You are left in charge of a

prize—”

“Yes, sir, and we lost her and took her again, and then captured a second prize. Dance and Grote have charge of her. Haven’t you seen her, sir?”

“No—yes. Of course, that is the vessel we sighted just before we attacked here to-day. But the other three men?”

“Don’t know, sir, unless they are prisoners in the forecastle.”

“Go and see, my lads,” cried the lieutenant; and, to the delight of their messmates, the others were set free from where they had been imprisoned.

“Then we are all accounted for,” said Mark, holding his hand to his burning face, “But where are the Yankees, sir?”

“Oh, they performed their old manoeuvre,” said the lieutenant, bitterly; “as soon as we set off from the *Nautilus* to board, they took to the boat they had ready trailing alongside, and made for the shore, where I hope the niggers’ll catch ’em and turn ’em into slaves. Hah, here comes Mr Whitney! Poor Russell! has he been long like this?”

“Yes, sir; all the time since the Yankees came off in their boat and surprised us.”

“Then you—you—Why, Mr Vandean, you don’t mean to say you’ve been in command all the time?”

“Yes, sir,” said Mark, modestly. “Fillot has been my first lieutenant.”

“Humph! the forecastle joker, eh?” said Mr Staples, grimly.

“No, sir, there has been no joking,” said Mark. “It has been too serious for that.”

“So I should suppose, my lad. Hah, Whitney, here’s work for you. Poor Russell again. Been insensible for days.”

“And this lad—burned?” said the doctor, sharply. “Why, Mr Vandean! why,

my dear boy, what a state you're in! Get him under an awning at once. I'll dress your face soon."

Mark was quite ready to walk, but he was carried and laid down under the shelter of a sail, and in a few minutes Mr Russell was laid beside him, and the doctor went down on one knee to make a careful examination.

"Very bad?" Mark heard the first lieutenant whisper.

"Bad enough," replied the doctor. "Fracture, with a piece of bone resting upon the brain. We must get him on board the *Nautilus* at once."

"Dangerous?"

"Pretty well."

"Fatal?"

"In some hands," said the doctor, importantly, "but we shall see."

Mark could hardly believe it true an hour later when he was lying in a comfortable cot on board the *Nautilus*, with cool applications to his face and head, and a man told off to attend upon him—that man being Tom Fillot. The captain had been to see him, and shaken hands, thanking him for what he had done toward capturing the two schooners, the second, with Dance and Grote on board, being now only a few cables' lengths away.

"We found you did not put in an appearance, Mr Vandean, so we sailed south in search of you, and a pretty dance you have led us. But you have behaved uncommonly well, my dear boy—very well, indeed."

As soon as he could get a chance, Bob Howlett paid the patient a visit, and reported that the doctor had performed an operation upon Mr Russell's head, and said that he had borne it very well.

"What an unlucky fellow he is," Mark cried, as he lay there in perfect peace now that he was relieved of his responsibility, and could rest.

"Not half such an unlucky beggar as some one I know," grumbled Bob.

“Oh, you mean me,” said Mark, quietly.

“That I don’t,” cried Bob. “I call you lucky.”

“Me?”

“Yes; look at the fun you’ve had all to yourself. A regular cruise.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun. Captain of the schooner; capturing another; complimented by the skipper; praised by old hooks and staples; and of course, just when I thought I was going to distinguish myself, and charged down into that dark cabin and made sure I’d captured the skipper at the point of my sword—”

“Dirk,” said Mark.

“Well, dirk, if you like—of course it must turn out to be you. Bah! it’s disgusting.”

“Nonsense!”

“It is, I say,” cried Bob, angrily. “You get all the fat and gravy of life. And now you’re as good as wounded, and you’ll be named in the skipper’s despatch, and—but oh, what a lark!” cried Bob, bursting into a roar of laughter. “What a jolly old fifth of November guy you do look!”

Chapter Forty Two.

Convalescence.

“Hallo, old mole!”

“I’m going to give you a thoroughly good licking, Bob, as soon as I get well,” said Mark, a few mornings later, on being saluted as above.

“I should like to see you do it.”

“You shall, my dear young friend. Last night it was rat; night before owl; now it’s mole.”

“Well, so you are a jolly old mole. Regular night bird.”

“Didn’t know a mole was a night bird.”

“Boo! clever. He’s getting well, is he? You’re always sneaking about in the dark. Why, if I’d been wounded I should be proud of my scars.”

“Should you?” said Mark, passing his hand over his bald head and scorched eyebrows. “Well, I’m not, and I shan’t care about showing myself till my hair’s grown.”

“Look here, I’ll get the armourer to make you a wig out of some oakum.”

“Bob Howlett, I’m strong enough to lick you now,” said Mark, gripping the boy’s thin arm, “so just hold your tongue. Now tell me how’s poor Mr Russell?”

“Coming round fast. Whitney goes about rubbing his hands when he thinks no one is looking. He’s as proud as a peacock with ten tails because he operated on Russell’s head and lifted up something, and now the poor fellow’s going on jolly. I like Russell.”

“So do I. He’s a true gentleman.”

“And I shall make him take me next row there is on. He’s sure to be wounded or something, he’s such an unlucky beggar, and then I should have to be in command.”

Mark burst out laughing.

“Now don’t be sneering and jealous,” cried Bob. “Think nobody else can capture slavers but you? Nasty slice of luck, that’s all it was. Yah! I’m sick of it.”

“Of what?”

“Hearing the fellows puffing and blowing you up. You’ll go pop like a soap

bubble one of these days."

Mark laughed good-humouredly.

"Anyone would think you had done wonders, and were going to be promoted to admiral instead of being only a middy who has to pass his examination years hence, and then going to be plucked for a muff, for I know more navigation than you do. Look here, Guy Fawkes: when the sun is in right declination forty-four degrees south, how would you find the square root of the nadir?"

"Put your head a little nearer, Bob; I can't hit out quite so far."

"Hit—hit me? Why, you bald-headed, smooth-faced— No, I won't jump on you now you're down. I'll be bagdadibous, as the chap with a cold in his head said through his nose. Favourite of fortune, I forgive you."

"Thankye."

"Because I shall get my whack of the prize-money same as you, old chap."

"Ah, how are all the slaves?"

"Nice and clean. They've all been white-washed."

"Get out."

"Well, I mean the holds, and they eat and drink and lie about in the sun basking like black tom-cats with their wives and kittens. I wish they wouldn't be so jolly fond of lying down on the deck like door-mats, and asking you to wipe your shoes on 'em."

"They don't."

"No, poor beggars, but they're so delighted that they're just like pet dogs. Seem as if they couldn't make enough of you."

"Got any news, Bob?"

“No. Leastwise, not much,” said Bob, taking out his knife and sharpening it on his boot, which was a sign that he was going to cut his initials somewhere, to the great detriment of her Majesty’s ship’s fittings and boats.

“It’s rather dull down here sometimes.”

“Then why don’t you come on deck?”

“I’d—I’d rather wait a bit,” said Mark, sadly.

“Perhaps it would be best. You do look such a rum ’un. I know. Capital idea. I’ll ask the ship’s tailor to make you a Turkish costume, white. Your bare head would look all right then. What’ll you have—a fez or a turban? Say fez; your complexion would look well with the scarlet.”

Bob joked, Mark read, and trusted to his friend for reports, and meanwhile the two schooners sailed on with their prize crews in the wake of the *Nautilus*. In due time Port Goldby was reached, and the freed slaves disembarked, all chattering and happy as so many girls and boys.

There had been times when Mark missed the excitement of his adventures, and agreed with Bob that it was hot and tame; but his burns rapidly healed, and he received visits from the men who had shared his troubles, and after dark stole unseen to Mr Russell’s quarters, to sit in his cabin and talk to him gently about all the past.

“You’ll have all the work to do next time, Mr Russell,” Mark used to say. “Some day I shall be the one down, but I hope I shall be with you when you command some other expedition.”

“I hope you will be with me,” said the lieutenant, feebly; “but not be so unlucky as I have been. But there: never mind past troubles. I’m getting stronger, thanks to Mr Whitney. All that time I passed insensible is to me like a long night’s rest. Mark, my lad, I hope we shall have many adventures together yet; but whether we do or no, though I am much older than you are, remember one thing: you and I must always be good friends, and some day, if ever I command a ship, I hope you will be my lieutenant.”

“Ah,” said Mark, “that’s a long way off, but I hope I may.”

Chapter Forty Three.

Mark is wanted on Deck.

“Here, Mark, old chap, the skipper wants you on the quarter-deck,” said Bob Howlett some weeks later.

“Wants me?” cried Mark, clapping his hand to his head.

“Yes.”

“Why, I heard the men piped up, and everybody’s there.”

“Yes, all of ’em. Russell’s there too, and Whitney.”

“Whitney?”

“Yes, I think the skipper’s going to have your bare head exhibited, and the doctor’s to give the men a lecture on the new growth of hair on the human skull.”

“Get out; he doesn’t want me, Bob. I shall be obliged to give you that licking.”

“No gammon, really. You are to come at once.”

“Is this serious?”

“Yes: honour.”

“But—oh, Bob, I’m such a guy.”

“You are, my boy; but we’ll forgive you. Come on.” Mark hurriedly covered as much of his disfigurement as he could with his cap, and followed his messmate on deck, where, to his horror, he found officers and men all drawn up, with the shabby port and town of Goldby glorified by the setting sun, and all beneath the quarter-deck awning bathed in a

golden glow.

One of the first objects upon which his eyes lit was the young lieutenant, looking weak and pale, as he sat there in uniform for the first time during many days. Tom Fillot and the rest of the prize crew were in front, and as Mark shrinkingly marched up to where the captain was waiting, Mr Russell gave him a friendly smile, and the first lieutenant one of his frowning nods.

Mark felt miserable, for, as Bob kindly told him afterwards, he looked just like an escaped lunatic, who had jumped out of a strait waistcoat into a middy's uniform. He felt as if the men were smiling in derision at his aspect, especially Tom Fillot and Dance, who were grinning, while Soup and Taters displayed nearly every one of their magnificent white teeth.

There was a singing in his ears too, and a sensation of giddiness; and when Mr Whitney nodded and looked hard at him, the midshipman half thought that Bob Howlett's words were right, and that the doctor was really going to lecture upon his bald head.

Then the captain spoke, amidst the most profound silence, and Mark felt as if he were a culprit, and as ready to hang his head; but somehow he drew a deep breath and held himself up stiffly, and his eyes flashed defiance, as he said to himself, "Let them laugh if they like. I did my duty."

"Glad to see you on deck again, Mr Vandean," said the captain, shaking hands, and speaking in his clear, penetrating tones. "I know that you have felt a little shrinking naturally, sir, but no British sailor need be ashamed of scars received in an honourable service."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Mark, in a choking voice, and his eyes looked his gratitude.

"I sent for you, Mr Vandean, because I felt that you ought to hear an announcement I have to make to the whole crew of her Majesty's sloop *Nautilus*."

He paused for a moment or two, and whispered to Mr Staples, who was close behind him. Then he nodded, and went on:

“The two schooners so gallantly taken, lost, and retaken by the brave little prize crew I sent on board, have been condemned and sold. They are beautiful little well-formed vessels, and have made a splendid price. —Silence!”

There had been a low murmur, which was instantly checked.

“Then for head money on one hundred and eighty-seven poor black fellow-creatures rescued from what to them were floating hells, there will also be a handsome sum to add, and make a capital distribution of prize-money amongst the smartest crew a captain in Her Majesty’s service could wish to command.”

Here there was an attempt at a cheer, but the captain held up his hand.

“I have a few more words to say, and they are these. We all owe our thanks to those officers and men who have turned what had so far been a barren time into one rich in action. There is not a man among us who would not gladly have done his duty as well; and no doubt—it shall not be my fault if they do not—others will have plenty of opportunities for distinguishing themselves. But I feel that we ought all to publicly thank these officers and men for the brave fight they made on our behalf. You will be glad to hear that I have strongly recommended my gallant friend Mr Russell for promotion, which he has won by his brave efforts and his sufferings in our great humane fight to wipe away the sinister black bar from the world’s shield of civilisation. Stop, my lads; you shall cheer directly. Dance, Fillot, and Bannock stand next for promotion, and I thank them publicly for setting so brave an example with their messmates, of patient self-denial, obedience, and sterling British manly pluck in a good cause.”

Another murmur ran along the ranks, and Mark saw that Tom Fillot was hanging his head and colouring like a schoolboy, while Dance could not stand still. Almost at the same moment Mark caught Bob Howlett’s eyes, which twinkled with mischief and seemed to say, “Your turn now.”

“One more word,” said the captain, “and I have done.”

He paused, and in the intense, painful silence the glowing quarter-deck, with its many faces, seemed to swim round Mark Vandean.

“There is one whom I have not named,” said the captain—“Mr Vandean.”

Here, unchecked, there was a tremendous cheer, in which the officers joined, and the captain smiled, while now Mark’s head did hang a little, and he trembled.

Then, as there was silence once more, the captain turned to him.

“Mr Vandean,” he said, “I thank you—we all thank you for what you have done. I name you, of course, in my despatch, but it is folly to talk to you of promotion for years to come. That is certain, however, if you go on in the course you have followed since you joined my ship. I tell you, sir, that it is such lads as you who have made the words British Boy admired—I may say honoured—wherever our country’s name is known. Mark Vandean, I am proud of you, and some day I feel that your country will be as proud—proud as we all are—proud as the father and mother at home will be when they know everything about their gallant son. God bless you, my boy! A British captain should be like a father to the lads whom he commands. Heaven knows I feel so toward you.”

He stopped, with his hand on Mark’s shoulder, and the first lieutenant stepped forward, cap in hand, to wave it wildly.

“Now, my lads,” he shouted, “for Lieutenant Russell and Mr Vandean: cheer!”

They did.

“One more for our captain!”

The voices rang out again and again, and yet again. And made the water ripple round the ship, Bob Howlett afterwards declared. But five minutes after, when he was down with Mark in the middies’ berth, while the hero of the evening sat hot and quivering in every nerve, Bob uttered a contemptuous snort.

“Oh!” he cried, “what a jolly shame!”

Mark stared.

“You do get all the crumb, old chap. All that fuss over a fellow with a head of hair like yours!”

Then, as he saw the pained look in his messmate’s countenance, the tears rose in his eyes, and he gulped out,—

“Only my gammon, old chap. I’m as proud of you as any of ’em, and I only wish now that we were two great gals.”

“Why?” cried Mark, wonderingly, as he caught the hands extended to him by his friend.

“Because then I could hug you. But I can’t: it would be so Frenchy.”

“Fists’ll do,” said Mark, gripping Bob’s fingers with all his might.

“Yes, and we’re to stick to each other always.”

“Always.”

“Through thick and thin.”

“Through thick and thin.”

“Chums to the end.”

“To the very end, Bob.”

“Yah!” roared the latter, angrily, as he picked up a bread tray to throw at a head he had seen through his dim eyes watching them intently, “How dare you sneak in, sir to watch what’s going on? Why, I thought it was one of the men. Come here and stand on your head, ugly. You can’t tell tales of how stupid and choky I’ve been.”

The chimpanzee came forward out of the semi-darkness, and squatted down to have its ears pulled; while, as soon as he grew more calm, and his heart beat regularly once again, Mark sat down to pen a long, long letter to that best of places—his far-off home.

with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH F3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTIBILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be

interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need, is critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at http://www.pglaf.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Its 501(c)(3) letter is posted at http://pglaf.org/fundraising. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at http://pglaf.org

For additional contact information:
Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit http://pglaf.org

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: http://pglaf.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

http://www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.