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**THE SEA RAIDERS**



SHE WAS THE FIRST TO REACH THE SCENE OF ACTION.

p. 19.

*The Sea Raiders.*

# THE SEA RAIDERS

BY

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FRONTISPIECE BY

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# THE SEA RAIDERS

## CHAPTER I

### GUNROOM MATES

“TALK about the tower of Babel——” said Midshipman Jack Cleaver, laughingly.

His pal, Lee Ferris, tossed his red head and drummed his heels.

“Bedlam, you mean,” he corrected. “Bedlam let loose; only more so! Does the noise disturb your lucubrations, Jackie darling? Shurrup, you ungodly roysterers, and let Jack get on with his letter.”

“Letter be blowed,” cried Midshipman Mountbarrel, the dandy of the gunroom, placing a battered record into the jaws of a remorseless phonograph. “Get on with it, Jack! The girl won’t know the difference if you spell sideways or upside-down. There’s only one ‘v’ in ‘loving,’” he added kindly.

“Ass!” answered Jack. “This is a letter to the brother, asking for a supply of tin! We don’t all write letters to girls, let me tell you, Master Oswald Alexis Christopher Ford Mountbarrel!”

Midshipman O. A. C. F. Mountbarrel promptly hurled the gunroom cushion at Jack’s head. Jack caught it deftly, and shoved it behind him.

“Thanks,” he said, and went on with his writing.

The noise increased in severity. To the general din was added the blatant bellow of that phonograph, which the middies were convinced was the loudest in existence. It was a veritable monster of a phonograph—a juggernaut, a hideous, squealing brute of a phonograph. Its piercing notes were warranted to cut through any din that man could devise. Just now the cooling-machinery was clattering and banging close by, several

middies were singing in ruinous voices, and two were conducting a heated argument about the merits of respective football-teams. Even so, the phonograph—out-shrieking the lot of them—was undismayed. “What are the wild waves say-y-ing?” was its raucous inquiry.

“I ain’t nobody’s darling!” came the counter-blast of the snottie chorus.

“I tell you, he’s the finest centre-forward they ever set eyes——”

“What rot! He never——”

Clatter - clatter, rattle - rattle went the cooling apparatus, alternating with the drumming of the feet of red-headed Lee Ferris.

“I hear but their low, lone song,” proceeded the diabolical phonograph.

“Good grief!” exclaimed Jack, putting his pen down in despair. “If this isn’t the noisiest old tub in the whole Fleet, I’ll swallow my dirk, scabbard and all! I don’t know whether I’m writing a letter to my brother about money, or a request to the King for the Crown jewels! I——”

“Oh, bother your old letter!” cried Blackmere, the biggest midshipman on board the *Thunderer*. Blackmere had the reputation of being a good bit of a bully, and it was a reputation of which he was fond, and wished to preserve. He snatched up the sheet of notepaper, and crumpled it in his great fist, grinning in aggravating fashion.

“I say!” said Jack, starting up. “Hand that letter back, Blackmere, or——”

With a sneer of contempt the big snottie threw the letter neatly through an open port-hole. In a minute it was bobbing up and down on the waters of Port Jackson, the current carrying it merrily away from the ship.

Jack was annoyed—there was no other word for it. He jumped forward, and caught Blackmere an open-handed smack on the cheek-bone, leaving a reddening mark. It was the impulsive blow of momentary

annoyance; but Blackmere did not think of that. He retaliated with a punch that sent Jack crashing up against the table, and followed it up with arms working swiftly.

Jack met him half-way in that, though. He got in a blow to the ribs that doubled the big fellow up like a jack-knife. Blackmere backed away, gasping for breath.

The next instant they were both trapped in the arms of their comrades.

“Cheese it, you chumps!” said Sub-lieutenant Rince, who was responsible for the gunroom and its noisy occupants. “This isn’t the place to go brawling like a couple of drunken navvies—understand?”

“By James,” said Blackmere fiercely, “you don’t get the hang of it yet! This is a private quarrel, see? And we’re settling it here and now. Of course, if Cleaver will apologise——”

“Which he won’t,” interrupted Jack, “not by a very long chalk! Here, Lee, let go my hands, I tell you!”

The two faced each other across the gunroom floor like duellists. This incident of the letter was, perhaps, a triviality; but it was the climax of a long series of similar incidents. Blackmere had been subtly bullying Jack Cleaver ever since the latter had joined the *Thunderer*. And there was bad blood between the two.

So they struggled and twisted in the grip of their mates until they were convinced that it was futile to struggle and twist any longer.

“Now look here,” said the Sub. “If you chaps are really in earnest about making a meal of one another, why not do it in the proper way?”

“What’s that?”

“Why, like gentlemen, with the gloves,” replied the Sub at once.

Blackmere laughed sneeringly. “As you please. But be quick about it, whatever it is. Cleaver here was looking for a fight, and he’s going through it.”

“Where will the battle come off?” asked Jack, who was not in any way afraid of Blackmere, large though the latter bulked in comparison to himself.

"Here and now," replied the Sub, helping to lift the table back, while others busied themselves with tying the strings of the contestant's gloves.

"Rather cramped for space, isn't it?" asked Lee Ferris.

"It'll serve. There won't be any running away possible," said Blackmere meaningly. "Now then, you fellows—stand back, unless you want your toes trodden on."

Then he was tearing into the attack, a fighting fury, full of determination and brute strength. By sheer force of the onslaught Jack Cleaver was driven back against the wall, where he was forced to endure several ugly strokes to the side of the head. He smothered up and crouched, waiting for Blackmere's wild assault to expend its force.

The instant that the big fellow allowed his punching to relax, Jack was charging in, head down, gloved fists flailing away at the body, with an occasional over-arm chop to the head. Blackmere felt as if he were trying to hold the kicking hind legs of a maddened mule.

Smack, smack, smack! The blows fell thick and fast: and under this violent assault Blackmere's science went thoroughly to pieces. He felt the urgent need of a moment's review of the situation. And so he ran back a few paces, and shook his head, and stood ready to meet the inrush of this most pertinacious attacker.

He was fortunate. His strategy was rewarded. As Jack tore in, game as a lion, Blackmere shoved out a straight left that was as rigid as a ramrod. Although Cleaver glimpsed the threatening glove, and ducked, taking it on his forehead, he was thrown back in his tracks as violently as if he had collided with the steel side of the *Thunderer* itself.

Instantly then Blackmere followed up with a rain of blows that put Jack down on the carpet, feeling extremely dazed.

"Stand back, there—don't foul him," howled the Sub, jumping forward in a business-like manner and commencing to count the seconds.

Blackmere stepped back, and, placing his gloves on his hips, stood looking down at his fallen opponent.

“. . . two, three, four . . .” chanted the voice of the Sub, rock-steady and precise as the chiming of a clock.

Jack Cleaver got up on one knee, shaking his head to clear away the dazing effects of the blows he had received. He was far from being done with yet, but he was enjoying as much of the brief respite as he could—“taking nine,” as the saying is, in ring parlance.

“. . . Nine, . . .” said the Sub; and his lips were trembling on the verge of the fatal word “Out,” when Jack shot up to his full height and the fight was on again.

And now Jack changed his tactics. Instead of rushing in like a bull at a gate, he stood off and boxed coolly, landing shrewd blows whenever he saw an opening. He permitted Blackmere, with his superior height and reach, to do all the forcing. The display was at its height, and had reached a pitch of high excitement, when Blackmere, tiring of the deadly counter-hitting of his foe, decided to risk everything in a wild charge. He watched Jack carefully, and then plunged forward with the reckless stampede of a maddened bison.

Jack only just got out of the way. He side-stepped prettily, and Blackmere whirled madly on, unable to check himself from falling. Luckily his head did not strike the iron bulkhead. Instead, it biffed the green baize curtain over the doorway, and he vanished into the flat beyond, like a man in a stage illusion.

Crash! Wallop! There sounded two loud noises of impact and collapse—two distinctly. And then a smothered exclamation from Blackmere, and a strange voice which rasped out on a note of high exasperation:

“Blazing volcanoes! What on earth——?”

The snotties made a rush to the doorway, twitched aside the baize curtain, and stared out. It was an unusual sight that met their gaze. Lying on his back in the flat was a tall bearded gentleman in mufti. Blackmere, sprawled over him, was trying to flatten him with

his head, it appeared; and altogether it was a Laocoon mix-up.

The middies burst into a howl of laughter.

"Another doll over!"

"What's he done now?"

Whatever Blackmere had done, he certainly picked the stranger up and restored his hat, which had rolled some distance along the flat; but the assaulted gentleman seemed far from pleased.

"You impudent young scoundrel," he said furiously. Clothed rather roughly, he resembled a beach fisherman out for a day's pleasure. What he was doing on board the *Thunderer* no one had the nerve to ask.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Blackmere. "I ——"

"Why can't you look where you're going?" rapped out the stranger. "Might have killed me, stampeding out like that. A habit of yours, I suppose?"

"No," growled Blackmere crossly, hardly delighted with this termination of his boxing bout. "Come to think of it, it was your fault as much as mine. Strolling along with your eyes on the ceiling, and——"

"What!" roared the other. "You impertinent puppy, don't you know who I am?"

"No," said Blackmere bluntly. "I've never seen you before and I don't much care if I never see you again."

This was rude of Blackmere, but then the middy was rather annoyed. The bearded stranger choked. For a moment he was capable of nothing more articulate than a series of wheezing gasps; and seemed on the verge of an apoplectic fit of amazing proportions.

"I am Commander Caggs, R.N., D.S.O.!" he roared at last.

"Oh, ah!" gasped Blackmere.

"You have assaulted your commanding officer, and been extremely impudent as well!"

"Oh crumbs!" said Blackmere, helplessly.

"For this, you will have your leave stopped for two weeks."

Blackmere gurgled.

"And this tomfoolery must not occur again!"

"Yes, sir—that is, I mean, no, sir!" stammered the discomfited bully of the gunroom.

Commander Caggs, R.N., D.S.O., snorted loudly and, turning on his heel, marched off. He had been newly appointed to the *Thunderer*, and although none of the snotties knew him personally, his reputation for eccentric conduct had gone in advance. For instance, it was well known that, in mufti, Commander Caggs resembled an ol' clo' vendor rather than an officer of His Majesty's Navy. It was also known that he invariably introduced himself as "Commander Caggs, R.N. D.S.O." The gentleman who had just fallen foul of Blackmere had exhibited both peculiarities.

"It's Caggs all right," said Blackmere, re-entering the gunroom with a dark frown of annoyance on his brow. "A couple of weeks' jammed, too—hang it! Your fault, Cleaver—all your fault."

"Couldn't be helped," laughed Jack, shaking hands with his late adversary. Now the contest was over, they felt a certain respect for each other—a respect not un-mixed with admiration, which is ever the result of physical conflict. "Who would have thought that the Bloke would be strolling along the starboard passage? Only a crank like Caggs would do such a thing. Anyhow, my turn for the goffers."

He tapped on the trap-hatch at the end of the gunroom, and a steward opened it instantly.

"Yes, sir?"

"A large goffer, Prendergast, please," said Jack, placing a shilling in the ready palm of the steward, who immediately repaired to the canteen and returned with a jug-full of fizzing liquid of doubtful manufacture, which tasted remotely like lemonade and rejoiced in the name of "goffers"—a name coined in the Navy.

Over the consumption of this beverage the middies of the gunroom abated their din a trifle. They even forgot to renew the winding of the phonograph. The merry clatter of the refrigerator, being beyond their control, continued as tirelessly as ever.

"Rotten easy life this—what?" drawled Midshipman

O. A. C. F. Mountbarrel. "Nothin' doin' anywhere—same old tasks, same old trips, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, with a bit of a skip over to Vila or up to Papua. When I joined the Navy, I had the notion we'd be fighting little wars every few weeks—but here we go cruisin' around like giddy old tourists."

"The war's over," said Lee Ferris sagely.

"I see you read the papers, my son," returned Mountbarrel with a yawn. "Yes, the war's over and there won't be another for a million years, or thereabouts. We'll grow to be old fossils at this game, believe me! Dash it all, there's no excitement in the Australian Fleet—we're too far away from everything."

"Well, there's Japan," said the Sub.

"Oh, Japan! That talk makes me tired. What we want is a bit of fun here and now, not the prospect of a scrap this time next century! Couldn't we rout out some giddy old pirates, or——"

"Pirates," the Sub informed him wisely, "are as dead as the Dodo—whatever that might be. No, my young fire-eater; the job of the Navy is to be ready—get that? You've been listening to the yarns of old Haigh, and his adventures with pirates on the old Mediterranean Fleet. All bunkum! Haigh is a good fellow, but you know what these old salts are—liable to exaggeration at times!"

"That's so. And yet——"

There the matter was dropped, for the time being. Mountbarrel had but expressed what all of them felt more or less, being young in the Service and anxious for an exciting time. It was true that war seemed far off—a most remote contingency. Probably actual warfare would not fall to the lot of any of them. Yet each one of them, keen as mustard, could not but hope for something more serious than mere cruising from port to port. Submarine attacks, the use of torpedoes from which the war-heads had been removed, dropping of sundry depth-charges, manœuvring, practice gun-firing, were all very well in their way, but they were not the real thing. The ship was full of men and officers who



had been in the North Sea, at Jutland, and elsewhere, and who could tell kindling yarns of actual fighting. Small wonder that the youngsters found the ways of peace tame by comparison.

But you never know your luck. . . .

The next morning, as had been arranged, coaling ship was to be carried out. Jack Cleaver, tossing in his hammock, was aroused by the raucous, unremitting chant of the ship's police, as they went the rounds.

"Guard an' steerage 'ammicks—make a move, make a move! Guard an' steerage 'ammicks—make a move!"

Jack groaned, and opened his eyes, abandoning a most delicious dream of pirates and smugglers, in the course of which he had led with notable prowess a boarding party, armed with cutlasses.

"Guard an' steerage 'ammicks. . . ."

Shortly after eight o'clock, a blackened South Coast collier ranged alongside, and prepared to unload several hundred tons of coal. With her two winches going she swung up basket after basket of the fuel on to the decks, where it was wheeled in barrows to the chutes and discharged into the bunkers. It was hard work, in which everybody took a hand. Coal dust was everywhere. A sooty film settled on the sides of the *Thunderer*, and even on the funnels; and Jack and the other snotties resembled a crew of negroes.

To such good effect did they work that it was not long after noon that 750 tons had been taken aboard.

"Thank goodness, that's over," said Lee Ferris, as he stood underneath the shower and scrubbed himself clean. "At any rate——"

He broke off. Somebody was racing down the passage-way at break-neck speed; and in a minute the door of the bath-room was shoved open, and the voice of Midshipman O. A. C. F. Mountbarrel made itself heard.

"I say, you chaps—we're on a giddy old adventure! We're leaving port straight away as fast as we can lick! There's wind of something very fishy out at sea, pirates or something; anyhow we got a wireless——"

“Wha-a-at!”

“Go hon!”

“No, you fellows—this is gospel, every word of it. It seems that some crack-brained fellows are trying the piracy stunt. Holding up merchant vessels on the high seas, and looting 'em. We just got a wireless from the *City of Perth*—of the White Funnel Line, you know—to say that she's in difficulties somewhere the other side of Lord Howe Island. And we're lighting out on the trail quick and lively!”

This was breathless news. But the day before the juniors of the *Thunderer* had been complaining of the absence of adventure from their humdrum lives; and here, like a bolt from the blue, was startling, incredible news, as yet difficult to grasp. They dressed hurriedly and went to their stations.

And here came the virtue of all the endless preparation of the Navy. The *Thunderer* was the only vessel of the Fleet in port, the others being at Melbourne. She would have to tackle the job single-handed; but she was ready. Two boats full of liberty men were hastily recalled, just on the point of leaving for shore; the boilers were under a full head of steam almost immediately; the whole ship hummed with activity. The Commander blessed the fact that the *Thunderer* was cram-full of coal.

Within an hour, immense clouds of smoke bursting from her raking funnels, the cruiser left her buoy and steamed up Port Jackson at full speed.

Through the Heads she raced at twenty-two knots, kicking into a deep swell, a swift-moving, grey purposeful shape, tearing over the seas to the rescue of the stricken *City of Perth*. The wireless calls from the latter vessel were urgent and incessant; and gradually the story of the disaster was pieced together and passed from mouth to mouth.

It was the most astonishing thing. If the wireless story was to be given credence, then amazing events were taking place on the troubled surface of the Pacific. Piracy on the high seas seemed the only name

which could be applied to them—bare-faced piracy, without even the extenuation of war.

The *City of Perth* had been accosted by a rakish vessel and peremptorily ordered to heave-to—a modern version of the “stand and deliver” of highwaymen’s days. The captain, treating the megaphone order as a joke, had laughed and gone ahead. Suddenly a gun appeared on the fore-deck of the strange steamer, and a shell was fired across the bows of the *City of Perth*. Matters looked serious. The captain hove-to and in a voice of anger demanded to know the meaning of the outrage.

He was enlightened soon enough. The captain of the threatening vessel admitted that he was a pirate, and went on to say that unless the *City of Perth* yielded up her cargo of gold specie, bound for San Francisco, she would be blown out of the water. As far as could be ascertained from the jerky disconnected tale that the wireless told, the specie had not only been stolen, but the steamer had been fired on as well, and left in a sinking state.

To add to the seriousness of the outrage the glass had been falling all day and a gale was blowing up. The people on the doomed vessel were in hourly anticipation of a storm of considerable severity.

Things standing so, the raider had callously steamed away to the southward, leaving the *City of Perth* in a rising sea with her helpless passengers and crew, frantically wirelessing for succour.

It was an atrocity without parallel in modern maritime history, harking back to the grim days of war and the sinister activities of the U-boats.

## CHAPTER II

### TO THE RESCUE

MORNING broke over an expanse of riotous waters, a long, heaving swell urged into choppiness by the force of the wind. During the night the gale had broken, and its force was not much abated even now. The *Thunderer*, charging through the welter of waves, sent out its wireless call to the badly damaged *City of Perth*, announcing the approach of help, sounding a message of cheer and encouragement.

But towards morning the answering wireless failed altogether. What had happened? Was it because the unhappy vessel had foundered? That she had been in sore straits had been made clear from the messages she sent; and those on board the *Thunderer* feared the worst.

"In this sea her boats would be swamped in a jiffy," said Jack Cleaver, standing by the rail of the quarter-deck. "I'm afraid we won't be of much use when we do arrive on the scene."

Nevertheless, the *Thunderer* continued to drive through the smoking seas with all the power of her turbines. The immense ironclad parted the waves with her sharp prow, and sent them foaming and leaping along her sides. Rolling and pitching heavily, she threw the spray as high as her topmast; and the decks were streaming with volumes of water that continually swept her bows. Down below, the stokers were working in double shifts, like demons in their tirelessness and vigour, while from the bridge came repeated orders to get more and more power out of the straining engines.

The stern vibrated with the pulsating screws, shaking to and fro like a dog's tail; and this vibration was communicated to the whole structure of the cruiser. The splendid ship had thrashed through the seas all through the night; and with morning there was no diminution in her effort.

There was something stirring in the sight of this greyhound of the seas, this magnificent mass of machinery, winning its way onwards in defiance of the elements, bursting through the opposing ranks of the waves in cloud after cloud of spray, and tossing them behind her divided and defeated. Despite the bitter opposition of the tempest, she raced over the long leagues of intervening sea as if there was nothing that could hold her back; and just before noon the *City of Perth* was sighted on the horizon.

Seen through the glass, the position of the liner seemed very precarious; and when the *Thunderer* dashed up, it was clear that she had not many more minutes to live. The waves were charging her like galloping squadrons, beating upon her as she lay low in the water, seeking to drive her to the bottom; and as the battleship approached a boat put off from the side of the doomed vessel, closely followed by a second.

"They'll be swamped," murmured Jack Cleaver, who was standing by the first whaler in readiness for lowering. Scarcely had the words left his lips when one of the crammed lifeboats was submerged under the massive fall of a great wave that looked like a collapsing tower. She emerged from the welter of froth, turned turtle, and with several persons clinging to her keel. A number of dots on the face of the waters indicated what fate had befallen the remainder of her occupants.

"Away first sea-boat's crew!" came the order, cracking out like a whip; and Jack tumbled into the stern sheets of the whaler, which was lowered to the surface and pulled rapidly in the direction of the disaster. Steam had been got up on the steam-cutter, which was also lowered, as was the second whaler. The little flotilla sped towards the fast-sinking *City of Perth*, which rapidly lowered its remaining boats so that they would not be involved in the suction when the parent ship went under—as she seemed likely to do any minute.

The steam-cutter was the first to reach the scene of action. Two boats pulled alongside and discharged their cargoes of shivering, frightened passengers. Jack picked

up as many as he could find of the spilled occupants of the lifeboat. It was difficult work. The peculiar chop on the surface rendered navigation perilous; besides, the luckless passengers were scattered far and wide.

"Hold hard," he shouted, "we're running one poor beggar down! Back water, men!" The whaleboat tossed uneasily. "Don't foul him with those oars—careful!"

As the humped-up body swirled alongside, Jack leant over and grasped the man by the collar. An athletic heave, and he was safely within the boat. One by one the survivors were salvaged and taken aboard the rescuing vessels. From the *City of Perth* there came no sign of life. Wallowing drunkenly amid the waves, it seemed as if she was on the very point of sinking. Did anybody still remain on board her?

Jack put the question to one of the men he had pulled into the whaler—a mate of sorts, by the look of him. The man stared stupidly at the labouring mass of the steamer. Even as he looked, she gave a lurch to starboard and recovered with difficulty.

"No," he said slowly, "they were all in the boats."

"It's just as well, because——"

"Wait there, though!" said the man, with a sudden start of consternation. "There was the skipper . . ."

"Where is he?"

"Why, he must be still on board! I saw the last boat put off, and——"

The petty-officer in the bows of the whaler gave a cry of confirmation. "I see him, sir! There by the davits!"

He pointed in the direction of the skipper of the *City of Perth*. From whatever motive, the captain had remained behind, and was now alone on the sinking ship. He stood motionless as a figure carved out of stone.

"You're right!" said Jack. "The fellow must be mad! Give way there, men—we'll have him out of that in a brace of shakes."

The whaler rose and fell on the waves, drawing nearer to the ship and her single occupant. He gave no sign

of having seen them. Not by the slightest movement did he seem to be aware of their presence.

"Hi!" roared Jack, through his cupped hands. "Jump over, and we'll pick you up!"

But there was no response from the lonely, impassive figure by the rail.

"He's dotty," murmured one of the whaler's crew. "Balmy, that's what he is."

Indeed, the Captain seemed to be crazed by the disaster that had descended upon him and his ship. He had been sorely tried by the events of the previous day and night, and his mind was obsessed by the notion of going down with his stricken vessel, although it was through no fault of his own that the *City of Perth* was in such dire straits. The strain had undermined his reason.

Ordering the whaler to be pulled quite close to the steamer, Jack stood up and waved his arms.

"Come down, sir," he shouted, "or I'll come up and fetch you myself! . . . Sing out to him, men," he went on, "and bring him to his senses."

The crew of the whaler shouted and yelled in an unearthly chorus. But to no effect. And then the petty-officer sounded a note of alarm.

"She's going, sir! She'll dive in a minute!"

An ominous shudder ran through the vast frame of the steamer. She was down heavily by the bows, and at that instant she dipped her nose under—and did not recover. Jack gave orders to pull out to a safe distance. He was responsible for the safety of the whaler and those on board, and it would not do to jeopardise that for the sake of the panic-stunned Captain.

The whaler was actually moving away when, without any fuss, without warning, the *City of Perth* slid obliquely into the sea, as she had slid down the slips at her launching. In the twinkling of an eye she was swallowed up, leaving a swirl of waters that threw the whaleboat about like a cork in a gutter. The figure of the Captain was nowhere to be seen. But as the whaler threshed up, he came to the surface, lifted in an eddy from the depths.

His immersion had snapped the rigour, the paralysis, that had held him fast in its grip. He was striking out in a fashion that showed that he was a strong swimmer, and that he was anxious to preserve his life. His visit to the underwater regions had cured him of any quixotic idea of drowning with his ship.

He caught at the nose of the whaleboat, and drew himself up, to receive a drastic rounding from Jack on his conduct, for the snotty was angry at the needless risks that such behaviour had occasioned. Apologising, the skipper explained that he must have been demented by his experiences; and the whaleboat put back to the *Thunderer*.

On the trip back to Sydney, the cruiser wirelessly the success of her venture—news that would calm many an anxious relative in Australia. So opportune had been the arrival of the cruiser that only two persons were missing as a result of the disaster. Had matters been otherwise, it is doubtful whether a single soul would have emerged alive.

The story of the outrage could now be learned from the lips of the people involved. The raider had been a slim, high-powered vessel, dazzle-painted in camouflage colours that enabled her to approach close to her victim without attracting undue attention. That she had been armed, and well armed, was certain.

As to the crew, they were largely foreigners.

“A more abandoned crowd you never saw in your life,” said the captain of the sunken steamer. “Oh, yes—they boarded us. They came to take our specie, and every man was armed to the teeth. McManus, my first mate, was misguided enough to resist. They shot him down like a dog! I tell you, there’ll be trouble for any ship that crosses their path.”

“It can’t last,” he was told. “Piracy was all very well in the old days, but modern inventions like wireless make it the dickens of a hard job now. Every ship carrying wireless will be aware of the little hold-up of yesterday, and will, consequently, be on the lookout for this precious pirate. We can wireless a description



of the vessel, and as she can't go unseen by every passing ship, we should pick up her trail very quickly. I'd not be surprised if the *Thunderer* is told off to chase her up, when we get back to port."

"I hope so," said the captain emphatically. "I want to see them blown to the bottom. When I think of the way the brutes shelled my helpless packet—heavens above, sir! They deserve all that's coming to them."

"We'll do our best," said Commander Caggs, R.N., D.S.O.

The return of the *Thunderer* to port was the signal for a scene of immense public enthusiasm. The papers were unanimous in their praise for the cruiser's great run to the assistance of the *City of Perth*; the exploit was described in glowing terms on every side.

Mingled with all this there was the natural indignation of the country at the outrage which the unknown pirates had committed. The happening threw Press and public into a state of ferment which had been unknown since the war. That the safety of shipping should be threatened by an organised band of robbers was a condition of things that could not be permitted to continue.

A certain section declared that the danger was exaggerated. That the piracy was a bold, reckless exploit that would not—could not—be repeated. The pirates, satisfied with the proceeds of the adventure, would now disband and live on the fruits of their crime. But the public looked at this kind of explanation with a sceptical eye; and the passenger-lists on the liners dwindled alarmingly.

Meanwhile, the eagerly awaited news of the pirate vessel failed to come to hand. Practically all the ships in the vicinity had been warned by wireless, and a strict look-out was being maintained for the camouflaged steamer. Nevertheless, she was not reported; and as the days went by this was accepted as proof of the theory that the pirates had disbanded.

"I'll admit I can't make head or tail of it," said Jack Cleaver. "Maybe she's lying low to spring out on some

other vessel as soon as this row has subsided. And if she does——”

“If she does,” said Lee Ferris warmly, “we’ll pounce on her like lightning, and——”

He snapped his fingers expressively.

They were on leave for a couple of days, and were staying at Jack’s home, in one of the northern suburbs of Sydney. Only too glad to stretch their legs after the cramping effects of the *Thunderer’s* gunroom, they had strolled out into the sunlit bush, chatting over various matters of importance, walking aimlessly.

“This affair has bucked us all up,” went on Jack, slashing with his stick at inoffensive saplings. “For my part, I hope that the giddy old pirates continue their operations.”

“So do I,” chimed in Lee Ferris. “Not that I want to see merchant shipping destroyed——”

“Neither do I; but it would be a pity if the beggars have gone out of business. The old *Thunderer* would make them sit up, eh?”

“Not half! Why I believe—hullo! who’s this?”

He indicated a hurrying figure—a man who approached waving both arms like the sails of a wind-mill.

“Hanged if I know,” said Jack doubtfully. And then “Oh! I remember; it’s young Eyolf—bit of a German they say. Lives about here somewhere.”

The man Eyolf came up to them swiftly. He was not at all pleasing to look at. His features were heavy and stolid and his small eyes gleamed like currants in an immense pulpy pudding—his face gave that irresistible suggestion. Just now, he seemed rather put out by something or other.

“What are you doing here? Get out of this!” was his utterance, accompanied by a threatening wave of the dog-whip he carried. “Clear out at once, you boys!”

“Wha-a-t!” Jack and Lee gasped with simultaneous surprise and annoyance. To be called boys was something that stung. Were they not officers of His Majesty’s Australian Navy, even when as now they were

in mufti? And to be ordered to "clear out" was no less affronting to their dignity.

"You cheeky ass!" said Lee Ferris hotly.

"Since when have you started to order people about?" asked Jack.

Eyolf brandished his whip, and the pale pudding-face went a shade paler with sheer anger.

"You are trespassing!" he said grimly. "This is private land, and you know it! You're only here to spy——"

"Thanks," said Jack cuttingly, "but we've no desire to spy on you—you're not interesting enough. Besides—oh, crumbs!"

Eyolf had seemingly no hold whatever on his temper, for he sprang forward and brought the whip down on Jack's shoulders with a vicious slash. "Clear out," he roared, "or I will put the police on you."

"Collar him, Lee!" snapped Jack; and like a pair of bulldogs the two middies jumped for the raving Eyolf.

Bump! Down came Eyolf with the awful collapse of a falling house, in an impact that seemed to shake the earth. While Jack gripped him by the arms, and Lee held his legs, he was lifted and dropped several times. Bump—bump—bump went the luckless foreigner on the callous ground; and finally, leaving him sprawling, the middies ran off, laughing grimly.

Eyolf sprang to his feet, uttering choked curses in a tongue that was certainly not English, and shook his whip after the escaping pair. Jack and Lee reached a fence and darted through it.

"Must have been private land, after all," said Jack.

"I didn't know. Anyhow, he'd no right to rave like a madman about it."

"Served him right, I'm thinking. And what was he driving at, with his talk about spying?"

"Search me! The beggar's a little bit mad, perhaps. But we'll be careful to keep out of his road in future."

Boy-like, they promptly forgot about the matter; nor did they give another thought to young Eyolf until——

But that must be recorded in its due place.

On the following day, the two chums had planned a trip into town, in Mr. Cleaver's tiny runabout. With Jack at the wheel they set out at a rattling pace, passed through the City, having carried out a commission entrusted to them by Jack's father, and travelled south along the coast. The day was fine, opulent with sunshine; and both boys were having the time of their lives, happily oblivious of speed limits.

Returning to town late in the afternoon, they pulled up outside a café. On the kerb, Jack handed a copper to a sensation-yelling newspaper boy, and as he sat down at table opened the sheet.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed sharply. "The raider's been seen again!"

He and Lee Ferris bent over the account.

## THE SEA RAIDER

### STRANGE VESSEL SEEN OFF COAST

BEGA, Friday.—Captain Smith, of the coastal steamer *Albatross*, reports that about seven o'clock this morning he observed a fast-running vessel heading south. It was painted in blue camouflage colours, and corresponded with the descriptions of the ship that attacked the *City of Perth* last week.

It did not attempt to interfere with the *Albatross* in any way.

There is a possibility that this is the same vessel as the one that encountered the *City of Perth*. If so, what is her object? Are we to hear of further depredations upon peaceful shipping?

This paper wants to know what the Fleet is doing under the circumstances. The taxpayers pay to maintain an effective navy, and expect to get protection in return. These unprincipled pirates cannot be allowed to harry our shipping with impunity. Mr. Berry-Jepp, M.H.R., Minister for the Navy, is reported as having said that in the event of further trouble the Fleet will probably be given a roving commission to track down the offenders.

“Well!” said Jack Cleaver, as they came to the end of the article. “That’s that! Looks to me, Lee, my lad, as if we’re going to see more of our friends the pirates than we reckoned on.”

“You’re right, old chap! And what do you think of the nerve of the fellows, strolling along our front fence, so to speak, and inviting us to chase them?”

“They’re bold enough—I’ll say that for them.”

“Of course, the report may be exaggerated. Captain Smith of the *Albatross* may merely have sighted a sea-gull on the horizon, or a floating cask. Again, he might have been drinking.”

Jack laughed, and they went on with their meal. When they had finished they clambered into the little car and Jack made ready to start. At that moment he happened to glance across the street, and his eye was held by the sight of a blue naval uniform.

It was an ordinary seaman, obviously very drunk, and he had emerged from a hotel between two civilians. They seemed to be trying to urge him to enter a taxi which stood by the kerb; but at the last moment he refused to budge. His loud talk came quite clearly across the street.

The two civilians acted then very quickly. One of them produced some object with which he struck a short, swift blow on the seaman’s head. The man collapsed into the taxi, and the others got in after him. It had all happened so rapidly that it was doubtful whether a single person, except Jack himself, had noticed the blow. To the casual observer, it was as if an extremely drunken seaman was being taken home by two friends. As soon as the men were aboard, the taxi moved off through the press of traffic.

“Jimmy!” said Jack. “I’ll bet there’s foul play there, Lee—one of our fellows, too, by the looks of him. I’m looking into this! May be stickybeaking, but——”

So saying, he let in the clutch, and the small, fast car moved off in pursuit. Jack, keeping the taxi well under his survey, explained what had happened.

“It may be all right,” he concluded, “but it looks

very fishy to me. Very fishy. Why should they knock him on the head?"

"To keep him quiet."

"Just so. Looks to me much like kidnapping."

From the crowded streets of the City the taxi led them through the suburbs at an increased speed; but the small runabout kept the front car within distance quite comfortably. Strangely enough, the road taken led in the direction of Jack's home.

"Funny!" yelled Jack to his companion. "They're not paying us a visit are they? But no! They're taking the other road now, and—are they slowing up, old scout?"

"They're stopping, right enough. There you are—they've hopped out, and they're carrying the seaman between them."

Jack brought the runabout to a standstill on the brow of a hill, and stared down into the gloom. The two men carried their companion through a high gate in a hedge; the taxi moved away. And Jack whistled—a long, low whistle of surprise.

"Lee!" he said softly. "Do you know who lives in that place down there?"

"Search me," said Lee laconically.

"Old Eyolf—father of that pudding-faced baboon we fell foul of yesterday!"

## CHAPTER III

### INVESTIGATION

THERE was a little silence. Then Lee Ferris cleared his throat noisily.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Positive, old chap. That house belongs to old Eyolf; our friend the seaman has been taken there by some sort of dirty work; and the question now is——”

“What are we going to do about it?” completed Lee with his usual grin. “Well, for my part I suggest—Forward, the Navy.”

“It’s the only thing. Tell you what—we’ll take the car home and return later, and do a bit of detective work. I’m hanged if I know what there is afoot, but whatever it is, it’s up to us to poke our noses in. Are you on?”

“Will a duck swim?” asked Lee, settling back in the car while Jack reversed, turned, and drove home. Stopping only to collect an electric torch, they hastened back through the fields to the Eyolfs’ house, keeping a wary eye open for anybody who might observe their approach.

The house was a big, rambling one, planted in the middle of spacious grounds that had been permitted to run wild. Two lighted windows on the lower floor proclaimed the habited rooms, and to these the boys advanced, keeping well in the shelter of the walls to deceive any possible onlookers. Then, while Lee Ferris kept guard, Jack peered through the first of the lighted windows.

There were five men within the room, seated about a long table. Eyolf and his pudding-faced son, the two civilians who had accompanied the seaman, and the seaman himself made up the number. The seaman was laughing and chatting, and showed no ill-effects what-

ever as a result of his blow on the head—a fact which was somewhat peculiar, since he had been struck helpless at the time. He held in his hands a small black box not unlike a camera, from which a silver-forked mast, slender and shining, arose; and this, evidently, was the object of interest of the five. He seemed to be explaining the working of the instrument, whatever it was, to the others; and they, in turn, were chiming in with comments and questions. All seemed decidedly pleased with themselves.

Jack bit his lip. The picture now before him hardly supported his view that foul play had occurred; yet it certainly deepened the riddle. The young midshipman could not doubt the evidence of his own eyes; he knew for a fact that the seaman had been very drunk, and, for another fact, that he had been struck a blow hard enough to stun him. It seemed incredible that the man should have recovered in such a short space of time; yet such, quite obviously, was the case. Here was the man laughing and talking as if he had never felt better in all his life.

At this stage some people would have decided that they had been mistaken; but that was not Jack's way. The problem was now more difficult, that was all. There must be some explanation for the affair; some account that would cover all the facts. What was it?

As Jack stepped back from the window to report to Lee and take counsel with him, a startling thing happened that, for the moment, banished all his theories from his head.

From one of the windows of the upper floor came a crash of glass, closely followed by a rending, smashing noise as of woodwork yielding under the assault of a crowbar. In the silence of the night it was utterly sudden and disconcerting.

"Great pip! What's that?" asked Lee Ferris.

Crash, crash, crash! Pieces of wood and glass hurtling from above in a mystifying shower. For some moments Jack and his fellow-middy were so



overcome by astonishment that they could do nothing but gape at one another in profound dismay.

Then, Jack darted back to the window in order to ascertain what had been the effect of all this surprising hullabaloo on the five men. Glancing through the lighted pane, he saw that they had jumped to their feet, their gaze directed upwards. Even as the boy watched, their suspense snapped, and led by young Eyolf they made a concerted rush for the door. One of them snatched a poker from the fireplace as he hurried by; in a twinkling the room was empty.

Jack thought a moment, and then, coming to one of his quick decisions, tried the window with his fingertips. It slid up easily and silently at the pressure.

"Lee," he whispered.

"What's up, Jack? You're not going to——?"

"Look here, I'm going up to find out what this business means. Something jolly peculiar's happening, and I want to get the strength of it. Wait here for me; I'll be back again in two ticks."

"Hold hard, old bean——" began Lee Ferris; but Jack was already over the window-ledge and half-way across the room.

Gaining the door, opening it swiftly, Jack found himself on a landing, whence a flight of stairs ascended to the first floor. There was no sign of the five men, but their voices could be plainly heard, raised in tones of anger and surprise, somewhere along the upper corridor. Hesitating but one instant, Jack ran in rapid silence up this flight of stairs, and, hugging the wall, stood at the top as still as the dead.

The voice of old Eyolf came to his ears, sounding on a querulous note.

"I thought you tied him tightly," he said fretfully.

"So I did," replied one of the others in gruff tones.

"We'd save all this trouble if we knocked him on the head right away, and——" the voice became inaudible as the speaker moved into the room.

Jack's excitement was intense, his curiosity overpowering. He cast a hasty glance along the corridor,

saw that it was deserted, and then moved on tip-toe towards the room in which the incident—whatever it was—was going forward.

The door was partly ajar, and through the opening Jack could see the back of one of the men; he heard the sounds of a scuffle and deep, swift breathing.

“You thundering scoundrels!” came a voice hoarse with rage. “Let me out of this! Let go my arms, and I’ll smash every one of you!”

“Shut your mouth,” came the brusque command, in a voice which Jack recognised as young Eyolf’s. “You’ve given enough trouble as it is. Some of us were for putting you away altogether—you hear? Infernal foolishness that we didn’t——”

“What’s your game—what’s your game?” came back the answer. “I’ve got no money. What are you after? See here, I’ve got to get back to my ship. Pinching a man’s uniform, and——”

Jack was willing to risk all for one glance inside the room. Applying his eye to the crack of the door, he was able to see all he wanted. Standing in the middle of the group of men was the young sailor who had been struck on the head. He was not in uniform; clad simply in a singlet and a pair of civilian trousers, he had his arms pinioned behind him by old Eyolf, while the latter’s son threatened him with a shut fist brandished within an inch of his nose.

The other man in the King’s uniform stood at the back of the others, a cynical smile on his face. In features and figure he was the exact counterpart of the prisoner who now stood so passionately confronting his foes. It has been said that every man has his double. For the first time in his life Jack realised that this was likely. For the two men might have been twin brothers; they were alike as two peas.

A sudden light broke on the boy’s mind—a flare of understanding that furnished him with the key to his riddle. He had been at a loss to reconcile the attack on the seaman and the seaman’s amazing recovery and even more amazing friendliness with his assailants.

Before him was the explanation of the difficulty: there were two men, so alike and yet so different; one the seaman, the other——

That brought up a fresh series of questions, even more perplexing than the last. Who was this substitute seaman? Why had he attired himself in the other's uniform? Obviously he was in league with the Eyolf crowd. He was assisting them in some deep-laid plot. What was that plot?

Jack recognised that the chance investigation had led him upon a mystery more profound than he had ever suspected. It seemed certain that the seaman's place was to be taken by this double of his; but why?

The question was a blind-alley of surmise and suspicion; Jack was confronted by the central mystery, and, rack his brain as he would, he could not produce an explanation that would satisfy him. And, hearing sounds of footsteps in the room, he was brought suddenly to realise just what dangerous ground he was treading. These were unscrupulous men, with unscrupulous schemes to work out; it would never do to be caught spying upon them. It was time to leave.

He turned to escape, but the time was too short. He would have to pass the half-open door, and in so doing he would certainly be seen. There was but one thing for it; he raced along the corridor in the opposite direction to the stair-head, opened the first door he came to, and darted into the room.

The men emerged from the room in which the sailor was being held prisoner, and the key was turned in the lock. With a final shout "Mind you behave yourself!" the Eyolf crowd passed downstairs.

Jack opened his door, and made a hasty inspection of the corridor. It was empty.

"Good business," he murmured, moving along in the direction of the prisoner's room. He tapped gently on the door, and then a look of astonished surprise spread itself over his face. For the key was still in the lock!

In half a jiffy he had turned it and whipped the door open. The seaman lay on his back on the floor, a gag

in his mouth, his arms and legs tied. Only his eyes were available for expressing emotion, and they opened wide as the young midshipman entered the room holding up a cautionary finger.

"Soon have you out of this pickle," said Jack Cleaver, whipping out his knife, and slashing at the man's bonds. In a moment he had liberated the seaman, and they were conversing in a whisper.

"I'm Midshipman Cleaver, of the *Thunderer*," said Jack.

"My ship, sir. Seaman Hammond's my tally; and what the devil is all this kidnapping business? It's got me beat—absolutely flattened!"

"I'm blessed if I know, Hammond. They've got a fellow dressed up in your uniform——"

"Yes, the play-actin' cow! And he's the dead spit of yours truly—going to take my place on board the old *Thunderer*, they said. Knows the number of my mess and all about me! A bit thick, ain't it, sir?"

"Well, we'll find out, never fear. But we'd better vamoose now, before they find us. I think we'd best get out of this room, for a start. It doesn't look healthy to my mind."

"Nor mine! If we can find a way out at——"  
Slam!

There was a terrific crash, as the door slammed to. Jack cursed himself for a forgetful fool; he had left the door ajar, and the window, smashed by Hammond, admitted a strong night-wind from the sea. He might have foreseen the result.

While they stood in dense dismay, they heard voices and movements from below. The men in the room underneath had heard the crash, and were coming up to investigate.

"Blithering ass!" said Jack Cleaver softly.

He meant this for self-accusation. He stood guilty of a grievous tactical error. At the moment when he and Hammond were nearly out of the wood, he had aroused the enemy by a piece of carelessness that was quite inexcusable.

“ I ought to be shot ! ” he said.

However, there was no sense in crying over spilt milk, and no time for it either. The mistake had to be retrieved by alert and decisive action. Rapidly he made his plans. Snatching the door open, he glanced outside. There was a noise of feet hurrying up the stairs ; but as yet the Eyolf crowd were not upon the scene ; and Jack, calling to Hammond to follow, gained the corridor and locked the door behind him.

“ That'll delay them for a bit, ” he murmured, as he and the seaman slipped silently into the other room—the room in which he had already taken refuge that night. Closing the door, they hastened over to the window, and tried it.

It was fastened ; but Jack, feeling for the catch, found that it was secured by a large nail that ran through both sashes.

Fortunately, the nail was loose, and came free at a single wrench of the fingers ; and Jack threw up the lower sash swiftly and silently. He peered out. The distance to the ground precluded their risking the safety of their limbs in a jump ; besides, the earth was beaten as hard as flint, and there were no patches of grass or loamy garden-beds that might have broken a fall. But the guttering of the roof was close above ; and this suggested to the middy's quick brain a possible means of escape.

“ Can you climb ? ” he asked.

“ Like a cat, sir, ” breathed Hammond. “ Why ? ”

“ Look here—if we climb on the window-sash, reach the gutter overhead, and draw ourselves up that way, we'll be set. I'll go first, and give you a hand. Quick's the word. ”

He pushed both windows down, and clambered upon them with the alert activity of a tree-monkey.

“ Steady my feet, Hammond, ” he said.

While the seaman held his feet, he reached up and grasped the edge of the guttering. He gave a tug ; it was quite firm. Breathing “ All right—let go, ” to Hammond, he drew himself up. He was never more

thankful in his life than at that moment for the horizontal-bar exercises at the Naval College, which had strengthened his arms and shoulders till they were as strong as steel and as supple as rubber. They had to bear all his weight now ; and right well did they meet the responsibility. He got his chest across the gutter, and then one knee—and then he was up and safe. Lowering his jacket, he called on Hammond to follow ; the seamen did so no less actively.

“ Good business,” murmured Jack, glancing round him.

“ Where to now, sir ?”

They were on the slippery slope of a roof of old slates—the first concern, obviously, was to reach the ridge. Like two cats the naval pair went up the incline, reaching a point from which they had a view of the whole roof. The latter rose in two ridges, between which there was a flat leaded space ; and in the centre of this, gleaming like water in the light of the stars, was a skylight. This it was that caught the midddy’s eye.

“ See that ?” he whispered. “ If we can get down there, the chances are we’ll be able to get round the back of them and scoot out of the house. Ten to one they’re all rushing around the room, without a notion of where we’ve got to.”

“ Good enough, sir,” said Hammond, who was ready to follow the boy wherever he cared to lead.

“ Come along, then.” They descended the other side of the pent-roof and came out on the flat. Crossing rapidly to the skylight, they tried it. Jack whipped out his big pocket-knife, and inserted it in the woodwork of the frame ; but he was unable to make the thing budge a single inch.

“ Sad, very sad,” he murmured. “ The affair’s fastened down on the inside, and we’ve got no chance of shifting it.”

“ Unless we break the glass.”

“ Too much row ! However, we—look out, here’s a light coming.”

Indeed, the room below was suddenly illuminated as

a man, bearing a candle, entered. The two on the roof moved back from the zone of the light; and the next thing they knew was that somebody was moving the catch that held the skylight in position. It slid back with a protesting squeak, and the skylight opened back on the roof. A hand bearing a revolver appeared on the frame.

"No admittance," said Jack, with a little laugh, jumping forward and making a snatch at the weapon. He realised that the men had tumbled to the fugitives' mode of escape, and that he and Hammond were in a very tight corner.

His attempt to secure the revolver failed. The hand was withdrawn suddenly, and a head appeared in its stead. It was Hammond who acted with rare promptitude. He lunged forward with his foot, and caught the fellow a solid kick on the side of the head. It was no time for civilities; the man uttered a howl of fury and pain, and vanished. There came the crash of a heavy fall, and a volley of curses.

Hammond leaned over the edge of the skylight. "You'd better keep away," he chuckled grimly. "Don't come putting your head where it's not wanted, or——"

Crack!

The man's hand must have been shaking with rage or excitement, for the revolver-shot missed. It struck the woodwork, and sent a shower of splinters up into the night. Hammond jumped away quickly.

"Murdering cows!" he said.

"Anyhow, they can't get at us," Jack assured him quietly. "We can hold the fort here without any trouble, and there's a pal of mine down below, who's sure to have gone for help by this. Don't worry! We'll have the police up here in a brace of shakes, and then we'll see who's top dog."

The whole position, indeed, seemed brighter. While the Eyolf crowd had the pair trapped, they could not get any satisfaction out of the circumstance. If Jack and Hammond could not descend, then equally the others could not come up to take them. It was a deadlock.

But a new factor entered into the situation—entered from above. A slight scraping on the slates was the only warning that it gave; Jack and the seaman wheeled about, to discover two dark figures on the opposite ridge.

“Trapped, by jingo!” muttered Jack between his teeth.

“Up with your hands, there,” came the triumphant cry of young Eyolf. “No nonsense, or I’ll blow a hole through you that you could drive a coach through! That’s it—keep ’em well up!”

Jack and the seaman stretched their hands upwards, realising that they had nothing to gain from further resistance; and the two captors descended the slates, calling to their companions in the room below.

“We’ve caught them, Piker,” said young Eyolf. “Give us a hand to get them down.”

This was soon done. There was an attic window at the front of the house, and Eyolf and the other had used this to gain access to the roof, with what success we have seen.

The captors held a short conference in the room with the skylight.

“This is a regular nuisance,” said young Eyolf. “The seaman was bad enough, but this other——” He peered closely at Jack’s face. “Why, it’s that young cub I chased off the grounds yesterday! Spying then, and spying now!” An evil grin overspread his features. “Who are you?”

“Never mind who I am,” said Jack sternly. “I warn you that you are keeping me and my friend here illegally detained, and that unless you free us at once, you must answer to the law for this outrage.”

“The law!” Eyolf sneered. “The law is only for fools! However——”

At this juncture the man called Piker—a dark, bearded ruffian—came hurrying up.

“What are you going to do with these fellows?” he asked. “The boat’s arrived ten minutes ago, and we should have left by this.”



"We can't leave them here," said Eyolf.

"Better take 'em with us, as far as I can see. We can sling them overboard at any time. And they may come in useful."

"It'll keep their mouths shut, at any rate," agreed Eyolf.

"That's so. I'll tie their hands, so they'll be able to walk all right."

"Don't forget to gag them," warned Eyolf. And, while the latter stood covering them with his revolver, the two naval men were tied and gagged in the manner described.

"Now, march!" said Piker, who was evidently taking charge of them; and perforce they had to move off—downstairs, and out through the back entrance of the house. A cool breeze from the sea smote upon their faces, and they could hear the murmur of the surf from close by. Piker and another man led them to the cliffs, and they descended to the beach, on which the Pacific swell was breaking.

Hidden beneath the bush-covered cliff was a double-ended surf-boat; this was run out to the water's edge, where the four of them set themselves to wait. They did not have to wait for long; presently Eyolf and his father approached, carrying large bags and boxes, which were dumped in the surf-boat.

"There's the light," said Piker, pointing out to sea.

Out in the darkness a light blinked slowly.

"Good," said young Eyolf. "Well, let her go."

With the captives and the luggage in the stern, the boat was shoved across the sand, and lifted to the swill of the first breaker. Presently the four jumped aboard, and took an oar each, rowing steadily through the mild surf.

A wisp of spray brushed across Jack's face. Whither were they bound? What was afoot? The mystery was more puzzling, more impenetrably dark, than ever.

## CHAPTER IV

### OUT TO SEA

THE surf-boat met the incoming waves with a brave buoyancy, leaping over them as a horse leaps over a fence, and, driven by the four sweeps, won her way through the surf and out to the lifting rollers beyond.

There followed perhaps twenty minutes of rowing; and then Jack Cleaver, casting his eye upwards, saw the gleam of a steamer's light, like a green eye in the darkness immediately above, and heard the swishing of the waves along her steel sides. His mystification increased. What was the object of this trip out to sea?—a trip taken, as he was well aware, in secrecy and stealth. He remembered the boxes and the other luggage. Probably Eyolf and party were boarding this steamer, which, to judge by the signals she had flashed, was seemingly expecting them. And as for himself and Hammond, he had no doubt that they were meant by a last minute-decision to accompany the party.

But the steamer—what was she? Why had these people not boarded her in the ordinary way? He thought of all the secret purposes that he could call to mind—smuggling, spiriting “wanted” people from the country, and the rest; but the solution did not seem to lie there. All at once, he was aware of something that lurked in the depths of his mind; something familiar, yet momentarily forgotten. What——?

“Immortal Cæsar!” he suddenly breathed, behind the hindering gag. A most startling supposition leaped up in his brain. Were these people connected with the piratical crew that had robbed and sunk the *City of Perth*? More staggering still, was this actually the vessel that had been the cause of all the trouble?

The shock was so sudden that his heart almost stopped

beating. And yet again, the notion had its fantastic side. Was it not the height of folly, if this was the identical craft, to approach so near to port? Especially when those on board must be aware that all shipping was on the lookout for them, and that a fast cruiser lay at her moorings not ten miles distant! Surely that was sufficient to show that this could not be the raider of which everyone was speaking, thought Jack; and yet grave doubts rested in his mind.

Further speculation was ended by the man Piker, who came aft and released the captives from their bonds.

"Now get up on deck," he said roughly, "and no larks, either, unless you'd care to stop a few bullets!"

Jack and Seaman Hammond went up the accommodation ladder humbly enough. They knew by now that they were in the hands of desperate men, and that they were quite helpless. There was nothing to be gained by resistance; on the contrary, if they remained quiet, they stood a good chance of being rescued when Lee Ferris notified the authorities, as he was sure to do. This Jack communicated to Hammond in a low tone as they gained the deck.

Eyolf was already waiting there, his pale pudding-face twisted in the vestige of a smile as the two forlorn captives approached.

"Two birds in our net, Chief," he commented.

"They will be useful," said the man addressed as "Chief," in a strangely metallic voice. He was a curious specimen. Small and shrunken, he possessed an aquiline face, so pale as to be almost transparent; and in this parchment skeleton of a face his eyes shone with a light that bordered on the unnatural. Even Jack was filled with a strange disquiet as the eyes, those extraordinary eyes, scrutinised him. The man seemed to know at a glance the boy's inmost secrets. When at last the Chief's gaze moved away, Jack found himself shaking with relief, as if some terrible ordeal had passed.

"Funny—very," he murmured, taking stock of the sort of man who seemed to possess this unusual power. The figure was slight, the hands long and bony. Dressed

in an immaculate suit of white drill, and wearing a yachting cap, the fellow seemed hardly likely to cause anyone any uneasiness; but when those magnetic, penetrating eyes faced round, the impression was altogether different.

"Queer—dashed queer," said Jack to himself.

The pair of them were taken to a little cabin abaft the bridge; they were pushed inside, and the door was locked. Almost at the same time, the whole ship began to quiver, as the engines resumed their running.

"She's fast, sir," said Hammond. "Listen to the tune of her engines. Wonder what she is, anyway?"

Jack put his mouth close to his companion's ear, so that he could speak in a low whisper.

"I'll tell you what I was thinking," he said. "My idea is, she's that sea raider we've been hearing so much about."

"What!"

"Seems likely, doesn't it? In fact, just about the one solution that fits the case!"

Hammond considered for a moment in silence. "By the powers, sir, it looks as if you're right! But what an unholy mess we've landed in, if that's the case."

"Unholy isn't the name for it! We'll be lucky if we scrape out of this alive. But I wonder what the notion was when they kidnapped you."

"To substitute that slab-faced son of a gun for me," replied Hammond viciously.

"And why?"

"Well, there you are! I can't get the ghost of an idea why they did it."

"Unless," said Jack slowly, "he's going on board to act as a spy."

"As a spy?"

"Something of the sort. Although, come to think of it, there'd be precious little work for a spy to do. Unless he could communicate with the raider somehow or other."

"And he couldn't do that," said Hammond decidedly.

"No . . ." Jack abandoned the idea; but there

flashed into his brain a recollection of the seaman as he had seen him at the Eyolfs' house. "At least, not without——"

"He couldn't do it," repeated Hammond.

Jack did not answer him. He was thinking of the strange instrument that the seaman had been toying with, back there at the house. A small black box not unlike a camera, from which a silver forked mast, slender and shining, arose. . . .

"Humph," he said. "I'm too sleepy to think. Let it wait until the morning."

He sought a hard, bare bunk, destitute of blankets. Presently there was silence in the little cabin; the steamer churned away into the night, her destination and her mission alike unknown.

Meanwhile, how had matters gone with Lee Ferris?

Jack's chum, it will be recalled, had been left standing outside the mysterious house while the impetuous midshipman had entered the window, with a promise to return in a short space. As we know it was a promise destined to be left unfulfilled. Lee had heard the men descending the stairs, and had closed the tell-tale window; then he had taken up his position to watch what went on.

As soon as the men re-entered the room, the seaman picked up his cap and left. Lee was unable to catch a definite impression of his face, as he merely crossed the room and passed from the house by means of the front-door. Crouched beneath the window, Lee watched his dark form walking down the drive; he reached the gates and vanished along the road. Almost immediately there sounded the banging of the door upstairs, loud as a pistol-shot; and the four men in the room hurried up to investigate, leaving Lee, wild with apprehension, to puzzle his brain as to what was transpiring within those ominous walls.

There was nothing to enlighten him until he heard the report of the revolver, which, as the reader is aware, had no fatal effect upon anybody. All the same, it worried the boy immensely. For a period, indeed, he was in favour of throwing caution to the winds and

hastening inside to discover his pal's fate. He had seen the seaman depart, and imagined now that the four men were concerning themselves with Jack alone.

His hesitancy tided him over until the men were ready to leave the house. His first intimation that the place was to be abandoned was the fastening of all the doors and windows on the ground-floor; and, moving around to the back, he saw Jack and his companions leaving for the coast. He was not to know that the real seaman was the figure in ill-fitting civilian clothes; he had no inkling of the deception that was being practised.

As matters stood, he determined to shadow the men; and, from a safe distance he followed them to the edge of the bay. It was a deserted little place, with a beach too treacherous to command it as a surfing resort. From a vantage point on the brow of the low cliff, Lee watched the movements of the men about the surf-boat.

It did not take long for him to satisfy himself that the surf-boat was joining the steamer whose light winked out on the dark curve of the waters; and with this knowledge in his mind he made his best speed back to Jack's home, where he released the alarming information that his companion had been kidnapped.

The news threw the household into a state of great consternation. Jack's father and Lee Ferris immediately repaired to the police station, and enlisted the aid of two constables, who accompanied them to the Eyolf residence. A peremptory rapping for admission brought no response from the darkened house; and the policemen opened one of the windows in order to effect an entrance.

But the birds had flown; the house was deserted; plainly the two Eyolfs and their companions had left on a cruise that promised to be fairly lengthy.

There was nothing to be done except to wire the intelligence to all parts of the Commonwealth and farther afield, putting many eyes on the lookout for a person answering to Jack's description.

That done, Lee Ferris rejoined the *Thunderer*. He

reported what had occurred to Commander Caggs, explaining why Jack was unable to join the ship. He also recounted the mysterious series of happenings that involved the seamen.

"I'm almost positive, sir," he concluded, "that the man was one of the seamen."

"Could you identify him, perhaps?"

"I wouldn't swear to it, sir. I had only the shortest of glances at his face. But it might be worth trying."

"All right," said the Commander. "Quartermaster!"

"Sir?"

"Pipe 'Clear lower deck--everybody aft.'"

The shrill notes of the pipe vibrated oddly clear in the morning air; there came a sound of running feet, and a wondering crowd assembled on the quarter-deck, falling in four deep on either side. The master-at-arms approached.

"Lower deck cleared, sir, please!" he shouted.

"Thank you," said the Commander. "Now, Mr. Ferris, see what you can do."

Accompanied by the master-at-arms, Lee Ferris walked along the motionless files of puzzled men. Half-way along the third rank he stopped and pointed to an ordinary seaman.

"I'm almost certain this is the man, sir!" he cried.

"That man stand fast!" said Commander Caggs in a voice of thunder. "Remainder right and left turn--off the quarter-deck, double march!"

The men doubled off for'ard, with the quartermaster piping shrilly in their wake, "'Ands, carry on working!"

"And now, my man," said Caggs, grimly, "what is your name?"

The seaman's mouth fell open, and he stared goggle-eyed at the stern face that confronted him. For a moment it seemed as if he was about to have a fit of the most violent description. But no answer came from his wide-open mouth, and he stood like one paralysed and rooted to the quarter-deck beneath him.

"Dash it all, are you dumb?" roared Commander

Caggs, in his best R.N., D.S.O. manner. "Have you a tongue in your head, or have you not?"

The quartermaster intervened.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but this is ordinary seaman 'Ammond! Returned from leaf three days ago, and been barmy ever since!"

"What!"

"Barmy, dotty, orf 'is crumpet! Fair silly, sir!" came the amazing reply.

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, sir, it's this way. 'E used to be a good man—a real good 'and. And then 'e goes on leaf, and changes so you wouldn't know 'im. Forgets all our names, and 'e's always adrift. Don't know 'ow to sling a 'ammick, 'e don't. Says 'e forgets."

"Eh," gasped Commander Caggs.

"It's a fact, sir. There's lots o' little things 'e forgets, too. My opinion is, 'e's barmy," he repeated confidentially.

"What have you got to say to this, Hammond?"

Hammond hesitated a moment. Then his hand went to his forehead, and he stroked it with a bewildered look.

"It's true, sir," he said at length. "I don't know what's happened. I think I've lost my memory."

"What?" roared Commander Caggs.

"Lost my memory, sir. I can't remember anything at all—except one or two things, you know—and I think things are coming back to me little by little."

Commander Caggs, R.N., D.S.O., stared wrathfully at the patient face before him. "Are you ill?" he asked.

"No, sir, there's no pain at all. Only my mind is a blank—a complete blank."

"This is most singular! It so happens that we want you to account for yourself while on leave; but if you can't remember——"

"I can't, sir."

"Side-boy," said Caggs, turning to a barefooted youngster, "go and tell the doctor I want to see him."

The doctor came bustling up—a short, jolly-faced man with twinkling eyes and rubicund cheeks. He was



apprised of the facts of the case of Seaman Hammond, and he proceeded to examine him carefully.

The man was a consummate actor. He did not look sulky or annoyed; he seemed imbued with a genuine desire to recover his lost memory. He was earnestly anxious to help his officers all he could. So much seemed apparent from his speech and demeanour. And there could be no doubting that this manner was the best calculated to serve his purpose.

"You can't remember anything?" asked the doctor kindly. He was not aware that the man was under a bit of a cloud, and so had no suspicions of possible fraud.

"No, sir. I'm picking up things gradually, but I can't remember names and things like that."

"How long have you been like this?"

"Since I returned from leave, sir."

"Have you any idea what caused the trouble?"

"I've got a sort of idea. I remember some fellows I was knocking around with, and I remember having drinks. And I'm almost positive they—somebody—attacked me. Whacked me on the head with a sand-bag or something. After that, everything's mixed up."

"Quite so."

"I found myself strolling along George Street, with no idea who I was. I knew by my clothes that I was a sailor, and by looking under my collar at the back I found that my name was Hammond. I came down and joined the ship—the only ship in harbour, and found that I had picked the right mark."

"Funny—very funny," said the doctor. "Give me a look at your head. H'm, ha! Evidently a case of temporary aphasia. Very queer!"

"You say," said the Commander, frowning, "that you came back to yourself in George Street. What happened just before that?"

"I can't remember, sir! I guess I must have been unconscious."

"You have no recollection of a motor-ride, for instance?"

"None whatever."

"Or of a house and four men?"

"No."

"I see." Commander Caggs rubbed his nose thoughtfully with a lean forefinger. "Quartermaster! How is Hammond carrying out his duties?"

"'E seems ready and willing, sir. 'E didn't say nothing about losing 'is memory, which is why I thought 'e was dotty. 'Owever, 'e seems to be shaping all right, and no doubt it'll pass off."

"What do you think, doctor?" asked the Commander.

"Well, if he reports progress to me every couple of days," answered the medico, "I'll be in a better position to say what's wrong. As far as I can see at present, there's nothing to be alarmed at. The case is singular, but not unheard of in medical records. He'd better keep quiet, and make no fuss; if his companions can supply him with particulars he had forgotten, no doubt he'll be able to return to normalcy."

"Very good," said the Commander. "You can carry on, Hammond."

The man saluted, and went for'ard, decidedly pleased with the way that matters had fallen out. He had saved an immense amount of trouble with his convenient loss of memory, which, it is needless to remark, was assumed for the occasion. He had substituted for Hammond, and the substitution had escaped detection. There had been trouble—that was only to be expected—but everything had passed off excellently. Eyolf's spy had every reason to feel delighted with himself.

"The question is," said the Commander, turning to Lee, "was that man at Eyolf's house?"

"It's hard to say, sir. Of course, I had only the briefest glimpse. But if it wasn't that man, it was certainly another very like him!"

"Yes. It's certainly very peculiar, that case of loss of memory, but——"

They both wheeled round at the sound of approaching footsteps, and saluted. It was Captain Stuart—stern-faced, grizzle-haired, beloved by all the men under him.

“Commander,” said the Captain, “did you hear about the wireless message that we received?”

“No, sir. What message was that?”

“The raider has been sighted again—this morning. We’re going out to take her at once. I’ve given orders to the engineer-commander to raise steam for full speed! Are all the men on board?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. I fancy we’ll have the fellow in a cleft stick. It’s like this.”

Stooping to the deck, he indicated with his finger. “Here’s the coastline. The raider was seen here twenty minutes or more ago, heading south. By a stroke of luck it happens that our two destroyers, the *Alert* and the *Austere*, are on the way up from Melbourne. They should lie somewhere in the vicinity of here. Now, I wirelessed them to steam out from the coast, and keep at scouting distance—ten miles apart. So that unless the raider makes a wide detour, he’ll strike them. Supposing he sights them a good distance off, and cuts back. That’s where we’ll come in. The *Thunderer* will steam south at full speed, and with a bit of luck we’ll have the beggar caught between two fires.”

“Splendid—I see,” said the Commander, and Lee Ferris nodded his understanding of the scheme. “Serves him right for his cool cheek in coming so close to port.”

“Certainly. It’s like pulling the Navy’s nose—bearding the lion in his den, this scouting round our coastline,” declared Captain Stuart. “It’s time the fellow was exterminated.”

It was not long before the *Thunderer* slipped from the buoy and went up the harbour at full speed. As she turned southward, she remained out of sight of the coast. The lookouts were all stationed; two middies were in the foretop with binoculars; and a seaman with a glass was posted at the crow’s nest—that sky-scraping station at the foremast.

This was the first determined attempt that the *Thunderer* had made to take the daring raider. And it looked as if the capture was to come off. If the raider fled

from the destroyers, with their great speed and four-inch guns and torpedo-tubes, she would almost certainly cannon into the *Thunderer*—and nobody entertained any doubts as to the result of that meeting. Consequently it seemed as if the raider had taken one risk too many.

The wireless was busy as the destroyers and the cruiser approached each other; but on neither side was there any news of the raider. Had she taken fright and sped eastward before the destroyers could cut her off? Time only could tell; and the result would be known before long.

A passing trawler was hailed. Yes; they had seen a camouflaged vessel, passing southward at high speed. Captain Stuart rubbed his hands together.

"It really looks," he remarked to the navigating-lieutenant, "as if its all U P this time with our camouflaged friend."

The words were barely out of his mouth when a boy telegraphist came running up with a signal pad containing a wireless from the *Alert*: "Sighted raider. Closing in and will engage her if necessary."

Messages came from the unseen scene of action in the south, as the *Thunderer* sped forward.

"Raider refuses to turn about. Making a run to pass to windward of us. The *Austere* coming in."

"Opened fire at four miles. Will be more successful at closer range. Shots having no effect on her speed. Returns our fire, but without success."

The Captain stared at these messages doubtfully. "She must be fast," he said. "I had no idea she'd run the gauntlet of the destroyers. Perhaps she got wind of our proposal to chase her up, though that's hardly possible."

The next message was surprising: "Raider passed us showing phenomenal speed. Managed to get several shots home on her hull. Shall we pursue? Evidently at least ten knots faster than we are."

To which they received the reply: "Do not pursue. Return north and report."

Thus it was that the *Thunderer*, steaming south, encountered her two destroyers kicking up through the long swell; but sight of the raider had to be postponed until another day. Still, nobody doubted that that occasion would eventually arrive; and then—"good-bye raider."

## CHAPTER V

### WITH THE RAIDERS

"AT last," said Jack Cleaver, as the door of their cabin opened and admitted the squat figure of a man in greasy overalls, who carried two bowls of some steaming mixture, and a tray bearing comestibles of various sorts.

He and the seaman had been waiting all the morning for something to eat; they were extremely sharp-set, and the arrival of food was decidedly welcome.

"What's this?" asked Jack. "Stew, eh? And if it tastes anything like it smells, it should be good! Thanks, old man—we thought you were going to starve us out."

The fellow in the greasy overalls ventured a smile of microscopic proportions, and watched the two ravenous naval men, as they made short work of the provisions. When they had done, Jack handed back his empty bowl and sighed.

"That makes a fellow feel better," he said. "By the way, what ship is this?"

"Well, she don't figure on Lloyd's list," grinned the man. "If you want to know, she's a privateer."

"Ah, I thought so! The raider, eh?"

"You've said it!"

"And we're out on more raiding business, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," was the cautious reply. "If you want to know all that we're going to do, you'd better ask the Chief."

"Ah, the Chief! That man interests me," murmured Jack. "A foreigner, isn't he?"

"An American. Foreign blood in him, though."

"What's his proper name?"

"Can't say. None of us knows, except that German pair that brought you on board—and you may bet your boots they won't tell!"

“Then they’re partners with him?”

“Look here,” said the man impatiently, “if you think you’ll pump me dry, you’re mistaken! Not but what I like to have a chat in good English now and then, you know. This hooker’s full of half-breed Mexicans, greasy dagoes and blooming ’Uns, and I don’t know which is the worst. I’ve been a bit of a hard case in my day, but I never could stomach them jabbering foreigners.”

“Rather not!” said Jack enthusiastically.

“The Chief, now—he helped me out of a hole, over ’Frisco way, and I followed him into this job like a blooming pet dog, as general handyman of sorts. Not that I had any idea what I was hopping into. More than likely I’d have frozen cold on the stunt! That’s if I’d known. However, I can’t be wasting time here. You fellows can stroll round the decks, and get a blow of fresh air—there’s nothing to stop you.”

After their confinement in the unpleasant stuffiness of the cabin, this suggestion was not repugnant to the midgy and the young seaman. They emerged from their retreat into the afternoon sunshine. A spanking breeze was churning over the tops of the waves into white flecks, and the two youngsters were at liberty to study the strange ship that was the talk of a whole continent, and indeed, of the world at large.

She seemed to be a vessel of about 5,000 tons. From her lines, she appeared to be built for speed; she was graceful, yacht-like, and slid through the waters rather than elbowed them aside. A number of traps about her decks both concealed and suggested the presence of quick-firing guns. As the visitors were destined to discover, later on, she carried torpedo deck-tubes as well. Her raking funnels were ingeniously camouflaged; and no smoke came from their mouths, although the vessel was travelling at a fair rate of speed.

“Oil fuel,” was Jack’s explanation of this circumstance. “Shows no smoke worth speaking of. I’ll bet she can travel; I’d give a bit to have a glance at her engines.”

The sides of the slim, swift craft were also dazzle-painted. A lookout, at the mast-head, continually swept the seas with a powerful glass, with tireless vigilance. The raider was plainly armoured—although not too heavily. It was recognised, seemingly, that her chief virtue must be speed, and plenty of it.

While Jack and Hammond were loafing about the deck, they were approached by young Eyolf, who was smoking a huge cigar.

“Well, I suppose you know what kind of a ship you’re serving on?” he asked blandly. Now that he held the whip hand, he seemed the essence of geniality.

“We know, thank you,” said Jack. “We were wondering how long you’ll dare to keep us detained!”

Eyolf merely laughed. “I haven’t even thought about it, my dear fellow! It’s not worrying me in the slightest. But, by the way, who are you?”

“The Emperor of China, but keep it dark,” said Jack. He was, of course, clad in his civilian clothes, and Eyolf could have no inkling that he was connected with the Navy.

“Is that so?” Eyolf blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke. “I expect you’re an amateur detective of some kind—scouting around our house because you heard we were Germans, eh? Or something of the sort. But still, I should like to know your name.”

“Hector Robinson,” said Jack sarcastically, “clerk in the Insurance Offices of Mugwump and Co. Anything else you’d like to know about me?”

But Eyolf’s temper, for a marvel, was singularly urbane. He was evidently pleased with himself; some scheme had worked well, and he could afford to parry all these defensive thrusts of Jack’s.

“You see,” he remarked, “I like to know the names of my employees.”

“Your what?”

“Well, you hardly expect me to keep you for nothing, do you? On board this packet, you’ve got to work—to do as you’re told.”

“Be hanged to you,” burst out Jack fiercely.



“We have a way of dealing with obstinate folk who won't see sense,” said Eyolf grimly. “Quite a horrible way, I can assure you. I hope we sha'n't have to bring you to heel.”

“We'll see!” said Jack.

“At any rate, I can't have you loafing around like this. Report to that chap with the red beard—he'll give you something to do.”

He indicated a brawny, murderous-looking fellow; and, after a brief hesitation, they went over and “reported.” They were not anxious to have their liberties curtailed by a premature rebellion against Eyolf's rule, distasteful though this was. They were put to the most menial duties of the deck-hand and the “slushy”; but as these helped to pass the time and to occupy their minds, they registered no objection.

So passed a couple of days. The raider was cruising back and forth, although what she hoped to gain by such tactics was not apparent. Always she dodged clear of approaching vessels, her dazzle-painting helping her to mingle with the dimness of the horizon before she was detected.

And then, she set her nose south, and on the trip encountered a small tug, a vessel of no importance whatever. She swanked past at fifteen knots, and the tug-master recognised her instantly. He was a man of resource and creditable promptitude of action. He put a boat ashore, and got in telephonic communication with the authorities.

The result of this was that the *Thunderer* received a wireless message; and she ran out in pursuit, as has been already recounted.

The wireless operator of the raider came running out of his cabin, and cannoned full into young Eyolf. Jack, carrying a bucket of paint, stopped to listen as the significant word “Thunderer” broke on his ear.

“The *Thunderer's* coming out of port to pursue us!” cried the telegraphist. “She knows the course we're taking, and she's following us up.”

“The message comes from Bargo?” queried Eyolf.

"From Bargo, our special correspondent aboard the *Thunderer*," grinned the operator. "He's going to let us know progress."

"The *Thunderer* can never catch us!" said Eyolf, with a sneer. "We can give that old-fashioned bus a dozen knots or more. Thanks for the information; tell Bargo he's doing magnificently!"

Jack moved away. The conversation, brief though it had been, had sufficed to prove that his suspicions were well-founded. Bargo, of course, was the man who had substituted for Hammond on board the *Thunderer*. The camera-like box was some sort of special wireless, by means of which he could get into touch with his principals on the raider. Veritably, he was a spy, well ensconced in the enemy camp.

The raider continued on her outward course, lifting her speed a few notches. She had little to fear from the *Thunderer*, which she could outpace comfortably enough; but after a few miles had been traversed, she sighted the destroyers *Alert* and *Austere*, spread out, going full speed, and obviously on the lookout for her. That altered the complexion of matters very considerably.

If she turned back, she would have to face the *Thunderer*—a most formidable proposition. A run to the east would bring her across the bows of the *Austere*, which could thus cut her off and probably send in a damaging torpedo.

The situation gave those on board the raider some moments of serious thought. There could be no doubt whatever that the *Thunderer* knew of the trap in which the raider was caught. Wireless signals would establish that—communication between the two units of the Fleet.

The Chief, on the bridge, was the only one who showed no signs of ruffled composure. He was his usual nonchalant self as he moved to and fro, issuing quick orders. For'ard, the traps opened, and two grim-looking four-inch guns rose silently, while the amidships torpedo-tubes were produced in like manner.

Then, the raider developed an enormous speed. Beneath her decks, she must have been all engines, her monstrous turbines geared to the maximum of efficiency. At ordinary speeds, nothing but the faintest of hazes arose from her funnels. Now, however, there was a distinct change. Great clouds of dark smoke poured upwards, eddying astern in an immense, obscuring bank. From her razor-keen cutwater there was thrown back a high half-moon of water, as she leapt forward almost as if she had received a terrific shove from behind.

“Great pip!” said Jack to Hammond. “She’s going to make a run for it!”

The young seaman smiled.

“There’ll be some good target practice for the Navy before long,” he prophesied.

“Here you fellows!”

Jack and Hammond wheeled round; it was Eyolf who had spoken. His usual cigar was in its place at the corner of his mouth, but it was unlighted, and the pale pudding-face had gone a shade paler. This man’s nerves, they told themselves, were not so steady as those of the Chief.

“Just lend a hand with that forward gun, will you?” said Eyolf, pointing to one of the four-inchers.

“What! Do you expect us to fire on our own men?” demanded Jack indignantly. “Haven’t you a man on board who can aim a gun?”

“Get for’ard!” roared Eyolf. “And do as you’re told. I want you to haul up ammunition, not to aim the gun. We’ve got plenty of gun-layers to beat the naval bunglers, let me tell you!”

“I’m hanged if we will!” said Jack. “Do your own dirty work, Eyolf! I’m not going to lift a finger to help fire on my friends, and neither is my mate here.”

“No! You can go to the mischief!” added Hammond.

“If you refuse——” began Eyolf. At that moment he was interrupted by the bark of one of the guns, and he turned to watch the result. A vast spout of spray licked

up into the air just to starboard of the *Alert*. Almost in the same second one of the destroyer's guns emitted a mushroom of smoke, and the sound of the return shot came across the waves, curiously delayed.

"Hurrah, the Navy!" yelled Jack.

Eyolf turned on him with a snarl. "All right, my young cockerel! We'll settle with your obstinacy later on!" He hurried away, no doubt deeming the open deck an unduly exposed position. Jack and Hammond, crouching by the rail, watched the manœuvres with dancing eyes.

The raider was attempting to run the gauntlet between the land and the *Alert*. The *Austere*, further out to sea, was rapidly approaching the scene of action, but for the present her fire was masked by her sister-destroyer. The *Alert*, as soon as the raider's object became apparent, turned on her heel as neatly as a skiff, and let go with both forward guns; but the shooting was a trifle wild. Then she raced along in the same direction as the raider, keeping a little in front, and firing with her after-group, wreaking a good deal of execution in the raider's hull.

"They've got the range," muttered Jack, as a shot flying high, sliced the raider's foremast as neatly as a walking-stick slices a poppy-stalk.

In a space of time that was quite incredible, for the *Alert* herself was hard to beat for speed, the raider had overhauled the destroyer, and they raced along neck and neck, separated by four miles of heaving sea.

"There goes a tin fish!" said Hammond, pointing suddenly to the racing destroyer. Jack saw it too in the same moment; there was a splash of spray as the torpedo hit the water.

They waited in a horrible sort of suspense that seemed endless. Would the torpedo strike them? If it did, there was no kind of doubt as to what would happen; they would be blown sky-high.

"Two more," said Hammond curtly. "They mean to do for us, all right."

At the same moment, Jack, who was watching for

the first torpedo, saw the silver head break water about half a mile off the starboard bow. It had run past the raider without doing any damage.

The Chief, watching from the bridge, saw the two remaining "tin fish"—detected them by the streaking, bubbling line that indicated their swift career through the waves. He instantly changed his course; but it was a narrow squeak. One of the deadly things shot past the stern at a distance of two or three feet; it was a miracle that it had not struck the propellers.

"The *Thunderer* wouldn't miss like that, I'll wager," said Jack. "They must have a crew of trainees on that boat!"

"We're going some, you must remember," said Hammond. "Look at that!"

The *Alert* was banging away with her three bigger guns in the hope of winging the raider before she got out of distance; and the shells were singing through the air in terrifying proximity to the decks.

Crash! One of the four-inchers neatly kicked the raider's after-funnel overboard.

"Aha!" yelled Jack. "Another doll over! One funnel in the ditch! Go on, you beauties, there's another left!"

The thick smoke, intended by the raider to act as a screen, poured over the decks like a London fog. But her speed did not diminish; rather, it increased.

"She must be going full out now, surely!" said Jack. "With engines like this she could beat any typhoon home to port. And, hullo! Duck your head, and hang on!"

The warning came just in time. Such was the speed of the phenomenal craft that she was "taking it green"—as the saying is—over her hurricane deck; and a veritable cascade spouted up the hawse-pipes, shooting up in the air like the spouting of a whale. In addition, a wall of water was rushing aft, and it well-nigh plucked the lads from their position at the rail. Gasping, spluttering, they emerged from the icy deluge more like half-drowned rats than anything else.

"Pleasant!" gasped Jack, with a wry grin. "Just look at the destroyers!"

The gallant little ships were wallowing up through the sea, going their hardest, despite the fact that they were pitching like seesaws, and firing frantically with all the guns they could bring to bear. Half-seas under at times, they nevertheless continued on a chase that was manifestly hopeless.

"We've got the legs of them," said Jack. "A pity. I wouldn't like to give them a third chance with the tin fish."

The destroyers were rapidly falling behind now, and it was not long before the expected happened; they gave up the chase. They had been outpaced, but they had given the raider a torrid time while they had been within range. By the narrowest of escapes, the fast steamer had missed being blown into fragments by the third torpedo. Had that landed, there would have been no escape for the Chief and his crew.

With the destroyers well out of sight, the raider changed course, heading north-east at somewhat diminished speed. Even her marvellous engines could not maintain her late frantic pace for long.

"Wonder where she's bound for now?" asked Jack.

"I think that their littl scrape with the Navy must have put a kink in their impudence! Showed 'em they can't swank on our door-step without getting sent away with a flea in their ear. Next time they'll keep off."

The fires in the after-group of engines had been extinguished, in view of the damaged second funnel, and the raider, by night-fall, was still holding to her new course. Evidently her plans, whatever these were, of hanging round the coast, had been sadly deranged; she held out to sea.

Two days later, she raised a small island on the horizon and made straight for it.

"Evidently our destination," remarked Jack. "I say," he went on, addressing the man in the greasy overalls, who had brought them food on the first day of their captivity, "what place is this?"

"This is home," said the fellow briefly. "Table-top Island, it's called—they get the name from a sort of square-topped mountain in the middle of it."

"Never heard of the place. Whereabouts is it?"

"I can't let on, youngster. But I can tell you that the Chief bought it from the United States."

"Miles from anywhere, seemingly. So this is the secret haunt of the raider? And we're running home to patch up our wounds?"

"Bull's-eye both times! I guess we'll have to lie up for a bit, too. The Chief's wild about what your pop-gun packets did to him!"

"It's just as well he didn't fall in with any of the light cruisers," said Jack drily. "I'll bet he'd have been twice as wild."

"Maybe. Look there," pointing to an infinitesimal speck that hovered over the island. "See that spot, 'way up in the air across there? That's the Chief's aeroplane. Wasn't in commission when we went out on this cruise, but she seems to be going good now. We carry her on board, and I guess that we'll make the Navy sit up next time we meet—light cruisers and all!"

The speck developed; grew from a speck to a bird, and from a bird to a full-sized monoplane that circled over the raider, her engines roaring untiringly. As evidence that she was in the best of running order, she flew back to the island with the speed of light.

She was followed by the steamer, which eventually entered a coral-fringed harbour, in which a couple of ketches and some lighter shore-craft lay at their moorings. The harbour was a natural one; deep, admirably sheltered; and the raider berthed at a roughly built wharf.

A considerable number of men had assembled to welcome her in. There was a buzz of comment from the crowd as the hull-wounds and the damaged funnel were pointed out.

"The Chief wants to see you two," said young Eyolf, approaching Jack and Hammond as they stood by the rail, watching the operations of mooring.

“Good of him,” murmured Jack, falling in behind the pudding-faced rascal and strolling to the Chief’s cabin. Since the first encounter on board the raider, the redoubtable Chief had not condescended to notice them. He had not even accorded them so much as a glance from these curiously penetrating eyes. But seemingly that was now to be altered.

“I’ve had reports concerning you two,” came the strange metallic voice, when at last the interview had begun. “You seemed inclined to be rebellious. Now I ask you, as sensible fellows, to put that aside. On this island, I’m king! The sooner you realise that, the better for you. Because I don’t care two straws whether you live or die—you understand?”

“I understand you’ve got the whip hand over us,” admitted Jack.

“You value your lives, I suppose? That being so, you’ll do what you’re told; you’ll do the work assigned to you, and you won’t be badly treated. You will be left on this island to work, with certain other men—so long as you behave, you’re safe, I can promise. But if you’re going to be troublesome”—the magnetic eyes flashed like lamps—“you will pass out quietly and in a way that won’t be pleasant. . . . That’s all. You may go ashore.”



## CHAPTER VI

### THE ISLE OF SLAVES

IT was no joke, as Jack and his companion realised, to fall into the hands of the Chief and his henchmen. It did not merely imply a period of bondage; their captivity on board the raider was an absolute flea-bite to the prospect that awaited them on the island—a prospect, as they were speedily to discover, of long months of absolute slavery.

The word "slavery" is consciously and deliberately chosen. In the next few days Jack and Hammond found themselves members of a band of slaves—nothing more or less. Herded together in the noisome shelter of rough tin shanties, they slept on coarse mattresses of palm-leaves, and slept soundly, too—the sleep of sheer exhaustion and weariness.

Early each morning they were aroused by the cries of their guards, who did not hesitate to hurry the laggards with a touch of the lash, on occasion. A hasty breakfast, coarse but plentiful, was then served out; and immediately afterwards the little band was set to work.

At the base of the mountain there existed an oil-bed of crude petroleum; quite a respectable bed in respect of size and richness; and here it was that workings had been established by the far-seeing Chief. In all probability, he had owned the place as an oil speculation long before the idea of piracy had entered his mind. But it could not be doubted that the supplies of crude oil for his engines, obtainable at this remote spot, formed the mainspring of his raiding activities; he would have been completely hampered by the necessity of obtaining oil in the ordinary way.

The black, thick liquid was drawn from the earth by means of bores, and refined in the distilling plant that

was erected hard by. By a process of fractional distillation, the Chief secured large supplies of marketable products, such as benzene and kerosene; these he disposed of in the ordinary way of trade, as a blind, while the residue of crude oil was retained for the raider's tanks.

Here was the reason why Jack and Hammond had been retained as captives, and brought from Australia. Their captivity served a double purpose: it kept them out of the way, and at the same time provided extremely cheap labour. Eyolf and his friend were nothing if not economical.

The particular tasks that they were allotted kept them separate during the day. Jack's business was to stoke a small furnace in the distillery, which required his attention to eighteen fires, all oil-fed; these had to be maintained at an unvarying temperature—a job that required no small amount of diligence. For the first few days, Jack being new to the work, and liable to bungle matters if left to himself, he was assisted by Remington, a tall, thin Englishman, who was burnt by tropic suns to a deep nigger-brown.

"I suppose you're here against your will?" asked Jack, as they busied themselves among the taps and tubes of the furnace.

"Caught by the press-gang," replied Remington, in tones of deep gloom. "We came here in the ketch *Muriel*, on a pearl hunt, and called in the harbour yonder. Before we knew it, we were prisoners, the lot of us. I expect we're posted up as lost at sea, or something of the sort. Anyhow, that's over two years ago—a long time on this beastly place, as you'll realise if you stay here as long."

"I hope not," said Jack.

"You will, in all probability. Like the new batch of men they got in six months back—a dozen of 'em, nearly. The Chief advertised for young men of spirit, who'd join in an adventure in strange parts of the world. Well! He roped 'em in, all right; they flocked to see him, and he engaged nearly a score for his marvellous

enterprise. Brought 'em out here on his steamer, and informed 'em, cool as you please, that they were budding pirates! The majority of 'em refused point-blank to have anything to do with the business—told him he was various kinds of a scoundrel and swindler, and wanted to be taken back to 'Frisco." Remington laughed shortly, and gave a twist to a turn-cock.

"Those conscientious objectors," he concluded, "are some of your fellow-workers here."

"He put them to work at the oil-wells?"

"Like slaves, my son; same as you and me! Nice cheerful prospect, don't you think?"

"Charming! But don't you ever try to escape?"

"Four fellows did," said Remington curtly. "They had no luck, though." He was silent for a time. "What happened to them made the rest of us fight shy of the idea."

"Why? What happened?"

"They got away in the lugger," went on Remington, giving a glance to his fires. "The Chief happened to find out about it sooner than they expected, and chased them in a motor-boat armed with a three-pounder gun. We knew it was all up; they didn't have a very long start. That was the last we ever saw of our four mates; but when the motor-boat returned," he finished, with grim humour, "there was a smile on the face of the tiger—you know the verse?"

"But surely when the Chief's away——" began Jack; then he turned, hearing a step behind him, to behold the Chief himself. There was a suspicion of a satiric grin on the thin lips.

"And how is my young friend progressing?" came the query, in that unearthly metallic voice. "Able to take charge of these furnaces alone by this?"

"Yes," answered Jack sullenly.

"Good! Remington, I have another job for you. Come along." He turned, certain of the obedience of Remington, and walked away; and the sun-burnt Englishman followed him as docilely as a pet dog. Jack watched them out of sight, and resumed his cheer-

less duties at the fires. The brief disaster that Remington had just sketched was an indication of what the prisoners might expect if they revolted against the iron rule of the Chief. The leader of the raiders was not the man to entertain any weak scruples. He was certainly not controlled by any considerations of mercy or humanity.

All the same, Jack was not deterred. While he was aware of the consequences of rebellion, he continued to search for some flaw in the Chief's system—a flaw that might lead to escape at some convenient time.

Obviously, the most opportune moment for a determined resistance would occur while the raider was out on one of her trips. The odds would be more even in such circumstances, although, as Jack discovered, the Chief retained a large staff on Table-top Island. As the days went by, the restless mind of the middy pieced together a rough outline of a plan. There were chances to be taken in its carrying out; but that was only to be expected.

Jack had no intention of becoming a mere slave, like Remington and the rest, passively awaiting help from outside. The ghastly injustice of the whole business maddened him. He was a believer in action—action first, last, and all the time. But the ground was cut from beneath his feet; just as he was ready to confide his plotting to Hammond and one or two other bright spirits, he was called away from the furnaces by an unexpected order.

“I learn,” said Eyolf, who had summoned him, “that you're an officer of the Australian Navy.”

He made this communication with a delighted grin, and Jack cursed the wagging tongue that had let the cat out of the bag. But outwardly the boy was calm; he gave a faint smile of pure amusement.

“You've been finding out things,” he said. “Who told you?”

“Never mind that. It makes no difference. The facts are correct enough. We're leaving on a trip tonight, and as you and your friend will be more useful

on board than here on the island, you're coming with us. You know how to handle a gun, I expect—one of the four-inchers?"

"Perhaps I do," replied Jack cautiously.

"Unfortunately, my man Piker, one of the best gunlayers on the ship, was laid out by a shell-splinter during our brush with the destroyers back yonder. We'll be wanting somebody in his place, and I've decided to give you a chance."

"Oh, you have, have you?" said Jack with ominous calm.

"Now, don't be a young fool," urged Eyolf confidentially. "Why not throw in your lot with us? The Navy doesn't offer you any prospects of great wealth, and you've got years of stale routine to look forward to. You must know that as well as I do. Join us, and your whole life will be altered. This game can't last much longer—six months at the outside—but we'll all leave it as rich men! You and your sailor friend will receive a tidy sum each, and if you get to America or Europe and use it the right way, you'll be absolute millionaires. Think it over."

"You can have your answer now," said Jack fuming with indignation. "You—you think I'm going to join a gang of ocean thieves and murderers? Then you're making the biggest mistake. Captain Kidd! You can have it all on your own!"

"You're a sentimental fool," returned Eyolf savagely, his pale pudding-face sullen at his failure to coerce Jack Cleaver. "It's no use talking with you!"

"Not in that strain, at any rate," snapped Jack, turning on his heel.

That night the raider was ready to leave the island, and she glided away from her anchorage at her usual brisk and business-like pace. The smashed after-funnel had been replaced; in addition, her hull had been painted black and her upper-work yellow; a transformation which completely altered her appearance. It had been difficult, during her camouflage period, to form any idea of her lines; but she was now revealed

as a rakish vessel of the most modern type. To all outward seeming, she was a tramp steamer of a superior kind. The Chief had apparently transferred his allegiance, for his ship now flew the flag of the United States, whereas she had previously exhibited the Norwegian standard.

After leaving the island, she headed her sharp bows westward, and by noon the next day was tossing upon a forsaken sea of frothy white-caps. To Jack and Hammond it was evident she was lying in wait; and this time she had improved her methods. The aeroplane, which was housed on a platform-hangar abaft of the fo'c'sle, was sent up into the crystal-clear air. Up and up she spiralled, until she became a mere speck in the sky: then she moved slowly to the north-east until she was lost in the haze and the sunlight.

Before long she had returned, and made a graceful volplane down to her appointed platform. She was wheeled back in readiness for instant flight, while the raider's engines were urged to the fullest speed, with the result that not long afterwards a steamer was sighted upon the horizon. Rapidly the two vessels neared one another; Jack, scanning the approaching craft through a "borrowed" pair of binoculars, gave a sudden start of surprise.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed to Hammond. "Do you know what that steamer is? It's the *Idaho*—the American mail-boat! Surely the Chief's not going to tackle her?"

But there was apparently no limit to the Chief's boldness and effrontery. Like a pallid skeleton he scanned the unsuspecting *Idaho* through his glass, and then rapped out a sharp order in a voice that sounded like the clanging of a steel door.

"Bring down her wireless, Smith!"

The man addressed focussed his sights on the wireless and pulled the trigger. With a sharp, barking explosion the four-inch gun released its deadly missile, which whined its way towards the horrified passengers on the *Idaho*. It struck the foremast fair and square, bursting

on impact in a shower of steel splinters which wrought havoc amid the wireless antennæ. The mast itself was snapped like a carrot, and went by the board, carrying with it the mutilated wireless in a chaos of wreckage.

Quite clearly over the intervening waters came the chorus of horror and indignation from those on the decks of the *Idaho*. As the raider drew abreast of the outraged mail-boat, the latter's skipper clapped a megaphone to his mouth.

"What is the meaning of this business?" he bawled. "You'll answer for this, you cowardly cur! Stand clear of my vessel, or——"

"Heave to," interrupted the Chief, disdaining the use of a megaphone, his metallic voice raised in a ringing shout. "Heave to, or I'll smash you to pieces in a brace of shakes!"

"Who are you?" came back the furious answer. "I'll report you for this day's work, my man! What the jumping Jupiter are you up to? If you dare to fire on me again——"

"I'll dare soon enough!" shouted the Chief grimly. "Ready there, Smith? Put a shot into his confounded hull!"

The foremost gun barked again, and there came a rending crash from the mail-boat's steel sides; simultaneously the plates gaped in a black hole, whence emerged a slow trickle of smoke. Almost weeping with impotent fury, the *Idaho's* skipper rammed over his engine-room telegraph to "Stop," and the beat of the engines died down abruptly. As the mail-boat rocked on the swell, her Captain came to the bridge rail again and gesticulated helplessly.

"What do you want, you fiends?" he demanded. "I've got a ship-load of helpless passengers, and you fire on them without mercy! Remember I'm not a gun-boat!"

"Therefore do as you're told," retorted the Chief. "I want a free hand with your cargo, and if there's any nonsense from you, you'll go to the bottom—helpless passengers and all!"

The skipper of the *Idaho* held a hurried conference with his officers. He had heard rumours of the raider from the American side, but he had been taken in by the change in the pirate's appearance. His hand was forced. It was impossible for him to do anything in the nature of resistance—the raider held all the cards in the game. And so he picked up his megaphone once more.

"You've got the whip hand!" he cried. "If I only had a couple of guns I guess I'd do my best to resist. As it is I can do nothing."

"Good," replied the Chief. "I am sending a couple of boats over, and there's to be no humbug, or——" He pointed significantly to the for'ard guns.

Two boats, filled with well-armed ruffians, were hastily lowered from the davits, and pulled to the mail-boat's side, where an accommodation ladder had been let down in compliance with the Chief's shouted orders. Brandishing revolvers, the pirates ascended the ladder and gained the decks, where the terrified passengers retreated from them in a wavering semi-circle.

"Where's the purser of this coffee-pot?" demanded the foremost of the raiding party.

Leaden-faced, trembling, the purser shuffled forward with the utmost discomfiture. Plainly he had never dealt with a situation of this magnitude in all his career; and he was obviously ill-at-ease now.

"What do you want me for?" he asked, his face the colour of cold ashes.

"You have specie on board," said the bandit with brutal brevity.

"You're mistaken," stammered the purser, although the working of his features gave the lie to his words.

"You're making a—a mistake."

"I fancy not," retorted the pirate cynically. "You see, we had wireless information to that effect before you left 'Frisco. Now, listen to me," he went on, directing his revolver with deadly menace, "you'll take four of my men below and get your valuables up on deck in double-quick time. Come on, jump to it!"

He brought the last words out with the vicious snap



of a whip-crack, and the purser jumped as if he had been bitten by a scorpion. It was useless to parley, unless to spar for time; and the unhappy man conducted the outlaws below, while the passengers stood in rigid helplessness, unable to move a hand to protect their property.

From the strong-room to the deck the marauders carried boxes of bullion and all the valuables that had been lodged with the purser for safe-keeping. When they were piled on the deck, the leader of the band gave a short laugh, and pointed to one of the women who stood by.

"That's a pretty set of sparklers you're wearing, my lady," he said. "Suppose you hand them over!"

The woman addressed started back, and placed a hand to her throat, where a magnificent diamond necklace caught the rays of the sun. The next instant one of the bandits had brutally snatched them from her, amid an outraged cry from the whole gathering of passengers.

"You cur!" cried her husband, all caution dispersed by the vicious action. He threw himself on the fellow and bore him to the deck, striking fiercely at the triumphant face, with the rage of a bull goaded beyond endurance.

*Crack!*

As casually as if he had been merely pot-shooting at a floating bottle, the leader of the band fired; and as the blue smoke vanished in the sunlight, the attacker was seen to be sprawling on the deck with a broken arm. Several of the women screamed shrilly, and the man's wife swayed and fell fainting. The bandit's voice cut through the hubbub, as cool and keen-edged as a rapier blade.

"You were warned, you know," he remarked calmly. "I might have killed that fool there, but I chose not to! Get that stuff across to the ship, men; there's no time to be wasted."

The boats crossed and recrossed the intervening water several times, and returned at last when all the booty had been transferred to the raider. Meanwhile, the leader had demanded to see the *Idaho's* manifest of cargo,

which he scanned eagerly for anything else in the way of loot.

"We'll want that wireless stock you're carrying," he said; "and those marine engines will come in useful, too! Just get them heaved up on the deck, will you? The sooner the better, remember!"

"You scoundrels," gritted the *Idaho's* captain, through tight-set teeth. "You'll learn you can't pillage an American ship with impunity! I guess you'll hang as high as Haman for to-day's work."

"Cut that cackle," said the pirate impatiently. "This won't be the last American ship we'll pillage, not by a long chalk! So you needn't rave!"

The heavy packages from the hold were laboriously brought up and put upon the decks, whence they were lowered to the waiting boats below.

"Sorry we can't stop for dinner," grinned the leader, as he motioned his men down the accommodation-ladder and followed them swiftly. "You see, we've got urgent business on our hand elsewhere. So fare-thee-well!"

With an airy gesture he dropped into the stern-sheets of his boat and was pulled away from the *Idaho's* side. He was followed by a storm of execrations from the passengers and crew of the looted vessel. The captain of the *Idaho* gave vent to no threats or abuse; he simply stared over the bridge rail with white face and burning eyes—stared at the jaunty figure of the Chief, who was walking up and down with his hands in his pockets, the personification of triumph.

"I guess we'll meet again!" he cried at last, shaking his fist as the raider took her boats aboard. "Wait—only wait!"

The Chief smiled.

"We haven't finished with you yet, my friend," he called back. "Eyolf! Give our young gunners a bit of practice. No need to let this fellow hurry off and tell the first ship he meets all the story! It might be uncomfortable for us."

With a hateful smile, Eyolf descended from the

bridge, and walked across the deck, where Jack and Hammond, with two others, stood by their gun.

“Now then,” he ordered, “slip a shell into the breech, quick and lively!”

Neither of the two naval men lifted a finger to obey, but the others inserted the shell and pushed home the charge. The breech was slammed to with a sharp clang.

“Now then, Mister Naval Officer,” said Eyolf sharply, “I want you to slam a shell into the *Idaho's* engine-room! You can hardly miss from here. Smart's the word—put one into them and hurry up!”

Instead of obeying, Jack calmly folded his arms.

“You low German hound!” he said grimly. “Do your own coward's work!”

Eyolf's pudding-face twitched ominously, and he looked as if he were about to fling himself on this aggravating youngster. But the mood passed; he pulled out an automatic pistol, and levelled it at Jack Cleaver's head.

“See here,” he cried, “I've had enough of your infernal impudence! I'll give you just one chance. Get to that gun and fire, or I'll shoot you down like a dog!”

Jack Cleaver confronted him boldly enough, but inwardly he trembled. Made of stern stuff though he was, Jack was too young and too fond of life to be shot down in his tracks, as Eyolf had threatened, like a dog. It was not in him to pass out without a struggle of some sort; and while he hesitated his brain sought frantically for some escape from this dilemma. Time was what he most urgently required—time to think, time to evolve some plan that would satisfy honour and safety at the same time.

He moved slowly over to the gun, summing up the situation, weighing his chances in a lightning appraisal. Out of the corner of his eye he measured the distance between himself and Eyolf. A swift sideways jump, and—

But it was Hammond who came to his rescue. The

young seaman had been busy during the looting of the *Idaho*, and was now ready to spring his surprise. Leaping over to the hatchway of the ammunition hoist, he raised a small object high over his head.

“Don't move, anyone!” he roared, in a voice of thunder. “I'll blow up the magazine, and we'll all go sky-high!”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE TREACHERY OF SINGAPORE

NEVER was a situation more dramatically reversed. A glance sufficed to show the meaning of Hammond's shout, and to show that he held the key to the whole position.

The gun on which he was serving was adjacent to the aeroplane hangar; and the young seaman had taken advantage of the recent confusion to steal inside and abstract a couple of bombs. These bombs, designed for use during the operations of the 'plane, were filled with trotyl and exploded by means of a fulminate of mercury detonator. He had merely to toss one of the deadly things into the open hatchway and—the brittle glass tube within the mechanism fracturing instantly—an explosion would occur in the most dangerous part of the ship—the magazine.

So much was apparent to every spectator. The Chief paused in his triumphant walk, as if he had been struck an actual blow; while Eyolf's revolver clattered to the deck from his automatically relaxed grip. Jack Cleaver sprang to his companion's side.

"We've got them on toast," he cried. "Just hang on to that bomb, and we'll get a hundred men across from the *Idaho* in half a jiffy!"

He picked up the fallen revolver, and swung round on the motionless figure of the Chief.

"Now then, Chief," he roared, "this is where we score! Tell your men to throw their arms on the deck, or I'll let daylight through you!"

The terrible pallid face of the Chief seemed to grow a shade more pallid. When he spoke, his words were veritably wrung from him, but he gave the required order, and threw down his own weapon with a resigned gesture.

"Now to get those men over," said Jack grimly, stepping to the rail. He raised his voice in a shout that carried over to the puzzled men on the decks of the mail steamer.

"Send across two boatloads of men!" he bawled. "We've got these beauties boxed up, and——"

He turned with a gasp, for there was a patter of feet on the deck behind him; out of the corner of his eye he saw the flash of a white-clad figure. It was one of the raider's men, who had crept unawares on the tense Hammond, and who, with desperate daring, had hurled himself on the arm that held the bomb on high.

They met in a grapple that sent a cold shiver down the spine of every man present. Should the bomb fall to the deck, there would be an explosion terrific enough to devastate half the ship. To and fro they swayed; then Hammond let go the bomb.

There was an instant of the most terrible suspense. Not a man but held his breath as the deadly package of trotyl whizzed through the air. It seemed certain that it would strike the rail; but, just as they tensed themselves for the report, and as Eyolf fled in panic fear, it skimmed the rail by the breadth of an eye-lash and went overboard. It met the water with a resounding plop, and vanished from view.

The success of the naval pair had been short-lived. With the loss of the bomb their trump card was gone; and the gun crew hurled themselves on the astounded Jack with hissing cries of triumph.

The revolver spoke, but the bullet flew wide; the next instant the youngster was hurled to the deck in the grip of two massively-built negroes, both of whom weighed close on thirteen stone. Desperately he struggled, hitting and fighting like a wild cat, but Eyolf, returning hastily, added his weight to the already heavy odds, and the boy had no chance after that.

He remembered, as hazily as if in a nightmare, smashing his fist home in a bearded face: then somebody grappled him round the throat and there followed a stunning, paralysing blow on the back of his head.

He sank into a black world of unconsciousness.

When he came to himself he was lying on a floor of rough palm leaves. His first impression was of a terrific headache; his head seemed to be twice its proper size, and it was throbbing as if it would burst.

He opened his eyes: Remington, the tall Englishman, regarded him grimly.

"Back to the treadmill," he said. "You've been senseless for two days. What were you trying on?"

Jack smiled weakly. "We tried to capture the raider by a trick," he answered. "I thought we had them too, but it wasn't as easy as it looked. However, better luck next time. Phew! there's a balloon, or something, on the back of my head, and it doesn't make talking easy."

"You've been swiped pretty easily," remarked Remington, sympathetically. "I think you had a slight concussion. Bleeding at the ears, you know."

"Lucky I'm thick in the head," grinned Jack. "But Hammond? Where's he?"

"They put him ashore too. I'm thinking you won't be leaving for any more fancy cruises; you've had your chance, and you passed it up! A spell of hard graft on this infernal island is what you've got in prospect."

"The raider—is she still here?"

"No. Called in to put you two firebrands and the loot ashore, and left almost at once. They must have wind of a prize somewhere in the vicinity."

Jack raised himself on his elbow and spoke eagerly. "I had a plan for getting free of this accursed place! Now that the raider's gone, we'll be able to work it, I fancy. Wish my head didn't throb so much—I can't think properly, somehow. But wait a minute."

Despite the insistent swelling and sinking of his poor wounded head, Jack contrived to piece together the details that he had evolved during his previous stay on the island. In a low voice he communicated them to Remington, who interjected a question here and there. At last——

“It sounds good,” admitted Remington. “But will it work?”

“Work? Only if we all pull together. We don’t want any half-hearted support in this scheme—better drop it altogether if that’s all we can call upon! But with a bit of determination, and a dash of luck, we’ll be well away by the time the raider returns. You, of course, will be in this right up to the neck?”

“Surely—and I can answer for the others, too. They’ll be only too ready to make a bid for escape. I’ll admit the idea is a good one, and with you to lead us, we’ll go for our lives!”

“That’s the talk,” replied Jack. “Now, not a word about this to the others—yet. Especially to Singapore!”

“Why not?”

“I suspect that fellow, somehow. He’d be the first to give information to our warders, if he thought he could better his own position thereby.”

“Perhaps you’re right. But we’ll have to take him with us.”

“We can’t leave him behind. Of course, he may be only too glad to join us, but it’s better to be on the safe side. We’ll tell him at the last moment, so that he’ll have no time to think out treachery.”

Remington nodded. “That’s the best way to handle Singapore. To-morrow night, then.”

“To-morrow night,” repeated Jack meaningly.

The next day Jack was put to work; in view of his wound, he was allowed light tasks in the kitchen, and he contrived to pass word to his fellow-prisoners in the course of the day—with the exception of Singapore, the suspect. One and all, they expressed themselves as being with him, hand and glove.

Night came all too tardily for the conspirators. But when they were safely in their huts, they made ready for the desperate dash that they had planned.

The raiders’ control of their prisoners was as strict and orderly as a military régime; there were four sentries, two to each of the huts. Excellent as was this system, it had its weak points, which suggested to Jack



the beginnings of his plan. To begin with, there was division of control, as the huts were a hundred yards distant. Moreover, continued obedience on the part of the prisoners who seemed resigned to the situation, the absence of any attempts at escape, had rendered the sentries somewhat lax. Lulled into a false sense of security, they were not half as alert as they should have been in view of the secret intentions of their charges.

Towards ten o'clock the sentries at the first hut were aroused by sounds from within that suggested a quarrel. The hut rang with cries and laughter; and one of the men complained loudly that he had been bitten by a snake.

This, of course, was far from being the case; but it summoned the sentries to quell the disturbance, and all the men acted their parts so well that the guards were entirely deceived. And—as Jack had anticipated—the sentries from the second hut were visited by an attack of acute curiosity. They ascertained that their own charges were asleep, and then hurried over to find out what was taking place.

This was the pivotal detail in Jack's scheme. As soon as the sentries were off the scene, he and his companions slipped quietly from their hut and concealed themselves close by.

Although there was no moon, the light of the stars was exceedingly brilliant, and revealed the returning figures of the sentries as clearly as could be desired. It was inevitable that the two men should satisfy themselves that all was well, by a glance into the hut; and as they stood by the doorway they fairly offered themselves as targets to the desperate fellows behind them.

As silent as shadows, the captives stole upon their guards, drew nearer and then sprang. The astonished sentries, utterly surprised, were flung to the ground without noise or fuss; hard hands, clapped over their mouths, precluded all chance of shouting for help. It is to be feared that they were roughly treated; bonds were knotted about their limbs in no gentle manner,

and they were gagged in a fashion that was as cruel as it was effectual.

"As smooth as clockwork," muttered Jack. "And now for the others."

The victors listened intently, but there was nothing to indicate that the struggle had been overheard by the remaining guards. Keeping to the shadows, the band of resolute escapees approached the first hut.

Here the sentries were more on the alert, more difficult to tackle.

"Rush them," murmured Jack in Remington's ear. "Try and keep them from yelling, if you possibly can."

"Right-oh!"

"Go!" he hissed; and a flood of hostile shadows was loosed from the darkness and reached the two sentries before the latter were aware of what was toward. A short struggle, as savage and silent as the first, and the two guards were helpless and speechless in the grip of their late prisoners.

"Tip-top," said Jack in a guarded voice. "Simply top-hole. That's the first part of our stunt, anyway!"

His companions gave expression to a low mutter of satisfaction.

But there was yet much to be accomplished before freedom would be theirs.

The night was calm and very still. In the vague shadows of the tin hut the little band of escapees took counsel with one another peering towards the barrack-like erection in which the remainder of the Chief's men were housed. One or two lights went out in the windows as they watched, leaving a solitary pane to cut a yellow rectangle in the black bulk of the building.

"Playing cards," said Remington tersely. "I've known 'em to stop up all night at poker. However, we'll have to take a chance with 'em, that's all!"

"It's the only thing," agreed Jack. "Got those boards and screws ready, Hammond?"

"All here. We'd better make a move now."

Jack nodded, and the fourteen men moved as softly as cats towards the sprawling bulk of the other building.

Two of them cut away to make the lugger ready for instant departure; the remainder selected doors and windows, and proceeded to screw stout boards over the entrances. It was not long before the oiled screws had slid home, and the raider's men were prisoners—for the time being, at any rate. There was a trifling difficulty over fastening the lighted window, which was left to the last, but, as the poker-players were absorbed in their game, this was finally accomplished without detection.

Then the escaping men hastened off to the bay, carrying with them supplies of provisions which they had thoughtfully looted from the lavishly supplied stores. On the point of boarding the lugger, Jack stopped and counted the faces in the starlight.

"Two on board," he said; "six, eight—why, who's missing? There's only thirteen of us! Who's missing?"

"By heck," said Remington with a savage gesture, "I know who it is—that dog Singapore!"

"Singapore!"

Not a man but muttered the name of the suspect—the half-breed who chose to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. They were all aware of his special proclivity for the traitor's part, and they cursed him now with freedom and fluency.

"I might have known it," said Jack bitterly. "The treacherous hound has stayed behind to——"

But there was no need for him to go on. There came from the building a chorus of shouts and the sound of smashing wood. The traitor had played his part, and it was only too evident that the raiders were aware that their charges were levanting.

"Our scheme's gone phut!" declared Jack crisply. "But we'll beat them yet. We collected six revolvers off those sentries, and with a bit of luck——"

He broke off as the furious raiders burst out of their impromptu prison, and, carrying lights, hastened towards the bay. There came the sound of running feet.

“We’ll never get away in time,” said Hammond. “Better recall those two chaps from the boat.”

A shout sufficed to bring back the two men, and the band of baffled escapees waited for someone to lead—for someone to suggest what was to be done. Obviously it was out of the question to attempt to put off in the lugger, and equally useless to make a stand where they were. The only alternative was flight—or surrender. The latter was repugnant; it was not to be tolerated that their success, so nearly won, should be dashed from them. But to fly—whither?

“This way,” rapped out Jack, who naturally assumed the lead. “Run for your lives! The oil-wells—that’s the ticket for us now.”

With blind faith in his courage and resource, they followed him, tearing madly into the darkness, stumbling over the uneven ground at a desperate pace.

The raiders arrived at the bay, and found that the levanters had vanished, although none of the craft was missing. They came to the only possible conclusion—that the pursued had gone inland, but imagined, wrongly, that they had made a dash for the opposite side of the island.

With this delusion in their minds, they determined to give chase in the morning. They knew that it was impossible for the escapees to leave the island, short of growing wings and flying, and the situation thus offered an exciting day’s hunting. Besides, the night was too dark for immediate pursuit.

Meanwhile Jack and his force had invested the oil-wells, which were situated on a slight rise, and which, from the disposition of the buildings, could be defended with a fair chance of success. He rightly judged that indiscriminate flight across the island was useless. They might just as well throw up the sponge at once. But the oil-wells could be held—the foe, at all events, could be kept at bay for a time, and it was on the cards that further strategy would suggest itself, to pull the fat out of the fire.

With the arrival of morning, the raiders left on their

foray. They were plentifully supplied with rifles and revolvers, and, strung out in a long, lax line over Table-top Hill, they proceeded to rake all places of concealment with an obvious zest.

“They must think we’re fools,” said Jack drily, “if they imagine we’re going to stay out in the open! We won’t enlighten them just yet.”

Apparently it did not enter the minds of the pursuers that their quarry was hidden right under their noses in the oil-wells; but among those left behind to guard the harbour a few were told off to visit the place, to see that there was nothing amiss with the plant.

Accordingly five men entered the oil-wells in all innocence. Little did they dream they would be encountered by thirteen desperate fellows, armed with six pistols and numerous iron bars, and savage at the failure of their attempted escape. It was not long before they were stretched very neatly in a row, tied hand and foot, and incapable of shouting to their friends by reason of gags tied by men who were now growing expert in that operation.

This small diversion yielded the defending force five more revolvers and the contents of five cartridge-belts.

“If we keep on like this,” murmured Jack, “we’ll be fully equipped!”

“We’re capable of a good deal of damage as it is,” returned Remington grimly.

By rolling a number of immense oil-drums in a row and standing them on end, the defenders contrived a barrier that would withstand a fair amount of firing; nor were they at all premature in this move, for within thirty minutes three more men came up from the harbour and the huts, no doubt puzzled to account for their five companions.

They had got within a dozen yards of the wells when the unusual situation of the oil-drums and the other defences struck their attention. They paused for thought as to what this might portend, and in that instant Jack decided on a bold move.

“We’ll take those three chaps!” he rapped out. “It

means three less on the other side, you know, and every little helps. Up and at 'em, boys!"

The "boys" were not slow to obey; the whole band left at the double, levelling their revolvers menacingly. The three raiders had barely time to move before they were covered by the whole armament of the escapees.

"Hands up, there!" snapped Hammond briskly; and six hands went up into the hot sunshine. "Good! Just collar their guns, you chaps, and——"

A mad shout from the brow of the slope below cut short his speech; turning, the levanters beheld a dozen more of the foe approaching at a run. Simultaneously, bright flashes came from the advancing horde, and bullets flung sand and shale into the air. The staccato barking of the pistols rent the quiet of the morning.

Remington sighted his revolver swiftly, and fired in return; one of the runners seemed to trip on an invisible obstacle, and went sprawling headlong.

"There goes Singapore!" said Remington coolly. "That account's paid."

Then he turned and ran after his comrades, who, with the three latest captives, were hurrying to the shelter of the wells. The winging of Singapore had given the attackers momentary pause; then they approached, scattered for safety, and firing rather from a sense of defiance than from the intention to hit anybody. Bullets whanged and rattled on the oil-drums, and the defenders replied calmly, conscious that their ammunition was limited.

It did not take many minutes to prove that the attackers, moving of necessity in the open, were at an infinite disadvantage. They were cut down by the deliberate fire of sharpshooters who, entrenched in their defences, could not be reached by return fire. And so the raiders withdrew, some at a walk, and others crawling painfully with broken legs or body-wounds.

"Driven them off!" whooped Remington triumphantly. "Look here, why shouldn't we make a dash for the lugger now? They don't out-number us by many, if at all, and we're all armed!"

Jack shook his head, and pointed to the ridge of Table-top Hill behind them. It was covered with the figures of the hunters, returning empty-handed, and attracted by the sounds of firing.

"It's too late," he said simply.

"Then we'll have to do the best we can. We'll make a fight for it, anyway!"

But if this was the intention of the defenders, it was also, most obviously, that of the attackers as well. The latter made a guarded inspection of the situation, and conferred with the survivors of the recent attempt to oust Jack and Co. from their dugout.

Then things happened. There was no trifling with revolvers now; rifles were served out, and the raiders advanced to the attack, lying down and firing, crawling forward, lying down and firing again. But they could approach only to a certain distance, beyond which the shooting of the defenders became too accurate to be borne.

Then some genius evolved a new idea, and presently there came up the hill an unwieldy contraption of iron sheets, from the centre of which a machine-gun spoke with a most menacing note.

The bullets sliced and slammed through the oil-drums in an inferno of sound. Crash, crash, crash—woomp! The deadly hail did not slacken for one moment, and try as they might the defenders could not stay the approach of the armoured death-machine. It drew to within a dozen yards or so, and was firing as merrily as ever. It spelt the death-knell of the defender's hopes; Remington smiled a ghastly smile.

"It's no good," he said; "we're done, and we may as well admit it. We can't——"

"Can't we?" retorted Jack. "Just a minute. I've thought of an idea that'll beat them into fits!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### ONCE ABOARD THE LUGGER

REMINGTON cast a bewildered look at the boy who possessed, so it seemed, all the initiative, all the "go," of the defending force. It did not appear possible, at the moment, that anything could be done to ward off defeat; but Jack had shown them on previous occasions that he could produce bright notions, and possibly he had something up his sleeve now that would turn the tables.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Remington.

"It's so simple that I'm kicking myself for not thinking of it previously. The oil, man, the oil!"

A glimmer of understanding crossed Remington's perplexed face. But he did not see the whole thing yet.

"You mean——?"

"Drive 'em out with burning oil," grinned Jack. "Look there! There's a shallow valley below us. Fill that with fire, and how are they going to get at us?"

"By Jove!"

Jack swung off, crawling out of the danger zone to the immense tanks that lay behind. He took a swift survey of the disposition of the tanks. Perched high in the air was an immense circular tank that discharged into a number of smaller portable ones; the gigantic connection, like a great hose-pipe, hung down slackly.

"That's the ticket," murmured Jack, swinging himself on to the top of one of the smaller tanks, which were equipped with wheels, and which ran on a small narrow-gauge railway. As he did so, he felt the thing move slightly on the rails, and another bright idea entered his head.

However, his present concern was with the connecting-pipe. He was a target for innumerable bullets as



he stood up in plain view; but, fortunately, he was obscured from the gaze of the men handling the deadly machine-gun.

He wrenched at the connection, and brought it free of the tank, leaving it projecting into space; then he grasped the wheel that opened the flow of oil. Round and round went the wheel until the spout was fully open, and then only did he jump down into safety.

Swish, swish, swish! The oil came gushing and hissing out in an eager torrent that rapidly flowed downhill, and Jack lit a match and tossed it into the stream.

He had to jump back, skin scorched and eyebrows singed, from the vast flare of flame that leapt skywards. There was a roar like the breaking of a great mill-dam, or the crash of a tidal wave upon a rocky shore. Black smoke of incredible thickness and volume mounted in one gigantic puff, that obscured the sunlight, and left the giant flames to throw everything into ghastly relief.

The crew of the machine-gun had been astonished when a rush of oil, ankle-deep, had swirled about their feet; but terror had followed swiftly. With an inkling of what was in store, they had abandoned their gun and their defences, and had run in panic.

They were minutes too late. Before they had covered five yards they were overtaken by a roaring, screaming wall of flame, that licked them up, mercifully, in a moment. Their companions lower down had more time to save themselves, and they broke and ran before the flaming death in desperate disorder.

"That's fixed them!" yelled Remington, dancing like a fanatic. "We win, we win!"

A strange sight he looked, covered with grime, and with one side of his face crimsoned from the mark of a spent bullet. Nor were the others in any better case. But they stood and cheered at the rapid reversal of the position, the dramatic turning of the tables.

"Look there!" yelled Hammond, pointing towards the slope.

In the trifling hollow that ringed the slope, there was now a veritable sea of flame, growing every moment, and already spreading in a dozen places towards the bay and the buildings there. There was a dull sickly glare abroad, due to the pall of smoke, the weakened sun-rays, and the flare of the flames. The stench of burning oil was in the nostrils of the defenders.

"I'll bet they're feeling warm," said Remington. "They must have lost five men at the machine-gun, and when they ran they all dropped their arms. You can hear the rifles going off now."

Indeed, the weapons were exploding as the scorching fingers of the fire touched them off.

"They've lost men and weapons both," agreed Jack. "Not a bad notion, was it?"

"Pulled us out of the fire, at any rate."

"By putting our rivals in the fire," grinned Jack triumphantly. "But, seriously, we're not out of the wood yet."

"Why not?"

"Look there." Jack pointed towards the great tank. "It's only a matter of minutes before that goes up," he said grimly. "And when it goes, we go up too! Savvy?"

"Well then, we're fixed!" gasped Remington in acute dismay. "We can't go to the bay, unless we walk through a dozen feet of flames! Not being salamanders, we can't do that. And we can't go back to the hills, because we'd only be found when the oil burns out."

"True for you," said Jack calmly. "But I've got another of my brilliant wheezes.

"And that is——?"

"There's an empty tank mounted on a truck here. It's on the rails, and the rails lead down to the wharf—just where we want to find ourselves."

"I see! You're going to get inside, and run through the flames on the railway."

"You've hit it in one," said Jack. "That big tank will hold the lot of us snugly as peas in a pod. When we run

down to the wharf, we hop out and do our best to escape. To my mind, that's heaps better than waiting for something to turn up."

"Top-hole!" grinned Remington. "Pile in, you fellows—were going for a ride on the railway!"

But Jack's keen mind anticipated another contingency.

"We may have to barge through twenty feet of flames," he said. "It's just on the cards that we'll tip up right in the middle of it, especially if the rails are warped by the heat. Hold on a minute."

He rushed across and caught up the nozzle of a hose-pipe, which was attached to a great tank full of sea-water pumped up from the bay. With a wrench at the tap, he led it, hissing and buckling, over to the opening of the tank-trolley, and proceeded to pour a powerful stream into the interior.

"We don't want to get scorched up like flies on a red-hot stove," he yelled. "This will keep us cool for a bit, anyway."

When about three feet of water had risen in the great cylindrical tank, Jack cast the hose away, and the men dropped inside one by one.

"Hustle!" cried Hammond. "Those flames are near the top now. Once they reach, they'll——"

Jack, mounting the brake beams of the huge affair, twirled the wheel that maintained the brakes, throwing them free of the wheels, and permitting the car to run forward. It slid away slowly at first, and then with gathering momentum. It had barely emerged from the huddle of the oil-well buildings, when the main well exploded with a titanic crash, the like of which is heard only once in a lifetime.

*Boom!*

Clambering up over the rounded back of the truck, Jack was stunned and appalled by the catastrophic roar of the exploding oil, by the instantaneous darkness that descended like the flinging of a blind across the sky.

He cast a glance upwards. The light of day was obscured by a vast blot of smoke and burning oil. The

truck reeled and shivered like a crazy thing ; the wind of the explosion had sent it forward, swaying dangerously, so fast that it seemed to have been kicked along by a giant's foot. Only by something approaching a miracle did it hold to the rails ; and even when the force had died away it was left rushing forward faster than ever before.

Jack emitted a sudden yelp of pain, as a spot of burning oil, as large as a shilling, struck the back of his hand. It was raining these fiery drops from the heavens ; giving the whole scene the appearance of being taken direct from Dante's "Inferno." Jack was not anxious to remain where he was ; his clothing was alight in a score of places, and he tumbled wildly through the opening in the top of the cylinder, falling into the water within, where his companions, crouching against the iron walls, were in complete ignorance of what was going on.

Somebody slammed the cover over the opening with a resounding clang ; it grew quite dark.

"Jiminy," said Jack, with a short cracking laugh, "something's going to happen in a minute ! Whether we'll be boiled alive or only fried, I can't say, but——"

He broke off, to listen to the rattling of the wheels on the rails below. The truck-tank, with its human freight, was hurtling through space at a mad pace, a frantic speed that could only mean destruction. In his mind's eye, Jack could picture what would happen should the railway-track be unsound where the fire crossed it. The tank would miss the rails and jump through the air like a shot rabbit, and land, probably, in the midst of a blazing pool. After that——

He laughed again, realising that this was the maddest adventure of all that had been his portion. Whatever happened, it would be touch and go !

The water in the tank was swishing from side to side in miniature waves. Closed in their iron cylinder, the adventurers were soaked through and through ; and all the time the truck was whizzing forward at fully thirty-five miles an hour.

Suddenly a violent change in the temperature made itself felt. They were within the fire-belt! This was the critical stage of their journey. If they survived it they would probably win out in the end; but would they survive?

It was Hammond who furnished the answer to that question.

“She’s stopping!” he yelled.

Indeed, the tank pulled up with a sudden jerk, and went forward at a crawl. Whatever it was that clogged the lines, it certainly made a radical change in the truck’s speed. She slowed down bit by bit, her wheels seeming to encounter some sticky substance that held them in check.

“We’re done!” gasped out Remington. “We’re finished, by Jove!”

“She’s still moving!” yelled Jack hopefully.

She was, but with an agonising slowness. And then, no forward movement was perceptible at all. The heat was incredible; it was like being baked alive. From contact with the hot iron sides of the cylinder the water began to steam; white clouds filled the narrow space, close, choking, oppressive. And still the tank remained moveless—or so nearly so that the difference could not be detected.

The warmth of the tank, at first, had been merely pleasant; but by swift degrees it became painful in the extreme. The men were being stifled by the steam, which grew thicker with every moment that went by. And as the choking white mists became denser, so the hopes of the fugitives declined.

There was a long silence in the narrow cylinder—a silence broken only by the hissing of the water as it slopped against the hot iron. Every man was listening intently for any sounds that would indicate motion on the part of the truck. But there was nothing to reward their attention; for all that could be learned to the contrary, the truck might have been at a dead standstill.

Jack Cleaver, reaching up with the butt of his revolver,

gave a hearty thrust that threw back the cover of the circular opening in the top of the tank. The flare of light revealed the fact that great flames were licking the sides of the cylinder, and meeting at the top of the cigar-shaped affair in a combined jet many feet in height. Small wonder that the interior of the tube seemed to its terrified occupants to be the hottest thing in Turkish baths that it had ever been their fortune to encounter.

The steam passed through the opening in a haze, sucked upwards by the fierce currents of hot air. By this time the water, even in the centre of the tank, was uncomfortably warm. It did not seem that it was far removed from the boiling point.

"By Jove!" said Remington hoarsely, licking his lips. "We were rank fools to entrust ourselves to this boiler; is she moving at all?"

"Seems to me the infernal thing's stuck fast," replied another. "We'll have to wrap our wet coats over our heads and make a bolt for it in a minute."

"Don't worry!" Jack cried cheerfully. "I believe she's moving!"

Indeed, a slight trembling made itself felt; the slow turning of wheels communicated itself through the curved iron floor of the tank. For a whole minute, that seemed protracted to the length of an hour, and a painful hour at that, the men waited in suspense that was almost unbearable.

Then, the question was put beyond all doubt; the tank shivered, jumped forward a few feet, and was then undeniably on the move.

"We're going!" yelled Jack, in a voice that echoed in the metallic confines of the tube.

The speed increased. Soon the flames ceased to show over the circular opening; and Hammond, placing his wet coat on the edge of the orifice, stuck his head through and surveyed the lie of the land.

The inferno of flame through which they had passed obscured all view of the blazing tanks; but an immense pall of smoke indicated that the place was still burning

with fury. The tank was blackened and blistered from its ordeal in the pool of flaming oil.

"A clear run to the wharf!" he shouted. "Barring accidents, we ought to get clear away."

"We won't show up for a while," counselled Jack. "The fellows will think that the truck got clear when the oil-well was wrecked, and possibly they'll pay no attention to it."

The wisdom of this advice was soon apparent. The truck slid without further mishap right down to the wharf, where it met the buffers with a resounding clang. One or two of the raiders gave it a glance from the other side of the bay, but as it remained where it was, no suspicion entered their minds as to its cargo. As Jack had predicted, they accounted for it on the supposition that it had broken away from its moorings by accident.

Ten minutes later, while the raiders were doing their best to prevent the oil from pouring down on the buildings, twelve stealthy forms emerged from the still smoking tank and dodged behind a stack of barrels on the wharf. Thence they rapidly transferred to the lugger.

"Like a dream!" chuckled Jack, busying himself about the engine of the small craft, while the others kept themselves secure from the chance view of anyone on shore. The moorings had been cast adrift, and imperceptibly the lugger edged out into the bay. As there was no one about her deck, the raiders had no reason to suppose the fugitives were on board: and with the fast launch at their disposal they could easily bring the little craft back. For the present they were occupied with more pressing tasks.

But a different complexion came over the matter when the two-cylinder marine engine began to stutter, the sound of the exhaust like the explosions of a gatling gun. The raiders knew instantly that the men they considered penned behind a wall of flame had contrived by some miracle to board the lugger. This conviction was strengthened when the sails of the small vessel went up in next to no time, and she began to leave the harbour with a spanking breeze behind her.

Aided by her engines, she soon established a good start. Once clear of the island, there was a brisk north-easterly dead astern, and she ran before the wind into the white-topped seas.

"She's pulling like a witch," declared Jack, who had charge of the tiller. "Hang me if I don't think she'll beat the motor-boat home, with this wind behind her. Cram all the sail on that she'll carry, Hammond."

Soon the two masts of the lugger were bearing every stitch of canvas that could possibly be attached to them. Hammond delved down below, and returned with all the spare sail he could muster.

"Good man!" commented Jack. He cast a glance behind him. "Hullo, here's the pursuit!"

It was as he said. From the lee of the island the swift motor-boat came snorting into the swell. She was a large craft for her class, and very powerful; in addition, she carried a three-pounder gun.

"Pity we couldn't have got her," said Jack. "But she was so chained up and covered with padlocks that it was out of the question, quite apart from the fact that her steering-gear was locked."

"We'll give them a good run for their money, though," returned Hammond. "This little soap-dish can skim some, and she's going great guns now!"

"Isn't she just! I'd like to see it blow like the dickens now. Not only for our sails, but if a good send of sea comes up, our friends yonder will have to run for home. They can't weather a bit of a blow like we can, you know."

"Let's pray for a hurricane, then!" laughed Hammond. The words were barely out of his mouth when a gust pounced upon them, straining at the sails till the stout spars creaked. Jack eased her off a trifle.

"No poppycock yacht, this!" he grinned. "I'd carry on full sail, I almost believe, even if your hurricane did arrive."

"She's a staunch little tub, all right! I'll bet those fellows astern are shaking their craft to pieces—if they don't get us soon, we'll lose them."



Jack gave an eye to the motor launch. "Yes," he said, "I suppose they're going all out. They're a few knots faster than we are; it's only to be expected. They've gained a fair slice already; but the instant we sight a passer-by of some sort, they can whistle for us! That's all to the good."

Fortunately the wind continued as strongly as ever. While Jack had no idea of his whereabouts, he suspected that a swift flight before the wind, while leading them somewhere, would hold the motor-boat at the greatest disadvantage. Once the latter craft got within firing distance, those on board the lugger would have to do some hard thinking.

The chase continued for a couple of hours without perceptibly altering the distance between the two boats: but no one could doubt that the motor-driven craft would eventually overhaul the other. She was stealing forward, gaining a matter of yards in every mile contested.

Nearer and nearer she drew, despite the efforts of the lugger's crew, until it was deemed practicable to try the three-pounder. There came a spit of flame from the motor-boat's bows, and a shell screamed overhead, to land with a splash thirty yards in front of the target.

*Boom!* The wind brought the sound of the report, curiously delayed. A second shot followed, but with no better success.

"Looks bad," said Hammond, through his shut teeth. "Once they get the range, they——"

"Our luck ought to hold good for a while yet," Jack quietly reassured him. "Don't you notice how the breeze is picking up? Unless I'm an utter duffer, we're in for a bit of a squall before long, and the beggars astern won't do much pot-shooting when their boat's hopping to and fro like a cork."

"Jiminy! I hope you're right."

"Well, even now it's difficult for them to aim straight—look at that!"

He indicated a fountain of water that marked a third miss from the motor-boat's weapon.

“She’s bowling wides every ball,” went on Jack, “and I can’t see how she’s going to catch us for a while yet—we’re going faster than ever with this gale behind us.”

Having damaged nothing more vulnerable than the Pacific Ocean with their next shot, the pursuers concluded to wait until they had drawn to within better shooting-distance. Meanwhile, the lugger was hustling along as probably she had never hustled before. Constructed, for a pearling boat, on trim lines, she responded gallantly to Jack’s superb handling. Nor was Remington, attending to the two-cylinder marine engine, unworthy of praise; for the engine, in his hands, was tuned up to the pitch of efficiency. The little ship slipped along, in the sailing phrase, “like a witch.”

At the same time, it was wrong to conclude that she was doing as well as the power-launch behind her. The marvel was, indeed, that she had maintained her lead for so long; and within another half-hour the gun spoke again.

This time better success attended its effort. The shell burst on the stern, smashing the port quarter to smithereens, and hurling a great cloud of chips over Jack as he stood on the poop at the tiller.

Hammond gasped with alarm as he saw blood running down the midshipman’s face.

“Jingo,” he said, “the brutes have marked you! What’s the damage?”

“It’s nothing,” returned Jack, mopping away the blood with his free hand. “Only a splinter. Gashed my cheek, I think. Stings a bit, that’s all.”

“Better let me take the tiller,” ventured the young seaman. “For a while, at any rate——”

“No, no! I’m O.K. Hop along for’ard and look out for the sails. Next shot may bring down some of our canvas, and we can’t afford that.”

Reluctantly enough, Hammond went for’ard. The next shot went wide; but another, immediately following, blew a tremendous hole in the main lug-sail. The

mass of canvas and rigging collapsed upon the deck, and slid over the side, dragging in the water, and impeding the lugger's progress very perceptibly. She staggered from her course, heeled over by the force of the wind, with the water almost flush with the star-board rail.

## CHAPTER IX

### FRIENDS AT LAST

JACK CLEAVER knew that he could safely entrust the work of replacing the sail to Hammond, who was an expert waterman. His own present concern was the steering, and so he did not attempt to hurry or haze the willing workers by shouted commands, but gave his undivided attention to bringing the lugger back on his proper course.

It was fortunate that she was equipped with the oil-engine; but even so the pace dropped off very markedly. The task of the workers was not an enviable one; for the wind was blowing quite a gale by this time: the spars were creaking ominously, and with the great lug-sail damaged the remaining spread of canvas imparted a disagreeable pitching-and-tossing to the vessel. She dug her nose under the waves, and then the following seas would sweep her broken port-quarter, sousing her decks in a succession of cascades, of which Jack, at the wheel, had his full share.

But while the gale, combined with the uneven arrangement of the sails, made things uncomfortable for the lugger, the power-launch was affected in an equal degree. With the rising sea she began to rocket up and down, her great speed making shooting somewhat more difficult than threading a needle on a racing motor-bike. One or two shots went so absurdly wide that the lugger's crew paused in their work to cheer ironically.

And the gale increased, punctuated with violent little squalls. The sky was overcast with an unbroken grey layer of cloud; the sea assumed a leaden tinge.

"Storm working up, all right." Jack—casting a glance behind him—marked where the power-boat wallowed

in a choppy sea, tossing the spray high as she tore through at a dangerous speed.

With every moment that went by the squalls grew more frequent, the wind more furious and blustering, so much so that Hammond deemed it advisable to reduce sail. And now came sharp bursts of icy rain, thrashing down with tornado force, pock-marking the straining seas far and wide. A little while, and the wind backed a few points to starboard, churning up a heavy cross-sea that handled the lugger rather severely. Nevertheless, Jack held her to her original course, steering by compass. He had a "hunch" that in so doing he was making in the right direction; he did not feel disposed to change.

As it turned out, the heavy weather was the salvation of the lugger and those on board. The motor-launch was not half so seaworthy; she was in actual danger; while the lugger, riding high, was safe enough—for the present, at all events. The three-pounder had been useless for a long time now, and the raiders had admitted as much by making no attempt to fire.

Hammond came staggering aft, making his cautious way over the slippery deck.

"I think they've turned back," he shouted. "This gale has settled their chances of overtaking us! What do you think?"

Jack cast a long earnest glance astern. "You're right, I do believe," he answered. "I can't see her very well, but if they've got any gumption at all, they won't chase us any further."

At the end of another five minutes the matter was not in doubt. The motor-launch had dwindled to a white, spray-covered speck, beating back for the island against sea and wind. The glad news was communicated to the men on the lugger's deck, and they cheered rapturously. Their escape had been made good, despite the treachery of Singapore and the thrilling experiences it had entailed. Freedom, purchased with a series of determined efforts, tasted very sweet to them at that moment.

It was now practicable to reduce sail even more, and prevent the spars from being hauled right out of the ship by the boisterous wind. Remington thought it advisable also to give the engine—which had rendered yeoman service—a rest. Beyond all doubt, sail-power alone would never have kept the motor-launch at a reasonable distance.

All that night, and for two days more, the lugger kept her nose steadily to the south-west course that Jack had intuitively selected. There is no point in detailing the adventures of the trip; to tell the truth, it was somewhat uneventful. The storm was exhausted before next morning; and the most decorous weather attended them thereafter.

Late on the afternoon of the third day, Jack, in the bows, detected a faint smear on the skyline; before very long land was in sight—a most welcome appearance, and greeted by the adventurers with delighted cheers.

But an even more welcome sight was in store. While they were yet a dozen miles from the land, a storm of smoke from the southward caught Hammond's eye, and a steam vessel was soon detected, taking a course that converged upon the lugger's. It was approaching at unusual speed; from a dark square it grew to a sleek grey hull, surmounted by four raking smoke-stacks—a destroyer, flying the flag of the Australian squadron.

"She's the *Austere*," carolled Jack; "I'd know her a million miles off! What splendid luck! I was to be transferred to her for a couple of months, when this little matter intervened. S'pose she's got another middy on board, in my billet—good luck to him!"

He ducked down below and returned with a couple of flags, which he held in his hands, and proceeded to semaphore to the *Austere*, which was at that moment drawing level with the lugger.

The result was that the destroyer ranged alongside, as neatly as a motor-launch, and her Commander, Lieutenant Holloway, demanded to know what was the

matter. He leant over his bridge-rail, bronzed, business-like.

“What’s all this cock-and-bull tale?” he asked. “I warn you that you can’t heave to one of His Majesty’s ships just to pass the time of day, my lad.”

“All right, Gertrude,” chirruped Jack cheerfully.

Lieutenant Holloway almost fell off his bridge with surprise. To be addressed, not by his Christian name, but by a most intimate nick-name, from the lips of one of this harumscarum crowd, simply took the wind out of his sails.

“What the dickens——?”

“I believe we’ve met before, sir,” chuckled Jack. “You remember me—Midshipman Cleaver, of the *Thunderer*!”

“Eh?” Lieutenant Holloway couldn’t believe his ears—simply couldn’t believe them. “Then you’ve turned up again, have you?”

“Like a bad penny, sir!” chuckled Jack.

“You young rip! Do you know that you’re the most talked-about person in Australia? Where have you been since——” He stopped abruptly. “But come aboard, and we’ll have a go at getting things straight.”

Jack went over the side quickly enough as the two vessels nestled against each other, and cannoned into a youngster in middy’s buttons and patches who had just leaped out of a companion-way. A naval cap went flying, and the faint sunlight glimmered on a fiery red head. The next instant Jack was wringing the youngster’s hand as if he would wrench it adrift from the arm.

“Lee! Lee Ferris, by all that’s marvellous! Old boy, this is something like a lucky day!”

Lee was no less pleased—or astounded. He slapped Jack on the back several times, broke off to dance a violent fandango of delight, much to the diversion of a stoker standing by. As soon as his tongue was under control, he exploded in a series of questions that popped out like machine-gun bullets.

Jack laughed protestingly.

“Give me a chance! I know you’re just falling over

yourself to know everything, but I'll have to explain later. So you were appointed to this hooker when I vanished, eh?"

"Yes, I——"

But Lieutenant Holloway's voice, from the bridge, summoned them both. "Come here, you couple of Bashi-bazouks! Keep your mutual felicitations until after!"

They hurried up the steps.

"Now, Cleaver, what's the strength of this disappearing-man trick of yours? First you're kidnapped in some weird and wonderful way, and then we find you calmly sailing off the east coast of New Zealand——"

"New how much?"

"New Zealand. Do you mean to say you didn't know——"

"Not the faintest idea, sir. But anyhow——"

He plunged immediately into his adventures, skimming them lightly enough, but making such a story out of them that the midddy and the Lieutenant listened with spell-bound attention. When he had concluded, they simply stared at him with wide eyes.

"So that's how it is, sir," he said. "The lugger's all right, except for a smashed quarter and a chipped spar, and we all need several hair-cuts and shaves each, but otherwise we're safe and sound." He stood there grinning—a quaint figure in his tattered clothes, congealed blood on his cheek, his hair a matted chaos. The Lieutenant whistled, and sighed profoundly.

"Truth," he observed, "is stranger than fiction, so the copybooks tell us; and after hearing that little lot I cheerfully subscribe. It's a wonder your hair hasn't turned grey!"

"Quite likely it has, sir, but I can't tell until I have a wash," grinned Jack. "It may be grey, for all I know."

"Well, it's no use marvelling at your escapades, you lucky young devil! The next thing is to decide what comes next. We'll take you and the seaman aboard, of course; your mates can wander ashore with their boat—it's theirs, I rather think, by right of conquest!"



"Might I ask, sir, what brings you here?"

"Roving commission—looking out for his excellency, the chief raider. The other units of the fleet are scattered from here to the Torres Straits on the same business."

"So you're free to use your own discretion a little?"

"Provided we don't wander too far out of our zone. Why do you ask?"

"Well, sir, Remington and I have thought out the dandiest little scheme for bringing the raider into the net. It's a sure thing, too, once the first part goes through."

"H'm. I'll hear of it later. Meanwhile——"

"What about bringing Remington on board? He's a useful man when it comes to knowledge of the raider and her business, and you can surely find room for him."

"Very good; I'll do that. Make your own arrangements about the lugger; bring your two men over, and get yourselves into presentable shape. Then see me in my cabin at the end of this watch."

It was done. The men left on the lugger had already decided to dispose of her, and to share the proceeds among themselves for the purpose of getting back to their home. They got sailing directions, and moved off just about nightfall.

Jack and Hammond were easily supplied with uniforms, Jack borrowing Lee's second suit; then, together with Remington, they proceeded to have the most enjoyable bath and general clean-up they had ever experienced. Clothed and cleaned to their satisfaction, they went to the Lieutenant's cabin, there to unfold the great scheme for taking a rise out of the raiders.

Lieutenant Holloway applied a match to an enormous cigar and grinned.

"The youth and beauty of this tub having assembled," he said, "the conference can now begin."

His cabin was crammed to its fullest capacity. With two exceptions, all the officers of the destroyer were present; together with the three derelicts from the

lugger they made quite a crowd—sufficient, at any rate, to give the place the semblance of a closely packed sardine tin.

“First of all,” said the Lieutenant, “Mr. Cleaver has a bright scheme, which he desires to let loose on the company. I’ll invite him to ventilate it.”

Jack coughed modestly.

“It’s just an idea, sir,” he began. “I’ve explained how the raider is in wireless touch with this island—Table-top Island it’s called.”

“Just a minute,” interposed the Lieutenant. “As a sequel to your story, it might interest you to know this: you discovered that a man Bargo was substituted, on board the *Thunderer*, for Seaman Hammond here, so that he could wireless the cruiser’s movements to the enemy.”

“That’s so, sir.”

“I caused a wireless to be sent to the *Thunderer*, informing them of Bargo’s presence, and advising his arrest. You will be pleased to hear that he has been arrested and put under guard, and his wireless set confiscated.”

“Good news!”

“It means that another of the raider’s props has slipped from under him. But carry on with your yarn.”

“During the big fire on the island,” Jack went on, “the wireless mast there was destroyed, so that presumably the Chief is unaware of what has taken place. He knows nothing about the business as far as I can judge. Now, luck has it that Remington here managed to—to—well, to obtain one of the Chief’s wireless code-books. I won’t explain the circumstances, but——”

“Say I found it,” chuckled Remington.

“At all events,” went on Jack, “however, we got hold of the thing; the fact remains that it’s jolly important and useful, for with that code-book in our possession, we can radio messages in the Chief’s own code, and make it appear that they come from the island. Now, what I suggest is this: wireless a message in code to the Chief, purporting to be from the island,

to the effect that a cargo of specie has been sent from Sydney to Auckland in a small tramp steamer. Explain that this message came through from a private source of information, and add that the small tramp was chosen for transport because——”

“The raider probably wouldn't interfere with it,” completed Lieutenant Holloway. “Yes, I see; but——”

“Now, it's ten to one that the Chief will be after that tramp steamer like a dog after a bone,” Jack went on. “We can inquire the raider's exact location, and advise him just where to intercept the tramp. But in any case we must avoid giving the affair the appearance of a trap.”

“Yes,” said the Gunner, wrinkling his forehead, “but what's the great notion? I may be dense, but——”

“I can see what you're driving at, Cleaver,” said the Lieutenant thoughtfully. “We'll lie off, and pounce on the raider when she shows up, eh? But there are serious objections—several. First, where on earth are we going to dig up the necessary tramp steamer? Next, the beggar has the legs of us, and would be able to scoot before we got close enough to damage him. Again——”

“Just a moment, sir,” laughed Jack, “but you're slating the wrong idea! Here's the important part of the scheme—we will be the tramp steamer!”

“We'll be—oh, I see, I see!” murmured the Lieutenant, wide-eyed.

The Gunner emitted an admiring whistle.

“And besides,” pursued Jack, “don't you see what an advantage that will give us? They'll come to within range, and before they know whether it's a tramp or a tornado that they've struck, a merry little tin fish or two will be making tracks for their plates. And then——outski!”

He threw up his hands in an expressive gesture.

“Of course,” he hurried on in a lower tone, “we don't look in the least like a tramp steamer at the present time, but with a lot of paint and canvas and a bit of ingenuity, we ought to manage it. The thing's been

done lots of times before. Remember how the *Emden* used to disguise herself, and sneak into port among all the shipping?"

"By Jove, it's an idea, all right!" said the Gunner enthusiastically. "If you can work it so that I can shoot off a couple of tin fish at, say, two thousand yards or so, I'll guarantee that the raider will give no more trouble."

"Do you think it's worth trying, sir?" asked Jack, anxious that the idea should find favour with Holloway, who could approve or veto it as he saw fit.

"It's got some good points, certainly," said the Lieutenant. "Just show me that code-book, will you, and we'll see what can be done."

The code-book was passed over, and Holloway studied it earnestly for some minutes. At the end of that time he looked up, and nodded.

"We'll give it a flutter," he said quietly. "I'll make arrangements straight away about the wireless, and if the raiders fall for it, we'll toddle out to the rendezvous in our new togs."

A discreet wireless message was sent out in the Chief's own code; and the reply that came back indicated that the raider was interested, and demanded further particulars. The Chief was doubtless chuckling to himself over the thought that the specie cargo, despite the underhand way in which it was being transported, was likely to fall into his hands. As far as the officers of the *Austere* were concerned, they were confident that they had satisfied the Chief as to the genuineness of the information, and that he had swallowed the story, hook, line, and sinker.

"We haven't much time, you know," said Lieutenant Holloway. "We'll have to camouflage ourselves on the trip—thank goodness, the weather seems likely to hold up. Oh, and Ferris—take the whaler ashore and buy up all the light timber you can get hold of. We'll make frames and stretch canvas over 'em. I'll show you the plan, and you and Cleaver must calculate what amount of timber we'll require."

He indicated roughly how the *Austere* was to be converted into the likeness of a small trading steamer, and the two pals hurried off to measure the lengths of wood required for the change. When they had made their estimate, they set off for shore in the whaler, with five seamen.

Meanwhile, the *Austere* came to with the starboard anchor in thirteen fathoms, and lay in the mild sea, rising and falling gently.

“Quartermaster!” said Holloway. “Pipe ‘Hands, fall in.’”

The hands quickly assembled aft, in response to the shrill tones of the whistle. The torpedo-coxwain saw that all were present, and reported as much to the Commander.

“Now men,” said Holloway crisply, “we are going to carry out a stunt that will blacken both the raider’s eyes for him, and to do that we have to blacken the ship. To be precise, we’ll be converted into a tramp steamer for the time being. Port watch will paint ship, while starboard watch will rig canvas and jerry-build under my instructions. I want everybody to jump about and look frightened! Port watch, carry on!”

The men of the port watch tumbled into the dinghy and on to rafts, and proceeded to slap the paint about with a lavish hand. Holloway rushing about and giving directions for the alteration of the destroyer’s lines in accordance with the plan that he had formulated.

The whaler returned before long, low in the water with a cargo of material for the intended re-modelling of the *Austere*, and the starboard watch set to work with the activity of a colony of beavers.

The *Austere* possessed four funnels—three small ones, and one larger—and about the sternmost three an arrangement of spars and canvas was contrived, painted to resemble a deck-house. The forward funnel became an imitation bridge; and the destroyer, half-painted, looked very queer indeed.

“For’ard, now,” said Holloway, sending his gang of willing workers up into the bows, where a startling

transformation began to take place. The bows were raised some ten feet by artificial sides, and these were stoutly braced into place by scantlings of timber.

"Looks like the real thing, sir," commented Jack, watching the "handy-men" of the Navy, hammering and sawing deftly. They had entered thoroughly into the spirit of the deep game that was being prepared, and every man was resolved that it would be no fault of his if the decoy business failed to come off.

"I'll bet the raider is taken in until he's right on top of us," replied Lieutenant Holloway.

"Until our torpedo-tubes show him different," grinned Jack. "Rather a haul for the *Austere*, if it comes off, don't you think, sir?"

"I don't see how it can fail to come off—provided the raider puts in an appearance." The Lieutenant rubbed his hands.

Denny, the First Lieutenant, came across the deck smartly.

"Hands have pretty well finished painting now, sir," he reported.

"Good—we'll get under way immediately," said Holloway. "Heave in the anchors, will you, Denny?"

While Lieutenant Denny issued orders for the weighing of the anchor, Holloway climbed on the bridge and rang the engine-room to stand by.

"Anchor's away, sir!" sang out the First Lieutenant, from the fo'c'sle.

"Half speed ahead both engines," said Holloway; and Lee Ferris moved the handle of the engine-room indicator to the required position. "Steer 310 degrees, coxwain," added Holloway; and the destroyer moved forward, gathering way quickly.

Meanwhile, Jack and a number of seaman had attacked the problem of arranging a false stern to the destroyer. When finally the thing was done to their satisfaction, to all intents and purposes there was a well-deck abaft the after-funnel. The funnels were entirely obscured; but as the destroyer was burning oil-fuel, there was no mysterious appearance of smoke from the middle of the

superstructure, to give the show away. Nothing but a slight haze drifted from the funnels, fortunately; but from a false funnel that Jack had contrived out of wood, wire and canvas there escaped a surprisingly dense cloud of black smoke.

"Cotton-waste soaked in oil," chuckled Jack, in explanation of this circumstance. "We've got it stowed in a barrel up there, and it'll burn for years." He hastened up and reported to the Commander that all was ready.

"Good!" said Holloway, with an admiring glance at the busily smoking funnel. "That smokestack's a work of art! But if the Admiral saw us digging along in this rig he'd fall down dead on his own quarter-deck."

The *Austere*, flying a manufactured house-flag of the W. and S. Line, chopped through the mild seas, showing a surprising turn of speed for the type of vessel that she outwardly seemed to be. But that she would utterly belie her meek-and-mild aspect was a discovery reserved for the raiders alone.

## CHAPTER X

### CATCHING A TARTAR

MAKING good speed all through that night, and through the best part of the next day, the *Austere* finally reached a point almost mid-way across the Tasman Sea. Here she turned, and began to crawl back in the direction of Auckland at the not bewildering speed of eight knots.

However, below decks, everything was in readiness for full-speed. The fires were banked, and the stokers were standing by, for no man knew when the raider might arrive on the scene.

Standing on the bridge in a disgraceful coaling rig, borrowed from a newly joined seaman, Holloway scanned the horizon with an anxious gaze. He was not sure from which direction the raider would arrive—if, indeed, it arrived at all. For it was quite on the cards that the Chief would smell a rat, and refuse to walk into the trap which had been so temptingly baited for him.

There were several things that might prevent the meeting. The raider might miss the *Austere* by a miscalculation of her course; she might be in wireless touch with the island, if the plant there had been repaired; or she might deem the danger of venturing into the Tasman Sea too costly for the prize in view. For she would certainly know—from the spy Bargo prior to his arrest—what the intentions of the Fleet were; would be aware, consequently, of the patrolling of the waters by the units of the Navy. And, knowing this, the prospect of running into the lion's den might not appeal.

All the same, Lieutenant Holloway was hopeful. He had no illusions about what would occur in the event of a meeting. He knew that he would have to tackle a formidable foe. But he was relying on the superior



discipline and skill of the men under him. Although the raider was well equipped, her nondescript crew, from all Jack's accounts, could not hold a candle to the skilled tradesmen of the *Austere*, who held the Tollman shield for gunnery, and had been runners-up in the Fleet contests for torpedo-firing.

"Yes," murmured Holloway, stroking his chin, "they're a fine lot of chaps aboard, and I'm proud of them. I'll bet we'll make the Chief sick and sorry if he shows up anywhere round these parts."

He was entirely right in his estimate of the crew. They were picked men. Holloway himself had no mean record of war-service. He had matriculated in the stern school of actual fighting, as a Sub-Lieutenant, seeing action at Jutland and the Dogger Bank. His second-in-command, Denny, had been at Falkland Islands with Sturdee.

Then there was Fulljames, the Engineer-Lieutenant, who had the reputation of getting more knots out of a set of engines than any other man in the Service. Gunner Moriarty did not look formidable. He was as round and fat as an alderman, and his red face beamed pleasure on the world; but when it came to a scrap, his perfect training of the gun-crews showed the fruits of his experience. Leading-seaman Valentine, gunlayer of the fo'c'sle gun, was known by the lads of the mess-deck as "Bull's-eye Bill" on account of his amazingly accurate shooting with his beloved four-inch semi-automatic.

Nor were the ratings in any way inferior. They knew their duty backwards, forwards and sideways; with the result that the *Austere* was the slickest ship in the Fleet.

"We've got nothing to fear," said Holloway, reflecting in this manner on the ship's company. "The only thing is, this waiting's getting rather——"

He broke off and whipped his binoculars up to his eye, and stared long and earnestly at a blur on the horizon. Then he called Lee Ferris across.

"Snotty," he said, "just cast your blinkers over yonder. What do you make of that animal?"

As Lee focussed his gaze upon the object, the lookout in the crow's nest shouted confirmation.

"Steamer bearing red four-five," he yelled. "Inclination zero, sir!" Thus, in naval parlance, he indicated that the steamer was making straight for them on the port bow.

Lee handed back the binoculars.

"A steamer right enough, sir," he said; "but is she the one we expect?"

"Young Cleaver can tell us for certain," replied the Commander quietly. "Have him up here, will you? I hope to goodness that she's the raider."

Jack came running up the bridge steps in great excitement. He took a long survey through his binoculars, while the others waited tensely for his verdict.

"Visibility is very low, sir," he said at last. "Looks almost like a fog coming up, and I can't be certain just yet. However, we'll wait a few minutes."

After an anxious interval, Jack turned with shining eyes, and threw his cap in the air.

"That's the little packet, sir," he cried. "And she's making no mistake as to her object, either. She's spotted us, and——"

Holloway rapped out an order, and the gun-crews made ready, concealed for the present by the canvas screens, but anxious to open fire as soon as possible and plunge into the thick of the fight.

The raider approached at her wonderful speed, rushing across the sea to meet the *Austere*, which continued to plug along at her modest eight or nine knots. Had the destroyer been all that she purported to be, her Commander must have trembled at this swift, ominous approach. As it was, however, Lieutenant Holloway grinned delightedly, and exchanged a word or two with the Gunner, standing by the amidships torpedo-tubes.

There was no sign, hostile or otherwise, from the raider, as she drew to within a thousand yards, and passed across the destroyer's bows at that distance. But sharp eyes were studying the smaller vessel, and comparing her with the description issued by wireless.

Evidently satisfied that this was the vessel he sought the Chief issued an order, and the raider turned back till she was bows-on to the *Austere*. As the destroyer drew level, and distant some three-quarters of a mile from the raider, there came a flash from the latter's hurricane deck.

*Bang!*

A time-fuse shell exploded just in front of the destroyer's bows. It wrought no great damage, being intended to make the *Austere* heave to; but to the utter dismay of Lieutenant Holloway the force of the explosion wrenched the false side free from its scantlings, and over it went into the ditch with a clash and a clatter of falling timbers.

"Great pip!" cried Jack. "That's torn it!"

The loss of the false side revealed the fo'c'sle gun and its crew standing by. There was no possibility that the unfortunate revelation had passed unnoticed. The fat had to be pulled out of the fire by rapid and decisive action.

The director of firing on the bridge had been adjusted to aim at the raider's amidships. Glancing at the tell-tale dials before them, each gun-crew trained their weapon in accordance with the mechanical instructions from the bridge.

"Range 1200," came the voice of the man on the range-finder, through the voice-pipes.

A bell rang sharply. The three guns shattered the afternoon silence in a triplicate report, and the H.E. shells ripped and tore through the raider's decks and superstructure. Like flying shuttles, the guns slid back and forth on their recoil cylinders; and immediately after that one heard the empty cartridge-case falling to the deck.

Three breeches were opened; three new charges were slapped home with the celerity born of long practice; three voices reported "Ready!"

The raider had clapped on speed and was scudding down on the *Austere's* starboard side. The seaman at the firing-director moved his twin wheels with cool

precision, and the sleek muzzles of the guns followed the raider as pins follow a magnet.

Again the bell sounded, and again the rippling crash burst out. This time one of the raider's guns was kicked cleanly overboard, and Jack caught his breath with exultation. Through the glasses, he could see the Chief walking the bridge as coolly as if he was strolling in the Botanical Gardens.

And now the raider began to retort. Her shells came singing over the destroyer's smokestacks, and one, which burst on the stern, made the *Austere* jump like a man stung by a horse-fly. But the naval men continued in their drill with the tireless precision of machines, and the deadly salvos wrought terrible destruction about the raider's decks and hull.

The noise of the firing and the exploding shells was deafening. The raider was by this time crossing the destroyer's stern, raining full broadsides upon the target; but owing to her narrow beam and the fact she was turned stern-on, the destroyer escaped without serious damage.

On the first approach of the raider, the *Austere* had sent out a message in naval code explaining the situation, and giving the latitude and longitude of the encounter. If there were any units of the Fleet in the vicinity, they would be on the spot before very long.

Now the raider, steaming fast, came threshing along, overtaking the *Austere* on her port side. Thus she had made a complete circle about the destroyer. As she swung into position, two torpedoes took the water simultaneously, like a pair of divers; the deadly tin fish left the destroyer's deck, and charged with grim menace for the raider's side.

"That'll fix them!" said Jack shortly.

He had barely spoken when there was a shrill whine, and then a crash just to the right of him. The air was full of flying splinters. The range-layer had collapsed across his instrument—dead.

"Individual firing!" sang out the Lieutenant coolly,

surveying the wreckage of his ruined bridge. "Not hurt, Cleaver?"

"No, sir."

"Just cut down to that for'ard gun, will you, then? They're short a man."

Obediently Jack skipped down and gave a hand with the forward semi-automatic. He was just in time to miss seeing one of the torpedoes slide under the raider's hastily averted nose, while the other wriggled down her plates with the thickness of a sheet of paper to spare. It was the narrowest of all narrow escapes. She had just got between the two torpedoes!

Then disaster swooped upon the destroyer. A shell struck the amidships gun fair and square, ripping it from its bed, smashing it in half. The whole gun-crew perished in the fury of flying splinters, leaving but two weapons to carry on the unequal contest.

But the destroyer had her torpedo-tubes, and it was to these that she now pinned her faith. As the raider swung round, exposing her hull, three silver streaks left from the destroyer's tubes. They carried with them the high hopes of the entire ship's company.

There came a surprising diversion. From the deck of the raider proceeded a thrashing, all-pervading roar, that made itself heard even above the barking of the guns, and an aeroplane—her engine singing viciously—shot out like a great bird released from its cage. It swooped across in the direction of the destroyer, humming with menace.

"Everlasting fish-hooks!" cried Lieutenant Holloway, in utter astonishment.

His surprise was only momentary. He yelled an order to the sweating men at the guns, and leading-seaman Valentine—"Bull's-eye Bill" of the mess-decks—rushed over and lovingly cuddled the shoulder-piece of the pom-pom abaft the after-funnel. The sleek, wicked barrel shot up at a sharp angle, veered round, and the best shot in the Fleet glanced along the sights with those keen grey eyes of his.

Then the little weapon began to bark—hastily, spite-

fully. A violent rash of white smoke-balls dotted the air all about the 'plane; and she staggered up steeply in a panicky climb.

"Give her beans! Oh, give her beans!"

The alertness of leading-seaman Valentine, the accuracy of his aim, utterly disconcerted and flurried the pilot. He was entirely unused to being fired on in this manner. He sent his machine rocketing up, seeking to get beyond the reach of the vicious pom-pom.

With an ordinary gunlayer he might have been successful. But Valentine was no ordinary gunlayer; he did not wear the proud title of "Bull's-eye Bill" for nothing. With his very next shot he got the 'plane fair in the centre of her fuselage, sent her rocking sickly, and—

Well, that was all there was to it. The aeroplane was carrying bombs, and by a stroke of good-fortune the shot exploded the lot of them, in one devastating sheet of flame. Blazing fiercely, the 'plane crumpled and fell with the sudden collapse of a singed moth. It struck the water, and was immediately enveloped in a cloud of steam. By the time this had dispersed, the waters had closed over most of the wreckage, and but for a twisted angle of wood and a few dismally smoking shreds, nothing was left to indicate where the 'plane and her occupants had vanished.

But the catastrophic loss of his aeroplane wasn't allowed to divert the Chief's attention from the fact that three torpedoes had been loosed, and might be anywhere at all. Might be making straight for his sides, or might be yards away. It was, of course, difficult to land a torpedo on such a swift-moving target as the raider, and the Chief manipulated the steamer so cannily as to redouble the difficulty.

Like a snake she wriggled back and forth, turning on her heel, slewing round like a top, never in the same place, or presenting the same front, for more than a couple of seconds at a time. The result of these tactics was that two of the torpedoes broke water a good distance beyond the mark; the other did not show up

at all. Presumably it also had failed to make connection.

And still the guns on both ships were stammering and crashing in an uproar like a monstrous firework display. Slowly, but surely, the destroyer was gaining the advantage. Smaller in bulk and admirably manœuvred, she presented by far the inferior target, and her accurate, ordered fire told in the long run.

Two more of the raider's guns went out of action very quickly. One was blown to smithereens; the other's breech-mechanism was hopelessly wrecked by a fragment of flying steel.

For all that the destroyer had not gone unscathed. Pitted from stem to stern with the gashes and scars of steel splinters, her bridge devastated, one of her guns wrecked, she had every appearance of having passed through a hail of fire. Her decks were cluttered with fragments of wreckage. Her last torpedo had been expended, and, as far as could be judged, ineffectively.

Both ships were manœuvring for a telling shot; both speedy, both steering sweetly as motor-launches, they circled round each other. The Chief has scanned the bare deck of the destroyer, and knows that there are no deadly tin fish in reserve. He gives orders to steer closer to his foe. . . .

The raider had to accept punishment for the move. One of her funnels went overboard with the trick collapse of a Punch-and-Judy show; a shower of shells ripped and tore sickeningly through her superstructure and sides, shaking her violently. At close range, the rapid firing of the semi-automatics was positively deadly.

But retribution was at hand. The first intimation of it was when the Lieutenant sprang forward like a madman, jamming over the engine-room telegraphs as if he had a personal spite against them.

"Full speed ahead port engine," flashed the signal. "Slow astern starboard!"

To the creaking protest of the tormented steering-gear, the *Austere* whirled round pretty nearly on her heel. Not a man but paused to gasp as the deadly

torpedo, released from an under-water tube on the raider, slid past.

"That was a narrow——"

The Lieutenant checked abruptly, and reversed wheel and engines again. He was a fraction of a second too late. Nothing in the world could have prevented that second torpedo from striking; and the destroyer took it right amidships.

*Whoo-oomp!*

The shock was terrific. The destroyer bucked as if she had been kicked by an exceedingly vicious earthquake. Careering up on the crest of a mound of foaming water, she seemed to have taken leave of the sea altogether, and to be desirous of emulating the albatross.

Hanging on to the ruined rail of his bridge, Lieutenant Holloway cast a glance behind him. Stunned as he was by the shock, sickened as he was by the mad swooping and cavorting of his vessel, he nevertheless was thinking as coolly as he had ever thought in his life.

The *Austere* fell back into the trough as lifeless as a stricken bird. Her plates were buckled and torn; her back was twisted so that she resembled a dog's hind leg, but, miracle of miracles, her engines were still going. At that the mad idea flamed in Holloway's brain.

"Out cutlasses!" he bawled. "Heavens above! We'll—we'll board her!"

A bullet sliced a red-hot furrow in his shoulder, but he noticed it no more than he would have noticed a mosquito-bite. He jammed the engine-room telegraph over to "Full ahead both," and taking the wheel from the coxwain, steered the pitiable, sinking wreck full at the raider's sides.

A hoarse cheer came from the grimed men on the decks as they grasped cutlasses and made ready for the shock.

"Ah, the steel—that's the stuff for 'em!"

Stokers and engineers came pouring out on the decks.

The stoke-hold and engine-room were awash, filling rapidly, swamped. But the engines were now running



themselves. All that was required now was a straight course, and a bit of luck—and——

It seemed for a moment as if luck was to desert them. The crippled vessel faltered, sagged beneath their feet, wilting from the wounds she had received. But she staggered on again in a marvellous recovery, picked up, charged like a fire-engine at the foe.

*Crash!*

The *Austere* barged into the raider's steel sides with a force that made them creak, a force that canted her over until her lee scuppers were awash. This gave the opportunity for the fixing of grappling-irons, immovably locking the two vessels in a death embrace.

"Not bad for a wreck doing four knots and an onion," whooped Jack, who had accepted a cutlass gratefully, and was now eagerly anticipating the fray. "We biffed her hard enough to——"

The boatswain's whistle piped, the shrill notes dominating the uproar and confusion.

"Boarders aw-a-ay!"

A wild exultation permeated and possessed the crew at that moment. In a cutlass-brandishing wave, the entire ship's company swarmed over the side, gaining the decks of the raider with the agility of tree-monkeys.

There followed a scene of wild tumult and commotion—a scene that well-nigh baffles description.

Scarcely had the tars mounted the raider's rail than the *Austere* went down. They had not been a moment too soon! Had Lieutenant Holloway been a whit less prompt or resourceful he must have lost his ship and his crew together. But fortune, it is said, favours the brave, and no adage ever had apter confirmation.

The dead weight of the water-logged destroyer was attached to the raider by the grappling chains, and it yanked the great vessel over with the full weight of 1,000 tons of metal. It was as if the raider had piled up on a reef. Her decks slanted at an affrighting angle, and the defenders on her deck were hurled into the arms of the attackers at the rail, crumpling the

contending parties together in a cursing, heaving, madly fighting mass.

Of that amazing affray those who survived it have only the haziest recollections.

Cutlasses were rising and falling like sickles among wheat. Above all sounded the crack-crack-crack of revolvers, the shouts of the fighting men, all the din of a desperate hand-to-hand encounter.

In the middle of it all the destroyer was released; she broke free, and went down like a stone. Whether the grappling-chains parted or whether great sections of the raider were torn away nobody could say, nor had anybody time to conjecture. The immediate concern was that the sudden loss of the weight sent the raider reeling over the other way, and her decks turned from a steep hill to something little short of a precipice, down which the cluster of men rolled helplessly, friend and foe locked together, to bring up in the opposite bulwarks with a terrific crash. The wonder was that the rails were not torn away.

Jack, fighting like a demon, was slashing gloriously with his cutlass. It seemed to his dazed brain that he had been standing and swinging his weapon for hours on end. A pistol was thrust in his face; he knocked it aside, and struck at the bearded face beyond it. There was a flash under his very eyes, and then something like warm tea was running over his shoulder. Dimly he realised that this was blood, and that his shoulder had been cut. But he did not seem to care; he——

His thoughts were suddenly curtailed by a sickening thump on the top of his head—a terrible blow that knocked all the fight out of him. He dropped his cutlass; he was swaying, and his feet were incredibly remote from his head. Then he was swimming down through a hazy blackness; swift oblivion came rushing over him; he knew no more.

## CHAPTER XI

### A TIGHT CORNER

FROM illimitable depths Jack Cleaver emerged into a sort of drowsy half-consciousness. He was aware of a blur of light; also of voices which filtered down to him from a vast distance. He caught loose phrases without understanding their meaning in the slightest.

"He'll be all right . . . nasty crack, but . . . wish we had some proper things for . . ."

At the same time he was conscious of water which splashed about his face. Summoning all his strength, he sat up.

The effort brought on a terrifying pain in his head, which made it appear as if his skull had been split in half. He opened his eyes, blinking with the acuteness of the sharp distress.

"Lee—Remington——" he gasped, seeing their familiar faces before him. "What——"

"All right, old chap," returned Lee, placing his hands gently on Jack's shoulders and forcing him to lie down again. "It's all right."

"But where—what——?"

"We're in the trap again," explained Hammond tersely.

"Caught by Eyolf and the Chief."

"I see. We—well, then, we didn't——?"

"No," interposed Lieutenant Holloway with a shake of his head, "we didn't! They were too many for us, and in the long run we got simply swamped! But don't worry about that now, Cleaver. We're still alive, that's one thing, and while there's life——"

"On board the raider, are we?" questioned the middy, staring about him at the cramped confines of the small cabin in which they were penned. Remington was there, Lee Ferris, Lieutenant Holloway, and Sea-

man Hammond. They all looked as if they had been passed through a chaff-cutter, and then gloriously mangled. The marks of close conflict were plainly to be read on their faces, their torn and bloodstained clothes, their fire-blackened hands yet cut and scarred with fresh wounds.

"Yes," said Holloway slowly, "we're on board the raider all right, and I don't mind saying we're in a passably tight corner. I thought I'd been through some hot stuff in my time, but this——!"

"Prisoners, you mean?"

"That's so," supplied Remington, shrugging his shoulders. "The Chief has us here, awaiting the suggestions of his own sweet will as to what he'll do with us. He's deliberating between throwing us to the sharks and boiling us in oil."

He laughed mirthlessly—a dry, cracked kind of laugh that jarred, and failed to stir amusement on the grim faces about him.

"But the others—the fellows from the *Austere*?"

Holloway shrugged his shoulders. "Goodness only knows! There were only eighteen of the poor beggars left, and the Chief sent them away in two boats with provisions enough to last half an hour—or thereabouts. If they haven't foundered, they've probably been able to reach New Zealand before this."

"But why was the distinction made?" asked Jack, with a frown of puzzlement. "Why did he let them go, and keep us here?"

"His pretty whimsical fancy, I expect. He said something about having no quarrel with the men, who were, after all, only doing what they were paid to do."

"He said that, did he?"

"But with us it was different. You and Remington, of course, with Hammond here, were the ringleaders in the plot that wrecked his oil-wells. Ferris and myself were the only officers left alive, and he blamed us for the damage he sustained in our late scrap. So he had a particular bone to pick with the five of us—and that explains why we were kept behind."

"Looks rather rotten for us, then!"

"Don't worry. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll—— Hang it all, we won't whimper, anyway!"

The fight-blackened men in the little cabin muttered a low chorus of assent.

"But," went on the Lieutenant, "a thousand things may happen before the Chief deals with us. We're still alive, and a live man is worth ten dead ones, any day. Never say die till you're sewn in your sail-cloth and tossed into the ditch with a heavy weight to keep you down!"

Jack grinned, and lay back with his wounded head buzzing with rapid thought. He knew very well that the Chief would make no mistake this time. Indeed, he had been informed by the leader himself that on board the raider they had a swift and sure method of dealing with people who proved troublesome. Just what form the Chief's revenge would take, he could not conjecture. But it did not seem probable that any of the five would ever see their homes or their people again. They had incurred the wrath of the Chief; and the latter, although driven from his island fastness, a fugitive from the war-vessels of the Pacific, was still capable of wreaking his vengeance upon the five captives, in whatever manner he chose.

Just at that moment, Lee Ferris uttered a low cry.

"Hullo!" he cried, "we're being chased, and by a warship at that!"

He pointed his finger through the open port-hole. The cabin was in the after part of the ship, and from this port they had a view of all that lay behind. Steaming rapidly in the centre of the picture was a large white-painted vessel, smoke pouring from her funnels in token of frantic speed. Holloway took a long, earnest glance, and nodded.

"I know her," he said. "United States battleship *Baltimore*. She was stationed at Pago Pago, I believe, and she's a pretty useful box of tricks, too, although she's getting a bit on the old side now. And she—but anyhow, there's no doubt she's chasing us. When the

raider held up and looted the mail-boat *Idaho*, he put himself in the bad books of Uncle Sam, I can tell you. No end of a shindy about it—talk about a hornet's nest! The upshot of it was that the United States is taking a hand in the game, and unless I'm mistaken, the Chief will have to run for shelter like a rabbit ducking into its hole!"

"Besides," he went on, "the various Governments have decided to drive the beggar off the seas! Our own Australian Fleet is on the track, together with two Imperial cruisers from the New Zealand station. The Japanese are out for the Chief's blood, since the raider blew their big new liner, the *Samurai*, to little bits. And, as I say, the Yankee Pacific Fleet is rubbering up and down the seas from here to Peru—with the result that you see."

He pointed over to the straining form of the *Baltimore*.

"Time was," he went on, "when the *Baltimore* was the fastest ship in the American Navy. She was a freak for speed, being built on peculiar lines, which made her very fast, but awkward in a heavy sea. Now, the speed of this hooker isn't anything marvellous. Some of our shots, I'll bet my boots, got home in her clockwork department, and her engines aren't all on the job! So if the *Baltimore* can cram on a couple more knots, there'll be something happening that'll put a few wrinkles in the Chief's marble brow!"

They all looked at the American vessel with a new-born hope. It was not to be doubted that she had recognised the raider, and was giving chase to the best of her ability; and the raider's speed was seriously hampered by engine-room troubles, as Holloway had shrewdly surmised. No ship can take a dose of H.E. shell in the vicinity of her engines without feeling the effects. It can be understood, therefore, that in the captives' eyes the situation had grown distinctly brighter.

"And another thing," went on Holloway, the optimist. "It's dead certain that the merry old *Baltimore*

has wireless on board, and has chatted with some of her friends in the vicinity. Consequently, the Chief may take a look ahead, and see another Yankee tin-box steaming up to pass the time of day. And then——”

“Then the band will begin to play,” completed Lee Ferris grimly.

They were all watching the American vessel with the utmost interest. There was no comparison between the respective armaments of the two vessels. The big guns of the *Baltimore* could stand out of range of the raider's semi-automatics and systematically pound her to pieces.

“It's a wonder the Yankee doesn't let loose,” said the Lieutenant. “At this range—hullo!”

There came a puff of smoke from the fore-turret of the American ship. Striding along with her smoking funnels and her queer skeleton masts, she was the very embodiment of the resolute avenger. Closely following the cloud-puff came the shrill whine of the shell—heavy metal, seemingly. The next instant an immense column of water sprayed up not a hundred feet astern.

“A little more elevation, laddie,” commented the Lieutenant. “Blow this hooker's stern to bits, and she'll pull up with a jerk!”

Indeed, with her very next shell, which arrived a few minutes later, the *Baltimore* ripped twenty feet of railing from the raider's side and annihilated a skiff dangling in the davits.

The imprisoned men heard the crash of the explosion and the rain of the fragments on the deck outside, and set up a cheer of approval and encouragement.

Then there came the sound of footsteps outside, and the chains were lifted from the door of the little cabin. Eyolf, a shade paler than usual, and clutching an automatic revolver, confronted them.

“You scum!” he said thickly. It was evident that he had been reinforcing his courage with the sort of bravery that comes out of a bottle. He swayed as he stood, and waved the revolver with reckless menace. “Just come out of that, and we'll give your friends

something to shoot at. Look lively, now, or I'll shoot you all—as you stand!”

There was nothing for it but to obey. Eyolf was in that state of mind that makes shooting a trivial matter. The five came out of the cabin, and stood awaiting the instructions of Eyolf and his two assistants.

Eyolf coughed out a curt guttural command, and herded the prisoners before him, like sheep. Up on to the poop they ascended, and finally brought up at the taffrail.

“Tie them up—tightly,” said Eyolf, giving a scared look at the *Baltimore*. It was only too evident that he was ill at ease in this exposed position.

The five men were tied to the rail, their backs to the oncoming war-vessel. Then Eyolf, with a twisted sneer on his face, turned to leave.

“I wish you a pleasant stay,” he remarked, and then as a shell burst overhead, he scuttled down the ladder in such a panic that he missed the last steps and landed mostly on his nose. The five at the rail set up a howl of laughter as the sound of his fall was followed by profound groans and curses.

But their laughter was not long-lived. There was a strange whirring crack overhead, and the deck resounded to the impact of myriads of bullets that hurtled from above.

Lieutenant Holloway gave a gasp of dismay.

“Shrapnel, by James!” he cried. “We're in for a warm time of it just in these parts! Shrapnel!”

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when a second shell burst forward of them, the shrapnel-bullets riddling the mast and ripping splinters up from the decks until they looked like a field of springing wheat.

“Hot stuff!” said Lee Ferris, with a reckless little laugh.

The riddled mast swayed drunkenly and lurched backwards like a toppling tree, striking the deck with a terrific crash. On the bridge, the Chief was walking to and fro with swift, uneasy pacing. He spoke angrily, insistently into the engine-room speaking-tube, and shortly afterwards a grimy person in overalls appeared



from the hatchway and engaged him in excited conversation.

After five minutes of yelling and gesticulation, the grimy person scuttled back.

“Give her all she’ll take, no matter if we blow up!” came the metallic shout of the Chief. “We can’t stand being shelled like this. Anything would be better than——”

The rest of his advice was lost in the shrill whine of another shell. The five captives at the taffrail instinctively ducked their heads—quite needlessly, for the shell, flying high, passed the foremast with something like an inch to spare and landed thirty yards beyond the raider’s bows.

Immediately afterwards came the infernal crack and whirr of the shrapnel, bursting full over the bridge and smashing every window in the charthouse. The bridge canvas hung in riddled folds.

“Peppering the beggars,” said Jack, sagging at the knees. The boy was as weak as a kitten after his trying experiences, and but for the ropes he must have fallen to the deck in a heap. The decks of the raider were clear of all other men. Now and then a figure appeared on the bridge, but never lingered for long. There was no sense in trying to reply with the raider’s own guns, for these were hopelessly outranged.

The brief conference between the Chief and the grimy engineer bore fruit within the next ten minutes. There was a renewed throbbing from below, and the raider’s second engine commenced to function. It was obvious that it had been out of commission, and that it had been patched up with a temporary makeshift of sorts. Whether it would hold out or not it was impossible to conjecture. At all events, it was going now; and the raider’s speed increased very considerably. She drew away from the *Baltimore*, which continued, all the same, to pump a steady shell-fire after her.

But the range was extreme; and as the minutes went past the shooting grew more and more futile.

“Land ahead!” cried Remington; and the five

prisoners at the rail gave a glance in the same direction.

"Islands, evidently," was the Lieutenant's verdict. "Wonder where on earth we are? I can't say I know that place at all, although there's something familiar about that peak——"

Rapidly the raider neared the islands, not, apparently, because she was anxious to visit them, but because her course brought her directly to them. On closer inspection the Lieutenant made the discovery that he was aware of their whereabouts.

"Why," he exclaimed, "that's the Teipo group, away south of the Paumotus—that is to say, miles from anywhere. Owned by France, I think, and worthless stuff all of it. Grows nothing but niggers and jungle."

For a moment he pondered the situation, and then added, "I don't know whether the Chief intends to put in just here—may have another base in these parts, for all we can tell. But I hardly think it likely, with the *Baltimore* so close on our tracks."

"Besides," he went on, "if the Chief's got any gump-tion he'll steer clear of these islands. Tell you why: they're absolutely sown with rocks and contrary currents, which haven't been charted so far. I ought to know, because I was out here on the old *Monogram*, on a surveying cruise, together with the French gunboat *Hirondelle*, just before the war. We'd just got an idea of how treacherous the place was, when war broke out, and we were recalled; the work wasn't taken up again. So that unless the Chief sheers off, he's liable to run aground, in which case he'll be well and truly in the soup. You see, the islands are of volcanic origin, and there are all sorts of small islands just showing their noses above the water, or just below it. Why, from here you can see broken water all over the place."

They all followed his gaze; but Hammond was staring in a different direction. Suddenly he spoke in a voice tense with discovery.

"The Chief will have to keep close in, if he's going to get away," he said softly.

“Why?”

“Just look over there! Unless I’m a bat-eyed lubber, there’s a couple of warships coming up from the south-east.”

This was speedily to be verified by the others. As the Lieutenant had anticipated, the *Baltimore* had wirelessed to some of her sister-ships in the neighbourhood, and they had arranged a very neat little trap for the unsuspecting raider. Cut off on the north by the islands and their dangerous waters, the raider was shut in by the converging war-vessels to the south-east and south-west. The net grew tighter with every moment that went by. Really it appeared as if the raider was trapped at last.

The Chief appeared on the shattered bridge, and took in the main aspects of the situation. He must have known that he was in probably the tightest corner of his career, but not a muscle of his face moved as he cast earnest glances to all sides. The queer eyes shone in a face inscrutable as a mask.

The raider turned south, attempting a run between the enemy forces; but at the movement one of the approaching ships veered out to cut her off; and she wheeled back again, the Chief realising the futility of such an attempt at escape.

“Checkmate!” cried Holloway delightedly. “She’s beaten at last!”

The next movement in the grim game of chess now tending to its close took the form of a northward run on the raider’s part; she headed directly for the islands. It seemed merely a postponement of the end, like the frantic moves of a threatened king on the chess-board; the raider was entangling herself still more hopelessly in the net being drawn about her.

Nevertheless, she held so steadily to her course that it began to dawn upon the minds of the five captives that she did not intend to be deterred by the dangers of the rocks and shoals.

Directly ahead of her was a long and tortuous strait between two large islands—the largest in the whole

group, as Lieutenant Holloway announced. The mouth of the strait was set with broken water; and the sharp-fanged rocks could be seen already, appearing in places as small black dots ringed with foam.

Here the raider slowed down to the proverbial "two knots and an onion"; and the American ships closed in on her swiftly. Barring the strait, there was no escape for her now. And the strait might as well have been left out of the question; for it would have been sheer idiocy to attempt to take a large steamer like the raider through that death-lined passage.

It was seemingly the Chief's intention to surrender; the United States warboats thought so, at all events, for they steamed in without firing a shot.

Meanwhile, the raider, at her slow gait, had been steadily approaching the mouth of the strait. Already she was in perilous waters, rock-strewn and beset with eddies; and every inch that she nosed forward took her deeper into the dangers of the uncharted death-trap.

The *Baltimore* sent over a shell, apparently calling for the raider's surrender. The little drama that was being enacted was quiet for some moments, and then it awoke to life with a positive shock. For the Chief rang for full-speed, and steering the vessel himself, he sent her racing for the strait-mouth like a runaway fire-engine.

"By James!" exclaimed Holloway. "The fellow's crazed; he'll rip the bottom out of this hooker in five minutes!"

"A cunning move, all the same," commented Remington. "See how he lured the warships into the bay here! They'll never dare to follow him; they'll have to go round one or other of the islands, and that means——"

"Forty or fifty miles," said the Lieutenant. "Perhaps more. Yes, as you say, it's a clever idea; but I'm hanged if I can see how he's going to take a ship like this through that beastly strait!"

The American ships commenced to blaze away as

soon as their quarry's manœuvre became apparent. But they had no target; the raider was swiftly lost to view between the rocky shores of the islands; and they had perforce to make their best speed about the coast in order to intercept the raider on the other side.

As for the raider and her crew, they were speedily in the thick of the business of navigating the danger-channel. The nerves of the Chief must have been amazingly steady; his cool, accurate steering drew a word of praise from the keenly watching Holloway.

"It's blinking marvellous," said Holloway; "a wonder he hasn't been aground a dozen times already!"

Scraping past cruel rocks with about an inch to spare, cutting through foaming cross-currents till the spray soared over the decks, the raider won her way onward. Fortune attended the ship in her intrepid move. Time after time it seemed to the empty hearts of the five at the rail that the Chief had taken one risk too many—that he would pile his ship up on the threatening crags. And every time he brilliantly evaded the danger, with a facile manœuvre that well-nigh brought a cheer to their lips, bitterly though they hated the man.

Once the side of the ship scraped on a sand-bank, but she drew clear again. Once an impetuous current began to hurl her towards a rocky face of cliff, but she just wriggled out in time. Finally she drew clear of the strait.

"I'd never have thought it," murmured Holloway. "Hullo—what's this?"

The raider's men were appearing about the decks again, all jubilant with the success of the Chief's cunning. Five of them bore rifles, and they marched down until they faced the captives at the taffrail. The neat, tiny figure of the Chief, who had relinquished the wheel, appeared behind them.

"And now, my friends," came the cruel, metallic voice, "we'll have a long-delayed act of justice. I guess it's no use talking to you fellows, and so we'll cut

the palaver and come down to the shooting." His voice rang with a sudden access of rage, and the eyes shone like coals. "For all you've done to me, I guess I ought to flay you alive! But I'll have some mercy—you'll pass out quickly and without trouble."

He motioned to the riflemen to approach.

## CHAPTER XII

### A CLOSE CALL

SURPRISE and amazement possessed the five captives at the rail, as the Chief made his cool announcement. They had been prepared for something of the sort, it is true, but they had not anticipated that it would come with such alarming suddenness. Lieutenant Holloway stiffened.

“What do you mean?” he burst out indignantly. “I warn you that——”

“Keep your warnings to yourself,” interrupted the Chief, thrusting his hands into his trousers’ pockets. “They won’t avail you in the slightest. I make no bones about it; you fellows will be dead in”—he glanced at his watch—“in just two minutes. So you know what to expect.”

“You cur!” rapped out Holloway fiercely.

“It is the penalty of interference,” replied the Chief, with the most consummate calm. “Thanks to you and your friends, I was badly damaged, and very nearly captured. You have crossed my path, and the natural result is that you have to suffer for it. I guess I allow nobody to muss up my plans just how they like!”

“At any rate,” snapped Holloway, “we’ll have the consolation of knowing that this will be the last bit of coward’s work you’ll have the chance of doing!”

The Chief smiled even more satirically.

“Why?” he asked.

“Look behind you, you dog! Look out to sea, and tell me that you’re still safe!”

The Chief and his assistants wheeled round. Standing in towards the shore was a long, grey, war-vessel—a cruiser of sorts, by the look of her. She was a strange bird to Holloway, despite his almost encyclopedic know-

ledge of the Pacific fleets ; but he lied readily, spurred on by the extremity in which he found himself.

“ One of ours ! ” he cried, in a voice of triumph. “ The cruiser *Mandarin*, Captain James Osbourne ! Now, shoot us in front of one of our own ships, if you dare ! ”

As far as his knowledge went, the *Mandarin* was in dock in Sydney Harbour, but the thrust served. Just for a moment it seemed as if the Chief’s iron control had, just for once, deserted him. His imperturbable mask fell ; consternation flashed across his pale features. He lifted a hand, and let it fall again.

Then he turned his back deliberately on the cruiser.

“ That can wait,” he said, with a recovery of his old jaunty manner. “ We’ll get this business over first. You dare me to shoot, do you ? Very well, we’ll see ! Are you ready, there, men ? ”

The rifles rose until they were directed at the breasts of the captives. There they held.

“ Say your prayers now,” came the hateful, metallic tones of the Chief. “ But be quick about them.”

The prisoners answered not a word. They faced the rifles and the grinning, odious face of the Chief with the glum calmness of despair. They did not flinch or quail ; they were conscious of nothing but a dull, oppressive emptiness.

And then——

It was the most amazing thing. Before the Chief had time to phrase the words that would command the fatal volley, before any of them had the faintest inkling of what was toward, the ship itself provided a distraction. She threw her bows in the air with a sickening lurch, and then wriggled convulsively, almost like a living thing stricken down in full career.

She had run aground, as it afterwards transpired. Strongly-made as she was, she was not proof against the iron-hard rock she had encountered, which ripped the bottom out of her as if it had been made of blotting-paper. From the first she had no chance. Running at full speed, she had impaled herself in a manner that admitted of no release. Perched on the fateful rock,



she reeled from side to side until she finally settled down, her scuppers almost level with the water, on her port side.

The first sensational shock had hurled the Chief and his five men clean off their feet. One of the riflemen, indeed, sailed helplessly towards the rail and went clean overboard with a hideous yell; nor did his companions pay any attention to him. As soon as they had scrambled to their feet they hurried forward, all thought of the five prisoners forgotten, falling helplessly at each lurch of the doomed ship beneath them.

“She’s going down!”

“To the boats, quick!”

Their shouts of alarm and affright rang out shrilly as the raider continued to sway.

Hammond was the first to recover himself from the moment of stupefaction that followed. Healthy opportunist that he was, he gave a terrific wrench to the cords that bound his arms; they parted like pack-cord at the tug of his powerful muscles, and in a trice he was setting his companions free. In a marvellously short space, they were at liberty once more, and led by Holloway, charged forward.

Stopping only to recover the rifles which still lay where they had fallen, the five men bolted down the steps and shut themselves in one of the cabins in the after-part of the ship. Holloway slammed the door and leant against it, breathing heavily.

“Who doesn’t believe in Providence now?” he asked. “Just shove up these boxes and barricade the door. We’re as safe as houses!”

His view might have been a wildly optimistic one, but it cheered the hearts of his companions. Working like beavers, they barricaded the door with great chests, and then threw open the steel shutter that pierced the door at eye-level.

“An unholy mess,” commented Holloway. “They’re scuttling about like rats, and I fancy they’re fairly trapped this time. They can’t get us out of this, and by the time that the cruiser——”

He broke off and went over to a port-hole to examine the doings of the war-vessel.

"She's not the old *Mandarin*, of course," he went on. "That was only bluff! All the same, I'm hanged if I know what she is. Hammond, what flag's she flying?"

Hammond took an earnest glance.

"Strike me pink if I've ever seen that ensign before," he cried. "Wait a bit, though—what about Chile?"

"Of course, of course!" The Lieutenant's cry was one of mortification at his own dullness of vision. "I couldn't quite make it out, but I see it now! She's the Chilian cruiser *Valdivia*; they bought her from France some time ago. I ought to know, because I've seen her many a time at Valparaiso; but my memory's not what it was.

"Yes," he went on, "that's the old *Valdivia*, sure enough, and I'll bet she doesn't know the raider from a bar of soap! Probably been out on a six months' cruise to get into these waters, and if she doesn't look out she'll slip frightfully. Here she comes up, like a sweet, innocent lamb, to find out what's the matter. If I know anything of the Chief he will probably——"

"He's running up a distress signal now," interrupted Lee Ferris.

The raider had by this time settled firmly into her position on the reef, heeled over to port, with her scuppers almost drinking the water.

The Chief had restrained all impulse on the part of his men to take to the boats. They were standing by, it is true, in readiness to desert the ship in the event of her foundering, but not a boat was lowered to the water. The distress signals fluttered at the halliards, and everybody awaited their reception by the cruiser. She was, by this time, standing in close enough to disclose her identity. It all depended on whether she was aware of the nature of the distressed steamer.

If she had an inkling that this was actually the long-sought raider, then the Chief and his men were fairly and squarely trapped. If, on the other hand, she was approaching in all innocence to proffer a helping hand

to a companion in trouble, the sea-scoundrels would be afforded another lease of life.

For some moments the issue was in doubt. The *Valdivia* asked the name of the stricken ship.

"American steamer *Elizabeth Cromer*," came back the lying answer. "Cannot last much longer; water gaining rapidly."

The little drama was reported by Lee Ferris at the door-slide and Holloway at the port-hole. Tensely the captives awaited the result. It was not long in forthcoming. The *Valdivia* counselled desertion of the wounded ship, and offered to take the crew on board.

This was playing right into the Chief's hands, with a vengeance. Delightedly he signalled agreement, and the sea-scoundrels left in four packed boatloads, with weapons discreetly concealed about their clothing. Once Eyolf and four men came aft to discover the whereabouts of the captives, but a rifle, thrust through the slide in the door, grimly checked all attempts at interference, and the raiders fell back baffled.

"Stay there and drown!" snapped Eyolf furiously.

"Thanks; we will," replied the Lieutenant, with mocking good-humour.

Eyolf ripped out a curse, and hastened off to board the last boat.

The four boats drew alongside the *Valdivia*, and the horde of men marched up the accommodation-ladder, with the Chief at their head. Amazing good fortune attended them still; the *Valdivia* had not heard about the raider, or, at all events, never for an instant suspected that she was in these waters.

Consequently, the Chief's daring scheme worked out with almost ridiculous ease. Choosing their most opportune moment, the sea-scoundrels whipped out their revolvers, and called on the astounded sailors to surrender. The boldness and audacity of the move was its chief recommendation. The Chilians were taken utterly by surprise; almost before they had grasped what was occurring they were locked up, prisoners on their own ship.

The stokers and engineers fell captives just as easily. The Chief ordered the trembling, bewildered Captain to summon them to the deck, and as they appeared out of the hatchways they were very neatly secured and bound by rough, desperate men, armed to the teeth. The whole thing had been a bold stroke; the *Valdivia* had been captured without so much as a shot having been fired.

The five survivors on board the raider stared in utter bewilderment. They had signalled frantically to the Chilean crew, but without affecting the daring raid in the slightest degree; and so peaceable was the possession of the cruiser, that they were in the dark as to what had really occurred.

They were not long left in doubt. The cruiser swung round until her bows pointed at the piled-up raider; then both forward guns spat flame, and the shells came crashing sickeningly into the hull of the helpless steamer!

Pounded fair and square by the shells, the raider could do no more than give a sluggish shudder; all life was gone out of her; it was like firing bullets at a dead hippo. But it is safe to say that the shooting greatly alarmed the five survivors penned in the cabin aft.

"Great pip!" cried Lee Ferris. "The beggars have taken possession of the cruiser! What dolts those Chilians must have been to be caught napping like that. Look out—here's another!"

There was a rending, tearing, smashing explosion close at hand, and the plates of the ship's side buckled inwards. An iron bulkhead was torn away like a strip of cardboard, and toppled across the doorway of the cabin, shutting them in behind a mass of wreckage that it would almost take a crane to remove.

"We can't stand this!" rapped out Holloway urgently. "Next thing we'll know is that we'll get a shell right through the side, and fair on top of us! I say, Hammond, open that door—quickly!"

Hammond tried the door in question. It was the entrance to an adjoining cabin, and was locked securely.

But this did not deter the brawny young seaman; gathering himself together like a sprinter at his holes, he sprang at the door and struck it with the vim of a battering-ram. It gave way, almost precipitating him into the cabin beyond; and the five captives passed through, Lee Ferris assisting Jack, who was still very weak and dizzy.

From the second cabin they were free to pass out on the deck, which they did without delay. They had hardly gained the open when a shell landed full on the side of the cabin in which they had originally taken shelter, and blew it to smithereens.

"Narrow shave!" commented Holloway grimly. "The Chief evidently believes in the motto that dead men tell no tales. But anyhow, it's not healthy, staying here. Come along for'ard."

The steamer was tilted up at such an angle that by hanging on to the port rail they were completely hidden from the view of those on the *Valdivia*. Slowly they made their way forward, and took shelter. Holloway and the others entered into a discussion as to the best means of getting ashore. Obviously, it was of little use to remain on the steamer, for all that she seemed in no particular hurry about foundering.

"*Crump, crump, crump!*" The guns of the *Valdivia* were industriously battering the stern of the raider into a shapeless mass. Then they commenced operations further forward.

"Systematic, all right," breathed Holloway, taking a glance at the cruiser, now standing quite close in. "It won't be long before—but hullo! She's moving off—what's the idea?"

Indeed, the *Valdivia* turned about and began to steam off in a north-eastern direction. Puzzled to account for the sudden cessation of firing, the five survivors watched her curiously. Then——

"I've got it," said Remington. "The American ships are in sight! They've rounded the island, and the Chief is sheering off. That's the reason, I fancy."

"True for you! The *Valdivia* isn't a bad old tub,

but she's not good enough to stand up to the *Baltimore* and the others. They'll give chase, all right; but they must be a fair distance away. Still with a bit of luck, the Chief ought to get it in the neck this time!"

The suspicions of those on board the American warships had been roused by the firing and the abrupt departure of the *Valdivia*. When they had drawn near enough to make out that the raider was a wreck, they jumped to the conclusion that by some miracle or other the Chief had made the transfer to the cruiser; and, aided in this belief by the very suspicious flight of the latter craft, they promptly swerved out and gave chase.

At that time the *Valdivia* was a tiny hardly visible dot upon the horizon.

"Left in the lurch," said Lee Ferris. "Looks to me as if we're intended to remain in these unnatural regions—for a while, at any rate."

Holloway took a glance at the dwindling hulls of the United States ships, and nodded.

"We'll investigate, I think," he said briskly. "Just leave Cleaver here—he'll be all right. The rest of us can fossick round and find out whether we're in any danger of going down immediately. You, Ferris, can hunt up some provender! I don't know how you fellows feel about it, but for my part I could eat a donkey and a sack of greens!"

The others all laughed assent, and the investigations began forthwith. They disclosed that although the hull of the raider was hopelessly ripped and torn, she was supported by the very reef on which she had struck. For the present the sea was calm, and no danger threatened; but it was problematical how long this condition of things would last.

"Once the seas start pounding her," said Holloway, "she'll break in two halves like a bally eggshell."

"Still she's safe enough for the present, isn't she? A bit smashed about, of course, but it's better camping here than on shore."

"That's so. If only she was on even keel, you couldn't better her for a seaside boarding-house! And

besides, we don't know what risks we'd run, going ashore. I remember that while we were here on that surveying cruise we had trouble with the natives."

"The natives, eh? Are they dangerous in these parts?"

"Extremely so," said the Lieutenant gravely. "Why, when I was here last, they attacked and killed a boat's crew from the *Hirondelle*. Made away with them entirely! That's why I think we'd be well advised to stay on board this hooker until help arrives."

"That's so," answered Remington. "We've got plenty of food."

"And as the water-tight bulkheads down below are all closed, there's no possibility of the ship's going down. But——"

He paused ominously, and cast a glance at the sky.

"It all depends," he went on, "how the weather pans out—if there's anything like a sea, we won't last an hour."

They made preparations for a meal, and feasted in regal fashion in the Chief's private saloon, which was lavishly furnished with every luxury that ingenuity could suggest. Their inspection of the condition of the ship had been reassuring to a certain extent. It was true that she was badly damaged. It was true also that if she slid off the reef she would injure herself in such a way that she would go to the bottom in double-quick time. But provided she remained perched where she was, she would make a perfectly satisfactory refuge for the five survivors.

That she was going to stop there, wedged in the rocky fangs, seemed fairly certain. But the period of this stability was dictated by the whims of the weather. As the Lieutenant had stated—and he spoke from deep knowledge and experience—the rising of bigger waves would spell disaster; their ceaseless pounding would maul and mangle the hull, shake it loose from the prisoning rocks, wrench it to pieces by sheer worrying and persistency.

For the present, however, nothing of the sort threatened. The Pacific seemed, on this pleasant day,

to be anxious to live up to its name—for once in a while. The sea was as calm as a mill-pond, marred only by the hurrying ripples and whimples of the current. The water purred against the rocks and the sides of the steamer; a vast, unbroken hush pervaded the empty solitude of the land, not much more than half a mile distant.

Through telescopes and binoculars, they studied the disposition of the land. A lazy surf slid in slow advance and retreat on a beach fretted with coral rocks; beyond, trees and tropical undergrowth formed an umbrageous wall, brilliant with greens, yellows, and vivid reds. This dense mass of vegetation concealed everything that lay behind it. Further inland, it was true, the tops of low hills showed purple over the crests of the palm-trees; but near at hand everything was hidden—secret.

“Funny thing,” said Lee Ferris, indicating the impervious foliage, “but I feel uncomfortable with that in front of me. Somehow, I feel that people are watching us—natives, perhaps! It’s all rot, of course, but—ever have that feeling, sir?”

“H’m!” Lieutenant Holloway puffed luxuriously at one of a box of prime cigars that he had looted. “Well, Ferris—there’s no telling. It’s quite on the cards that the niggers are taking stock of us. It’s not every day that a big steamer piles up in these parts, you know.”

“That’s just it. They’ve probably seen us, and know that in point of numbers we’re nothing at all. Then there is the native fondness for—loot.”

“Loot. Yes, I know. I’d thought of that, and that’s the reason why were going to keep watches at night, starting to-night. We’ve got guns galore, and if we’re attacked we can give a good account of ourselves, but we mustn’t be taken unawares.”

For the remainder of that day they rested each according to his habit. Jack, weak from his wound, underwent the natural reaction from the strain and stress of his late experiences. He was glad to be able to lie down in the state-room and sleep.

Remington and Hammond, being older and of more



settled constitution, suffered hardly any ill-effects. They busied themselves with making a raft upon which it would be possible to reach the shore. The two naval officers, Holloway and Lee Ferris, looked to the food supply and, when that was done to their satisfaction, procured fresh clothing and weapons for themselves and their party.

Then Lee, who had to take first watch that night, retired for a rest; a great padded-leather lounge in the state-room and a book held his mind occupied until he, too, dropped off to sleep.

He was awakened by a determined shaking of his shoulder.

"What——?" he sat up, blinking in the brilliance of the electric light, for the moment fancying himself back on the old *Thunderer*. Holloway, unshaven, clad in the ill-fitting duck of a borrowed suit, grinned at him.

"Dreaming of home and beauty, hey? . . . Time for your watch, youngster. I didn't like to wake you, and so I took first watch myself. But hop up on deck, and take a glance round you. You can wake Remington at one o'clock—we're all as sleepy as owls. But don't you go to sleep; I've no ambition to be overrun by niggers."

Lee grinned back, wideawake in a moment, and went up on deck, while Holloway subsided with a great yawn into the comfortable lounge.

Up there, the stars shone with an incredible brilliance; the soft mutter of the surf was the only sound. Lee Ferris, strolling up and down awkwardly on the sloping deck, watched the shore closely, humming a dance-tune to keep himself awake. For an hour nothing unusual came to reward his vigilance. His mates were sleeping quietly close at hand.

And then, something happened that altered the whole face of the situation.

## CHAPTER XIII

### LIKE THIEVES IN THE NIGHT

THERE was no change in the unbroken silence of the tropic night. The surf continued to purr gently, like a cat newly milk-fed. Also, the sibilant rustle of the tides about the wrecked steamer formed a steady accompaniment. Everything remained as it was. No; there was no change in the silence.

It was rather the flash that roused Lee Ferris to a state of complete, almost painful, wakefulness. A flash, a trickle of phosphorescent fire, in the dark water about a near-by point. It caught his eye, and he was all attention in an instant.

A fish? A ripple of the current? Or——?

He did not know. He watched carefully, leaning over the rail at the break of the poop. And the flash was repeated a second time.

Certainly it did not seem like a leaping fish. There had been no rush of emergence, no plop to mark the dive; no sound at all. He was very suspicious. And now, as he watched, his eyes more attuned to the dark and the distance, he discerned a wriggling line of fire, like a glowing whip-snake crawling over the waters to him. Behind it was visible another, of the same length, and wriggling in the same direction.

“I wish I knew——” he began, watching the fire of beads. “Something coming . . .”

He made up his mind suddenly, ducked down into the state-room and roused Holloway. The Lieutenant sat up with the alertness of one accustomed to light, easily broken slumber.

“What is it?”

“Something coming, sir! Better come up and have a look at it. I can't make it out, but——”

He doubled up after the Lieutenant, and pointed out

the tell-tale streaks. The Lieutenant watched them for one intent moment, and then he spoke briskly, in a guarded voice.

"Canoes, I think! I half-expected it. But we'll give the beggars a scare; there's a searchlight in working order—I forgot to tell you."

The searchlight was a small one, mounted amidships; a larger one on the bridge had been wrecked in the engagement with the *Austere*. To this instrument Holloway hurried. All was in readiness; and with a steady hand the Lieutenant guided it in the direction of the streaks of bubbly fire. Then he pulled over the switch.

The blinding light sliced the darkness as with a sharp sword; for a moment or two the naval men could see nothing. Then, focussed at the end of the beam, they made out the long, black shapes of great war-canoes, crammed with men, and urged forward by a cluster of paddles. They sprang into being like figures on a cinematograph-screen.

"Great Scot, look at 'em," said Holloway, manipulating the roving, inquisitive searchlight. As the beam swung back and forth, it disclosed more of the canoes in the wake of the first two. "Must be over a dozen of the things!"

A fierce shout arose from the packed canoes—a wild outburst of anger and defiance. The paddles rose and fell madly, and the sleek, cigar-shaped craft came shooting forward swiftly, all thought of stealth abandoned.

At the same time a shower of arrows clashed and clattered about the raider's sides and deck. Holloway and Ferris were not slow in ducking into shelter. The Lieutenant grabbed Lee by the arm.

"Run and rouse the others," he rapped out. "No, not that way—you don't want to be pinked with an arrow! Get in the lee of the deck-house, and tumble the others out quick and lively. Don't expose yourself to the fire. Savvy?"

Lee "savvied," and rushing wildly down the deck,

flung himself into the state-room and found that his companions were already awake; roused, without doubt, by the fiendish howling of the natives.

"What's up? What's the matter?" asked Remington. "Sounds like ten thousand wild cats, each with a tin-can tied to its tail."

"Niggers—millions of 'em!" replied Lee with pardonable exaggeration. "Grab your guns, and come up chop-chop!"

Up the companion-way he darted, and the three others, buckling on revolver-belts, lifting rifles from racks on the walls, came crashing in his wake. Dire were the threats they breathed against the yelling profaners of their slumbers.

As they hurried along, and mounted the bridge steps, there came a rattling, stammering sound from the searchlight platform amidships—a sound like a sword drawn rapidly along iron railings. It was the machine-gun, wielded by the ever-ready Holloway.

*R-r-r-rip! R-r-r-rip!*

Its chattering sound quickened until it was like the tearing of gigantic sheets of cloth. In an irresistible hail, the stream of bullets smashed and tore into the foremost canoe. Riddled, half her complement killed or maimed, she fell away in the swirl of the current, sagged, kicked up her stern and went under, leaving the black heads of her survivors bobbing like corks in the fierce glare of the searchlight.

"Come on, you beauties!" cried Holloway; and then seeing his mates close at hand: "Oh, here you are! Just get hold of that light, Cleaver, and buzz it round for a bit—show us where they are, and we'll attend to the shooting!"

Jack deftly focussed the great beam of light, and the remaining canoes, sneaking up in the darkness, jumped into the picture with almost alarming abruptness. The revealing glare showed them spread out trying to encircle the steamer as she lay helpless on the rocks.

The foremost was no more than a dozen yards distant.

The wicked snout of the machine-gun swung round, and the deadly chatter burst out anew, the bitter hail flailing and thrashing the canoe into a shattered, foundering mass. It was terrible. The natives had never seen its like. But still they came on, the blind courage of ignorance driving them forward, confident that they would be able to avenge these disasters in the long run.

The swimmers from the vanished canoes came on also, their arms dashing the water into sparkling spray. A dozen of them gained the port rail of the raider, which, as the reader may remember, was well-nigh at the surface, and drew themselves up, yelling defiance and brandishing spears.

*R-r-r-rip!*

Round came the death-splitting muzzle of the machine-gun, and round came the slamming hail of bullets. The luckless natives were swept off the rail like flies off a wall. They vanished, falling back into the water again.

“Quick work!” Holloway slipped another belt into the machine-gun. He swung it round in time to devastate a third canoe.

A fourth met a similar fate; but the two canoes, torn and useless as they were, disgorged a score or more of unharmed men, who came swimming gamely for the sides of the steamer, their weapons held in their mouths.

But the five on the amidships platform were fighting with that consummate coolness that tells in the long run. Jack continually swept the light back and forth, surprising those who endeavoured to mount the sides in the least likely places; Holloway, at the machine-gun, was as deadly as he was resourceful. Remington handled a rifle with chill accuracy; Lee Ferris guarded the starboard side, for even here dusky figures appeared in the torn railings, silhouetted against the sky and the stars, preparing dire attempts with spear or with arrow.

Time after time he let fly with his Webley pistol, and one shot from the heavy bullets was sufficient every

time to send the intruders back, killed or desperately wounded.

Meanwhile Hammond had busied himself with a one-pounder quick-firer that was mounted close to the machine-gun. He had hauled up a stack of ammunition, and with Remington to help him in the loading, he made ready to give the raiders the shock of their lives.

Cuddling the shoulder rest, he swung the lean muzzle round.

"Just light up the canoes, and I'll answer for the rest," said the young seaman to Jack.

"Good luck to you!" chirruped Jack. "Slam it into them!"

Hammond gave a glance along his sights as the gun was trained on one of the canoes. He took an artist's joy in his work. With his first shot he utterly smashed the canoe, so that not a man escaped.

"One!"

The stammer of the maxim died away abruptly.

"Hang it!" cried Lieutenant Holloway. "This gadget's jammed. Carry on with the other dingus, Hammond, while I fix it!"

There was no need for the order. In rapid succession the one-pounder banged, and with every shot a canoe went to the bottom. It was as if Hammond could not miss.

Really, this was the turning-point of the battle. The machine-gun was hopelessly jammed, and was moreover emitting clouds of steam, the water-jacket boiling furiously.

The one-pounder more than compensated. The rearmost canoes, fearing this terrible destruction that never failed to strike true, were paddling back as hastily as they had lately paddled forward.

"They're going! We've beaten them!"

The swimming natives, deserted by their supporters, were completely trapped. Some of them elected to sell their lives dearly; the majority turned and swam for the shore with all their remaining strength.

One gigantic fellow, clutching a striking-spear, had gained the deck unseen, and crouching in the shelter of a deck-house, awaited his opportunity. It soon came. With a prodigious spring he was upon Jack Cleaver, who had his back turned.

“Look out——!”

Lee Ferris screamed the words, and Jack wheeled dimly glimpsing the threatening spear. His brain working with the celerity born of desperate straits, he ducked, and the thrust missed.

But the rush of the native bowled him over. He fell down like a sack, and with a hissing syllable of triumph the native lifted the spear for the finishing stroke. He held it poised, he——

*Bang!*

It was Lee Ferris who fired, Lee Ferris who hauled the corpse of the native from off his mate's body.

“Jack—Jack!” He peered anxiously. “He didn't——?”

“No, old chap, he didn't—thanks to you! But it was a close thing, all the same. I won't forget this, Lee, old man——!”

They shook hands. The bond of mateship between them had been strengthened by another strand.

It was the last shot fired in the thrilling encounter. But the five adventurers, although they recognised that they were safe, could not return to their rest. They paced the decks until a cloudy dawn, rising dully in the east, advertised the opening of another day. It was destined to be a day that none of them would ever forget.

Even before the coming of grey dawn it was evident that the weather was undergoing a change. Waves slapped the steel sides of the raider as she lay sodden and resistless on the rocks—not the mild swell of the day before, but waves that shook the steamer, testing her strength, probing out her weakness before they began the inevitable assault.

With morning the sky was hazy; a sombre blot lay over the sea, and the air seemed heavy and listless.

From time to time chill little winds dispersed the sluggish atmosphere.

"South-west," said Holloway wisely. "Hanged if I like the look of the sky, or this wind, either! How's the glass this morning, by the way?"

"Been falling steadily," replied Jack Cleaver, who by this time was almost his old self. "Think there's a gale about, sir!"

"Think?" repeated Holloway. "I do more than that—I know! Mark my words, Cleaver, there's a nasty blow coming up. You don't know these parts; I do. On this coast we get the full force of the race of waves to the Horn. And I tell you that these ocean greybeards, as they're called, can't be beaten for sheer force and hitting power. They're the dread of all sailors rounding the Horn at this time of the year.

"And besides," he went on, "they gather up strength as they go. Goodness knows where they begin, but they may come from Leeuwin or southward of it, and swing past New Zealand on a clear run for the Horn, picking up force in the journey. You see, there's nothing to stop them. No continents or large islands in the way!

"You see," he continued, as they all gathered round him and he warmed to his subject, "the greybeards have a clear, uninterrupted run until they reach South America. There the current breaks up, splits in two; one-half coursing up along the coast of Chile, and the other tearing around into the Atlantic by way of Cape Horn. Look at your maps, and see how they've twisted the toe of South America around between 'em. See what I mean?"

"It's this northward current that gets us here in the Teipo group. We're right on the outer fringe of it, and we get the greybeards before they've got time to settle down after their long run; so that if a storm picks up—and it looks confoundedly like it—look out for squalls! This old tub will go down like a broken biscuit-box."



"We'll have to get ashore then," said Remington who had been following the lecture intently.

"Undoubtedly. But can we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look over there!" replied Lieutenant Holloway, and jerked a pointing index-finger shorewards.

Remington and the others had just time to see a skulking black figure vanishing into the undergrowth.

"They're waiting for us!" declared Holloway trenchantly. "You may be sure that they know there's a storm in the offing. They're just waiting there, hundreds of them. We've got to take a chance, that's all . . ." He broke off, and laughed cheerfully. "But buck up! After all we've been through, we're not meant to be chewed up by a lot of ignorant niggers! We'll die in our beds yet. And here's Lee Ferris calling us to breakfast already! Lead on the coffee and muffins!"

They fell to with a will. Fortunately, the ship was amply supplied with edibles, and of the best quality at that. There was even fresh meat from the refrigerating chamber, and the five adventurers ate everything in sight and shamelessly asked for more.

When at length they desisted they went up on deck feeling a great deal better. Even the delicate situation in which they found themselves did not seem quite so precarious as before. A wave of optimism swept them.

But even optimism could not disguise the fact that the wind was on the increase; that the first fore-runners of the greybeards were making their unwelcome appearance.

A tattered canopy of cloud went scudding across the heavens, obscuring the sky, transforming the light into a sickly glare. The sea, too, was rising every minute; and the steamer lay in that precise part of the coast that was least protected, so that she trembled to the shock of considerable waves long before the gale could be said to have actually broken.

A thin sea-fret, somewhat thicker than mist, drifted

over the raider as she lay, covering everything with a fine film of moisture.

In perfect contrast to the day before, the temperature was low. Some of the chill of the Arctic drift had been preserved in the ice-cold winds, the stately procession of greybeards that now began in real earnest. From the south-west they trooped, veritable monsters of the deep, each wave larger than the one that had gone before. Thundering in on the shallows, with the awful collapse of falling towers, they raced in a welter of spume for the hapless raider, licking her sides greedily, shaking her so that she trembled in the grip of the rocks.

There was something ominous in the ceaseless cannonade of the greybeards. It seemed as if they had made the entire journey over the desolate seas for the sole purpose of wreaking vengeance on the raider. From Kerguelen they had conceivably risen, to march across the South Pacific until they reached these rocky islands, irresistible battering-rams. The first of their number to display definite malice came sweeping along as high as the taffrail, hung poised a moment, and then with a crash stove the skylights of the after-cabin.

The decks ran white; the creaming froth slid down their tilted surface like a cataract.

"Hadn't we better get ashore?" asked Jack anxiously. "It won't be long before——"

He grasped the rail just in time to avoid being swept away by the savage rush of a second greybeard. Mist and flying spume well-nigh hid the harried clouds from sight. The port scuppers were spouting brine.

The rapidity with which the gale was upon them was utterly incredible. It took but a moment for the grey line of the sea to become crumpled and contorted with the rushing greybeards. As the raider shook from stem to stern to the impact of the galloping waves, Holloway realised that he had failed to take the measure of the real danger. He had delayed unwisely—delayed too long, perhaps.

"The raft!" he sang out. "We'll have to launch her straight away!"

“But the natives!”

“We’ll have to chance them!” He shrugged his shoulders as a burst of icy rain sleeted across the deck. “If we stay here, at any rate, we’re dead men! Better to——”

*Crash! Gur-r-r-r!*

There was an ominous grating sound, as a great wave struck a wicked blow. The raider slid perhaps a couple of feet on her rocky bed. It was obvious to them all that she had not much longer to last. The raft lay ready to hand. They had to lower it across the deck, launch it on the leeward side of the steamer, and make best speed for the shore, taking their chance in the surf.

Holloway and the others cut it free from its moorings. It began to slide down the tilted deck, with the men restraining its progress.

But the greybeards laughed to scorn the frail expedient. A great wave rose with a mocking hiss, topped the starboard rail by at least ten feet, and descended on them like an avalanche of water. There was no hope of escape. They had all they could do, indeed, to keep themselves from being washed overboard.

The raft was doomed. It was plucked from their grasp as if a giant hand had snatched it. Rolling over and over like a straw hat in a high wind, it went overboard and was lost to view. For a moment it was visible in the welter of froth; once it leaped high like a jumping salmon; then it was swallowed up, sucked down—gone.

“Everlasting fish-hooks!” gasped Lieutenant Holloway. “We——”

*Boom! Swish!*

A second wave, larger even than the previous one, smote the hapless raider. The cataract swooped over the tilted deck, drenching the men as they laid desperate hold on to stanchions and ropes.

“Get for’ard!” bawled the Lieutenant, his voice dominating the uproar. “It’s our only chance! If we stay here, we’ll be swept into the ditch!”

Taking their chance, they staggered and slithered to the bows. Here it was somewhat higher; the raider was down by the stern; and they had a view of the raging sea that struck terror into their hearts.

Great rollers were charging endlessly out of the vast and seething horizon. Pregnant with menace, they bolted forward with the reckless fury of a cattle stampede. The raider shook horribly to their repeated battering; she groaned almost like a wounded beast in agony.

"She won't last ten minutes!" cried Jack, his mouth to the Lieutenant's ear. "There's only one thing for it. I know there's a breeches-buoy close handy. I'll swim ashore with a line——"

"No, no!" shouted the Lieutenant in horror. "You can't—I forbid——"

But Jack had already swung himself down over the break of the half-deck, and plunged into the deck-house. He emerged presently, carrying a canvas breeches-buoy and two great coils of rope. Regaining the half-deck, he proceeded to knot the light manilla cord about his waist.

"When I get ashore," he said, "bend the rope on to this cord, and I'll haul in. Don't worry, I'll be as safe as houses!"

"But, Jack——"

"Don't jaw, Lee, old fellow! You know I'm something of a dab at swimming."

"Yes; but look there!"

He indicated the great waves that rose out of chaos and dashed growling to shatter the vessel.

"No man can swim through a sea like that!" he cried. "Besides, you're wounded, and——"

"Wounded nothing!" said Jack with a gay laugh. "Don't let that trouble you. I'm going! So long, you fellows!"

He ran nimbly in his bare feet to the rail, despite their protests. As a result of the pronounced list of the steamer there was only about a yard of freeboard on the lee-side. Jack stood poised on the edge. Over his shoulder he laughed happily; but the face he turned

to the sea was grim and fixed, a stern mask of determination.

He went overboard. Paying out the line, they watched breathlessly for his rising head. Up it came; and with it came his strong, bare arm, beginning the steady beat of a powerful trudgeon-stroke.

## CHAPTER XIV

### HOW IT WAS DONE

IT would be difficult to say who suffered the greater torments in the course of the task that Jack had set himself—his four friends, watching with heavy hearts from the fo'c'sle, or Jack himself, battling with the frenzied seas.

Doubt, suspense, dread—all these possessed the four men on the steamer, as they stood watching the game youngster who was risking his life that they should be saved. Careless of the wild rocking of the raider, unmindful of the lashing sheets of spindrift, they could not remove their eyes from the moving speck on the face of the waters that marked where Jack still battled with the pluck and doggedness of a bull-terrier.

It is well-nigh impossible for the reader to conceive of the difficulty of the brave boy's task. It is not given to many to challenge the wrathful seas, and yet live. In the vast majority of cases the seas triumph, and the story of the battle remains untold by the one person qualified to tell it.

As for Jack, he was not thinking of these things. One single thought possessed his mind—to gain the lee-shore, no matter what it cost him.

It remained a heart-breaking task. Once clear of the ship, he was whirled hither and thither like a thing of straw. Sucked up in eddies, he was hurled out of his course yards at a time, and then tossed back again just as carelessly; choppy combers struck wicked blows at his head; swirls and under-currents mocked at the threshing of his strong young arms.

The salt seas blinded him. The din and turmoil of the waves deafened him. He choked, gasped, and spluttered as with each frantic breath he drew in

mouthfuls of salt water. With infinite labour, he advanced a few yards, only to be driven back by the mocking currents, losing all the advantage he had gained. Once he was turned completely round, and, until he discovered his mistake, was swimming back for the ship again.

With it all, he did not lose heart for one moment. He was of the breed whose determination is increased by stern opposition.

The manilla rope dragging behind him, he fought for the shore with desperate courage. Already it seemed to him as if he had been in the water for ages. He lost all sense of time. He did not even understand, after a while, why it was that he wanted the land. All his faculties were bent on getting there.

And, slowly but surely, his efforts began to tell. The shore drew nearer. It was not for nothing that Jack, in the old days, had been the champion distance-swimmer of the Naval College. His stamina was incredible. It seemed as if he had the strength of a dozen men in that sturdy frame. It did not appear as if he would ever grow tired. Buffeted by the breakers, he emerged slowly from the region of the eddies and cross-currents, and came to where the great combers were shooting for the beach.

They lifted him, carried him forward now. With a glad cry he observed that the breakers were crumbling forward—real “shooters” these, like those on the beach at Coogee that he knew so well. He allowed himself to be carried, awaiting his chance.

It was not long in coming. Paddling in the trough, he saw a breaking wave loom over him; heard the hiss as it hung poised. The next moment he was caught up; he gave two strong strokes, and was well “aboard.”

*Swish!*

Up he went, and then down with the graceful curving run of the true surf-shooter. He snuggled into the wave, racing forward like a swallow, in a magnificent shoot. The next thing he knew was that he had bumped the beach; he rolled over and over; was

tumbled, gasping, in a welter of froth. He began to slide back again with the return of the wave.

Summoning all his strength, he dug fingers and toes into the sand, resisting the pull of the under-current. Then, rising, he raced up the beach, staggering with exhaustion. Above the limit of the tides, he threw himself down, panting like a hunted hare.

The rope about his waist recalled him to a sense of the situation. For a moment he wondered dully why it was there; then he remembered. Jumping up, he stared seawards: the steamer was still there, outlined in foam.

"Got to be quick now," he murmured, hauling in for all he was worth. Presently, at the end of the light cord, came the double line of the breeches-buoy. Gripping the thick hemp rope, he made it fast to a tree on a little eminence; the rope stretched from the tree to the ship, clear of the water.

"Now we shan't be long," the boy cried, giving a tug to the line. The rope ran smoothly through the pulley-block fastened to the tree, and the buoy, laden with Lee Ferris, swung out from the steamer's side.

The breeches-buoy apparatus, it should perhaps be explained, consists of a life-belt with a pair of canvas breeches attached. This is attached to an endless rope running through a pulley on the ship to another pulley on the shore, permitting the buoy to be hauled to and from the ship as many times as may be necessary.

In this particular instance the apparatus had been properly set up; but it would need to be worked with lightning swiftness. It was quite clear that the raider had not many more minutes to last. Rolling drunkenly now, she was shattering her water-tight bulkheads on the fangs of the rocks. With every battering wave she slid from her perch. At any moment she might dive smoothly under, and then—

Jack hauled for all he was worth. Those on board the ship pulled hard on the incoming rope; and between them they ferried Lee over the waves at a tremendous pace. His feet dragging in the water, he



splashed swiftly shorewards, moving triumphantly through the waves swelling to engulf him.

As he reached the beach he sprang nimbly out, and the buoy was whirled back, to return carrying Remington; he too was landed safely, and then Hammond joined his companions on the beach.

When next the buoy came shorewards, it was seen to be carrying not Holloway, but a couple of cases lashed together.

"The fool!" cried Remington. "He's risking his own life to send that junk. He'll go down if he's not careful—here!"

He grasped the cases and dumped them on the beach, and the buoy was hauled back.

"He's getting in this time!" said Lee Ferris.

"Yes, but the ship's going—look!"

Indeed, the raider was now at the end of her tether. The stout rope tautened and twanged as the stricken ship lurched this way and that. Holloway, just leaving the side, was alternately soused under water and dangled in the air.

Then, like a falling house, the steamer left the rocks. A gigantic greybeard rose like a hunter taking a fence, and smashed upon her with the full weight of hundreds of tons of water.

She staggered over with a roar and lay with the seas beating over her in a mad flurry of foam; she rocked, rolled, went deeper; then she was gone, and the waves raced over the spot in ghoulish triumph.

The line of the breeches-buoy had snapped and fallen into the water; but the buoy, with Holloway safely within it, was still attached to the shoreward rope; and the four on the beach hauled it manfully.

It was not long before the Lieutenant was dragged ashore. He stood up, spluttering.

"Are you all right?" they asked him anxiously.

"Right as rain! Except for the fact that I've consumed about a hogshead of sea-water, I'm safe and sound. But Jack—how's he?"

"Rather chilly," laughed Jack, "but nothing worse."

As he had stripped in order to swim unhampered, he was feeling the full force of the icy gusts; but Lee Ferris had brought his clothes, comparatively dry, and he donned now a rough sweater, some canvas trousers, and a pair of rubber shoes.

"There's food in those cases, and ammunition for our guns," explained Holloway. "We'll need them before long, or I'm a Dutchman. The ammunition I wrapped in oiled paper; and as it's contained in water-tight boxes, it should be pretty right. The other stuff won't hurt. But I'm doing you an injustice, Cleaver," he went on; "I should have congratulated you on that plucky swim of yours! Upon my soul, I've never seen anything to equal it, and I've seen some game actions in my time, you may bet."

"And besides," he continued, "I'm specially glad that it was a naval man who did it! I've known grown men who'd rather have gone down with the ship than tackle a swim through that sea. We all owe our lives to you, Cleaver, and we're grateful—depend on that."

His companions murmured hearty assent.

"It was nothing," said Jack diffidently. "I—oh, hang it all, let us get away from here. The niggers are sure to search this place in the morning, and we'd have no chance of getting away! If we haven't been seen already, there's just the possibility that they'll think we were drowned when the ship went under."

"Logical—distinctly logical," pronounced the Lieutenant. "We'll take the tackle of the breeches-buoy with us, and vamoose leaving no trace."

It was done. Skirting the bay, the little party moved off round the coast. The tropical undergrowth was of an almost unbelievable thickness. Finally Holloway stopped.

"We'd better camp somewhere here," he said. "If we can find a clearing out of the way of the wind, we'll be all right for the night."

Lee Ferris put down the box he was carrying, and moved along the barrier of lush vegetation, like a keen terrier nosing about a hedge.

"This way," he cried, pointing to a gap of microscopic proportions, that pierced the thick cane-brake. "We can get through here."

They could, and did, but it was a bit of a scramble. Presently, straining and sweating through the stems and twisting vines, they emerged upon a sort of clearing, a natural glade where seedlings were already sprouting. With a sigh of relief, Remington set down his box.

"Here's the happy home," he said.

"Ours is a nice house, ours is," grinned Jack. "We're safe here, at any rate."

"I don't know," murmured Holloway, who had been gazing keenly about him. "I rather think I heard—ah!"

He pointed upwards; as their eyes followed his finger they saw a slim, athletic native swing from one tree-top to the next. For a moment he was visible, ape-like, inhumanly agile; then he had vanished—gone without noise or sound of any description.

So swift, so utterly incredible had been the apparition of the native that the five travellers remained staring at the leafy wall for quite a minute, as immobile as if they had been turned to so many statues. A faint wind, all that was left here of the strong gale outside, stirred the topmost leaves; flowers and splashes of fungus trembled fantastically; but that was all.

Lieutenant Holloway shook himself free of the mood, with an impatient toss of his head.

"Was I dreaming?" he demanded incredulously. "I'd no idea that any man could get out of sight so quickly! Upon my soul, if you fellows weren't here to confirm me, I'd be ready to swear that I imagined it all. There was a man, wasn't there?"

"You weren't dreaming," returned Remington soothingly. "The fellow was there, right enough, and I didn't half like the look of his chiv! He means trouble, or I'm the poorest judge in the wide world!"

The Lieutenant mused for a moment.

"So?" he replied. "Well then, in that case we'd better be moving. We'll pack our tents like the Arabs

and silently steal away—the silenter the better. I'm not exactly yearning to impale myself on a spear, nor yet an arrow! and so——”

Lifting their impedimenta, they faced the jungle again. Light-hearted as had been the Lieutenant's words, he was inwardly more than a trifle disturbed, for this was no bed of roses that they had tumbled into. To remain where they were was to positively court disaster. They could be shot down from ambush with the utmost of ease. On the other hand, a retreat to the shore would place them at a similar disadvantage. Rapidly the Lieutenant outlined this view of the position.

“And so,” he continued, “it seems to me that our game is to discover some stronghold or other that we can defend against the blessed niggers. Preferably a bit of a hill, with fresh water close handy. It's absolute suicide to stop out here in the open.”

The good sense of these words having been digested by his companions, Holloway turned and led the way through the thick jungle. Really, the adventurers were in a moderately tight corner. It was true that they had weapons and a generous supply of ammunition. It was also true that they had food in a compact and convenient form. But the natives were aware of their presence on the island, and would not be long in giving chase.

If they gained a fortress before being attacked, they would be able to keep the foe at bay for a time. But, when their food ran low, when their ammunition was exhausted—what then? It had to be admitted that the prospect thereafter was far from bright.

Still, their safe emergence from the perils of the last week or so gave them confidence. Many times had it appeared as if they were due for their final reckoning; always fate had warded off the evil hour. Was it not probable that the present crisis, darkly though it loomed, would be just as safely weathered?

At all events, they were not giving way to premature despair. Through the thick jungle they marched with

all possible speed, threading the dense tangle of vines and creepers, striking always inland, and, with the Lieutenant's pocket-compass as a guide, not diverging from their track one hair's breadth.

The going was heavy, undeniably. Many a time they tripped and fell as unseen creepers set traps for the feet; and the atmosphere was so close, so humid, that the perspiration rolled off their bodies in great beads. In addition they were plagued with mosquitoes and a host of pestilential insects.

But they dared not stop now. They were not safe for one moment while they were in this dangerous part of the island. Discovery on the part of the natives would mean that they were caught like rats in a trap.

Besides, night was close at hand. It was not practicable to pursue their journey under cover of darkness; they would be lost hopelessly in the immense wilderness of the jungle, wandering blindly—perhaps into the very arms of the men they wished most to avoid. It was imperative, therefore, that they should reach some place of refuge before darkness fell.

"A pity we're forced to make so much noise," said the Lieutenant. "It can't be helped, however. I rather fancy the niggers are on our tracks by this time, and, having ears like blessed microphones, they'll be certain to hear us. But we'll give them something to go on with if they show up!"

"Besides," put in Jack, "the country's opening out a bit, don't you think? We must be getting on to the foothills now."

It was as he had said. In the thickly wooded valleys through which they had passed progress had been slow; but in the last few minutes it had quickened beyond all question. The trees were bigger, more widely scattered; and the clustering vines had given place to lush, coarse grasses, reaching almost to the knees, through which it was possible to travel decidedly faster. There were frequent outcroppings of stone, interspersed with plants like spiny cactuses. Every indication pointed to their proximity to the hills.

"Now we shan't be long," chuckled the Lieutenant. "I've seen a few places already that we could defend without much trouble, and we'll strike better ones still, depend upon it!"

He turned, and called to Remington, who stood facing back along the path they had traversed.

"What's up?" he questioned. "See anything?"

"No!" replied the Englishman slowly. "I thought I heard—by Jove, look there!"

He flung out a pointing finger. They all stared in the direction indicated, and then they all spoke.

"Jiminy! It's the niggers!"

"Coming this way, too! They might——"

The adventurers stood irresolute for a moment. At the foot of the slope numerous active, dark forms revealed themselves at a score of breaks in the undergrowth, dodging this way and that with hoarse cries. Even as the five watched, the natives came forward, grouping themselves, their numbers increasing with a rush of reinforcements that sprang from nowhere in particular.

"Come on!" bawled Holloway. "Don't stay here, or we'll be——"

A sudden rain of arrows interrupted him, whistling through the air with the menacing whine of great mosquitoes. The range was rather too great for successful bow-work, but one of the missiles slammed into the box that Lee Ferris was carrying, and remained fast, quivering.

The white men did not pause to entertain a fresh volley. They turned and fled, Lee and Remington in the van, carrying the boxes, and the others bringing up the rearguard, ready to fire as opportunity offered.

The natives followed, loping over the uneven ground in great strides that brought them nearer with alarming swiftness.

It was fortunate for the white men that the country was now more open. Had they been assailed in the thickets below, there was no question but that they would have been shot down from behind the screen of

creepers and vines. Here it was different. The enemy advanced, but in full view of the men they pursued.

As the natives approached to within range, Holloway, Jack, and Hammond stopped and fired three shots each from their revolvers—and for every shot a native fell, a grim example to his fellows of the dangers attending too impetuous pursuit. The volley gave them pause; they halted, gathered for consultation, and then came on again, this time at a more moderate pace.

“Here,” cried Holloway suddenly, “let’s make a bit of a stand behind this rock! We’ll give the black beggars a lesson.”

The rock he referred to was a knife-like ridge that formed a natural breastwork. The five of them flung themselves down and slipped clips of cartridges into the magazines of their rifles.

“Steady firing, now!” rapped out Holloway curtly. “All together is the way that does the damage! Ready—fire!”

The five rifles crashed out in a compact, unified roar that woke the echoes in the hillside. Barely had the smoke blown away when a second volley ensued, even more horribly damaging than the first. The natives saw their fellows cut down four or five at a time, and stood undecided how to act. Even as they hesitated, a third blast bowled five more over, and a fourth, swiftly following, took an equally dismaying toll.

It was enough. The natives broke and fled for shelter; and the white men, abandoning their rock, pushed on again.

“That’s cooled their ardour a bit,” chuckled Holloway. “But it’s wrong to think we’ve shaken them off. The time will come when they’ll charge us like a lot of lunatics, and we’ll need a natural shelter to keep ’em off. I know the ways of the heathen brother—they won’t take long to get over this little surprise.”

As it happened, he expressed the native mind pretty correctly. The blacks, dodging cunningly behind trees and rocks, maintained the pursuit; and with every

minute their confidence grew, so that a concerted rush could not be long delayed.

But as the white men entered a long, narrow valley that lay like a huge gash in the hillside, the pursuit died down very suddenly. It was the most curious thing. The natives stood plainly in view at the entrance to the valley, but they made no move to enter it.

Jack Cleaver stared at them a moment.

"Funny," he said. "Notice how the nigs have gone cold on the chase. Not one of 'em will enter this gully—queer, isn't it?"

"Let's stop and watch them for a bit," suggested Lee Ferris. "Maybe this valley is taboo or something."

Accordingly, the five white men stopped, and even sat down; but the natives, although their numbers in the valley-mouth visibly increased, remained motionless.

"I know what it is," declared Holloway triumphantly. "This valley is probably taboo, for some reason or other. You know how superstitious the niggers are! Some ridiculous notion is abroad concerning this valley, and they daren't enter it, just on dark. We're safe, for a while at any rate. But we'll move along a bit."

Picking up their gear, they marched down the dusk-filled valley, secure from all pursuit. They had laughed at the superstition of the natives, but they were destined to discover that it was something more than mere superstition that held their pursuers back at the valley-mouth.



## CHAPTER XV

### THE VALLEY OF THE ANTS

THEY were safe here, at all events. Far safer than they had been out in the open, with arrows threatening destruction and spears hissing into the long grass. Here the valley closed into a sheer defile, which five men, adequately supplied with ammunition, could hold against five hundred until starvation enforced surrender. They went forward into the gathering dusk with lighter hearts.

Safe—so they told themselves. But in the mind of each of the five was lurking the recollection of the queer behaviour of the blacks. That memory left a strange taint of uneasiness. Why was it that the pursuit had baulked at the entrance of the valley? What reason was there for the sudden stoppage?

True, the Lieutenant had ventured an explanation. That the valley was taboo, that there was some local superstition that forbade entrance. But again—why? There must have been some reason for the taboo, superstition or not. A taboo is not declared for nothing at all; certainly there was something that caused the valley to be proscribed. The question was—what was that “something”? or rather, was it a mere triviality, or a thing that threatened actual danger to them all?

With thoughts in this strain, the five adventurers were somewhat silent during the earlier stages of their trip. Oppressed by premonitions of lurking danger, they scanned the situation with unusual closeness. But nothing out of the ordinary revealed itself; and after a while they allowed their suspicions to subside.

When it was quite dark, Holloway pulled up in the lee of a great escarpment of rock and looked about him.

“It’s too dark to go on,” he said. “What do you

say to camping here for the night? We'll take watch in turns, and be off first thing in the morning."

"Good enough, chief," said Remington, "I'm just about sick of toting this box around, and you other chaps don't look as if you'd like to start a ten-mile paperchase, either. Smoke-oh be it, I say."

The others, wearied with the stresses of their late adventures, were entirely in agreement. And so they sought shelter, took a little food, and turned in, with Jack taking the first watch.

The night passed without interruption. The five of them watched in turn, and there was no sign at all of the natives. When morning came, Remington roused them, and they made a hearty meal, refreshing themselves from the clear water of an adjacent spring. The ugly fears of the night before seemed pale and tame in the thin morning sunlight. Their spirits were buoyant, and they discussed the situation eagerly. Remington moved off to secure some sticks for a fire, with the intention of boiling tea-water, and the others studied the craggy hillside, with the great mountain towering above them.

"Up there," said the Lieutenant, "we'd be able to command a view of the sea, and know when any vessel was passing that might help us out of this hole. I propose that we make an effort to get out that way."

"Good idea, sir," said Jack. "The sides are a bit steep, but otherwise—great Scott! What on earth——?"

They all started to their feet as Remington came running back, crying out and wringing his hands.

"What's up, Rem? What——?"

"Ants!" cried Remington. "I'm bitten, and it's worse than putting your finger in a chaff-cutter, believe me. The big brutes are the size of rats, and they can run as fast as bally kangaroo dogs!"

"They bit you?"

"Yes, on the finger." He waved the injured member about wildly, ludicrously like a small boy who has just been caned. "I was hunting for sticks, and I disturbed them somehow. Came at me like tigers, too. One got

a grip on my finger—pew! I killed that one. The others——”

He turned and scanned the tangle through which he had broken.

“Hullo! here they come,” said Lee Ferris suddenly.

“Ants! Great Scott!” cried Jack. “What ants!”

They were ants, but as different from the domestic ant as the lioness from the domestic cat. They were as long as a man’s hand, bright red in colour, and incredibly active. They came forward with a complete absence of fear; came forward with the boldness and indifference of armed hunters advancing to the kill. Also, there were scores of them; they poured out of the cane-brake like a red, wriggling cascade.

“Look out!” howled Remington. “Don’t let them sting you—I’ve had some!”

There was great execution among the ants for a few minutes, but it made not the slightest difference. They simply swarmed, and it was not long before Lee and Hammond had also “had some.” They emitted howls of wrath and anguish.

“We can’t stay here,” cried Holloway. “We’ll be bitten to death! Up the hill, for all you’re worth. Ants—good heavens!”

They turned and fled before this new horror. The ants increased in numbers with staggering swiftness. It was as if the very ground oozed ants. And for courage and pertinacity they had the bull-dog ant left far behind. They swarmed after the white men with grim savagery. In a few minutes the whole floor of the valley was rippling and heaving—a sea of red.

It was utterly stupefying, vastly disconcerting. A reason for the taboo over the valley was not now wanting; it was plain that the natives had encountered the ants, and had been badly worsted on many distant occasions. The five madly-climbing adventurers shuddered to think how the bare-skinned niggers must have suffered from the savage bites of their small enemies.

Their own case was sufficiently dismaying, however. They discovered that the ants were capable of climbing

every whit as fast as they could themselves. They scrambled up great chutes of volcanic rock, rushed through grass covered ledges and staggered ankle-deep through screes of sand and rubble. Always their indefatigable pursuers were a yard or two behind them.

The ants acted with an intelligence foreign to most insects. They had powers of anticipation that were positively uncanny. Their advance was not a wild, animal-like rush. It was intelligent and resolute as the advance of columns of infantry. From point to point they raced, almost in ordered ranks. Some of them, indeed, were executing a flanking movement, seeking to cut the five men off from a path that zigzagged up the hillside. It was a near thing. Only by racing at a run for the narrowing path were they able to get through.

At that, Holloway and Jack, bringing up the rear, plunged into a savage sea of red bodies and wriggling legs. Two or three rapid steps took them through, and then they were clear; even so several ants had attached themselves to their clothing.

"Look out!" gasped Jack, "there's one whopping brute just——"

Smack!

His palm came down with force; an ant seeking to reach Holloway's collar, fell to the ground, where, maimed as it was, it wriggled and fought with unconquerable ferocity.

Then Jack felt an appalling sting on his bare instep, and he bent with a howl to brush off the vicious intruder. The scurrying creatures were but a yard in the rear; the whole hillside was inundated with them, so that a red patch spread upwards, as red-ink is absorbed by blotting-paper. Once Remington stumbled and fell; before he could recover, he was absolutely flooded by the ants. He lay yelling, ants pushing over and around him like waves round a rock.

"Jee-roosalem!" shouted Holloway, turning back and clutching at his fallen companion. "Come up—here!"

"It's my ankle—twisted—dash it all, I——" gasped

Remington, staggering up and falling again. He moaned with anguish, as the bites sank in—in a dozen places at once. It was like being pierced with red-hot needles.

Holloway did not hesitate one moment. Regardless of the swarming insects, he stooped and hoisted Remington on his shoulder with a fireman's lift. Desperation lent him, at that moment, a strength that amazed him.

Remington was no light weight, for all his spare willowy build; but the plucky Navy man ran after his companions as lightly burdened as with a child in arms, coming down heavily on his heel to dislodge the pertinacious ants.

He, too, was badly bitten; but Remington killed all the ants within reach, slapping madly at them as they crawled on himself and on his rescuer.

By this time they were nearly at the top of the hill. A fringe of grass ran round the bald summit, oddly like a fringe of hair on a bald man's head; and this gave Holloway an idea.

"The grass!" he howled. "Set it afire—quickly!"

Jack Cleaver stopped, pulled out a packet of matches, and fired a piece of dry bracken. The stuff, baked as dry as a tinder, flared up readily; and with this as a torch he ran swiftly along the line of grass. Swish, crackle! The stratagem succeeded magnificently. They saw the whole tract leap into flame; a singing wind spread the fire from end to end; hot flames, emitting a black rain of cinders, licked into the morning air.

"Sweet papa!" ejaculated Remington, sitting on the ground behind the fiery barrier. "That's just about fixed the brutes!"

Indeed, the ants were baffled by this latest manœuvre of their intended victims. They retreated to the rocky ground, where they remained, fanned by the heat, but unharmed.

"That won't keep them long," cried Jack, who had been exploring the hilltop. "Look! The fire's dying

down in parts already ; there isn't enough grass to keep it going. I've got a notion that will do the trick, though ! Come up here !”

They raced after him, with the exception of Remington, who was unable to do any racing just then, and who hobbled up painfully. At the top of the hill was an extinct crater, fully a hundred yards across ; it was brimming with a lake of shimmering water. Jack pointed to it excitedly.

“ See that crack ?” he asked. “ If we could take that as a beginning, and ram some powder into it, we might blast the whole side of the crater away. It's badly cracked already, and it'd fall out like the side of a tea-cup !”

“ And give the ants a bath ?” cried Holloway. “ Just the ticket, Cleaver ! Empty out all the cartridges you can manage, and we'll get powder enough.”

They worked madly. While Remington enlarged the cracks in the crater-side, the others accumulated hatfulls of powder, and rammed them in at a dozen places, tamping them down with a thick, blue clay that lay close by, and finally laying a train to enable the charges to be touched off.

“ Look out !” warned Remington. “ The fire's done, and the ants are pouring through. Quick with that light !”

It was a breathless moment. The ants, which had banked up in incredible numbers, were close at hand, as numerous as the sands of the sea.

Remington had lost his nerve. . . .

He was loosing off the whole contents of his automatic pistol at the onrushing army of ants. A more ineffectual proceeding could not be imagined. The revolver shots were useless against the advance of myriads of swarming insects. It was utterly futile.

In extenuation, it must be remembered that Remington had already had an experience with the terrible ants that he was not likely to forget. No doubt that unnerved him ; his sudden access of panic was pardonable, in the circumstances.

“Light the train!” he howled. “Can’t you——”

As a matter of fact, Jack Cleaver had already fired the train. Indeed, it was sizzling and spluttering under the very feet of the swarming ants. The thin line of fire smoked up to the charges, and the five men waited breathlessly.

No result.

“It’s failed!” cried Holloway. “It must have——”

*Boom! Boom! Boom!*

He had spoken too soon. The charges went off with muffled reports; there was a gush of sour smoke, then a pause. Then there was a rending, as the weakened rock, with the tons of water exerting pressure upon it, gave way.

Over it went with a roar. The liberated water hissed out in a huge jet, tearing away more fragments of the cracked crater in its impetuous rush. In a vast silver mass the water swept upon the army of the ants, plucking them up, sweeping them away like chaff in a gutter.

Perched high on the rim of the crater, the five men watched the destruction. As it spread, the water licked up the millions of ants, so that it was dyed red from their countless bodies. In a crimson cataract it poured down the long slopes into the valley, and the ants were swept back into their breeding-grounds far quicker than they had come up-hill.

“Cooled ’em off!” shouted Jack exultingly.

“Cleaver, you’re priceless,” said the Lieutenant. “If ever you’re in charge of a Fleet, your enemy won’t stand a show! I never saw such a fellow for ideas!”

Remington, whose panic had slipped from him as quickly as it had risen, laughed happily.

“Sweet papa,” he said, “but it was a glorious victory! Talk about the deadly avalanche!”

The water continued to gush out, spreading far and wide, and scattering such of the ants as still remained. When the lake had emptied as far as it would go, Lee Ferris stood up and gazed about him.

“Splendid view from here,” he commented. “I didn’t have much time to admire it on the way up,

but——” He laughed, and then changed the laugh to a shout in the same breath. “Jiminy!” he cried, “look who’s here!”

They all stared in the direction indicated by his pointing finger. Then Holloway apparently went quite mad. He plucked his cap off and threw it a dozen feet in the air. Then he proceeded to dance a delighted *pas seul*, most creditable in view of the limited space at his disposal.

“Everlasting fish-hooks!” he yelled. “It’s the *Thunderer*! *Thunderer* ahoy!”

Looking like a toy ship, the grim Australian cruiser was steaming along the north-west coast of the island. Jack and Lee looked at their beloved vessel with shining eyes.

“She’s the *Thunderer* all right,” said the former. “If only we can attract her attention!”

“We can signal,” said Holloway, with a sudden return to sober behaviour.

He turned and glanced about him.

“Cleaver,” he said, “cut down and get a couple of saplings from that clump of trees there. We’ll rig up a semaphore, and flag-wag the beggars.”

In a trice Jack had returned with a couple of long, thin poles. Holloway tied two jackets to them by the sleeves.

“They’re dark,” he explained, “and they’ll show up against the sky. We’ve used all our ammunition, haven’t we?”

“No—I’ve got a cartridge or two left,” answered Lee, feeling in his pockets.

“Then load all the rifles and automatics, and we’ll fire them all at once,” said Holloway. “I’ll wag the flags. Look slick!”

It was not long before Lee reported that all was in readiness. Then he, Hammond, and Remington fired all the available weapons, while Holloway, with Jack to help him, wagged the impromptu flags in the calling-up signal.

*Boom!*



The report, nicely managed, was quite considerable. At all events, it was successful, for the flags soon elicited a responsive flicker from the cruiser far below.

"Lie down, you chaps, and give us a clear skyline," said Holloway. "Ready, Cleaver?"

The great poles wagged to and fro in the semaphore signs: "Lieutenant Holloway of the *Austere* up here with four others *aaa* No ammunition left *aaa* Please send boat's crew to take us off *aaa* Beware of the natives *aaa*"

The letters *RD* came back, signifying that the message had been received; and shortly afterwards the five on the mountain-top had the gratification of seeing the motor-boat put off from the cruiser's side and head for the shore. They sat down to wait, with a feeling of utter relief that they had not known for weeks.

So it happened that the motor-boat's men, in charge of Midshipman O. A. C. F. Mountbarrel, came striding up the mountain-side. The sight of the alert, clean-looking men in their neat uniforms sent a strange thrill through the hearts of the castaways.

Mountbarrel, the dandy of the gun-room, looked positively out of place in those wild, primitive surroundings. His white uniform, with its brass buttons, was as immaculate as ever; the vizor of his naval cap glistened in the sun; his hair, in its unnatural sleekness, hinted at the use of hair-cream.

"Happy to meet you, sir," he said, saluting Holloway as the latter came forward. "I hope we can be of assistance and—great snakes! Who's this? Cleaver, you reckless brute, don't rumple my beastly uniform! And Ferris, too, by all that's marvellous!"

He fairly gaped.

"How, in the name of the nine gods, did you happen to be here?" he demanded.

"If you've got half a day to spare," laughed Jack, "I'll tell you. By the great Hook-block, I've a yarn to spin, too! But not now. Let's get back to the ship."

They descended and passed safely through the jungle on their way to the coast. Shortly afterwards, Jack

and Lee were back again in the gun-room, slapping their old pals on the back, and being slapped in return. They were simply in the seventh heaven of delight.

No time was lost in rigging them out with a new uniform apiece, while the steward was despatched for two jugs of "goffers" to celebrate the occasion. While they were engaged in spinning their yarns, amid incredulous comments from their fellow-midshipmen, a side-boy entered and said that Captain Stuart wished to see them in his cabin.

They hurried along, entered, and saluted.

The stern-faced, grizzle-haired Captain smiled widely as he glanced at them.

"I'm glad to get you back again, you young rascals," he said. "I see that you also wear the honourable marks of battle with the ants."

Indeed, Jack's face had a lump on it that resembled a mushroom, while Lee's hands were puffed in truly astonishing fashion. But it was Lieutenant Holloway who had suffered the most. With time, the ant-bites on his face and neck had swollen tremendously, and he looked as if he had just engaged in a bare-fist encounter with three heavyweight bruisers.

"Well, you've had some high old times," went on the Captain, shaking hands with them. Especially Cleaver here. Sit down, and let me hear the full tally of it all."

Jack went into his story at once, tersely narrating all that had happened since he had left the *Thunderer*. The Captain listened intently, while Commander Caggs, R.N., D.S.O., tugged at his beard and uttered astonished exclamations from time to time. When Jack had done, Captain Stuart rubbed his hands and nodded vigorously.

"Mr. Cleaver," he said, "you have done famously. On my soul, you're the luckiest young scamp in the Service! Your smashing of the pirates' stronghold is the best thing I've ever heard of, and you may be sure that it's gone a long way towards driving the scoundrel and his men off the seas."

‘I couldn’t have done it, sir,’ replied Jack, “without the help of Remington and the others. They stood by me splendidly.”

“I’m sure they did. And they won’t be forgotten when this business is wound up, and the raider’s discovered. I hear that the Chilian cruiser *Valdivia* was captured by the rogues, and is now in their hands. We had the news from the American battleships, which failed to overtake her. But, depend upon it, she’ll be found sooner or later, and I hope it’s the *Thunderer* that finds her first. With a stormy petrel like you on board,” he laughingly concluded, “that’s not such a remote possibility.”

It was by the merest chance that the *Thunderer* had called in at the island. She had simply turned out of her course to ascertain whether anything yet remained of the raider. Nothing was farther from the mind of her Captain than that he was destined to rescue the five castaways from a rather nasty hole.

There was now nothing to keep her in the neighbourhood of the Teipo group. She continued on her course towards the South American coast, where, in conjunction with the American ships and other vessels, she intended to close the net round the *Valdivia*.

That the net was tightening there was no doubt whatever. Raking the Chilian seas, the various ships of war left no loophole through which the *Valdivia* could double back into the wide Pacific. News came of the captured cruiser at intervals. She had passed by two becalmed sailing-ships, heading south for the Horn. Seemingly it was her object to get round into the Atlantic; and the units of the net, in wireless touch with one another, concentrated on that objective.

The *Thunderer*, the southernmost of the Fleet, struck a Danish steamer off the Arenas Archipelago with news of the flying *Valdivia*. Three days previously, the cruiser had held up the steamer and commandeered all her available coal, after which she had headed south towards the Straits of Magellan.

Wirelessing to her co-operating ships, the *Thunderer*

steamed off in pursuit. Veritably the coils were tightening about the Chief now. He had played his game, and played it with coolness and skill, but the avengers were hot on his tracks, and it did not seem as if retribution could be cheated much longer.

## CHAPTER XVI

### AT THE RIO RUIZ

THE *Thunderer* rounded the Horn during a propitious period when the seas of that dreaded region were, for a marvel, unusually indulgent. It was bitterly cold, and ice-floes were encountered at one stage; but she got through without mishap, and headed northward for the warmer latitudes of the Atlantic.

Three destroyers, despatched by the Argentine Republic, were steaming southward to meet her, and, incidentally, to keep a weather eye open for the much sought after *Valdivia*. These hornets of the seas would give the cruiser all the hurry-up she was likely to desire, if they ran across her in the course of their search.

Unfortunately, they were deprived of the pleasure; the encounter was deferred. They met the *Thunderer*, and exchanged greetings, together with regrets that the *Valdivia* had given them the slip.

It did not seem probable that the *Valdivia* had kept to the coast. Between them, the three destroyers and the *Thunderer* had ranged the whole Patagonian seaboard, and the *Valdivia* had been conspicuous by her absence. It seemed likely, therefore, that she had bolted into mid-Atlantic, bound for goodness-knew-where.

The Argentine vessels and the Australian cruiser parted company, and, spreading out, steamed eastwards. For two days they hunted, seeking news of the captured cruiser from passing vessels, but without avail. The *Valdivia* had vanished as completely as if the seas had swallowed her up.

At the end of that time the American battleships, together with two Australian destroyers, came round into the Atlantic to join the hunt. So that the seas could be systematically raked, they appointed a rendezvous at the Rio Ruiz, in order to hold a conference and

decide just how far they were prepared to pursue the *Valdivia*.

Obviously to chase her across the Atlantic was a plan that required some thinking over. For one thing, such a chase would take the warships miles out of their usual waters. Again, it was not certain that the *Valdivia* had gone that way. She had not been reported by a single ship, which was a serious objection to the theory that she had made a run for the open sea.

Accordingly the *Thunderer* repaired to the Rio Ruiz, a sluggish river on the Patagonian coast. She arrived there in advance of her fellow-hunters, and anchored in the mouth of the brown, turgid estuary to await their arrival.

It was not the most pleasant of places. The bleak coast had a desolate and forsaken aspect that had something of the grim, something of the sinister in it. Nothing more uninviting could have been imagined; yet the cheerful middies of the gun-room planned a trip ashore.

They obtained the necessary permission, and put off in the first cutter with high spirits. They had brought firearms with them, and intended to do some hunting in the bush, although what they proposed to hunt was problematical. Happy optimists all, they pulled with a will up the Rio Ruiz, reaching a point a couple of miles from the mouth.

Here they disembarked, and went scrambling up the steep barranca of the riverside.

"Tip-top hole, this," said Midshipman O. A. C. F. Mountbarrel. "I expect to bag a few tigers and——"

"Elephants?" supplied Lee Ferris scornfully. "You might as well be thorough while you're about it."

"At any rate," retorted the dandy of the gun-room, "I shan't be scared by a tribe of ants, like—— here, careful! Don't rumple my collar!"

"If you wish to preserve a whole collar," said Lee grimly, "refrain from cracking that ancient wheeze! The stings of the ants were hot enough, without the bites of your mosquitoes."

"Oh, hang your arguments!" said Blackmere

impatiently. "If you go on chattering like this, there'll be no game within miles!"

"That's so," rejoined Jack. "I vote we split up into parties of three, and scatter. Arrange to be back at the cutter by five. We can't all go tramping round the bush together—too much row."

So it was settled. They broke up, Mountbarrel allying himself with the inseparable Jack and Lee, and making farther up the river. It was hardly exciting at first, for shots were scarce. Mere birds they despised, but at length, Jack, with a sigh, pulled up and spoke.

"Hang it all," he said. "We'll have to get something. I'm going to see whether I can pot one of those green and red parrots with the revolver. We can't use the rifles, for they'd blow the birds into little bits. Pity we didn't have more shotguns between us."

The parrot selected sat high on the top of a great tree, and Jack, taking careful aim, let fly. The bird screeched and flew away indignantly.

"Miss one," murmured Jack; and then, suddenly, "what's that?"

A stifled growling made itself heard, coming, apparently from the lower branches of the great tree. The three middies stared; Jack emitted a gasp as he glimpsed a tawny-flecked hide, a flattened, wicked head and a pair of flaming green eyes.

*Swish!*

Out from the lower leaves it came, the stout branch quivering with the impetus of its spring—a monstrous, yellowish, cat-like shape that whizzed through the air with a quite horrible ease. Its outstretched forepaws, armed with sharp claws, lunged at Jack as it came through space.

Jack only just got out of the way. Even so, the great paw brushed his shoulder, ripping his jacket, and sending him sprawling into the undergrowth.

*Thump!* The great cat hit the ground, and whizzed round like lightning, snarling terribly. Flattened to the ground, it allowed them a momentary glimpse of eight feet of wickedness; its tail thrashed from side to

side; then, with an incredibly easy action for so weighty a creature, it sprang again.

It was making for the prostrate, helpless Jack. This time it looked as if all was over with the luckless midshipman. He gasped as the snarling animal came at him. . . .

*Bang!*

Over it went with the swift collapse of a truly collared footballer. The bullet had taken it fairly on the side of the head; even Mountbarrel himself was amazed at the success of his shot. Having dropped in a heap, the thing snarled madly, and struggled back on its feet.

*Bang! Bang!*

Both Lee and Mountbarrel fired this time, and the heavy service bullets smashed into the straining body. For a moment it seemed as if it was about to spring again; then, wheeling with wonderful agility, it leapt through the curtain of leaves and vanished, howling horribly.

Jack staggered to his feet, strangely sick and giddy.

“Holy Cæsar. What was that?”

“A puma! A narrow squeak—what?” Mountbarrel grinned cheerfully. “But the brute’s wounded—it can’t get far. What do you say to following it and nabbing its hide. Bit of a memento, don’t y’know!”

“Come along, then!” The reckless youngsters dashed into the bush, their guns held in readiness for instant use. A generous trail of blood, scattered on fallen leaves and near-by undergrowth, was a spoor that a blind man could almost have followed. They spurred on eagerly, incredibly anxious to possess their first puma-skin.

Exactly how far they chased that wounded puma they only realised when it was time for them to retrace their steps. Once, indeed, they came within view of it, sitting down and licking its wounds, grotesquely like a cat cleaning itself. But at sight of the hunters it got up and loped off, apparently little affected by the three bullets that had pierced its hide. So the long chase went on; and in the hot impetuosity of youth they



pursued the wounded beast for miles. Finally, Jack pulled up, panting.

“Keel-haul the thing!” he gasped. “It’s a member of the cat-tribe, and the brute’s got nine lives.”

“Eight of them left, too,” responded Mountbarrel, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with a marvellous silk handkerchief. “Somehow, I fancy we wouldn’t overhaul it even if we——”

He stopped, transfixed, the handkerchief still held to his forehead.

“Hear anything, you chaps?” he went on, in a lower tone. “I thought—listen.”

There was dead silence in the little glade for some seconds. Then Lee spoke in a strained whisper.

“What was it?”

“Voices. There—down the river.”

The chums nodded. Certainly they had caught the distinctive sound of distant voices. They looked questions at each other. Voices were not common in the heart of this primeval wilderness.

“Natives?” whispered Jack.

“Don’t know. We’ll have a look, anyway! This way, you fellows.”

They went silently forward. The other parties of midshipmen, they were well aware, had struck well out from the river bank; besides, the three puma-chasers had gone so fast and far that the others must have been left miles in the rear. No; the voices were not those of their companions, they were certain.

Then whose? They did not know, but they took no risks. As silently as Indians, moving with the stealth and guile of experienced shikaris, they drew near the river. Then Jack stopped and pulled at the sleeves of his mates.

“Down!” he breathed. “Look over yonder!”

It was a strange sight that met their eyes. In the river lay a great ship, moored to the bank. Her masts were festooned with vines, her funnels were concealed by huge masses of shrubbery. Close as they were the three middies had difficulty in making out her lines.

To a casual glance, she was invisible; only that they had been so keenly on the alert, they would almost have walked straight into her.

"Heavens above!" whispered Jack. "Do you know what ship that is?" Then, without giving his pals time to reply, he himself supplied the answer: "The *Valdivia*!"

By the merest chance they had found the retreat of the pirate ship, the vessel that was supposed to be half-way across the Atlantic. The Chief, with that cunning that had marked all his enterprises, had steamed miles up the Rio Ruiz and hidden his ship in the dense jungle. It was a perfect plan, but an accidental discovery had revealed the secret. Otherwise, the *Valdivia* would have been able to remain concealed for months on end, while the warships of the world were vainly seeking her in the open sea.

"We must get back," breathed Jack. "No noise—don't show ourselves."

They turned, and crept silently off; but as they did so there came a crashing in the bushes, and three men, with Eyolf at their head came into view, cutting off their retreat!

It is only fair to say that, if the three middies were taken by surprise, the three pirates were no less off their guard. In fact, the two parties were almost within touching distance before either realised what had occurred.

Then things happened very swiftly.

Eyolf recognised Jack immediately, and his expression showed blank surprise, then triumph, then rage.

"You prying cub!" he said, through set teeth.

"Out of my way——" began Jack.

"So!" gritted Eyolf. His hand went with a marvellous quickness to his belt, and came back gripping a great revolver. The first shot whined past Jack's ear, and the next——

There was no next. Mountbarrel, cool as a cucumber, saw to that. Recognising the murderous light in the German's eyes, he fired, with that uncanny accuracy

that the puma had had reason to regret. Eyolf pitched forward on his face—dead.

Nor did Jack waste any of his precious time in reflecting over the scoundrel's end. He leaped upon the second man, and smashed home a staggering left that tilted the fellow's head back; then, with a right follow to the jaw, temptingly upturned, he knocked him out.

The third man gave trouble. He fired, and his shot scored Lee's shoulder badly. Jack, grappling with him prevented further shooting, but the man was as strong as a bull, and got one smash home on Jack's nose that made the young officer see numerous stars of surpassing variety and brilliance. Then, realising that the raiders were pouring out of the *Valdivia*, Lee decided that something drastic had to be done.

He did it with the butt-end of his rifle. Brought down with force and precision on the fellow's head, it knocked him senseless; and the next moment the three youngsters were running—running for their lives.

Behind them they could hear the cries and the firing of their pursuers, and the crashes as they hurled themselves desperately through the thick scrub.

Of that terrible run the midshipmen do not like to speak. In their wild career through the forest they were cut and scratched by vindictive thorns; vines lurked treacherously to trip them up and delay them for precious moments. The pursuit was grim and determined. But the boys were running as they had never run before—they knew that the news must be got through to the *Thunderer*, even if it killed them.

And so they tore onwards. Even when the sounds of pursuit died away, they did not dare to slacken speed. They went on and on.

The other middies, awaiting them in the cutter, were grumbling at their lateness. They had prepared a series of biting remarks on hunters who get lost, for the edification of Jack, Lee, and Mountbarrel. They had them in readiness as the three came dashing up.

But they promptly forgot their prepared sarcasm

when three bleeding, dishevelled, tattered youths came scrambling down the barranca. Truly they were an alarming sight. Jack's nose, flowing from the blow he had been dealt, had encrimsoned his whole face and most of his attire. The hands of the three were raw from scratches and cuts; their clothing hung in ribbons. They were panting as if they would never stop. They just tumbled into the cutter and lay exhausted, panting out instructions to move off as quickly as possible.

Alarmed, disquieted, the others pulled out and down the stream. Bit by bit the story came out; and then the rowers redoubled their efforts.

They reached the *Thunderer*, and spread the amazing news that the *Valdivia* was concealed several miles up the Rio Ruiz. Then it was that the Navy showed how quickly it could be ready to fight.

"Action stations," was sounded, and the cruiser heaved in her anchors and turned slowly round.

At a quarter to six she began to steam swiftly up the turgid flood of the Rio Ruiz.

"There she is!"

The *Valdivia* was coming out to fight. Her smokestacks spouting great floods of smoke, she raced forward to meet the *Thunderer*, the brown water curving from her prow in a gushing wave.

The two vessels opened fire simultaneously; at that range they could not miss. But it was an unequal battle from the commencement. The armament of the *Thunderer* was far and away heavier than that of the somewhat old-fashioned Chilean cruiser. Her great shells wrought fearful damage.

As soon as she had sighted the *Valdivia*, the *Thunderer* went astern, backing out of the river as the other cruiser came on; but the battle, such as it was, was short and sharp. The restricted area of the operations prevented any resource to finesse. It was akin to those savage duels in which two men, their left wrists tied together, wield daggers in their free hands. There was no room for manœuvring.

In less than three minutes the *Thunderer* had rendered her opponent helpless, smashing every gun on her decks. One of her own funnels was battered into a shapeless mass, but she had come out of it very well, all things considered. The *Valdivia* sagged against the bank, making no reply, thoroughly whipped.

"Do you surrender?" ran the flags on the *Thunderer's* halliards.

"They don't want any more toko, surely," grinned a burly A.B. wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

They didn't. From information gleaned from survivors afterwards, the *Valdivia's* crew were eager, to a man, for surrender. Only one wished otherwise—their leader.

The Chief, badly wounded on his wrecked bridge, was defiant to the last. Raging, he shook his fist at the *Thunderer*; alternately raving at the enemy and his own sullen, spiritless crew. But a sudden calm came upon him; once more he was the cool, cynical adventurer. A gambler to the last, he had played all his cards and seen them trumped by an unfriendly fate.

His last card had been spent—fruitlessly. He had risked much on the move, expected much from his run into shelter and obscurity; but it too had let him down. He was up against the real thing this time.

His last card? Wrong; there was another. At the end of his tether, he counted on something else, and he did not hesitate one moment to put it into effect. He stepped over to the switch that was placed ready to his hand, and as calmly as he would have turned on the electric light he pressed it over, and turned on—destruction.

It is safe to say his hand did not even tremble as it reached out and operated the switch. . . .

*Boom!*

A stunning, stupefying crash, that echoed and re-echoed in the desolate hills, sending the birds into the air for miles around, startling the wild animals of the forest in the distant fastnesses of the jungle. The

*Valdivia* burst open like a paper bag. The air was thick with flying fragments; smoke swirled about the muddy waters of the Rio Ruiz.

The Chief had mined the magazine, and exploded it by electricity.

Those on board the *Thunderer*, after a moment of sheer amazement, removed their caps; then, lowering the boats hastily, they hurried to the relief of the survivors. Of the entire crew, but twenty miserable men were recovered.

The *Valdivia* had ceased to exist. Fragments of her had been hurled far into the jungle; the shattered hull had gone down instantly, only the tip of one of the masts showing above water.

And there, in the muddy waters of the Rio Ruiz, in the heart of the unknown Patagonian jungle, our story is at an end, as far as The Sea Raiders are concerned.

The full tally of what subsequently happened to our heroes would make a story itself. The *Thunderer* returned to Australia to receive the enthusiastic plaudits of the world. Her Captain was promoted; Holloway was given command over the biggest, fastest, newest destroyer of them all, fresh from the dockyards, which made him proud as Lucifer. Remington, with his share of the tidy reward offered by the Governments of Australia and the United States, plunged headlong into the adventure of business. Seaman Hammond found himself, amazingly, a petty officer on Holloway's ship.

As for Jack and Lee—it would be easier, perhaps, to omit the sum total of banquets, invitations, and presentations that were showered upon them by an admiring public. Jack, in fact, received so many gold and silver watches from shipping companies and the like that his locker resembled nothing so much as a pawnbroker's shop. It was his great day; but as coolly as he had passed through the tight corners of his late adventures, so coolly did he stem the tide of praise and adulation.

There, then, we will leave him and his pals at the

threshold of a naval career auspiciously begun—a career destined to hold many excitements and stirring adventures. Some day these, too, may be recorded, and we will set forth how Jack and Lee subsequently—— But that, as Kipling remarks, is “another story.”

THE END





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