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SUNK AT SEA.

By CHAS. HAMILTON.



Dick thrust forward his ear, and knocked the mate back.
Phil and Duncan sprang into the longboat.

No. 270

SUNK AT SEA.

By CHAS. HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

The "Sea-Nymph"—The Cabin-boy's Predicament— What Dick Langton Overheard in the Captain's Cabin.

"Keep a sharp look-out, Brail. I am expecting to fall in with the 'Neptune' off Cape Bojador. Call me the moment you see a sail."

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied the boatswain of the "Sea-Nymph." And Captain Barbidge, making a sign to his chief mate to follow him, went below.

The "Sea-Nymph," of Liverpool, was standing off and on, under easy sail, within sight of that strip of sand and rock stretching out into the Atlantic from the West African coast known as Cape Bojador. Ever since the earliest streak of dawn Captain Barbidge had been scanning the horizon in search of a sail, with an impatience that was visible to the crew and most surprising to them. No one on board could imagine why the skipper, who was bound to Valparaiso, should be so anxious to meet another vessel off the African coast. The whole crew, from boatswain Brail down to cabin-boy Dick Langton, puzzled over the matter, without being able to find any satisfactory solution to the mystery. An uneasy feeling, a vague foreboding that some underhand work was intended, pervaded the minds of the seamen.

Dick Langton, though the lowest in rank of the ship's company, was probably the one whose surmises were nearest the truth. For in his capacity of cabin-boy he was so frequently in and out of the officers' cabins that, keen-witted as he was, he often picked up scraps of conversation between the captain and the mate which put him on the scent. We do not mean to say that Dick played the spy. He was too high-spirited a lad to be guilty of that meanest of all small sins. But some unguarded expressions of Captain Barbidge, who often spoke more freely in the presence of the boy than he would have done had Dick been older, had aroused young Langton's suspicions, and he could not help putting two and two together.

Now, when Captain Barbidge spoke the words which open our story, and descended the companion with Dalston, the chief mate, Dick Langton was in the cabin, where he had no business to be at that moment.

There was a certain chart, which Dick often saw Captain Barbidge and Dalston poring over, which, when not in use, the skipper kept in a padlocked locker. In his anxiety about the ship he was to meet, the captain had forgotten his usual caution, and had left the chart lying open upon the table. Dick, passing the open cabin-door, had seen it there, and could not resist the temptation to dart in and have a look at it. Scarcely had his eyes rested upon the coveted sight, when he heard the footsteps of the captain upon the companion-ladder.

Dick Langton fairly jumped, startled almost into terror. If the captain found him there, he could not fail to guess the reason of his visit. What could he do to avoid discovery? He could not leave the cabin without being seen. In an instant his resolution was taken. A long cloth, reaching nearly to the floor, covered the table. Dick lifted the fringe, and plunged beneath it. Crouched under the table, the cabin-boy was completely concealed by the table-cover.

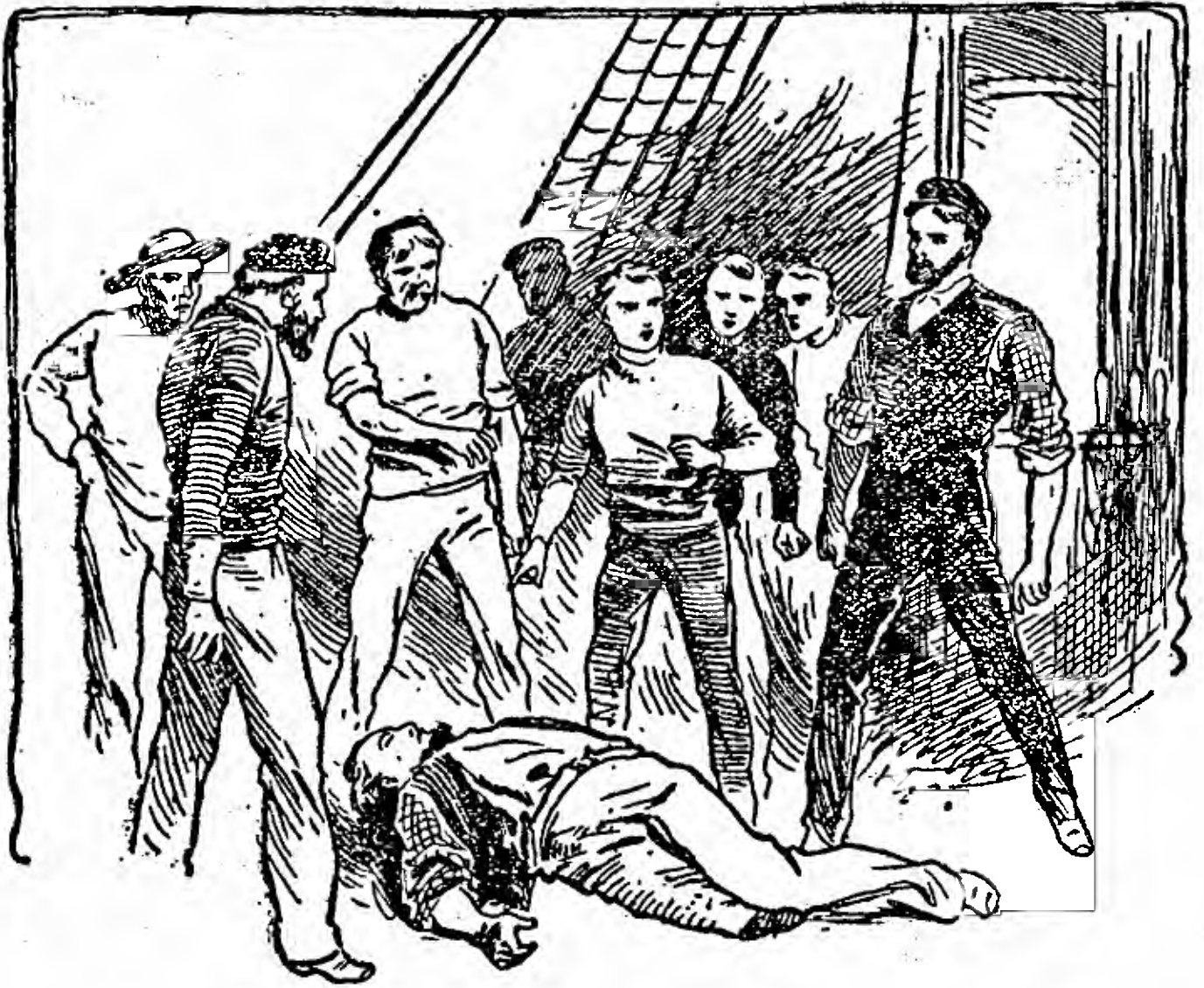
How his heart beat as the step of the captain sounded on the carpet! So quickly had Barbidge entered, that Dick fancied that the swaying of the table-cover would betray his

presence. But the skipper was too preoccupied to take note of so trivial a circumstance. If he observed it, he probably attributed it to the wind.

"Shut the door, Dalston," he said. "I want to speak to you about this affair."

Dick heard these words with dismay. He had hoped that the skipper would remain only a few minutes. But it seemed that the two officers had come down for a private consultation. Dearly as he wished to know what secret existed between the captain and the chief mate, Dick was far from desiring to play the eavesdropper. But it was now unavoidable. To discover his presence to them would be to expose himself to a severe punishment, and he was already badly enough treated by the two men, both of them brutal and unfeeling towards those unlucky enough to be in their power. And soon, as the precious pair went on speaking, Dick was too interested to wish himself anywhere but where he was, in spite of his scruples.

"You don't think we have missed the 'Neptune,' do you, captain?" asked Dalston, as he seated himself upon the edge



"Mr. Brail, sir; and he's dead." "Good heavens! Can it be possible? Bring a lantern, somebody."

of the table, his feet resting within a few inches of the hidden cabin-boy.

"No, Dalston; we can't calculate to an hour," replied the skipper. "The 'Neptune' may not even turn up until tomorrow. But haven't you noticed something queer about the crew? As soon as they heard that I anticipated meeting a vessel on this coast they began to nod and whisper. Do you think it possible that they can suspect anything, Dalston?"

"They cannot suspect the truth; that's impossible. But certainly, what we're doing has a rather queer look about it, captain."

"It'll look queerer when the 'Neptune' turns up, and we transfer our cargo to her and take in ballast," replied the captain, with a chuckle.

"Between you and me, captain, the seamen will be thick-headed if they don't see through the game when we do that."

"Their suspicions won't be strong enough for them to act upon. I am going to make it a point to be a little more liberal with them for the future. For, look you, the provisions that

are not eaten will go down with the 'Sea-Nymph,' so what's the use of being sparing with them? Double grog, and duff three times a week; if that won't win seamen's hearts, nothing will."

"Have you finally fixed upon the spot where the 'Sea-Nymph' is to be introduced to Davy Jones?"

"Yes, I have marked it on the chart with a red cross. Look, here you are, about three hundred miles off the coast of Brazil, in the latitude of Porto Allegro. A lonelier part it would puzzle you to find."

"Loneliness, of course, is what we want, captain; but we may have too much of a good thing," Dalston said, laughing. "We want to be picked up, you know; it would be a sorry ending to our little game if we starved on the sea, or turned cannibals and devoured each other."

"No danger of that, I reckon, Dalston; I shall take proper precautions. Our boat will be well found and provisioned, and a few days' sail will take us into the regular route of the steamers to Rio Janeiro. Depend upon it, we shall come out all right."

"I don't doubt it, and I shall look upon that thousand as easily earned."

"The owners will make thirty thousand, of which I shall have five and you one. Hard lines, when we have to do all the work and take all the risks! Hang it all, Dalston, I'd rather earn the money any other way, I tell you."

"Well, of course, there's danger in this kind of work——" "I wasn't thinking of the danger," the captain replied frowningly. "It's those fellows who will have to go to Davy Jones's locker before I get my five thousand!"

"Come, captain," Dalston said banteringly, "are you beginning to be thin-skinned just now, at the last moment, when everything promises success?"

"No; but yet, I can't help thinking of——" "Oh, yes, you can, if you try. If you must think, think of the time when you will command your own ship, bought with the profit you make out of this business."

"If I ever do, I won't have you for my chief mate," said Captain Barbidge. "I shouldn't feel safe with you; you're such a cool villain, Dalston!"

"Thanks! But what's that? 'A sail,' is he crying?" "The 'Neptune' at last, I hope," said the captain.

"Sail on lee bow!" Bosun Brail was shouting down the companion.

Captain Barbidge thrust the chart into the locker and turned the key, and the two conspirators left the cabin and gained the deck.

Then Dick Langton crept out from his hiding-place, pale-faced and shivering.

He had heard enough to tell him everything.

All the careless sentences of the captain, which at different times had excited his suspicions that some kind of foul play was meditated by those two men, were now explained. The "Sea-Nymph" was a "coffin-ship," heavily insured, and destined by the owners to be sent to the bottom of the Atlantic with the whole crew. The words of the two heartless scoundrels could bear no other meaning. Langton had entered the cabin to gain information from the chart; he had, by accident, gained enough to destroy utterly his sense of security while he remained on board the coffin-ship.

"It is terrible!" he muttered, as he crept through the cuddy, escaping unseen from the captain's cabin, the attention of everyone being concentrated upon the strange sail which had appeared to leeward. "What can I do to frustrate those fendish wretches, and save the 'Sea-Nymph'? I must talk it over with Phil and Duncan, and see what they think of it. After all, there is plenty of time."

CHAPTER 2.

The Crew Mystified—The Cargoes Changed—Dick Consults his Chums—He Confides in the Bosun—"Murder most Foul."

If the crew of the "Sea-Nymph" had been surprised by the strange anxiety the captain manifested to meet with the "Neptune," his proceedings after the vessels had joined perfectly astounded the seamen. The ship which Bosun Brail had sighted during the colloquy in the cabin was soon ascertained to be the one the captain expected. After exchanging signals, they proceeded together to a small inlet in Cape Bojador, where they anchored amid the shoals.

Then Captain Barbidge called the crew together.

"My lads," he said, "I have work—hard work—for you to do now. There must be no shirking or complaining. But, if you are active and dutiful, I will see that you do not lose by it."

The seamen looked puzzled, as well they might. The boatswain, the usual spokesman of the seamen in dealing with a captain, made reply:

"What is it you require of us, sir?" he asked.

"The cargo of the 'Sea-Nymph' is to be transferred to

yonder vessel, and I want the work over as quickly as possible."

If the maintopmast had suddenly nodded, and spoken those words, the crew could hardly have been more astounded. They looked at each other in silence, and every face expressed vague uneasiness and alarm. Of all who stood there, only Dick Langton, the Irish cabin-boy, possessed the clue to the mystery.

The "Sea-Nymph" did not possess one of the finest crews possible. In fact, Captain Barbidge had, in choosing his men, purposely picked out those who were most likely to be as wax in his hands. The smart alertness of the British seaman was little seen on board the "Sea-Nymph." Although of 900 tons burden, she had a company of only fifteen—the captain, the mate, the boatswain, the cook, the carpenter, seven ordinary seamen, and three boys. These were Phil Johnson, an English lad of fifteen, Duncan Fife, a Scottish boy, and Dick Langton, who hailed from Dublin. The three boys were close chums, and always stood by one another for mutual protection, as they needed to do, for the crew were a rough lot, much given to kicking and cursing. Four of the sailors were Lascars, and the cook was a German. This variety among his men Captain Barbidge had planned, because mutual antipathies would prevent them from ever uniting against his authority.

As he made his startling announcement, the skipper looked keenly over the collected crew to see how they took it. He was satisfied to notice only astonishment and vague doubt upon their faces, and not the suspicion he had half-expected.

"But, sir——" began the boatswain, who was, probably, the sharpest fellow on board, and a decided out above the rest of the crew. "But, sir——"

"Have you any questions to ask, Brail?" The captain's voice was gentle and courteous, in marked contrast to his habitual rude and bullying demeanour.

"With your permission, sir, I have," said Brail.

"Speak freely, then. What is it that you want to know?"

"What for is the cargo of the 'Sea-Nymph' to be unloaded?"

"I have orders from the owners. The 'Neptune' is to take our cargo on to Valparaiso, and we are to run into Buenos Ayres for a new cargo."

"But why don't we do the job at some quay, 'stead of pickin' out a desert coast like this here?"

"I can only say that I am strictly observing the orders of the owners. That is sufficient for me, and it must be sufficient for you. Have you more to ask?"

"No, sir," replied the boatswain, and he stepped back among the crew; but the expression of his face rendered the captain slightly uneasy. However dense the other seamen might be, the boatswain was no fool. The strange conduct of the captain, and the refusal of an explanation, had plainly made Brail suspicious of something.

The difficulty of unloading a ship in the situation of the "Sea-Nymph" was great; but the crew, quickened by the promise of reward, set to work with a will. The men of the "Neptune," all foreigners, who could not speak a word of English, assisted in the labour, which went forward rapidly. Dick Langton had no opportunity to inform his mates of the discovery he had made that morning. Hard at work the crew were kept all through the day and far into the night. When they knocked off at last, the three boys went to rest in the crowded forecabin, no place to tell secrets in. At dawn labour was resumed, the regular watches being discontinued. At mid-day the seamen took their dinner on shore, and ate it sitting on the sand. Now came Dick's chance. He and his chums took their rations to a rock which jutted out into the sea, where, out of earshot of the crew, they were at liberty to speak.

"A queer idea this of the captain's," Phil Johnson remarked. "What can he mean by changing the cargo into another craft?"

"He must have a bee in his bonnet," replied Duncan Fife. "I can explain," said Dick quietly. "I have been waiting for a chance to speak to you, so listen."

And the Irish lad related his adventure in the captain's cabin, and the startling conversation he had overheard while concealed beneath the table. His chums listened with eyes wide-opened with astonishment.

"By George, this is serious!" Phil said, when he had finished.

"Serious enough. If there were any doubts about it, the skipper's conduct now would dispel them. The spalpeen manes to scuttle the ship!"

Dick, born and bred in Erin, had a touch of the Irish brogue, and whenever he was excited this became more pronounced. He was, however, a well-educated boy, and had originally been intended for a midshipman in the Royal Navy; but his father's failure in business, and subsequent death, had thrown him upon his own resources.

"Surely, he cannot mean to let the crew go down?" Duncan said.

"About that I'm not sure; but he plainly said that som

fellows would have to go to Davy Jones's before he got his five thousand, so he must mane to sacrifice at least a part of the crew, Duncan."

"That's certain," Phil observed. "But now, what ought to be done? Knowing the villainy the captain purposes we cannot let him do his horrible work unopposed."

"I hardly know what ought to be done. If we betray our knowledge the crew will be alarmed, and Captain Barbidge will deny my story. I have no witnesses; it will be my word against his, that's all. Which is the more likely to be believed? The captain's, of course. He has always been a bully to me, and he will say that I invented the story in revenge."

"No one will believe you. But it seems horrible to leave the crew unsuspecting, at the mercy of that assassin. Besides, our own lives are at stake."

"I think I can find a middle course. You noticed how Bosun Brail looked when the captain first told us about changing the cargo?"

"Yes: Brail smelt a rat, I believe."

"I will tell everything to Brail on the quiet."

"And if he doesn't believe you?"

"Then nothing more can be done. We will keep a secret watch upon the captain and the chief mate as soon as we are at sea again. Now I understand why Captain Barbidge quarrelled with his second mate and sent him ashore at Deal. He didn't want anyone aft to spy on his actions."

"The captain cannot make his preparations for abandoning the ship without one of us finding him out, Dick. He'll want a boat, with provisions and water enough to last him until picked up by some vessel."

"We must keep him in sight, and that will not be difficult, as I am in the starboard-watch, and you two in the port, so that one or two of us will always be on deck. But, for Heaven's sake, don't let the shan roghara suspect what we're doing, or he wouldn't stop a moment about throwing us overboard!"

The consultation of the three boys ended in the decision to communicate with the boatswain upon the first opportunity. But that opportunity it was hard to find. For some reason, Brail was always kept under the eye of the captain or the mate, and the lads soon saw that the boatswain was, in fact, being closely watched. The conspirators had determined that he should have no chance to alarm the crew by airing his suspicions, if he felt any.

For several days the "Sea-Nymph" and the "Neptune" remained together; and when the latter had finished taking on board the cargo of the former, giving her ballast in exchange, both vessels stood out to sea.

The "Neptune" stood south-west, the "Sea-Nymph" south, and they speedily lost sight of each other.

The regular routine was now resumed on board the "Sea-Nymph." There being no second mate, Bosun Brail took the starboard-watch, and Dick Langton, being in the same watch, he was at last able to speak to Brail. In the middle-watch, which begins at midnight, he at last unbosomed himself. Brail was, momentarily, released from the vigilance of the captain and mate, both being below.

"Mr. Brail," Dick said, stopping beside the seaman and speaking in a low voice, "I have something important to tell you."

"What is it, Paddy?" asked Brail. He was a kindhearted fellow, and Dick was a favourite with him; he was, in fact, the only man on board with whom the Irish lad was safe from ill-usage, the rest being roughs and rowdies.

"It's about the captain, sir. I have found out that he means to sink the 'Sea-Nymph' off the coast of South America."

Brail gave a start, and looked earnestly at the cabin-boy.

"Tell me what you know," he said shortly.

Dick did so, as briefly as possible. His manner, quiet and earnest, showed the astute seaman that he was speaking the truth. Brail listened calmly, and remained silent for a few minutes.

"The infernal scoundrels!" he said, at length, in a suppressed voice. "The cowardly dastards! But they shall be defeated—yet how?"

"There must be a way, sir," said Dick.

"Yes, we could imprison the pair in their cabins—the crew would join me, for their own security—and take the ship to the nearest port. But when we arrived there we should be arrested as mutineers. We could prove nothing against these two."

"The changing of the cargo," urged Dick.

"Would prove nothing. The owners are evidently in the game, and they would uphold the action of the captain. Your word, too, would go for nothing against that of the officers. But leave me now; I will think over it."

Dick left the boatswain, who paced the deck, much perturbed in mind.

Meanwhile, a consultation was also being held in the captain's cabin.

Captain Barbidge, pale as death in the lamplight, sat facing Dalston, who was as cool and composed as ever.

"It must be done, Barbidge," Dalston said calmly. "What is there to make a fuss about? When we scuttle—"

"Don't speak so loudly, for Heaven's sake!"

"Nonsense! No one could possibly hear me. As I was saying, when the 'Sea-Nymph' is scuttled the whole set will be drowned. What do a few days more or less matter in the case of one man? Brail has got to go to Davy Jones's; why not to-night just as well as next week?"

"But—but actual murder!" stammered the captain.

"Pooh! I will see to all that. Calm yourself, captain, and remain in your cabin. You can be too fast asleep, if you like, to hear the cry of 'Man overboard!'"

Dalston quitted the cabin, shutting the door after him, and ascended the companion.

Captain Barbidge remained alone. Quite as great a villain as his subordinate, he did not possess the animal courage of Dalston, so that in their conspiracy it was the mate who played the leading part. Dalston was a thorough ruffian, heartless and conscienceless, hardened in crime, and full of bulldog determination.

"And that is the man," muttered the skipper, "with whom I am to trust myself alone on the sea when the 'Sea-Nymph' has gone down! Luckily, he will have no reason to turn on me!"

Bosun Brail looked gloomily at Dalston when he appeared on deck. The rascally mate had no idea of what was passing in Brail's mind. He was too busied with the dastardly scheme he had formed to notice the boatswain's expression.

"We shall have a capful of wind before four bells," he said. "I reckon it will be best to reef the topgallant. What do you think, Brail?"

"It would be safer, sir," Brail answered shortly. He could hardly force himself to speak civilly to his superior officer, knowing what he did.

Perhaps Dalston noticed something peculiar in his tone. If he did, it only strengthened his already-formed resolve to get rid of him for ever.

"Hands aloft to take in maintopgallant!" sang out the chief mate, and he led the way.

The seamen sprang into the rigging. The darkness was thick, and no one saw how, on the maintop, one man struck another a savage blow, hurling him to the deck. The chief mate alone heard the thud of the falling form upon the planks and the dying groan which followed, but he said nothing. The topgallant sail was taken in, and the seamen returned to the deck. Dick Langton, nimblest of all, was the first down, and as he leaped upon the deck he heard a faint moan from the foot of the mainmast. A spring carried him down to the main-deck, and there, inanimate and lifeless, he saw Brail the boatswain.

His startled cry of horror brought the whole watch to the spot.

"What yer cryin' out erbout?" demanded one rough 'foremast hand.

"Look! Mr. Brail—dead!"

"Great tornados! How did he come like this?"

"What's the matter?" asked the calm voice of the chief mate, as Dalston, having taken care to be the last to descend, advanced towards the horrified group.

"Mr. Brail, sir—and he's dead!"

"Good heavens! is it possible! Bring a lantern, somebody, quick!" cried the mate.

A lantern was quickly brought. Dalston, without trembling or changing colour in the least, knelt and flashed its light upon the boatswain. The face of the unfortunate man was white and ghastly, and the unnatural posture of his head showed that his neck had been broken. One of his legs was twisted beneath him, broken also. He was dead. Dick Langton had heard his last moan.

"Poor fellow!" said Dalston. "Poor fellow! He must have missed his footing in the dark. Poor fellow!"

So natural an explanation of the catastrophe could hardly be refused credence, even by Dick, who mistrusted the mate thoroughly. Dalston was so composed, and his face expressed regret with such apparent sincerity, that the Irish lad was partly, if not wholly, deceived.

"I must go and inform the captain of this terrible accident," Dalston said, rising. "Ah, my boy," he added, as he saw the tears running down Dick's cheeks, "you may well cry for his loss, for never a truer sailor trod a plank! Carry him to his bunk, my lads, and be tender with the poor fellow!"

In sorrowful silence the seamen carried the dead man forward, while the mate walked aft to the cabins under the poop.

Captain Barbidge looked up inquiringly as the relentless villain came into his presence, composed, as usual.

"I have heard something," the more timid scoundrel said hesitatingly. "Has anything happened, Dalston?"

"I am sorry to have to report an accident, captain. I gave orders to furl the maintop gallant-sail, and went aloft myself to

help, and when we descended we found that the bosun had fallen to the deck and broken his neck!"

"Is he dead?" said the captain hoarsely.

"Yes; we must bury him at sea to-morrow. A most lamentable accident!"

"Dalston, you are a demon!"

"You are too flattering. Good-night."

Dalston went to his own cabin, and in a few minutes was in his bunk, sleeping as soundly as though nothing had happened.

CHAPTER 3.

Dalston Tries it on—The Alarm—The Tables Turned on Dick—Condemned—Dick upon his Mettle—The Lamb becomes a Lion—The Three Messmates Agree to Leave the "Sea-Nymph"—In an Open Boat.

Dick, when afterwards he thought coolly over the circumstances of the boatswain's death, and discussed the matter with his chums, could not but come to the conclusion that there had been foul play. But his own judgment, as well as the



Just as he rose he gave a start of terror as he felt a heavy hand fall on his shoulder.

advice of Phil and Duncan, urged him to keep silence about his surmises. An accusation, when he could prove nothing, would be worse than useless. Indeed, now that the conspirators had shown that they would not stop short of assassination to secure themselves, it would have been suicide to have made them dread him. Only by keeping strict secrecy could he hope, not only to bask them in the end, but to preserve his own life.

As our hero had learned from the captain's conversation with Dalston that the ship was to be scuttled in the latitude of Porto Allegro, in Brazil, there was no immediate cause for anxiety. The voyage of the "Sea-Nymph" across the line was uneventful. The captain and mate had, by this time, managed to regain the goodwill of the crew. Brail, buried at sea the day after his death, was almost forgotten. "Duff" thrice a week, double allowance of grog every now and then, and suchlike favours, had had the effect the skipper anticipated, and though the officers could not quite stop their bullying, they exercised it chiefly upon the three boys, whose good opinion was nothing to them.

When at last the "Sea-Nymph" passed the tropic of

Capricorn, and neared the spot where the scuttling was to take place, the three chums became vigilant as hawks. Their only hope of saving themselves and the ship lay in catching the criminals in the act, and thereby proving their guilt to the crew.

One starry night, when the starboard-watch, to which Dick belonged, was on deck, the acute young Irishman noticed signs which showed that the beginning of the end was at hand. Although Dick acted as cabin-boy, he was compelled to take the watches with the seamen, the crew of the "Sea-Nymph" being so small that every hand was required to do the work of the ship. When the starboard-watch was off duty, either Phil or Duncan became cabin-boy for the time being. Why Captain Barbidge went to sea with so small a crew is not clear, unless meanness in the matter of wages was the cause. Or perhaps he was actuated by a strange freak of humanity, and wished to earn his blood-money by drowning as few men as possible.

On the night we allude to, the "Sea-Nymph" was approaching the 30th degree of south latitude, and was between two and three hundred miles from the coast of southern Brazil. The nearest land was Tristan d'Acunha, and that was too far off to be of any assistance to the crew, abandoned upon the scuttled ship.

The loss of the boatswain compelled the captain to take watches alternately with the mate. This night, in the "first watch" (8 p.m. to midnight), Captain Barbidge was "officer of the watch." There were only five others on deck.

"It's a beautiful night," the captain remarked to the seamen. "You've had some hard hauling to-day, my lads. I won't keep you out of your hammocks, you can go below. If I want you I'll call you."

This considerate offer of the usually selfish and harsh captain was surprising enough, but it was too pleasing to be declined, and the seamen gladly went to the fore-castle. Dick Langton went with as much alacrity as the rest, but not to his hammock. He knew, as well as if the captain had told him so, that the villainous plan of the conspirators was now about to be put into execution. He did not enter the fore-castle with the seamen, but slipped away aft, 'tween decks. As he was cabin-boy, his absence would excite no comment in the fo'c's'le; the men, of course, would think that he was on duty in the cuddy.

"The spalpeens are at their work, bedad," Dick muttered, with difficulty keeping calm, as he crept into the pantry, now dark and deserted. "But if I don't spoil them, and show them up, may I never see ould Ireland again!"

The captain, pacing the gangway, whistled "Hearts of Oak" in a low key. It was a signal. Before two bars were whistled Dalston issued from his cabin, carrying some tools in his hand. From the pantry Dick saw him plainly. The chief mate went below into the hold, and there turned on the light of a dark-lantern. Dick, leaping over the top of the main hatchway, heard the sound of a hammer below.

It was the intention of the conspirators to drill holes in the bottom, plug them, and then prepare the boat. When all was ready, the plugs could be withdrawn, the boat put off in an instant, and the ship left to founder. Dalston meant to drill holes in all the boats, and cut them adrift, before leaving the ship, excepting, of course, the one reserved for himself and the captain.

Dick knew now that the fatal work was begun. Enough had been done by the mate's drill to convince the crew, when they examined the spot, that Dalston had intended to scuttle the ship. Satisfied of this, Dick rose from his stooping posture to go forward and acquaint the inmates of the fo'c's'le with his discovery. But just as he rose he gave a start of terror as he felt a heavy hand fall upon his shoulder.

In his interest in Dalston's doings he had almost forgotten the captain. The latter, descending to the main deck to join his confederate, had observed the boy in an attitude that betrayed everything. He grasped him, while his face was distorted by a horrible expression of terror and demoniacal rage mingled.

"So," he hissed, "you—you whelp! you must needs spy upon us? You shall repent it!" And he dragged the boy to the nearest deck-port.

The first surprise over, Dick began to struggle manfully. "Help! help!" he shouted. "Help! help! Murder! murder!"

From stem to stern of the "Sea-Nymph" rang the cry, like the blast of a trumpet.

"Silence!" hissed Captain Barbidge, gripping his throat.

Dalston came out of the hold in two bounds.

The situation of the captain and the cabin-boy told him everything. Seizing Dick, he jerked him forcibly towards, not the sea, but the hatchway. Unexpected by the boy, the movement could not be resisted; before he well knew what had happened, Dick was borne into the hold, where Dalston held him in a grip of iron.

"Are you mad, Dalston?" said the captain hoarsely.

"No!" said the mate, between his teeth. "It is you who are a fool! I have discovered this little rascal trying to scuttle the ship, in revenge upon us for rope's-ending him. Call the crew; for Heaven's sake, be quick!"

Captain Barbidge understood now the diabolical plot which the brain of Dalston had so quickly conceived to meet this dread emergency.

"Tumble up, lads!" he shouted. "Ahoy, there! tumble up! All hands on deck!"

Dick Langton's cry had aroused the seamen, and the captain's voice guided them to the spot.

"Ay, ay, sir! Anything wrong?"

"Anything wrong? I should think there is! If Dalston hadn't happened to be awake, you'd all be at the bottom by now. That young scoundrel Langton has attempted to scuttle the ship!"

The seamen gave a murmur of astonishment.

Phil and Duncan, utterly taken aback, remained silent.

"Yes," said Dalston, dragging Dick up to the main-deck; "I heard him moving in the ouddy, and wondered what he was up to, and got out of my bunk to see; and here's where I found him, drilling holes in the ship's bottom!"

The crew made a motion towards Dick, as if to seize him and wreak vengeance upon him on the spot. Dick, with a sudden wrench, tore himself free from the grasp of Dalston.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "It was——"

The chief mate sprang upon him like a tiger, and, with a grip on his throat, cut short his speech. But Duncan Fife spoke up.

"It was the captain or Dalston who were scuttling the ship!" he exclaimed. "Dick discovered them, and they're trying to throw it upon him."

"You lying rascal!" roared the captain. And he rushed upon the unprepared young Scot, and sent him flying across the deck with a brutal blow.

"It's the truth!" broke in Phil Johnson. "Mates, this is a coffin-ship, and the captain is employed by the owners to scuttle her! That's why he changed the cargo at Cape Bojador for ballast. Stand off, Captain Barbidge, or, by Heaven, I'll strike you dead!"

And the English lad brandished his opened knife, facing the captain, who was about to leap upon him like a wild beast.

It had never entered the minds of the conspirators that the three chums knew of their plans; they had deemed the cabin-boy's discovery of their plans accidental. But now, the crew, hearing what the three boys said, looked doubtfully upon the captain, the allusion to the changed cargo particularly influencing them.

Dalston, who saw that all was lost if the boys' accusations were allowed to make any impression upon the minds of the crew, acted quickly.

"My lads," he said, "I suppose you're all too sensible to take stock in the clumsy lies of these little rascals! Many times, when Langton has been punished, he has sworn to have revenge; but I never regarded that——"

"You lie!" interjected Dick

"But here's what it has led to. The young fiend has tried to drown us all! He cannot remain on board the 'Sea-Nymph,' or our lives will never be safe!"

"Chuck him overboard!" exclaimed the carpenter of the ship, who hated Dick, our hero having once knocked him down with a belaying-pin in return for a blow.

"Stand by me, mesmates!" Dick exclaimed. "I swear it was Dalston who was drilling holes, and your lives will pay for it if you believe him!"

But Dalston had an advantage; he was stronger than Dick, and could throttle back his words. Half the cabin-boy's speech was lost to the seamen. The chief mate understood the danger of allowing Dick to speak, and he compressed his grip upon the boy's throat until he was nearly strangled.

But, if Dick was perforce dumb, his chums had tongues. Phil and Duncan, who had been only momentarily silenced by the skipper's blow, spoke up boldly. But force was unluckily on the side of the villains. The captain seized Duncan; and, at a word from him, two of the Lascars threw themselves upon Phil, and, wrenching away his knife, made him a prisoner.

"Those two, at least, can know nothing about the matter," the captain said to the seamen. "And this isn't a matter to be discussed with boys."

"What's to be done with this little scoundrel?" Dalston said, shaking Dick, and choking back the words he tried to utter.

"Chuck him overboard!" repeated the carpenter.

"Do you agree to that, captain?" asked the mate.

"Yes; our lives won't be safe while he remains on board Over with him!"

The remorseless mate dragged the lad to the side.

The crew looked on with indifference. The conspirators, by making the first accusation, had prepossessed the men in their favour. Dick's counter-charge did, in fact, somewhat resemble a reckless falsehood, told by one caught red-handed, to those who did not know what the three chums knew. And Phil and Duncan's defence of their mate was nothing, as it was easily supposed that they spoke from partiality, and the seamen, ignorant of what the boys knew, were not likely to be led in their opinions by these drudges of the ship. And Barbidge and Dalston took good care to cut short the explanations the chums tried to make to the crew. The crew were, therefore, against Dick wholly, though momentarily influenced by Phil's allusion to the changing of the cargo, which was indeed an argument in favour of his chum.

So not a hand was raised in Dick's behalf as the savage-hearted mate dragged him to the ship's side. Phil and Duncan tried in vain to go to his assistance.

Dick, realising that his life was at stake, made a desperate effort to win his liberty. He kicked backwards at Dalston's shins, and as the mate, with a yell of pain, relaxed his hold for an instant, the nimble lad darted away. After him sprang Dalston; Dick threw himself down; Dalston, unable to stop, pitched right over him, crashing upon the deck. Dick was up again in a flash, and ran into the cuddy, quickly reaching the captain's cabin.

The captain had a pair of handsome revolvers, which he kept ready loaded in a drawer of his table. Dick, who had practised shooting before he went to sea, in his palmy days as a rich merchant's son, was anxious to get hold of these weapons. With a six-shooter in his hand, he felt that he could defend his life. Hastily he opened the drawer. Only one pistol was there; the other was probably in the captain's pocket. One, however, was enough for Dick. He grasped it, saw that it was fully loaded, and put his finger upon the trigger just in time. Dalston, his face bleeding, cut by his fall, and panting with rage, came bursting into the cabin.

"Stand back!" cried Dick. "Stand back, or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

His face was set; his voice rang with resolve. Dalston, brave as he was, stopped, and started back.

"Put down that pistol!" he said threateningly.

"That's likely. Turn round, you hound, and go on deck! I'll follow you."

Quivering with repressed fury, the mate obeyed. Dick followed him with levelled pistol, and rejoined the group, placing his back against the mainmast to be secure from an attack in the rear.

"Captain Barbidge," said the chief mate, in a choking voice, "you hate a pistol; draw it, and wing that young fiend!"

"Captain Barbidge," Dick said coolly, "if I see a pistol in your hand, I will shoot you through the heart!"

Every eye was bent upon Dick Langton in amazement, as he stood there, erect, with flashing eyes, the starlight gleaming on the polished barrel of his pistol. A change seemed to have suddenly come over him. Only sixteen years of age—a year older than his two friends—Dick was a sturdy, well-formed lad—determined, self-reliant, and a tough customer in a tussle. But to the eyes of the crew he appeared to have leapt into manhood all at once; they could hardly recognise this stern-faced, resolute fellow who defied them, as the former quiet, even-tempered cabin-boy.

Captain Barbidge, cowed by the levelled six-shooter and the flashing orbs behind it, looked questioningly at the mate. Dalston bent his glance upon Dick with a scowl of the bitterest hate.

"So you wish to add murder to your list of virtues before you go to Davy Jones!" he said sneeringly.

"I shall protect my life!" Dick replied. "Canudo and Benida, release my mate, unless you want starlight let through you! Captain Barbidge, do the same!"

In an instant Phil and Duncan were at Dick's side, and each armed himself with an iron belaying-pin, no mean weapon in a close fight.

"We'll stand by you, Dick!" exclaimed Phil.

"That we will, my laddie!" Duncan said, flourishing his club. "Come on, anybody who wants a braw tuzie, and get a cracked skull!"

If Dalston could have depended upon the crew, he would have "rushed" the three bold lads who stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the mainmast. But the four Lascars he knew to be rank cowards, and the others, excepting the carpenter, would not have cared to risk their lives merely to please the mate. So Dalston hesitated, hardly knowing what to do. But seeing that Dick, safe now, was about to address the crew, he put a spoke in just in time.

"Back to the fo'c's'le, lads!" he ordered. "The captain and I will deal with these scamps!"

"Don't go," said Dick. "I will prove to you——"

"Hold your tongue, you whelp! How dare you interrupt me! By the Lord Harry, I'll give you a rope's-ending for what you've done to-night!"

"You've got to get hold of me first, Mr. Dalston. Mess-mates, listen to me!"

The seamen, however, returned to the fore-castle in obedience to the mate, though rather reluctantly, speaking to each other in whispers.

"Now, my lads," the chief mate said, "we had best call it a drawn game. I will give you a boat and provisions, and you can leave the 'Sea-Nymph,' for I'm resolved that you shall not remain on board."

"Wherever we go, we all go together!" declared Phil.

"You may all go to the bottom together, for all I care," was the amiable reply.

"Agreed, then," Dick assented. "Give us one of the quarter-boats, and three months' rations, and we'll go."

A compromise was, in fact, necessary. The trio could not always hold the two conspirators at bay upon the main-deck. If they remained on board, Dalston would soon find some means of getting rid of them. The mate was determined upon their death, but he had a secret plan for securing that.

"I'll give the orders, then," said Dalston. "Now, put away your pistol, Langton."

"Thanks; but I prefer to remain on my guard," replied Dick.

Dalston scowled, and called back the four Lascars.

"Clear out the port quarter-boat," he said. "And put rations for three months in the locker for these three lads."

"Phil," said Dick, "see that it is done properly, while I keep watch upon these two villains. Captain Barbidge, and you, Dalston, be warned. You are both to remain here, and stand as you are. On the first suspicious movement either of you make, I shall fire. Don't think that I shall miss; I have practised for a long time, and I can hit the bull's-eye eleven times in twelve. I don't want to shed blood, but in defence of my life I shall not hesitate. So beware!"

The resolute ring of his clear voice showed that his mind was fully made up. He was, in fact, half inclined to shoot, any way, for he knew that only the death of the conspirators could save the ship from scuttling and the crew from drowning. It was not mercy that held his hand. It was the knowledge that he would be seized by the very crew for whose sake he acted, delivered up to the authorities at the first port, and hanged for murder. No, the crew would not listen to him, and if he could not save them without condemning himself, he must leave them to their doom. Only in self-defence would he fire.

Captain Barbidge and the mate did not oppose Dick. The change that had come over the Irish lad daunted the former, and the latter was consoled for his present defeat by the near prospect of revenge. It was his intention, as soon as the boys should be in the boat, to bear down upon it and swamp it. But for the prospect of this, he would have rushed upon Dick and risked the pistol.

Phil and Duncan were hardly less surprised than the officers at finding their messmate so easily assume the character of a stubborn, self-reliant man. Unforeseen circumstances often bring out a man's character in colours the most unexpected. When dangers and difficulties are thickest, he who is born to command makes himself known at once by his actions.

Under Phil's supervision, the quarter-boat was stored, sails and oars put in, and lowered. Dick directed his two ohms to enter it first, the lines were cast off, and the lads stepped the mast.

"All's ready, laddie!" called out Duncan.

"Lay by to take me in. Captain, I must trouble you for your pistol. I do not wish to run the risk of being shot in the back. I will not be disposed of so easily as poor Brail, I promise you!"

Dalston started violently; but, recovering himself, he made a sign to the captain to obey. Barbidge, completely under the dominion of his mate, submitted; Dick, taking the revolver, dropped it into his pocket. Then, still keeping the pair under cover, he backed to the side. He quite expected that Dalston would make a rush to take him behind as he got into the chains; therefore he was expeditious; two bounds landed him in the boat.

"Shove off!" he cried exultantly.

Phil shoved off with an oar, while Dick and Duncan set the lugsail; the breeze caught it, and the boat flew from the ship's side. Then the boys heard Dalston's voice ringing along the deck.

"Tumble up there, tumble up! All hands on deck! If I don't run that boat down in a brace of shakes, my I never taste liquor again!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Phil. "We are lost. He means to run us down!"

CHAPTER 4

Dalston Checked—A Deep Game—The "Sea-Nymph" Scuttled—A Fearful Deed—Left to Perish.

"Look alive there!" shouted Dalston, as the crew came out of the fore-castle. "Do you hear, you set of lubberly swabs! Man the lee braces. Helmsman, you are to run down that boat!"

The seamen stared at him in surprise. The helm had been lashed while the conspirators had been at their nefarious work; but now Dalston had sent the carpenter to the wheel, feeling that that ruffian could be trusted to do his worst for the boys' boat. The carpenter was willing enough to gratify his hatred for Dick by sending him to the bottom of the sea with his mates, but the rest of the crew were of a different mind. The three English sailors, rough fellows as they were, shrank from such a deed.

Believing that Dick had attempted to scuttle the ship, they did not care for him; but they would not assist in the massacre of three lads, two of whom at least were innocent. These three seamen and two of the Lascars turned their backs on Dalston, and walked back into the fore-castle. The German cook followed them, with the remark that it was "von great zhamme to vant to trown der dree poys mit deir boat." The remaining two Lascars seemed much inclined to imitate their shipmates.

"You lubbers!" shouted Dalston, "come back, or I'll come with a handspike and fetch you, d'ye hear?"

"Do your own dirty work!" called back one of the seamen.

"You swab, don't the young villain deserve to go under for trying to scuttle us?"

"De oders didn't dry to scuttle," the German cook remarked.

"We four ought to be able to manage it," Dalston said, turning from the recalcitrant crew and addressing the captain. "Come, Benida and Canuda, lend a hand. We'll have 'em yet!"

The two Lascars did not reply, but, exchanging a look, went into the fore-castle and joined their comrades. This new defection made Dalston stamp with rage.

"You have other pistols?" he said quickly to the skipper.

"Yes, in the locker in my cabin."

"Fetch one quickly, will you? It may not be too late to pick off those infernal young scoundrels!"

Meanwhile, the three lads in the quarter-boat had not been idle. With the lugsail drawing, and Phil at the tiller, they glided rapidly away from the "Sea-Nymph," which was slowly moving southward. Every moment they expected to see the gigantic hull of the ship towering over the frail skiff.

"If they bear down upon us we shall be swamped," said Duncan.

"I hope not. Our craft is lighter; we may avoid her rush."

"They don't seem to be tacking," Phil remarked. "Perhaps the crew refuse to be a party to such a cowardly deed!"

"It is possible."

"In that case, we have nothing to fear."

"Unless they open fire on us," answered Duncan.

"I thought of that," said Dick. "In this starlight, bright as it is, it would be difficult to take aim. I think we can call ourselves safe now."

"Look! there's the mate with a pistol!" cried Duncan.

Dalston, having obtained one of the skipper's revolvers, had told the helmsman to edge as near the boat as he could without bracing the yards. Leaning over the taffrail, he aimed at the boat, and fired the six shots in swift succession. But too much time had been lost. The boat was too far; the light of the stars uncertain. The nearest of the bullets whizzed by a cable's length from the boat. Dalston flung the revolver upon the deck with a savage oath.

"I'll have them yet!" he swore. "They laugh at us now, but they shall go under, by Pluto, they shall!"

The captain approached him with a gloomy brow.

"And this is the end?" he said sneeringly. "Your cleverness has ended in this. You are a fool and a bungler, Ben Dalston! Had I flung the brat into the sea when I could have done it we could have bullied the crew into quietness, whatever they thought of my deed. Now, those three whelps are free, to be picked up by the first passing vessel, to tell the tale of the scuttling of the 'Sea-Nymph.'"

"Captain Barbidge," replied Dalston, with bitter disdain, "I have always known you to be a fool and a coward, and I begin to suspect that you are weak-brained as well! I have sworn that those three brats shall die! In this latitude, where is the ship that will pick them up? When we leave the 'Sea-Nymph' in the longboat, what is to prevent our hunting them down, and sending them to the bottom of the sea?"

"Simply this, that when we leave the 'Sea-Nymph' they will be too far off——"

"We leave the 'Sea-Nymph' this night!"

The captain looked at him in unbounded astonishment.

"To-night?" he echoed.

"Ay. What better time! The crew are sullen, and have gone into the fo'c's'le. No one can interfere with us."

"The carpenter—"

"I shall fool him. Prepare to leave the ship, then. Come, no drawing back. We are in the same boat; you won't take the lead, so you must follow mine."

The captain had been enraged by his subordinate's insolence; but it was too late to stand upon a matter of dignity. He sullenly went to his cabin to make his preparations, and Dalston went aft to the man at the wheel. The stormy scenes we have described had occupied almost the whole of the first watch, and it was now close upon midnight. The stars, shining like brilliants in the expanse of dark-blue sky, were reflected in the ocean. It was a lovely night, possessing all that soft and dreamy beauty found only in southern climes. Dalston, however, was as insensible as an ox to the beauties of Nature, and the hushed calmness of midnight on the sea did not tend to soothe his angry passions, or soften his flinty heart.

"My man," he said, stopping beside the carpenter, "there isn't a whisper of wind; the ship can take care of herself. Secure the wheel; I want you to help me."

"Ay, ay, sir," the carpenter replied.

"The fact is, I am going after those brats in the long-boat, and I want you to come with me. With the long-boat's sails we shall run 'em down in an hour or two. I know I'm asking you to do work you're not paid for; but you sha'n't lose by it; you shall have fifty pounds when they're under water!"

"Have you skipper's orders for it, sir?"

"Yes; you can ask the captain. Look you, my lad, I won't let Langton escape, after accusing me as he did. You don't bear him any love, either, after being knocked down by him with a handspike. As for Johnson and Fifo, we won't harm them if they'll come back peaceably. I recollect that we're short-handed, and may need them."

"I'm your man, sir—at any rate, about Langton." The ruffian, though he would willingly have swamped the boys' boat, had a scruple about killing the lads with his own hands, which Dalston, guessing, removed, as we have said, by pretending that it was only Dick Langton's life that he sought.

With the carpenter's assistance, Dalston cleared the long-boat, and, "in case of accidents," as he said, put in stores. The quantity of the stores, for such a short trip, rather surprised the carpenter, who, however, only shrugged his shoulders at what he deemed the mate's over-carefulness. When the work was finished, the captain came on deck, and remained talking with the carpenter while Dalston went below.

After making sure that he was not observed, the villainous mate tranquilly drilled holes in the timber in several places which would be difficult for the seamen to get at, if they should attempt to stop the leaks. He did not leave the hold until the water was bubbling in. Then he returned to the deck, and the long-boat was lowered, the carpenter getting into it to keep it off the hull until Dalston was ready to embark.

"What are we to do with that poor wretch, Dalston?" the captain whispered.

"I will knock him on the head," the mate replied coolly.

"The other boats? They must be rendered useless."

"I am about to attend to that."

And he did. A plank was ripped out of each, and the mate then cut them adrift. The splashes in the water caught the attention of the carpenter.

"What's up?" he called out

Dalston sprang into the boat by his side.

"What have you done to the boats, sir?" exclaimed the carpenter, suspicion strongly written upon his face.

The mate, without a word, sprang at him, and struck him full in the face. The boat rocked; the unfortunate man lost his balance, and fell backwards into the sea. He disappeared for a moment, then rose again, clutching the gunwale of the boat. The mate seized an oar with both hands, and swung it aloft to strike.

"Mercy!" shrieked the seaman. "Spare my life!"

The pitiless blow descended; he tried to avoid it in vain; he sank, and the moonlit water gleamed purple with blood.

"Quick, captain!" cried Dalston. "Jump for you life!"

There was no time to lose. The cry of the murdered man must have alarmed the crew. The captain dropped into the boat; the mast had already been raised, and in a minute the mainsail was shaken loose.

There was a trampling of feet upon the deck, a hubbub of voices. The roused sailors were out of the fo'c's'le already.

If they succeeded in boarding the long-boat! Captain Barbidge shuddered at the thought. Dalston, more courageous, sharply told him to take the tiller, trimmed the sail, and the boat shot forth from the great hull like a shaft from a bow.

Ten yards only separated the long-boat from the ship, when the fierce faces of the abandoned seamen glared over the side. The crew knew all now. As they came out of the fore-castle they heard the water pouring into the hold. They knew that the ship was scuttled; themselves doomed to a watery grave.

"Come back!" yelled one, shaking his fist at the boat, which receded fast.

Dalston sent back a mocking laugh. The long-boat flew onward, becoming soon a mere speck in the moonlight. And the crew, overwhelmed with despair, were left to die on board the coffin-ship!

CHAPTER 5.

The Open Boat on the Atlantic—The Burning Ship—Dick Rescues Ida Wilson from the Fire—The Story of the Catastrophe—One Reason why British Seamen should Man British Vessels—The Longboat in Sight—Barbidge and Dalston Again—"Let them Come!"

"Can you see anything yonder, Phil?" asked Dick Langton.

It was the morning after their departure from the "Sea-Nymph." The sun was shining on the vast expanse of water which surrounded the quarter-boat manned by these three British boys. They had, during the remainder of the eventful night, kept steadily to the north-west, their only chance of rescue being that they might fall in with some homeward-bound Australian trader. Their only course was to get into the regular track of ships, and a north-westerly direction was the likeliest.

At sunrise they ate their breakfast, talking cheerily the while. Dangerous as their situation was, in an open boat on the pathless ocean, it did not damp their spirits. They had escaped the haunting anxiety which they could not but feel while on board the coffin-ship. Their only regret was that they had been compelled to leave the crew of the "Sea-Nymph" to their fate. The men had never been messmates to them, but rather cruel bullies, yet it was not pleasant to think of the certain doom that hung over the "Sea-Nymph." But regrets were useless, and the boys strove to banish the matter from their minds by discussing their own situation and chances of rescue.

It was a couple of hours after breakfast when Dick spoke the words which open this chapter. He had been standing up in the bow, shading his eyes with his hand, gazing steadily over the curling waves. The sea, heaving in long billows, imparted to the boat the motion of a see-saw, the bow being alternately raised on a curling crest and dipped into a hollow beyond. Dick, however, was a thorough sailor, and the motion of the boat did not unsteady him, or cause him to take his eyes from the object which had attracted his attention.

In answer to his question, Phil Johnson strained his eyes in the same direction, the north-west, towards which the boat was swiftly flying.

"I think there's a faint streak of something against the sky," he replied. "It looks like the smoke of a steamer."

"Luck is with us! I believe that's what it is, Phil. Come here, Duncan."

The Scottish lad secured the tiller, and came forward. After an earnest glance, he, too, pronounced the streak to be smoke.

"A ship, for certain!" Dick said, his heart beating. "How fortunate for us, alanna, that we left the 'Sea-Nymph' last night. I never dared to hope that we should be picked up the first day. It seems almost too good to be true, begorra!"

"Maybe it is too gude," suggested Duncan, whose Scottish mind was less hopeful, being more practical and "canny" than Dick's. "Maybe, it is too gude, laddie, to be true."

Dick, who possessed the true Irish optimistic temperament, only laughed.

"We shall soon see," Phil remarked. "The smoke, or whatever it is, lies directly in our course, and an hour will settle the question. What a pity we haven't a telescope. I ought to have thought of it when the boat was loaded."

Swiftly flew the boat, the sail drawing splendidly in the breeze; and the young hearts of the voyagers bounded with the bounding of the dancing skiff.

Nearer they drew to the dusky cloud which patched the azure of the horizon. And when an hour had gone by, their faces grew less cheery. The smoke spread out into a large, fanlike cloud, too vast to issue from the funnels of the largest steamer. They could not see a vessel, if one was there; the smoke hid it.

"What can it be?" Dick muttered uneasily. "The smoke is enough for a dozen steamers."

"Don't you smell something?" asked Phil, sniffing suspiciously.

"By George, yes! Something's burning. Can the ship be on fire?" gasped Dick, filled with dismay at the thought.

"That's it," Duncan said, with conviction. "The amount of smoke ought to have told us so before. It's a burning ship!"

It was a cruel disappointment. Their hopes had risen so high, and now, at a blow, they were annihilated. Yet, after the first minute of blank dismay, the first thought of the young Britons was a generous one.

"There may be some persons yet on board that craft," Dick

said slowly. "Let us keep on; if any are there we may be able to save them."

The others nodded assent. Prudence would have warned them to avoid the burning ship. Their boat was small, their food and water limited; they were themselves in danger of starving on the sea. But when did prudence ever deter British bluejackets from attempting to aid fellow-creatures in distress?

With that generous disregard of selfish considerations which we may justly claim as a leading characteristic of our gallant seamen, the three young sailors were prepared to run any risks to save anyone who might yet be on board the burning ship. And as, in spite of cynics, virtue seldom goes unrewarded, even in this world, our heroes were destined to owe their ultimate rescue to their generosity upon the present occasion.

Fast flew the boat, skimming the waves, and soon the boys saw the hull of the strange vessel, enveloped in smoke, with flames bursting from the portholes and the fore-castle. The craft was a barque, and the young sailors could read the name on her bows, the "Osprey." There was much more smoke than flame about the vessel, which showed that the conflagration was as yet mainly confined to the cargo and the 'tween decks. The hatches had been battened down, doubtless to keep the fire under while the crew escaped. That they had escaped was apparent, for there was no sign of a man or a boat anywhere about the "Osprey."



Dick relinquished the insensible girl into the arms of Phil, who laid her gently in the stern-sheets.

"She is deserted," Dick remarked. "The crew are gone; but it sometimes happens that some poor fellow is left behind in the confusion and hurry, so we'll just examine her, to make sure."

The sail was taken in, and the boys rowed round the barque. On the leeward side the smoke blinded them, and they made haste to get back to the windward.

"I'll hail them," said Dick. "If anyone is on board, we shall hear a reply."

"Unless they're overcome with the smoke, Dick."

"Well, I'll try a hail. Ahoy!" he shouted, at the top of his voice. "Ahoy, the 'Osprey'! Is anyone on board?"

"Help!"

The single word, which expressed so much, rang from the stern of the barque. The three chums looked at one another with paling faces.

"A woman's voice!" Phil ejaculated.

"Close up, under the chains. I am going to board."

"Heaven aid you, laddie!" said Duncan. Neither of his chums tried to dissuade him. They would willingly have taken his place. But the Irish lad was their admitted leader, and he had a right to go.

It was a "right" which few would have cared to dispute with him in the burning ship. Smoke and flame roared to oppose him. Undaunted by perils, he sprang into the chains, and reached the deck. A moment later the black vapour swallowed him up, and he disappeared from the sight of his chums.

With his cap drawn over his eyes, Dick Langton stumbled through the blinding smoke into the cuddy of the barque. Terribly risky work, for at any moment the deck, heated by the furnace below, might have collapsed beneath his feet, and let him through into the pit of roaring fire. In the cuddy, fortunately, the smoke was less dense; the conflagration appeared to be principally in the forepart of the ship.

"Where are you?" shouted Dick, with a strength of lung that Stentor himself might have envied. "Answer me, quickly!"

"Here," replied a feeble voice, choked by vapour.

Dick dashed into the cabin whence the voice came. The opening of the door let in the smoke in denser volumes, and the cabin, before pretty well filled, became like a London fog in its obscurity. Dimly Dick saw a slim, graceful figure—a face that, though darkened by smoke, and drawn with horror, was yet beautiful in its outlines.

"Save me!" cried the girl, springing towards Dick.

"I will. Come; I must carry you!"

The girl was almost fainting, incapable of the exertions necessary to reach the boat. Without ceremony Dick clasped her in his arms as if she had been a child, and lifted her from the floor. Out of the cabin he carried her, and was about to recross the deck, when, with a deafening crash, the planks fell in, and a dazzling pyramid of flame shot up from the now exposed furnace. Dick reeled back just in time, and set down his fair burden at the foot of the companion-ladder.

"Wait here a moment!" he cried, and sprang up the companion. But it was closed above; his frenzied blows were futile. In a few seconds he rejoined her. She was insensible; terror had mastered her.

"The cabin windows; our only chance," Dick muttered; and, clasping the tender form once more, he plunged into the aftmost cabin. The floor, or deck, was cracking with the heat below; through two or three gaps flames shot up. But that fearfully dangerous floor had to be crossed, and he crossed it bravely, and, by the help of Heaven, reached the cabin windows. He opened the window; the barque was an old-fashioned "tub," with large ones in the stern, fortunately for Dick and the girl he carried. He leaned through the aperture, lifting the girl through by main force, and held her suspended over the water. How sweet was the cool sea-breeze that fanned his aching forehead!

"Phil! Duncan!" he shouted. "Aft for your lives!"

They heard, and understood. In one second the boat rocked beneath the cabin windows. Dick relinquished the insensible

girl into the arms of Phil, who laid her gently in the stern-sheets. At the same moment the planks under Dick's feet gave way; flames scorched his boots. Had he not been leaning over the window-frame he would have fallen helplessly into the fire beneath. A dizziness came over him, his senses swam; but, with a final effort, he pitched forward into the sea, and Phil dragged him into the boat, where he lay senseless.

"Poor Dick!" said Phil, with tears in his eyes. "Duncan, attend to the lady, will you, while I look after Dick?"

Duncan, after shoving off from the "Osprey," to avoid the smouldering spars which now began to drop into the sea, did as Phil asked. The faces of the fainting pair were bathed in seawater, caught up in the caps of the boys, and Dick Langton quickly came to himself.

"Is she safe?" he gasped, starting up.

"Yes, quite safe, Dick, but in a faint."

"Are there others on board, do you think, laddie?" Duncan asked.

"No, or they would have called out. But I'll ask this lady when she comes to. Phil, take the tiller; you take the oars, Dun.

We must give that craft a wide berth, if we don't want to go down with her to Davy Jones's."

Dick attended to the girl he had rescued, while the others obeyed his commands. The boat rested at six cables' length from the doomed barque. The masts and spars were now alight; fire shot up as high as the main truck.

The girl opened her eyes—eyes of the deepest blue, which sent a thrill to Dick's heart as they met his.

"Have no fear," Dick said reassuringly; "you are safe, with friends."

"You saved me?" murmured she.

"I was fortunate enough to do so, with Heaven's aid. Can you tell me if there was anyone else on board that ship?"

"No one, I believe. Ah," she said, shuddering, and covering her face with her hands, "it was terrible! They fought for the boats; no one remembered me but my father, and he they carried away by force. Ah, it was terrible!"

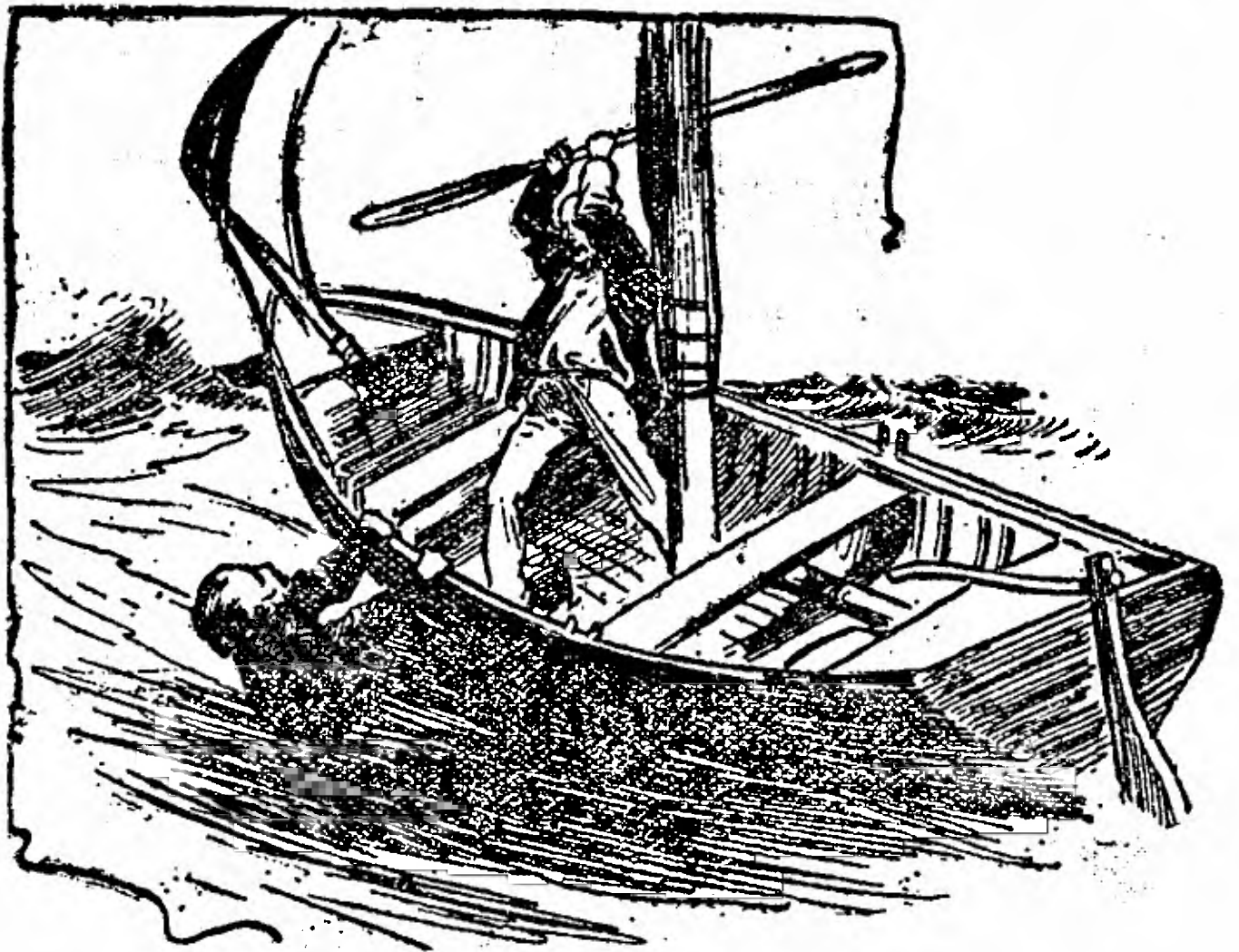
As the girl grew calmer, she told her rescuers what they were curious to know. She was the daughter of the commander of the "Osprey." She had been asleep when the fire broke out. Awakened by the smoke, she rose and dressed; but when she tried to leave her cabin the deadly smoke drove her back. She heard her father's voice giving orders, but the crew were unruly. There were only two Englishmen on board beside her father, these two being the boatswain and the mate. The crew was composed of Lascars with these exceptions. In her cabin, she heard the sounds of conflict on deck; the crew had lost their heads, being too terrified to regard the orders of the captain. She heard two splashes in the water, and, from a porthole, saw the bodies of the mate and boatswain floating, with blood upon their faces. The mad rush for the boats had led to the murder of the two brave Englishmen who tried to restore order. She saw the boats put off, filled with Lascars, some of whom held the captain in their midst, a prisoner.

"They were attached to my poor father," she continued tearfully, "so they saved him. He tried to get away from them, to return for me, but they prevented him. At last they tied him down in the boat to keep him quiet. I think I must have fainted then, for I remember nothing more until I found myself lying on the cabin floor, nearly choked by the smoke. My maid, a Lascar girl, was with me, and she was laughing and grimacing; fear had turned her brain. You may judge how horrified I was to find myself deserted on the burning ship, with a madwoman in the same cabin. The poor girl, after a time, ran out of the cabin, and I heard her scream and jump into the sea. I think I was going mad myself, when I heard a shout, and you came. Ah! how can I thank you for your bravery?"

There was a pause for a few minutes.

"How long do you think it is since the crew deserted the vessel?" Dick asked, at length.

"It seemed centuries to me; I cannot tell."



Captain Barbidge grasped the boat to climb in. Dalston made a blow at him.

"Was it before or after dawn?"

"After; soon after sunrise," the girl replied, after thinking for a moment.

"Three hours ago, or more. The cowardly lubbers! If they had stood by the ship they could have saved her. The fire could not have been half under way then."

"They were too frightened."

"When will shipowners learn the folly of being penny-wise?" Dick said, with an emotion of anger against the unknown owners. "For a paltry saving in the matter of wages they employ blacks or half-breeds instead of British sailors. And, in a fire or a hurricane, they get paid as they deserve. A British crew would have preserved discipline, and saved the ship. The Lascars lose their heads, and all is lost. The owners deserve their loss; but the two Englishmen who were stabbed, their fate was the fault of others; their lives pay for the meanness of the owners!"

"It is true," said the girl sadly. "The ship will be regretted by the owners, but those brave men will be mourned by widows and perhaps children."

"You have not told me the name of the captain," Dick remarked, after a pause.

"Captain Wilson. I am Ida Wilson."

"Captain Wilson? I knew a Captain Wilson once, in Dublin. Have you ever heard your father speak of John Langton, Miss Wilson?"

"Often. They were friends before my father left Dublin last."

"Then it is the same! I am the son of John Langton, who"—Dick's voice faltered—"died eighteen months ago, after failing in business. I wished to sail with your father, when I took to the sea, but I have not known where to find him."

Dick's surprise was great in finding the girl he had saved to be the daughter of his dead father's best friend. Ida was pleased by the discovery; it made Dick seem less of a stranger to her.

During Ida's narrative the boat had remained at a distance from the burning barque. The fire, having once broken through the deck, made fearfully rapid progress; flames enwrapped the hull, and darted in all directions. Masts, spars, rigging, decks, were a mass of blaze.

"Let's go a little further off," Phil said, after a long silence, during which the occupants of the boat watched the flaming ship, fascinated by the terrible yet beautiful sight. "The topyards may come tumbling down soon." And he grasped the oars.

The boat rested again a quarter of a mile from the "Osprey."

"Can you tell me, Miss Wilson," said Dick, "in which direction the boat which held your father went."

Ida shook her head.

"I do not know," she said despondently.

"If we knew, we could follow. He must be suffering anxiety."

on your account. But do you think it is possible that he may induce the Lascars to turn back?"

"It is possible. He has great influence over them."

"Then we will stand by for a time, against his return."

"Look!" cried Phil, who had just turned his eyes from the burning ship to sweep the sea. "Look! A sail!"

He pointed to a white patch on the blue to the east. While their attention was concentrated upon the barque, the sail had approached unseen.

"It is a boat's sail," Dick remarked. "Let us stand towards it, messmates; no doubt it is Captain Wilson's boat returning."

"Oh, I pray Heaven it may be!" cried she, clasping her hands.

The two boats rapidly neared one another. The young sailors soon saw that the stranger was a ship's long-boat, with mainsail, topsail, and jib set, and filled out by the wind.

"There are only two men in that boat," Duncan said, after a time.

"Only two," repeated Ida. "Is one a white man?"

"Both are," replied the Scottish lad, after a careful survey.

"Both!" cried Dick, his brows contracting. "By Heaven, yes! Mates, that is the long-boat of the 'Sea-Nymph.' Those two men are Barbidge and Dalston!"

"Our enemies!" cried Duncan and Phil, in a breath.

"Our bitter enemies! We have got to fight for our lives now!" said Dick, setting his teeth. "They were not content to let us go; they have run us down. We will not fly; it is time we showed our teeth. Let them come; they will find us harder to tackle than they anticipate!"

CHAPTER 6.

Sunk at Sea—The Raft—The Sufferings of the Survivors—A Day of Torture.

The doomed crew of the "Sea-Nymph" continued to watch the long-boat with haggard eyes as it receded in the moonlight. Smaller grew the white, gleaming sail in the distance, and at last the shadows swallowed it up. Blank despair fell upon the abandoned seamen. Some strode about the deck, clenching their fists and scowling; some heaped curses upon the dastardly traitors; others remained mute in the apathy of hopelessness. Beneath their feet the water bubbled and hissed, pouring into the hold and flooding the vessel.

"Mates," said one of the English seamen at last, "'Tain't no good settlin' down to die like this here. Let's have a try to save ourselves!"

"Wot can we do, Rogers?" said the German cook. "Dose sgoundrels hafe taken away all der poats!"

"We can build a raft," answered Rogers.

The suggestion animated the hopes of the deserted crew. With one accord they set to work; planks were loosened, casks collected, spars broken down. Sailors are quick hands, and the lives of these men depended upon their exertions. A rude raft, composed of a framework of spars lashed together, and strengthened with casks and planks, soon rocked upon the ocean by the sinking hull of the "Sea-Nymph." Quickly as the work was done, the inrush of the water was still quicker. The hull of the "Sea-Nymph" shook with that trembling which announces that a vessel is about to founder, before the raft could be loaded with stores.

"She's going!" cried one of the seamen.

"To the raft!" exclaimed the Lascars, rushing to the side.

"Stop, you swabs!" cried Rogers. "We must have grub and water. As well go down at once as float without 'em!"

The four Lascars, unheeding, sprang upon the raft, and began to shove off from the "Sea-Nymph." The others rushed to obtain provisions.

A terrible shiver ran through the "Sea-Nymph," and her bowsprit dipped into the water. In a moment the fore-castle was submerged. The stern was lifted into the air for an instant, and then, with a plunge, the whole hull sunk beneath the billows. The topmasts remained a moment still exposed, then disappeared, and the coffin-ship sank to her eternal home at the bottom of the Atlantic.

In the vortex of the sinking ship the raft was dragged under water. The moonlight shone upon the waves, cumbered by nothing but a few floating spars.

Then, one by one, heads began to appear, dotting the water. The raft emerged, upside down, but fortunately unbroken, with two of the Lascars clinging to it. The German cook came up, snorting like a stranded grampus, and grasped the edge of the raft. Two Englishmen next appeared, breathless, but swimming vigorously.

Spars, casks, and debris of all kinds soon speckled the waves. But no more men came up. In the depths of the ocean, three men had met their fate. The survivors clambered upon the raft, with gloomy looks. There were Canuda and Benida, Lascars; Rogers and Sands, English; and the German cook, who had escaped being sunk at sea with the coffin-ship. Not a

morsel of food had they saved, nor a drop of water. Rogers had a bottle of brandy, which he kept carefully concealed. They looked into each other's faces, each reading in his comrades' features the despair which gnawed at his heart.

Of what use was it to cling to the raft? They were too far out of the track of ships to dare dream of being picked up. Sooner or later, no doubt, the waves would throw up their raft upon the shores of South America. But when? In a year, perhaps. And they had not food for one day! No wonder they threw themselves upon the frail planks which parted them from the ocean, and lay there silent, half-senseless, sunk in a dull torpor.

Night waned. Moonlight died; a bar of light shot up into the sky. Day was waking on the Atlantic.

With the day came heat. The burning sun of the south floated in the heavens, pouring down savage rays upon the defenceless castaways. By noon thirst parched their throats. The heat, and the salt-water which had got into their mouths during their immersion, made their thirst a maddening torture. Hunger began to gnaw, but the terrible thirst made them almost unconscious of the lesser want.

A large piece of canvas had been thrown upon the raft, to make a sail. Fortunately, it became entangled in the timbers, and was not lost when the raft was sucked into the vortex of the coffin-ship. This canvas was spread upon some spars, which floated above the wreck of the "Sea-Nymph," and the sail, rough as it was, answered its purpose. The breeze bore the raft north-westerly, in the track of the long-boat. If, by luck, the scuttlers could be overtaken—they possessed provisions—life and revenge would be gained. Rogers, Sands, and the German felt this tiny ray of hope; the Lascars felt nothing in their changeless stupor.

The day wore on. Not a speck appeared upon the sea. No sail, no boat, not even a sea-gull skimming the waves. The shadows of coming night dimmed the blue of the sky. Darkness brought relief from the heat. But drought burned in the throats of the seamen as they lay about the raft, "with throats unslaked and black lips baked." And now the silence of the sea was broken by muttered oaths, ringing yells, bursts of maniacal laughter. Three men of the five were tossing in delirium. Their wild cries rang weirdly through the darkness. The moon came out, and her silvery light, calm and tranquil, fell upon the raft and its suffering burden, and changed the broad surface of the ocean into a gleaming mirror. The two men who retained their senses swept the sea with hungry eyes in search of a sail.

Rogers grasped his arm, while his eyes scintillated like diamonds.

"Look! look!" he said hoarsely. "Look!"

He pointed across the silver-tinted water. The German looked eagerly. A small dark object was dancing upon the waves, just visible to a keen scrutiny.

"A boat!" said Rogers, through his clenched teeth.

"If it is the captain—"

"Oh, if it only were! Revenge! revenge!" hissed the half-insane seamen.

The sail was still set and drawing. The clumsy raft, with many a veer and twist, slowly but steadily drew closer to the boat, which was rocking upon the billows at its will, seemingly untenanted.

CHAPTER 7.

The Encounter—Short and Sharp—Dick's Victory—A Sail at Last.

Captain Barbidge and his confederate quitted the coffin-ship without the slightest idea that any of the crew would escape from her before she foundered. The ship had been scuttled, the boats cut adrift; all had been done that could be done to secure the success of the plot, and the dastards never suspected that some of their victims still floated upon the bosom of the Atlantic.

"We will run north-west," Dalston remarked, as he trimmed the sails. "That is the direction the boys have taken."

"They have a long start of us," the captain remarked.

"True; but we easily outsail them. We have mainsail, top-sail, and jib, immensely superior to their lugsail."

"What if they change their direction?"

"They won't. They must have chosen north-west because it will take them into the track of vessels from Australia. We shall sight them sooner or later, of that I feel convinced, and then—"

"Recollect that, though they are only boys, there are three of them, and that young villain Langton has a couple of six-shooters."

"Bah! we have pistols also. Are you getting chicken-hearted?"

At dawn the long-boat was far from the spot where the "Sea Nymph" had gone down. A few hours after sunrise, Dalston saw the smoke of the burning ship, and pointed it

out to Captain Barbidge. At first they thought it was the trail of a steamer, and trembled at the thought that the three lads had been picked up. But, with a powerful glass, Dalston soon made out the "Osprey," wrapped in flames, and the quarter-boat standing by a quarter of a mile from the barque.

"There they are!" he said exultantly. "There they are, captain!"

"We are lucky! We had better open fire as soon as we are within range, without stopping for any palaver," observed Barbidge.

The long-boat drew rapidly nearer to the quarter-boat.

"They are not trying to escape," Dalston said, after a while; "yet they must see us. Perhaps they know we're certain to run them down. Why, by Jove, there's a girl aboard!"

"A girl?" ejaculated the skipper, in astonishment.

"Yes; I suppose they must have saved her from that vessel."

The skipper looked irresolute.

"I say, Dalston, it's hard lines on her!" he said.

The ruffian turned upon him with a savage scowl.

"Do you want to let them escape?" he demanded.

"No, I don't; but—"

"Curse your butts! That boat has got to go to the bottom, with every soul it carries. Is the girl to live, to hang us both some fine day? Don't be a fool!"

"You are right, Dalston, I suppose. But if I had known what this infernal coffin-ship business was going to lead to, I'd have seen the owners with old Nick before I'd have taken it on!"

"It is too late to draw back now. Look to your pistol!"

Meanwhile, the quarter-boat lay awaiting the attack. The lads had taken in the lugsail, and lowered the mast, to give themselves freedom of movement. Dick had explained to the astonished Ida the cause of the coming strife. The girl was placed in the stern-sheets, and the boys remained in the bow, so that the bullets would fly as far as possible from Ida. They knew well enough that if they were defeated, Dalston would not spare the girl's life. But until the conflict was over he would not waste a shot upon her, and the lads were determined to win. The thought that they were fighting as much for the helpless girl as for themselves filled them with the most resolute ardour.

Ida had told Dick that she could steer a boat, and, after testing her skill, the young captain of the quarter-boat allowed her to take charge of the tiller. This was a great help to them, as it left them all free to fight, and yet kept the boat steady. Dick and Duncan armed themselves with the two revolvers, and grasped an oar. Dick was a crack shot, probably superior to either of the foes, and Duncan had practised a little.

"Remember one thing, messmates," said Dick, keeping his eyes upon the long-boat; "this will be a fight to the death. If we can take them prisoners we will, but no foolish notions of mercy must be allowed to interfere with our chances of victory. They will show no mercy; that's sure enough. And remember that we are not fighting for ourselves alone."

"We're game, laddie," answered Duncan. "I think we shall beat them!"

The two scuttlers had the disadvantage of having no one to attend to their tiller. Dalston secured it, however, and both of them stood up to take pot-shots at the boys as they shot past the quarter-boat.

"Miss Wilson," said Dick, without turning his head from the enemy, "when I say 'port,' send her to port on the instant."

"I will do so, Mr. Langton," answered the girl.

"And you fellows," added Dick, "take care, and don't lose your footing."

Barbidge and Dalston levelled their revolvers. The long-boat, keeping straight on, sped past the little boat. Crack-ack! sounded the two revolvers, just as Dick yelled "Port." Ida instantly obeyed; the boat swung round, and the occupants were out of the line of fire. The shots, though well-aimed, did not pass within six yards of the boys.

In spite of Dick's warning, both Duncan and Phil lost their balance with the sudden turn of the boat, and fell back in the bottom. Not so Dick. He stood as steady as an oak. Before Dalston and Barbidge could take fresh aim, or even make a movement to avoid his fire, he pulled the trigger. At Dalston he aimed, and his aim was true. The mate gave an awful groan, and fell into the bottom of the boat. Captain Barbidge crouched under the gunwale, scared by Dalston's fate, to avoid Dick's revolver.

"I've settled the worst of the two," exclaimed Dick. "Now, boys, take the oars, and lay them alongside before they can escape."

Captain Barbidge would have shirked further fighting; but Dalston, who, though badly wounded, was not disabled, crawled aft to the tiller, and directed the long-boat towards Dick's. In a moment, therefore, the two were alongside. The mate started up with levelled pistol, but his wound in the chest

weakened him, and he fell upon his knees. Dick, instead of firing, thrust forward his oar, and knocked the mate backwards. Phil and Duncan sprang into the long-boat to assail Captain Barbidge. His pistol was aimed; he could have killed one, and have had his brains knocked out at the next moment by the other. He weakened, and lowered his pistol.

"Hold your hands!" he cried. "I give in!"

"Drop your revolver," ordered Dick. "Knock him down if he doesn't."

The six-shooter was flung down. Then the two threatening oars that had swung above the captain's head were lowered. Captain Barbidge sat down, and Phil Johnson, picking up the pistol, mounted guard over him.

Dalston was nearly senseless. Dick stooped over him, holding his revolver ready to shoot in case the mate renewed the conflict. But he was too far gone. Blood gushed from the wound in his chest, and his face was ghastly.

"I'll have your life yet!" he muttered, with a feeble effort to rise.

"Miserable wretch!" Dick said, in disgust. "Better prepare for your own death than plan mine. Let me see your wound."

Dalston fainted with the pain as soon as he touched it. Dick saw that, though serious, it was not necessarily fatal. It was impossible to extract the bullet; but he washed the wound and bound it up as well as he was able. Then, with Phil's help, he lifted the insensible man into the quarter-boat, and Captain Barbidge was forced to follow.

"What is this for?" the skipper of the "Sea-Nymph" demanded.

"We are going to take the long-boat, as there are more of us," Dick explained. "Miss Wilson, allow me to assist you."

Ida, taking his hand, stepped lightly into the boat. The three lads removed their personal belongings, leaving the defeated party in possession of the quarter-boat.

"We will leave you the rations you allowed us," Dick said to his former captain. "You will have precisely the same chance of being picked up that we had in that boat. If you had been content to leave us in peace, the long-boat would still be yours. You may thank your stars that you're no worse off. It would be no more than you deserve if we pitched you into the Atlantic!"

The captain scowled, and made no reply. Had he been still armed he might have plucked up courage to renew the contest. But Dick had searched both the scuttlers, and removed their weapons.

"Take care of your confederate," Dick added. "I don't think his wound is fatal, but he will want looking after. And don't follow our boat, or I will run you down and sink you. I suppose, from your being here, that you have scuttled the "Sea-Nymph." It is not my place to punish you. But mind this, I will run no more risks. If I find you near me again, both of you shall die!"

The boats parted company. Captain Barbidge sat down, scowling at the victorious lads as the long-boat, with set sails, glided away. Our heroes soon vanished from his gaze, beyond the "Osprey," which was now burnt down to the water-line.

"She will go down in ten minutes," said Dick, with a glance at the smoking and shattered hull, which was rolling heavily on the billows. "I am afraid, Miss Wilson, that it is useless to linger here. Your father's boat cannot be returning. The seamen, no doubt, know which is the ship-track, so a north-westerly course is likeliest to bring us across them. They may, in fact, have been picked up already."

Ida assented. The long-boat sped upon the course the three young Britons had followed before in the quarter-boat. The running was smooth, and a considerable distance was covered during the afternoon. The lads erected, with some spare spars and canvas which Dalston's care had placed in the long-boat, a sort of tent in the stern for Ida's accommodation, to shelter her from the sun, and to make, as it were, a separate apartment. How long the four would remain afloat they could not even surmise; it might be days or weeks, or—terrible thought—they might not be rescued at all. In any case, it was best to prepare for a lengthy stay in the boat.

The sun was setting in a blaze of gold and crimson when Dick sighted a speck on the horizon, to the south-west. Taking Dalston's telescope, he scanned the spot with eager keenness. Then, in spite of his strong self-control, he went white and red by turns.

"What is it, laddie?" exclaimed Duncan quickly.

"Begorra," cried Dick, "I believe it's a sail! By St. Patrick, acushla, this is a stroke of luck! A sail, he jaspers, a sail!" he shouted, his Irish brogue coming out strongly, as it always did when he became excited.

"A sail!" cried Ida gladly. "Ah, if my poor father were but here with us!"

"Perhaps he has already been picked up, Miss Wilson; I hope so. Bedad, this vessel is coming towards us! Whither can it be bound? Mates, we are saved!"

Darker grew the sky; but the moon replaced the sun. The boys were soon able to make out the royals and topgallant sails of the stranger without the aid of the telescope. The ship was coming nearer, and Dick steered the boat to intercept her course.

Would the crew see the long-boat?

That, now, was the burning question. The castaway quartette continued to watch the ship with straining eyes, as she became plainer and plainer to their view.

CHAPTER 8.

When Rogues Fall Out—A Desperate Struggle—The Captain Killed—The Meeting—Dalston's Fate—A Horrible Resource.

Captain Barbridge watched the long-boat out of sight, and then turned his attention to the disabled mate. Dalston lay upon the lowered sail, breathing heavily. He was just coming to his senses, and a faint groan told that with consciousness returned pain.

Hate gleamed in Barbridge's eyes as he fixed them upon Dalston.

"It is to that villain I owe all my misfortunes," he muttered. "It was he who pressed me to accept the offer of the shipowners; it was he who argued and taunted me into firmness whenever I began to repent of the bargain. He is a pitiless villain! He may kill me. Why should I not secure myself while I can do so? If I give him time to recover, he will be more than my match in courage and strength. Why should I place myself at his mercy? No, by Heaven, he shall die!"

The result of this soliloquy was that Captain Barbridge rose and grasped one of the oars. Like most cowardly and weak men, he was cruel as a cat when he had the upper hand. He poised aloft the oar to dash out the brains of the wounded man.

Dalston fixed his lack lustre eyes upon the ruffian.

"What are you doing?" he said feebly.

"I am going to kill you, Dalston! You have led me to this pass; you have domineered over me and ruled me, now I am going to pay you back!"

Dalston's ghastly face filled with rage and fear. This danger was about the last he would have expected. He was accustomed to regard and treat the captain as a coward, and he never suspected that the worm would turn in this manner. But, disabled as he was, Dalston was not a man to submit unresistingly to the death-blow. A boat-hook lay beside him; he stretched out his hand and seized it; while Barbridge was aiming the blow, he hurled the boat-hook, which struck the captain across the face and knocked him backwards. He fell from the gunnel; the boat rocked violently with the shock, and Captain Barbridge fell head-first into the sea. The oar dropped beside Dalston, who seized it with both hands, and, though every movement cost him a pang of anguish, raised himself on his knees to oppose the captain's return into the boat.

Captain Barbridge, with his face bleeding from the blow of the boat-hook, grasped the gunwale of the boat to climb in. Dalston made a blow at him, which he dodged, and the oar struck the gunwale and slipped from the mate's hands. The captain, with a demoniacal grin of triumph, clambered over the side; Dalston leaped forward to strike him with his fists; the weight of both fell upon the gunwale, with the result, naturally, that the boat capsized and turned keel upward. The combatants both plunged into the water. Captain Barbridge thought that the wounded mate would now be quite at his mercy, but he was mistaken; the contact of the water revived Dalston, and he appeared as strong as ever, though the bandage had slipped from his wound, and the blood was flowing afresh.

"A truce," growled the captain. "We must right the boat, or the sharks will have us both. Do you agree?"

"Yes; you take starboard, I'll have port. Over with her."

The quarter-boat was a small one, and the difficult task of righting her was luckily accomplished in a few minutes. Then, each holding on to an opposite side of the boat, the two men glared at each other. This strange truce was prolonged while they baled her out with their hats. She was still, however, nearly half-full of water when they left off baling. Each tried to steal a march upon the other by making a sudden scramble to get in, with the result that Dalston got into the bow, and the skipper into the stern, without opposition. They glared round for weapons; there were none. Mast and sail, spars and oars, were floating away upon the surface of the sea. Worst of all, the locker had been open; the provisions had been lost, and the kegs of water had disappeared for ever. By their conflict the two ruffians had sealed their own doom. The loss, for a minute, dazed them; then, with fury newly inflamed, they sprang at each other's throats. Growling like wild beasts, they clenched and rolled into the water at the bottom of the boat.

Barbridge was underneath. Dalston, who felt his strength failing, showered blows upon the captain, striving to keep the

wretched man's head under the water. At last a frightful blow, which made Barbridge's head crash against the bottom, stunned him. Then Dalston rolled him over, and placed his face in the deepest part of the water that flooded the boat. In five minutes Captain Barbridge was stone dead! Dalston saw it; then the reaction set in, and he fell beside the dead man, his head leaning against the gunwale of the boat, and relapsed into unconsciousness.

Under the burning sun of the south, the boat rocked idly upon the waves, unguided and unwatched, tenanted by a dead man and a dying one.

The senses of Dalston returned to him after some hours. Night had descended, and moonlight gleamed upon the sea. He tried to move, but failed, and the agony of the effort nearly deprived him of his life. He gave a heavy groan. Then, to his amazement, a voice sounded in the silence.

"Thar's somebody in it, mates. By George, 'tain't the kids, though it's their craft; it's Dalston and the captain!"

The terrified Dalston saw two men leap into the boat. They were Rogers and the German cook of the "Sea-Nymph." Three others followed. The delirious seamen had been calmed, as if by magic, by Rogers's cry of "A boat!" Even their wandering senses took in the renewed promise of life.

Rogers was nearer to insanity than the others. Surreptitious pulls at the bottle of brandy he had saved from the "Sea-Nymph" had inflamed him almost to madness, while keeping up his strength. He had hoped to find food and water aboard the boat, and his disappointment made his reason tremble. The distressed seaman searched the boat in vain; not a scrap of food, not a drop of water, was there. The two Lascars uttered pitiful howls; the other three gathered about Dalston with a malignity in their faces that was truly terrible.

"You caused all this," said Rogers thickly; "you shall suffer for it!" He pulled out his bottle, which hitherto he had kept hidden from his companions, to take a last pull. The German snatched at it, so did Sands. It fell; the three men struggled furiously to seize it. Rogers regained it, and, finding it empty, broke it across the head of Sands, stunning the seaman. Rogers brandished the fragment that remained in his hand, uttering wild yells. The struggle had excited him, and completed what privation and brandy had begun; he was a raving maniac! The German drew back in horror, though he was not far from the same state himself. The two Lascars had fallen insensible in the bottom of the boat. A more horrible scene than this can scarcely be imagined—dead or dying men lying about, Dalston groaning in agony, and the madman gesticulating and howling; the boat rocking, swishing the water it had shipped from side to side, and the captain's body with it.

The groans of the mate drew the attention of the mad seaman. He approached the wounded man, and, even in his insanity, knew him for a foe. His thin fingers gripped Dalston's neck; the mate struggled in vain; in a minute he lay lifeless under the grasp of the madman.

Then Rogers turned towards the German, with a horrible leer.

"Mate," he cried, "why should we starve? Here's food for you!"

The cook came forward, baring his teeth like a famished wolf. Then was enacted a scene too fearful for description. Let us draw the curtain.

CHAPTER 9.

Picked Up—What was Found in the Quarter-boat—Home to England.

"Ship ahoy!"

With the full force of his lungs Dick Langton uttered the shout. Duncan and Phil were waving, one a hat, the other a lantern, to attract the attention of the stranger. Ida was at the tiller, keeping the long-boat towards the ship.

To the delight of the boat's crew, an answering hail came ringing over the moonlit water.

"Boat ahoy! All's well!"

"Thank Heaven!" cried Dick; "they've seen us. We are saved!"

The ship rounded to as she neared the boat. A line was flung; Dick made it fast to the painter; they came alongside the hull, and in a few minutes were upon the deck. The captain of the "Blackbird" came to welcome them.

"Glad to see you, my lads!" he said. "You're the second party I've picked up since noon——"

Then a man who, had been looking intently at Ida, rushed forward and clasped her to his breast.

"My darling girl! Thank Heaven, you are saved!"

"Father!" the girl cried joyously.

It was a happy moment for all concerned. The three young sailors were presented to Captain Wilson, who at once recognised Dick. Explanations followed. The captain had been picked up by the skipper of the "Blackbird." He had persuaded the skipper to turn eastward in search of the burning "Osprey," in the faint hope of finding Ida still alive. That

was how the "Blackbird" had happened to come within sight of the long-boat. The lads could not help reflecting with satisfaction that their gallant rescue of Ida had led to their own safety. Had they given the burning ship a wide berth, and continued on their course north-westward without stopping, they would now have been perhaps twenty or thirty miles from the "Blackbird," out of sight, instead of securely walking her deck.

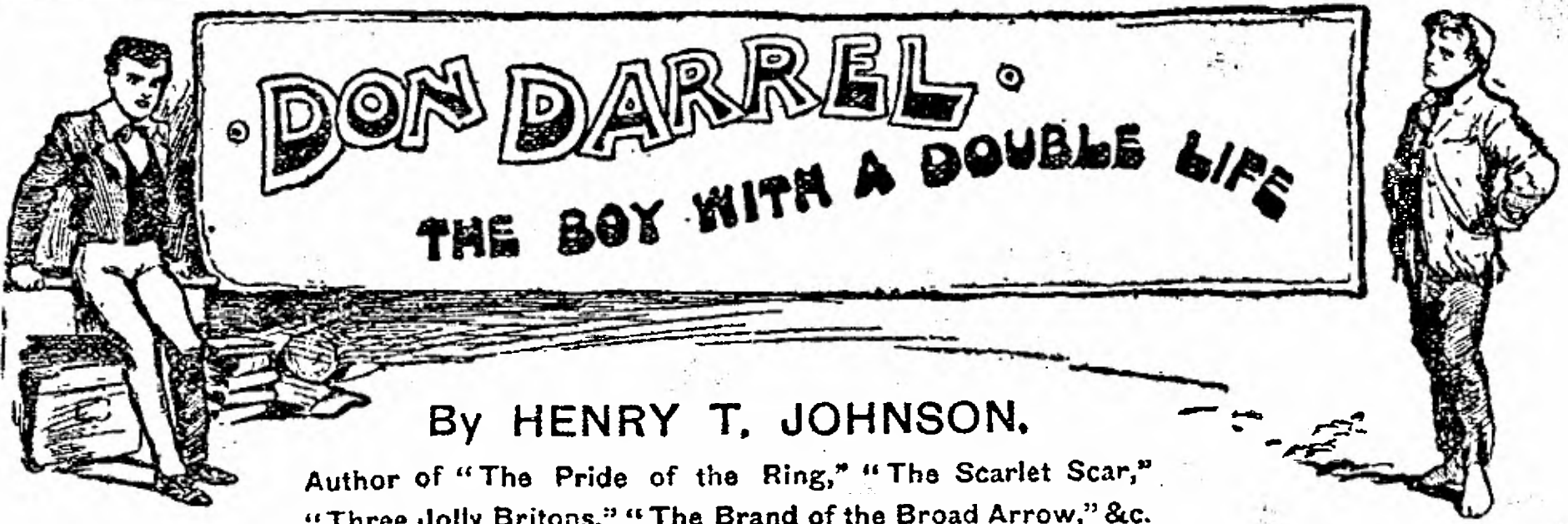
When the "Blackbird's" skipper heard their story, he decided to keep on in search of the boat containing the two scuttlers. Whatever their crimes, he could not determine to leave them to their fate. A cabin was assigned to Ida, and another to our heroes, and they were soon enjoying a well-earned repose. At daylight, however, the three lads came on deck, aroused by the cry of "Boat on the lee-bow!"

The "Blackbird" soon ran down to the boat. Then a terrible scene met the eyes of the sailors. In the boat Dick recognised the survivors of the "Sea-Nymph." In the stern the two Lascars lay, stone dead. Sands was extended in the bow, insensible; Barbidge and Dalston lay side by side, horribly mutilated. Two men, who scarcely seemed to be human beings, were gnawing bones, and took no notice of the rescuers as they entered the boat. Whence had the bones come? The state of the dead mate and captain showed only too plainly. Shuddering with horror, the seamen tried to remove the two men to the "Blackbird"; then it was seen that they were

mad. The German cook leaped into the sea as the sailors tried to secure him, and disappeared. Rogers was carried on board struggling and foaming at the mouth, and Sands went next. Then the dead men were "buried," Captain Wilson leading the service ere they were dropped into the water. Rogers and Sands were attended during the voyage home with unflinching care, but it was in vain; their fearful sufferings had set the seal of Death upon them. Before the Bermudas were passed they had been buried at sea. Of the crew which had sailed in the coffin-ship only three reached England again—Dick, Phil, and Duncan—and they could not but feel that it was due to the favour of Providence that they had been permitted to see their native land after being exposed to so many perils.

Captain Wilson never went to sea again; but, though retired from his profession, he did not forget the three young sailors to whom he owed his daughter's rescue. He took them under his protection, and enabled them to enter the Royal Navy as middies. By the force of their merit they rose in rank. Dick is now in a fair way to become a commander. When he attains that rank it is very probable that Ida Wilson will change her name and become Ida Langton. So that, in the end, our hero has profited by sailing in the coffin-ship which was "Sunk at Sea."

THE END.



PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

- DON DARRREL, the hero. A pupil at St. Bingle's. Swinferth's ward. At times he leads the life of a street-boy.
- GEORGE DORMER and JOHN JOBLING, boys at St. Bingle's. Don's great chums.
- TOD TINNEY, a newspaper-boy, of whom Don is very fond.
- MAUD DORMER, George Dormer's sister.
- PECKLING, a rascally youth, who is masquerading, at Swinferth's request, as his ward Don.
- SILAS SWINFERTH, Don's guardian. A villain, who misuses Don's money, and wishes to kill him.
- SCRIMSHAW, once an under-master at St. Bingle's. He helps Swinferth against Don.
- DR. GRIGSBY, the head-master of St. Bingle's.
- MRS. CHICHESTER, by whom Tod is adopted and sent to St. Bingle's.

Mr. Swinferth decides to put up for Parliament. A deputation, very much the worse for drink, arrives at his house. The leader is requested by Scrimshaw to get on with his speech.

"Eh, but wait a minute, maister," this gentleman replied. "I bean't much of a scholar; it might be easy for them what wrote it out to read it, but I 'ad to larn it by 'eart."

"Shut up, you silly idiot!" spluttered Scrimshaw. "You'll give the show away!"

"Danged if I can tell what thee wants, maister. First thee tells me to go on and then to shut up. Which be I to do?"

"Why, go on with the speech," replied the frantic Scrimshaw, in a stage whisper.

"Right, then!" And, after a preliminary series of coughs and hums and hahs, the orator commenced: "Mr. Swinferth, sir, we, the undersized—no, that bean't it—the undersigned, after nature—no, no, that bean't it—after mature disgustin'—no, discussion—have arrived at the decision to request you to do us the honour of standing—"

"Ah, now we're coming to it! We'll see what he's going to stand!" observed the bulk of the petitioners, while their leader stolidly went on:

"Of standing for the constituency, you being, in our opinion,

the best man fitted for the job; very model of a candied—what's this?—candied date."

"Candidate, you fool!" said Scrimshaw, prompting. And the leader of the deputation repeated:

"Candidate, you fool!"

"You're wrong, you're wrong!" said Scrimshaw.

"I tell you I bean't. I've said what's put down; if aught's wrong it's he who wrote it as is to blame."

At this point Swinferth and his henchman deemed it prudent that the delegate's flow of eloquence should dry up. And Mr. Swinferth, his right hand reposing inside the lapels of his frock-coat, mounted the camp-stool, and, addressing the group of out-of-work loafers and public-house loungers, began:

"Gentlemen, free and independent electors, citizens of this great Empire on which the roll of the Queen's drum never sets, and the setting of whose sun is heard all over the world. The patriotic speech of your eloquent spokesman—"

"I allus thought I was a ploughman!" the eloquent spokesman interjected; but Swinferth, without noticing him, went on:

"Has touched me." And one of audience remarked sotto voce:

"I said as 'ow he were touched!"

"Gentlemen," said Swinferth, "I shall be proud to stand—"

Here he was interrupted by loud and continued cheering, and the remark:

"'Ear, 'ear! You said you'd stand a gallon a head!"

"To stand for your borough, you idiots—I mean, gentlemen—and, if elected, to sit for you—"

"'Ear, 'ear!" one of his audience ejaculated. "He'll do the lying for himself!"

"I shall always regard your interests as my own," said Swinferth. And one of his audience expressed the opinion that if he did that their interests would always be well looked after.

"Having disposed of foreign policy," said Swinferth, "let us turn to home affairs."

"'Ear, 'ear!" exclaimed several of his audience spontaneously. "Home-brewed is what we want to consider now, talking's dry work."