

Adams Henry Cadwallader

Hair-Breadth Escapes: The Adventures of Three Boys in South Africa



Henry Adams

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Adams H. C. Henry Cadwallader Hair-Breadth Escapes: The Adventures of Three Boys in South Africa

Dedication

To the Rev. G.G. Ross, D.C.L., Principal of St. Andrew's College, Grahamstown, Cape Colony.

My dear Ross,

I dedicate this Tale to you for two reasons: first, because it is, in some sort, a souvenir of a very interesting visit to South Africa, rendered pleasant by the kind hospitality shown us by so many in Grahamstown, and by no one more than yourself. Secondly and chiefly, because it gives me the opportunity of expressing publicly to you my sympathy in the noble work you are carrying on, under the gravest difficulties – difficulties which (I am persuaded) many would help to lighten, who possess the means of doing so, were they but acquainted with them.

H.C. Adams.

Dry Sandford, *August 1876*.

Chapter One

The Hooghly – Old Jennings – Short-handed – The Three Boys – Frank – Nick – Ernest – Dr Lavie – Teneriffe

It was the afternoon of a day late in the November of the year 1805. His Majesty's ship *Hooghly*, carrying Government despatches and stores, as well as a few civil and military officers of the East India Company's service, was running easily before the trade wind, which it had caught within two days' sail of Madeira – and was nearing the region of the tropics. The weather, which had been cold and stormy, when the passengers left England some weeks before, had been gradually growing bright and genial; until for the last three or four days all recollections of fog and chill had vanished from their minds. The sky was one vast dome of the richest blue, unbroken by a single cloud, only growing somewhat paler of hue as it approached the horizon line. The sea stretched out into the distance – to the east, an endless succession of purple wavelets, tipped here and there with white; to the west, where the sun was slowly sinking in all its tropical glory, one seething mass of molten silver.

It was indeed a glorious sight, and most of our readers will be of opinion that those who had the opportunity of beholding it, would – for the time at least – have bestowed little attention on anything else. But if they had been at sea as long as Captain Wilmore, they might perhaps have thought differently. Captain Wilmore had been forty years a sailor; and whether given, or not given, to admire brilliant skies and golden sunsets in his early youth, he had at all events long ceased to trouble himself about them. He was at the outset of this story sitting in his cabin – having just parted from his first lieutenant, Mr Grey – and was receiving with a very dubious face the report of an old quartermaster. A fine mastiff was seated by the captain's chair, apparently listening with much gravity to what passed.

"Well, Jennings, Mr Grey tells me you have something to report, which he thinks ought to be brought straight to me, in order that I may question you myself about it. What is it? Is it something about these gentlemen we have on board? Are they dissatisfied, or has Lion here offended them?"

"No, cap'en," said the old sailor; "I wish 'twas only something o' that sort. That would be easy to be disposed of, that would."

"What is it, then? Is it the men, who are grumbling – short rations, or weak grog, or what?"

"There's more rations and stronger grog than is like to be wanted, cap'en," said Jennings, evasively, for he was evidently anxious to escape communicating his intelligence, whatever it might be, as long as possible.

"What do you mean, Jennings?" exclaimed Captain Wilmore, roused by the quartermaster's manner. "More rations and stronger grog than the men want? I don't understand you."

"Well, cap'en, I'm afraid some on 'em won't eat and drink aboard this ship no more."

"What, are any of them sick, or dead – or, by heaven, have any of them deserted?"

"I'm afeared they has, cap'en. You remember the Yankee trader, as sent a boat to ask us to take some letters to Calcutta?"

"Yes, to be sure; what of him?"

"Well, I've heard since, as his crew was going about among our chaps all the time he was aboard, offering of 'em a fist half full of guineas apiece, if they'd sail with him, instead of you."

"The scoundrel!" shouted Captain Wilmore. "If I'd caught him at it, I'd have run him up to the mainyard, as sure as he's alive."

“Ay, cap’en; and I’d have lent a hand with all my heart,” said the old seaman. “But you see he was too cunning to be caught. He went back to his ship, which was lying a very little way off, for there wasn’t a breath of wind, if you remember. But he guessed the breeze would spring up about midnight, so he doesn’t hoist his boats up, but hides ’em under his lee, until – ”

“I see it all plain enough, Jennings,” broke in the captain. “How many are gone?”

“Well, we couldn’t make sure for a long time, Captain Wilmore,” said Jennings, still afraid to reveal the whole of his evil tidings. “Some of the hands had got drunk on the rum fetched aboard at Madeira, and they might be lying about somewhere, you see – ”

“Well, but you’ve found out now, I suppose?” interjected his questioner sharply.

“I suppose we has, cap’en. There’s Will Driver, and Joel Grigg, and Lander, and Hawkins, and Job Watson – not that *he’s* any great loss – and Dick Timmins, and – ”

“Confound you, Jennings! how many?” roared the captain, so fiercely, that the dog sprang up, and began barking furiously. “Don’t keep on pottering in that way, but tell me the worst at once. How many are gone? Keep quiet, you brute, do you hear? How many, I say?”

“About fifteen, cap’en,” blurted out the quartermaster, shaking in his shoes. “Leastways there’s fifteen, or it may be sixteen, as can’t be found, or – ”

“Fifteen or sixteen, or some other number,” shouted the skipper. “Tell me the exact number, you old idiot, or I’ll disrate you! Confound that dog! Turn him out.”

“Sixteen’s the exact number we can’t find,” returned Jennings, “but some of ’em may be aboard, and turn up sober by-and-by.”

“Small chance of that,” muttered the captain. “Well, it’s no use fretting; the question is, What’s to be done? We were short-handed before – so you thought, didn’t you, Jennings?”

“Well, cap’en, we hadn’t none too many, that’s sartain; and we should have been all the better for half a dozen more.”

“That comes to the same thing, doesn’t it?” said the skipper, who, vexed and embarrassed as he was, could not help being a little diverted at the old man’s invincible reluctance to speaking out.

“Well, I suppose it does, sir,” he answered, “only you see – ”

“I don’t see anything, except that we are in a very awkward scrape,” interposed the other. “It will be madness to attempt to make the passage with such a handful as we have at present. If there came a gale, or we fall in with a French or Spanish cruiser – ” He paused, unwilling to put his thoughts into words.

“’Twouldn’t be pleasant, for sartain,” observed Jennings.

“But, then, if we put back to England – for I know no hands are to be had at Madeira, we should be quite as likely to encounter a storm, or a Frenchman.”

“A good deal more like,” assented the quartermaster.

“And there would be the loss and delay, and the blame would be safe to be laid on me,” continued the captain, following out his own thoughts rather than replying to his companion’s observations. “No, we must go on. But then, where are we to pick up any fresh hands?”

“We shall be off the Canaries this evening, cap’en,” said Jennings. “We’ve been running along at a spanking rate with this wind all night. The peak’s in sight even now.”

“The Canaries are no good, Jennings. The Dons are at war with us, you know. And though there are no ships of war in the harbour at Santa Cruz, they’d fire upon us from the batteries if we attempted to hold communication with the shore.”

“They ain’t always so particular, are they, sir?” asked the sailor.

“Perhaps not, Jennings. But the Dons here have never forgiven the attack made on them seven or eight years ago, by Nelson.”

“Well, sir, they might have forgiven that, seeing as they got the best of it I was in that, sir – b’longed to the *Foxy* and was one of Nelson’s boat’s crew, and we got nothing out of the Dons but hard knocks and no ha’pence that time.”

“That’s true. But you see Nelson has done them so much harm since, that the damage they did him then seems very little comfort to them. No, we mustn’t attempt anything at the Canaries.”

“Very good, sir. Then go on to the Cape Verdes. If this wind holds, we shall soon be there, and the Cape Verdes don’t belong to the Dons.”

“No; to the Portuguese. Well, I believe that will be best. I have received information that the French and Spanish fleets are off Cape Trafalgar; and our fellows are likely to have a brush with them soon, if they haven’t had it already.”

“Indeed, sir! Well, Admiral Nelson ain’t likely to leave many of ’em to follow us to the Cape. We’re pretty safe from them, anyhow.”

“You’re right there, I expect, Jennings,” said the skipper, relaxing for the first time into a grim smile. “Well, then, shape the ship’s course for the Cape Verdes, and, mind you, keep the matter of those scoundrels deserting as quiet as possible. If some of the passengers get hold of it, they’ll be making a bother. Now you may go, Jennings. Stay, hand me those letters about the boys that came on board at Plymouth. I’ve been too busy to give any thought to them till now. But I must settle something about them before we reach the Cape, and I may as well do so now.”

The quartermaster obeyed. He handed his commanding officer the bundle of papers he had indicated, and then left the cabin, willing enough to be dismissed. The captain, throwing himself with an air of weariness back on his sofa, broke the seal of the first letter, muttering to himself discontentedly the while.

“I wonder why I am to be plagued with other people’s children? Because I have been too wise to have any of my own, I suppose! Well, Frank is my nephew, and blood is thicker than water, they say – and for once, and for a wonder, say true. I suppose I *am* expected to look after him. And he’s a fine lad too. I can’t but own that. But what have I to do with old Nat Gilbert’s children, I wonder? He was my schoolfellow, and pulled me out of a pond once, when I should have been drowned if he hadn’t I suppose *he* thought that was reason enough for putting off his boy upon me, as his guardian. Humph! I don’t know about that. Let us see, any way, what sort of a boy this young Gilbert is. This is from old Dr Staines, the schoolmaster he has been with for the last four or five years. I wonder what he says of the boy? At present I know nothing whatever about him, except that he looks saucy enough for a midshipman, and laughs all day like a hyena!

“Gymnasium House, Hollingsley,

“September 29th, 1805.

“Sir, – You are, no doubt, aware that I have had under my charge, for the last five years, Master George Gilbert, the son of the late Mr Nathaniel Gilbert, of Evertree, a most worthy and respectable man. I was informed, at the time of the parent’s decease, that you had been appointed the guardian of the infant; but as Mr Nathaniel had, with his customary circumspection, lodged a sum in the Hollingsley bank, sufficient to cover the cost of his son’s education for two years to come, there was no need to trouble you. You were also absent from England, and I did not know your direction.

“The whole of the money is not yet exhausted; but I regret to say I am unable to retain Master George under my tuition any longer. I must beg you to take notice that his name is *George*, as his companions are in the habit of calling him “Nick,” giving the idea that his name, or one of his names, is Nicodemus. Such, however, is not the case, George being his only Christian appellation. Why his schoolfellows should have adopted so singular a nomenclature I am unable to say. The only explanation of it, which has ever been suggested to me, is one so extremely objectionable, that I am convinced it must be a mistake.

“But to proceed’ – (‘A long-winded fellow this!’ muttered the captain as he turned the page; ‘who cares what the young scamp’s called?’) – ‘But to proceed. I cannot retain Master George any longer. His continually repeated acts of mischief render it impossible for me any longer to temper the justice due to myself and family with the mercy which it is my ordinary habit to exercise. I

will not detail to you his offences against propriety' – ('thank goodness for that,' again interjected Captain Wilmore, 'though I dare say some of his offences would be entertaining enough') – 'I will not detail his offences – they would fill a volume. I will only mention what has occurred to-day. If there is any practice I consider more objectionable than another, it is that of using the dangerous explosives known as fireworks. Master Gilbert is aware that I strictly interdict their purchase; in consequence of which they cannot be obtained at the only shop in Hollingsley where they are sold, by any of my scholars. But what were my feelings – I ask you, sir – when I ascertained that he had obtained a large number of combustibles weeks ago, and had concealed them – actually concealed them in a chest under Mrs Staines's bed! The chest holds a quantity of linen, and under this he had hidden the explosives, thinking, I conclude, that it was seldom looked into. Seldom looked into! Why, merciful heaven, Mrs Staines is often in the habit of examining even by candlelight' – ('I say, I can't read any more of this,' exclaimed the captain; 'anyhow, I'll skip a page or two.' He turned on a long way and resumed.) – 'When I found out this morning that he was missing, I felt no doubt that my words had produced even a deeper effect than I had designed. Mrs Staines and myself both feared that in his remorse he had been guilty of some desperate act; and we made every effort, immediately after breakfast, to discover the place of his retreat. Being St Michael's day, it was a whole holiday, and we were thus enabled to devote the entire day to the quest. It has been extremely rainy throughout; but when we returned, two hours ago, exhausted and wet to the skin, after a fruitless search, we found him, dry and warm, awaiting us in the hall. This was some relief; but judge of our feelings when we discovered that the shameless boy had put on my camlet-cloak and overalls – they had been missing, and I had been obliged to go without them! he had taken Mrs Staines's large umbrella, and had waited for us, from breakfast time, round the corner, under the confident assurance that we should go to look for him. Sir, it has been his amusement to follow us about all day, gratifying his malevolent feelings with the spectacle of our exposure to the elements, our weariness, our ever-increasing anxiety! You will not wonder after this, sir – '''

"There, that will do," once more exclaimed the skipper, throwing aside the letter with a chuckle of amusement. "I must say I don't wonder at the doctor's refusing to keep him any more after that! Well, his father wanted him to be a sailor, and maybe he won't make a bad one. Only we must have none of his tricks on board ship. I'll have a talk with him, when I can spare the time. That's settled. And now I can see Dr Lavie about this other lad, young Warley. Hallo there, Matthews, tell the doctor I am at liberty now."

In a few minutes the person named was ushered into Captain Wilmore's presence. The new comer was a gentlemanly and well-looking young man, and bore a good character, so far as he was known, in the ship. The captain was pleased with his appearance, and felt at the moment more than usually gracious – possibly in consequence of his recent mirth over George Gilbert's exploits. He spoke with unusual kindness.

"Well, doctor, what can I do for you? You have come to speak to me about young Ernest Warley, I think?"

"Yes, Captain Wilmore, I want to ask your advice. His father was the best friend I ever had. He took me by the hand when I was left an orphan without a sixpence, and put me to school, and took care of me. When he was dying, he made me promise to do my best for his boy, as he had for me. But I'm afraid I can't do that, glad as I should be to do it, if I could – "

"But I don't understand, doctor. Old Warley – I knew a little of him – was a wealthy man, partner in Vanderbyl and Warley's house, one of the best in Cape Town. The lad can't want for money."

"Ah, he does, though. His elder brother has all the money. He was the son of the first wife, old Vanderbyl's daughter, and all the money derived from the business went to him. The second wife's fortune was settled on Ernest; but it was lost, every farthing of it, in the failure of Steinberg's bank last year."

“Won’t the elder brother do anything?”

“No more than very shame may oblige him to do. He hated his father’s second wife, and hates her son now.”

“How old is the lad?”

“Past nineteen; very steady and quiet, but plenty of stuff in him. He wouldn’t take his brother’s money, if he had the chance; says he means to work for himself. He wanted to be a parson, and would have gone this autumn to the University, but for the smash of the bank. He’ll do anything now that I advise him, but I don’t know what to advise.”

“‘Nineteen!’ – too old for the navy. ‘Wanted to be a parson!’ – wouldn’t do for the army. ‘Do anything you advise!’ Are you sure of that? Few young fellows now-a-days will do anything but what they themselves like.”

“Yes, he’ll do anything I advise, because he knows I really care for him. Where he fancies he’s put upon, he can be stiff-backed and defiant enough. I’ve seen that once or twice. Ernest hasn’t your nephew Frank’s temper, which is hot and hasty for the moment, but is right again the next. He doesn’t come to in a minute, as Frank does, but he’s a good fellow for all that.”

The captain’s brow was overcast as he heard his nephew’s name. “Frank’s spirit wants breaking, Mr Lavie,” he said in an angry tone. “I shall have to teach him that there’s only one will allowed aboard ship, and that’s the captain’s. Frank can ride and leap and shoot to a bead they tell me, but he can’t command my ship, and he shan’t. I won’t have him asking for reasons for what I order, and if he does it again – he’ll wish he hadn’t. But this is nothing to the purpose, Mr Lavie,” he added, recovering himself. “We were talking about young Warley. You had better try to get him a clerkship in a house at Cape Town. You mean to settle there yourself after the voyage, do you not?”

“Well, no, sir, I think not I had meant it, but my inclination now rather is to try for a medical appointment in Calcutta. You see it would be uncomfortable for Ernest at the Cape with his brother – ”

“I see. Well, then, both of you had better go on to Calcutta with me. I dare say – if I am pleased with the lad – I may be able to speak to one of the merchants or bankers there. What does he know? what can he do?”

“He is a tolerable classical scholar, sir, and a good arithmetician, Dr Phelps told me – ”

“That’s good,” interposed the captain.

“And he knows a little French, and is a fair shot with a gun, and can ride his horse, though he can’t do either like Frank – ”

“Never mind Frank,” broke in Captain Wilmore hastily. “He’d behave himself at all events, which is more than Frank does. Well, that will do, then. You two go on with the *Hooghly* to Calcutta, and then I’ll speak to you again.”

Mr Lavie rose and took his leave, feeling very grateful to his commanding officer, who was not in general a popular captain. He was in reality a kind-hearted man, but extremely passionate, as well as tenacious of his authority, and apt to give offence by issuing unwelcome orders in a peremptory manner, without vouchsafing explanations, which would have smoothed away the irritation they occasioned. In particular he and his nephew, Frank Wilmore, to whom reference more than once has been made, were continually falling out. Frank was a fine high-spirited lad of eighteen, for whom his uncle had obtained a military cadetship from a director, to whom he had rendered a service; and the lad was now on his way to join his regiment. Frank had always desired to be a soldier, and was greatly delighted when he heard of his good fortune. But his uncle gave him no hint that it was through him it had been obtained. Indeed, the news had been communicated in a manner so gruff and seemingly grudging, that Frank conceived an aversion to his uncle, which was not removed when they came into personal contact on board the *Hooghly*.

The three lads, however, soon fraternised, and before they had sighted Cape Finisterre were fast friends. Many an hour had already been beguiled by the recital of adventures on shore, and

speculation as to the future, that lay before them. Nor was there any point on which they agreed more heartily than in denunciation of the skipper's tyranny, and their resolve not to submit to it. When Mr Lavie came on deck, after his interview in the captain's cabin, they were all three leaning over the bulwarks, with lion crouching at Frank's side, but all three, for a wonder, quite silent. Mr Lavie cast a look seaward, and saw at once the explanation of their unusual demeanour. The ship had been making good way for the last hour or two, and was now near enough to the Canaries to allow the Peak of Teneriffe to be clearly seen, like a low triangular cloud, and the rest of the island was coming gradually into clearer sight. Mr Lavie joined the party, and set himself to watch what is perhaps the grandest spectacle which the bosom of the broad Atlantic has to exhibit. At first the outline of the great mountain, twelve thousand feet in height, presented a dull cloudy mass, formless and indistinct. But as the afternoon wore on, the steep cliffs scored with lava became visible, and the serrated crests of Anaga grew slowly upon the eye. Then, headland after headland revealed itself, the heavy dark grey masses separating themselves into hues of brown and red and saffron. Now appeared the terraced gardens which clothe the cultivated sides, and above them the picturesque outlines of the rocks intermingled with the foliage of the euphorbia and the myrtle, and here and there opening into wild mountain glens which the wing of the bird alone could traverse. Lastly, the iron-bound coast became visible on which the surf was breaking in foaming masses, and above the rocky shelf the long low line of spires and houses which distinguish the town of Santa Cruz. For a long time the red sunset light was strong enough to make clearly distinguishable the dazzling white frontages, the flat roofs, and unglazed windows, standing out against the perpendicular walls of basaltic rock. Then a dark mist, rising upwards from the sea, like the curtain in the ancient Greek theatre, began to hide the shipping in the port, the quays, and the batteries, till the whole town was lost in the darkness. Higher it spread, obscuring the masses of oleander, and arbutus, and poinsettia in the gardens, and the sepia tints of the rocks above. Then the white lava fissures were lost to the eye, and the Peak alone stood against the darkening sky, its masses of snow bathed in the rich rosy light of the expiring sun. A few minutes more and that too was swallowed up in darkness, and the spell which had enchained the four spectators of the scene was suddenly dissolved.

Chapter Two

The Cape Verdes – Dionysius's Ear – Unwelcome News – French Leave – The Skipper's Wrath – A Scrape

Three or four days had passed, the weather appearing each day more delicious than the last. The *Hooghly* sped smoothly and rapidly before the wind, and at daybreak on the fifth morning notice was given that the Cape Verde Islands were in sight. The sky, however, grew thick and misty as they neared land; and it was late in the forenoon before they had approached near enough to obtain a clear view of it.

"I wonder why they call these islands *Verdes*?" observed Gilbert, as the vessel ran along the coast of one of the largest of the group, which was low and sandy and apparently barren; "there doesn't seem to be much *green* about them, that I can see."

"No, certainly," said Warley; "a green patch here and there is all there is to be seen, so far as the sea-coast is concerned. But the interior seems a mass of mountains. There may be plenty of verdure among them, for all we know."

"No," said Mr Lavie, who was standing near them. "Their name has nothing to do with forests or grass-fields. There is a mass of weed on the other side of the group, extending for a long distance over the sea, which is something like a green meadow to look at – that's the meaning of the name. There are very few woods on any of the islands, and this one in particular produces hardly anything but salt."

"They belong to the Portuguese, don't they?" asked Frank.

"Yes; the Portuguese discovered them three centuries and a half ago, and have had possession of them ever since. Portuguese is the only language spoken there, but there are very few whites there, nevertheless."

"Why, there must be a lot of inhabitants," remarked Ernest, his eye resting on the villages with which the shores were studded.

"Yes, from forty to fifty thousand, I believe. But they are almost all of them half-breeds between the negroes and the Portuguese."

"Well, I suppose there's some fun to be had there, isn't there?" inquired Frank.

"And something to be seen?" added Warley.

"And first-chop grub?" wound up Gilbert. "There's plenty to see at Porto Prayo," returned Mr Lavie. "The town, Ribeira Grande they call it, is curious, and there are some fine mountain passes and grand views in the interior. As for grub, Master Nick" (for this sobriquet had already become young Gilbert's usual appellative), "there are pretty well all the fruits that took your fancy so much at Madeira – figs, guavas, bananas, oranges, melons, grapes, pine-apples, and mangos – and there's plenty of turtle too, though I'm not sure you'll find it made into soup. But as to fun, Frank, it depends on what you call fun, I expect –"

"Let us go ashore," interrupted Nick, "and we shall be safe to find out lots of fun for ourselves. It would be jolly fun, in itself, to be walking on hard ground again, instead of these everlasting planks. I suppose, as these islands belong to the Portuguese, and we've no quarrel with them, the skipper will go ashore, and allow the passengers to do so too?"

"He'll go ashore, no doubt," said a voice close at hand; "but he won't let you go, I'll answer for that."

The boys turned quickly round, and were not particularly pleased to see the first lieutenant, Mr Grey, who had come aft, to give some orders, and had overheard the last part of their

conversation. Mr Grey was no favourite of theirs. He was not downright uncivil to the boys, but he was fond of snubbing them whenever an occasion offered itself. It was generally believed also that a good deal of the captain's harshness was due to the first lieutenant's suggestions.

"You'd better leave the captain to answer for himself," remarked Frank, his cheek flushing with anger. "I don't see how you can know what he means to do."

"Perhaps you mayn't see it, and yet I may," returned Mr Grey calmly.

"Why shouldn't he let us go ashore, as he did at Madeira?" asked Warley. "Nothing went wrong there."

"I beg your pardon," replied the lieutenant; "things did go wrong there, and he was very much displeased."

"Displeased," repeated Warley, "displeased with us? What do you mean, Mr Grey?"

"I mean that you are not to go ashore," returned the other curtly, and walking forward as he spoke.

Ernest's cheek grew almost as crimson as Frank's had done. The apparent insinuation that he had misconducted himself while on his parole of good behaviour, was one of the things he could least endure. Mr Lavie laid his hand on the boy's arm.

"Hush, Ernest!" he said, checking an angry exclamation to which he was about to give vent. "Most likely Mr Grey is not serious. Anyway, if the captain does forbid your going ashore, you may be assured he has good reasons –"

"What reasons can he have?" interposed Gilbert; "we are no more likely to get into trouble here than at Madeira, and who has a right to say we did anything wrong there?"

"The first lieutenant *didn't* say so," observed the surgeon. "I think there is some mistake. I'll make inquiries about the matter before we enter the harbour."

He moved away, and the boys resolved to retreat to their den, where they might hold an indignation meeting without molestation. This den, to which its occupants had given the classical name of "Dionysius's ear," or more briefly, "Dionysius," was an empty space on the lower deck, about six foot square, where various stores had been stowed away. By some oversight of the men a dozen chests or so had been left ashore, and a vacant place in a corner was reserved for them. When, however, they were brought aboard, they could not conveniently be lowered, and were secured on deck. Master Nick, in the course of his restless wandering, had lighted on this void space, and it occurred to him that it would make a snug place of retreat, when he wished to be alone, as he not unfrequently did, in order to escape the consequences of some piece of mischief. When his friendship with his companions had been sufficiently cemented, he had communicated the secret to them, and Frank at once appreciated its value. Advantage had been already taken of it on one or two occasions, to evade an unwelcome summons from the skipper, or smoke a pipe at interdicted hours.

To be sure it was not a very desirable retiring room, and most persons would have considered a Russian or Neapolitan dungeon greatly preferable to it. As the reader has heard, it was about six foot square. It was lighted by a dead light in the deck above, which had fortunately been inserted just in that spot. Whatever air there was, came through the barrels, or along the ship's sides. But it is needless to say it was at all times suffocatingly close, and nothing but a boy or a salamander could have long continued to breathe such an atmosphere. Entrance was obtained by pulling aside a small keg; the removal of which allowed just enough room for any one to work his way in, like an earthworm, on his stomach. Then the keg was drawn by the rope attached to it into its place again, and firmly secured to a staple in the ship's side. Whatever might be its other defects, it was certainly almost impossible of detection.

Arrived here, our three heroes lay down at their leisure on some sacks with which they had garnished their domicile, and proceeded to discuss the matter in hand, lowering their voices as much as possible, as they had discovered that conversation might be heard through the barrels by any one on the other side, which fact, indeed, was the explanation of the name bestowed on their

retreat. They were not at first agreed as to the steps to be adopted. Nick was for going ashore under any circumstances – the difficulty of accomplishing his purpose, and the fact of his having been forbidden to essay it, being, in his eyes, only additional incentives. Frank was not disposed to make the attempt, if his uncle really had interdicted it; but he professed himself certain that no such order had been given by anybody but the first lieutenant, and he was not, he said, going to be under his orders. Warley for once was inclined to go beyond Frank, and declared that though he would obey the captain's order if any reasonable ground for it was assigned, he would not be debarred from what he considered his right as a passenger, by any man's mere caprice. He added, however, that he thought it would be better to hear what Lavie had found out, before coming to any resolution.

"Well, it is time we should see the doctor, if we mean to do so," remarked Frank, after an hour or so had passed in conversation. "We must be entering Porto Prayo by this time, or be near it at all events; and he must have had lots of time to find out everything."

"Very good; one of us had better see Mr Lavie at once," said Ernest. "I'll go, if you like, and come back to 'Dionysius' here, as soon as I have anything to tell."

He departed accordingly, and returned in about half an hour, looking very cool, but very much annoyed.

"Hallo, Ernest, what's up now?" exclaimed Nick, as he caught sight of his face. "What does the doctor say?"

"I haven't seen the doctor," answered Warley. "One of the crew has been taken dangerously ill, and the doctor has been with him ever since he left us."

"What have you learned, then?" asked Frank. "Are we in the harbour?"

"We're in the harbour, and the skipper's gone ashore. I saw his boat half-way to the beach. Captain Renton, Mr May, and Mr De Koech have gone with him. They are the only passengers who wanted to go."

"Well, but I suppose there are some shore boats that would take passengers to and fro."

"The captain has given orders that no shore boat is to be allowed alongside. He won't even allow the fresh provisions, or the water, to be brought aboard by any but the ship's boats. I saw the largest cutter with the empty water-casks in her, lying ready to go ashore presently."

"Who told you this?" inquired Wilmore, half incredulous.

"Old Jennings, the quartermaster. He has charge of the boat. He said the captain's resolved we shan't leave the ship."

"It's an infamous shame," said Frank. "I declare I've half a mind to swim ashore. It can't be very far."

"No," said Nick, "but it wouldn't be pleasant to land soaking wet, to say nothing of the chance of ground sharks. Even Lion had better not try that dodge. But I'll tell you what – if the boat is lying off the ship's side, with a lot of ankers in her, why shouldn't we creep in among them, and go ashore unbeknown to the first lieutenant?"

"We should be seen getting aboard," said Frank.

"No, we shouldn't. The men are at dinner just now, and we can slip in when the backs of the fellows on deck are turned."

"I forgot that," said Frank; "but we should be certain to be seen when we landed."

"Ay, no doubt. But that will be too late, won't it? Once ashore, I guess they must be pretty nimble to catch us; and besides, old Jennings is too good-natured to do anything against us, which he isn't obliged to do."

"Well, that's true, certainly," returned Wilmore. "What do you say, Warley? Are you game to make the trial?"

"Yes, I am," returned Ernest. "I think it is regular tyranny to oblige us to stay in the ship, when there is no reason for it, except the captain's caprice. But if we mean to try this, we must make haste."

The three lads hurried on deck; and a glance showed them they were just in time. There were only two or three men to be seen, and they were at the other end of the ship. They skimmed nimbly down the ladder, and found no difficulty in concealing themselves at the bow end of the boat, which was completely hidden from sight by the empty casks. They had not been in their hiding-place very long, before the old quartermaster and his men were heard coming down the side. The shore was soon reached, and the keel had no sooner grated on the sand, than the boys sprang out and ran up the beach, saluting old Jennings with a parting cheer as they went.

“Well, I never,” muttered the old man. “The cap’en ’ull be in a nice taking when he hears of this! And there ain’t no chance but what he *will* hear of it. We’ve Andy Duncan in the boat, and he carries everything to the first lieutenant, as sure as it happens. Well, I ain’t bound to peach, anyhow – that’s one comfort!”

Meanwhile the captain had gone on shore, his temper not improved by the report of the doctor which had been brought to him as he was leaving the vessel, that another of his best hands was rendered useless – for several weeks to come at all events – by a bad attack of fever, which might very possibly spread through the ship. He returned on board after nightfall, still more provoked and vexed. He had met with the greatest difficulty in his attempts to fill the places of his missing men. There were, as the reader has been told, very few whites on the island, and none of them were sailors. The blacks were very unwilling to engage, except upon exorbitant terms, and hardly one of those with whom he spoke appeared good for anything. He had at one time all but given up the matter in despair. But late in the afternoon he was accosted by a dark-complexioned man, lean and sinewy as a bloodhound, who informed him that the vessel in which he traded between the South African ports and the West Indian Islands, had been driven on the Cape Verdes and totally wrecked. But the crew had escaped, he said, and were willing to engage with Captain Wilmore for the voyage to Calcutta.

The captain hesitated. He had little doubt that the lost vessel had been a slaver, and he had an instinctive abhorrence of all engaged in that horrible traffic. Still there seemed no other hope of successfully prosecuting the voyage, and after all it would be a companionship of only a few months. He resolved to make one effort more to obtain less questionable help, and if that should fail, to accept the offer. Desiring the stranger to bring his men to the quay in an hour’s time, he once more entered the town, and made inquiries at all the houses to which sailors were likely to resort. His success was no better than it had been before, and he was obliged to close with the proposal of the foreign captain. He liked the looks of the crew even less than those of their captain. There were eighteen of them, however, and all strong serviceable fellows, if they chose to work. He must hope for the best; but even the best did not appear very promising; and if the Yankee captain, who had been the prime cause of the mischief, had been delivered into his hands at that moment, it is to be feared he would have met with small mercy.

In this frame of mind he regained the *Hooghly*, and shortly after his arrival was informed by the first lieutenant of the escapade of the three boys, with the gratuitous addition that he had himself delivered them the captain’s message – that no one was to be permitted to leave the ship, except those who had gone ashore with the captain.

The skipper’s wrath fairly boiled over. He vowed he would straightway give his nephew a smart taste of the cat-o’-nine-tails, and put the other two into irons, to teach them obedience. The boatswain accordingly was summoned, and the delinquents ordered into custody, but after a delay of half an hour, during which the captain’s wrath seemed to be every moment growing hotter, it was announced that the boys could not be found, and the boat’s crew sent ashore with the water-casks positively declared that they did not return with them. As no other boats but theirs and the captain’s had held any communication with the land, it appeared certain that the young gentlemen were still on shore, intending probably to return by a shore boat later in the evening.

“Do they?” exclaimed Captain Wilmore fiercely, when this likelihood was suggested to him by Mr Grey. “They’ll find themselves mistaken, then. Up with the anchor, Crossman, and hoist the mainsail. Before their boat has left the quay, we shall be twenty miles from land. Not a word, Mr Lavie. A month or two’s stay in these islands will be a lesson they’ll keep by them all their lives.”

No one ventured to remonstrate. The anchor was lifted, the great sails were set, and in half an hour they were moving southward at a pace which soon left the lights of Porto Prayo a mere speck in the distance.

But the boys had not been left behind, though no one but themselves and old Jennings was aware of the fact. He had kept the boat from putting off on her return to the ship, on one pretext or another, as long as he could venture to do so, in the hope that the lads would make their appearance. But he was aware that Andy Duncan’s eye was upon him, and could not venture to delay longer. It happened, however, that soon after his return, Mr Lavie had found it necessary to send on shore to the hospital for some ice, of which they had none on board, and old Jennings had volunteered to go. He took the smallest boat and no one with him but his nephew, Joe Cobbes, who was completely under his orders. He landed at a different place from that at which the boat had been moored in the morning, and sent his nephew with the message to the hospital. He then made search after the boys, whom he soon discovered at the regular landing-place, waiting anxiously for some means of regaining the *Hooghly*.

“Hallo, Jennings,” exclaimed Frank, as he caught sight of the old man’s figure through the fast gathering darkness; “that’s all right, then. I was afraid we were going to stay ashore all night?”

“I hope it is all right, sir,” answered Jennings, “but if the captain finds out that you’ve been breaking his orders – ”

“I don’t believe he has given any order – ” interrupted Frank. “And it would be monstrous if he had,” exclaimed Ernest in the same breath.

“I don’t know what you believe, Mr Frank, but it’s sartain he has ordered that no one shall leave the ship; and I don’t know as it’s so unreasonable, Mr Warley, after the desertion of the hands at Madeira.”

“We never heard of their deserting,” cried Warley.

“I dare say not, sir. It was kep’ snug. But that’s why the cap’en would allow no boats to go ashore, except what couldn’t be helped. You see, sir, if more of the men were to make off, there mightn’t be enough left to work the ship, and if there came a gale – ”

“Yes, yes; I understand that,” again broke in Frank, “but we didn’t know anything about their deserting.”

“Well, sir, it was giv’ out this morning as that was the reason, and every one, I thought, knew it. But anyways, sir, you’d best come and get aboard my boat, and keep out of the skipper’s way. He’ll be sure to find out about your doings. Andy ’ull tell the first lieutenant, and he’ll tell the skipper – ”

“I am sure I don’t care if he does,” exclaimed Warley.

“Ah, you don’t know him, sir. He’s not a man as it’s wise to defy. Wait a bit; let him cool down and he’s as pleasant a man as any one. But when he’s put up, old Nick himself can’t match him. I don’t mind a gale of wind off the Cape, or boarding a Frenchman, or a tussle with a pirate, but I durstn’t face the cap’en, when he’s in one of his takings. Come along, and get into the boat.”

The lads obeyed, somewhat subdued by Jennings’ representations, which were evidently given in good faith. They allowed the old man to cover them with a tarpaulin, which he had brought for the purpose, and in accordance with his directions lay perfectly still.

Presently Cobbes returned with the ice, and the boat was rowed back to the ship. It was pitch dark before she came alongside, and her approach was hardly noticed. Jennings made for the gangway, and having ascertained that Captain Wilmore was still on shore, sent his nephew with the ice to the doctor’s cabin. He then suffered the boat to float noiselessly to the stern, where he

had purposely left one of the cabin windows open; through this the boys contrived, with his help, to scramble.

“You’d better hide somewhere in the hold, Mr Frank,” he whispered, as young Wilmore, who was the last, prepared to follow his companions.

“No, on the lower deck, Jennings; we’ve a hiding-place there, no one will find out. When you think it’s safe for us to show ourselves, come down, and whistle a bar or two of one of your tunes, and I’ll creep out to you. But I hope we shan’t be kept very long, or we shall run a risk of being starved, though we have got some grub in our pockets. Good night, Jennings, and thank you. You’re a good fellow, any way, whatever the captain may be.”

“Good night, Mr Frank; mind you keep close till I come to let you out. I won’t keep you waiting no longer than I can help, you may be sure of that.”

Wilmore followed his friends; and the three boys, creeping cautiously along in the darkness, gained the lower deck unperceived, and were soon safely ensconced in “Dionysius.” Tired out with their day’s work, they all three fell sound asleep.

Chapter Three

Strange Tidings – Pirates on Board – A Revel – A Narrow Escape – Death of Jennings

The boys were awakened next morning by the pitching and tossing of the ship. A storm had come on during the night, which increased in violence as the morning advanced. It was well for the *Hooghly* that the fresh hands had been taken on board, or she would have become wholly unmanageable. Frank and his friends, in their place of retreat, could hear the shouts and cries on deck, the rolling of the barrels which had broken loose from their fastenings, and the washing of the heavy seas which poured over the gunwales. They made their breakfasts on some of the fruit and sausages with which they had filled their pockets on the previous evening, and waited anxiously for old Jennings' arrival. It was late in the afternoon before he came, and when he did appear, he would not hear of their venturing to show themselves for the present.

"The cap'en wasn't altogether in a pleasant state of mind yesterday," he remarked, "but he's in a wuss to-day. He's found out that the most part of his crew ain't worth a tobacco stopper. I must say the Yankee made a good pick of it. He got away pretty nigh every smart hand we had aboard. These new chaps is the best we has now."

"New chaps?" asked Frank. "Has my uncle got any fresh hands?"

"Picked up nineteen new 'uns at Port Prayo," replied Jennings. "Stout nimble fellows they are, no doubt. But I don't greatly conceit them neither. They keep together, and hardly speak to any one aboard, except Andy Duncan and Joel White and Bob O'Hara and that lot. They're no good either, to my mind. Well, young gents, you must stay here till the gale breaks, as I guess it will to-morrow, or the next day, and then the skipper will be in good-humour again. I've brought you a heap of biscuits and some fruit and a keg of water. But I mustn't be coming down here often, or we shall be found out I've tied the dog up in the fo'castle, or he'd be sniffing about after Mr Frank here, and most likely find him out."

"Very well, Tom," said Frank, "then we'll wait here. But it's terribly dull work. Nothing to do but to sleep and smoke."

"I think the skipper would let us off, if he knew what we'd gone through during the last twenty-four hours," observed Nick, yawning. "Well, I suppose one must grin and bear it." So saying, he rolled himself into his corner and endeavoured to lose the recollection of his *désagréments* in sleep.

The evening wore on heavily enough. It was past midnight before the gale began to lull, and the lads at length fell sound asleep. But they were roused soon afterwards by a loud commotion on deck. Voices were heard shouting and cursing; one or two shots were fired, and Frank fancied he could once or twice distinguish the clash of cutlasses. But presently the tumult died away, and the ship apparently resumed her customary discipline. Daylight came at last, glimmering faintly through the crevices of their prison, and the boys lay every minute expecting the advent of the old quartermaster. But the morning passed, and the afternoon began to slip away, and still there was no sign of Jennings's approach. The matter was more than once debated whether they should issue from their hiding-place, which was now becoming intolerable to them, altogether disregarding his advice; or at any rate send out one of the party to reconnoitre. But Ernest urged strongly the wisdom of keeping to their original resolution, and Frank after awhile sided with him. It was agreed, however, that if Jennings did not appear on the following morning, Warley should betake himself to the doctor's cabin and ask his advice.

Accordingly they once more lay down to sleep, and were again awoke in the middle of the night, but this time by a voice calling to them in a subdued tone through the barrels.

Wilmore, who was the lightest sleeper, started up. "Who is that?" he asked.

"It is I – Tom Jennings," was the answer. "Don't speak again, but push out the barrel that stops the way into your crib there. I'll manage to crawl in, I dare say, though I am a bit lame."

Wilmore saw there was something wrong. He complied literally with Tom's request, and pushed the keg out in silence. Presently he heard the old man making his way, stopping every now and then as if in pain. At last there came the whisper again: "Pull the barrel back into its place, I've got a lantern under my coat which I'll bring out when you've made all fast."

Frank again obeyed his directions, having first enjoined silence on his two companions, who were by this time wide awake. Then Jennings drew out his lantern, and lighted it by the help of a flint and steel. As the light fell on his face and figure, the boys could hardly suppress a cry of alarm. His cheeks were as white as ashes, and in several places streaked with clotted blood. His leg too was rudely bandaged from the knee to the ankle, and it was only by a painful effort that he could draw it after him.

"What's the matter, Tom?" exclaimed Frank. "How have you hurt your leg in that manner?"

"Hush! Mr Frank. We mustn't speak above a whisper. There's pirates on board. They've got possession of the ship."

"Pirates!" repeated Wilmore. "What, have we been attacked, and my uncle –"

"He's safe, Mr Frank – at least I hope so. Look here. You remember them foreign chaps as he brought aboard at Porto Prayo? It was all a lie they told the cap'en, about their ship having been lost. They were part of a crew of pirates – that's my belief, any way – as had heard Captain Wilmore was short-handed, and wanted to get possession of his ship. They was no sooner aboard than they made friends with some of the worst of our hands – Andy and White and O'Hara and the rest on 'em – and I make no doubt persuaded them to join 'em. About ten o'clock last night, when the men were nearly all in their berths, worn out with their work during the gale, these foreigners crept up on deck, cut down and pitched overboard half a dozen of our chaps as were on deck, and then clapped down the hatches."

"That was what we heard, then," remarked Gilbert. "Were you on deck, Tom?"

"Yes, sir, I was, and got these two cuts over the head and leg. By good luck I fell close to the companion-ladder and was able at once to crawl to my berth, or I should have been pitched overboard. Well, as soon as it was daylight, the captain and the officers laid their heads together to contrive some means of regaining the ship; but, before they could settle anything, a vessel came in sight, and the fellows on deck hove to and let her come up –"

"The pirate ship, I suppose, hey?" cried Frank.

"Yes, sir, no other. She'd followed us beyond a doubt from Porto Prayo, and would have come up before, if it hadn't been for the gale. There wasn't nothing to be done, of course. The pirates threatened the captain, if he didn't surrender at once, that they'd fire down the hatchways and afterwards pitch every mother's son overboard. And they'd have done it too."

"Not a doubt," assented Frank. "So my uncle surrendered?"

"Yes, sir, he did, but he didn't like it. I must say, from what I've heard of these fellows, I judged that they'd have thrown us all in to the sea without mercy. But it seems White and O'Hara and the rest wouldn't allow that, and insisted on it that every one, who chose it, should be allowed to leave the ship. I did 'em injustice, I must say."

"What did they go in?" inquired Wilmore, a good deal surprised.

"In the two biggest of the ship's boats, sir. You see we've been driven a long way south by that gale, and are not more than a few hundred miles from Ascension. They'll make for that, and with this wind they've a good chance of getting there in three or four days."

"Are all the officers and passengers gone?" asked Warley.

“Well, no, sir. Mr Lavie ain’t gone. The men stopped him as he was stepping into the boat, and declared he shouldn’t leave the ship. But all the rest is gone – no one’s left except those who’ve joined the mutineers, unless it’s poor old Lion, who’s still tied up in the fo’castle.”

“Why, *you* haven’t joined them, Jennings, to be sure?”

“I! no, sir; but with my leg I couldn’t have gone aboard the boats; and to be sure, I hadn’t the chance, for I fainted dead off as soon as I’d reached my berth, and didn’t come to till after they was gone. And there’s my nevvie too – he wouldn’t go, but chose to stay behind and nurse me. I hadn’t the heart to scold the lad for it.”

“Scold him! I should think not,” observed Warley.

“Well, sir, it may get him into trouble if he’s caught aboard this ship, and I expect he’ll get into troubles with these pirates too. But there’s no use fretting about what can’t be helped. I’m thinking about you young gents. You see if I’d been in my right senses when they went away, I should have told the cap’en about you, and he’d have taken you away with him. But I wasn’t sensible like, and no one else then knew as you was aboard.”

“No one knew it *then*?” repeated Warley. “No one knows it now, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir, Mr Lavie knows it, and Joe too; I told them an hour ago, and we had a long talk about it. The doctor’s resolved he won’t stay in the ship, and I suppose you don’t want to stay neither?”

“We stay, Tom!” replied Frank. “No, I should think not indeed, if we can help it. But how are we to get away?”

“This way, sir. These pirates have been choosing their officers to-day, and they’ve made O’Hara captain. They say he’s the only man who’s up to navigating the ship. Anyhow, they’ve made him captain, and one of the foreign chaps, first mate. They’re to have a great supper to-morrow night in honour of ’em, and most of the crew – pretty nigh all I should say – will be drunk. Well, then, we claps a lot of things, that Mr Lavie has got together, aboard one of the boats – there are enough of us to lower her easy enough – and long before daylight you’ll be out of sight.”

“*You’ll* be out of sight. Don’t you mean to go yourself, Jennings?” asked Frank.

“My leg won’t let me, Mr Frank. I couldn’t get down the ship’s side; and besides, I ain’t in no danger. My old messmates won’t let me be hurt, nor Joe Cobbes neither. I’d best stay here till my leg’s right. Mr Lavie says it wants nothing but rest, and a little washing now and then. No, sir; Joe and I would rather stay on board here and take the first opportunity of leaving the ship that offers. Mr Lavie and you all ’ull bear witness how it happened.”

“That we will, Tom,” said Warley. “Well, then, if I understand you, we’ve nothing to do but to remain quiet until to-morrow night, and you and Mr Lavie will make all the preparations?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right. Stay quietly here till you’ve notice that everything’s ready.”

“But I don’t like you having all the risk and trouble, Tom,” said Wilmore.

“You’d do as much for me, sir, and more too, I dare say, if you had the chance. Besides, I am anxious you should get away safe, because you’re my witnesses that I and Joe had no hand in this. I shall get well all the sooner, when you’re gone.”

“All right, Jennings,” said Warley. “And now I suppose you want to get out of this again?”

“Yes, sir; you must help me. Getting out will be worse than getting in, I am afraid.”

The lantern was extinguished, the keg removed, and with much pain and difficulty the old man was helped out. The next twenty-four hours were passed in the utmost anxiety by the three lads, who would hardly allow themselves even to whisper to one another, for fear of being overheard by the pirates. All the morning they could hear the preparations for the feast going on. Some casks in the lower deck, which, as they knew, contained some unusually fine wine, were broken open, and the bottles carried on deck. Planks also were handed up to make tables and benches. From the conversation of the men employed in the work, they learned that the feast was to take place in the fore-castle, none of the cabins being large enough to hold the entire party. Once they caught a mention of Mr Lavie’s name, and learned that he had been all night in attendance on Amos Wood,

the sailor who had been attacked by fever at Porto Prayo, and that the man had died that morning, and been thrown overboard. The doctor, it was said, had now turned in for a long sleep. The boys guessed that his day would be differently employed. About six o'clock in the evening, everything seemed to be in readiness. The tramp of feet above was heard as the men took their places at table, and was followed by the rattling of plates and knives and forks, and the oaths and noisy laughter of the revellers. These grew more vociferous as the evening passed on, and after an hour or two the uproar was heightened by the crash of glass, and the frequent outbreak of quarrels among the guests, which were with difficulty suppressed by their more sober comrades. Then benches were overturned, and the noise of bodies falling on the deck was heard, as man after man became stupidly intoxicated. The uproar gradually died out, until nothing was audible, but drunken snores, or the unsteady steps of some few of the sailors, who were supposed to be keeping watch.

It was about two hours after midnight when the expected summons came. Frank crept out first, followed by Nick and Ernest. They found Mr Lavie and Joe Cobbes waiting for them.

"Everything is ready, Ernest," whispered the doctor. "We've put as many provisions and arms into the jolly-boat as we can safely carry; but you had better take a brace of pistols apiece. There are some one or two of the men who are the worse for drink, but still sober enough to know what they are doing, and we may have a tussle. Put on these caps and jackets, and come as quick as you can. The jolly-boat is on the starboard side, near the stern. She's not in the water yet, but everything is ready for lowering her. Quiet's the word."

The boys obeyed. They crept cautiously on deck, pulling the caps over their foreheads, and imitating as well as they could the movements of drunken men. They soon reached the jolly-boat, where old Jennings was waiting for them. The helm had been lashed, but every ten minutes or so one of the watch came aft to see that all was right. Jennings had unfastened the lashings and taken the rudder, telling the first man who came up that he would see to it for the rest of the watch. The man willingly enough accepted his services, and this skilful manoeuvre saved them for the time from further interruption.

"Lower quickly, Mr Lavie," he whispered in the doctor's ear. "Andy Duncan has had liquor enough to make half a dozen men drunk, but he knows what he's doing for all that. He's keeping an eye on the ship, and may be down upon us any minute."

He was obeyed promptly and in silence. The boat was lowered without attracting notice. Warley was the first to slip down the rope, and was safely followed by Nick. Frank was just climbing over the bulwark when a man staggered up, and accused them with a volley of drunken oaths of intending to desert.

"No, no, Andy," said Jennings quickly, "no one means to desert. There's a man overboard, and we're lowering a boat to pick him up. Make haste, my lad," he continued, addressing Wilmore, "or he'll be too far astern for us to help him."

Frank promptly took the cue, and vanished over the side. For a moment Duncan was staggered by the old quartermaster's readiness, but the next he caught a momentary glimpse of Frank's features.

"Hallo, that's young Wilmore, that's the captain's neevy, as you said had been left behind," he shouted. "There's some devilry here! Help, my lads, there!" He drew a pistol as he spoke, and fired at Mr Lavie's head, who was attempting to seize him.

His nerves were unsteady from drink, and the bullet missed its mark; but it struck Joe Cobbes on the temple, who fell on the instant stone dead. Some of the men, startled by the pistol shot, came reeling up from the forecabin.

The doctor struck Andy a heavy blow with the butt end of his pistol, and the man dropped insensible on the deck. He then turned to Jennings. "You must go with us now, Tom," he said, "or they will certainly murder you. Go, I tell you, or I'll stay behind myself."

The old man made a great effort and rolled himself over the bulwarks, reaching the boat by the help of the rope, and the hands of the boys below, though he fainted from pain and exhaustion immediately afterwards.

Mr Lavie fired at the nearest man, who dropped with a broken leg. The others hung back alarmed and stupefied. Lavie skimmed down the rope, and disengaged her before they had recovered their senses. Just at this moment there was a heavy splash close beside them.

“Hallo!” cried Ernest, “one of the fellows has fallen overboard. We must take him in. We can’t leave him to drown.”

“It isn’t any of the crew,” said Frank. “It’s old Lion. I can see his head above water. He has broken his fastenings and followed us. Haul him aboard, Nick.”

The dog was soon got in, and Lavie and Warley, seizing the oars, rowed away from the ship. An attempt was made to lower a boat, and one or two shots were fired. But the crew were in no condition for work of any kind, and in a few minutes the *Hooghly* was lost sight of in the darkness. Lavie and Wilmore, who understood the management of a boat, hoisted the sail and took the rudder.

Meanwhile, Warley and Gilbert were endeavouring to restore the old quartermaster from his swoon. They threw water in his face, and poured some brandy from a flask down his throat, but for a long time without any result. At last the boat was in proper trim, and Mr Lavie set at liberty to attend to his patient. Alarmed at the low state of the pulse, and the failure of the efforts to restore consciousness, he lighted his lantern, and then discovered that the bottom of the boat was deluged with blood. The bandages had been loosened in the struggle to get on board, and the wound had broken out afresh. The surgeon saw that there was now little hope of saving the old man’s life. He succeeded, however, in stanching the flow of blood, and again bound up the wound, directing that Jennings should be laid in as comfortable a position as possible on a heap of jackets in the bow.

This had not been long effected, when morning appeared. Those who have witnessed daybreak in the tropics, will be aware how strange and brilliant a contrast it presents to that of northern climates. The day does not slowly gather in the East, changing by imperceptible degrees from the depth of gloom to the fulness of light, but springs as it were with a single effort into brilliant splendour – an image of the great Creator’s power when He created the earth and skies – not toiling through long ages of successive processes and formations, as some would have us believe, but starting at one bound from shapeless chaos into life and harmony.

The doctor cast an anxious look at the horizon, and was relieved to find that the *Hooghly* was nowhere visible. “Well out of that,” he muttered. “If we could only bring poor Jennings round, I shouldn’t so much regret what has happened. But I am afraid that can’t be.” He again felt the old man’s pulse, and found that he was now conscious again, though very feeble.

“Is that Mr Lavie?” he said, opening his eyes. “I’m glad to see you’ve come off safe, sir. I hope the young gentlemen are safe too.”

“All three of them, Jennings, thank you,” was the answer; “not one of them has so much as a scratch on him.”

“That’s hearty, sir. I am afraid poor Joe – it’s all over with him, isn’t it?”

“I am afraid so, Tom. But he didn’t suffer. The ball struck him right on the temple, and he was gone in a moment.”

“Yes, sir, and he was killed doing his duty. Perhaps if he’d remained among them villains, he’d have been led astray by them. It’s best as it is, sir. I only hope you may all get safe to land.”

“And you too, Tom,” added Frank, who with his two companions had joined them unperceived.

“No, Mr Frank, I shall never see land – never see the sun set again, I expect. But I don’t know that I’m sorry for that I’m an old man, sir, and my nevvie was the last of my family, and I couldn’t have lived very long any way.”

“No,” said Mr Lavie, “and you too have met your death in the discharge of your duty. When my time comes, I hope I may be able to say the same.”

“Ah, doctor, it’s little good any on us can do in this world. It’s well that there’s some one better able to bear the load of our sins than we are! But I want to say a word or two, sir, while I can. I advised you, you’ll remember, to run straight for the nearest point of the coast, which I judge is about eight hundred miles off. But I didn’t know then where them pirates meant to take the *Hooghly* to. Their officers only let it out last night over their drink. They were to make the mouth of the Congo river, where they’ve one of their settlements, or whatever they call them. Now, that happens to be just the point you’d be running for, and they’d be pretty sure to overhaul you before you reached it. You’d better now try to reach the Cape, sir. It is a long way off – a good fortnight’s sail, I dare say, even with this wind. But there’s food and water enough to last more than that time; and besides, you may fall in with an Indiaman.”

“We’ll take your advice, you may be sure, Jennings.”

“I’m glad to hear that, sir. It makes my mind more easy. Make for the coast, Dr Lavie, but don’t try for it north of Cape Frio – that’s my advice, sir; and I know these latitudes pretty well by this time.”

“We’ll take care, Jennings,” said Warley. “And now, isn’t there anything we can do for you?”

“You can say a prayer or two with me, Mr Ernest,” replied the old man feebly. “You can’t do anything else, that I knows of.”

Warley complied, and all kneeling down, he repeated the Lord’s Prayer, and one or two simple petitions for pardon and support, in which old Jennings feebly joined. Before the sun had risen high in the heavens his spirit had passed away. His body was then reverently committed to the deep, and the survivors, in silence and sorrow, sailed away from the spot.

Chapter Four

A Fog – Wrecked – A Consultation – Survey of the Shore – A Strange Spectacle – The First Night on Shore

It was early morning. Lavie and Warley were sitting at the helm conversing anxiously, but in subdued tones, unwilling to break the slumbers of their two companions, who were lying asleep at their feet, with Lion curled up beside them. It was now sixteen days since they had left the ship; and so far as they could ascertain, Table Bay was still seven or eight hundred miles distant. They had been unfortunate in their weather. For the first few days indeed the wind had been favourable, and they had made rapid progress. But on the fifth morning there had come a change. The wind lulled, and for eight and forty hours there fell a dead calm. This was followed by a succession of light baffling breezes, during the prevalence of which they could hardly make any way. On the twelfth day the wind was again fair; but their provisions, and especially their supply of water, had now run so low, that there was little hope of its holding out, even if no further *contretemps* should occur. Under these circumstances, they had thought it better to steer for the nearest point of the African coast. They were now too far to the southward to run any great risk of falling in with the pirates, and at whatever point they might make the land, there would be a reasonable prospect of obtaining fresh supplies. The course of the boat had accordingly been altered, and for the last three days they had been sailing due east.

According to the doctor's calculations they were not more than sixty or seventy miles from shore, when the sun set on the previous evening; and as they had been running steadily before the wind all night, he fully expected to catch sight of it as soon as the morning dawned. But the sky was thick and cloudy, and there was a mist over the sea, rendering objects at the distance of a few hundred yards quite undistinguishable.

"We cannot be far from shore," said the doctor. "My observations, I dare say, are not very accurate; but I think I cannot be more than twenty or thirty miles wrong, and according to me we ought to have sighted land, or rather have been near enough to sight it, three or four hours ago."

"I think I can hear the noise of breakers," said Warley, "I have fancied so for the last ten minutes. But there is such a fog, that it is impossible to make out anything."

"You are right," said Mr Lavie, setting himself to listen. "That is the beating of surf; we must be close to the shore, but it will be dangerous to approach until we can see it more clearly. We must go about."

Ernest obeyed; but the alarm had been taken too late. Almost at the same moment that he turned the rudder, the boat struck upon a reef, though not with any great force. Lavie sprang out and succeeded in pushing her off into deep water again, but the blow had damaged her bottom, and the water began to come in.

"Bale her out," shouted Lavie to Frank and Nick as he sprang on board again. "I can see the land now. It's not a quarter of a mile off, and she'll keep afloat for that distance. Take the other oar, Ernest; while they bale we must row for that point yonder."

The fog had partially cleared away, and a low sandy shore became here and there visible, running out into a long projecting spit on their left hand. This was the spot which Lavie had resolved to make for. It was not more than two or three hundred yards distant, and there was no appearance of surf near it. They rowed with all their strength, the other two baling with their hats, in lieu of any more suitable vessels. But the water continued to gain on them, nevertheless, though slowly, and they had approached within thirty yards of the beach, when she struck a second time on a sunk

rock, and began to fill rapidly. They all simultaneously leaped out into four-foot water, and by their united strength contrived to drag the boat on until her keel rested on the sand. Lavie then seized the longest rope, and running up the low, shelving shore, secured the end to a huge mass of drift-wood which lay just above high-water mark. Fortunately the tide was now upon the turn, so that in three-quarters of an hour or so she would be left high and dry on the beach.

The first impulse of all four was to fall on their knees and return thanks for their deliverance, even the thoughtless Nick being, for the time, deeply impressed by his narrow escape from death. Then they looked about them. The fog had now almost disappeared, and a long monotonous line of sand hills presented itself in the foreground. Behind this appeared a dreary stretch of sand, unenlivened by tree, grass, or shrub, for two or three miles at least, when it terminated in a range of hills, covered apparently with scrub. Immediately beyond the narrow strip of beach lay a lagoon, extending inland for about a mile. This was evidently connected with the sea at high-water; for a great many fish had been left stranded in the mud, where they were obliged to remain, until the return of the tide again set them at liberty. Presently a low growl from Lion startled them, and they noticed an animal creeping up round a neighbouring sand hill, which on nearer approach they perceived to be a hyena. It was followed by several others of the same kind, which forthwith began devouring the stranded fish, while the latter flapped their tails in vain attempts to escape from the approach of their enemy. Availing themselves of the hint thus offered them, the boys, who had not yet breakfasted, pulled off their shoes and stockings, and followed by Lion, waded into the mud. The hyenas skulked off as they approached, and they soon possessed themselves of several large eels and barbel. Mr Lavie, whose appetite also reminded him that he had eaten nothing that morning, gathered a heap of dry weed and drift-wood, and drawing out his burning-glass, soon set them ablaze. Frank undertook to clean and broil the fish, which was soon afterwards served up, and pronounced excellent.

By the time they had finished their meal, all the water had run out of the boat, and the sand was sufficiently dry to enable them to convey their stores on shore. Having completed this, and covered them with tarpaulin to prevent damage from the broiling sun, their next task was to turn her over and examine her bottom. It took the united strength of the four to accomplish this; but it had no sooner been done, than it became evident that it would be useless to bestow further trouble upon her. The first concussion had merely loosened her timbers, but the second had broken a large hole in the bottom; which it was beyond their powers of carpentry to repair, even had they possessed all the necessary tools.

"Thank God she didn't strike on that sharp rock the first time," exclaimed Lavie, as he saw the fracture; "we should not be standing here, if she had."

"Why, we can all swim, Mr Lavie, and it was not more than a quarter of a mile from land," observed Gilbert, surprised.

The doctor made no reply, but he pointed out to sea where the black fins of more than one shark were visible above the surface.

Nick shuddered and turned pale, and all present again offered an inward thanksgiving.

"Well," resumed Frank, after a few moments' silence, "what is to be done, then? I suppose it is pretty certain that she will never float again."

"Well, not certain, Frank," suggested Warley. "There may be some fishermen – settlers, or natives – living about here, and they of course would have boats, and would therefore be able to repair ours. The best thing will be to make search in all directions, and see if we can discover anywhere a fisherman's hut."

"I am afraid there's not much chance of that, Ernest," said Wilmore. "If there were any fishermen about here, we should see their boats, or any way their nets, not to say their cottages; for they would be tolerably sure to live somewhere near the beach."

“The boats might be out to sea, and the nets on board them,” suggested Gilbert, “and the huts may be anywhere – hidden behind those hillocks of sand, perhaps.”

“So they may, Nick,” observed Mr Lavie, “though I fear there is no very great chance of it. It is worth trying for, at all events. Look here, one of us had better go along the shore to the right, and another to the left, until they get to the end of the bay. From thence they will, in all likelihood, be able to see a long way along the coast, and if no villages or single dwellings are visible, it will be of no use making further search for them. It will take several hours to reach the end to the left there, and that to the right is probably about as far off; but it is still so hidden by the fog that, at this distance, it can’t be made out.”

“And what are the other two to do?” asked Frank.

“They had better stay here and make preparations for supper and passing the night,” said Mr Lavie. “It is still tolerably early, but whoever goes out to explore won’t be back till late in the afternoon, and will be too tired, I guess, to be willing to set out on a fresh expedition then. Besides, the night falls so rapidly in these latitudes that it wouldn’t be safe. Now, I have some skill in hut making, and I think you had better leave that part of the job to me.”

“By all means, Charles,” said Warley; “and Frank here showed himself such a capital cook this morning, that I suppose he’ll want to undertake that office again. Well, I’m quite ready. I should like to take the left side of the bay, Nick, if you’ve no objection.”

“It’s all the same to me,” said Nick; “anything for a quiet life – and it seems quiet enough out there anyway. Well, then, I suppose we had better be off at once, as I don’t want to have to walk very fast. I should like to have Lion, but I suppose he wouldn’t follow me.”

“No, he’s safe to stay with Frank, but you two had better take your guns with you,” said Mr Lavie. “I don’t suppose you are likely to meet any wild animals on these sand flats – nothing worse than a hyena, at any rate.”

“Thank you kindly, Mr Lavie, I don’t particularly want to meet even a hyena,” said Nick.

“Pooh, Nick, he wouldn’t attack you, if he did meet you. But you may want our help for some reason or other, which we can’t foresee, and we shall be sure to hear you, if you fire. Here, Nick, you shall have my rifle for the nonce. It is an old favourite of mine, and has seen many a day’s sport. And here’s Captain Renton’s rifle for you, Ernest. By good luck he had asked me to take care of it, so it was safe in my cabin the day we got away. I’ve never seen it perform; but if it is only one half as good an article as he declares, you’ll have no cause to complain of it.”

“How was it that the captain didn’t take it with him?” asked Gilbert.

“Because they wouldn’t let him,” said the surgeon. “He asked to be allowed to fetch it, and looked as savage as he dared to look, when they swore they’d allow no firearms to be taken.”

“I don’t wonder at their not permitting it,” observed Wilmore.

“Nor I, Frank. The wonder to me has always been that they let the officers and passengers go at all. But it seems that such of our men as agreed to join these Congo pirates would not do so, except on the express condition that the lives of all on board were to be spared; and the pirates daren’t cross them. But we mustn’t dawdle here talking. There’s plenty to be done by all of us, and more than we can do, too.”

Warley and Nick accordingly set off in opposite directions, and Lavie and Frank began their work. They first took an axe from their stores, and choosing from among the drift-wood three of the longest spars, resolved to fix two of them in the ground, and lash the third to their upper ends. They selected for this purpose a hollow between two high sand hills, about a hundred yards above high-water mark. Then they were to cut six more poles, and lay them on either side against the ridge piece, burying the other ends in the sand. Over this frame-work the tarpaulin was to be stretched, and kept in its place by laying some heavy pieces of wood on the lower ends. Thus a small tent would be formed, at the bottom of which the boat’s sail was to be spread, forming a convenient place on which to lay their stores, and make up their beds.

Plainly it would occupy a considerable time to complete these arrangements, but they had not advanced half-way, when Nick came hurrying back in a state of the greatest excitement, declaring that he had seen, at a short distance, the roofs of what was evidently a town of considerable size; and on a flat piece of ground adjoining it, a number of men – soldiers they seemed to be – in red and white uniforms, drawn out in long lines, as if on parade.

“A large town, Nick! soldiers in uniform!” repeated Wilmore in great astonishment. “You must be dreaming.”

“I assure you I am not,” replied Gilbert, whose demeanour showed that he was thoroughly in earnest. “I could see, quite distinctly above the fog, the towers of a church, apparently, and a long row of battlements, evidently part of a line of fortifications; and, through openings in the mist, the red caps and jackets of the soldiers were as plain as anything I ever beheld in my life.”

“But it can’t be, doctor, can it?” asked Frank. “I am sure I should be glad enough to think we were near any inhabited spot, let alone a large city. But you’re pretty certain of our whereabouts, ain’t you?”

“Yes; I don’t think I can be mistaken very much, and I must be out of all reckoning wrong, if this is true. There is no town, that I know of, on this coast, between the Portuguese settlements, which are something like eight hundred miles to the north of where I suppose we now are, and Cape Town, which is almost as far to the south.”

“Well, just come and look for yourself, doctor,” said Nick. “It won’t take you long. The place is not above two or three miles off at the outside.”

“Of course I will go – we’ll all go, Nick – Lion and all I am sure I hope with all my heart that you may be right. It will save us a very long and dangerous journey if you are.”

He caught up a fowling-piece which had belonged to his friend the purser, and handed Frank the fourth gun, an ordinary seaman’s carbine. “Now then, Nick, lead the way.”

Gilbert complied, and the whole party stepped out briskly, their curiosity, as well as their interest, being strongly awakened. They toiled through the heavy sand, which was only varied by heaps of drift-wood flung up by the sea, and the rotten carcasses of mud fish, which had been carried too far inland by the tide to be able to recover their native element. The stench, under the burning sun, was almost insupportable, and the three adventurers were greatly relieved, when, after a walk of three-quarters of an hour, the desert of sand was passed, and they ascended a rocky plateau, where some crags, twelve or fifteen feet in height, afforded at least some shelter from the rapidly increasing heat. “We are getting near the place now,” observed Nick, as they reached the last of a long chain of rocks, and came upon a wide and apparently level plain, but so much enveloped in mist as to be very imperfectly discerned.

“There it is, I declare,” exclaimed Frank, who was the first of the party to turn the corner of the limestone shelf. “There it all is – houses, fortifications, and soldiers, just as Nick said!”

There, indeed, it was. At the distance, as it seemed, of scarcely more than three hundred feet, were seen distinctly the battlemented walls of a city of great size and strength. There were the gateways, the flanking towers, and the embrasures; while behind them rose domes and cupolas, and the sharp-peaked roofs of numberless houses, intermingled with lofty trees. Under the walls ran a broad river, the waters of which rippled brightly in the sunshine, and upon its banks long lines of infantry were drawn up, or what appeared to be infantry, all standing silent and motionless as so many statues.

The two boys gazed in the utmost bewilderment at this spectacle, while Lion bounded forward, evidently meditating a plunge into the cool and sparkling waters. The astonishment of the party was in no way diminished, when the doctor, raising his gun to his shoulder, fired directly at the nearest platoon of soldiers, one of whom was seen to fall. The next moment the whole of his companions rose with loud screams into the air, and dispersed themselves in all directions. Almost at the same moment the walls and battlements of the fortress and ridges of roof behind

them wavered and shook, and finally vanished from the scene, as the smoke of a wood fire is lost in the surrounding atmosphere. In their place appeared a low serrated ridge of rock, on which a few stunted shrubs were growing, while in front and behind alike extended the interminable waste of sand.

“Here is your soldier, Nick,” said the doctor, as he picked up the carcass of a large flamingo, which his shot had brought down. “Here’s his red cap and jacket – his beak and wings, that is to say – and here are his white facings – his neck and chest. You are not the first by a good many that has made that mistake!”

“This is what is called a mirage, then?” said Frank. “I’ve often heard of it, and longed to see it; and it is a more extraordinary delusion than I could have supposed possible. Why that low line of rock there, and those dwarf shrubs looked as if they were at least sixty feet high. How in the world do you account for it, Mr Lavie? Why even Lion was taken in!”

“I am afraid I cannot give you an explanation, which you will understand very clearly, Frank. It is caused by the inequality of the temperature in the lower strata of the air; which again is the result of the reflected heat of the sun’s rays on the barren, sandy plain. While the strata are unequally heated, these curious reflections, which are like those seen in broken mirrors, continue to deceive the eye. Objects appear to be raised high into the air, which in reality are to be found on the surface of the earth, often too they are immensely magnified, as indeed you saw just now; a single stone will seem the size of a house, and an insignificant shrub look as big as a forest tree. But when the sun gains sufficient power to raise all the strata to a uniform heat, the mirage melts away.”

“But your shot seemed to disperse it just now.”

“So it did. But my shot only disturbed the strata; and if the mirage had not been nearly on the point of vanishing, from the increasing solar heat, I doubt whether the same effect would have followed. But it is time for us to go back to our hut and finish our work. Nick, I suppose you will join us? We may see pretty plainly for ourselves that there are no fishermen’s huts in this quarter.”

Nick assented, and the three, after a short rest under the shade of the rocks, returned to the spot whence they had set out, and resumed their work. By two o’clock the two uprights were fixed in the sand, and in two hours afterwards the tent was complete. All the stores were then carefully conveyed inside, the keg of gunpowder being buried in the sand to prevent the possibility of accident. Then the two lads set about preparations for supper, which was to consist, like that of the morning, of fish broiled on the embers.

“And a very good supper too,” observed Nick; “I don’t think I ever ate a finer fish than this cod here.”

“It’s first-rate, there’s no doubt of that,” returned Frank; “but I must own I should like something besides. I suppose your flamingo there wouldn’t be very good eating?”

“I expect not,” replied Lavie. “The flamingo is too gross a feeder to make very good food itself. One might eat it, I dare say, if there was nothing else to be had. I have eaten lion steaks once in my life, but I have no ambition to repeat the experiment. No, I don’t propose to make any further use of my flamingo than to cut off one of his beautiful red wings to make a fan of, and hand the rest of the bird over to Lion. What a splendid-looking bird he was; it really seems almost a shame to kill him!”

They all gathered round to admire him. The colours in which nature had dressed him, showed that he was one of her favourite children. The long thin legs – they were two feet and some inches in length – were of the most delicate shade of pink, and shaped with wonderful grace. The short thigh, chest, and neck were covered with down, the softest and whitest that can be imagined. But the great beauty of the creature lay in its wings, in which the brilliant scarlet and pure white hues were intermingled with wonderful delicacy and grace, both colours being bordered and thrown out by the deep black of the under feathers.

“I wish I could stuff that specimen,” said the doctor, as he contemplated the dead bird. “It would be the making of a collection. It can’t stand less than four foot four, or perhaps four foot six high. However, I’m afraid it’s rather out of place to be thinking of collections. It will be a good job,” he muttered to himself, “if we are not put into a collection ourselves by some Hottentot or Damara chief But it won’t do to hint that to the boys.”

He seated himself on one of the casks in the shelter of the tent, and appeared to be watching the preparations for supper, lost, in reality, in a reverie of mingled pain and pleasure. He was roused at last by the information that Warley was returning; and presently the youth himself appeared on the scene, throwing down, to Frank’s great satisfaction, a brace of wild ducks which he had been fortunate enough to shoot. His report, however, was not encouraging. He had reached the extremity of the bay, and had ascended an eminence, perhaps two or three hundred feet high; but nothing was to be discerned from it but long wastes of mingled rock and sand, varied here and there by thickets of euphorbia, or monotonous scrub. In the distance indeed were lofty mountains; but it was impossible to say, in that transparent atmosphere, how distant they might be. As regards the more immediate object of his expedition – the discovery of some trace of man – it had been an entire failure.

While Warley was delivering his report to the doctor, the other two were busied in plucking and roasting the ducks. Presently it was announced that all was ready, and the four sat down to their repast with an appetite sharpened by a long day of exertion. It was no sooner over than fatigue began to assert itself in place of hunger. It was agreed that the fire should be kept up all night, and that each should watch for two hours by it. It was now nearly nine o’clock, and the last watch would thus bring them to five in the morning, when it would be desirable that all four should be awakened to the heavy day’s work, which (as none of them doubted) lay before them.

Chapter Five

Plans – The Boys set out – A Disappointment – The First Bok – Water! Water! – A Midnight Visitor

The whole party slept soundly, and by six o'clock were sitting under their tent over the remains of their breakfast. Frank and Nick were on the point of issuing forth to collect some more fish for the mid-day meal, when the doctor called to them to stop.

"It is time," he said, "that we hold a consultation, and come to some resolution respecting our future movements. Sit down here in the shade, and we'll talk the matter over."

The boys obeyed, and took their places; Lion, as usual, seating himself at Frank's side, and occasionally bestowing a broad lick of affection on his face and hands.

"I have made a fresh examination of the boat this morning," began Lavie, "and am quite satisfied that it is impossible for us to repair her. She is an old boat, and wouldn't anyway have lasted much longer, and now she is so much hurt, that no one but a regular boat-builder could make her float again. It is impossible therefore to carry out our original intention of going on to Cape Town by sea. Well, then, we must hit on some other plan."

"Wouldn't it be the simplest way to travel along the line of coast the whole way?" suggested Ernest. "As far as I remember my geography, there are no bays running far inland, or very wide rivers to interfere with us."

"You're right, Ernest," rejoined Lavie. "There are nothing but small bays all the way, and until we reached the mouth of the Gariep, there would be no rivers to interfere with us."

"And when we did reach the Gariep, said Frank, we should be pretty safe to fall in with some settlers or, any way, natives, who, 'for a consideration,' would help us through the rest of our journey. I think Ernest's advice very good."

"I should think it so also, Frank," said the surgeon, "if I didn't happen to know something of the line of country proposed. I have never been along it myself, but I have met people who know it well. It is one long sandy waste the entire way – no trees, no grass, scarcely even a rock; and if there are any water-springs, they are so few and scanty, that it is almost the same thing as if there were none at all. There would be no food to be obtained, no shade from the sun, and no resting-place at night, as it would be impossible to carry our tent with us. And, to wind up, we should certainly not meet with a human being from the beginning of our journey to its end."

"Well, that is pretty nearly enough, I think," observed Nick, "I have no fancy to be broiled like a fish on a gridiron, or have a leg of nothing and no turnips for dinner, like the clown in a pantomime. Let us hear what you propose."

"I advise that we should travel towards the east, until we come to the banks of one of the rivers which run southward into the Gariep. I know there are several at no very great distance from the coast: we can follow any one of these to its junction with the great river. When we have once got there, I have no doubt what Frank suggested is true enough. We shall come to the farmhouse of a Dutch boor, or a Hottentot village, or fall in with a hunting party, and so find the means of reaching Cape Town."

"That sounds feasible," said Frank. "We shall be sure of water, at all events, by going that way, and water's the first thing to be thought of."

"And there'll be plenty of game, most likely," added Lavie, "and, any way, fish."

"And shade from the heat of the sun, and resting-places at night," said Warley.

"But how about the wild beasts and the snakes?" struck in Nick. "Wouldn't it be better to make a canoe, or a raft, and sail down the river itself?"

"That is not a bad idea, Nick," said Frank. "What do you say to that, Charles?"

“That it would be a very good idea on some rivers, but not on these,” answered Lavie. “Nick has never seen one of these South African rivers, or he’d never suggest it. At times, the channels here are reduced to mere threads, along which no boat that was ever made could pass; at others, they are swollen to raging torrents, which would shatter them to fragments. A boat journey to the Gariep is out of the question.”

“Very well, then, we must make the journey along the banks,” said Warley. “Of course we must follow your advice, Charles. You know a good deal about the country between this and Table Bay, while we know absolutely nothing. I suppose you would recommend that we should set off, as soon as possible, for the nearest river that runs southward?”

“Yes,” said Lavie, “there is no kind of object in delaying here. There is neither food nor shelter to be had here, neither shade nor water; and the stench from the mud and the dead fish is very far from fragrant. I counsel that we move off with as little delay as possible.”

“Hear, hear,” said Frank; “I am quite of the same mind. Well, then, Charles, the next thing is, what are we to take with us? The boat would have held as much as we were likely to want; but our backs and pouches are different things.”

“Quite so, Frank – that was the next thing I was going to speak about. We must, of course, leave by far the greater part of our cargo behind. In fact, we must cumber ourselves with as little baggage as possible. But some things will be absolutely necessary. There are the guns and powder-flasks and bullets. We cannot do without them.”

“That is voted, *nem. con.*,” said Warley; “and there is the flint and steel and tinder-box. The doctor’s burning-glass will be no good when the sun doesn’t shine.”

“And we shall want the gridiron, and the knife and spoon and cup, and the iron pot for cooking and holding water,” struck in Nick.

“Each of us ought to carry a change of linen,” said Mr Lavie, “and a second pair of shoes; but no more, I think. I suppose one brush and comb must serve all four.”

“I hope you’ll take your lancets, Charles, and some physic, in case of any of us being taken ill,” suggested Warley.

“I am not likely to forget that, Ernest,” returned the surgeon. “Very well, then, that will be all. We had better each provide ourselves with the articles agreed on, make a hearty meal off some of the salt meat and biscuit, and then set off at once, leaving everything else in the boat, for the benefit of any one who may be thrown up, like ourselves, on these barren flats.”

No one urging farther objection, this programme was forthwith carried out. Belts and knapsacks were adjusted, the various articles required for the general use were divided between the four, a hasty meal was eaten, and then each man took his gun, and the party bade farewell to the old boat and low sandy shore, and set forth on their travels.

They soon surmounted the rocky shelf which they had visited on the previous day, and, passing through an opening in the barren hills, entered a valley, which seemed even more dreary than the scene they had just quitted. On either side were rocks of a dull grey colour, broken into all kinds of fantastic shapes, and full of holes and winding caverns, which suggested the possible neighbourhood of venomous snakes. Nick, in particular, cast many a suspicious glance at these orifices; which seemed to his imagination the lurking-places, whence at any moment the hideous head of a cobra or python might rear itself, preparatory to a deadly spring on its victim. He was greatly relieved when, after an hour or two of walking, the valley gradually opened into a wide plain, and patches of vegetation began to show themselves. The euphorbia was the first to appear, with its tall stiff bunches of foliage, each of which bore a curious resemblance to a chandelier with its cluster of candles. Then the kameel-doorn, the dwarf acacia, and the wild pomegranate began to vary the landscape with their contrast of colours; and presently there appeared the aloe and the mimosa, the bright yellow of the last-named reminding Ernest of the gorse and broom among which his walks had so often lain.

But though there was a great improvement in respect of the scenery, its most important accessory, water, was nowhere to be found. Lavie looked anxiously on all sides for some indication of the vicinity of the river; which, if his information was correct, lay only a few miles eastward of the spot where they had landed. They could hardly have mistaken the way, for no other opening in the rocks had been visible in any direction, except that which they had pursued; and the gradual downward slope of the glen could hardly end in anything but water. But they had now been travelling since mid-day, only sitting down to rest for a few minutes, at intervals of two hours or so; and now the sunset was near at hand. He was greatly rejoiced when, on turning the corner of a dense clump of euphorbias, they came in sight of what was evidently the course of the river, though the dense bushes on either side hid the stream from view.

“Hurrah! my lads,” shouted the doctor; “now for a good drink, and a cool bath too, if the water is only deep enough.”

He broke into a run as he spoke, and was joined by the other three, who forgot their weariness and anxiety in the excitement of the moment. Lion bounded along at Frank’s side, as eager apparently as his master. They were the first to reach the fringe of shrubs, into which they plunged with headlong haste. But the next moment there came a loud cry of disappointment; the others hurried up, but only to catch sight of Frank and Lion standing over a dry bed of sand, which had evidently once been the channel of the river. There was now not the slightest trace of water to be seen. The sand was not even moist. Lavie now felt extremely anxious. There were rivers he knew lying to the eastward, and that at no very great distance, twenty or thirty miles at the outside, and probably they were not so far off as even twenty miles: and if so, the strength of the whole party might hold out until the nearest was attained. But then the lads were not used to roughing it in the desert; and they might miss the track and become too exhausted to travel further. He had fully reckoned on finding water at the spot which they had now reached, or he would have brought a supply with him from the water-cask in the boat, which had still contained several gallons. But it was too late now to think of returning that night to the seashore, and besides, such a step would naturally alarm and depress his companions. The best chance would be to proceed on their way as long as daylight lasted, and take the chance of falling in with some of the springs or pools, which are scattered about, though at rare intervals, in this inhospitable land.

“Well, that’s a nuisance,” he exclaimed aloud, as he gazed into the blank faces, and marked the dry parched lips of the boys. “That’s a nuisance, but it can’t be helped. Better luck next time. We had better step out as fast as we can while daylight lasts. We are safe to come to water, sooner or later, even in this country.”

“All right, Charles,” said Frank; “the sooner we reach it the better. We must step out, best pace.”

The other two made no remark, but they also quickened their walk. Emerging from the bushes, Mr Lavie pursued his route due eastward, though the path he followed did not seem very likely to fulfil his hopes. It lay along a bare hillside, over which huge boulders of rock were scattered; while the vegetation growing more and more scarce every mile of the way, at last ended in a waste as barren as that which they had traversed at the outset of their journey. It was, indeed, very much the same character of scenery as before, only that they were no longer shut in by a hollow defile in the hill. On either sides there rose high shelves of stone pierced by what seemed to be caverns running far inward. Between these masses of rock, long vistas of bare stony plains presented themselves, seeming to the belated travellers the very picture of desolation.

The sun was now fast setting; there remained scarcely an hour of daylight, and for all they could see, Lavie and his party would have to continue their journey by starlight, or bivouac on the sand. Suddenly at this moment, Lion, who had been tramping along for the last hour or two, as much depressed apparently as any of the party, stood still, sniffed the air for a moment or two, and

then sprang forward with a joyous bark, turning round, when he had proceeded a few yards, as if inviting Frank to follow him.

“Don’t call him back, Frank,” said Mr Lavie as Wilmore shouted after him. “His instinct is much keener than ours. Either there is some animal near at hand, which you may shoot for supper; or, as I earnestly hope may be the case, he scents water. Cock your gun, and go after him.”

“I am afraid there is but little chance of his finding water here,” said Ernest, as Wilmore hastened forward. “There is nothing to be seen anywhere but hard crag-stone and dry sand. But he may put up some game among the rocks there which he is scrambling up. Ha! and so he has,” he added the moment after, as a steinbok came bounding down the cliff. “Now, then, to test Captain Renton’s rifle.”

He drew the trigger as he spoke, and the animal dropped on its knees, but rose the next minute and was making off, when a shot from Lavie again brought it down. They ran up and found that the steinbok was already dead. Ernest’s bullet had struck it in the side, and inflicted what would probably have proved a mortal wound, though it would, for the time, have succeeded in effecting its escape. But Lavie had aimed directly at the heart, and his shot having gone true, death was instantaneous.

“Hurrah!” shouted Frank, at this moment, waving his cap on the shelf of rock above. “Three cheers for old Lion. It is all right now.”

“All right as regards the meat, Frank,” said Nick, “but how about the drink? A fellow in this wicked world requires to drink as well as to eat – at all events, I do.”

“Meat,” repeated Frank, peering over the edge of the precipice, which might perhaps be a dozen feet in height. “Have you got any meat? Did you kill anything when you fired just now?”

“To be sure we did, Frank,” said Warley. “We’re not given to miss in our part of the world. We’ve brought down as nice a young steinbok as you’d wish to eat. If you’d only find us some water to match, we should be quite set up.”

“Water! why, that is just what we *have* found. Here has old Lion lighted on a well of water, the most delicious that any fellow ever drank of.”

“Water! what, up there? You don’t say so. Hurrah! here goes.” Laying down their guns, the three thirsty travellers speedily climbed the stony heights, and stood by their companion’s side, when their eyes were gratified by a very strange as well as a very welcome spectacle.

In the very middle of the plateau of rock surmounting the precipitous ascent appeared a circular hole, some three or four feet in diameter, and so deep, that its bottom could not be discerned. The cavity was evidently natural; nor indeed did either the Hottentots or the Bushmen – the only tribes by whom the spot was ever visited – possess either the tools or the patience necessary for so laborious a work. It was doubtless what is sometimes called, though most erroneously, a freak of nature – one of those beneficent provisions, more than one of which we shall have to notice in the course of this story, by which the providence of God supplies the wants of His creatures in the desolate wastes; without which help they must inevitably perish. The hole had retained the rain, with which it had been filled a week or two previously, and the water being sheltered by the surrounding rocks from the burning rays of the sun, was sweet, clear, and deliciously cool to the taste. The cup was passed round and round again, before the thirsty travellers were satisfied, and even then they were half disposed to envy Lion’s simpler mode of satisfying his drought, viz., by plunging head over ears into the well, and imbibing at every pore the refreshing moisture.

At length thirst was satisfied, and gave way to hunger. Descending from the rocky platform, they set themselves to prepare their supper. Nick collected the grey leafless shrubs, which grew in abundance among the rocks; and which, though anything but picturesque in appearance, made capital firewood. Frank cut up the carcass, broiling some parts of it on the gridiron, and boiling as much more as the pot would hold. It was dark long before their preparations were completed, and they had to eat their dinner by the light of their fire, assisted by the stars, for the moon had not yet

risen. But the road to the mouth is very easy to find, especially when men are hungry. They all four soon finished a most excellent meal. Then the fragments of the repast were handed over to Lion – Frank declared he ought to have been called to the chair, and his health drunk with all the honours – and arrangements were made for the night. Some of the shrubs which Nick had collected, and which had not been used for the fire, made very comfortable beds. These were spread inside one of the largest caverns, though not before Nick had carefully examined its recesses by the help of a blazing log, to make sure that they contained no venomous reptiles. Lion stretched himself out to sleep at the entrance of the cave; and it was considered that his instinct might be trusted to warn them against the approach of danger, without additional precautions. In a few minutes they were all sound asleep.

They might have slept for perhaps three hours, when Frank, whose slumbers were unusually light, was roused by a low growl close to him. Looking round, he saw Lion standing in the entrance of the cave over the remains of the steinbok, only a part of which had been eaten. Frank remembered that the carcass had been left at some little distance from their sleeping-place; and the dog, therefore, must have dragged it to its present place. Something unusual must have occurred to make him do this; and besides, the attitude of the animal, his hair bristling, his chest advanced, his muscles stretched to their full tension, and the fierce glare in his eye showed plainly enough that he beheld some formidable enemy.

“A hyena has scented the carcass, I have no doubt,” thought Frank, “but I can hardly afford to throw away a shot upon him. He must be driven away, though, or we shall get no rest.”

He stepped noiselessly up to the entrance, but recoiled instantly at the sight he beheld, and it was with difficulty that he stifled a cry of alarm. At a distance of about four yards, the outline of its magnificent figure clearly revealed in the bright moonlight, a lion of the largest size was crouching, evidently preparing itself to spring! Frank had never seen one of these animals, except in captivity. About a twelvemonth before, during his stay in London, Captain Wilmore had taken him to Exeter 'Change, where one or two lions were exhibited. But these were small of their kind, and enfeebled by age and long captivity. They bore no more resemblance to the glorious and terrible creature with which Frank was now confronted, than the trickling stream which glides lazily over the ledge of the rocks bears to the foaming cataract, swollen by snows and rains.

He perceived in a moment what had taken place. The lion had come to the water to drink; and the dog, scenting the approach of some beast of prey, had possessed itself of the remains of the steinbok, which would otherwise fall a prey to the marauder. The lion in its turn had discovered the vicinity of food, and had leaped down from the rock to seize it. All this passed through Frank's mind in a moment. It could hardly be called thinking, but was rather like a sudden revelation. He felt, too, the necessity of killing the monster without a moment's loss of time, or all their lives would be imperilled. He stooped noiselessly, and picked up the nearest gun, which chanced by good fortune to be Captain Renton's rifle. Frank was a steady shot, as the reader has already been told; but he had never fired at a mark like this. He recalled, on the instant, what he had heard Mr Lavie say that the only spots in a wild animal's body in which a bullet could be lodged with the certainty of causing instant death, were the ear, the eye, and immediately behind the shoulder, where there was a direct passage to the heart. It was impossible to aim at either ear or shoulder in the present instance, as the animal was standing directly facing him. The eye, therefore, which flashed large and yellow upon him in the broad glare of the moonlight – the eye must be his mark. He raised the rifle and brought it down to the level of his eye, drawing trigger the moment he had done so. It was well for him that his aim was true, and his hand steady. As the barrel dropped to its place, the metal flashed in the moonbeam, and its glitter seemed to rouse the creature from its momentary torpor. It rose into the air at the very moment at which the bullet struck it, and if the latter had not been aimed with the most perfect accuracy, there would have been an end of the mastiff, and probably of his master also. But the shot passed directly through the eyeball, and lodged in the brain, causing

instantaneous death. The muscular power communicated to the limbs failed even before the leap was accomplished. A furious roar burst from the king of the forest as he felt the wound, but it died off abruptly, and the vast carcass fell, a lifeless mass, within two feet of the entrance of the cavern.

Chapter Six

A Second Visitor – Nick's Club – A Halt – A Mysterious Cry – A New Mode of Imprisonment

The noise of the gun, and the dying roar of the lion, roused the whole party from their slumbers; and in another minute they were standing round the fallen monster, eagerly asking for information.

"You did that well, Frank," said the surgeon, after carefully examining the wound; "just in the right place, and at the right moment. Half an inch either way, or ten seconds later, and there would have been a very different story to tell. You'll be a mighty hunter one of these days, I expect. It's very few who have made their *début* with a shot like this. But we must make sure that there are no more of them about. It's strange that I should have forgotten the likelihood of beasts coming down at night to drink, or the risk there would be of an encounter between them and Lion. Get in, you old rogue," he continued, giving the dog a playful kick in the ribs, and driving him inside the cave, where he secured him to a large fragment of rock. "You don't know what an escape you've had. You are ready enough to fight, I don't doubt, but 'cave cui incurras,' as the Latin grammar says, Master Lion; a single single blow of that brute's paw would have been enough to break a horse's back, let alone a dog's. There, stand in the entrance with your gun, Nick, and keep a sharp look out, while we go to examine the well."

The lads took their guns, and the three making a considerable *détour* to the left, cautiously ascended the rocks, until they gained a higher shelf than that in which the well was situated, and then looked over. The moon had by this time begun to set, and the steep summit of the crags behind them intercepted its light, throwing the shelf into deep shadow. A dark mass was indistinctly visible, lying immediately on the edge of the well, partly indeed protruding over it. "That's the lioness drinking," whispered Frank. "She has most likely followed her lord to the water, and has only just arrived here."

"Most likely," answered the doctor in the same cautious tone, "but don't fire. You can't see her plain enough to take a sure aim at her, and a mere wound would only enrage her. Leave her to me. As soon as she has done drinking, she'll get up, and then we shall have a clear sight of her."

They waited patiently for several minutes. It became evident that the animal was not, as they had supposed, drinking, but was either asleep or refreshing herself with the cool air, which the close proximity of the water produced. In either case it was impossible to conjecture how long she might retain her present attitude. "Let drop a stone upon her, Ernest," whispered the doctor. "That will put her up. I have my rifle all ready."

Warley looked round him. There was no stone near at hand, but he detached his shot-flask from his belt and threw it with a skilful aim, striking the lioness on the flank. She instantly sprang to her feet; but just as Ernest discharged his missile there came a dense cloud over the moon, and the figure of the animal was lost to sight. Before the cloud could quite pass away again, the lioness gave vent to a low savage roar. She had caught sight, notwithstanding the darkness, of the carcass below, and sprang down to examine it. "I wonder how Nick will get on with her?" exclaimed Frank. "He's no great shot. I think we had better go down to the rescue. Just hold my gun, Ernest, while I slip down."

Handing his rifle to his companion, he slid down the projecting face of the precipice, feet first, and then called to Warley to lower his weapon after him. Mr Lavie reached the shelf almost at the same moment, and both pressed forward with some anxiety to see what was passing below. The spectacle they beheld would have been extremely ludicrous, if it had not been still more alarming.

Forgetting or disregarding Lavie's directions, Gilbert had laid aside his gun as soon as his companions left him, and had gone to make an examination of the lion – an animal which he had never before seen. He was greatly struck by the enormous size and vast strength of creature, and stood for a few moments considering whether he might not be able to carry away some souvenir of the adventure. A lock of his shaggy mane, or one of his huge teeth, were the first mementos which suggested themselves to him. It would be difficult, however, to obtain one of the last-named articles – that is without the help of certain tools which they had not in their possession. No, it must be a lock of the gentleman's hair, which could be easily enough to procure, and equally easy to preserve, though the keepsake would be somewhat cumbrous. He picked up the knife, which Frank had left on a slab of stone near the entrance of the cave, and proceeded to choose the place whence the ringlet was to be cut. Suddenly it occurred to him that the tuft at the extremity of the tail would be extremely suitable for the purpose; or why, by the way, should he not retain the entire tail? Mr Lavie had been telling them, only that evening, of the practice adopted by the Bushmen of wearing a belt round the waist, by which the pangs of hunger were considerably mitigated. To judge by what happened yesterday, such a belt might be extremely serviceable, and the skin of the lion's tail would make a famous belt. At all events there could be no harm in cutting the tail off; and this he effected easily enough by the aid of Mr Lavie's hatchet. He was still engaged in examining his treasure by the imperfect light, when a whirling noise was heard over head, and a large object of some kind dropped within a few feet of him.

A good deal startled, Nick let fall the hatchet and grasping the upper end of the tail with both hands, whirled it, like a flail round his head. At the same moment the moon again broke out, and he perceived that his new companion was a large lioness, whose fierce growls were evidently the preliminary to a still fiercer assault. Nick gave himself up for dead; and if the attention of the animal had in the first instance been directed to him, there would indeed have been but small hope of escape for him. But the lioness had scented the dead body, and she proceeded to examine it all over, sniffing the tainted air, and uttering every now and then a low howl, like a mourning cry. Nick would have retreated to the cover of the cavern, but a feeling of fascination held him to the spot; and he continued to swing the tail right and left, apparently hardly conscious of what he was doing. Presently, the mood of the lioness seemed to change, and the notion to occur to her of taking vengeance for the ruthless slaughter of her mate. She glared fiercely at Nick, and gave vent to a low roar. She would, in fact, have instantly sprung upon him, but that the whirl of the tail immediately in front of her nose, dazed and bewildered her for the moment, and kept her at bay. This could not, however, have lasted, and Nick's career would soon have been run, if rescue had not been at hand. But at this moment the crack of the doctor's rifle was heard, and the brute, shot through the heart, rolled over in the death struggle.

"Bravo, Nick," exclaimed Lavie, as he leaped down from the rock. "Hercules himself never wielded his club more valiantly, than you did the lion's tail. I was sorry to keep you so long in suspense, but the beast persistently kept her back towards me, till just the moment when I fired. If I had only wounded her, she would have sprung on you all the same."

"All right, doctor," said Nick; "you couldn't do more than bring me off with a whole skin. And it's more than I deserve, too, for I didn't obey orders."

"Well, now I suppose we may go back to bed?" suggested Frank. "It's not much past midnight, and I feel as if I wanted plenty more sleep before morning. I don't fancy we shall have many more visitors to-night."

"No," said the doctor, "we may sleep soundly now. Animals don't often go near a fountain where they have seen lions drinking. Indeed, the shots which have been fired would probably be enough to keep them away. Let us turn in again, by all means."

His prognostications were fulfilled. There was no further disturbance that night, and when the travellers awoke on the following morning, they were in high health and spirits.

“Do you intend to take the same track which we were following up yesterday, Charles?” asked Warley, as they sat at breakfast, “or have you altered your mind about it?”

“I see no reason for changing it,” replied the surgeon. “I am sure the river, which Vangelt told me of, cannot be above fifteen miles off at the outside, and when we are once there, it is all, comparatively speaking, plain sailing. I don’t know how far this kind of country may last, but I feel sure it cannot be for any great distance. Notwithstanding yesterday’s experience, I don’t advise our taking water with us, or anything but a few slices of meat I am persuaded that we shall not suffer a second time, as we did yesterday; and carrying water always hampers travellers terribly.”

All readily gave their assent to his suggestions, and before six o’clock the travellers were again in motion. They journeyed on for several miles, the bare rocks and sand still continuing the main features of the landscape: but about twelve o’clock their eyes were relieved by the appearance of wooded slopes in the distance. Presently they came to a small pool, surrounded by a grove of oomahaamas and acacias, among the branches of which they noticed a quantity of grey-crested parrots, which kept up an incessant screaming, from the moment the travellers came in sight to that of their departure.

“Here’s a good place for a halt,” suggested Ernest. “This shade is most refreshing, and the water seems clear and cool.”

“I am quite of your mind, Ernest,” said Nick, flinging himself at full length on the grass at the edge of the pool. “Exhausted nature can’t go further without a respite. Now, if any one would be so good as to shoot two or three of those parrots, that are actually crying out to be shot, they would make a famous – What are you up to now, man?” he added sharply, as he felt a sudden blow on his shin. “You would do well to take care what you are doing.”

“*You* would do well to take care,” retorted Warley. “Do you see what was crawling up your leg?” He held up, as he spoke, a dead snake about eighteen inches long, with a curious-looking horn on either side of its head. “If I hadn’t hit him on the neck the moment I saw him, he’d have bitten your hand to a certainty. He was making straight for it.”

“A snake!” cried Nick, starting up in horror. “So there is, I declare. The nasty brute! I don’t know whether it is venomous or not, but I’m much obliged, even if it isn’t. They are not nice things up a fellow’s leg!”

“Hand him over here,” said Charles Lavie. “Oh ay, I know this fellow. He is called the cerastes, and is venomous, I believe, though not one of the worst kinds of poisonous snakes. You are well out of it, Nick, I can tell you, and must look more carefully about you in this country before you sit down in a place like this. Some of the reptiles are so nearly the colour of the ground, or the trees, that even an old stager may be taken in.”

“Are there any large pythons in these parts?” asked Warley. “I’ve heard two quite different accounts. One says that they are never found so far south as this; the other, that they are to be met with thirty or forty feet long, and as thick round as a stout man. What is the truth of the matter?”

“Well, the truth is something between the two, I believe, as is generally the case,” said the surgeon. “They are certainly not common in Southern Africa, since people who have lived here all their lives have never seen one. But now and then they are to be met with. I know persons who have seen serpents’ skins thirty feet long in the possession of natives; and one case I heard of, in which a skin was exhibited fully ten feet longer than that.”

“Are they difficult to kill?” asked Frank.

“Not if you bide your time,” said Lavie. “If you come upon them when they are hungry, they – the larger ones, that is – are more than a match for even the strongest men: and unless they are approached unawares, and wounded, so as to destroy their muscular power, a struggle with them would be most dangerous. But after they have gorged their prey, they are killed as easily as so many sheep – more easily in fact, for they are quite torpid.”

“What are the worst snakes found in these parts?” inquired Gilbert. “The cobra and the puff adder, I should say,” returned the surgeon. “The first will spring at you as if it was discharged out of some engine, and with such force, that if it fails to strike its mark it will overshoot the spot by several feet. The natives call it the hair-serpent, and are in great terror of it. If no sufficient remedy is applied, its bite will cause death in less than an hour.”

“Is there any sufficient remedy?” rejoined Nick. “I thought there was no cure.”

“It’s not so bad as that, Nick. There are remedies for most bites – the cobra’s for instance. There is a root which the mangoust always eats, when it feels itself bitten by a cobra, and which is, so far as is known, a complete cure. Eau de luce and sweet milk are generally given in this country for a snake’s bite, and the natives have beans and serpent stones, which, it is said, effect a cure. But the best thing to do – what I should have done in your case, Nick, if you had been bitten – is, first to fasten a ligature as tight as possible above the wounded part, and then cauterise or cut away the injured flesh. Snakes’ bites are nasty things in these hot countries, and one can’t be too careful. But come, it is time we move on again. We ought to reach the river banks early in the afternoon.”

They recommenced their march accordingly, and had proceeded half a mile or so further, when Frank suddenly called upon them to stop.

“What can that noise be?” he said. “I have heard it two or three times in the course of the last few minutes. It doesn’t sound like the cry of a bird, or beast either. And yet I suppose it must be.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Gilbert. “Nor I,” added Warley. “But my hearing is not nearly as good as Frank’s. I’ve often noticed that.”

“Let us stop and listen,” suggested Charles.

They all stood still, intently listening. Presently a faint sound was wafted to them, apparently from a great distance – from the edge of the sandy desert, they fancied, which was still visible beyond the wooded tracts.

“No,” said Charles, when the sound had been twice repeated, “that is not the cry of any animal, with which I am acquainted. It sounds more like a human voice than anything else. If it was at all likely that there was any other party of travellers in these parts, I should think they were hailing us. But nothing can be more improbable than that.”

“Still it is possible,” urged Warley, “and they may be in want of our help. Ought we not to go and find out the truth?”

“I think you are right, Ernest,” said Frank.

“Well, I don’t know,” urged Gilbert, nervously. “I’ve heard all sorts of stories of voices being heard in the deserts, enticing people to their destruction, and it may be some ruse of the savages about here, who want to get us into their hands, to possess themselves of our guns. What do you say, doctor?”

“Why, as for the voices, Nick, I’ve heard the stories you speak of, which have been told chiefly by persons who had lost their way and were nearly dead from cold and hunger. Under such circumstances, when people’s nerves and senses begin to fail them, they fancy all sorts of strange things. No doubt, too, there are all sorts of acoustic deceptions in these wild regions, as there are optical delusions; but I don’t think we four – all of us in sound health – are likely to be so deceived –”

“But how about the savages, doctor?” interposed Nick, anxiously.

“Well, if these were the backwoods of America, and we had the Red Indians to deal with, there would be a good deal in your suggestion. But neither the Hottentots nor the Bushmen are given to stratagems of this kind. However, we’ll move warily, and if any treachery is designed, we shall be pretty sure to baffle it.”

They turned off in the direction whence the cry had come, keeping to the open ground, and giving a wide berth to any clump of trees or underwood which might harbour an enemy. Every now and then they paused to listen for the sound, which was regularly repeated, at intervals apparently

of two or three minutes, and grew more distinct as they advanced. It was now certain that the cry was human, and sounded like that of a full-grown man.

“We are getting a good deal nearer,” observed Warley, as they passed the last patch of trees, and entered once more the sandy wilderness. “I should say we must be almost close, only I don’t see any place where the person who is crying out in this manner can be hidden.”

“It comes from that heap of stones there,” exclaimed Frank, “that heap to the left, I mean – about two hundred yards further on.”

“I see the stones, Frank, plain enough,” said Mr Lavie, “but a man couldn’t be hidden among them. You call it a heap of stones, but there is no heap. There is not so much as one lying upon another.”

“Nevertheless the cry comes from there,” said Warley; “I heard it the last time quite plainly. Let us go up and see.”

They cautiously approached the spot in question, where there were about thirty or forty moderate-sized stones scattered on the plain. As they advanced the mysterious call was again heard.

“I see who it is that’s making it,” shouted Wilmore. “It’s a fellow whose head is just above ground. I took his head for a black stone, with a lot of moss growing on it. But now I can see that it is a head, though the features are turned away from us.”

They hurried up, and found that Frank was right. The stones were lying round what seemed to have been a dry well. In this a man had been buried up to his neck, the chin being just above the level of the ground. It did not appear that he was conscious of their approach; for at the interval of every two or three minutes he continued to give vent to the shrill monotonous cry, which had attracted their attention.

“What in the world can this mean!” exclaimed Nick. “The fellow can’t have tumbled into the well, and the stones have fallen in after him, I suppose?”

“Is it some penance, do you think, that he is undergoing?” suggested Warley.

“Or a punishment for a crime he has committed?” said Wilmore.

“It may be a punishment for some offence,” said Mr Lavie, “though I never heard of the Hottentots punishing their people in that way, and the man is plainly a Hottentot. As for anything else, of course it is quite impossible that he can have got jammed up in this way by accident; and the Hottentots know nothing of penances. Such a thing has never been heard of among them. But the first thing is to get the poor fellow out and give him something to restore him; for he is half dead with thirst and exposure to the sun, and does not seem conscious of what is passing.”

They fell to with a will, and had soon so far released the captive, that he was able to draw his breath freely and swallow a little brandy, which Mr Lavie poured on his tongue. He then opened his eyes for a moment, gazing with the utmost bewilderment and wonder on the dress and appearance of the figures round him; and then closed them again with a low groan.

“They meant this – the beggars that holed him in after this fashion,” observed Frank. “The stones are fitted round him as carefully as though they had been building a wall. And, look! the poor wretch’s arms are fastened by a thong to his sides. What brutes! Hand us the knife, Nick, and I’ll cut them. How tough they are!”

It needed a strong hand and a sharp blade to sever the stout thongs, which on subsequent examination were found to consist of rhinoceros hide. But when his arms were at length free, the man made no effort to use them. It was evident that they were so benumbed by the forced restraint in which they had so long been kept, that he had lost all power over them. They were obliged to continue to remove the stones, until his feet were completely released, before he could be extricated from the hole; and when this was effected, it was only by the joint strength of the four Englishmen, the Hottentot himself being unable to render any assistance.

He was now carried to the shade of the nearest trees; Nick ran back to their recent resting-place, and returned with the iron pot full of water, while Warley and Wilmore, under the surgeon’s

direction, chafed his limbs. By the time of Gilbert's return their efforts had been successful. The sufferer once more opened his eyes, and making signs that the water should be handed to him, drank a long and refreshing draught. "He'll do now," observed Nick, as he witnessed this feat. "There's no more fear for his health after that. But I should like to know who he is, and how he came there. I say, blacky, what may your name happen to be, and how did you come to be boxed up after that fashion, like a chimney-sweep stuck in a narrow flue?"

To the astonishment of the whole party, Nick's question was answered.

"Omatoko my name. Tank Englishman much for pull him out. Omatoko soon die, if they not come. Bushmen bury Omatoko one, two day ago. Good men, give Omatoko food, or he die now."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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