

Otis James

Commodore Barney's Young Spies



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Otis James
Commodore Barney's Young Spies A Boy's
Story of the Burning of the City of Washington
FROM LOSSING'S "WAR OF 1812."

"Evidently ashamed of the barbarism committed by British hands, Vice-Admiral Cochrane attempted to palliate it by a pitiful trick. After the destruction of the capital, and the invaders were safely back on their vessels in the Patuxent, Cochrane wrote a letter to Secretary Monroe, in which he said to him, 'Having been called upon by the Governor-General of the Canadas to aid him in carrying into effect measures of retaliation against the inhabitants of the United States for the wanton destruction committed by their army in Upper Canada, it has become imperiously my duty, conformably with the Governor-General's application, to issue to the naval force under my command an order to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as may be found assailable.' Cochrane then expressed a hope that the 'conduct of the executive of the United States would authorize him in staying such proceedings, by making reparation to the suffering inhabitants of Upper Canada,' etc. This letter was antedated August 18, or six days before the battle of Bladensburg, so as to appear like a humane suggestion, in the noncompliance with which might be found an excuse for the destruction of the national capital. It did not reach Mr. Monroe until the morning of the 31st of August, a week after Washington was devastated, when that officer, in a dignified reply, reminded the vice-admiral that the wanton destruction by the British of Frenchtown, Frederick, Georgetown, and Havre de Grace, and the outrages at Hampton by the same people, had occurred long before the destruction of Newark."

CHAPTER I. CAPTAIN JOSHUA BARNEY

It is two years since what we called the "War of 1812" came to an end, and I, Amos Grout, once owner of the oyster pungy, Avenger, propose to set down here that which happened to my friend, Jeremiah Sackett, and myself, during the year of grace, 1814, when, so others have said, we did good work for our country, although at the time neither of us was more than fifteen years old.

This I do for two reasons, first because I am proud of what we two lads succeeded in doing, and hope that at some day, when, mayhap, both Jerry and I are dead, other boys may read of the part we played, and be encouraged thereby to work out their own plans for the good.

Secondly, because I would have it known that through a scheme of his, two boys, living on the shore of Chesapeake bay, succeeded in doing what experienced men might have failed at, and I am eager to have others realize my friend's worth.

So much for the reason as to why I, a seventeen-year boy, with none too many advantages in the way of book education, am thus attempting to write a tale for others, and now, that whoever should chance to read this may feel acquainted with us, it is for me to introduce my friend and myself in regular story-telling shape.

We lads lived in Benedict, Charles County, Maryland, near the mouth of Indian Creek, when the war broke out, and while many of the people of our town were not pleased with the idea of fighting the Britishers again simply to establish the rights of our American seamen, Jerry and I were hot in favor of it, for, in 1810, my friend's brother Tom was taken by the king's officers out of his vessel while she was off the capes, on the false ground that he was born in England. The poor fellow was forced to serve in the English navy three years, leading a dog's life, as can well be imagined, since he would never say that he was willing to serve his majesty to the best of his ability.

Therefore it was that when we invested our savings in a small sloop-rigged pungy, with the idea of making a living by fishing, we named her the Avenger, with never a thought that she might one day do something toward avenging poor Tom's wrongs.

Jerry's parents and mine were poor people, who could not afford to give their sons what so many fortunate lads have – a good education, fine clothes and money to spend. We were obliged to do all we could to aid our families, and had been wage-earners since our tenth birthday.

It would be too long a story if I should attempt to set down all that my friend and I did by way of gathering up money enough to pay Nicholas Trundy one hundred dollars for his pungy, which was then going on six years old. It was a big lot of money for two lads to save, after contributing to the support of their families, and we were near to four years doing it.

It was a proud day for us when the little vessel became our property, and we painted out the name "Handsome Susan," to put in its place in big red letters, "The Avenger."

She was about twenty-four feet long, with a cuddy in which were four small bunks, and had been in the oyster business since being launched, as we intended she should remain there.

We bought her early in the spring of 1812, when the people were talking strongly for or against war; but it never entered our minds that we might get mixed up in the fighting, for who could ever have dreamed that the Britishers would come to Benedict? It was enough to satisfy us that the oyster business was fairly good, and that we could often earn, with the pungy, as high as three dollars a day, not counting the time occupied in running up to Annapolis or Baltimore.

During the second year of the war we did not do as well; but there is no good reason why I should go into all the details of what would not be entertaining save to an oysterman. It is enough if I jump over to the spring of 1814, when we made a trade with an old sailor by name of Darius Thorpe, whereby he was to sail with us for one-third of the profits after all expenses had been paid,

and this bargain was a good one for us lads, since he was a master-hand at dredging, being able to work all around either Jerry or me.

Besides being an expert fisherman, old Darius was an artist at story-telling, and there was hardly an evening during the first two months he was with us, when we did not sit in the cuddy long after we should have been asleep, listening to the old man's yarns.

Then, as everybody knows, about April, Captain Joshua Barney was ordered to fit up a fleet of small boats to protect the towns of the bay, for by this time we were having mighty good proof that the United States was at war with England, and it stands to reason that we lads were eager to know all that was possible concerning this officer, who had been the most successful of the privateers sailing out of Baltimore.

We were on our way to Annapolis with half a load of oysters when the news was given us by the captain of the Oriole, while he quoted the prices he got for his cargo, and since the Avenger was creeping along lazily, with about one-quarter as much wind as she needed, we had plenty of time in which to discuss a matter that seemed to be of very great importance to us.

"There won't be any foolin' when Joshua Barney gets here, no matter how big or how little his fleet is," Darius said as he laid at full length on the deck sunning himself, and in a twinkling it flashed across me that the old man may have sailed with or under the gentleman who was to command such a naval force as could be gathered in the Chesapeake bay, therefore I asked:

"Do you happen to know the captain, Darius?"

We always called the old man by his first name, because he insisted so strongly that we should; said it made him feel at home, and sounded a good deal like putting on airs to tack on the "Mister."

"Know him?" the old man cried, rising lazily on one elbow and swinging half around to look at me as I sat on the rudder-head. "I know him lock, stock an' ramrod, lad. The last deep sea cruise I went on was with him. He's a snorter, that's what he is, an' I've heard his whole story a hundred times over. I tell you, lads, there's nothin' in a book that can come up with Josh Barney's doin's."

"Give us the full yarn, Darius!" Jerry cried. "We're like to be loafin' around here a good many hours, if this wind holds soft as I reckon it will, an' we may as well make the most of the time."

Darius was always ready to spin a yarn, which was much in his favor according to my way of thinking; but he couldn't seem to rattle the words off easy like except when his mouth was full of tobacco, therefore Jerry and I could always tell whether the story was to be long or short, by the amount of roughly-cured plug he stowed between his jaws.

It was a mighty big chew he took while making ready to tell of Captain Barney, and I must say for Darius, that he never spun a yarn which interested me more than the one I count on setting down here.

"Josh Barney was born somewhere along 1759 in Baltimore," the old man began slowly, as if determined to give a regular biography of the captain. "His folks let him go to school till he was ten years old, an' then he began to shift for himself by goin' into a store; but, bless you, he never was made for that kind of work, an' before two years passed he found it out. Went over to Baltimore one day on a visit, an' wound up by shippin' on a pilot-boat; but even that wasn't what he hankered for, an' finally his father shipped him as apprentice to Captain Tom Drisdale, on a brig for a voyage to Ireland."

"I was in hopes your yarn had somethin' about his runnin' away to go to sea," Jerry said in a tone of disappointment.

"You'll find these 'ere runaway sailors don't 'mount to very much, except in story books, an', besides, Josh Barney wasn't that kind of a chap. Drisdale made the passage, an' then went up to Liverpool, where he got a chance to sell the brig. Barney worked his way home before the mast on a full-rigged ship – I don't jest remember her name. When he struck Baltimore again it was to find that the old man Barney had been killed accidentally by the youngest boy of the family, who was foolin' with a loaded pistol, an' Joshua had to shift for himself, seein's his father didn't have none too much

money, an' a big family. The lad shipped for Cadiz as ordinary seaman; made the voyage all right; had a little cash to leave with his mother, an' then signed as an A1 on a brig bound for Italy."

"It don't make very much difference to us how many voyages he made," Jerry interrupted. "What we want to know is the kind of a man he is."

"If you can put a stopper on your jaw a bit, you'll soon find out! The mate of the brig was sent into the forecandle, not bein' up to his work, an' Josh Barney took his place. Then the captain took sick, an' lo an' behold, before the lad had turned sixteen years old, he was in command of the brig. Owin' to the freights that offered, he sailed for Alicant, an' made port just as the Spaniards were fittin' out an expedition against Algiers. The brig was chartered as transport, an' he earned big money for the owners, gettin' back to the mouth of the Chesapeake in '76, when the British sloop of war King Fisher hove him to an' took all his papers an' weapons; but let him keep on to Baltimore, where the brig was laid up. Then Barney had more money, an' considerable of it, for his mother."

The old man paused to take in another cargo of tobacco, and then continued:

"Young as he was, the lad found a chance to ship as master's mate on the sloop Hornet, William Stone commandin', an' in one day, so it's said, he, carryin' a flag an' with a drummer an' two fifers, enlisted a full crew for the Hornet, all from Baltimore, which goes to show that the people there thought he amounted to somethin'. Barney sailed in Hopkins' fleet to the Bahamas, where the town of New Providence was taken, an' the commodore scooped in all the ammunition to be found on the island. A little while after that, he shipped on the schooner Wasp, which convoyed off the coast the vessel in which Benjamin Franklin was goin' to Europe to help pull this country through, an' when they came back into the Cape May channel they found the king's ships Roebuck an' Liverpool – one of forty-four guns an' the other of twenty-eight – waitin' for 'em. There was lively times for a spell, until the Wasp contrived to slip into Wilmington creek, where she laid till half a dozen row galleys came down from Philadelphia to attack the British ships. Then the schooner came out, an' while the fightin' was goin' on, captured the brig Tender, one of his majesty's armed vessels what poked her nose in to help the big fellows. They say Barney fought like a tiger, an' with his captain wounded, brought the little schooner an' her prize through the fog into port.

"Then they gave him a lieutenant's commission, an' sent him off in the sloop Sachem, all of which happened before he was seventeen years old. He soon found a chance to fight, an' after an action of two hours, captured an English brig. After that they took the sloop Race Horse, cuttin' her up so badly she sank, an' the next to come their way was a snow from Jamaica, which the lad counted on bringin' into port, he bein' put on board as prize master. Then he had a bit of bad luck; the snow was re-captured, an' Barney made prisoner, as stands to reason; but he was exchanged at Charleston, an' rode horseback to Baltimore."

"How do you happen to remember all these things?" Jerry asked, thinking, perhaps, that Darius was giving us more guff than truth.

"Remember it?" the old man repeated sharply. "Why I've sailed with Captain Barney, an' every mother's son of the crew knew the story, for it ain't often that a lad of seventeen gets such a record, so we couldn't help keepin' it in mind, besides which, I've got lots of stuff in my pocket that's been printed about him. Well, in '77 he shipped on the Andrew Doria for the defense of the Delaware River, an' when that scrimmage was over, he found himself drafted to the frigate Virginia, when, as everybody knows, he was taken by the Britishers again, an' held for nearly a year before bein' exchanged for the lieutenant of the Mermaid. Then he went out in a letter of marque – meanin' a privateer – with Captain Robinson; they had but twelve guns, a mighty small stock of powder, an' only thirty-five men, but bless you those fellows thought nothin' of tacklin' the British privateer Rosebud, full of men an' guns. Forty-seven of the enemy were killed or wounded, an' aboard the Yankee only one was wounded. They sailed to Bordeaux, took on a cargo of brandy, shipped seventy men, mounted eighteen guns, an' on the voyage home had a runnin' fight lastin' well on to two days, when they captured their game.

"Then it was that Barney got married, an' about a month afterward, when drivin' in a gig from Philadelphia to Baltimore, he was robbed of every cent he had in the world. He never told anybody of his loss; but turned back to Philadelphia, took service aboard the Saratoga, sixteen guns, an' made a big voyage, capturin' one ship of twelve guns, another of thirty-two, an' two brigs. Then he was taken by the Intrepid, an' mighty barbarous treatment he got for well on to a year, when the young officer escaped, an' after he got home the government gave him command of the Hyder Ally, with which he soon took the British ship General Monk, as this 'ere bit of paper will show."

Darius took from his pocket a well-worn slip cut from some newspaper, which purported to be an extract from the Hyder Ally log-book, and as it was mighty interesting to me, I'm going to set it down here just as it was printed.

"April 8th, 1782, at 10 A.M. laying at anchor under Cape May (Delaware) discovered three sail standing in from sea with a light wind from the eastward; at 11 perceived that they were a frigate, a ship, and an armed brig. At meridian the frigate stood for Cape Henlopen channel, the ship and brig standing in for Cape May; made a signal for our convoy to get under weigh, and followed the convoy. At 1 P.M. the ship and brig came into the bay, by Cape May channel, the frigate coming around under Cape Henlopen; prepared for action, all hands to quarters.

"At three-quarters past one, the brig passed us, after giving us two fires; we reserved our fire for the ship, then fast coming up; we received very little damage from the brig, who stood after our convoy; she mounted sixteen guns, and was formerly the American privateer 'Fair American', commanded by Captain Decatur, and equal to us in force.

"At 2 P.M. the ship ranged up on our starboard quarter, and fired two guns at us; we were then at good pistol-shot; we then attempted to run her on board, by laying her across the starboard bow, but our yard-arms locked, which kept us too far off to board; at the same time poured in our broadside from great guns and small arms.

"Our fire was briskly kept up for twenty-six minutes, when she struck her colors. Immediately sent our first lieutenant on board, and stood up the bay, the frigate at this time under a press of sail in chase after us, and the brig ahead in chase of our convoy; again prepared for action, and stood after the brig, but on her perceiving that the ship had struck, she stood for the frigate, and got aground; we were obliged to pass her, as the frigate gained on us.

"At 4 P.M. the frigate came to anchor in the bay, (supposed for want of a pilot.) We then spoke the prize for the first time, and learned she was his Majesty's ship the General Monk, Captain Rodgers, of nineteen nine-pounders, but fighting twenty guns, and had on board, when the action began, one hundred and thirty-six men, of whom thirty were killed, and fifty-three wounded. Of sixteen officers on board, fifteen were killed or wounded. The captain received three wounds.

"We had on board the Hyder Ally four killed and eleven wounded. The Hyder Ally mounted twelve six-pounders, and four nine-pounders, with a complement of one hundred and fifteen men. During the action we fired thirteen broadsides from our cannon, and from sixty to seventy rounds from our muskets.

"Proportion of metal: The General Monk ten nine-pounders, fired ninety weight of shot at one broadside. The Hyder Ally, six sixes and two nines, fired fifty-four weight of shot at one broadside. Proportion – fifty to ninety."

"That all came from the log-book, an' you'll find Captain Barney didn't try to blow his own horn," Darius said as I ceased reading. "But I happened to go on board the General Monk when she

got into Philadelphia, an' saw the killed an' wounded bein' brought ashore in hammocks. The prize looked tough; her decks were covered with blood, an' three of the bow ports were knocked into one. She was sold, bought in by the government, an' Barney took command of her, sailin' for France, with despatches to Benjamin Franklin. Then the war came to an end, an' he settled in Kentucky somewhere. Here's a newspaper story of what happened after that," and Darius gave me another slip of paper, the matter on which I read aloud to Jerry, as follows:

"In 1789 Captain Barney, finding his health impaired by his services, embarked for Carthage in a small brig belonging to himself and partner. Thence he went to Havana, and then home. In 1792 he sailed again, and arrived at Cape François. While there the town was burnt, and he was obliged to fight his way. He brought off fifty or sixty miserable women and children. His vessel was captured by an English privateer brig, two others in company. Three officers and eleven men were put on board, and all the Americans taken out except Barney, the carpenter, boatswain and cook. They were ordered to New Providence. The keys of the treasure chest were demanded, but Barney would not deliver them, which occasioned much abuse and ill treatment. He had concealed a small blunderbuss, and his men some other arms, with which they re-took the ship. The Englishmen were made to work the vessel until they arrived at Baltimore. Barney was compelled, for his own safety, to sleep on the quarter-deck in an arm-chair. He again sailed for Cape François in 1793; on his return, he was again captured by an English brig, and taken to Jamaica. When he arrived in Kingston he was committed to prison, and bills were found against him for piracy. His ship and cargo were condemned. Once more he escaped, and on his return was offered command of a frigate; but declined. In 1795 he entered the French service, remaining in that employ until 1800."

"Now you can see what kind of a man it is who'll be in command here on the Chesapeake," Darius said triumphantly when I ceased reading. "The Britishers won't find it all plain sailin' while he's around, and I'm allowin' he'll make things hum."

It pleased me to know that we would have a live man to protect us, for if all the rumors were to be credited, the time had come when we needed protection mighty bad; but with all Darius' storytelling, it never came into my mind that we would know this wonderful Captain Barney, except by hearsay.

We continued at our oyster business without being troubled in any way by the war, although small fights were going on all around us during the early part of the summer.

More than once had we seen the flotilla under command of this same Captain Barney, who was come to be a commodore now. In it were twenty-six barges and pungies, with nine hundred men, all of whom saw more of service from May to July than they had ever dreamed of.

The commodore did indeed make things "hum," as Darius had predicted. He attacked anything and everything that was British, never seeming to care one whit whether he was outclassed or not, and succeeded in doing the enemy a big lot of injury. It is well known that once, during a full four hours, he kept his small fleet under the fire of a frigate's guns, hoping to capture her.

Then the Britishers began to understand that if they wanted to have things their own way in the Chesapeake, it would be necessary to first do away with Commodore Barney, and they began operations in great shape, although at the time we who were most interested in that locality had little idea of what was coming.

Now after this fleet of barges and pungies began their work, Jerry seemed to have something of import on his mind; but never a word would he say in explanation to Darius and me, until our business grew so dull that it was only with great difficulty we could earn enough to pay the running expenses, and then it was that the lad came to the front with a scheme which he thought great, while neither of us so much as dreamed of what the carrying out would result in.

"It's no use freightin' oysters to Baltimore, when we can't sell 'em for enough to pay for the use of the pungy, to say nothin' of our time in dredgin'," Jerry began one afternoon about the first of August, when we were coming down the bay with our pockets nearly as empty as the Avenger's hold.

"But we do get a dollar now an' then," I said with a laugh, "which is more than could be done if we turned idlers. Half a loaf is way ahead of no bread at all."

Darius nodded gravely as if to show that he agreed with me fully, and Jerry cried with more of anger than good humor in his tones:

"But I'm countin' on havin' a bit of meat now an' then. I could eat a razor-back this minute without stoppin' to take off the bristles; but there isn't money enough on board to buy the smallest ham."

"How are you goin' to mend matters, lad, while the price of oysters keeps down as it is now?" Darius asked, beginning to understand that Jerry had something in his head which might serve us.

"I'm told that Commodore Barney keeps his men jumpin' so lively at fightin' that they don't have time for anythin' else," the lad said slowly, as if speaking to himself, and I wondered if he counted that the commodore could raise the price of oysters.

"I reckon that's the straight truth," Darius replied. "It ain't his way to keep cats that don't catch mice."

"Then why is it we can't make a trade to help supply the commodore with fish an' oysters? Even though he didn't give very much for the freights we brought in, it wouldn't be a case of losin' three or four days out of every ten runnin' up to Baltimore."

Even then I failed to understand his scheme, and said as much, whereat the lad cried impatiently:

"You must be thick-headed, Amos Grout, if you can't see what I'm drivin' at. The matter has been in my mind these two months past, so now I propose that we go to Commodore Barney – he surely will hear what we've got to say – , an' try to make a trade. He buys more'n half of all his provisions, for the men of the fleet don't get time to do much fishin', an' we could let ourselves an' the pungy outright, or agree upon a price for what we bring in."

It wasn't at all a bad scheme, now that our regular business was so dull; but I questioned if the commodore would listen to such as we were, long enough to understand what kind of a bargain we had to offer.

"I'll go bail that you won't have any trouble in gettin' speech with Joshua Barney, an' for so long as the business warrants, pervidin' you can catch him when he's got a few spare minutes on his hands," Darius said quickly, and from his tone I understood that he heartily approved of Jerry's scheme.

"But where shall we find the fleet?" I asked, and to the question Jerry made answer:

"We've been countin' on runnin' in to see our folks at Benedict, an' I warrant that there we'll get news of the commodore. If not, it won't cost so very much time to have a look around the lower end of the bay."

"Yes, an' be snapped up by some bloomin' Britisher," I said, having no desire to mix in where people were fighting with such playful weapons as cannon and rifles.

"We should be able to keep out of the way of danger," Jerry replied, as if he had thought out the whole scheme, and I then understood that he had been mooning over it the past two months, determined to spring it on us when the price of oysters dropped below what would be decent wages.

Well, we didn't come to any conclusion that day, owing to my standing back and throwing cold water; but we were bound to touch at the home port, and Jerry bided his time until we were where information regarding the fleet could be had.

CHAPTER II. AT BENEDICT

I had not supposed that the people of Benedict would know very much concerning what was going on at the lower end of the bay; but the Avenger was hardly more than at anchor when I understood that we could have gone to no better place in order to learn what was being done.

We had but just come to anchor, not having time to set foot on the shore, when Jim Freeman rowed over to us, his eyes bulging and every freckle on his face standing out like pips on a gooseberry.

"What did you put in here for?" he cried before yet coming alongside. "Are you hankerin' to have your pungy burned or sunk?"

"What's the matter, Jim?" Jerry cried. "You're actin' like as if somethin' had gone wrong!"

"Gone wrong?" Jim exclaimed, and it did really look as if his eyes would roll right down on his cheeks. "The whole bloomin' bottom has dropped out of everything. The Britishers are comin' into the bay thicker'n spatter, an' I don't see how you got in here without bein' caught!"

"In here?" I cried in amazement. "Have you lost your wits that you think the Britishers would come into the Patuxent river?"

"I reckon it's you that are needin' wits!" Jim cried as he scrambled over the rail. "So you think they wouldn't come into the Patuxent, eh?"

"Certainly not, and for the very good reason that there's nothing here they want."

Jim looked at me in pity, and I afterward understood that there was good reason for his so doing.

"How long have you been up Baltimore way?"

"Near to ten days," Jerry replied, hoping to hasten Jim in the telling of the news with which he was near to bursting. "We had hard work to sell our oysters at any price, an' then it fell a dead calm with weather hot enough to tan a nigger."

"Then there's little wonder that you boys are way behind the times as to what has been goin' on 'round here," and Jim threw out his chest as he swelled with the importance of being the first to impart startling news. "In the first place," he said, speaking slowly as if to prolong his enjoyment at giving information which would not be pleasing to hear, "Admiral Cochrane, the Britisher, has passed the capes with twenty-one vessels, an' Commodore Malcolm is below with a fleet loaded with soldiers. Tom Harrison swears there were more'n ten thousand men."

"Somebody has been stuffin' you, Jim," I said, not crediting his news.

"Then they've stuffed Commodore Barney too, an' when he runs I allow the rest of us had better be huntin' a hole."

"Commodore Barney don't run!" Darius cried angrily, for he never allowed anything disparaging to be said in his presence of the man whom he believed to be the greatest naval commander who ever lived.

"Perhaps he don't very often; but he has this time," Jim said in a tone so decided that we could not but believe he was convinced of the truth of his own words.

"Did you see him?" Darius demanded, and I expected that when he answered this question Jim's story would fall to pieces; but the lad replied bold as a lion:

"Of course I did! All the boats laid here after the fight in St. Leonard's bay, an' it was only yesterday they scooted up the river!"

Here was news with a vengeance, and I no longer felt the same desire to punch Jim's head which had come over me when he first came aboard with what I believed was a cock and bull story.

Then, with first one and another asking questions, we learned from Jim that while we were in Baltimore the British frigate Loire had chased Commodore Barney's flotilla into St. Leonard's bay,

and blockaded it there until Colonel Carberry's artillery came down from Frederick and drove the enemy away.

Then, having learned of the enormous force at the mouth of the bay, Commodore Barney sailed to Benedict, where he remained four and twenty hours, or till word was brought that ten or twelve of the enemy's vessels were bound up the bay, bound most likely for Baltimore or Washington, when he sailed for Nottingham, further up the river.

Darius was more concerned than either of us, for he firmly believed that Joshua Barney would not have beaten a retreat without first having been positive that an overwhelming force was near at hand, and if there were Britishers near enough to drive the commodore away, we had got ourselves in a pickle by coming up the river.

The first thought which came to my mind was that the Avenger was in great danger of being captured in short order, for I made no question but that the enemy would pursue Barney, and we were where we could not escape, save by way of the bay.

Jerry, however, had the idea that all these man[oe]uvres would further his scheme, and he said as if being thoroughly well satisfied with the situation:

"We can run up to Nottingham, as well as the commodore, and once there I reckon it will be possible to make our trade."

"But if the fleet is forced to remain there, all hands will be idle, and the commodore won't care to hire us while several hundred men are loafing around the decks," I suggested, and Jerry's jaw fell.

But Jim had not exhausted his budget of news, although it was impossible for him to give us anything more very startling.

"The commodore had only got eight pungies an' five barges of the fleet – "

"Where are the other boats?" Darius demanded sharply.

"Somewhere on the Delaware side; they went off on a cruise before the Britishers hove in sight. He has taken on the schooner Scorpion, which was here at anchor, an' I heard one of the officers say that there was about five hundred men in this part of the fleet."

"I'm goin' ashore," Darius said abruptly. "It ain't no ways certain to me that Jim has heard this thing right, an' I count on gettin' down to facts."

Jerry and I were eager to land, and, without even stopping to thank Jim for the news he brought, we went over the rail into our canoe, pulling in hot haste for the shore.

Never waiting to speak with such few loungers as were to be seen near the water front, I went directly to my own home, and there found more tidings of war.

My father had joined Commodore Barney, as had nearly all the able-bodied men of Benedict, agreeing to remain in service while our section of the country was menaced by the enemy, and mother seemed to have the idea that I would follow his example.

Jerry's father had gone with the fleet, and, as she said, only those who had been opposed to the war with England, remained at home. After greeting me, and telling what little she knew of the situation, mother set about getting together the few things I owned which might be needed on a long cruise, and I was ashamed to say that as yet I had had no idea of going to fight the Britishers.

Don't let it be understood I believed the United States could have done other than declare war in 1812, or that I had any secret liking for the Britishers. I simply believed that I did not have the backbone of a fighter, and preferred to stand at a distance while the more eager went ahead; but yet I was not really a coward, as I think was afterward proved.

However, just then it made me feel rather uncomfortable to have mother gathering up my few belongings, and telling me what to do in event of receiving such or such a wound, and, with my brain all in a whirl, I went out of doors under the pretense that it was necessary I should have a talk with Darius and Jerry.

Once alone by myself, behind the corn-crib where no one would be likely to see me, I tried to sum up the situation so far as I was immediately concerned, and it did not look cheering. We had

sailed the Avenger down the bay and up the river never sighting a single craft, although it appeared that the British were swarming near about our very course. It was not probable we could run to the southward without coming across some of their vessels, especially if they were reckoning on pursuing Commodore Barney, and even though we did get to the mouth of the river in safety, where could we go? The big fleets were at the entrance of the bay, and had not come there for nothing; the enemy was counting on attacking Washington or Baltimore, it seemed certain, and by going to the northward we would likely find ourselves out of the frying-pan into the fire.

It seemed very much to me as if we had lost the Avenger, whichever way we turned, and my heart grew heavy, for once she was gone Jerry and I were badly off.

Hardly knowing what I did, I went toward my friend's home, and met him coming my way, a look of excitement and eagerness on his face.

"Well, it seems as if we were in for it!" he cried when we were come within hailing distance, and I asked irritably:

"In for what?"

"A bit of fightin', of course. You wouldn't be willin' to stay here with the cowards Commodore Barney left behind, would you?"

"There are a good many things I had rather do than poke my nose into a hornet's nest," I replied, feeling as if Jerry was in some way my enemy because he appeared to be so delighted with the situation.

"What did your mother say?" he asked, giving no heed to my grumpiness.

"Nothing much; she is getting things ready for me to go away, and without so much as asking if I counted on leaving."

"She knows, as I do, that you wouldn't remain behind," the lad cried, showing as much joy as if we were thinking of visiting a peepshow. "Come on; Darius is waitin' for us. We must try to get a supply of provisions, for it's likely they haven't any too large a store in the fleet."

Then was the moment when I should have declared bluntly that I had no idea of putting myself in a position to be shot at if it could be avoided; but I hadn't the courage to tell him that I would not leave Benedict immediately, although I was fully determined not to go up the river.

Jim Freeman and a couple of other boys strolled along, having been in search of us. They also took it for granted that the Avenger would join Commodore Barney's fleet, and were come to ask that the three be allowed to go with us.

"It won't do, Jim," Jerry said, taking it upon himself to act as spokesman, although I figured as captain of the puny. "We can't feed ourselves, the way things look now, an' it don't stand to reason we should add to the crew."

"But I'll bring enough to eat," Jim persisted, and turned to me as he said, "I've done you many a good turn, Amos, an' you won't lose anything by givin' me lift now."

"Do you call it a lift to be put where the Britishers can kill you?" I asked angrily, for if these lads were so eager to have a hand in the fighting as to beg for a chance, it would be all the harder for me to declare that I wouldn't join the fleet.

"We might carry you as far as Nottingham, if you'd agree to ship on some other craft after we got there," Jerry said without stopping to ask my permission.

"That we'll do, an' be glad of the chance," Jim replied, acting as if really overjoyed by the permission to run his nose into danger. "We'll be on board in half an hour; you can't get under way before then?"

"No; we shall likely be here an hour or more," Jerry said as if he was the sole owner of the Avenger, and when the foolish boys ran away at full speed, he began to figure as to where we could get a small store of food.

I held my peace, angry and timorous, until we were come to the water front, where we found Darius awaiting us, and he, as could be seen at a glance, was of the same mind as Jerry.

"I've found two hams an' a side of bacon!" he cried triumphantly, pointing to the articles which were in the canoe. "If you fellows can scare up some meal, we'll be fixed for a spell. Did you see Jim Freeman an' his crowd?"

"Yes; they're goin' to Nottingham with us," Jerry replied, and the old man asked me:

"How soon can we get under way?"

I hesitated; it was on the tip of my tongue to say that I would not stir a hand in the matter, nor should the Avenger leave her moorings; but, fortunately, I remembered that we couldn't hold the pungy there to be destroyed when the enemy came up the river, and, to tell the absolute truth, I was ashamed to declare bluntly that I had no idea of casting in my lot with such a firebrand as Commodore Barney.

"We ought to leave here in an hour," Jerry said, making answer because he thought I was trying to figure how long it would take us to make ready. "Amos won't need more than ten minutes to get what stuff his mother is puttin' up for him, an' I'm goin' round by the mill to see if they will trust us for half a bushel of meal."

He was off like an arrow as he spoke, and Darius had no idea that I was hesitating as to the course to pursue, for an old fighter like him supposed it would be a pleasure for me to voluntarily go into the worst kind of a row.

It was fortunate indeed for me that the old man never suspected what was in my heart, otherwise I would have been shamed in my home to such an extent that I could never go there again; but all that came to mind later. Just then I felt as if I was being cruelly wronged by those who should have stood my friends.

Darius would have told me yet further of what Commodore Barney had done in the past; but I cut him short by saying like a spoiled child:

"I don't care to hear anything more about him; just now it strikes me that we'd better be thinking of ourselves."

The old man looked really distressed, and but for the fact that my heart was sore, I could have laughed because of the mistake he made. Darius really believed that I was grieving over being thus obliged to leave my mother and the children, and he said soothingly:

"I come somewhere near knowin' how it is, lad. At such a time as this the least home talk that's made, the better, for it kind'er unstrings a fellow. You wait here, an' I'll go after what dunnage your mother is gettin' together; she'll understand that a short partin' is the best."

I could not have stopped him, for he was off before I had time to so much as open my mouth, and there I stood leaning against the canoe, giving the people of Benedict to believe I was eager to be fighting for my country.

Jim Freeman and his companions came along a few moments after Darius left, and in order to have some occupation, rather than from a desire to serve them, I offered to put the three aboard the Avenger.

They talked of nothing but what they would do once the enemy gave them an opportunity, until I asked petulantly:

"Is everybody in Benedict as eager to shed blood as are you?"

"Not much," Jim cried with a laugh. "There's Elias Macomber, for example – he's an Englishman, you know, an' hasn't been in this country more'n four years. He's makin' a lot of wild talk 'bout what he'll do to us folks when the Britishers come up the river."

"What reason has he to make any fuss?" I asked, rather for the sake of saying something, than because I desired information.

"Well, I suppose all hands have roughed into him pretty bad, on account of things he's said, an' now he counts on showin' what his countrymen can do."

Now it was that I began to feel glad because of having said nothing in opposition to joining Commodore Barney's fleet. By hanging back while all the others were taking up arms, I would be

ranging myself on the side of Elias Macomber, which would have caused me to be ashamed of myself, for he was by no means a reputable citizen.

However glad I might be because I had refrained, or been prevented, from saying that which would have made it appear as if I took sides with the British, I was in nowise reconciled to the idea of going where the bullets were like to be flying, and, after putting Jim and his friend aboard the Avenger, I pulled back to the shore in anything rather than a cheerful frame of mind.

Darius was waiting for me, and he must have run every step of the way from the river to my father's home. He had with him a small bundle wrapped in one of mother's blankets, and said as he pulled the bow of the canoe up on the mud:

"I reckon it is jest as well that I went after your dunnage, lad, for your mother was ready to have a cryin' fit, which she couldn't perlutely let come on while I was there; but I'll warrant the water would have run had you been alone with her."

"She can't be feeling terribly bad, otherwise she wouldn't have been so anxious to have me go," I said sulkily.

"I don't know about that, my boy. It stands to reason she had rather anything else happened, than that you should stay at home when this part of the country needs every hand that can be raised in defense. She feels sore because you are goin'; but I'll go bail she'd have felt ten times worse had you said you'd stay back with such as Elias Macomber."

I wasn't in a proper frame of mind to appreciate all that the old man said, and continued to consider myself as being abused, although not to such an extent as before I heard about Elias Macomber.

It was noised around in the village, told most likely by Jim Freeman, that we were going to Nottingham to join the commodore, and while Darius and I stood by the canoe waiting for Jerry, we were literally besieged by women, whose husbands or sons were with the fleet, nearly all of whom wanted to send some message, or this or that article which had been forgotten at the time of departure.

I believe of a verity that Darius and I charged ourselves with no less than twenty errands by word of mouth, and as for packages, why we had the bow piled full, until it seemed as if we were to carry something by way of reminder for every man under Commodore Barney's command.

Near-by where we stood were also gathered four men whose sympathies were entirely with the British, and among them, as a matter of course, was Elias Macomber.

These worthless ones who would injure the country which had provided them with a home, food and clothing, to say nothing of the comforts of life, evidently counted on ruffling our feathers, believing it would be safe to do so now that nearly all the men were gone from the village, and they began by talking loudly of the sorry spectacle which the commodore and his followers would present when Admiral Cochrane and his vessels came up the river.

I feel certain that Darius would have held his peace, for he was not naturally a quarrelsome man, had they made sport of everybody in the American army and navy, save Joshua Barney; but a word against him was to the old man much as a red flag is to a bull, and in a twinkling the trouble began.

"The man who says aught against the commodore must answer to me for his words," Darius said angrily as he strode toward the four who were trying to bait him. "I'll not stand here and listen to such talk!"

It was Elias Macomber who showed his lack of sound sense by making reply:

"We didn't ask you to stand here; but if you choose to do so, it's more than likely you'll hear a good many things which may not please you."

"Hold your tongue as to Barney, or it'll be the worse for all hands!" Darius cried angrily, and at that moment Jerry appeared, staggering under a bag which must have contained a full bushel and a half of meal.

I shall always believe Elias Macomber held the idea that Darius was a feeble old man, otherwise he would have kept his tongue between his teeth, for he was far from being brave; but however that may be, he replied hotly:

"I do not count on choosin' my words when I speak of such a bag of wind as Josh Barney has shown himself to be!"

It seemed to me as if the words had not been fully spoken before Darius launched out, and, in less time than it takes to tell it, was in the midst of a hot, one-sided fight, for the Tories all pitched into him, regardless of the fact that his quarrel was with Elias.

It stands to reason that I could never remain idle while a shipmate was getting the worst of it, particularly when his adversaries were men for whom I entertained no friendly feelings, and the scrimmage was hardly more than begun when I took a hand, standing close by the old man's side.

As I aimed a blow at Elias I saw, out of the tail of my eye, Jerry drop his meal as he came forward at full speed, and at almost the same moment a loud splashing in the water caused me to glance quickly in the direction of the puny.

Jim Freeman had jumped overboard to do his share toward teaching Macomber a lesson, and when he arrived the odds would be even.

Of course it was a disgraceful spectacle; but it could not have been avoided, so far as I was concerned, and I did my best, fighting as vigorously as if I had been the one to urge upon my companions the necessity of joining the fleet.

It is not well that I give too much space to this brawl when there are so many other adventures, in which a fellow might well take pride, to be recorded, therefore I will only say that we had no very easy task to down these admirers of King George and the Prince Regent; but finally succeeded, thanks to the assistance of Jim Freeman.

It is doubtful which side got the worst drubbing, although we claimed a victory because the others ran; but positive it is that the four of us had all the punishment needed, and were forced to wash our faces more than once before we could look at each other without a certain feeling of shame.

"What made you tackle the whole of 'em?" Jerry asked the old man. "If the rest of us hadn't been near at hand, they'd wiped you out."

"I'd tackle twenty if they dared say anything against Joshua Barney!" Darius cried as he shook his fist in the direction where our adversaries had last been seen. "I'd rather get the toughest pummellin' such as them could give, than keep my mouth shut while they was slurrin' their betters!"

We were actually obliged to use force with him, otherwise the old man would have gone in pursuit of the British-lovers, and it was only by tumbling him into the canoe head-foremost, holding him down by sitting on him once he was there, that we could make Darius listen to anything like reason.

"Let up on me, an' I'll keep quiet," he said after we had threatened to continue the drubbing begun by the Tories; "but this much I promise, that after the commodore has made shoestrings of that conceited admiral, I'll come back here an' have it out with Elias Macomber."

"We'll let it go at that," Jerry said as he released his hold of Darius and went back for the meal, while Jim wrung the water out of his clothing as best he could, for the fellow had not stopped to throw off coat or shoes when he jumped overboard to take a hand in the scrimmage.

It was near to half an hour before we were ready to go on board the Avenger, and by that time it was too late to make any protests against following the commodore.

My comrades took it for granted that I was equally eager with them to be where I could do my share of fighting the Britishers, and so stirred up was I by the game of fisticuffs ashore that I actually forgot to be frightened by the prospect of taking part in a battle.

We got our anchor and made sail on the Avenger without delay, and thus, in less than an hour from the time of making port, we were off again on what proved to be a series of wild adventures.

CHAPTER III. ELIAS MACOMBER

Of a verity Elias Macomber did me a good turn when he started the quarrel with Darius Thorpe, for up to this time I had been sadly lacking in patriotism, as may have been learned from that which is already set down in these pages.

Until this day it had been as if the war did not concern me or mine, save as it affected the price of oysters, and when I saw this lad or the other who had enlisted, I said to myself that another foolish one had been found who willingly engaged to go where he might be killed.

Within a very few moments after the fight between Elias Macomber and his crew of British-lovers had come to an end, I began to view the situation of affairs as an honest lad should.

The country which protected me in my home – that territory which had been bought, or redeemed, by the blood of brave men, and even of women and children, from the savage Indians and a merciless king, was in danger, and if I did not rush to its defense how might I expect my heritage of a free land could be preserved to me and those who came after me?

Like a picture I saw before me those brave men and women who had battled against the forces of nature as they made homes in the wilderness; then struggled against the bloodthirsty Indians to protect their little all, and were finally called upon to fight a powerful nation in order to hold themselves free in the land already redeemed by sweat and blood.

Once that was presented to my mental vision I ceased to regret having been forced to thus set off for the purpose of joining Commodore Barney's fleet, and rejoiced that my comrades had prevented me from showing the white feather when even my loving mother urged me forward. I forgot all the fears which had assailed me, and thought only of what it might be possible for me to do in order to show myself worthy the land of my birth.

In a word, I had in a few seconds been transformed from a cowardly lad who would shirk his duty lest, perchance, he receive some bodily hurt, to a boy burning with the desire to do whatsoever lay in his power toward checking the advance of an enemy who was bent upon carrying on the war by destroying the property of peaceful settlers.

Unless my comrades read what I have here set down, they will never know how near I was on that day at Benedict, to proving myself a false-hearted American lad.

The afternoon was considerably more than half spent when we left home for the eighteen-mile sail up the river, and I saw little chance of our coming upon the fleet before morning, unless we kept the pungy under sail far into the night, for the breeze, what little we had of it, came from the westward, and we could not make more than two miles an hour against the current.

Therefore it was that I said to Darius when we were half an hour or more from port, after Jim Freeman and his friends had wearied themselves by cutting monkey-shines on the deck in order to prove their joy at thus having an opportunity to do whatsoever they might in defense of their country:

"With so light a wind we are like to be forced aground when it is so dark that we cannot give the shoals a wide berth, because of not seeing them," and the old man replied, saying that which was in my own mind:

"It'll be a case of comin' to anchor, lad, after the sun has set, for we had best make haste slowly rather than jam the pungy up where a day may be spent in tryin' to float her."

"But suppose the British are close at hand?" I asked, for now I was hot with the desire to make certain of keeping so far ahead of the enemy that I could take part in whatsoever might be done by way of fighting.

"They will be more helpless than we, after night has come, for we know the river fairly well, while they are strangers to it."

If it had not been that we lads were about to take part in the war I might have refused to accept Darius' advice so readily, for, it must be confessed, I am overly headstrong and apt to go contrary when one makes the least show of driving me; but in the business we were about to embark upon, I knew it was safe to follow the old man, since he had had long experience in such matters, the telling of which would be more entertaining than will be the account of our adventures.

It was destined, however, that the Avenger should come to anchor even before the river was shrouded in darkness, for we were not more than four miles above our own town of Benedict, when the wind, died away completely, thus forcing us to make fast somewhere, unless we were minded to drift back to our starting point.

In my ignorance, I would have anchored the pungy in the stream, hoisting a riding light, and turned in feeling that everything was safe and snug; but to this Darius made decided objection.

"Keep out of the channel," he said emphatically. "We know beyond a peradventure that the enemy is astern of us, and there is no tellin' when he may come – "

"He will wait for wind before goin' very far up the river," I interrupted, and thus showed my ignorance of anything concerning warfare, for the old man replied:

"It wouldn't be strange if he should send a boat in the night to make certain of the water, and get such other information as might be useful. This 'ere pungy would be captured by half a dozen men as easily as if the whole British fleet was close by."

"Are you of the opinion that we should haul in to the bank?" I asked very humbly, understanding that if we would run safely it might be better to give Darius the command.

"Let her drop back beyond the point, an' then sneak in as far among the trees as her spars will permit," he said, and this we did, pulling her around by aid of the canoe until we were nicely hidden from all save by closest scrutiny.

Right glad was I by this time that Jim Freeman and his two friends had come aboard, for they were willing lads, who strove to do all they might in the way of work, and we who belonged on the Avenger had an easy time of it.

Jim took it upon himself to get supper, and he had brought with him such a tempting store of provisions, all of which he turned over to the party, that our meal that night was a veritable feast. I had never but once before had such an appetizing repast, and that one exception was when oysters were scarce, and a Baltimore dealer gave us a dinner at the hotel in addition to the regular price of the cargo.

When our hunger had been satisfied, and the cuddy put to rights, we lads would have spent the time spinning yarns, or in some other such amusement; but Darius put his foot down strongly against it.

"Remember that you are liable to be made prisoners of war at any moment," he said gravely. "Wise men do not hide themselves and their vessel, an' then talk and laugh that strangers may know where they are hidden."

"Do you really expect to see Britishers on the river this night?" Jim Freeman asked with a laugh, and, much to my surprise, the old man said emphatically:

"I surely do, if all we heard at Benedict be true, an' I have little doubt of it. The enemy count on destroyin' Commodore Barney's fleet, an' know that it can be found up this stream. It will be strange, 'cordin' to what I know of such business, if the admiral does not send out spies before shovin' any armed vessels up here."

It can well be supposed that such talk as this insured silence among us; we had hardly begun to understand that we might be very near a British prison unless every precaution was taken; but the old man's words, and manner of speaking them, brought us to a better realization of the situation.

We almost held our breath, fancying the enemy might be close aboard, until Darius, talking in a whisper, said:

"I'm countin' on seein' or hearin' the Britishers 'twixt now an' mornin', an' it strikes me that we might do a good stroke of work for Joshua Barney, by lookin' after a prisoner or two. It wouldn't be no ways strange if we could nab 'em, pervidin' they put themselves in a fair position to be taken."

I was dumfounded by such a proposition, and it is not impossible that my knees began to shake as I thought of attempting such a thing. Then I suddenly remembered that we had no weapons aboard, except an old musket which we used to shoot into a flock of ducks now and then, and I said with a laugh:

"Do you expect that the Britishers will surrender if we simply invite them? Our one musket wouldn't make much of a showin' against a boat-load of men."

"All that has been in my mind, lad, an' I reckon it won't be hard to put ourselves in right good shape. If any British spies count on comin' up the river, it wouldn't be till after dark, an' we've got no right to expect they'd be around this way much before midnight. Now I'll paddle back to the village, an' see if I can't scare up two or three muskets. It won't take me more'n an hour for the whole job."

Darius said this as if asking advice; but I could make no reply, and my companions held their peace, therefore, after waiting a few moments without hearing any comment, the old man set about carrying his plan into execution.

Noiselessly he hauled the canoe alongside, went over the rail into her, and took up the paddle, as I stood near the bow waiting for his command to cast off the painter.

"Keep quiet, whatever happens, an' don't fuss if I'm kept quite a spell, for if there's anythin' to be learned, I shall make mighty little account of time. Cast off, lad, an' be certain that nothin' goes up or down the river without your seeing it."

I obeyed the command, and in an instant the canoe glided into the obscurity of the shadows cast by the overhanging trees.

With the disappearance of Darius there came upon me the full sense of my responsibility, for I was the one to whom the others would look in event of trouble, and I knew full well how poorly fitted I was by experience to be in command of the pungy.

The knowledge of my own short-comings at least served one good turn, since it made me more than usually cautious, and without delay I set about preparations for obeying the command given by Darius.

All my companions were on deck, and calling them aft to the cuddy companion-way, I said in a whisper:

"You heard the words of Darius. Now I propose the work shall be done in this fashion: All hands will remain on duty, not in a group, but stationed equal distances apart at the rail, each one to watch and listen to the best of his ability. No fellow shall speak with his neighbor, nor can he move about lest the sound of footsteps on the deck give an alarm."

Then I took up my station near the stern, and in the gloom I could see the forms of my companions while they ranged themselves as I had suggested, neither of them making more noise than so many mice.

From that moment not a sound could be heard from the deck of the Avenger. That which Darius said had aroused us all to the danger, and even though we had only a crew of lads, I felt confident no blunder would be charged against us.

It was dreary work waiting there in the darkness, listening intently for the lightest unusual noise, and believing that an enemy was, or soon would be, close at hand. The gurgling of the water in an eddy; the leap of a fish, or a bit of drift-wood striking against the side of the pungy, sounded in our ears loud as thunder, and we heard the ordinary night rustlings of the forest as if it was something strange to our ears.

Then came that which caused us to bend far out over the rail, trying to pierce the gloom with our eyes, for the measured stroke of oars could be heard, and it was a positive relief to me, even though it betokened the coming of strangers.

I felt certain an enemy's boat was approaching, because had any one living on the river been coming up at that time of night, paddles would have been used instead of oars. I knew of no one nearabout Benedict who would have rowed a boat against the current when she could have been handled so much more readily the other way.

Nearer and nearer came the splashing of water, as if more than one oarsman was at work, and when it seemed as if the boat must be close upon us, I heard a low voice, but could not distinguish the words.

Immediately the noise of the oars ceased, and then came the words, not loud, but clear enough for us who were listening so intently to hear with reasonable distinctness:

"On which side of the river were we to pick the man up?"

"The left, sir; the same side as the village."

The Avenger was lying near the right bank of the river, such position having been taken because of the trees, and not through good judgment.

"One of you men get ashore, and see what can be found. If this is the place agreed upon, and he said he would be about three miles above the village, there should be a road running on a line with the river."

There was no question in my mind but that the speakers were Britishers from one of the fleets, and that some of our people had agreed to play the traitor by giving information, or piloting the boat. But, if such was the case, where was Darius? He had not had time to reach Benedict before this boat came past there, and might already be a prisoner on his way to the nearest English vessel.

Even though he had gained the village while the strangers were yet below it, then was his danger the greater, for he might unwittingly come directly upon them when he returned. Whichever way I looked at the matter I saw cause for grave fear, and the perspiration came out in big drops on my forehead, for without him we would be in a bad predicament.

While these thoughts were running through my mind I gave due attention to what might be going on at the opposite side of the river, for I was convinced that the boat was nearly in a straight line across from where we lay.

I could hear such noises as told that one of the crew was scrambling ashore amid the underbrush, and I heard a man cough; but after that all was still until at least fifteen minutes were passed, when there was a faint sound of voices from a distance, and then the rustling of the foliage as if one or more was forcing a passage through the tangle of vines.

"Hello!" came in a hoarse whisper from the boat, and some one ashore replied:

"It's all right, sir."

From what could be heard I knew that a man, or men, were making their way to the boat from the highway, and then, when it seemed as if he or they were aboard, the voice which had given the command, said in greeting:

"So you're come at last, Macomber. I had begun to believe we were mistaken as to the rendezvous."

"I was delayed in the village, for your orders were that I must get away without its being known, and there are many inquisitive ones in Benedict."

My heart gave a great bound. So it was Elias Macomber who was playing traitor, for even though he was born in England, the United States was his home by adoption, and to our people he was bound in honor.

If Darius could only get weapons so that we might capture the boat's crew, what joy would be mine to carry the base hound to Commodore Barney as a prisoner!

Elias was speaking in a low tone and rapidly to some one – whom I had no doubt was a British officer – , and I could only catch a word here and there; but it was enough to let me know that he was reporting all he had heard concerning the movements of the flotilla.

"At Nottingham yesterday," I heard. "Thirteen barges an' pungies, with the schooner Scorpion. Five hundred men all told. Well armed, an' knowin' how to use their weapons."

It was by such fragments of conversation as set down above that I knew Elias Macomber was giving all the information in his power to the enemy, and I resolved that some day he should pay the penalty of the crime, even though I was forced to pursue him single-handed.

When all the story had been told the officer asked:

"Can you give us a place on the river where we may lay by during the day? I am minded to have a look at the boats before going back to make report."

I bent forward eagerly to hear the reply:

"At a mill, five miles above here, you will find a friend by name of Essek Harland. He can give you all that may be needed."

"You shall go with us to make certain he takes us in."

"Very well, sir; but in that case I cannot get back home before morning."

"You should be able to pull eight miles with a current in a few hours, and I will pay for the hire of a boat."

"Very well, sir," Macomber replied in a tone of content, and I laughed inwardly with joy, for he would be our prisoner to a certainty if he came down the river alone.

Then the word was given for the oarsmen to resume their work, and we heard the light splashing of water as the boat was pulled up-stream.

After that all was silent once more, and Jerry came tip-toeing aft to whisper in my ear:

"Do you think Darius managed to give them the slip, or did they capture him?"

"It seems to me that the officer would have told Elias if he had taken a prisoner," I replied, and such fact gave me great satisfaction. "At all events he must be here soon if nothing has happened to his disadvantage."

Even as I spoke the canoe came out of the shadow, gliding lightly and noiselessly as thistledown, and we knew that Darius was safe, for the time being at least.

"Did you run across the boat when you went down?" I asked in a whisper as he came over the rail, and he stood silent as if with surprise.

"Didn't you see a boat?" Jerry asked impatiently, and the old man replied:

"I met with nothing either goin' or comin' an' I've brought back two muskets with a mighty small lot of powder an' ball; but it's better'n nothin'. What do you mean by a boat?"

Then we told him what we had heard, and when I mentioned the name of the traitor, he brought his hand down on his leg with a resounding thwack that might have been heard some distance away, as he said incautiously loud:

"We'll have that snake, lads, if we don't do anythin' more, an' he shall have a chance to see how the commodore looks when the Britishers come up the river!"

"Then it is for you to take command of the Avenger, Darius. The boat has not been gone from here above ten minutes, therefore it is likely to be some time before the traitor comes down stream."

"We won't wait here for him, lads. There's breeze enough stirrin' now to send the pungy against the current, an' we'll push ahead."

Sheltered by the trees as the vessel had been, we were ignorant of the fact that a night breeze was springing up, until the Avenger swung out into the stream, and then we found it as Darius had said.

The little craft could make about two miles an hour against the current, which, as I reckoned, was about what the boat could do with a couple of men at the oars, and I suggested to the old man that there was danger we might over-run our game.

He gave heed by sending all hands, save me, into the bow as lookouts, and steered a zig-zag course, which reduced our speed a full third.

"I don't believe I've ever heard of this Essek Harland you tell about," the old man said to me in a whisper, and, understanding that he desired all the information I could give concerning the miller, I replied:

"He's of much the same kidney as Elias Macomber, except that he was born in this country. A mean native of North Carolina, who starves his slaves, and makes them work twice as many hours as they should. He runs the mill, and it is said that all those who carry grist to him keep a sharp watch lest he take out too much toll. If he hides the Britishers, or gives them any information, it will be because they pay him, for he will do any mean thing for money."

"Have you ever heard it said whether he was for or against the war?"

"No, and I haven't heard his name spoken for a year or more. It would make little difference with him which side he was on, if the opposite party offered money they could buy him."

Then we fell silent again during half an hour or more, when Darius said:

"You shall tell me when we are within a mile of the mill; it won't be safe to run any nearer unless we have overhauled that snake of a Macomber."

I was so well acquainted with the river as to know every crook and turn for at least ten miles above Benedict, and when it seemed certain the pungy had run three miles or more, I kept a sharp look-out on the banks in order to comply with the old man's request.

It was just when I believed we were close upon the spot where the Avenger should be stopped, that Jerry came tip-toeing aft, waving his arms to attract our attention.

"Macomber has hove in sight!" Darius whispered. "Take the tiller, an' head her for his canoe!"

As he spoke he darted into the cuddy, returning a few seconds later with two muskets, and these he carried with him well forward.

I strained my eyes in vain for a view of the canoe, which should be coming right fast, with a favoring current, and had not yet made her out when Darius hailed:

"In the boat there! Whereabouts are our people?"

The old man had disguised his voice, and the traitor must have believed that we were a party of British coming to join those whom he had piloted, for he paddled alongside fearlessly, as he replied:

"Up the river half a mile or so."

"Can you show us the way?"

"Ay, that I can; but it will delay me in –"

He ceased speaking very suddenly, for at that moment Jerry incautiously came toward the port rail, and even though the night was dark, it was possible to see that he was neither a British soldier nor sailor.

Quickly he seized the paddle to shove off; but Darius thrust the muzzle of a musket in his very face, as he cried sharply:

"Pass up your painter, or I'll shoot! Quick, or your life is gone in another second!"

Elias Macomber was a coward, as we knew full well, but I never believed he would give in quite as readily as he did. He passed up the painter as meekly as any cooing dove, and when Darius ordered him to come over the rail, he made all haste to obey the command.

When we gathered around the cur, however, for all of us were so eager that we could not keep out of sight any longer, and he saw who had captured him, he let go a cry of anger that was like unto the whoof of a bear, as he struck out with both fists savagely.

He would have showed better sense had he taken matters with a bit more grace, for before he could land a blow on either of us, Darius floored him with the butt-end of the musket, and during a minute or two he laid like one dead.

"You struck too hard!" I cried in alarm, for even though the man was a traitor, it seemed terrible to take a human life.

"Not a bit of it," the old sailor said quietly as he set about lashing the fellow's arms and legs. "He ain't the kind that can be killed so easily. Get off the hatch, for we must have him out of sight before coming up to the mill."

Five minutes later our prisoner was snugly stowed aft, near the cabin bulkhead, and we had brought the puny to anchor lest she over-run the port we counted on making.

CHAPTER IV. A LIVELY TUSSLE

Darius would have it that the traitor had not been seriously hurt by the blow on the head; but when he failed to show any signs of consciousness after we stowed him away in the hold, I grew alarmed, and, calling on Jim Freeman for assistance, set about trying to bring him to life, for of a verity I believed him dead.

It was not until we had worked over him ten minutes or more that I could see any change, and then suddenly he opened his eyes, blinking in the rays of the lantern Jim was holding close by his face.

"What happened to me?" he asked wildly, and as my fears that he had been killed were banished by the words, so did my anger against him return.

"You were known to have been giving information to the enemy, and piloting English spies to a hiding-place," I replied sharply. "We took it upon ourselves to cut your career as a traitor short, and while the job was being done you got a clip on the head that knocked you senseless."

While I was speaking the cur looked me full in the face, as if trying to make out who I was; but I believe he feigned ignorance only that he might have time in which to decide upon a course of action.

I could see by the look in his eyes, when his mind was made up as to how he should steer, and a moment later he said with a start of pretended surprise.

"Is it you, Amos Grout? I was afraid I had fallen into the hands of enemies!"

"You are not among friends, and that is certain," I replied, boiling with rage because the miserable cur would try to pull wool over my eyes, for I well knew what tack he was about to take.

"And are you willin' to hold enmity simply because we had a bit of a scrimmage over differences of opinion? I thought all that was settled on the spot."

"So it was," I said curtly.

"Then why have you tied me up in this fashion?"

"Listen to me, Elias Macomber," I cried. "Do you think for a moment that you can deceive any one aboard this craft. We heard all you said to the British officer who is in the Patuxent with a boat's crew spying, and know where you took him to pass the night. We sailed up the river for the purpose of capturing you, and here you remain until we can deliver the meanest traitor in Maryland over to Commodore Barney."

Now the cur was frightened, and with good cause. He would have said something more, thinking, I dare say, that it might yet be possible to blind me; but I refused to listen.

"I only came here to learn if you were alive, and now that matter has been settled, I count on leaving you. Don't be so foolish as to think you can wiggle out of the scrape by lying, for when you made your talk with the Britisher this puny was on the other side of the river, her spars hidden by the trees. We heard nearly every word that was spoken."

"An' you're gettin' out of this part of the trouble mighty easy, if Amos insists you shall be left alone," Jim added angrily. "If I had my way, all hands of us would take a turn at thumpin' you, an' then the account between us wouldn't be square."

"Come on, Jim," I said impatiently. "It is doing no good to parley with such as him. Leave the traitor to himself until the commodore directs what shall be done."

Elias called after us imploringly as we went out of the hold; but I had no desire to remain longer with the cur, and we put on the hatch in order that, if he did succeed in freeing himself of the bonds, he would yet be imprisoned.

On gaining the deck I looked around for Darius, but he was not to be seen, and Jerry, understanding for whom I searched, said:

"The old man has gone ashore. He counts on lookin' around the mill, so that we may know exactly how to get at work when the time comes."

"At work?" I repeated in bewilderment. "What does he reckon on doing now that we have caught the traitor?"

"It is in his mind that we can make prisoners of all the boat's crew, an' if that could be done, we'd be takin' with us such as would insure a hearty welcome from the commodore."

"We had better let well enough alone," I replied irritably. "If Commodore Barney won't be pleased to see him when we offer our own services, the use of the pungy, and the biggest traitor in Maryland, then there's little reason to try to purchase his favor."

"You've agreed that Darius should run this thing to suit himself, an' he's doin' it. I believe he's right, too! If there's a chance to take a few prisoners, it would be downright folly to let it slip."

"And do you expect that we can capture at least half a dozen well-armed Britishers?"

"There are as many of us, when you come to figgerin' up the fightin' force, an' the advantage of takin' them by surprise will overbalance the difference in weapons."

It was useless to argue with Jerry, as I understood by his tone, therefore I turned away, saying to myself that by trying to bite off too big a piece in the way of taking prisoners, we might find the tables turned very suddenly to our disadvantage.

Jim Freeman and his friends seemed to be of the same mind as Jerry, and I said nothing to them lest I be accused of faint-heartedness, when everything was apparently going our way.

We waited in silence for the coming of Darius, allowing the Avenger to remain in the stream where some of the boys had anchored her while I was caring for the prisoner, and not until nearly midnight did the old man put in an appearance.

Jim Freeman was on the lookout well forward, and that he did his duty well was shown by the fact that he came aft with the word that a canoe was drifting down the river while the craft was yet some distance away.

Jerry and I, each with a musket, went forward to make certain the newcomer was a friend rather than an enemy, and when we hailed softly, Darius replied with a low hissing sound which was familiar to us all.

He made fast, came inboard, and entered the cuddy without speaking, therefore we followed, knowing full well that he had something of importance to impart.

When we were all together, unable to see each other because of the darkness, Darius said softly, in a tone of triumph:

"I've found the Britishers, an' can put my hand on the whole gang without much trouble. There are but three men an' the officer, who, I reckon, will be the only fellow to make much fuss when we get at work. Now I'm countin' that one of Jim's friends shall be left on board to look out for the pungy, an' make certain the traitor don't kick up any row. Three of us will have a musket each, an' the other two can do mighty good work with belayin' pins."

"Where are the men?" Jerry asked.

"In the loft of the mill. The officer is havin' a right sociable time with Essek Harland, an' if the miller's bottle holds out, I reckon them two won't be in shape to make much trouble. Jim is to say which of his party shall stay aboard, an' the sooner the rest of us get to work the better, for I want to begin the scrimmage in a couple of hours."

It was evident that my opinion as to whether the attempt to capture the Britishers should be made, was not to be asked, and yet I must follow where Darius led, or give my comrades good reason for calling me a coward – or worse.

The old man settled it that he and Jerry should arm themselves with belaying pins, and the two muskets he brought back from Benedict, together with our old fowling-piece, was distributed among the rest of us.

Jim Freeman named Dody Wardwell as the one to keep ship and look after the prisoner, and Darius instructed the watchman to be free with his blows in case Elias tried to pick up a row.

"If he undertakes to yip even once, give him a dose over the head that will put him to sleep, an' it won't be much harm if you kill such a cur as he is. Keep your wits about you, lad, an' remember that the prisoner is the one who can make the most trouble."

Then the old man saw to it that each of our weapons was loaded, after which he led the way to the rail where the canoe was made fast.

The little craft would not carry more than three, therefore two trips were necessary in order to land us all, and when we stood on the bank Darius proposed that Jerry paddle the boat up to the mill.

"Why do we want her there?" I asked, thinking he was providing for a means of escape. "We couldn't all take passage in her, and in case we need to get away in a hurry, it might be done easier by striking into the woods."

"I'm not thinkin' how we can get her off, for if the plan fails to work there's little chance any of us will need the canoe," Darius said grimly, and I began to understand that he might be more of a fighter than would suit me. "It may be we shall want to send some prisoners down to keep Macomber company, an' then a small craft will come in handy, for their boat is hauled up high an' dry among the bushes; she is so heavy that it would be a long job to float her."

Jerry was so impatient to be in the thick of danger that he hardly waited for the old man to conclude his long-winded speech, and before the last word had hardly been spoken he was paddling up stream at a rate which told that he would arrive at the rendezvous some time in advance of us who were to walk.

Neither was Darius willing to waste much time, and when Jerry was lost to view in the darkness he struck through the underbrush toward the highway, leading the party, while I brought up the rear.

It can well be fancied that we moved with the utmost caution, for people do not set out on such an enterprise as we were bent upon with any great blowing of horns, and although none of us were what might be called woodsmen, I flatter myself that we did not bungle the job very badly.

Hardly more than a quarter-hour had passed when Darius left the underbrush to cut across toward the river, and within five minutes more we were halted near the southeast corner of the mill, not having heard or seen anything of those whom we hoped to make prisoners.

Jerry joined us almost immediately, having been on the lookout during five minutes or more, and he reported that there had been no signs of life in the vicinity since his arrival.

"We who carry the clubs will go ahead, an', if it so be possible, do the biggest part of the work, for our weapons ain't the kind that make much of any noise," Darius whispered. "Jim Freeman will stand guard at the door of the mill, but he is not to shoot unless it becomes necessary to prevent the Britisher or the miller from takin' a hand in the scrimmage, pervidin' there is one. Now follow me, lads, an' remember that we must get the three sailors under our thumbs, once we've started, no matter what turns up."

We stole up to the big door on the northwest corner, the only entrance to the building, and, as I had expected, found it fastened on the inside. One would hardly have supposed that the Britishers in hiding would neglect to make themselves as secure as possible.

It appeared that Darius was not disappointed, for after pushing gently at the door, and motioning for Jim to stand in front of it, he led the way along the northerly side of the mill to a portion of the under-pinning which had given way, disclosing an aperture through which a mule might have been driven.

"Keep close at my heels," he whispered, and then he plunged into the darkness, we obeying his command to the letter, for a mis-step might throw us into the mill-race, which we could hear rippling close at hand.

One would have said that the old man had always lived in this place, so directly and swiftly did he go to the desired point, which was a portion of the flooring where was a trap-door, evidently

used to dump the refuse, for suddenly we found ourselves climbing up a heap of what appeared to be husks and cobs of corn.

It was a simple task to gain entrance to the building in this manner, for Darius had only to force the trap-door up with his shoulder, and in a twinkling we were standing on the lower floor, near-by what I took to be the hopper.

Touching each of us in turn that we might be warned to follow closely, Darius led the way to the easterly end of the building, where he halted at the foot of a flight of stairs.

Now he marshaled his force according to the weapons. Jerry was behind him; I came next, determined to use my musket as a club so long as it could be done, rather than take the risk of killing a man, and in the rear of me was Josiah Coburn, one of Jim Freeman's party.

Now it must be understood that we could see nothing; the darkness was so intense that one could almost feel it, and yet we proposed to blunder in upon enemies who would probably shoot without warning in the direction of the slightest suspicious noise.

It was not a cheerful adventure, and I hold myself well excused for being frightened, so that I followed the leader's orders implicitly to the best of my ability.

Just at this point, when we were trembling with suppressed excitement, and, as in my case, fear, Darius remembered that he had not unlocked the outer door in order that Jim might hide within the building, and we were forced to stand at the foot of the stairs while he groped his way back to remedy the neglect.

It seemed to me that we remained there hardly daring to breathe, a full half-hour, although I suppose now that it was no more than five minutes, and then our leader was returned.

Pushing his way to the head of the line once more, we began the ascent of the stairs, each fellow stepping cautiously; but despite all our efforts each board sent forth loud protesting creaks as we bore our weight upon it, and the only wonder was that the Britishers did not awaken sooner.

The noise we made in ascending the stairs seemed to me loud enough to alarm the inmates of the house near at hand, and, therefore, I was neither startled nor surprised when some person at one end of the second floor, cried out:

"Who is there? What's the row?"

"Can't you give your shipmates the same show for a watch below that you've got?" Darius asked with a regular deep-sea note in his voice, and this it was that gave us a slight advantage, since the men did not open fire.

"How did you get here?" the same voice asked, and again the old man answered as if speaking to shipmates:

"The bloomin' swab that piloted you here, gave us the course. Where are you?"

"Over here," and the voice came from the westerly end of the building, thus showing that we must walk the entire length of the mill before coming upon our adversaries. "What ship are you from?"

My heart stood still as this question was asked, for I knew only too well that Darius was wholly ignorant as to what British vessels had entered the bay; but the old sailor never hesitated, as he replied:

"What other than the flag-ship, you lubber?"

"No, I'll be burned if you are!" the man cried loudly, and I heard him spring to his feet. "She's in the Potomac river long before this! Rouse up, my bullies, an' let's have a look at these beach-combers."

During this brief conversation we had been advancing swiftly in the direction from which the sailor's voice could be heard, and when his comrades were ready to receive us, we could not have been a dozen paces distant from the three.

I felt, rather than saw, that Darius sprang forward; there was a dull thud, a groan, and a cry from one of the other Britishers which told that the battle was on, but the number of active enemies had been reduced by one, for there could be no question but that Darius had put his man out of the fight for some time to come.

I ran forward with my companions; but it was impossible to use the musket, even had I been eager to shoot, because of the darkness, and as I swung the weapon from side to side, striving to feel my way, some one clutched me by the throat.

"Here's one of 'em!" I managed to scream before the fellow's fingers shut off my wind, and then I had my hands full trying to save my own life.

I managed to hit my adversary two or three solid blows which weakened his hold somewhat, otherwise I would have been strangled in short order, and then I fought as I never did before, but sadly at a disadvantage, as can be imagined.

How long we swayed to and fro, I striving to reach the enemy's face with my fists, and he trying to strengthen his hold on my throat, I know not; but certain it is that I held him in fairly good play five minutes or more before the report of Jim Freeman's musket told that the Britishers were about to receive reinforcements.

Even as I fought with my adversary I understood that the English officer, and, probably, the miller, aroused by the noise of the scrimmage, were coming to the rescue, and the thought flashed through my mind that in a few moments more the battle would be decided in favor of his majesty's forces.

Just at that moment a heavy body pushed past me; I heard that sickening sound which tells that a living object has been struck a powerful blow, and instantly the hands relaxed their grasp on my throat.

"That makes the third one; we've got the upper hands of all up here, an' you lads are to make the Britishers fast the best you can in the darkness, while I 'tend to the visitors."

It was Darius who spoke, and when this had been said I understood that he was running toward the stairway.

Now it was possible to see faint gleams of light coming through the cracks of the floor, and I realized that the newcomers had with them a lantern.

The report of Jim's musket had been followed by the discharge of a pistol, and I heard the lad running across the floor at full speed.

I did not have sense enough to obey the old man's command in regard to the prisoners; but stood there like a simple, staring at the moving rays of light, and wondering how long it would take the British officer to shoot us all down.

Then, to my great surprise, I heard a voice from the head of the stairs, on the floor where we were, cry loudly:

"This way, sir! We've got the best of two bloomin' Yankees, an' the other is sneakin' in some corner!"

There came the sound of hurried footsteps, and then the light of the lantern so far illumined the head of the stairway that I could see Darius, lying at full length on the floor, within a few inches of the opening.

Just for one second I stood as if stupefied, and then I understood what the old man would do.

The British officer ascended swiftly; but before his head was fairly above the top of the stairs Darius stretched out his long arm, seizing the gentleman by the throat even as my adversary had seized me.

Now I had my wits about me; running forward swiftly I caught the lantern before the officer could let go his grasp on it, and thus made it possible to have a view of what was going on.

Darius hauled his captive up, much as if he had been a bale of merchandise, and as he was dragged to the floor I saw one whom I believed to be the miller, directly behind him, within three steps of the top of the stairs.

With the lantern in my left hand, I thrust forward the barrel of my musket full in his face, as I said sharply:

"Throw down that gun, or I'll fire!"

The man was armed in much the same fashion as was I; but he had little stomach for fighting, as could be seen when he dropped the weapon immediately I spoke, and when it fell clattering to the floor below, Jim Freeman came into view from behind a pile of bags.

"Can you look after the miller, Jim?" I cried, and the lad replied as he came bounding up the stairs:

"Ay, let him go, an' I'll blow the whole top of his head off if he dares to look crosswise!"

I knew Jim's musket must be empty, since he had not had time to recharge it after firing that which served as an alarm; but I took the chances of the fact being discovered, and turned with the lantern held high above my head to view the scene.

Near at hand Darius was kneeling on the British officer's chest, industriously engaged in strapping the latter's arms to his body with the prisoner's waist-belt.

In the distance Jerry and Josiah knelt beside a form which was stretched out frightfully limp, as if life had departed; but I observed that they were securing the man's hands and feet with portions of his trousers.

Beyond them a short distance was a second Britisher, tied tightly with what appeared to be strips torn from his own clothing, and midway between them and Darius, was a third body, evidently that of the man who had attacked me; but he remained motionless, and, having heard the blow which struck him down, I could well understand why he did not give any very violent signs of life.

It did not appear that I was needed elsewhere, therefore I turned my attention to the miller, who was standing like a statue, not daring to lift a finger lest Jim should "blow off the top of his head."

"Come here," I said to him. "Come here while my friend trusses you up in proper fashion. What can you find there to tie him with, Jim?"

"Plenty," Jim cried gleefully as he picked up from the floor a couple of bags and began cutting them into strips. "Here's enough an' to spare, of what is better than rope."

The venture had come to a most successful end, providing there were no others in the vicinity whose love for the British would prompt them to interfere, and I was amazed, even amid the excitement of victory, that we had come off ahead when it seemed certain the enemy could overcome us easily.

Darius, having bound his captive, stood up facing me, and from the expression on his face one never would have supposed that he had just come unscratched out of as lively a tussle as I ever took part in. It was as if he had been stowing oysters in the hold of the Avenger, and was stretching his back before going at it again.

"You've done a big thing," I said, holding out my hand to congratulate him. "To you belongs all the credit of having taken these prisoners, and when we meet Commodore Barney I shall insist that he hears the whole story, for I doubt if every old sailor has head enough to put such a venture through in good shape."

It could readily be seen that the old man was pleased by the praise; but he made as if it was of no consequence.

"You lads have done your full share, an' if any credit is to be given it goes to the whole crowd."

"Not a bit of it!" Jerry cried, looking up from his task of binding the sailor with whom I had fought. "It's as Amos says; but for you this never would have been done, an' it won't be my fault if all the men of the fleet don't hear of it."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Darius said, as though he would change the subject. "If I'd had half the head you give me credit for, we'd run the pungy up here, instead of leavin' her a mile away."

"Josiah can go after her," I suggested, "and by the time we're ready to put our prisoners aboard she should be here."

This proposition suited the old man, and Jim's friend left the building at full speed, while I asked Darius to make certain the miller was trussed up in proper fashion.

"What'er you goin' to do with me?" Esseck Harland cried with a whine. "I ain't to be blamed for what's been done this night! How can I help it if a crowd of Britishers take possession of my mill?"

"Talk that over with Elias Macomber; he's aboard the pungy," Darius replied in a matter-of-fact tone as he proceeded to bind the man with strips of bags provided by Jim.

CHAPTER V. WITH THE FLEET

The British sailors did not make any talk on returning to consciousness and finding themselves bound hand and foot. The officer, however, after recovering from the bewilderment which appeared to have come over him because of having been taken prisoner in such an unceremonious fashion, protested against being tied like a criminal.

"Will you give your word to make no attempt at escape?" Darius asked; but this did not suit the Britisher, for most likely he was reckoning on a rescue by those of the people who favored the king, and there were not a few of such vermin on the Patuxent river.

"I refuse to give my parole, save to an officer of the American army or navy," he said stiffly, and Darius replied cheerily:

"Then you see that we've got no other course save to deal out the same dose for all, 'cause we're not countin' on losin' any of you."

"What are you goin' to do with me?" the miller asked, and I took it on myself to make reply:

"You'll get the same treatment as Elias Macomber, and however harsh it may be, you won't have it as tough as is deserved. These others are prisoners of war; but you two are traitors and spies, therefore must expect to fare according to your deserts."

"That's about the size of it, Amos," Darius said as he went from one to another of the prisoners to make certain they were secured properly, and in condition to travel. "I reckon, lad, that we might as well be gettin' the crowd down to the shore, for unless the wind has died away entirely Josiah Coburn should be here mighty soon."

"How would it do to take along a supply of meal?" Jerry asked. "If it so be that we don't come up with the fleet by noon to-morrow, we'd be short of provisions, with so many to feed."

"Right you are, lad. We'll take from Essek Harland's meal-chest as much as may be needed, an' surely he can't make any complaint when he gets his share."

While Jerry was rummaging around to discover the miller's store, we got the prisoners downstairs, finding it no slight task because two of the sailors, in a spirit of pure mischief, refused to walk, and we were forced to tote them like so many barrels of flour. By the time they were at the foot of the stairs, however, both were willing to provide their own means of transportation, for we did not handle them with any too much care.

Essek Harland whimpered and whined like the cur that he was, until we came to suspect he might be making a noise in order to give an alarm to somebody in the vicinity, when Darius reduced him to silence by threatening to put a gag in his mouth.

We had no more than got in fairly good marching shape when Josiah came up with the Avenger, the wind being strong enough to push her along about as fast as a man could walk.

Then well on to an hour was spent before the prisoners and the meal were stowed in the hold of the pungy, and I counted that it was near daybreak when we started up the river toward where Commodore Barney's fleet was supposed to be.

It struck me that we should meet with a warm reception from the commander, when we delivered up to him the Britishers and the traitors, for by capturing the spies we had delayed the coming of the enemy for a few hours at least.

And in thinking of this I came to ask myself how we were to present ourselves? Whether as lads who wanted to make a bargain to supply the fleet with fish, or as recruits? Ponder over it as I might, it was impossible to come to any satisfactory conclusion, and I decided that before committing myself in any way I would ask the advice of my father, whom I was likely to find on some of the vessels belonging to the flotilla.

It was Darius who broke in upon my perplexing thoughts by asking:

"Well, what do you think of it now, lad? We couldn't have done the job any browner if we'd had on board a full cargo of rifles an' ammunition."

"Ay, Darius, it has been well done because you were on hand; but I question if another might have worked the scheme as well."

"There are thousands who'd make less bungle of it," the old man replied, and I could see that he was well pleased because of being praised, even by a boy. "All that's needed is a little backbone; but if the other fellow happens to have more'n you've got, then things are apt to go wrong."

"Thanks to your arrangement of the affair, the enemy didn't have a chance to show his pluck; but we'd have been in a bad box if you hadn't made the Britishers believe, for a minute or two, that we were their friends."

Darius laughed heartily as he thought of the brief conversation with the sailors, and then said with a chuckle:

"If I'd only known the name of a vessel belongin' to their fleet, we'd been right on top of 'em before bein' found out; but as it was we got well alongside when the trouble began."

Then Jerry came aft to take part in the conversation, and we spent a good half-hour praising each other and chuckling over the good fortune that had been ours.

We might have continued at such pleasing occupation a very long while, but that day began to break, and there was too much work on hand to admit of further foolishness.

Darius gave up the tiller to me, and went below to look after the prisoners, returning five minutes later with the British officer, who, much to my surprise, was no longer fettered.

"This gentleman has decided that he can give his parole to us as well as to brother officers," Darius said by way of introduction. "He has pledged his word to make no attempt at escape, therefore we will give him the liberty of the ship."

"Which won't mean much for one who has been accustomed to the luxury found on board some of his majesty's vessels," I added, trying to show that I had some semblance of good breeding. "An oyster pungy isn't the most beautiful craft in the world."

"Very true," the officer replied with a friendly smile; "but there is a vast difference between the hold and the deck of an oysterman."

"Yes, I can fancy that to one unaccustomed to such things, the Avenger seems like a foul ship below."

"So your vessel is named the Avenger?" and the gentleman looked at me quizzically. "Isn't that rather high-sounding for a peaceful fisherman?"

The officer was so different from what I had fancied a Britisher might be, and had such a friendly air, that I made no hesitation in telling him how the pungy got her name, and after the explanation he ceased to laugh at it.

"I can well believe that some of your people have been abused," he said in a kindly tone; "but there are always two sides to a story, and the commander of one of the king's ships may believe that he is doing absolutely that which is right and just, when in your eyes he commits a most grievous wrong."

I had sense enough to understand that if I attempted to argue with the officer on the causes of the war I should speedily find myself in deep water, therefore I made reply:

"It is not for me to measure words with such as you, sir. I know that Jerry's brother, who had never stepped foot on other than American soil, was forced to serve in one of your ships, being carried forcibly and secretly away, to the great distress of all who cared for him."

"And in that case his majesty's officers did a most grievous wrong," he said frankly, and then as if to turn the subject of conversation, he asked, "When do you expect to come up with Barney's fleet, for I understand you are in search of it?"

"If the wind holds, we should be there by noon, providing Commodore Barney is yet at Nottingham."

With this the gentlemen turned away to take note of what was being done, for Darius had brought the three sailors on deck, they also having solemnly pledged themselves to refrain from attempt at escape.

Jerry was making preparations for cooking breakfast, which would be no small job with so many to be fed, and Jim Freeman was helping him. It was to be a good wholesome meal, better than we of the Avenger had enjoyed for many a day; because there was to be a plentiful supply of fried ham with corn-dodgers, which last Jerry could make better than any person I ever knew, except my mother.

The British sailors were taking things comfortably, being seated on the deck well forward, and apparently enjoying the sail up the river, even though they were going as prisoners rather than passengers who could come or depart at will.

Darius remained in the hold some time, and when he showed himself again as if his work was done, I asked what he had been about.

"I've been makin' them two sneaks fast to a stanchion, where they won't have any too good a time. I reckon we've got to treat 'em somewhere near decent, though it goes mightily agin the grain. How is breakfast comin' on? I could eat the toughest mule that ever walked!"

Fortunately for him Jerry announced at this moment that the meal was ready, and Darius would have it that I should eat in the cuddy with the officer; but I insisted he was the one who could best do the honors aboard the Avenger, when we had seamen as guests, and literally forced him to act the host.

Dody Wardwell and Josiah Coburn were detailed to feed the prisoners, including the curs in the hold, and Jerry, Jim and I ate on the deck aft, where I could at the same time keep the pungy in the channel.

Jim brought out some of the stores he had taken from home, and we lads had a veritable feast, with the cause of success to give flavor to food which could not be improved upon even though it had been served on a king's table.

It is needless for me to set down all that was said during the forenoon when we sailed very slowly up the river, chatting in friendly fashion with our prisoners – meaning such of them as were allowed to remain on deck – , or discussing our plans for the future among ourselves, and as we did this last we almost unconsciously reckoned Jim and his friends as belonging to the pungy. In fact, after what they had done toward helping out on the night's work, it was no more than right they should be allowed to consider themselves as a portion of the Avenger's crew, if so be their desire ran that way.

It was half an hour past twelve o'clock when we came in sight of the flotilla anchored off Nottingham, and seemingly blocking the river until it would have been difficult for anything larger than a canoe to pass through.

"Where shall we find the commodore among all that crowd of vessels?" I asked in perplexity, and Darius replied promptly:

"He's like to be aboard the Scorpion, unless havin' gone ashore. At all events, it's there we should look for him."

Fortunately for us, the schooner was anchored nearer down stream than the remainder of the craft, and there was no difficulty in running the Avenger alongside.

"You shall do the talking, Darius," I said as Jim Freeman passed a hawser, and his friends dropped the sails.

"I'll look after that part of it so far as tellin' Joshua Barney who you are; but after that you'll take the tiller, for the owners of a vessel are the ones to show themselves."

Just then a kindly-faced gentleman came from the schooner's cabin and looked about as if asking how we dared to make fast alongside. He was one whom I would have picked out for a good friend, rather than a desperate fighter, therefore my surprise was great when Darius whisked off his hat, made a great flourish as he bowed in sailorman fashion, and said:

"We're here to report for duty, an' it please you, Commodore Barney, though you wasn't more'n a captain when I sailed under ye. We've brought a few British prisoners, an' a couple of traitors."

"Why, bless my heart, its Darius Thorpe!" the commander cried as if well pleased at seeing the old sailor, whereupon Darius bowed again, grinning with delight until it seemed as if he would split his mouth from ear to ear.

"It's the same old shell-back, sir, only he's turned oysterman, bein' too stiff in the joints for much deep-sea work."

"When your joints grow stiff, Darius, I shall begin to look after mine; but up to the present time they're fit for a hornpipe almost any day. Is that your craft?"

"No, sir; she is owned by these two lads," and he pointed to Jerry and me.

"And you have taken prisoners on your own account?" the commodore asked, looking directly at me as he advanced nearer the rail, therefore I felt called upon to reply.

"It was really Darius who took the prisoners, sir," I made answer. "He planned the work, and did most of the execution; the rest of us simply obeyed his orders, with the result that we have this officer," and I pointed to the gentleman who was standing well forward as if to be out of ear-shot, "with three sailors, all on parole. In addition, there are, in the hold, two men living on the river, whom we found giving information to the enemy, and aiding them in their spying."

"Come aboard, and let me hear the particulars," the commodore said kindly, and yet the words were a command.

I beckoned to Jerry, and, observing it, the commander said:

"Come with the lads, Darius Thorpe, it may be that I have particular need of you."

We three clambered on to the schooner's deck, following the commodore into the cabin which was not fitted up very much better than our cuddy, save that it had a fair-sized table with chairs, and here we seated ourselves as comfortably as if about to have speech with our equals.

"Now tell me how it happens that you are on the Patuxent river taking prisoners here and there without due warrant from the government at Washington," the commodore said with a smile, and I began by explaining why we started in search of the fleet, not forgetting to make mention of the fact that we had hoped to find a sale for fish or oysters.

Then I gave a detailed account of all that had happened to us, winding up by saying:

"We count that you'll take the prisoners from us, sir, because we haven't overly much food for so large a number, and if it so be you can buy such as we can catch, it shall be at whatever price you set."

"Do you think, lad, that I would encourage you to spend your time fishing when you have already shown yourselves capable of bigger things? I can use Darius to good advantage, and I doubt not but that he may need you and your vessel. Are you minded to serve your country, lad?"

"Ay, sir, if it so be she needs me; but lads like Jerry and me may be of more service as fishermen than as soldiers."

"Regarding that I am not so certain, because of the proof you have brought; it strikes me that your pungy and her crew will well serve my turn. You may deliver the prisoners to an officer whom I will send aboard, and later in the day we will have another chat."

Then the commodore arose to his feet in token that the interview was at an end, and we lads went out, Joshua Barney saying to Darius as he went up the companion-way stairs:

"Since your joints are so stiff it may be a good plan for you to stay aboard the sloop during the remainder of the day, and then you'll be on hand when I'm ready to see you."

I was both surprised and pleased to know that the old man stood so well with the commander, I had looked upon Darius Thorpe as a broken-down sailor; but Commodore Barney appeared to have a far different idea on the subject.

Darius was actually puffed up with pride when he gained the deck of the Avenger. His face was as red as a beet, and his mouth open so wide that I could have tossed a quart of oysters into it without spilling one.

"Well, lads," he cried, turning on Jerry and me insistently, "you've seen the biggest man in this country, an' what do you think of him?"

Neither Jerry nor I could do less than praise the commodore, for he had treated us in a friendly fashion; but although we spoke our minds emphatically, declaring that he was a very pleasant gentleman, Darius was not satisfied.

"I tell you he's the greatest man in the country," he repeated, and I am not certain but that he would have insisted on our saying the same over and over again if an officer from the schooner had not come to receive the prisoners.

The officer and the sailors went over the rail on being told that they were to change quarters; but it was necessary that the traitors be brought from the hold, and I proposed that Darius and Jim Freeman attend to such duty, for I had no desire to set eyes on Elias Macomber again.

"Let's you and I deliver some of these packages and messages with which we are charged," I suggested to Jerry. "By so doing we shall meet many old friends, and I would, if possible, have speech with my father before seeing the commodore again."

"Why?" Jerry asked as if in surprise, when we went into the cuddy to get the articles which were to be delivered.

I was at a loss to make reply. It would not be pleasant to tell the lad that I wanted my father's advice before agreeing to serve under the commodore, since he might believe that to be a coward's trick, therefore I said after some hesitation:

"It is for him to say what I shall do; surely a fellow's father should decide anything of this kind."

"But your mother the same as told you to come."

"Ay, and I am here; now I will see my father, which is but natural. Do not spend so much time in idle words for I would be out of the pungy before those curs are brought from the hold."

We had our arms full of packages by this time, and it did not take us long to load them into the canoe, after which we paddled among the fleet having a bundle or message for some person aboard nearly every craft in the river.

It was not until our work was nearly done that I came upon my father and he received me as if expecting I would come.

"When did you arrive at Benedict?" he asked.

"Yesterday noon, sir."

"You couldn't well have got here earlier because of the wind. I allowed you would join us as soon as possible."

"Then you think, father, that I should serve under the commodore, taking the chances of losing the pungy after having paid so much money for her?"

"Don't you?" he asked sharply, and I could do no less than reply as he expected I would.

Thus it was settled beyond a peradventure that the Avenger and her crew should become a portion of Commodore Barney's flotilla, and I really felt better in mind after the question had been definitely decided.

We stopped long enough to give father a detailed account of our adventures, and by the way he slapped me on the back after the story was brought to an end, I knew that he felt right well pleased because I had begun serving my country in such a satisfactory manner.

When we returned to the Avenger after our round of visits, we found Jim Freeman and his friends keeping ship in great style. They were looking as proud as peacocks, and I failed to understand the meaning of it all, for ordinarily they were meek lads, until Jim whispered:

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