

Stables Gordon

O'er Many Lands, on Many Seas



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Gordon Stables O'er Many Lands, on Many Seas

Chapter One

“And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward; from a boy
I wantoned with thy breakers – they to me
Were a delight...
For I was, as it were, a child of thee.”

Byron.

Not a breath of wind from any direction. Not a cloud in the sky, not a ripple on the ocean's blue. Only when a bird alighted on the water, quivering rings of silver formed all around it, and widened and widened, but soon were lost to view. Or when a fish leaped up, or the dorsal fin of some monster shark appeared above the surface, the sea about it trembled for a time, trembled and sparkled as if a shower of diamonds had suddenly fallen there.

And a broad low swell came rolling in from the Indian

Ocean, as if the bosom of the sea were moving in its sleep. But landwards, had you looked, you might have seen it break in a long fringe of snowy foam on a beach of yellow sand; and, had you listened, the distant hum and boom of those breakers would have fallen on your ears in a kind of drowsy long-drawn monotone.

The brave ship *Niobe* (this word is pronounced as if spelt “Ni-o-bee”) slowly rose and slowly fell, and gently rocked and rolled on this heaving tide, and sometimes her great sails flapped with the vessel’s motion, but, alas! not with the rising wind.

No, not with the rising wind, but whenever they moved, the officer who paced up and down the white-scoured quarter-deck, would glance above as if in hope; then he would gaze seawards, and anon shorewards, wistfully, wishfully, uneasily.

Uneasy, indeed, was the feeling on the minds of all on board.

The vessel was far too near the shore, the wind had been dead for hours, but it had died away suddenly, and the glass had gone tumbling down. That it would come on to blow again, and that before long, everyone from the captain to the dark-skinned Kroo-boy was well aware. But from what direction would the wind come? If from the east, strong though the *Niobe* was, close to the wind though she could sail, well-officered and manned though she was, there was more than a probability she would be dashed to pieces on that sandy beach.

And small mercy could the survivors, if any, expect from the savage Somali Indians, and the still more cruel Arabs, who dwelt in the wretched little towns and villages on the coast. For the ship

was here in the Indian Ocean for the avowed purpose of putting down slavery and piracy, and by slavery and piracy those Arabs lived.

It was in the days before steam-power was generally adopted by our navy, when sailors were sailors in reality, and not merely in name.

The crew of the *Niobe* numbered about seventy, all told fore – and – aft. She carried ten good guns, and an unlimited supply of small arms, cutlasses, and boarding pikes. The timbers of this brave craft were of the toughest teak, ay, and her men were hearts of oak. They feared nothing, they hated nothing, save uncertainty and inaction. All that they longed for was to be accomplishing the object of their cruise.

Had you been on board the *Niobe* when the wind was blowing half a gale, and the ship ripping through the waves with, maybe, green seas hitting her awful thuds at times, and the foam dashing high over the main or fore-tops, you would have found the men as merry and jolly as boys at cricket. Had you been on board when the battle raged, and the cannon roared, and balls crashed through her sides or rigging, when splinters flew and men dropped bleeding to the deck, you would have found nought save courage and daring in every eye, and calmness in every hand.

But to-day, at the time our story opens, there was neither laughing, joking, nor singing to be heard. The men clustered quietly about bows or fo'c'sle, or leaned lazily over the bulwarks watching the vessel roll – for at one moment she would heel over

till the cool clear water could be touched with the hand, and the next she would raise her head or side until a yard at least of her copper sheathing shone in the sunlight like burnished gold.

There was no sound to break the stillness save the far-off boom of the breakers; so quiet was it that the sound of even a rope's-end thrown on deck grated harshly on the ear, and a whisper could be heard from one end of the ship to the other.

"Bill," said one sailor to another, biting off the end of a chunk of nigger-head tobacco, "I don't half like this state of affairs."

"And I don't like it either, Jack," was the reply, "but I suppose we must put up with it."

"Do ye think it would be any good to whistle for the wind, Bill?"

"Whistle for your grandmother," replied Bill, derisively.

"Bill," persisted Jack, "they do tell me – older men, I mean, tell me – that whistling for the wind is sure to bring it."

"Ay, lad, if you whistle long enough. Look here, Jack, don't be a superstitious donkey. I've seen five hands at one time whistling for the wind; but, Jack, they nearly whistled the whites o' their eyes out."

"And the wind didn't come?"

"Never a breath. Never a puff."

"Hand in sail!" This was an order from the quarter-deck.

"Ay, ay, sir." This was an answer from for'ard.

"Thank goodness," cried Jack and Bill both. "Better something than nothing."

There was plenty of bustle and stir and din now, for a time at least, and bawling of orders, and shrill shriek of boatswain's pipe. But when all was done that could be done, silence once more settled down on the ship – lethargy claimed her again as its own.

"I think, sir," said the boatswain, touching his cap to the officer on watch, "I think, and I likewise hope, the wind'll come off the land when it does come, sir. Anyhow, if it doesn't commence to blow for the next ten hours we'll get away into the open sea."

"You're an old sailor, Mr Roberts, and know this coast better than I do, so I like to hear you say what you do. Well, sure enough, the sun will be down in three hours, then we may get a bit of a land breeze. But the falling glass, Mr Roberts! I don't like the falling glass!"

"No more do I, sir, and I've seen a tornado in these same waters, and the glass not much lower than it is now."

Leaving these two talking on the quarter-deck, let us take a look down below.

Within a canvas screen, that formed a kind of a square tent on the main deck, a cot was swung in which there lay, apparently asleep, the fragile form of a young woman. A woman, a mother, and still to all appearance but little more than a girl.

Presently the screen was gently lifted, and a young soldier, dressed in the scarlet jacket of a sergeant of the line, glided in, dropped the screen again, then silently seating himself on a camp stool beside the cot, he began to smooth the delicate little snow-

white hand that lay on the coverlet. Then her eyelids lifted, and a pair of orbs of sad sweet blue looked tenderly at the soldier by her side.

She smiled.

“Oh, Sandie!” she said, “I’ve had such a dear delightful dream. I thought that our darling had grown up into such a beautiful child, and that you, and he, and I, were back once more, wandering among the bonnie hills, and over the gowany braes of bonnie Arrandale. I thought that father had forgiven us, Sandie, and kissed and blessed our boy, and was laughing to see him stringing gowans into garlands, and hanging them around the neck of our old and faithful Collie.”

“Cheer up, dear wife,” said the young sergeant, kissing her pale brow. “Oh! if you only knew how much good it does my heart to see you smiling once again. Yes, dear, and I too have good hopes, brave hopes, that all will yet be well with us. I was but a poor corporal when you fell in love with me, Mary; when, despite the wishes of your father, who would have wedded you to the surly old laird of Trona, and to lifelong misery, I made you my wife. Your father knew I had come of gentle blood – that Dunryan belongs by rights to me – but he saw before him only the humble soldier of fortune; and he cursed me and spurned me.

“But see, dear, look at these stripes on my arm, behold the medal. I carry already a sergeant’s sword; that sword I hope to wave and wield on many a field of battle, and with its aid alone, though friendless now, I mean to earn both fame and glory, ay,

and with it win my spurs. Then, Mary, the day will come when your father will be glad to own me as a son.

“But sleep now, dear; remember, the doctor says you are not to move. Sleep; nay, you must not even talk. See, I have brought my guitar; I will sit here and sing to you.”

He touched a few chords as he spoke, then sang low, sweet, loving songs to her, and ere long she was back once more in the land of dreams.

The sun sank lower and lower in the heavens, and at last leapt like a fiery ball down behind the waves. A short, very short twilight succeeded, a twilight of tints, tints of pink, and blue, and yellow. Sky and ocean seemed to meet and kiss good-night. Then shadows fell, and the stars shone out in the eastern sky, and twinkled down from above, and finally glittered even over the distant hills of the western horizon: then it got darker and darker.

But no breeze came off the shore, and this was in itself full ominous.

The captain was now on deck with his first lieutenant.

“We cannot be very many miles,” he said, “off the river.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the lieutenant, “I reckon I know what you are thinking about. If we cannot keep off from the shore in the event of its coming on to blow, you would try to cross the bar.”

“I would,” replied the captain. “It would indeed be a forlorn hope, but better that than certain destruction.”

“I fear, sir, it would be but a choice of deaths.”

“Better die fighting for life, though,” said the captain, “than

without a struggle.”

“Quite true,” said the other, “and once over the bar we could get round the point and shelter would be certain. But that terrible bar, sir!”

It was far on in the middle watch ere the storm that had been brewing came on at last. It came from the east, as the captain had feared it would. Clouds had first risen up and gradually obscured the stars. Among these clouds the lightning flashed and played incessantly, but for a long time no thunder was heard. This, at last, began to mutter, then roll louder and louder, nearer and nearer, then a bank of white was seen creeping along the sea's surface towards the ship, and almost immediately after the wind was upon her, she was on her beam ends with the sea dashing through her rigging, and the storm seeming to hold her down, but gradually she righted and sprang forward like an arrow from a bow, and apparently into the very teeth of the wind.

The ship had been battened down and made ready in every way hours before the gale began, and well was it for all on board that preparations had thus been made.

She was headed as near to the wind as she would sail, but for some time it seemed impossible for her to keep off the shore. Gradually, however, the wind veered more to the south, and she made a good offing. But the storm increased rather than diminished; still the good ship struggled onwards through darkness and danger.

The royal masts had been got down early on the previous

afternoon so as to reduce top-hamper to a minimum, but the pitching and rolling were frightful, yet she made but little water.

Towards morning, however, fire and wind and waves appeared to combine together for the destruction of the ship. The gale increased suddenly to all the fury of a hurricane, the roaring of the wind drowned even the rattle of the thunder, a ball of fire quivered for a moment over the fore-top-mast, then rent it into fragments, ran along a stay and splintered the bulwarks ere it reached the water, while at the same moment the whole ship was engulfed by a solid sea that swept over her bows, and carried away almost everything it reached, bulwarks, boats, and men.

Then, as if it had done its worst, the gale moderated, the sea became less furious, the thunder ceased to roll, the lightning to play, and in half an hour more the grey light of morning spread over the ocean, and on the eastern horizon a bank of lurid red showed where the sun was trying to struggle through the clouds.

With bulwarks ripped away and boats gone, the *Niobe* looked little better than a wreck, while, sad to relate, when the roll was called five men failed to answer. Five men swept away during the darkness and tempest, five brave hearts for ever stilled, five firesides at home in merrie England made to mourn for those whom their friends would sadly miss, but never, never see again!

But see: the gale begins once more with redoubled fury, and to the horror of that unhappy ship, the wind goes round to meet the sun.

"I fear, sir," said the lieutenant to the captain, "that nothing

can now save us. We must die like men.”

“That we will, I trust,” replied the captain, “but we will die doing our duty to the very last. Is there any one on board who knows this coast well?”

“The boatswain, sir, Mr Roberts.”

“Send for him.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Mr Roberts, what think you of the outlook?”

“A very poor one, captain. But I have been looking at the land, sir, and hazy though it is I find we are right off the bar of Lamoo.”

“Why, then, we must have been driven back many many miles; we were off Brava last night.”

“I reckon, sir, we made up our leeway at times like, when there was a bit of a shift of wind, and lost it again when it veered. But our only chance now is to head for that bar, sir.”

“You’ve been over it?”

“I have, sir, many is the time; and I’ll try to pilot the good *Niobe* over it now.”

“Very well, Mr Roberts, you shall try; if you succeed, you are a made man, if you fail – ”

“All,” said the boatswain, “I knows what failure’ll mean, sir.”

Half an hour afterwards, stripped of nearly every inch of canvas save what sufficed to steer her, with four men at the wheel, and the sturdy pilot guiding them with hand movements alone – for his voice could not be heard amid the raging of the storm and awful roar of the breaking billows that were

everywhere around them – the brave *Niobe* was rushing stem on through the mountain seas that rolled shorewards over the most dreaded bar on all the African coast.

It is impossible to describe the turmoil and strife of the waves when the vessel was once fairly on the bar; and to add to the terror of the scene more than once she struck the sandy bottom with a force that made every timber creak and groan. Next moment she would be swallowed up apparently in boiling, breaking, swirling water, but rising again on the crest of a wave, she would shake herself free and rush headlong on once more.

But look at her now: she is on the very top of a curling avalanche, and speeding shorewards with it, her jibboom and bowsprit, and even part of her bows, hang clear over that awful precipice of water, and if the ship moves faster than the breaker beneath her then her time is come.

It is a moment of awful suspense, but it is only a moment, for in shorter time than pen takes to describe it, the billow seems to sink and melt beneath her; again she bumps on the sand, but next minute amidst a chaos of snowy foam she is hurled into the deep water beyond.

An hour afterwards the *Niobe* is lying snugly at anchor in a little wooded bay, with all her sails furled, and nothing to tell of the dangers she has just come through, save the splintered mast, the ragged rigging, and sadly-torn bulwarks.

But the wind goes moaning through the mangrove forest, where birds and beasts are crouching low for shelter among the

gnarled boughs and roots, and although the water around the *Niobe* is calm enough, the storm roars through her upper rigging, and she rocks and rolls as if out at sea.

The youthful sergeant is sitting beside the cot within the screen, but his head is bowed down with grief, and a sorrow such as men feel but once in a life-time is rending his heart. The little white hand of his wife still lies on the coverlet, but it is cold now as well as white. The heart that loved him had ceased to beat —

“And closed for aye the sparkling glance
That dwelt on him sae fondly.”

All his bright visions of yesterday have fled away, all his hopes are crushed, his very soul seems dead within him.

At the very time the gale was raging its fiercest, and the sea threatening every minute to engulf the ship, the lady's life had passed away, and he who sits here pen in hand was left without a mother's care. Born on the stormy ocean, rocked in infancy on the cradle of the deep, no wonder he loves the sea, and can look back with pleasure even to the dangers he has encountered and gone through.

As the sea on which he was born, so stormy has been the life of him who tells this tale.

Chapter Two

“Majestic woods of every vigorous green,
Stage above stage, high waving o’er the hills;
Or to the far horizon wide diffused,
A boundless deep immensity of shade.”

Thomson’s “Seasons.”

“Hearts of oak!” our captain cried, “when each gun
From its adamant lips,
Spread a death-shade round the ships,
Like the hurricane eclipse of the sun.”

Campbell.

There are two events in the history of a man, of which he himself in writing his autobiography can hardly be expected to give any very clear account, namely, his birth and his death. To describe the former, he would require to be born with his eyes very wide open indeed, and instead of a silver spoon in his mouth, which they tell me some children are born with, a silver pencil-case behind his ear; to describe the latter, a man would need to be a prophet in reality. How is it then, it may be asked, that I, Niobe Radnor, am able with truthfulness and accuracy to give an account of the occurrences that were taking place around me

when I first made my appearance on “the stage of life.” For the ability to do so, I am indebted to the only father I ever knew, my true and trusty old friend Captain (formerly boatswain) Ben Roberts, who supplies me with the facts.

Yonder he is, sitting out on the rose lawn there, as I write, book in hand, his white beard glittering in the spring sunshine, and his jolly old round red face surmounted by an immensity of straw hat – just as if *his* complexion *could* be spoiled, just as if a complexion that has borne the brunt of a thousand storms, been scathed and scarred in battle, blistered by many a fierce and scorching summer sun, and reddened by the snows of many a hard and stormy winter, *could* be spoiled.

Ah! dear old Ben! he is getting old, wearing up towards the threescore years and ten —

” – That form
That short allotted span.
That binds the few and weary years
Of pilgrimage to man.”

Yes, Ben is getting old. As oaks get old, so is my faithful friend getting old. As oaks in age are hard and tough, and defiant of the gales that rage through the forest, uprooting mighty trees, so is Ben my friend; and for all the storms he has weathered, I trust I shall have him by me yet for years and years to come. Ben is so buoyant and fresh, it always instils new blood into my veins merely to talk to him. “Ben, my boy,” I often say, “you are, by

your own confession, some twenty years my senior, and yet I believe you feel as young and even younger than I do.”

“Well, Nie,” he replies, “I believe it’s the heart that does it, you know.

“For old as I am, and old as I seem,
My heart is full of youth.

“Eye hath not seen, tongue hath not told,
And ear hath not heard it sung,
How buoyant and bold, though it seem to grow old,
Is the heart for ever young.

“For ever young – though life’s old age
Hath every nerve unstrung;
The heart, the heart, is a heritage
That keeps the old man young.”

He always calls me “Nie” for short, “because,” he added once, by way of explanation, “your name is a heathenish kind of one at best, but a person is bound to make the most of it.”

I cannot deny that Ben is right; my name is a heathenish one. How did I come by it? I will tell you. I was born, as you know, at sea, in the Indian Ocean, in the *Niobe*, whilst she was cruising in that region in the search of slavers – born not long before the appearance of that terrible gale of wind described in the first chapter of this story, when the tempest was at its fiercest,

and the stormy waves were doing their worst; born on board a vessel which seemed doomed to certain destruction. And it is the custom of the service to call a child by the name of the ship in which he first sees the light of day.

I never knew a father's love or a mother's tender care, for the gentle lady who gave me birth lived but a little after that event; but she bequeathed me all she had – her blessing – and died. In a glade in the gloomy depths of an African forest my mother is sleeping, in the shade of a banian tree. I stood by that lonely grave one morning not many years ago. The ground, I remember, was all chequered with sunshine and with shade from the tree above; little star-like primulas grew here and there. Among these and the fallen leaves sea-green lizards were creeping; high overhead bright-winged birds sang soft lullabies, and every time the wind moved the boughs a whole shower of sparkling drops fell down, like tears.

And my father? He never seemed to rally after my mother's death until one hour before his own, just a fortnight and a day from that on which he had followed her to her grave in the forest like one dazed. He did not appear in his mess-place after this. He took no food, he spoke to no one, he spent his time mostly within the screen by the empty cot where my mother had been – in grief.

About the tenth day he suffered my friend Roberts (the boatswain) to lead him like a child to the spare cabin where his baby boy was sleeping; and in a daze he had seen her loved

remains laid to rest beneath the tree. He bent over the grave for a moment, and then for the first time he burst into tears.

The *Niobe* remained for ten days where she had cast anchor, in order to make good repairs.

It was a very quiet spot in which she lay, a kind of bay or bight, as the sailors called it, with mangrove trees growing all around it close down to the water's edge, except at the one side where the great river stole silently away seaward, its current seeming hardly to affect in any degree the waters in the bay itself.

At last all repairs were finished, and the "clang, clang, clang" of the carpenters' hammers, that had been till now incessant all day long, and far into the night, was hushed, sails were shaken half loose, and the *Niobe* only waited for a breeze to bear her down the river and across the great and dreaded bar, where, even in the calmest weather, the breakers rolled and tumbled mountains high.

But the breeze seemed in no hurry to come. During the day those dull dreamy woods and forests lay asleep in the sunshine, and stirred not leaf or twig, and the creatures that dwelt therein were as silent as the woods around them. Had you landed on that still shore, and wandered inland through the trees, you would have seen great lizards enjoying themselves in patches of sunlight, an occasional monkey enjoying a nap at a tree foot or squatting on a bough blinking at the birds that – open-beaked as if gasping for more air – sat among the branches too languid to hop or fly. But except a startled cry at your presence emitted

by some of these, hardly any other sound would have fallen on your ears.

The only creatures that seemed to be busy were the beetles on the ground and the bees, the latter long, dark, dangerous-looking hornets that flew in clouds about the lime and orange-trees, and behaved as if all the forest belonged to them, the former of all shapes and sizes, and of colours more brilliant than the rainbow. No doubt they knew exactly what they were about and had their ideas carefully arranged, but what their business was in particular would have puzzled any human being to tell – why they dug pits and rolled little pieces of stones down them, or why they pulled pieces of sticks along bigger than themselves, dropped them, apparently without reason, and went in search of others. There was, one would have thought, no method in the madness of these strange but lovely creatures: it looked as though they were doomed to keep moving, doomed to keep on working, and doing something, no matter what.

In the great river itself sometimes small herds of hippopotami would appear, especially in parts where the water was shallow. They came but to enjoy a sunshine bath and siesta.

But at night both forest and river seemed to awaken from their slumbers.

The river cows now came on shore to feed, and their grunting and bellowing, that often ended in a kind of shriek, mingled (Two pages missing here).

“Well, my friend, how much for your bananas, and that bottle

of honey, and those eggs, and fowls? Come, I'll buy the lot," said the boatswain.

"De Arab chief come in big ship, two three week ago. De ship he hide in de bush. He come to-night when de moon am shine. He come on board you big ship, plenty knife, plenty spear, plenty gun, killee you all for true. Den he take all de money and all de chow-chow. Plenty much bobbery he makee, plenty much blood he spillie, plenty much murder. Sweeba tell you for true."

While this conversation was going on the fruit, eggs, and fowls were being handed on board and money thrown into the boat, which was quickly concealed by the natives in their cummerbunds.

They found themselves richer than they had ever been before in their lives.

"But why do you come and tell us?" then inquired Roberts. (Roberts, by the way, was the only one the native would converse with. He had eagerly requested the captain and officers to keep away, for fear of exciting the suspicion of those who he averred were lurking in the forest.)

"What for I come and tellee you?" he replied. "English have been good to me many time 'fore now. Arab chief he bad man. He come to my house, he tie me to a tree by de neck. He think I dead. Den he takee my poor wife away, and all de poor piccaninnies. My poor ole mudder she berry bad. She not fit to trabbel away to de bush, so he cut her head off, and trow her in de blaze. He burn all my hut, all my house. I not lub dat Arab

chief berry berry much.”

“I shouldn’t think you did,” was the reply; “but now, my friend, if all goes well come back to-morrow, and we will reward you.”

About eight o’clock that same night, the full moon rose slowly up over the woods, bathing the trees in a soft blue haze, but changing the river, ’twixt the ship and the distant shore, into a broad pathway of light that shimmered and shone like molten gold. There was hardly a cloud in the heaven’s dark blue, and the stars shone with unusual brilliancy.

No one was visible on the *Niobe’s* decks, and never a light burned aloft, but, nevertheless, sentinels were watching the water on all sides, and down below the crew, fully armed, were waiting. The guns were all ready to run out, and there was no talking save in whispers, and when any one had occasion to cross the deck he did it so lightly that you could scarcely have heard his footfall.

Except the officers of the watch, all others were in the saloon or ward-room. They too were armed, but passing the time in quietly playing draughts and other games. Instead of being in his cabin, the captain was there along with his officers.

Presently the boatswain, whose duty it was to keep one of the night-watches, came quietly in to make a report.

“There are no signs yet, sir. The forest is quiet enough, except for the birds and beasts. It is very bright now. If they do come, we will have light enough to give ’em fits.”

“I hope they will, then,” replied the captain; “I sincerely trust that tall native wasn’t a-gammoning us.”

“I feel sure enough he wasn’t, sir.”

“Hark!” cried the captain.

It was the sentry’s hail. Next moment his rifle rang out on the night air. It seemed to be caught up by the echoes of the forest, and the sound multiplied indefinitely, but there was instant evidence that this was no echo.

A long line of fire swept across the forest shore, and bullets rattled through the rigging or on the vessel’s sides.

The attack was about to commence.

Guns were speedily run out in the direction from which the volley had come, and just by way of showing the enemy that the *Niobe* was prepared, two loaded with shrapnel were fired.

The yell of rage and pain that rang through the forest, told plainly enough that some of the savages had bitten the dust. The battle had begun.

But it was not to be a fight of rifle against big guns. The Arabs, unless at close quarters, are ever at disadvantage. The chief who led this particular band bore a fierce and implacable hatred to the English race, more especially to those who wore the blue uniform of the Royal Navy. Many a time had he been thwarted in his designs by the ubiquitous British cruiser, and, sword in hand, he had sworn by Allah – sworn on his “book” – to have revenge.

His time, it almost seemed, had come to-night. Though far south when the first news of the disaster to the *Niobe* had been brought to him by a swift-footed Somali spy, Zareppa had lost no time in setting sail in his largest dhow – he was the proud owner

of many – and making his way north.

It was no trouble for this daring piratical slaver to cross the bar even on a light wind. He had stolen up the river by night unseen, and soon after planned his attack.

Now at the very moment that a whole fleet of canoes filled with armed Somalis and Arabs left the forest shore, under cover of volley after volley from the bush, Zareppa, the pirate chief, was stealing round the corner of the bay with over a hundred of his best warriors, who were lying down so that they might not be seen, to attack the *Niobe* on the other quarter.

Swiftly came they while guns thundered forestward, and all hands lay on the port side to repel boarders. It looked as though the fate of the good ship were sealed.

Till this moment the soldier sergeant – my father – had lain apparently helpless and apathetic in a screen berth on the main deck. But the sound of warfare will stir the blood of even a dying soldier, as the blast of a bugle does that of the aged and worn-out war-horse. No sooner had the firing commenced than he started from his cot and speedily dressed himself, often tottering as he did so.

Captain Roberts tells me that even then my father could hardly have known what he was about: that all he could have been certain of was that a fight was going on, and it was his duty to be in it.

Grasping sword and pistol, he rushed on deck. Still staggering, and gazing wildly around him, almost the first thing he saw was

the approach of Zareppa's boats. He was all alive now, he rushed across the deck, and more by gesture than by voice made the commander aware of the terrible danger.

None too soon. Already the heads of the foremost boarders were appearing above the bulwarks. But our men were speedily divided into two parties, and in a minute more the battle was raging fiercely on both sides of the deck.

"Deen! Deen! Deen!" was the fierce and shrill Arab war-cry.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" was the bold and answering shout of our marines and bluejackets.

The tall form of Zareppa seemed everywhere. It towered high on the bulwarks. It was seen springing down on deck, and vaulting backwards, and wherever it came death followed in its wake.

Soon no sound even of pistol was heard. It was a hand-to-hand fight *on* deck, for the *Niobe* had been boarded: hand to hand, and breast to breast; cutlass and sword 'gainst Somali dagger and Arab spear. There were the shrieks of pain, the cries of exultation, and horrible oaths as well, I blush to say, mingling with the groans of the dying in this dreadful *mêlée*.

How peacefully the moon shone – how quiet and lovely and still the forest looked all around! How great the contrast 'twixt man and nature!

But, see! the fight is finished. The enemy are borne backwards into the sea. Our fellows hack them down as they fly, for they are wild with the excitement of the strife.

But high on the poop a young soldier is engaged in a deadly strife with the Arab chief himself. All his skill would hardly save Zareppa. For several minutes the duel seemed to rage. Then with a wild rash the Arab dashed forward on the soldier, his sword passed through his body and – my father fell dead.

“English dogs!” shouted Zareppa, standing for a moment on the bulwarks with bleeding sword upheld. “Dogs of English, Zareppa’s day will come! Beware!”

He would have vaulted into the sea, but up from behind the very place where he stood rose a dark naked figure. A dagger gleamed one instant in its hand, and next was plunged into the back of the chief, who gave a fearful shriek.

“Ha! ha! aha!” yelled this strange figure, “Zareppa’s day *hab* come. Plenty quick. Ha!”

The Arab chief fell face forward on the deck.

It was the negro Sweeba, who had brought the news of the intended attack.

From his own side of the river he had heard the firing and the wild shouts that told of the raging combat, and had speedily launched his rude canoe, intent on revenge for the murder of his poor wife and babes.

Chapter Three

“Hope, with her prizes and victories won,
Shines in the blue of my morning sun,
Conquering hope with golden ray,
Blessing my landscape far away.”

Tupper.

Not a single prisoner was taken.

Those who were not fatally wounded had sprung overboard.

The rest of the night passed in quietness, but when day broke, the sun shone on a sad and ghastly scene. There still lay about broken cutlasses, spears, torn pieces of cloth, and all the *débris* of fight, and blood, blood everywhere.

On one side of the deck, with upturned faces, lay in ghastly array the dead of the enemy, on the other our own poor fellows had been put, and carefully covered with flags.

All hands were summoned to prayers, to bury the dead and clear up decks.

When, after service, the commander and his officers – alas! among those who lay beneath the Union Jack were one or two officers – went round to view the bodies, to their astonishment, they found that Zareppa had gone.

He had only shammed death, then, in order to escape!

Incidents of the very saddest character are soon forgotten in the service. It is as well it should be so. But a battle is no sooner fought than the decks are carefully washed, the damages all made good, and even rents and holes in the ship's side, that might well redound to her honour, are not only carefully repaired but painted over. And whenever a vessel has had sails torn in a gale of wind, sailors are put to mend them on the following day.

For modesty always goes hand-in-hand with true valour.

In a fortnight after the fight in the river the brave *Niobe* was once more at sea, and looking all over as smart a craft as ever sailed.

Just as I wrote these lines my good friend, Captain Roberts, looked over my shoulder.

"Ay, lad," he said, "and she *was* a smart craft too. They don't make such ships now, and they couldn't find the men to man 'em if they did. I tell you, Nie, it was a sight that used to make Frenchmen stare to see the old *Niobe* taking down top-gallant masts."

"Well, my dear old sea-dad," I replied, "of course you are fond of the good old times. It is only natural you should be."

"But they *were* times. Why, nowadays they could no more do the things we did than they could pitch a ball o' spun yarn 'twixt here and Jericho. I'm right, lad, I tell you, and I should know."

"Oh!" I replied, "for the matter of that, I was living in those brave old days as well as yourself."

"Yes, so you were," cried the old captain, laughing. "You were

borne on the books o' the old *Niobe* as well as myself, and a queer little chap you were when first we met. Heigho! time flies: it's more'n forty years ago, Nie."

"Wait half a minute," I said, for I knew the old man was going to spin me a yarn that I was never tired of hearing – the story of my own early years. Why was it that I liked to hear him tell the tale over and over again, you may ask. For this reason – he never told it twice quite the same: always the same in the main incidents, doubtless, but with something new each time.

"Wait half a minute."

"Ay, ay, lad!"

I brought out the little table and set it down under his favourite tree on the lawn, and placed thereon his favourite pipe and his pouch.

The old sailor smiled, and drew his great straw chair up and sat down, and I threw myself on the grass and prepared to listen.

The captain had his two elbows on the table; he was teasing the tobacco, and when he began to speak he was evidently following out some train of thought, and addressing the tobacco, not me.

"As saucy a wee rascal he turned out as ever put a foot on board a ship," said Captain Roberts.

"Whom are you talking about, old friend?" I asked.

"I'm talking about baby Nie," replied the captain, still addressing the tobacco. "I wonder, now, what would have become of him, though, if it hadn't been for old Bo'swain Roberts. Why, he would have died. Died? Ay, but I wouldn't see

poor Sergeant Radnor's baby thrown to the sharks, not for all the world. Fed him first on hen's milk (the name given by sailors to egg beaten up in water). Didn't do well on that. 'Cap'n,' says I to the skipper one day, 'soon's we go to Zanzibar we must get a nanny-goat for the young papoose, else he'll lose the number of his mess, and the doctor will have to mark him D.D.' (discharged dead.) 'Very well, Roberts,' says the skipper, 'that's just as you like.'

"Now our purser was a mean old fellow. 'Nanny-goat!' he cries, when I went to ask him for the money. 'What next, I wonder? the service is going to the deuce. No, Her Majesty pays for no nanny-goats, I do assure ye.'

"I just touches my hat and marches off to our dear old doctor. I knew he had a kindly heart. 'Nanny-goat,' cries he, 'why, of course the darling baby'll have a nanny-goat. We'll keep it out of the sick-mess fund, and mark it down medical comforts.'¹ 'Excuse me, sir,' said I, catching hold of the doctor's hand – it was as rough as my own – 'but you're a brick.'

"And that, 'Nie,' is how you came for the first five years o' your life to be called nothing else but young 'medical comforts.'"

"Five years!" I said, "that is a long spell for a ship to be on one station."

"Ay, lad, you're right. But ships were ships in those days.

"Young 'medical comforts'," he continued, "as they called

¹ Medical comforts are luxuries for the sick, bought at the surgeon's discretion out of the sick-mess fund.

you, in less than four years was a deal smarter than any monkey on board. Not that he could climb quite so high, maybe, but he was more tricky, and that is saying a lot. And it was among the monkeys that ‘medical comforts’ would mostly be, too.

“But the monkeys all seemed to like you, Nie; they would tease each other, and fight each other, but they never touched you. There was one animal in particular, and he was your favourite, the queerest old chap you ever saw. We got him down in Madagascar, and they called him the Ay-ay. Doctor always said he was a being from another world, a kind of a spirit, and the men used to be afraid of him. He had hands like a human being, but the middle finger was much longer than the others, and not thicker than a straw. When only a baby, he used to dip this long skinny finger in milk and give you to suck, and when you went to sleep he never left your side. Sometimes he would stroke your face and say, ‘Ay-ay’ as tenderly as if he’d been a mother to you. But the men always declared it was ‘Nie, Nie,’ he’d be saying.

“But you had one pet on board that maybe you mind on – the Albatross?”

“I do,” said I, “young as I must have been at the time.”

“People say,” the captain went on, “they’ve never been tamed; but there he was, sure enough, in an immense great hencoop, that the doctor had made for him, and there you’d be in front of him often enough, though he would have cut the nose of anyone but yourself; and never a flying-fish was caught you didn’t get hold of, and take to him. The men got small share of these. But, bless

you, Nie, you were the ship's chief pet, and the men would have gone through fire and water for you any hour of the day or night.

"The jealousies there used to be about you, too, Nie! Why, lad, if it had been a young lady it couldn't have been worse. Jealousies, Nie, ay, and more than jealousies, for our fellows didn't need much to make them strip to the waist and fight. Fact is, when times were dull with us, I think they rather liked the excuse. I've heard a row got up for'ard just in the following fashion:

"You would be playing on Davis's knee.

"Give us half an hour o' the wee chap,' Bill would say.

"Go along,' Davis would reply, 'you 'ad him all day yesterday.'

"He's smilin' to me,' Bill would say.

"Smilin' *at* you, you mean,' Davis would answer derisively.

"Smilin' at your ugly face. Why, that mouth o' yours couldn't be made any bigger 'athout shifting your ears back.'

"This would be enough.

"Come below,' Bill would cry, 'and I'll see if a big ugly lubber like you is to cheek me!'

"Go with him, Davis!' half a dozen would cry. '*I'll* hold the youngster!'

"And there would be such a scramble to get you, that I used to wonder you weren't torn to pieces. And all the while that animal with the long skinny middle finger would be jumping around like a demon and crying —

"Ay-ay! — Ay-ay! — Ay-ay!'

"As he never cried like this without all the monkeys following

suit, and all the parrots whistling and shrieking – on occasions like these, Nie, there was five minutes of a rough ship, I can tell you.”

Chapter Four

“Still onward, fair the breeze nor rough the surge,
The blue waves sport around the stern they urge;
Far on the horizon’s verge appears a speck,
A spot – a mast – a sail – an armed deck.”

Byron.

“Well, Ben,” I said, “life must have been very pleasant to me then.”

“And isn’t it now, Nie? isn’t it now, lad? Look at the beautiful old place that you have around you – all your own; you ought to be thankful. Listen to the birds on this delightful morning, their songs mingling with the cry o’ the wind through the poplars. And, lad, you cannot draw a breath out on the lawn here, without inhaling the odour of honey, and the perfume of flowers.”

“You are quite poetic, Ben Roberts,” I replied.

“Quite enough to make the barnacliest old tar that ever lived feel poetic, Nie,” quoth Ben.

“Well, fill your pipe again, Ben.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed the old man, “fill my pipe again, eh? That means heave round with another yarn, eh?”

“Something very like it,” I said.

“Well,” said the captain, “an old man is to be forgiven if he

does get a little bit gossiping now and then, and wanders from his subject, and I always was fond of a bit o' pretty scenery, Nie – pretty bits like the old mill by the riverside down yonder.”

“And a bit of fishing and shooting, Ben?”

“Ay, lad. But memory is at this moment taking me back to one of the loveliest bits o' woodland landscape in the world. What a poem our Robbie Burns could have written there! You were still the *Niobe's* pet, but old enough now to be left at times without your sea-dad. Away miles and miles into the wooded interior of Africa, we were a good long distance south the Line, and just sitting down, me and my mates, to a snack o' lunch on the banks of a roaring tumbling brook, where we'd been bathing. We'd had a smartish week's shooting, and were thinking of returning to the ship the very next day.

“Our guns were lying carelessly enough at some little distance, when suddenly a branch snapped, and before any of us could have stood up to defend ourselves, had it been an unfriendly Arab, or a savage Somali, a dark skin pushed the branches aside and stood before us.

“It was our faithful Sweeba, the negro who had brought us the news of Zareppa's intended attack on the night your poor father was killed, Nie.

“Sweeba, what on earth brings you here?” says I.

“Commander's orders,” said Sweeba, saluting.

“Now Sweeba was always dressed when on board like a British sailor, but here he was almost as naked as the stem of a palm-

tree.

“What have you done with your clothes, Sweeba?” I asked.

“I expect he has pawned them,” said little Brown, our purser’s clerk.

“I not can run muchee wid English clothes,” Sweeba said modestly.

“And so you hid them in the bush, eh?”

“Ah! Massa Roberts,” replied the negro, smiling; ‘you berry much clebber.’

“Well, and what are the commander’s orders?”

“You come back plenty much quick.”

“Ship on fire?”

“No, sah.”

“Anything happened to Nie?”

“No, sah. Nie and de monkey all right, sah.”

“Well, explain.”

“Only dis, sah, we goin’ to fight Arab dhow.”

“We were all up quick enough at this intelligence. We didn’t stop to finish our luncheon.

“Lead the way, Sweeba,” I cried.

“And off went Sweeba through the forest, we following in Indian file. We didn’t take more of the game with us than we could easily carry, so the jackals had a good feed that night.

“It was a long and a rough road to travel. You know the style of thing, Nie; the dark dismal woods, the broad swamps, the hills and the wide stony uplands, where never a thing lives or thrives,

bar the lizards and a few snakes, and then last of all the mangrove forests. Our anxiety to get back made us hurry all the more. We made forced marches, and burned but two camp fires ere we reached the coast.

“The ship we had left lying at anchor in a little wooded creek. We returned to find it gone.

“‘Massa, massa; we too late,’ cried Sweeba. ‘Now de Arab men come quick and kill us all for true.’

“‘Where is the nearest village, Sweeba?’

“‘Long way, sah; long way, and no good. Dey kill Englishman. No gib mooch time to tink.’

“‘Well, we’re in a fix, I think,’ I said.

“‘Not a bit of it,’ cried a cheery voice close behind us; and looking round there stood little Midshipman Leigh, of the starboard watch. The young rascal had heard us coming, and hidden his boat among the trees, making his men lie close, as he expressed it, to see how we’d look.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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