

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

**In the grip of the Mullah: A tale  
of adventure in Somaliland**



Frederick Brereton

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# **In the grip of the Mullah: A tale of adventure in Somaliland**

## **CHAPTER I THE CASTAWAY**

"Perim!" shouted Colonel Hubbard, placing his hand to his mouth, and his lips close to the ear of his friend Major Bellamy. "The island of Perim, or I am much mistaken. It lies in the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and has proved the destruction of more than one fine vessel. I can tell you that, on this dark night and with this fierce gale blowing, we are lucky to have caught even a glimpse of the light, and still more fortunate to have slipped by in safety. Now we leave the Red Sea, and run into the Gulf of Aden, where we shall feel the full force of the wind and waves. However, what does that matter? Better plenty of water all round, even though it is lashed into frenzy, than a lee shore close at hand, a dark night, and no bearings to steer by. Halloo, there's the flash of the light again!"

Clinging with one hand to the rail which ran round the saloon, the speaker pointed eagerly into the darkness. Aided by the faint gleam of the electric lamp which was suspended from the spar deck above their heads, his comrade, Major Bellamy, followed the direction of his finger, and having watched for a few seconds, suddenly exclaimed:

"Yes, colonel, you're right! I could have sworn that there was nothing but inky blackness over in that direction. But there's no doubt about the matter. The light is flashing in that quarter, I'll stake my word upon it. Won't our skipper be joyful! I heard him saying, an hour or more ago, that our safety depended upon his sighting the island; and there it is, sure enough. Well it's a great relief, and now I can turn in with some degree of assurance. I'm not nervous, you know, colonel, but, by Jove, a storm like this, and a pitch dark night such as we are experiencing, make one a little anxious in spite of one's self. Now, if it were on land, and we were in an enemy's country, I should feel far more at my ease. I'd double the pickets, of course, so as to give the boys a little more courage, don't you know; for even a soldier feels queer when posted a couple of hundred yards away from his fellows, especially if he knows that a score or more of niggers are probably crawling round like ghosts, ready to fall upon him at any moment. Yes, I've had experience of that, and I well remember how fidgety I was, for we were fighting on the West Coast, and knew well that the natives of Ashantee were as cruel and as cunning as they make 'em. So I'd double the pickets, colonel, and I'd make a point of going round to inspect them, and at the same time to encourage them, every quarter of an hour. Depend upon it, nothing like letting Thomas Atkins know that his officer is at hand, taking an interest in him, and ready to help him at any moment."

"Just so," responded the colonel, clinging the while with all his strength to the rail, for the steamer was rolling and plunging heavily. "Quite right, Bellamy; I'd do the same. But what can our poor skipper do? He can't send out sentries, and if he could they would be useless on a night like this. He must just trust to his eyes, and to his skill as a navigator. But, thank Heaven, we are out of the Red Sea and well on our way for India. Heigho! I'm sleepy, and, like you, want to turn in. Good-night! Let's hope the sea will have gone down by morning."

With a nod, they separated, and, still taking advantage of the rail, went along the slippery and deserted deck to their quarters. This was no easy matter, for every now and again their progress was impeded by the plunging of the vessel, which caused them to halt and cling frantically to their support till they saw a favourable opportunity to proceed.

"Good-night!" shouted the major, who reached the companion first, turning to wave his arm to his friend; but his words were caught by the wind and whisked into space. Then he dived below. The colonel never saw him again.

Colonel Hubbard and his friend Major Bellamy were on their way to India to rejoin their regiments, both having for the past two years been engaged in special work in South Africa. At another time the ship would have been full to overflowing with troops, going to the East to replace those who had completed their term of service there, but, owing to the fact that all Indian reliefs had practically been suspended during the South African war, there were only a few other officers on board.

The steamer had sailed from Liverpool ten days before, and had made a fine passage to the Suez Canal. But now a change had come over the weather, the glass had fallen with surprising swiftness, and a fierce gale had sprung up. Navigating his vessel with all possible care, the captain had at length the satisfaction of piloting her past the island of Perim, and had breathed more freely as he steered a course into the Gulf of Aden, *en route* for the Indian Ocean.

"We're safer here, at any rate," he remarked in tones of satisfaction to the first mate, as the two stood poring over a chart in the deck-house on the bridge. "We've our bearings, and can go straight ahead till dawn. But we shall have to be careful to take into account the set of the gale. I reckon that we are making a knot or more to leeward for every five we advance. So keep her helm well up, Farmer, and send to wake me if you have any doubts. If I were at all anxious, I'd keep at my post till morning; but now that we're in the open sea, there can be nothing to fear. A bright look-out, then, and good-night."

The captain gave vent to a loud yawn, and wearily left the chart-house; for he had resolutely kept at his station on the bridge ever since the ship entered the canal, and was now completely worn out. Groping his way, he descended to the spar deck, and disappeared into his cabin. Ten minutes later the gleam of light from his porthole was suddenly cut off, and the deck outside was plunged into darkness.

For three hours the fine ship plunged forward, ploughing deep into the waves and rolling heavily every minute. But no one suspected danger. Why should they indeed? What harm could come to such a powerful vessel in this open sea? Evidently the mate, as he kept watch upon the bridge, had no qualms, for he even hummed the refrain of a popular London air as he clung to the chart-house table, and pricked off the course run during the night. Danger! Why, not a soul expected such a thing, for if they had, would the passengers have been lying below in their bunks, vainly endeavouring to snatch a few moments' sleep? Certainly not. They would have been cowering in the open, a prey to terror, expecting every moment to bring some dire catastrophe.

"We're in the gulf, and safe," murmured the colonel, thrusting a pillow between his shoulders and the edge of his bunk, so that he might retain his position more easily. "We've a capable skipper and crew, and, so far as I can see, we have nothing to fear. So here's for a snooze till morning."

With that he turned on his side, and, covering his head with the clothes, settled himself for slumber.

Crash! The shock threw every sleeper from his bunk, and even brought the steersman to the deck. Crash! Suddenly arrested in her onward progress, the ship drew back for a moment, and then hurled herself with awful force against the obstruction. For the space of a few seconds she remained firmly fixed, and then, to the accompaniment of rending iron and timber, and the crash of the waves as they beat against her side, she slid into deep water once more, and wallowed there, as if undecided how to act. But there was no pausing with that sea raging all about her, and with such a gale forcing her onward. Heaving her stern high into the air, she rushed upon the unknown reef for the third time, seeming to leap at it eagerly in the vain hope of surmounting it. A moment later her keel fell upon the rock with a sickening bump, and breaking asunder in the bows, she disappeared in the raging sea.

It was a frightful calamity, and Colonel Hubbard, as he clung to a portion of the wreck, could scarcely believe that he was awake – could hardly realize that this was not some terrible dream, a nightmare for which the storm and its attendant discomforts was to blame.

"Wrecked?" he wondered, shaking his head to clear his eyes of water, and shifting his grasp so as to obtain a more secure position. "Am I awake, or is this only imagination? No; I am wet and shivering. It is all too real."

At this moment a monstrous wave bore down upon him, and clinging desperately to the tangled seaweed with which the rock was thickly covered, he braced himself to withstand the strain to which he was about to be subjected. Taking a long breath, he had just time to close his eyes when the mass of water was upon him. Claspng him in its cold embrace, it tore him from his hold as if he were weaker than a child, and then, bearing him onward, it hurled him against a piece of floating wreckage, and left him there, breathless, gasping for air, and almost unconscious. But the instinct of self-preservation soon asserted itself, and ere a minute had passed he was astride the floating woodwork, clinging to it with all his strength.

"If this is torn from me," he gasped, "I shall be washed away and drowned. But it shan't be, I'll see to that, for I don't mean to die yet. Things look black enough, but I won't give in."

Clenching his teeth, the gallant colonel clung to the wreckage gamely, and, though frequently submerged beneath the huge masses of green water which rolled and tossed about him, contrived to maintain his hold. Breathless, and shivering – for it was the winter season, and a piercingly cold wind blew through the gulf – he rode his strange steed through the remainder of the night, and just as the dawn was breaking, and the dark clouds in the east were beginning to light up with the rays of the rising sun, he espied a low bank of sand lying directly before him. Shading his eyes with his hands, he looked long and eagerly, and then gave vent to a shout of joy. Yes, though he had lost the best friend he ever had during the night, and had to mourn the death of every one of the crew and passengers of the ill-fated liner, yet so strong is the love of life to the average healthy individual, that Colonel Hubbard's spirits were raised to the highest by this piece of good fortune.

"Land, land!" he shouted excitedly, sitting up upon the baulk of timber to obtain a better view. "I reckon it is two hundred yards away, and getting closer every minute. I'm a bit done, or I'd make nothing of the swim. But I mustn't forget that the gulf has a reputation for its sharks; they are said to swarm everywhere, and to be only too ready to snap up everything that comes within their reach. Ugh, I won't give 'em a chance!"

Shivering at the thought, the colonel turned once more to the land, and watched it closely as the light of the dawning day disclosed its various features.

"A long rolling sandbank," he said thoughtfully, "with blue hills in the distance, and scarcely a patch of vegetation to be seen. Now, what shore can it be? The gale has been from the northeast, and therefore it must be the northern coast of Africa, and, I fear, a desolate, uninhabited region altogether. But I mustn't begin to grumble when Providence has watched over me so carefully. I must just make the best of matters, and be thankful that my life is saved."

Cheering himself with these thoughts, and with the reflection that, once ashore, the greater part of his troubles would be ended, the colonel began to paddle with his hands and kick out with his feet. By now, too, he had the satisfaction of finding that he was in smooth water, though a line of hissing surf in front of him, and the dull boom of breakers falling upon the sand told him clearly that he had still some danger to contend with. But what was it, after all, when compared with the storm he had outlived that night? He asked himself the question, and for answer prepared to leave the piece of wreckage which had proved his salvation, and strike out for the shore.

"I should be a fool to stick to it longer," he said. "Once in those breakers it would be twisted and turned in every direction, and if it did not stun me by a blow upon the head, it might very well roll over me and crush the life out of my body. So here goes!"

Slipping gently into the water, he struck out for the shore, firmly determined to do battle with the breakers. Almost before he thought it possible he reached the broad white line, and was engulfed in a moment. And now, indeed, his powers of endurance were put to the test, for whereas a green wave had frequently covered him for the space of a minute whilst in the open sea, now the seething water bubbled and frothed about his mouth and ears continually. Then, too, caught by the fierce wind which was blowing, a sheet of spray covered the tops of the breakers, making breathing almost an impossibility. But the colonel was no chicken, and now that he had come through so much danger, was determined to reach the shore alive. Undaunted, therefore, and with never a pause, he struggled manfully onward.

At length, worn out with his exertions, he reached shallow water, and though the receding waves did their utmost to drag him backwards, he contrived to escape their fatal embrace, and to reach a belt of dry and glistening sand upon which he threw himself at full length, for he was utterly exhausted. A quarter of an hour later he sprang to his feet, and, turning from the sea, set out for the interior.

"I shall starve if I stay here," he said, "for there's not a living soul in sight, and not a tree or green bush to be seen. I'm done, and I want food and drink badly. Perhaps I shall find both over that line of sandhills, and in any case by climbing to the top I shall have a better opportunity of looking about me to see how the land lies. Perhaps I shall see a village in the distance, or a shepherd's hut, and if so I'll go straight on and give myself into the hands of the inhabitants. It'll be risky, I know, but I must just chance it."

Trudging onward through the sand, which often rose above his ankles, he at length reached the summit of a low range of dunes which the wind, during centuries of ceaseless energy, had blown into position.

"Ah!" No wonder the colonel gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment, for when he reached the top he saw immediately before him a native camp. It was composed of numerous shelters of coarse linen or tattered camel-hide, which were dotted about the sand in regular order. Farther off were herds of sheep and goats and of camels, browsing upon the grass which here cropped out in every direction. There were also many horses, and natives were standing about, watching the animals as they fed. But what attracted his attention most and filled him with a feeling of dismay, was the sight of some thirty or forty armed men who sat on horseback in the midst of the camp. They were wild-looking natives, swarthy of feature, tall, and not ungainly, and clad from head to foot in flowing robes of white. Some were armed with guns, while a few carried long spears and shields, which they waved frantically above their heads. Then, at a shout from one of them who had suddenly caught sight of the colonel, they set their horses in motion, and came galloping at a headlong pace towards him. In a few moments he was surrounded, and very soon he was bound hand and foot, a prisoner of these fierce warriors of Somaliland.

Two hours later the camp was struck, and the natives began to march into the interior, driving their herds before them. The colonel's legs were freed, and he was ordered by signs to rise and follow his captors. To attempt to disobey was useless, and therefore, with downcast head and spirits at the lowest, he trudged onward beside the horsemen, a native with particularly brutal countenance riding close behind him. The colonel noted at a glance the long double-handed sword with which this ruffian was armed, and straightway he banished from his mind all thoughts of resistance or escape. For a week the caravan pushed onward, accomplishing, however, only short marches each day, for the pace was, of course, regulated by that of the herds which accompanied them. On the seventh day they reached their home, which consisted of a collection of mud hovels, and thereafter settled down to enjoy the loot which they had taken from the tribes inhabiting the coast. Colonel Hubbard was handed over to the wife of the Sheik, as the headman of the tribe was known, and at once became hewer of wood and drawer of water, a hateful and laborious employment for a man who had fought so well for his country, and who had commanded one of His Majesty's smart regiments.

Of the passengers and crew of the ill-fated ship which had come to grief in the Gulf of Aden not another soul escaped. The colonel, who was thus carried off into captivity, was the only survivor.

"Come in, my lad," said the head master of a large school situated in the Midlands, turning in his chair, as a knock sounded on his door. "Ah, come in and sit down there, Hubbard. I'm grieved, my boy, terribly grieved at this sad news. If only we knew for certain what had happened, it would make this trouble easier to bear; but the doubt, the hope that one dare not indulge in, is most trying. But you've come to see me. Have you any more news?"

As he spoke he sprang to his feet and crossed the floor to meet the youth, who was no other than the son of the officer whose fortune we have been following. Like his father, the lad was tall, and by no means devoid of good looks. His features, indeed, had a close resemblance to the colonel's. There was the same square chin, the same open, steady look, and a similar air of resolution.

"News, sir," responded James Hubbard, eagerly, declining the proffered chair in his excitement, "yes, I have; look at that!"

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he produced a yellow envelope, and offered it to his master with trembling fingers.

"Good news, sir," he cried; "here is a telegram from my uncle which gives me more hope. After all, father may not have gone down with the ship. He may have been washed ashore. He may have had the good fortune to secure a life-belt, which would have kept him afloat. Why should this news not refer to him?"

Snatching the telegram from him with equal eagerness, the head master dragged the paper from the envelope and scanned the contents.

"More news to hand," ran the telegram. "A native arrived last week at Aden, having come from the Somali coast, and reports that, on the morning following the night upon which the station at Perim sighted a steamer passing east, a white man was cast upon the coast fifty miles east of Berbera. He was at once pounced upon by a marauding band of Somali warriors, despatched to the coast by the Mullah for the purpose of obtaining loot and prisoners. This is the only news, except that pieces of wreckage have been washed up close to Aden, while a homeward-bound steamer picked up a portion of a stern rail bearing the name of the ill-fated vessel."

"Hum, it is certainly news," said the head master, doubtfully. "This telegram proves beyond doubt that the ship upon which your father sailed met with a catastrophe. But, my dear lad, anxious as I am to give you hope, I feel bound to tell you that you must not jump to conclusions. This man who was cast upon the coast, and who fell into the hands of that fanatic known as the Mullah, may have been a stoker, a greaser, or an able seaman aboard the ship. I do not wish to discourage you, of course. God knows, if it were only possible, and certain news had been received that it was your father and no one else who reached the shore, I would rejoice with you, and do my utmost to aid you in obtaining further information. But it is hopeless. Whoever it was who lived through that night and safely reached the African shore, would have been far happier, far more fortunate, had he perished like the rest."

The head master paused for a few moments, and stood looking at the young fellow before him. There was no doubt that he was full of sympathy for his loss, and anxious to help him. But what could he do? To advise the lad to hope on would have been cruel in the circumstances. Better, far better, to put the facts plainly before him, even though in doing so he should cause him bitter grief. Yes, that was the best course to pursue, for to hold out the hope that his father still lived, simply upon the strength of this news just received, would have been madness – indeed, the greatest unkindness possible. Why, the man who fell into the hands of the Mullah was more surely dead than all those others who had sunk to the depths of the ocean.

"Don't think, my lad, that I am lacking in sympathy," he went on, taking a pace forward, and placing his hand encouragingly on Jim's shoulder. "I wish to help you to bear this trouble, and I feel that, when I tell you to extinguish all hope, I am giving you the best and the most considerate advice.

There, tell me that you will take it in this way. Try to absorb yourself in work, and so forget your loss. Do not let this hideous uncertainty prey upon your mind, but banish it, for that is far the best course to pursue."

He pressed his hand more firmly upon Jim's shoulder, and looked earnestly into his face, as if to help him in coming to a decision. But the young fellow scarcely seemed to be aware of his presence. His eyes were fixed upon some distant object visible through the window, and his thoughts were evidently still farther away. His head was bowed upon his breast, and he looked for the moment as though this trouble, which had come upon him at such an early age, was crushing him. But suddenly his eye brightened, and a more cheerful expression overspread his face. He straightened himself, and, raising his head, looked steadily at his master.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I know how kind you are, and that in speaking to me in this way, and in giving me the benefit of your experience and of your advice, you have acted with the sole purpose of assisting me. But I cannot believe that my father is dead; I cannot, indeed. Something tells me that he has survived the wreck, and that this white man referred to in the telegram is none other than he. Until I prove this or the contrary, I can never rest, and never settle to my work. I am thankful now that my mother is not alive to feel this grief. I am an only child, and my father is my best and kindest friend. I cannot, and will not, forsake him. I don't know now how I shall act, but I feel that if the necessity arises, as, indeed, it must, I will willingly make my way into the heart of Somaliland, into the midst of the Mullah's bands, and there clear up this doubt. If I find that it was not he who was washed ashore and captured by the natives, then I shall be far easier in my mind, and besides, sir, I might have the good fortune at the same time to bring help to this poor captive. If he were only a stoker, it would be sufficient reward to have rescued him from such an horrible fate."

"But your examination, my lad. Will you permit yourself to miss it altogether?" exclaimed the head master. "Think what it means to you. You have now been reading hard for a year, and in two months, if only you are successful, as I fully believe you will be, you will have won a commission in the Army, and will be on the high-road to success, to follow in the footsteps of your worthy father."

"I will give it up, sir," replied Jim, emphatically. "Everything must be put aside for the sake of my father. I would rather lose this commission, and spend the remainder of my days upon an office-stool, than leave this doubt unsettled. It haunts me, and though I know how hopeless the matter is, I will go through with it till I am sure of my father's fate. But, in spite of everything, I feel that he still lives, and, perhaps, is even now wondering whether his son will take up his cause and set out for the purpose of rescuing him. There, sir, forgive me for saying that my mind is firmly made up, and that I must act contrary to your advice. In any other matter I would, as you know, have instantly fallen in with your wishes. But here it is different, for my father's life may be at stake, and both his happiness and mine depend upon my exertions. Therefore, I ask you to let me leave at once and go to my uncle. I will talk the matter over with him, and I feel sure that he will help me in every way."

Involuntarily Jim's hand left the pocket in which it had been reposing, and went out to meet his master's. And there together they stood for the space of a minute exchanging a firm and cordial clasp.

"You are a credit to me!" exclaimed the head master, enthusiastically. "A credit, I say, and your comrades here will be even prouder of you than I am. I have put the position plainly before you. And, without wishing to discourage you, have endeavoured to point out how hopeless it is. You must know as well as I do what dangers and difficulties will have to be faced in this undertaking, for your father and the many books you have read will have given you some idea of life in Africa. Knowing all this, and with a full knowledge that if you persevere in your search you must undergo privation and exposure, and may even lose your life, you tell me that you will sail for that country; that you have firmly made up your mind to go through with it all for the sake of your father? Then leave us, my lad, and may Heaven help you, for you are a brave young fellow, and deserve the utmost success. There, go to your room and pack your boxes. A cab will be at the door in half an hour; that will

enable you to catch the next train for London. There, leave me now. I wish to think over the matter quietly before I say farewell."

Once more the two shook hands in silence, and then, turning about, Jim went hurriedly from the room, and hastened to prepare for his journey. An hour later he was in the train, and that evening had arrived at his destination, leaving his friends at the school to mourn the loss of as fine and good-hearted a young fellow as had ever entered its portals.

## CHAPTER II

### OFF TO ADEN

Jim Hubbard was a young gentleman of decidedly prepossessing appearance. Broad of shoulder, and particularly well set up for a lad of a little more than seventeen summers, he looked for all that far too young to have such troubles thrown upon his shoulders, to be called thus early in his life to face a difficulty which might well prove too great for a man of mature years and experience. But just as the colonel was endowed with the pluck and perseverance which had enabled him to live through that wild night in the Gulf of Aden, so also was his son gifted with a spirit and tenacity that helped him now to make up his mind to face any danger and difficulty in accomplishing the task he had set himself.

"It is clearly my duty," he said, as he trudged along from the London terminus of the railway to his uncle's residence in Kensington, "to see this matter through to the end. I have spent hours and hours in thinking about it, and have always come to the same conclusion. Until this doubt is absolutely settled, I can never rest, and never be sure that my father is not living. I will show him and all those who are interested in him that I am no fair-weather friend, and that I am prepared to stick to him and to his cause until further search is useless. I cannot imagine anyone placed in similar circumstances coming to any other determination, and if I were to hesitate now and allow imaginary dangers to frighten me, I should be a coward at heart, and unfit to bear my father's name. I'll put the facts before Uncle George, and I'm sure he will do his utmost to help me. Ah, there is his house opposite."

Crossing the street, James mounted the steps of a handsome dwelling, and pulled the bell vigorously. A moment later the door was thrown open by a footman, who had scarcely taken possession of his bag and ushered him into the hall before a short, stout old gentleman, with grey whiskers and hair and a florid countenance, bustled forward to greet him. Mr. George Hubbard was, in fact, some ten years the colonel's senior, and was of decidedly comfortable appearance. Indeed, whereas his younger brother had led an active life, going hither and thither to all parts of the world, wherever the duties of a soldier called him, George could scarcely boast that he had ever left the shores of old England.

"I'm a regular stay-at-home, and never feel better, nor more contented, than when I am engaged in my business in London," he had often said, with no small amount of satisfaction and pride. "I confess that a soldier's life never had any attraction for me, though, like all civilians, I can and do admire the man who goes out to face death at the call of his country."

As he advanced towards Jim with outstretched hand, his fat, good-humoured face showed the concern he felt for his young nephew.

"My dear, dear boy, welcome!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what to say to you, or how to help you in this distressing affair. Both your aunt and I have done nothing but talk the matter over, and have, indeed, spent sleepless nights in endeavouring to come to some conclusion, but without success. It is the most cruel, the most unhappy misfortune that I have ever experienced. But come upstairs. Your aunt would never forgive me if I kept her waiting."

Wiping the moisture from his forehead, and coughing as though the effort of speaking had been almost too much for him, George Hubbard turned and led the way upstairs. Jim followed him closely, and a minute later was in his aunt's presence. Then sitting down, the three discussed the matter fully, Jim telling his relatives to what decision he had come.

"You know the facts as well as I do, uncle," he said, "and I am going to ask you to do all you can to help me, and not to try and thwart me. I know how hopeless my mission must seem to you, and that many would think I was undertaking a wild-goose chase. But, as I told the head master at school, I feel sure that the man cast up upon the African coast was my father, and if that is the case,

he surely needs my help. I have been thinking the matter over as I came up in the train, and bought a map specially to help me. By it I see that my best course will be to take a steamer direct to Aden, and from there I shall be able to get a trader to Berbera. Meanwhile, I shall telegraph to the News Agency which supplied the information sent me this morning, and will endeavour to arrange that the man who saw this survivor of the wreck land upon the coast, and afterwards fall into the hands of the Mullah's Somali warriors, shall be in waiting to receive me. Then, with him as guide, I shall make my way to the actual point where the incident happened, and from there we shall turn our faces inland. It may happen that I shall be able to join some shooting expedition, for one reads occasionally in the papers that English gentlemen take caravans into that part of Africa for the purpose of big game shooting. If not, I shall endeavour to hire a few followers, and take up the search alone. I know it sounds a big thing to attempt, uncle; but wouldn't you do the same in a similar case?"

George Hubbard gasped. He was a man of peace, and though well read and thoroughly sensible, he had, nevertheless, an exaggerated idea of the wildness and dangers to be met with in Africa. Nor could he be blamed for that, for weeks past the papers had been filled with accounts of Somaliland, and of the doings of the Mullah. And now to sit there in a comfortable armchair before his open hearth, and hear his young nephew calmly propose to sail for Africa, and make his way into the very heart of the Somali country, was quite enough to make a man of his disposition do more than gasp. He sat forward in his chair staring at Jim with a horrified expression on his face, and with eyes which threatened to fall out of his head.

"Go to Africa! March into the interior, and probably meet the Mullah face to face!" he exclaimed, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief. "Good gracious, you will be killed, you will lose your life to a certainty!"

"I may, uncle," responded Jim, calmly. "On the other hand, there is a possibility of my succeeding, for many men have made their way into Somaliland and returned to tell the tale. Think of the joy it would be to rescue father."

"But it is madness, Jim! Because one single white man out of some two or three hundred who left England on that unlucky ship contrived to reach the shore alive, you fly to the conclusion that it must have been my poor brother. It is utter folly to argue in this way, though I cannot help but admire the brave thought which prompts you. Still, I am a matter-of-fact man, and I say, without hesitation, that the dangers are too great, and the end too uncertain, to justify your taking the risks. However, no efforts and no money shall be spared to obtain further information, and should it turn out, as I trust and hope it may, that this survivor is indeed my brother, then you shall go. Indeed, so deeply do I feel his loss, that I am tempted to say that I, too, would join you in the search. But that would be foolish, considering what I am, and how utterly unfitted for such exertions."

He rose from his seat, and turning, stood facing Jim, with a comical look of despair upon his features. For some minutes there was silence, and then, just as he was about to begin a long and telling argument, with the object of dissuading Jim from an attempt which, to his uncle, appeared worse than madness, a knock sounded on the door, and a footman entered.

"A telegram, sir," he said.

With an agile spring, which was wonderful considering his unwieldy proportions, George Hubbard left his position by the fire, and darted across the room. Taking the telegram from the footman, he tore it open, and then began to read it aloud, while Jim and his aunt jumped to their feet and looked over his shoulder.

"From the News Agency!" he cried excitedly. "I gave them instructions to spare no expense in obtaining information, and here is the result."

"Read it!" exclaimed Jim and his aunt, impatiently. "What does it say?"

"Listen!" answered Mr. Hubbard, holding the paper so that the light should fall upon it. "In accordance with your instructions, we have questioned native who gave information. He states that surviving white man was tall, with dark hair, getting grey at temples, grey moustache, and muscular

body. Not quite certain, owing to distance, but thinks he caught a glimpse of a bangle about his wrist. If not that, it was a piece of cloth tied there, perhaps to cover a wound."

"That is father!" shouted Jim, unable to restrain his excitement. "I am certain it is he, for the description tallies exactly with his appearance, and, moreover, he was in the habit of wearing a watch bracelet upon his wrist."

"Tall, dark hair getting grey, and grey moustache," repeated Mr. Hubbard, as if to assure himself that he had read the telegram aright. "There can be no doubt that this is my brother. I quite agree with you, Jim, for, though it is possible, and even very probable, that many men aboard the ship would have answered to that description, the fact that the survivor wore a dark bracelet upon his wrist is, in my opinion, an absolute confirmation. I am glad, my boy – more than glad. Indeed, I cannot tell you how much this good news rejoices my heart."

Turning to his nephew, he grasped his hand and shook it till the lad's fingers ached, patting him meanwhile upon the shoulder with his other hand.

"Yes, delighted; pleased beyond measure," he continued earnestly. "Now you may rely upon the fact that your uncle is wholly on your side."

As for Mrs. Hubbard, she had a tender heart, and gently pushing her husband aside, threw herself into Jim's arms with tears of joy in her eyes.

"You deserve the good news, my dear boy," she said, kissing him affectionately. "It went to my heart to see your silent grief, and how bravely you had determined to clear up this uncertainty. It was horrible to feel that your father might be dead, and still more trying to hear that there was just a possibility that he was still alive, a captive in the hands of this man they call the Mullah. The uncertainty was more than I could bear, and I feel sure that, had I been a man, I should have followed the same course, and gone to Africa, so as to set the matter for ever at rest."

"And now let us discuss the question," interposed Mr. Hubbard, pacing restlessly up and down the room. "There must be no delay in setting out to rescue my brother, and as we in England can do little, seeing that we are so far from Somaliland, I advise that you at once take ship for Aden. It happens that my firm have business relations with a man living there. He exports camels to that part of Africa ruled over by the Italians, and gathers in his warehouses every description of merchandise which comes from the interior of the country. If anyone can help you he is the man. Now, let me see, a ship will leave the London Docks for the Mediterranean and Egypt to-morrow evening; we will telephone at once to obtain a berth for you. That done, we will set about getting you a kit, for it is absolutely necessary that you should go well provided, and in that respect the utmost attention must be paid to weapons. That reminds me, a gentleman of my acquaintance who has visited Africa for purposes of sport happens to live close at hand. We will go in and see him at once, for it is more than likely that he will be able to give us valuable advice."

It was wonderful to see the energy displayed by Mr. Hubbard. Now that there was no doubt that it was his brother who had survived the wreck, he was like a schoolboy in his eagerness to set about his rescue, and took the matter up in a manner which showed that he was determined to do as much for the cause in his own way as was his nephew. Hastening from the room, he and Jim quickly donned their coats and hats, and hurried to the nearest telephone station. As it was late in the evening, the instrument was disengaged, and within five minutes a passage was booked upon a steamer that was to leave England the following evening. Jim and his uncle now hailed a cab, and were quickly transported to the residence of the gentleman of whom the latter had spoken.

"Glad to be of service, I'm sure," he said, when Mr. Hubbard had explained the reason of his coming. "Indeed, had it been possible, I should willingly have undertaken to accompany your nephew, in which case my experience of life in Northern Africa would have been of some help to him. Aden is certainly his first point of call, and as you already have an agent there, the difficulty of obtaining a passage over to Berbera, and of getting together the necessary followers and camels for transport purposes, will be easily overcome. I strongly advise him to engage a 'shikari,' or head hunting-man,

to accompany him and take charge of the natives; and if he applies at the British Consul's at Berbera, it is possible that he will be able to obtain the services of a man called Ali Kumar, a civilized Somali warrior, who accompanied me on an expedition two years ago, and who proved invaluable. Now as to kit. A couple of suits of rough cloth, with leather gaiters and good marching boots, will be the best. A felt hat would be worse than useless as a head-covering out there, for in the hot season the sun pours down with a fierceness that cannot be imagined, and can only be fully understood when actually experienced. Three or four water-tanks, so constructed as to be capable of being easily slung upon camels, should be procured, for this gentleman known as the 'Mad' Mullah has his happy hunting-grounds some two hundred miles inland, and to reach him it is necessary first to cross a range of hills, and then to face the Hoad, or waterless desert, which stretches for quite a hundred and fifty miles without a break. That is always a most trying ordeal, but you will have to face it, for, until the Hoad is passed, there will be no prospect of obtaining more than the most meagre news of your father."

"That will, indeed, be a terrible difficulty," interposed Mr. Hubbard. "One often hears of whole caravans lost in the attempt to cross these waterless tracts, and I suppose, in the case of this one which you call the Hoad, such a fatality is not unknown."

"I will not say that accidents have not happened," was the answer, in reassuring tones; "but so well is this desert known, and so accustomed are the natives to crossing it, that they think lightly of its dangers. But your raising the question reminds me to speak of animals. A good supply of transport camels will be required, and, in addition, a dozen or more of the trotting variety will be absolutely necessary. Then, supposing our young friend happens to obtain some piece of important news, he will be able to leave his caravan, and make a dash to any given point. Horses, too, he must have, and he will find no difficulty in getting as many as he requires. A small case of drugs is another item that should prove of use, and I strongly advise him to take some rolls of strong barbed wire. The additional weight that will have to be carried will be fully compensated for by the feeling of security that the wire will give."

"But how? I do not follow your point," said Mr. Hubbard dubiously. "I do not see how this wire will help my nephew."

"Then I will explain. He will march in the early morning, and if the sun is not too hot, will continue to do so for the greater part of the day. Sometimes he will cover only a few miles, and will then halt, for his powers of getting about the country will depend greatly upon the condition of his transport animals. Again, he will occasionally have to make forced marches, for the water-holes are often separated by long distances, which it is absolutely necessary to cover."

"But to come to the barbed wire. When he halts at night, he will form a zareba, sending out his followers to cut thorn-bushes with which to build a hedge. A few posts driven into the ground at intervals along the outside of the zareba, with wire stretched between them, will effectually stop a rush of the enemy, and will give timely warning in case of attack. In South Africa miles and miles were used between the blockhouses, and proved of great service."

"I see your point," exclaimed Jim, who had followed his words closely, "and I should imagine that if the posts and wires were hidden amongst the thorns, the surprise and alarm of the enemy would be even greater. Numbers might easily become entangled, and then we should be able to teach them a lesson with our rifles."

"Quite so. I fully agree with you," was the answer. "And, speaking of weapons, reminds me that I have not yet dealt with that subject."

For a few moments the speaker buried his face in his hands, and sat there thoughtfully.

"There is no doubt," he suddenly continued, "that this is a most important matter. I take it that you are not bent upon big game shooting, and that if you come upon lions or elephants you will leave them severely alone. For your purpose the Lee-Enfield rifle will be the best, and should it turn out, as it very well may, that you are attacked by the beasts I have mentioned, then you must trust to slay them by means of a volley, for it is hopeless to expect that a single one of these small-calibre

bullets will prove fatal. If it were to strike a vital spot it certainly would, but that is a piece of luck which you must not count upon, for, remember, you cannot afford to take unnecessary risks. So you should equip your party with the rifles I have mentioned, and, in addition, a hunting knife and a brace of good revolvers would be useful possessions for yourself. A pair of field-glasses and a tin water-bottle should complete your equipment. I need hardly mention the advisability of carrying an abundant supply of ammunition.

"And now, my lad, it only remains for me to wish you the best of luck. I admire your pluck immensely, but I shall give you a few last words of advice. Be always cautious, never omit to post sentries at night and visit them yourself, and, above all, be ever on the look-out for treachery. The Somali natives have the reputation of being cunning rogues. Plunder seems to be their sole object in life, and camels have a peculiar attraction for them. They would think nothing of killing you, if by doing so they could obtain possession of your transport animals."

Thanking him heartily for his kindness, and exchanging a cordial shake of the hand, Jim and his uncle left their friend, and returned home at once.

"We shall have to be busy to-morrow," said Mr. Hubbard, as they took their seats once more in front of the fire. "In the first place, we must get your clothing and revolvers, with a few strong trunks in which to carry them. The rifles and any other items we may happen to think of can be purchased during the week, and I shall see that they follow you out to Aden. You will want to have means of drawing money, and for that purpose I shall write full instructions to our agent. His name, by the way, is Andrews, and you will find him an extremely obliging gentleman. I shall tell him to supply you with anything you may ask for, and I may say now that, though I do not desire that you should be extravagant, no expense that may help to the recovery of my dear brother shall be spared. And now to bed, my dear Jim, for to-morrow you have much to do."

Early on the following morning Mr. Hubbard's house in Kensington was astir. There was an air of subdued excitement about the servants, who in some mysterious way had contrived to hear full details of all that was occurring. Mrs. Hubbard took her place at the breakfast-table, assuming as cheerful a look as she could, though her heart was full of misgivings for the safety of her nephew. But she was wise enough to know that he needed encouragement and help, and therefore determined that he should not guess what her thoughts were. As for Jim, he appeared with smiling countenance, for now that he felt sure that his father had really escaped the wreck, he was quite light-hearted, and though fully aware of the difficulties and dangers before him, was prepared to face them without hesitation.

"I know it's going to be a job," he had said to himself, as he lay awake during the night, "and I must be prepared to spend months, and even a year, in accomplishing it. But it has to be done, and if only I make up my mind from the beginning that nothing shall beat me, then my chances of success will be good."

Breakfast over, he said good-bye to his aunt, and then, entering a cab with his uncle, drove off to a firm in the city, from whom he was able to obtain a complete outfit of clothing. Trunks were bought at the same place, and directions given to have them packed at once.

"We'll call for them in an hour," said Mr. Hubbard, "and I shall be obliged if you will arrange to have everything ready for us, so that there shall be no delay."

Entering their cab again, they drove to a gunsmith's, where a couple of big Webley revolvers were purchased, together with a strong hunting knife contained in a sheath, which was so arranged as to be slung in a belt. A small case of drugs in tabloid form was obtained at another establishment, and then, armed with their purchases, James and his uncle returned for the clothing.

Within five minutes the luggage was on the cab, and they were on their way to Fenchurch-street Station. An hour later James was safely installed in his cabin, and shortly afterwards took leave of his uncle.

"You may rely upon my sending the other things promptly," said Mr. Hubbard, as he moved towards the gang-way. "They should reach you within a week of your arrival in Aden, and so that there shall be no difficulty about importing the arms, or about transhipping them to Africa, you had better go to the Governor at Aden, and tell him all the facts. I will visit the Foreign Office in London, and I am sure that every effort will be made to help you. Good-bye, and may you be successful."

That afternoon the steamer put out into the river, and by night was well at sea. Running down Channel, she made a good passage to Ushant, and was soon in the Bay of Biscay, which, to the delight of all the passengers, was comparatively smooth.

Jim was enchanted with this new experience, and before very long began to feel quite at home. Indeed, so quickly are friendships made upon an ocean-going steamer, that within a day or two he felt as though he had known all the passengers for quite a lengthy period.

After coasting along the Portuguese shore, the ship steered to the east, and entered the Mediterranean. Gibraltar was sighted, and signals exchanged, so as to let the folks at home know that a safe passage had thus far been made.

A week later they were in the canal, and in due time reached Aden. Here Jim's baggage was put ashore, and he himself followed, feeling somewhat forlorn amongst so many strangers.

"Mr. Hubbard, I think?" said a cheery voice at his elbow, causing him to turn round with a start, to find that a short, bearded man, with a pleasant face, was addressing him. He was clad in white from head to foot, and wore an enormous "topee," or pith helmet, upon his head. "I am making no mistake, I think?" he continued. "I am Mr. Andrews."

In a moment they were shaking hands, and then Jim's new friend called loudly to some Indian porters, and gave them instructions concerning the baggage.

"Everything here is done by natives from India," he said, noticing a look of inquiry on Jim's face. "In fact, Aden is, officially, part of our Eastern possessions, and boasts of no other coin than the rupee. But I will tell you all about that later. We'll drive to my place now. Hi! gharri!"

At his shout an open carriage, drawn by two "tats," as the small native ponies are known, dashed up to them, and when they were seated drove off along the main street of Aden at a pace which in London would have been considered furious. Leaving the town, they took another road which led to the right, into a part occupied by many bungalows, and at one of these they finally alighted.

"Aden itself is a horrible place," said Mr. Andrews, apologetically, waving his hand towards the town. "It is, as you see, little more than a wide volcanic plain, with nothing in the way of vegetation to relieve its barrenness. Out here, however, we have contrived to arrange a little oasis, in which we Europeans live. But come in, Mr. Hubbard, and I'll show you the room you are to occupy while staying with me. Then we'll have tiffin (luncheon), and afterwards we'll sit on the verandah and talk this matter over. I believe I've excellent news for you, which you shall hear in good time."

"About father? Does it concern him?" asked Jim, eagerly, pricking up his ears at the mention of news, for he had been without any for more than a week. "Perhaps he has been rescued? But that is expecting too much."

"No, it's not that," was the answer, in reassuring tones; "but it's remarkably good news, I can tell you, for I have ascertained that a certain gentleman is bound upon a similar expedition, or rather, is about to go into the Mullah's country for the purpose of obtaining intelligence of his movements. Hearing that you also contemplated penetrating into the interior, he asks leave to accompany you, and I have no doubt you will be delighted to take him."

"I shall, indeed," answered Jim, eagerly. "I was quite prepared to undertake the journey alone, but a companion will make all the difference, and I willingly agree to his joining my expedition."

"Then, that's settled; and now for tiffin."

Leading the way through a wide compound, laid out like an English garden, Mr. Andrews mounted the steps of a shady verandah, and entering a doorway in front of which hung a curtain of reeds, ushered his companion into a delightfully cool inner room, in which, on a table placed in the

centre, was spread a snowy white cloth, littered with sparkling glass and silver. Silent-footed natives salaamed and prepared to wait upon them, and at once the two sat down and began their meal.

## CHAPTER III

### THE GUN-RUNNERS

"Now come out to the verandah," said Mr. Andrews, taking James by the arm as soon as tiffin was finished. "I have a couple of comfortable chairs there, in which we can lounge, for just now is the hottest part of the day, and no European ventures abroad unless compelled to by unforeseen circumstances."

Leaving the airy dining-room, the two stepped on to a broad paved verandah, which entirely surrounded the bungalow, and took their seats in a shady nook.

Above their heads was a thickly thatched roof, the eaves of which projected so far beyond the supporting posts as to make a broad stretch of shadow beneath. But as they lay in their chairs, Jim and his new friend could easily see beneath it. For the moment they sat there in silence. Indeed, Jim was lost in admiration, for Mr. Andrews had created for himself a perfect English garden. Glancing between the pillars, about which clung roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle, and many another creeper, he looked out upon beds of brilliant flowers, laid out in orderly array, and flashing gorgeously in the rays of the Eastern sun.

"I've only to forget the bungalow, and imagine myself in old England again," said Mr. Andrews. "That garden is just one of the luxuries I allow myself, and which helps to make life more pleasant here. Some day I hope to end my exile and return home, for, however fascinating bright and continuous sunshine may be, to return to one's native country is always a pleasure to which we who live out here look forward. But here is someone coming through the gate. Ah, I see, it's the gentleman of whom I was speaking."

He sprang from his seat and went toward the steps to greet his visitor. As for Jim, he watched with some interest to see what kind of man this stranger should prove to be.

"I hope I shall like him," he said to himself, "for it would be disastrous to our expedition if we were to fall foul of each other. But here he is, and – yes, he looks a good fellow, and I am sure we shall be excellent friends."

As this passed through his mind the visitor mounted the steps, and Jim obtained a clear view of his features. He was tall and thin, with fair hair and clean-shaven face, and, as far as one could guess, was about twenty-five years of age.

"Ah, how do, Andrews?" he exclaimed cheerily, springing with one bound on to the verandah. "Glad to see you, my dear fellow. I heard that the ship had arrived, and so came along to have a chat, and to meet the Mr. Hubbard of whom you were speaking."

"There he is, then," cried Mr. Andrews, turning to Jim; "and he, too, is anxious to make your acquaintance."

A moment later the two were shaking hands, each greeting the other with a steady look, which seemed to say, "I want to know what sort of a chap you are, and how we are likely to get along together."

"Glad to meet you, and I hope we shall be good friends. My name is Dixon – Tom Dixon; Tom for short."

"And mine is James – James Hubbard, you know," said our hero, with a friendly smile. "Mr. Andrews tells me that you, too, are bound for Somaliland, and have suggested accompanying me. I need not say that I shall be delighted, for it would be dreary work to go alone. But I would do it if necessary, for my father's life depends upon my going."

"Quite so, and that is just where we shall agree," was the ready answer; "for you must understand that I am a secret agent, an Intelligence officer, as we are often called, and – But one minute. Are we alone, Andrews? For my news is of great importance, and if your native servants were to obtain

an inkling of it, the tidings would fly at once, and reach the ears of the Mullah in an incredibly short space of time. It is a fact," he continued, noticing the look of surprise with which Jim greeted his remark. "Our dusky friend has a perfect system of espionage, which would shame that of many a European country. Tales of a coming expedition told across the dinner-table in these bungalows are whispered in the native bazaars before a day has gone, and I speak only the truth when I say that the first ship for Berbera or the Somali coast, whether it be a steamer, a native dhow, or a rascally gun-runner, bears a man whose duty it is to pass on his information to the Mullah. Why, he knows well that the British Government is now buying camels here and training and equipping a native levy at Berbera. Our camp there is full of spies, and I do not exaggerate when I tell you that the movements of our troops are known by the Mullah almost before they are by our officers. So, take my advice, and go about with your lips closed and your eyes very wide open."

Tom Dixon spoke in the most earnest manner, and lifted his finger, as if thereby to impress Jim with his warning. And, indeed, he was making no erroneous statement, and telling only the truth when he described the extraordinary manner in which news is conveyed into the heart of Somaliland.

"Make your mind easy, Tom," said Mr. Andrews, reassuringly, stepping across the verandah to look into the dining-room. "The servants are all on the other side of the bungalow, and out of earshot, so that you may speak here without fear of the consequences, and chat this matter over to your heart's content. But your warning is a timely one, and, indeed, has only forestalled by a few minutes the advice I was about to give our young friend. Ever since this matter cropped up, I have kept it a dead secret between myself and the British Governor, you, of course, being also included. I have gone so far as to set aside a certain number of camels of the trotting and of the transport variety, and have also engaged some fifty followers. They were despatched from here a month ago for the service of the Government. But this is a more urgent matter, and, with the Governor's permission, I have arranged that you shall have them. When you arrive at Berbera, you will find them all encamped outside the town. Ali Kumar, a shikari of noted reputation, and a trustworthy fellow, will be there to head the followers and guide you through the country, while some twenty miles along the coast is a village in which lives the man who gave information about the survivor of the wreck. I have purposely refrained from engaging him in any capacity, but my agent at Berbera has seen him, and has informed him that a relative of the survivor will come to speak with him. That means reward, or 'backsheesh,' as these Somali fellows know it, and you may be sure that he will not fail you."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Jim. "Then, thanks to your kindness and forethought, there will be little or no delay, and, so far as I can see, the weapons and ammunition which are coming from England are the only things that can keep us waiting, and my uncle promised that they should be here within a few days of my arrival. What luck, too, to have got hold of Ali Kumar, for he is the very man I was told to engage."

"I know him well, and can tell you that he is a capital fellow," answered Mr. Andrews. "But to continue my story. All these preparations have been made in the quietest and most secret manner possible. Once you and Tom arrive at Berbera, you have only to ride out to this camp. Then, when night falls, you can slip away and march along the coast. There is a headland, forty miles east of Berbera, where you had better camp for a few days, keeping a bright look-out for a certain native dhow, which will bring you your rifles, ammunition, and stores. By acting in this way, you will be able to leave the coast for the interior without anyone being aware of your intentions – at least, I hope you may. Tom and I have talked the matter over, for he is as anxious as you to get away without the news reaching the Mullah's ears."

"Just so," interposed Tom. "You see, Hubbard, your search will carry you into the very heart of the Mullah's country, and as I am anxious to obtain full information of his doings, I, too, am bound in that direction. If he had the slightest notion of our intentions, you may be sure that he would do his utmost to murder the whole lot of us, and so it is of great importance to keep him in ignorance. This is your expedition, but I propose that we share expenses, and the command also, if you like. You see,

I have spent many years on the coast, and speak the language like a native – a useful accomplishment for the job we have in hand. But I'm not a bit of a soldier, and when it comes to fighting I shall have to look to you to pull us through. Nominally, you will be in charge of the expedition, but I think that by putting our heads together we shall get along with greater success."

"I quite agree with you," responded Jim, thoughtfully; "the fact that you speak the language will be of the greatest service, and as this expedition is to suit your purpose as well as mine, I feel sure that we shall not fall out when difficulties arise. But there is one thing I wish to say. I must not have my movements hampered in any way, for it may turn out that news of my father will reach us as soon as we get into the interior. Perhaps, even, we may have the good fortune to rescue him at once, and in that case, my mission being ended, I should return to the coast immediately."

"And I should not attempt to dissuade you," said Tom Dixon, with a smile. "If by that time I had not obtained information of the utmost value, it would be my own fault entirely; and besides, supposing you were to rescue your father, I think there is but little doubt that we should find it necessary to retire at once – in fact, to make a bolt for our lives, for the Mullah has a reputation for fierceness, and would not easily forgive our boldness."

"But I have something else to tell you, which may cause you to prick up your ears. It has come to my knowledge that a rascal here is about to ship a load of guns across to Somaliland. Would you care to join me in an attempt to capture him? It would be a risky business, I tell you candidly, but if we are successful, it would be a glorious adventure. You need not be afraid that it will delay us, for my plan is to ship aboard as a hand, and wait until close to the African coast. Then matters must depend upon circumstances. I shall endeavour to give warning to one of the British gunboats stationed in these waters, and in that case should allow myself to be taken prisoner without saying a word. But it is just possible that I may be unable to ascertain the exact destination for which we are bound, and in that case should have to take my chance of capturing the dhow single-handed, or of looking on quietly while the guns were handed over to the Mullah's emissaries. If you were with me, we could make a grand fight of it, for these dhows seldom have more than four men aboard. Sometimes, of course, they carry a bigger crew, and if it were to turn out like that, we should have to alter our plans."

"But how am I to be smuggled aboard?" asked Jim, eagerly, delighted at the thought of such an adventure. "I don't speak the language, and should certainly be spotted the very moment I set foot upon the vessel."

"I don't think so," responded Tom Dixon, emphatically. "The natives in these parts do all sorts of curious things, and it has just struck me that, by pretending that you have made a vow, you can get over this difficulty. We'll give it out that we come from some Somali tribe which is friendly to the Mullah, and that we are willing to lend a hand in loading and unloading the dhow in return for our passage. I shall say that you have sworn never to speak until you have made a pilgrimage to Mecca. That is no uncommon vow, and amongst these fanatical people will raise you to their highest estimation."

"It sounds a likely story," cried Jim, "and I'll come with you. When do you propose to start? And when are we likely to arrive on the Somali coast?"

"That I cannot say, but I believe the dhow will sail within a couple of days, and two more should take us across the water. Then much depends upon how matters turn out."

"It's a risky business," said Mr. Andrews, who had listened attentively all the while. "But I won't try to dissuade you, Hubbard, for the danger is no greater than you will encounter in Somaliland, and I think the experience you will get will help you in your search. It may turn out that by going upon this dhow you will come across a native who knows of your father. In that case the risk will not have been taken for nothing, for you can rely upon it that Tom will worm his secrets out. Our friend is a thorough native, and I only tell you the bare truth when I say that his get-up and behaviour are marvellous. You see, his father was stationed here for many years, and Tom has made the most of his opportunities."

"That is so," said Tom. "I used to be awfully fond of dressing up as a native and going down to the bazaar. Once or twice my disguise was discovered, and if I hadn't taken to my heels, I should have come in for some rough handling. But that is a very old tale, and I have played the trick so often now that, when in native costume, I feel and act the part with assurance. Indeed, I often forget that I am an Englishman, so absorbed do I become, and many and many a time have I come from the bazaars primed with a piece of information that has proved of service to our Governor. And it is on that account that I have been employed as an Intelligence officer. But you'll come, then, Hubbard? That is splendid, for, with you to help me, I shall hope to bag these fellows. I propose that you remain here till this evening, and then, when the servants have retired after dinner, walk down the garden to the gate. I'll be there to meet you, and together we'll go to my place. Mr. Andrews will look after your things here, and will send them over in the ship he spoke of."

Tom Dixon now rose, and, after chatting for a few moments with his friends, departed. For more than an hour Jim and Mr. Andrews sat on the verandah, talking in low tones, for there were many points to be arranged. Then Jim went to his room, and wrote a long letter to his uncle, telling him all that was about to occur, and describing the preparations which Mr. Andrews had made for his expedition.

"And now, as weapons will be required, I'll look to my revolvers," he said to himself. "I am very glad that I spent the time on board ship practising, for until then I had never fired anything but a toy pistol. Now, however, I can feel fairly sure of putting a bullet into a man at ten yards' range, and, as they are heavy revolvers, that should be quite enough to stop him. I have heard that these natives are very hardy, and will stand far more knocking about than the average individual, but I've a notion that if I were to hit the hardiest of them plump with one of these big bullets he would not require any more."

Unpacking his revolvers, he set to work to clean and thoroughly overhaul them. Then wrapping them in a towel, together with a small box of ammunition, he placed them in one of his trunks until it was time to join Tom Dixon. Then he set to work to look through his possessions, and so absorbed did he become in the occupation that he did not notice the time slipping by, and, when dinner was announced, could scarcely believe that it was already evening.

An hour later, having said good-bye to Mr. Andrews, he left the bungalow, with his bundle under his arm. When he emerged from the gate of the compound, he was joined by Tom Dixon.

"That you?" asked Tom, in a low voice.

"Yes; here I am," answered Jim.

"Then come along, old chap. We had better walk along silently, for I know these natives well, and caution in such matters pays. For instance, it's quite likely that someone is following you, just to see where you are going. The natives are the most curious people under the sun, and will take no end of trouble over a little matter like this. But we'll soon see. Come down here."

Catching Jim by the sleeve, Tom Dixon suddenly drew him into the deep shadow of a palm which grew close at hand, and whispered to him to crouch low upon the ground. Ten minutes later their caution was rewarded, for a dusky figure crept silently past them, and disappeared in the darkness.

"We'll give him five minutes to get well away," said Tom, "and then we'll move off in the opposite direction, and get to my place by a different route. I dare say all this secrecy seems unnecessary to you, but you've heard my warning."

"It does seem strange," Jim agreed, in a whisper. "Coming from old England, where everything is so free and open, one is at first at a loss to understand the need for all this secrecy; but after what you have told me, I can fully believe that our plans might easily be ruined, unless we kept them to ourselves. That fellow creeping after us just now is an object-lesson which I shall not easily forget."

When sufficient time had elapsed to make it certain that there was no fear of detection, the two rose to their feet again, and leaving the shadow of the tree, went off in the opposite direction. In some

twenty minutes' time they arrived at the outskirts of the town of Aden, and, pausing to make sure that they were unobserved, entered a narrow doorway, which led to the interior of a native house.

"Ten paces to your front, and then stop," whispered Tom. "Now follow me closely, and take care that the door does not bang in your face."

There was the creak of rusty hinges, and the snap of a lock being pushed back. Then, guided by Tom's hand, Jim found himself descending a flight of rickety stairs, which groaned beneath his weight, and threatened to deposit him with more swiftness than was quite agreeable in the room below. A minute later a match flickered before his eyes, and he saw Tom applying it to a candle, which quickly burned up and allowed him to take note of his surroundings. To his astonishment he found himself in a comfortably-furnished room, with a tiny bed in one corner. There was a washhand-stand against the wall, and a couple of basket-chairs, while a big chest stood beneath a tiny window, which admitted light and air to the room during the day, but which was now curtained with thick material.

"Not exactly a model dwelling, or the kind of place that a European would choose for his residence in this hot climate," said Tom, with a laugh, "but it has the great advantage of obscurity. This is really part of a disused building, and it was whilst consorting with a gang of rogues, whose secrets I was endeavouring to ascertain, that I accidentally discovered it. I at once saw that it was the very place for me, and promptly set about putting it in order. You see, I am supposed to be a kind of clerk to the Governor, though my duties in that way are purely nominal. As a matter of fact, I turn up every now and again with bundles of papers in my hand, and have an audience with my chief. But the official-looking documents are a fraud, and my conversation has no reference to them. But to return to this room. I've the share of a bungalow elsewhere, and when about to undertake one of my spying adventures, I slip away from there during the night, for all the world like a thief, and find my way to this place. That chest is full of disguises, stains, and paints, and it takes but little more than an hour to transform myself into a worthy Parsee, a race of men engaged in trade in Aden. More often I leave this place as a simple coolie, and at times I have appeared in more disreputable attire, such as is worn by the budmashes, or criminal class of the town. Look here!"

Taking the candle with him, he went across the room to where the chest stood, and slipped in a key. Throwing open the lid, he disclosed a neatly packed interior, with a shallow tray at one end, which contained a number of wigs and hirsute adornments for the face.

"My stock-in-trade," said Tom, with some degree of pride. "It has taken me a long time to collect them, and so important do I consider the question of wigs, that I've gone to enormous trouble to provide myself with all those you see. After all, clothes are easily purchased. One has merely to go into the bazaars, and one will easily find every variety of garb worn by the natives in these parts. With the hair it is a different matter, and to obtain exactly what I wanted I have been compelled to make every one of those little articles myself, for the slightest mistake in get-up would lead to discovery, and most likely to death. But take a seat, and let us decide how we are going to act."

Throwing himself upon the bed, Tom motioned Jim to one of the chairs, and then lay at full length, his hands behind his head, and his eyes fixed upon a patch of dingy light thrown by the flickering candle upon the ceiling above. As for Jim, he sat back in his chair, lost in wonderment. Indeed, when he came to think the matter over, he could scarcely believe that less than three weeks had passed since the first news of the wreck had reached his ears. Then he was just a schoolboy, on the threshold of life, with no higher aim than to go up for his examination, and win a commission in the Army. In the meanwhile no worry troubled his mind, and all his spare hours were taken up in an endeavour to excel in games, for he was passionately fond of exercise in any form. And now, in a moment it seemed, he had been transported into a different life – into a different world indeed. Who could have dreamt that those few short days would have made such a difference to him, would have brought him all those miles across the sea, to face dangers and difficulties the extent of which he could scarcely conceive!

"And here I am, a regular conspirator," he said to himself, looking about the room, "and bound upon an adventure which, from all I can gather, will afford considerable excitement. But I've thought the matter out carefully, and believe that I am justified in entering upon it, for, who knows but that it may turn out an advantage in the end! If these gun-runners are in league with the Mullah, it stands to reason that they know something of his movements, and as white prisoners are seldom or never taken, the fact that the survivor of the wreck fell into his hands will have reached their ears. Perhaps, too, they are even aware of father's exact whereabouts, and if only Tom can worm the secret out of them, we shall be saved enormous trouble, and very likely a large proportion of risk; for, in that case, we should march into the interior as rapidly as possible, choosing night for our movements, and hiding up amongst the sand-dunes and hills during the day. Then, when we got within striking distance, we should mount our trotting camels, and make a dash for the place. If we were successful, I should abandon the transport animals and our baggage, so as to enable us to retire to the coast at all speed.

"But that is hoping for too much," he continued. "This business is going to be no ordinary affair, and before we are successful we shall be compelled to face no end of difficulties. But all the better, if in the end we are able to carry out our purpose."

For quite five minutes Jim sat there silently, lost in thought, while Tom lay upon the bed, still staring at the dingy ceiling, as if, indeed, he could see there a plan which would be likely to prove of service when endeavouring to capture the dhow.

"I can see my way quite easily," he said aloud, as if addressing himself to no one in particular. "At first, of course, I shall have to find out where the dhow lies, but an hour or two spent in the bazaar will soon set the matter at rest. That done, we shall have to obtain a passage aboard her, but there again I fancy things will be easily arranged. I'll get into casual conversation with some fellow who seems to know the destination of the craft, and I'll drop, as if by accident, a few words which will let him know that I am a friend of the Mullah. These natives are well aware of the risk they incur in these gun-running expeditions, and I've no doubt that hands are difficult to obtain. If that is the case, they will jump at our services, and we shall soon find ourselves installed upon the dhow. After that the outlook is uncertain."

"Bound to be!" exclaimed Jim, emphatically. "That's just where the risk comes in. But it would be a fine thing to hold them up, and to capture the vessel and its contents."

"By George, it would! You're right, Jim, and we will do it," cried Tom enthusiastically, swinging himself into a sitting position. "Look here, I've been going over all the points, and I've come to the conclusion that our best plan will be to do as I have just said. Just you lie down there and have a snooze, while I get into the proper togs and go out to the bazaar. Then we shall be able to start for the dhow to-morrow morning, without delay."

"I'd like to come, too, if it could be arranged," said Jim eagerly. "You see, I have to get used to the dress of a native, and shall feel far more sure of myself if my first attempt is made while it is dark."

"Then come along. Just hop out of your things as quickly as you can, while I do the same. Then we'll apply the stain to our bodies, and dress ourselves in the robes usually worn by natives from the interior of Somaliland."

Both at once proceeded to undress, and that done, Tom dived to the bottom of the chest, and produced a carefully stoppered jar, and a big brush, composed of the silkiest hair. With this he at once proceeded to paint Jim from head to foot, and when that operation was concluded, the latter took the brush and did the same for his companion. Another dive into the chest produced an earthen pot. This contained a dark, oily liquid, which was freely applied to the hair and eyebrows.

"Hum! Doesn't smell over-pleasant," remarked Jim, with a grimace. "It has a most peculiarly pungent odour."

"Oh, you'll get used to it in time," was the laughing rejoinder. "But I can assure you that it is very necessary, and quite typical of the Somali people. There are your sandals. Slip your toes into the tags, and walk across the floor. No, not that way, but like this, shuffling along."

Slipping a pair on to his own feet, Tom strode swiftly up and down the room, imitating a native, and would not be satisfied until Jim was able to do precisely the same.

"Now watch me put on this head-gear," he said, taking a long fold of snowy linen, and beginning to wrap it about his temples. He then produced a light belt of webbing, to which two holsters were made fast, and proceeded to buckle it about his waist, tossing a second to Jim for his own use. A minute or two later he had wound a long cloak of linen about his body, contriving, however, to leave one arm and half his breast bare, while his legs were visible from the knee downwards. Then revolvers were placed in the holsters, a small pouch filled with ammunition, and a long and spiteful dagger thrust through the belt, and arranged so that the handle just peeped out through the clothing. A second and shorter weapon was attached to the inside of the left arm, and thus equipped, Tom placed himself before a wide strip of looking-glass which was nailed against the wall, and having put the candle in position, so that its light fell full upon him, began to survey himself critically.

It was evident that he was satisfied, for he smiled at his own image, displaying a set of teeth which looked particularly white, now that his features were stained.

"And now for you," he said. "I want you to dress yourself from head to foot just as I have done, for, remember, you may have to do so before the natives, and if you bungled, then you would certainly be discovered."

Twenty minutes later the candle was extinguished, and the two crept up the creaking staircase and went out. Then, with long, shuffling strides, which carried them quickly over the ground, they made their way towards the native bazaar.

"Remember your rôle," whispered Tom, as they approached the line of squalid huts and booths which formed the native market. "Not a sound is to escape your lips. If you are addressed, make no answer, but turn away angrily, waving your arm. Should the man persist, turn upon him, but beware that you do not touch your weapons, for to do so would be fatal. Of course, if you are discovered, you must make a fight of it; but we'll hope that it is not coming to that."

Walking side by side, the two were soon in the midst of the bazaar, and Jim was interested to see how these Eastern people behaved. Lights twinkled in the various booths, and dusky natives were gathered in knots here and there. Some sat silently, but the majority were conversing in the most excited and voluble manner. Indeed, they might very well have been engaged in a squabble, so exaggerated were their movements. Suddenly, on turning a corner, the two adventurers came upon a circle of men squatting about a brazier, and singing a weird song to the accompaniment of a tom-tom. As they came into the firelight, one of the natives caught sight of them, and called loudly to them.

"Come hither and join us, brothers," he shouted. "Here we shall make room for you."

He shuffled to one side, those who were close at hand doing the same, until a sufficiently wide gap was left in the circle.

"Come on," whispered Tom; and straightway, shouting his pleasure, he went towards the place, Jim following closely upon his heels. To hesitate would have been to arouse instant suspicion, and therefore, watching closely to see how his comrade acted, our hero joined the circle and squatted in native fashion. It was a trying ordeal for a lad who had but recently left school, and though he fought against the feeling of excitement, almost of fear, which assailed him, he was nevertheless well aware that his heart was beating like a sledge-hammer against his ribs, and that his pulses were throbbing almost painfully. But he was not the lad to show the white feather, and remembering his determination to go through with the adventure, he sat stolidly, staring into the glowing brazier.

"A song, brother! Allah has willed it that you should join us this night, and we would hear your voice," shouted one of the group, stretching out a lanky arm and touching Jim upon the knee.

There was no answer, and, to the astonishment of all the natives gathered there, the stranger who had been bidden to join them as a guest still kept his eyes fixed upon the brazier. That he had heard they were certain, for an involuntary turn of the head had betrayed that fact. At once shouts of anger arose, and the man who had spoken sprang to his feet.

## CHAPTER IV IN DISGUISE

For the moment it looked as though the expedition upon which Jim and his friend had set out was doomed to early disaster, for there was no denying the fact that they had unwittingly aroused the anger of the natives. And yet, what could they do? Passing through the bazaar in their search for information, an evil chance had brought them into contact with this gathering, and they had found themselves compelled to accept the unwelcome invitation to join the circle which sat about the brazier. And now, at the very beginning, indeed, within less than a minute they were engaged in an altercation with them. Deeply did Jim regret the fact that he could not speak the language, for had he been able to do so, there would have been no need for silence, and no need to ruffle the feelings of the gathering.

It was a dilemma, and, puzzle his brains as he might, he could not come to any solution that would help him. Instead, therefore, he sat there stolidly, his eyes now fixed upon the brazier, and then turning for the space of a second to the man who confronted him.

"Insolent! How dare you to insult us so?" shouted the native, thrusting his hand into the folds of his waistcloth, to withdraw it a moment later claspng the handle of a dagger. "Dog!" he continued, springing forward. "Speak, or I will bury this blade in your flesh."

Meanwhile the other natives who formed the gathering had sprung to their feet, and crowded about the two young Englishmen with threatening gestures.

"Yes," they shouted angrily, "answer, or we will kill you now, and throw your bodies into the gutter."

It was wonderful to see the coolness with which Jim and his companion acted. Had they lost their presence of mind, and sprung to their feet with the intention of escaping, they would have been instantly cut to pieces, for they were entirely surrounded. Indeed, there was no doubt that this was a situation demanding cunning more than anything else, and both recognized that fact fully. Seated, therefore, side by side, as if they were unaware of the commotion raging about them, Jim still looked nonchalantly into the flames, as if, indeed, he had no other interest in life, while Tom stared at the circle of angry faces with the utmost calmness.

"Are we, then, guests or dogs?" he demanded quietly, letting his eyes wander from one to the other. "Was it not you who bade us join your circle? Then why do you grumble if one of us is a man who will keep his vow, whatever befalls? My friend and I have come here from Somaliland, bound upon an expedition to Mecca. But ill fortune fell upon us, and now we return to our country to replenish our funds. For my part, I confess that I am disappointed, but my comrade is grieved beyond expression. His lips are closed, and his ears deaf, until the day when he completes his pilgrimage. He has sworn it by Allah, and by Allah he shall keep to his oath, even though thousands attempt to dissuade him. Take your places, then, again, I beg of you, and let us be friends, for we are deserving of your kindness."

The words, spoken quietly as they were, acted like oil upon troubled waters. Scarcely had they left Tom Dixon's lips, when the excitement of the angry natives disappeared even more rapidly than it had arisen. For a moment only they looked incredulously at one another, and then, saluting Jim with the utmost respect, they took their places again shamefacedly.

"We meant no harm, brothers," said the first speaker, apologetically. "Forgive us, if we spoke angrily and in some haste, but the occasion demanded instant explanation, and, now that you have given it, we are fully satisfied. More than that, it is an honour to us to know that there sits in our circle in friendship with us one who has made such a vow, and who refuses to break his oath in spite of any danger. I watched him carefully as I advanced upon him with my drawn weapon, but he did not flinch, did not even turn aside, or raise an arm to ward off the blow which might well have fallen.

Moreover, he allowed no sound to escape his lips, and, true to his word, and to the holy task which he has set himself, sat there unmoved, prepared to die rather than cry out for mercy. It is marvellous the strength that Allah gives to such men."

"Yes, it is a great thing," chimed in an aged native, who sat crouching over the brazier, as if to absorb all its warmth; "and in Aden here not one in ten thousand is capable of making and keeping such a vow. It is only men from Somaliland who are brave enough to do such a thing. Our brother has just told us that we are honoured; we are more than that, for these guests of ours are friends of the Mullah, a holy man, who has made many pilgrimages to Mecca, and who will yet be king of the country which lies yonder across the sea."

He pointed towards the harbour, and looked round at his companions.

"Yes," they agreed in guttural tones, "the Mullah is a great man, and will be even more powerful."

"We can speak openly," continued the old man, "for there are none but friends here, and no Hindoos are within hearing. How thrives the Mullah?" he went on, addressing Tom. "Does he know that the English are preparing to march against him?"

"Yes, he is fully aware of it," answered the latter, quietly, "and will meet them in battle. But at present he is fearful of defeat, for though his soldiers are numerous, they are poorly armed, and for the most part carry only shields and spears. Guns are what he wants, and he is prepared to pay well for them. Indeed, he bade us on our return to make enquiries here, and endeavour to induce some of the wealthy merchants who are friendly to him to send him a ship-load of weapons and ammunition. We believe that such a ship has lately sailed, or will shortly leave this shore, but we are uncertain. We have been to more than one of those who live in this town, and are friendly to us, but they will do nothing until silver is placed in their hands, and of that we have absolutely none. However, once we can get a passage across to Somaliland, we shall be able to replenish our store, and shall return immediately."

"And how knows your friend of this arrangement?" asked the old man suspiciously, glancing sharply at Jim. "If he has made a vow not to speak, how can he have discussed this matter with you?"

The question was a shrewd one, and at once set the whole circle of natives staring hard at their guests.

"Yes, how can he have learnt of this plan?" cried another, rising to his feet, and waving his arms excitedly. "You say that you have been to many in the town, and have questioned them concerning arms for the Mullah. Then this vow of which your comrade boasts is one made to be broken or kept at will. Perhaps he is a spy come here to learn our secrets."

His words at once brought the whole gathering of natives to their feet, and again, such is the excitability of these Eastern people, they crowded threateningly about their guests, calling loudly for an explanation. But Jim and his friend were equal to the occasion. The former was certainly dumfounded at the sudden turn affairs had taken, for he had not understood a word of all that had been said. But he was fully aware that here again an attempt to escape would be worse than useless, and therefore, placing full reliance in his friend, he squatted there as calmly as before, prepared, however, to spring to his feet in a moment and join Tom in fighting for their lives. A hasty glance at the latter told him that there was still some chance of calming the natives, for Tom Dixon sat as if carved in stone. One hand was buried, as if accidentally, in the folds of his waistcloth, though Jim knew well that it grasped the butt of a hidden revolver; while the other was stretched out towards the brazier, as if to gather some comfort from its glowing embers.

"Did I say that I had discussed this matter with my comrade?" he asked sarcastically, looking round the circle with a contemptuous glance. "When I said that we had been to various merchants in the town, I thought that you were wise enough to understand my meaning. My comrade's vow is one which few or none of you would dare to take, and yet you do not hesitate to doubt it. It was sworn more than a week ago, and, by Allah, it has never been broken. But look at him? Do you not see him turn his head as each one speaks? He cannot help the words falling upon his ears, and hears

and understands all that you say, without, however, deigning to answer. So it is with me. So that he should know what was to happen, I have spoken of my plans to him, but we have never entered into discussion on the matter. Come," he continued, "let us be friends, and treat us like brothers."

"We will," exclaimed the old man warmly. "We cannot venture to take risks, for were a spy to come amongst us, he would learn many things of value to the Government. It was on that account that we tested you, and have proved you to be of ourselves. We are friends and brothers."

Each of the natives gave vent to a guttural exclamation of approval, and then, as if to forbid further altercation, the sharp notes of the tom-tom were heard, and the gathering began a chant, one of those peculiarly dismal dirges which seem to delight the ears of natives of the East. Then, when the song was finished, an earthen dish, containing slices of juicy lemon, was handed round, each man present helping himself.

"You spoke of a ship which might be sailing for Somaliland," said the old man, suddenly, awaking from a reverie into which he seemed to have fallen, and looking up at Tom. "You also told us that you and your friend were in search of a passage. Are you strong, and are you willing to work? For, if so, I will find places for you upon the dhow."

"It is a good offer, and we accept it gladly," responded Tom promptly. "As for strength, we are capable of hauling at the ropes as well as any man. Would there be much else to do? For I tell you honestly that we are unused to the sea, and are more at home when mounted upon horseback and galloping across the smooth plains of Somaliland."

"There is little else for you to do than keep watch upon the deck, and help to pull in the sails, for three men will go besides yourselves, as well as the master. But I warn you that fighting may fall to your lot, for a steamship flying the Government colours patrols these seas, and, should she sight you, will certainly endeavour to capture you. In that case your death would be swift and almost certain. If not, you would be thrown into prison, and would be a slave for the greater part of your days."

"Then the post will suit us well. If there is fighting we shall not grumble, for it is our trade, and as capture means death, you may rely upon it that we shall do all that is possible to defeat the enemy. But why should the Government fall upon this dhow?"

For a moment the old man scrutinized Tom closely, as if still suspicious of him, and as if doubtful whether he was to be fully trusted. But the latter returned his glance with one that was equally steady and unflinching, and, satisfied with this, the native at length answered:

"That dhow is filled to overflowing with guns and ammunition for the Mullah," he said. "If she reaches the Somali coast in safety, I shall have done well for myself, and shall have aided the cause of your master. She sails to-morrow at noon, and you will know her by the fact that she bears a red streak upon her bows, and has a large rent in her sail. When you see her, she will be lying some few yards from the shore, and any of the small craft in the harbour will put you aboard her. You must go below as soon as you get on board, and if any of the crew are there, pass them without a sound, but salute them in this manner."

The old man paused for an instant, and withdrawing his hand from beneath the blanket which covered him, placed two fingers upon his lips.

"That is the sign which you must make, and be careful that you do it exactly as I have shown you, for, if not, the crew will believe that you are spies, and will fall upon you as soon as you are below. To-day the Customs officer has been on board, inspecting the cargo. But the crew are even now busily employed in transferring it to another ship, and in taking in the guns and ammunition destined for the Mullah's troops."

"It is a good plan," said Tom, "and I can see the need for secrecy. To-morrow we shall go on board the dhow, and we shall be careful to follow your wishes. Can you tell us how long the passage will take, and where we shall be landed?"

Again the old man looked suspiciously at him, and then shook his head emphatically.

"No, I cannot tell you that. If Allah wills it, you shall land upon the coast and return to your people."

Some five minutes later Tom touched Jim upon the arm, and made signs to him to rise. Then, nodding to the natives, they left the circle, and went on into the bazaar. But they had already had one experience of native cunning and curiosity, and instead of turning their steps towards the room in which they had disguised themselves, they moved away in the opposite direction, and taking advantage of a narrow alley, which was filled with chattering natives, they mingled with the crowd, and sauntered on, now looking curiously at the wares of some Hindoo merchant, and then watching with evident interest the skill of a juggler, who sat in the middle of the street, with an admiring circle about him. Winding hither and thither, they at length came to a deserted part, and having hidden in the shadow of a booth for some ten minutes, so as to assure themselves that they were not followed, they took to their heels, and before very long had reached the dwelling in which they were to shelter that night.

"We're in luck," exclaimed Tom, in tones of satisfaction. "I must admit that at one moment I thought it was all up with us, for these natives are suspicious beggars, and would think nothing of killing anyone whom they suspected of spying upon them. If they had discovered us, you may take it for certain that we should have disappeared for good, and no amount of searching on the part of our friends would have led to news of our fate. There is no doubt that they are masters at the art, and no bribe will induce anyone to give evidence against his comrades."

"I can quite believe that," answered Jim, "and I agree with you that things looked very black. Of course, I didn't understand what was happening, and am puzzling about it even now. But the shouting and excitement, and the fact that that fellow drew his knife, told me that trouble was coming. It was as much as I could do to sit there quietly, but I took my cue from you, and I can tell you I was jolly glad when the squabble ended."

"You behaved like a brick, old boy. Considering that you are a novice, and quite unused to these natives, you showed no end of pluck. I admit that it was not without some misgivings that I allowed you to accompany me into the bazaar, for, you see, I hadn't an idea how you would behave. But I felt sure that the fellow who could come out here, and quietly make his preparations to face the dangers of an expedition into the heart of Somaliland, must be someone quite out of the ordinary. Of course, you might have been a thoughtless kind of beggar, who had no fear simply because you were unaware of, and had taken no trouble to find out, the difficulties and risks you were about to face. But I soon saw that you realized the gravity of your task, and, by George! I admired you for it, for there are precious few youngsters of your age who would have the grit to go on with the matter. But I am wandering from the subject. There's no doubt that if you had flinched, and shouted out when that beggar drew his knife, we should have been set upon by the whole gang of ruffians, and, though we were armed with revolvers, we should have had precious little chance. The whole row arose because you made no answer when they invited you to sing."

Throwing himself upon the bed, Tom Dixon gave his comrade a full account of the altercation, and then went on to describe how a passage had been offered them upon the dhow, which was to sail upon the following day, with arms for the Mullah.

"It will not do to take any risks," he said, "and therefore I vote that we practise going aboard and making the sign, for the slightest slip would mean ruin to our plans."

Accordingly, while Tom stood at one end of the room, Jim advanced from the other, and turning, raised his fingers to his lips as he passed him. Not till he had done it some half-dozen times was Tom satisfied, and then he, too, went through the process.

"The next thing will be to give news to the Governor," said Tom, "so as to make it possible for the gunboat to intercept us. She left Aden a couple of days ago, but was to return to-morrow night. If she slips away again at once, she should easily overtake us, and then I should give very little for the chances of the crew. There should be four on board besides ourselves, and if we cannot master

them with our revolvers, I shall be greatly surprised. It will be a feather in our caps, Jim, to capture the dhow by ourselves and then hand her over to the gunboat."

"But you said that you had been unable to ascertain the destination of the dhow," interposed Jim. "Supposing the gunboat could not find her?"

"It would be very awkward, and that's where the risk comes in."

"Yes, it would be awkward," agreed Jim; "but then there would be all the more honour in capturing her. It would be grand to overpower the crew and compel them to sail the dhow back to Aden."

"Perhaps it will turn out like that," said Tom. "But you lie down on the bed and have a sleep while I go off to the Governor. I shall be back within an hour, and shall make myself comfortable in the corner there with a blanket as a covering. No," he exclaimed, seeing Jim about to remonstrate, "you are not yet used to sleeping on a hard floor like the natives. But I am, and even prefer it."

A few moments later Jim was left alone in the room, and blowing out the candle, at once lay down upon the bed and settled himself to sleep. An hour later his comrade returned, and threw himself down in the corner, where his heavy breathing soon gave evidence of the fact that he, too, had forgotten the adventures of the night and was lost in dreams.

Scarcely had the sun risen on the following morning when both were astir, and at once rearranged their clothing, so as to make sure that their disguise was satisfactory and would pass muster in broad daylight. Then Tom produced a small oil stove and a frying-pan, and began to prepare breakfast. Eggs were to be had in plenty, and as these were easy to cook, four of them were quickly spluttering upon the pan. Meanwhile a kettle of water was set upon a second stove to boil, and soon they sat down to a satisfying if not dainty repast. To a hungry man food, if clean and fairly well prepared, is always acceptable, and Jim and his companion were not the ones to turn up their noses simply because their eggs reposed on rough tin plates, and their tea was contained in mugs of similar material. Seated upon the two chairs of which the room boasted, and taking the plates upon their knees, they set to work with energy, and quickly caused the food to disappear. Indeed, so keen was their appetite, that they unanimously agreed to prepare a second relay of eggs, and partook of them with the same relish.

"And now to business," cried Jim cheerily. "I feel as fresh as paint, and quite ready for this adventure. Shall I do as I am?"

For the moment Tom did not answer, but pulling the curtain from the window so as to allow all the light that was possible to enter the room, he placed his comrade in the centre and walked slowly round him.

"The disguise is perfect," he said in tones of satisfaction. "I guarantee that you will pass muster anywhere, and, so long as you remember that you are never to open your lips, I have little fear that you will be discovered. Let me give you a little additional advice. As we go towards the dhow it is quite on the cards that we shall run across some of the passengers who accompanied you from England, and you may be tempted to renew your friendship with them, quite forgetful of your disguise. But you must not dream of doing such a thing, for sharp eyes are always watching in this town, and were the natives to learn that a spy is amongst them, your chances of success in Somaliland would be considerably diminished. Now, are your revolvers in position, and do you feel ready to accompany me?"

"Quite," exclaimed Jim, with emphasis. "I tell you that I feel as light-hearted as possible, and fully prepared for the adventure."

"Then come along."

Leading the way to the window, Tom Dixon threw it open, and placing a chair beneath it, stepped upon it and crawled through. Jim followed, without hesitation, and found himself in a narrow courtyard, from which a gate that was almost tumbling from its hinges led into a street behind. A glance showed them that the street was empty, and at once they stepped into it, and hurrying along, were soon in the main thoroughfare of Aden.

Had anyone taken the trouble to scrutinize them closely, he would have seen two stalwart and swarthy men, one somewhat younger than the other, and of slightly smaller proportions, but both evidently from the shores of Northern Africa. They strode along with that quick shuffling gait common to men of their race, and due, no doubt, in some degree, to the sandals which they wear. That they were strangers to Aden could be easily guessed, for they looked curiously about them, and stopped every now and again to look in at the shop windows. An Englishman marching along the footpath was obviously an object of interest and respect, for they turned aside to give him more room to pass, and gazed at him in wonderment. So cleverly did they act their part that no one suspected that they were not what they pretended to be, and even the natives, who swarmed everywhere, let them pass without a doubt. On one occasion a native arrested their progress, and would have entered into conversation with Jim, but a few words from Tom altered his intention, and he stood aside, allowing them to pass without comment. A few minutes later, when turning a corner sharply, they barely escaped running into a second Englishman, who was no other than Mr. Andrews. But he motioned them aside with a brusque "Out of the way!" and went on, without a thought of the two young fellows who had sat with him on the previous evening, and without a suspicion that the two Somali tribesmen whom he had met face to face were those whose interests he had so much at heart.

Half an hour's sharp walk brought Jim and his companion to the shore, where they paused for some minutes to gaze at a large steamer which was moored there, undergoing the process of coaling with the help of a perfect army of dusky figures who swarmed about her, shouting at the top of their voices.

From there they took their way to that part of the harbour usually allotted to native craft, and before very long had the satisfaction of noting that one which floated in deep water, and was of fairly large proportions, had a thin streak of red upon her bows.

Tom at once turned towards her, and, followed closely by Jim, went down to the water's edge. A number of flimsy native boats were drawn up on the mud, with their owners seated chatting beside them. As soon as they caught sight of the two strangers, the boatmen at once sprang to their feet, and, gesticulating wildly, offered their services.

"We want to go aboard the dhow there," said Tom shortly, selecting one of the boatmen. "What will you take us for?"

A price was agreed upon after some little haggling, and a few moments later a boat was run down into the water and pushed off. Taking his place in the stern, the oarsman paddled out into deep water, and quickly brought them alongside the dhow. Tom at once handed him his fare, and then, grasping the halliards, which were close at hand, swarmed up on deck, closely followed by Jim. As he did so he threw a glance aloft, and noted that the huge leg-of-mutton sail which was tied up to the mast had a large rent in one corner of it.

"We are on the right ship, at any rate," he said to himself. "And now for the crew."

Turning towards the stern of the dhow, he and Jim walked towards a narrow hatchway, which evidently gave admission to the hold. As they did so, three figures started up from behind some coils of rope with the silence of spectres, and gazed at them curiously and suspiciously; while a fourth, happening to thrust his head up at that moment, caught sight of the strangers, and, with a guttural exclamation, climbed out upon the deck. They were fierce-looking fellows, clad in scanty raiment, and undoubtedly armed, for, as the newcomers returned their glances and ran their eyes over them, they noted the handle of more than one weapon protruding from their waist-cloths, while the man who had just emerged from the hold bore a pistol of gigantic proportions.

"We shall have our work cut out to master them," Jim said to himself, "for they will fight hard and make a desperate resistance. However, so long as their suspicions are not aroused, and they believe that we are friends, and to be thoroughly relied upon, we shall have every opportunity of taking them by surprise. If we are successful in doing that, I think we shall be able to overawe them; and if not, why, they must look to themselves."

A movement on Tom's part now attracted his attention, and following him closely, Jim strode down the deck, taking little notice of the natives. Arrived at the hatchway, his companion paused for the space of a moment, and rapidly made the sign. Instantly the crew, who had stood there with menacing looks, evidently determined to attack them should they prove to be enemies come to spy upon them, sauntered away, watching, however, to see that Jim, too, lifted his fingers to his lips. A moment later both had disappeared into the darkness of the hold, and, creeping forward, sat down side by side.

"Guns!" whispered Jim, feeling about with his hands, and venturing for one second to break the silence which he had promised to observe. "Scores of them! They are all over the place."

"And precious uncomfortable to sit upon," answered his companion in husky tones. "The stock of one is digging into me. But, hush! We must not talk, for those beggars are certain to be curious about us, and we may take it for granted that for a day at least they will watch us like cats. No doubt, for the present, and until the dhow sails, we shall be left severely alone; but then will come the trial. Recollect, Jim, that we are landsmen, and don't forget to bungle when you hang on to a rope. I shall let them know of your vow, and you must act up to it by appearing morose and stupid. Hear nothing; say nothing; but wait until everything is explained to you by signs."

"Right, old man; you may rely upon me," was Jim's whispered reply; after which they both sat silently, neither venturing to speak nor move, but listening intently to every sound that reached their ears. Now and again they could hear the distant shout of some native boatman, or the howl of a cur prowling along the shore. Then, too, the voices of the crew could be occasionally heard as they chatted together on the deck, but the actual words could not be distinguished at that distance, though Tom would have given anything to learn what they were saying. And all the while the dhow rolled lazily from side to side, her mast creaking dismally as she did so, while the rigging rattled loudly against the woodwork. Occasionally, as a boat of large proportions passed, the sea would come with a splash against the side and drown all other sounds. But the noise soon quieted down, and Jim and Tom found themselves listening again, as if fascinated, to the distant shouts, the murmur of voices above, and the flapping of the sail.

Three long and weary hours passed – hours of suspense to the two young Englishmen seated below; and then, just as their patience was exhausted, they heard someone moving on the deck. There was a patter of bare feet upon the boards, followed by the noise of a rope passing through a block.

"Up goes the sail!" whispered Jim, in tones of delight. "Hurrah! We're off!"

"Then prepare to go on deck," answered Tom. "They'll wait until we're out of sight, and then will call us up."

"Ah, there she goes!" exclaimed Jim, as the dhow suddenly heeled over, and began to move through the water. A minute later she was driving along before a brisk breeze, and the two young fellows below realized that, at last, their adventure had begun in earnest.

## CHAPTER V

### A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER

Barely half an hour had passed from the time when the sail was unloosed, and the dhow cast off her moorings, before one of the crew knelt upon the deck, and, thrusting his head through the hatchway, shouted to Jim and his companion to come out of the hold.

"Now for it," whispered Tom. "Keep cool, and be perfectly unconcerned. If there is trouble, do not hesitate for an instant, but draw your revolvers and shoot. You've only got to look at those fellows' faces to see that we have to deal with desperate men, who would kill us if they had the slightest doubts of our good faith. Ready?"

"Quite," answered Jim with a calmness that surprised himself.

"Then up we go."

Rising to their feet, and bending low, for the cargo of guns left little space in which to move, they crept towards the hatchway, and in due time emerged upon the deck, blinking as the dazzling rays of the noonday sun fell upon their eyes. When they had accustomed themselves to the strong light, they became aware that three of the crew confronted them, while the fourth stood at the tiller, keeping the vessel to her course. Right astern, a dim blue line showed the position of Aden, while ahead, and on either hand, nothing but blue ocean could be seen. Not a sail was in sight, though Jim strained his eyes in every direction, and not a streak of cloud in the sky could, by the wildest flight of imagination, be interpreted as the smoke from the funnel of the gunboat. But at this moment one of the natives addressed him.

"You and your comrade can lie upon the deck for a while," he said, "but you must be ready at any moment to give us a help. Keep a keen look-out in all directions, and if you see a sail, shout so that I shall know. If we are pursued we must fly, and may Allah send a breeze to aid us. If not, we will fight, and in that we are told that you can help us."

"We hear what you say," answered Tom hurriedly, anxious to explain his companion's silence. "Take no notice of my friend, for, as those who sent us here may have told you, he is, for the time being, both deaf and dumb. Do not speak to him, I beg of you, for he will not answer, and will stand, as he does now, refusing to comprehend your words. If you have orders to give, I will hand them on to him by signs. As for fighting, what is that to us? In our country we are ever at war, and should be miserable without it. Make your mind easy, therefore, for we shall strike hard when the moment of danger arrives."

Apparently his words satisfied the natives, for they turned away, and walked towards the steersman. Tom at once grasped Jim by the arm, and pointing to the deck, strode across to the bulwark, and threw himself down there for an instant. Then he rose to his feet again, and placing a hand above his eyes, so as to shield them from the sun, stared long and anxiously across the sea. Again he threw himself upon the deck and repeated the process, but this time with a different result, for, apparently, he caught sight of some distant object, and giving vent to a shout, ran to communicate his news to the crew. Indeed, so realistic was his acting that they, too, imagined he had seen something of interest, and at once came crowding to the bulwarks, and stared eagerly across the water in the vain endeavour to discover some object between themselves and the horizon.

"Where?" shouted the man who had addressed Jim, and who seemed to be the master. "Where?" he repeated anxiously. "I can see no sail, though it is possible that one is hidden in the haze yonder. Hold out your arm so that I may follow the direction."

There was no doubt from the manner in which he spoke, and from the anxiety displayed by the remainder of the crew, that the prospect of discovery had filled them with alarm. They were

conscious that they were engaged upon an unlawful expedition, and though that did not trouble them much, the thought of what would follow if they were captured set them trembling.

"Ah, what is that?" shouted one of their number. "I can see something which has the appearance of a bird, but which may well be a sail. If so, we are safe, for the Government would follow us in a steamship, if at all."

"It is nothing," replied Tom calmly, with difficulty keeping his features straight. "I saw nothing to alarm me, but was merely explaining to my comrade the duties he was to carry out. See, it is evident that he understands."

"Is that so?" was the grumbling reply. "By the manner in which you gave the alarm, I thought you had sighted a suspicious sail, and my heart leapt into my mouth at your shout. But it is well that there is nothing in it. Go to your places now, and do not forget to keep constant watch."

For a minute he stood by the bulwark, while Jim and his companion went forward and threw themselves upon the deck. Then he retired to the stern of the vessel, and sat down in the shade cast by the enormous sail.

For three hours the dhow kept steadily on her course, and then Jim, who lay upon the starboard side, suddenly caught sight of a speck of white coming from the opposite direction. Keeping his eyes fixed upon it, he noticed that it increased rapidly in size, and soon there was no doubt that it was another vessel. Giving a low cough to attract Tom's attention, he pointed towards the object, and then sprang to his feet. Walking along the deck, he approached the group at the farther end, and laid his hand upon the shoulder of the master, shaking him as he did so, for he had fallen asleep.

In a moment all were on their feet, and staring across the sea.

"It is a large dhow," said the man who commanded the crew, "and she is sweeping down in our direction. What do you think she is?"

"It is too early to say," answered one of the men, "but she is not a trader – of that I am sure – nor does she belong to the Government. It is possible that she comes from some African port, but until she is closer I cannot be certain. This I can say, she is larger than any dhow plying between Aden and the opposite coast, and therefore we shall do well to keep her at a distance."

For a few minutes the natives held a heated conversation, and a sharp order was given to alter the course. When that was done, and the dhow was holding along in a southerly direction, the crew gathered in the bows and stood there, gazing anxiously at the distant vessel. Cries of alarm escaped their lips when they noticed that her head came round, and that she, too, had altered her course so as to intercept them.

"She sails faster than we do!" exclaimed the master, with an oath. "We cannot hope to escape her, and therefore I advise that we resume our course, and make ready for an encounter, though it is more than likely that she will prove to be a friend. And if not that – well, we must prepare to sell our lives dearly. But I cannot believe that we have anything to fear, for none but peaceful traders sail upon this sea."

"That is so," agreed one of the crew. "But I have heard that, at times, piratical craft sail from the coast of Africa, and swoop down upon the traders. If that dhow is bent upon such an expedition, we are lost, for her owners care no more for the Mullah than they do for other people."

The news filled his companions with dismay. In a half-hearted manner they produced a number of guns from the hold, and proceeded to load them. Then they placed swords beside the bulwark, and motioned to Jim and Tom to select a couple.

"There is trouble before us, and we must fight for our lives," said the master, brightening up a little. "If you do not wish to be killed, you must join us, and help in the struggle."

"We shall do so gladly, if there is need," answered Tom. "But let us hope that the stranger will turn out to be a friend."

"I wish I could think the same," the master replied with a shake of his head. "It is more than likely that she is a pirate. But now we must separate. You and your friend go forward into the bows.

I shall station two of my men in the centre of the dhow, while I and the fourth go aft. Then we shall be prepared at all points, and wherever they attempt to board us, we shall have men at hand to beat them back."

"If I were you I should order everyone to lie down," said Tom, thoughtfully. "At the distance they are from us now they cannot have ascertained how many we have on board, and will naturally keep away until they are certain. If they are bent on capturing us, and open fire when within range, we can all creep to the centre and give them a volley. Then we'll hasten to the bows, and fire from that quarter. You have plenty of guns, so that you have only to load a number, and pile them at various points along the deck, in readiness for our volleys. If we are quick, and take good care to keep well below the bulwarks, we ought to confuse them, and make them think that we have plenty of men."

"It is a good plan," the native answered. "I shall see that the guns are brought up at once, and the men warned. That ship will sail close up to us, expecting us to fall an easy prey. But we'll astonish them with our bullets, and will set them wondering, for it is unusual for a peaceful trader, as we are supposed to be, to carry any firearms. Go forward now, and explain to your comrade."

Tom at once ran to the bows, where Jim was reclining on the deck, watching the oncoming ship, and throwing himself down beside him, began to make signs to him, keeping a watch all the time, however, upon the other members of the crew.

"Ah, they've gone below for the guns," he said at last, "and there is only the man at the helm to be feared, and he is engaged in watching this pirate, or whatever she may be. Listen, Jim. We're in for a struggle, for that ship is an enemy, and is probably filled with negro cut-throats. I have advised the master of our ship to make a fight for it, but I doubt if he or his men have the necessary courage. What are we to do if that is the case?"

"It is hard to say, Tom. If the dhow over there carries a big crew, resistance would be madness, in my opinion. Better to give in and fraternize with them, if they will allow us, trusting to get away from them at some future date. That's the best advice I can give. But if you think we have any chance, I'm ready and willing to stand by you."

"I know that, old boy," answered Tom warmly; "but though I have advised resistance, I doubt whether it will be attempted. We'll just wait, and see how things go. This stranger may turn out, after all, to be a friend."

Whatever hopes they might have had as to the peaceful nature of the approaching dhow, they were quickly disappointed, for she was coming up rapidly, aided by a steady and brisk breeze. Almost before they thought it possible, she was within range, and then they saw that she was quite double the size of their vessel. Shooting up into the wind, she lay to dead across their bows, displaying at the same moment a broad expanse of white deck, which was thickly crowded with men. Almost instantly a puff of smoke belched from her bulwarks, and a ball came hurtling over the water.

"Caught, I am afraid," whispered Jim, peeping at the stranger. "We haven't a chance, Tom, for look at our comrades."

As he spoke the leader of the native crew rushed to the helm and waved his arm frantically in token of surrender, while his men threw themselves upon the deck, and grovelled there, in terror lest another shot should be fired by the pirate.

"Curs!" exclaimed Tom, angrily. "When there is no danger to be feared, they are fierce enough looking fellows. But now that we are in trouble, they show the real stuff of which they are made. But what are we to do?"

"Stay where we are till the enemy comes alongside," answered Jim, promptly. "If they rush on board with the intention of killing us, we must stand side by side up here in the bows, and keep them off with our revolvers. It is ten chances to one that they are only armed with swords, and in that case we ought to be able to make a good fight of it. Whatever happens, I don't mean to be killed without a struggle."

He spoke quite calmly, and thrust his hands into his waistcloth to make certain that his weapons were there. As for Tom, he looked at his young companion with amazement, and then, fired by his example of pluck, prepared to do as he had said.

"Then it's agreed that, if there is no hope, we fight," he said; "and if there is, we give ourselves up, and trust to better luck later on."

"That's it," replied Jim, shortly. "It would be madness to resist if they were inclined to spare our lives. But if they want to slay us, they'll find one here who strongly objects."

By now, the big native dhow had paid off into her course again, and, seeing that she had nothing to fear, came on till within easy hailing-distance. Then a huge negro, dressed in gaudy colours, and bearing a cutlass in his hand, sprang upon the bulwarks, and shouted to them.

"Who are you?" he cried. "And where do you come from?"

Shaking with terror, the master went to the side, and answered that there were five besides himself on the vessel, and that she came from Aden.

"Where for, and what cargo?" was the next question.

"For the coast, with arms for the Mullah."

"Then we are friends," came the answer. "The Mullah is our master also, and we sail the sea in his ship. All whom we capture we send to him to swell his forces, while the loot we keep for ourselves. Do you know of any trader about to leave the shores on the farther side?"

"Not one," shouted the master, scarcely able to restrain his joy. "But I can tell you that a British gunboat is on patrol, and you will do well to keep clear of her. Now, good-bye. We must press on at our fastest pace."

Going aft to the helm he brought the dhow round, and in another minute they were shooting away from the piratical-looking stranger, leaving her rolling gently on the water, with her bulwarks lined by a crew of natives, of all sorts of every race, who stood there watching the smaller vessel depart. Ten minutes later she, too, had turned, and was dashing away at a pace which showed how hopeless it would have been for the dhow to have attempted to evade her.

The delight of the master and crew of the smaller vessel was immense, and they could scarcely contain themselves for joy. They threw themselves into one another's arms, leapt high into the air, and shouted at the top of their voices. Then they produced a huddle-buddle, and, going aft, squatted down close to the steersman, and began to converse in loud tones. It was wonderful to see the change in their appearance. Whereas, a few minutes before, they had been shaking with terror, and prepared to accept their death without so much as a struggle, now they held their heads erect, and recounted to one another, in piercing tones, the brave deeds which they would have accomplished had the larger dhow turned out, after all, to be an enemy.

As for Jim and his friend, they lay full length upon the deck in the bows of the vessel, keeping a bright look-out over the bulwarks, and apparently undisturbed by the excitement of recent events. But, for all that, they were deeply relieved, for the situation had for a time seemed desperate.

"I am trying to think what would have happened," whispered Jim, taking advantage of the fact that the natives were fully engaged in conversation. "Suppose those pirates had compelled us to join them, and we had afterwards fallen in with a British ship, we should have been in a very awkward position, for we could not have refused to fight."

"We should have found a way out of it somehow, Jim. I noticed that, like this dhow, she carried a dinghy on her decks, and we could have taken advantage of that and slipped away during the night. But I am glad that things have turned out as they have, for now we have a better chance of capturing this vessel. Look out! Here's one of the beggars coming to talk to us."

As he spoke one of the men aft handed the stem of the huddle-buddle to his companion and came running forward.

"The chief bids you come and join us," he cried, and at once returned to his old position.

"You stay here, Jim," whispered Tom; "those fellows want a chat, so I'll go and smoke with them. If you were to attempt that you would certainly fail, for it requires a deal of practice to tackle a hubble-bubble."

Accordingly, leaving Jim on the look-out in the bows of the vessel, Tom sauntered aft, and was soon squatting beside the natives. The stem of the pipe was at once handed to him, and soon he was engaged in animated conversation. It was evident that something had aroused the suspicion of the master and his crew, for they questioned him closely. But his answers seemed to satisfy them, and in half an hour he returned to Jim's side, and taking advantage of the fact that the natives were still engaged in animated conversation, began to chat in low tones to him.

"They seem inclined to be very friendly," he said, "but I am not quite satisfied. Something – I don't know what it is – seems to have upset them. The fact of the matter is they don't quite believe in this silence of yours. One man declared that he had seen us exchanging words when the pirate bore down upon us. Of course, I said that that was impossible, and that he had imagined it. But he was positive, and, I could see, had been talking to his fellows. However, the subject dropped, and after a time turned to the Mullah. His position was mentioned, and, by pretending to know a great deal more about him than I really do, they became quite confiding, and told me the number of adherents of which he boasted. In the most unconcerned manner, I mentioned that a white prisoner had fallen into his hands of late, and I could see at once that they knew all about it. But I could get no further information from them.

"'Yes,' said their chief, 'a man was thrown upon the shore, and fell into the Mullah's hands; but he is only one, whereas, as soon as the foolish English advance, hundreds more will be made into slaves.'

"That's all I could get out of him, and so, after changing the conversation and having another turn at the hubble-bubble, I rose to my feet and returned."

"I'm not surprised to hear that they are suspicious, Tom. I saw one of the natives look at us while we were deciding what to do, and if he is quite certain that he saw us speaking, he will never be satisfied until he has found out all about us. You know what kind of men these fellows are, better than I do, and I have no doubt that, rather than run any risk in the matter, they would pounce upon us and throw us overboard. I advise that we keep watch in turn. It's already getting dark, and, if you like, I'll take the first watch. I'll wake you in a couple of hours, and you can do the same for me when you have had your turn. Hush! They are moving."

Turning his head, Jim saw the natives rise to their feet and disappear down the hatchway. Ten minutes later they climbed to the deck again, bearing a large dish and a gourd of water, and, having given the steersman a drink and placed a pile of food beside him, they advanced to the mast and sat down there, motioning to Jim and Tom to join them. Gladly did the young fellows obey the summons, for many hours had elapsed since they had partaken of any food, and their naturally keen appetites were sharpened by the sea air and by the excitement of the past few hours. Indeed, up to that moment, so much had occurred that Jim had had no time to think of food, for all his thoughts had been concentrated upon his surroundings. But the sight of it reminded him at once of his long fast, and he joined the group, feeling that it would require a large amount to satisfy his hunger.

Squatting around the bowl, they helped themselves to dates, of which there was an abundant supply. Simple though the food was it was satisfying, and Jim soon returned to his old position, feeling very much better. Tom remained for a short while chatting with the natives, and then rejoined his friend. It was now evening, and within a few minutes darkness fell, for there is scarcely any twilight in the Tropics.

"The night will be a cold one, and the dew heavy," said the master, coming up to them. "You had better go down into the hold and sleep there. I will post a man up here to keep watch."

"If it is the same to you, we would rather remain where we are," Tom answered promptly. "You see, we are not used to this kind of thing, and that stuffy hold makes us feel ill. We will ask you to lend us a couple of blankets in which to wrap ourselves."

"You shall have them, but you cannot sleep here, for the look-out man must stand in this position; but you can go farther along the deck, if you like. Come with me now, and I shall give you what you have asked for."

Ten minutes later Jim and his friend were wrapped from head to foot in thick blankets, and had taken their places close to the bulwark on one side, and about the centre of the vessel. As they did so one of the crew passed them and went to take his station forward, while the remainder proceeded aft, and throwing themselves down upon the deck, prepared to sleep. Two hours passed without incident, Tom's heavy breathing telling clearly that he was asleep. Then Jim, whose eyes had been wide open all the time, touched him gently with his foot, and had the satisfaction of seeing that he had awakened his companion. Then curling himself in his blanket, he closed his eyes. He could not sleep, however, for, though he was tired out with the long day of excitement, his novel position, and the thought that danger threatened them, kept him wide awake. He was, therefore, fully prepared when Tom stealthily stretched out an arm and tugged at his blanket, and at once sat up with his back against the bulwark. Once more it was time for his companion's watch, and Jim, who was now feeling decidedly drowsy, awoke him and lay down again upon the deck. A few minutes later he was fast asleep, and remained so for a considerable period. But a shout from Tom suddenly roused him, and, starting up, he saw that a struggle was taking place within a few feet of him. Dawn was just breaking, and the light enabled him to discover the fact that his companion was clasped in the arms of two of the natives, who were hustling him towards the bulwarks, and evidently endeavouring to throw him overboard.

Springing to his feet, Jim leapt across the deck at one bound, and sent his fist crashing into the face of one of Tom's opponents. Then, with a shout, he clasped the other by the neck, and, tearing him from his hold, sent him reeling across the deck.

"What has happened, Tom?" he asked. "What made them attack you?"

"I can't say," was the breathless answer; "but I deserved to be thrown overboard, for I believe I had fallen asleep. At any rate, they were upon me before I was aware of it, and, while one held me by the shoulders and placed a hand firmly over my mouth, the other caught me by the legs, and hustled me to the side. I fought like a cat, and managed to free my mouth. But you saved my life, old chap."

"Look out! They are preparing to rush again," cried Jim, in a warning voice. "I suppose we must make a fight for it."

As they were talking, the two men who had attacked Tom had picked themselves up, and had retired to their comrades, who stood close to the helm. That they were disconcerted by the sudden resistance was evident, but, seeing only two unarmed young fellows, they forgot their fear, and at once prepared to renew the combat. Snatching arms from a pile which lay beside them on the deck, they shouted to their comrades to join in the struggle, and then came rushing towards Jim and Tom at their fastest pace.

It was a critical moment, and might well have unnerved the bravest of men. Indeed, Tom was so shaken by the narrow escape he had had, that, for a second or two, he did nothing but stare at his opponents, as if fascinated. Jim, however, was fully alive to the danger, and promptly took measures to protect himself. Without taking his eyes from the natives he felt for and grasped the butt of a revolver, and, as they approached, presented it at their heads, hesitating to press the trigger in the hope that a sight of the weapon would overawe them. But they were maddened with rage, and, with shrill cries, came on boldly, waving their swords above their heads.

Crack! Jim pressed the trigger ever so gently, and, to his astonishment, the report had scarcely rung out upon the air when the leading man suddenly tossed his weapon above his head and fell to the deck with a crash. A second later, the native who followed him tripped over his body, and came sprawling upon all fours, where he lay, stunned by the fall.

"Now get ready for the other two," cried Jim. "Pull yourself together, Tom, and when they rush, leave me to manage the first one. You can put a bullet into the second, if necessary, but we don't want to kill them all, if it can be helped. Ah, here they come!"

Undeterred by the quick fate which had befallen their comrades, the master of the dhow advanced cautiously along the deck, accompanied by the steersman, and armed with an enormous double-handed sword, which he held well before him. The steersman snatched at one of the guns which had been loaded in preparation for the attack of the pirate on the previous evening, and sinking upon one knee, took steady aim in Jim's direction. He was in the act of firing it when Tom, who had suddenly come to his senses, took a snapshot at him with his revolver, in the hope of killing him before he could do any harm. But the bullet flew wide of the mark, and striking the bulwarks, buried itself deep in the wood. An instant later there was a loud report, and, to Jim's amazement, the folds of linen which were bound about his head flew high into the air, while he staggered back, feeling as though someone had struck him violently.

But he was not the lad to give way without a struggle, or to cry out before he was hurt. Starting forward a pace or two, he levelled his revolver at the man who had just fired, and who was, at that moment, engaged in reaching for another gun. Sighting carefully, and with the utmost coolness, he pressed gently upon the trigger, and had the satisfaction of seeing the native start to his feet with a shriek of pain, and then collapse suddenly upon the deck.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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