

Bindloss Harold

# In the Misty Seas: A Story of the Sealers of Behring Strait



Harold Bindloss

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# Harold Bindloss

## In the Misty Seas: A Story of the Sealers of Behring Strait

### CHAPTER I JIMMY'S DUCK

"The sea!" said Bluey, the Nova Scotian, sitting up on his pillow. "Oh, yes. It's kind of pretty, but the only use I've got for it is for bathing in."

There was laughter and a growl of disapproval from two beds in a corner of the dormitory, for nobody could go to sleep at nine o'clock, especially on the last night of the term, though retiring at that hour was compulsory at Sandycombe School. Pearson, the assistant master, had not, however, come round as yet to turn the lights out, and the gas-jet blinked fitfully in the big wire cage which apparently protected it from unlawful experiments. It did not, however, do so in reality, because Niven had discovered that the cage could be unscrewed, and it was not difficult to curtail the hour of preparation in the morning and evening by blowing strenuously down the pipe in turn. There were, of course, risks attached to this, but Niven had pointed out that anybody caught at the operation would suffer in a good cause, and it provided work for the Sandycombe plumber, who was voted a good fellow because he would smuggle in forbidden dainties for a consideration.

"The sea," said Appleby, "is everything that's fine. What do you know about it, Bluey?"

"Well," said the Nova Scotian in his slowest drawl, "I do know quite a little. You see, ours is a kind of hard country, and most of our folks go in sea now and then when they can't do better. Sometimes it's fishing way out on the Grand Banks where you got lost in a fog in the dory boats and starve before the schooner finds you, and if you don't it's quite likely a liner steaming twenty knots runs bang over you. Or it's carrying dried cod south in little schooners in winter time, with your long boots stuffed with straw to keep your feet from freezing, while you run for it under a trysail that's stiff with ice, with a full-size blizzard screaming behind you. No, sir. Going to sea isn't any kind of picnic, and that's why I'm sorry for Niven. The fellows who wrote those books 'bout cutting out pirates and catching slavers are dead, and it's 'bout time they were."

"Bluey's not going to stop to-night. Throw a pillow at him, somebody," said Niven, and there was a thud as the Nova Scotian's slipper, which was quicker than the pillow, alighted within an inch of the speaker's head.

Niven, however, took it good-naturedly, and he would have resented a better shot less than the remarks which had preceded it. He was going to sea, and had been describing his apprentice's uniform, and the life he fancied he was to lead on board a sailing ship, to an appreciative audience. His contentment had only one alloy, and that was the fact that Appleby, who had read Marryat and others with him under a gorse bush on sunny afternoons when he was presumed to be playing cricket, was not coming with him too. Nobody, however, was apparently willing to pay Appleby's premium, and Niven pinned his last hope on the possibility of his comrade being able to ship on the same vessel as ordinary seaman. Appleby, whom Niven privately considered somewhat slow and over-cautious, did not appear very enthusiastic about the scheme.

"To your kennels!" said somebody, and there was a footfall on the stairway, while two cots rattled as a couple of scantily-attired forms alighted upon them with a flying leap. They had been lying prone upon the floor giving a realistic representation of Niven swimming ashore with the captain in his teeth, though the lad who played the part of skipper protested vigorously that there was no necessity for his being grievously bitten.

"That was fine," said somebody. "When Pearson's gone we'll have it again. You could pour some water on to him first to make it more real."

"Then," said the skipper, "you'll get somebody else in the place of me. It was a good deal nicer the last time I was nibbled by a ferret, and I'm not going home with hydrophobia to please any of you."

After this there was silence whilst the footsteps grew nearer, and presently the assistant master came into the room.

"You are all here?" he said as he swept his glance from bed to bed.

Then he gave a little sigh of relief, for he had a good deal to do that night, and they were all there, and apparently very sleepy, while it was not his fault that he did not see that two of them wore their outdoor clothes under their night gear. Appleby and Niven had business on hand, and they had discovered that with the aid of contributions levied from their comrades it was possible to lay out a suit of clothing that sufficed to pass a hasty inspection on their chairs. Pearson, however, glanced round again, for he had been taught that there was need for greater watchfulness when his charges were unusually quiet, and then turned out the gas.

"Good-night, boys. If there is any breach of rules some of you will not go home to-morrow," he said.

Two minutes later everybody was wide awake again, and a voice was raised in a corner.

"Let's have a court-martial and try Bluey for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman," it said. "You'll be president, Appleby, and we'll make Niven executioner."

"Sorry," said Niven, "but we can't. You see, Appleby and I have got another assize on to-night. We're going to put an *habeas corpus* on Tileworks Jimmy's duck."

"More fools you!" said Bluey. "I'm sorry, too, because I've a few fixings handy that would double the court-martial up. Anyway, you'll only catch red-hot trouble instead of Jimmy's duck."

"What's that about a duck?" asked a lad who had come up in the middle of the term, and a comrade proceeded to enlighten him.

"It is by this time ancient history, and it may have been a drake," he said. "Anyway, this is Appleby's story. He stays here in the holidays, you know, and he made a catapult thing during the last ones."

"It wasn't," said Appleby. "It was a crossbow, and Pearson thought so much of it that he took it from me."

"Well," said the other, "Appleby went out shooting, and shot a wild duck, but it was a tame one, and Tileworks Jimmy's. Now if he'd been wiser he'd have buried it, but he took it to Jimmy's house. Jimmy wasn't in, and Appleby forgot, but a few days later Jimmy came round to see the Head, and wanted ten shillings for his duck. Took an affidavit that it would have won prizes at a dog show anywhere. The Head, who should have kicked him out, gave him five shillings, and stopped it out of Appleby's pocket-money, and Appleby went back to Jimmy's to ask for his duck. Jimmy told him how nice it was, and that he'd eaten the thing to save it going bad. That, I think, is Q.E.D. Appleby."

Appleby laughed softly. "You're not very far out, but it wasn't the duck but the principle of the thing that worried me," he said. "The one I shot was a common one worth one-and-six, and I didn't even get it, though when Jimmy took the money he sold it me. Now I don't like to be cheated by anybody."

There was a little laughter, for Appleby was known to be tenacious of his rights.

"It was better than a circus when he made the Aunt Sally man fork out the cocoa-nuts he won," said somebody.

"Well," said Appleby slowly, "it was right, and sixpence has to go a long way with me. I don't get so many of them as the rest of you."

He slipped out of bed as he spoke, and there was another rustle when Niven followed him, while a lad in the cot nearest them sat up.

"You haven't told us how you're going to get the duck," he said.

"That," said Niven, "is going to be almost too easy. I throw big stones on Jimmy's roof, and when he comes out after me Appleby slips in and gets the duck. With a little brains a fellow can do anything."

Next moment they were out in the dark corridor, and Niven held his breath as they slipped past the half-open door of a lighted room where the Head of the school was busy making out the bills. The treatment at Sandycombe was at least as firm as kind, and the Head was known to have an unpleasantly heavy hand. Nobody heard them, however, and in another minute or two they were crawling about the dark passage where Charley, the boy of all work, had laid out a long row of boots. Niven, it was characteristic, took the first pair that seemed to fit him, while Appleby went up and down the row on his hands and knees, until his comrade fancied he would never be ready. Then Niven shoved up a window.

"Get through while I hold it. There isn't any sash-weight," he said.

"Then who's going to hold it for you?" said Appleby. "There'll be no duck catching if it comes down with a bang."

Niven growled disgustedly. "Your turn! I never thought of that," he said.

"Then," said Appleby, "it's a good thing I did. Put this piece of stick under it."

It was done, and they dropped into a flower bed, slipped through the garden behind the hollies, across a quaggy field, and came out into the road just beyond the village. It was drizzling, and a bitter wind drove a thin white mist past them. Niven stood still a moment ankle-deep in mud, and glanced back towards the lights of the village blinking through the haze.

"It doesn't look quite so nice now, but we had better go on," he said.

Appleby said nothing, but laughed a little as he plodded on into the rain and mist, and, though the plan was Niven's, this was typical of him. Appleby was not very brilliant at either work or play, but he usually did what he took in hand with a slow thoroughness that occasionally carried him further than his comrade's cleverness. He was also slow to begin a friendship or make a quarrel, but those who drove him into the latter usually regretted it, and his friends were good. Nobody but Niven knew anything about his relations, while it was but once in the term, somebody sent him a few shillings for pocket money. Niven on the contrary could do almost anything he wanted well, and came back each term with several hampers and a big handful of silver in his pocket.

"It's beastly cold, and one of these boots is coming off. I'm not sure it's my own," he said. "It would be a good joke for the other fellow if I lost it."

"It wouldn't be for me," said Appleby dryly. "If I lost mine I would have to go home with you in my stockings, but we'll have to get on faster than we're doing."

They could scarcely see the hedgerows, and the mud got deeper. Now and then a half-seen tree shook big drops down on them as they went by, and there was a doleful crying of wild fowl from a marsh not far away. The drizzle also beat into their eyes, and Niven, who felt distinctly sorry he had ever heard about the duck, presently stopped altogether with his feet in a pool.

"We could still go back, Tom," he said.

"No," said Appleby dryly. "I don't think we could, though because I could manage it myself there's nothing to stop you if you wanted to."

There was not much mirth in Niven's laugh. "I'm not very anxious, if you put it like that," he said.

They went on again, getting rapidly wetter, until Niven fell down as they clambered over a dripping stile. "We're a pair of splay-footed asses, Tom," he said.

Appleby nodded. "Still, we'd be bigger ones if we did nothing after all this. I wouldn't sit there in the mud," he said.

Niven scrambled to his feet, and presently they crawled through a hedge into a rutted lane with the lighted window of a cottage close in front of them, and the radiance shone upon them as they stopped to glance up and down. Appleby stood square and resolute with decision in his face, and he

was short and thick, with long arms and broad shoulders. Niven shivered a little, and leaned forwards turning his head this way and that with quick, nervous movements. He was lithe and light, with a graceful suppleness that was not seen in his companion.

"Tom," he said softly, "there aren't any stones. Still, I could heave a lump of stiff mud through the window, and that would fetch him."

Appleby shook his head. "There are tiles yonder, and they would do as well," he said. "You see, we are entitled to the duck, but Jimmy's window is another thing. Give me a minute, and then begin."

He slipped away into the gloom of a hedge, and it was evidently high time, for a dog commenced growling. Niven felt very lonely as he stood still in the rain, but the depression only lasted a moment or two, and in another minute he had flung a big tile upon the roof. When the second went banging and rattling down the slates he raised a high-pitched howl.

"Jimmy, come out," he said. "Come out, you shuttle-toed clay stamper, and be a man."

He was not kept waiting long. The door swung open and a man stood out black against the light in the opening. He was peering into the darkness, and apparently grasped a good-sized stick, but when another tile crashed against the low roof above his head he saw the object deriding him in the mud.

"Ellen, loose the dog," he said as he sprang forward.

Niven promptly darted up the lane, but there were two things he had not counted on, and one of them was the dog, for Jimmy had not kept one when they last passed his cottage. The other was even more embarrassing, for while Niven could run tolerably well on turf in cricket shoes the deep sticky mud was different, and one of the boots which were somebody else's would slip up and down his foot. Still because Jimmy was not far behind him, he did all he could, and was disgusted to find that a tileworks labourer could run almost as well as he did. Indeed, for the first five minutes he had a horrible suspicion that Jimmy was running better, but presently it became evident that the splashing thud of heavy boots grew no louder, and he saw that he was at least maintaining his lead. Still, he could not shake off the pursuer, and while he held on with clenched hands and laboured breath an unfortunate thing happened. One foot sank deep in a rut, Niven staggered, blundered through another stride, and then rolled over in the grass under a tall hedge. That was bad, but it was worse to find that he had now only a stocking upon one foot. Jimmy was also unpleasantly close, and Niven, seeing he could not escape by flight, rolled a little further beneath the hedge.

Then he lay very still while the man came floundering down the road, and held his breath when he stopped as if to listen close beside him.

"The young varmint has made for the hedge gap," gasped the man. "If I cut across to the stile I might ketch him."

He went on, and when his footsteps could no longer be heard Niven crawled out and felt in the puddles for the boot. It was not to be found, and rising with a groan he worked round towards the back of the cottage. The dog was growling all the time, and he could hear a woman's voice as well as a rattle of chain, but presently he saw a dark object gliding along beneath a hedge. When he came up with it he noticed that Appleby had something in his hand.

"I've got it," he said.

Niven looked at the object he held up. "It's very quiet," he said.

"Of course!" said Appleby. "You wouldn't make much noise without your head. Killing anything is beastly, but there was a billhook handy. We've no time for talking now. It's a good big dog."

They crossed a field, and Niven's shoeless foot did not greatly embarrass him until they crawled through a hedge into recent ploughing, while as they plodded over it the growling of the dog drew nearer.

"Come on!" gasped Appleby. "She has got him loose at last."

The beast was close at hand when another hedge rose up blackly against the sky before them, and Niven swung off a little towards an oak that grew out of it.

"It's a horrible brute, but it can't climb a tree. I'm going for the oak," he said.

Appleby grasped his shoulder. "Jimmy could," he said. "Go on, and try if you can pull one of those stakes in the gap up."

In another minute Niven was tearing out a thick stake, and felt a little happier when he saw the end of it was sharpened, while Appleby had clawed up a big clod of stiff clay from the ploughing.

"He's only a cur, any way, and I think there's a stone in it," he said.

They could now dimly see the dog, and it was evident that it saw them, for it stopped, and then commenced to work round sideways in their direction, growling as though a little disconcerted by their waiting.

"It's an ugly beast," said Niven, whose heart was in his mouth. "It would get us if we ran."

"We're not going to run," said Appleby quietly, though his voice was a trifle hoarse. "Howl at him, Chriss."

Niven commenced a discordant hissing, and the dog growled more angrily. They could see it black against the ploughing, and it looked very big. Appleby was standing perfectly still with something held up above his head, and drew back a pace when the brute came creeping towards him.

"Here's something for you, Towser," he said, flinging his arm up.

Then a howl followed, and next moment Niven was tearing up the clay, and hurling it in handfuls after something that seemed fading in the dimness of the field. When he could see it no longer he stood up breathless.

"We've beaten him," he gasped. "It's about time we were going."

They went at once, and did not stop until they reached the road, where Niven leaned against a gate, and glanced down ruefully at his foot.

"It wasn't so bad on the grass, but I don't know how I'm going to get home now," he said.

"Put up your foot," said Appleby. "We'll tie our handkerchiefs round it."

He was quick with his fingers, but when they turned homewards Niven was not exactly happy. He was wet and very muddy, while, as he afterwards observed, walking a long way on one foot is not especially easy. It was also raining steadily, and a little trickle from his soaked cap ran down his shoulders, while the bare hedgerows seemed to crawl back towards them very slowly. The mud squelched and splashed underfoot, and there was only the crying of the plover in the darkness.

"I never fancied it was such a beastly long way to the tileworks," he said as he limped on painfully.

At last when the knotted handkerchief hurt his foot horribly a light or two blinked faintly through the rain, and presently they plodded into the silent village. Nobody seemed to see them, the window they had slipped out of was still open, and crawling in they went up the stairway and along the corridor on tiptoe with the water draining from them. Niven had expected to find his comrades asleep, and was too wet and dispirited to wish to waken them, but there was a murmur of sympathy when he crept in.

"I wouldn't be you," said somebody. "The Head came in to ask how many panes in the greenhouse Nettleton had broken, and he saw you were away."

"And he came back, and threatened to keep the whole of us here to-morrow, if we didn't tell him where you were," said another lad. "It was very nice of you to let us all into lumber."

"Did you tell him?" asked Appleby.

"Of course!" said a third speaker sardonically. "It's just what we would do. I'll thank you for that to-morrow, and I'd get up now only the Head would hear us, and he's breathing slaughter."

"Tearing around," said Bluey the Nova Scotian. "Cutlasses and pistols, and the magazine open! You know the kind of thing you're fond of reading."

Niven, who was tired out, groaned. As he told his comrades afterwards he had enjoyed himself sufficiently already, and one wanted to brace up before a visit from the Head.

"What are we going to do, Tom?" he said.

Appleby laughed softly. "I'm going straight to bed," he said. "The Head's busy, and there mayn't be anything very dreadful if he sends Pearson."

He was undressed in another two minutes, and as Niven crept into bed somebody said, "Did you get the duck?"

"We did," said Niven solemnly. "And be hanged to it! That's enough for you or anybody, and don't worry me. I want to be asleep when the Head comes."

"You needn't be afraid he'll mind waking you," said another lad. "I'd rolled up my jacket, so it looked just like Appleby's big head, and when he saw it wasn't, he got speechless mad."

Ten minutes passed, and Niven was just feeling a little warm again when there were footsteps in the corridor. They drew nearer, and with a little gasp of dismay he swung himself out of and then under his bed. A swish and a rustle told him that Appleby had followed his example, and a voice from under the adjoining cot said, "He'll go away again if he doesn't find us, and we may tire him out before the morning."

Next moment the door was opened, and while a light shone in somebody said, "Asleep, of course, all of you! Have Niven and Appleby returned yet?"

Niven, glancing out from under his cot, saw a robust elderly gentleman holding a candle above him, while he swung what looked like a horse girth suggestively in his other hand, but a snore answered the master's question, and he laughed unpleasantly.

"We have had sufficient nonsense," he said. "You can either tell me at once where your comrades went, or improve your memories by writing lines the rest of the night."

Here and there a sleepy object sat up on a bed, but there was still no answer, and the head of Sandycombe School tapped his foot impatiently on the flooring.

"I'm not in a mood for trifling, boys," he said. "You have another minute to decide in, and nobody in this room will go home to-morrow if you do not tell me then."

There was for several seconds a silence that could be felt, and though all of those who heard him knew the head of the school would keep his word, nobody spoke. Then there was a rustle under a bed, and Niven caught a low murmur, "Keep still. If he get's one of us he'll forget the other."

Next moment Appleby was speaking louder. "I'm here, sir," he said.

The master lowered his candle as something wriggled out from under the cot, and then swung up the strap when Appleby stood very straight before him in his night gear.

"Where is Niven? It was you who took him away?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said Appleby. "I did, but he came back all right."

"Very good!" said the master. "You seem to be proud of it. Hold out your hand."

Appleby glanced at him, and did not move for a second or two while he thought rapidly. He did not like what he saw in his master's eyes, and now he had delivered his comrades it was time to shift for himself. He and Niven were leaving school early on the morrow, and he fancied he might escape if he could tide through the next ten minutes, because the head of the school had a good deal to attend to on the last night. The door was also open, and not far away, the candle was flickering in the draughts, and swinging suddenly round he darted for the opening. He was, however, a second too late, for the great strap came down swishing, and coiled about his shoulders, but he was in the corridor before it rose again, and making for the head of a short stairway. The master, however, seemed to be gaining on him, and Appleby fancied he heard the swish of the strap when a yard away from the first step. One taste had been sufficient, and bracing every sinew he went down in a flying leap. As he alighted there was a thud and a crash, and the candle suddenly went out. Still, nobody fell down the stairway, and surmising that the pursuer missing him with the strap had driven the candle against the wall, Appleby did not wait for a recall but went on, and into the great, dark schoolroom underneath. There he listened until heavy footsteps overhead seemed to indicate that the master had gone back to his room, when creeping up another stairway, he regained the opposite end of the corridor through a class-room. In another few minutes he had crawled back into his bed.

"Does it hurt, Tom?" said Niven sympathetically. "I'm owing you a good deal for this, but I know you don't like that kind of talk – and did you forget the duck?"

Appleby laughed softly, partly to check the groan, for there was a horrible tingling round his shoulders.

"I've had a lighter tap, but I've got the duck. It's here under the bed," he said.

## CHAPTER II

### OUT OF DOCK

Appleby went home with Niven next morning, as he had done once or twice before, for he had no home to go to, or relations who seemed anxious to invite him anywhere. Mr. Niven was a prosperous Liverpool merchant who had, however, made his own way in the world, and he and his wife had taken a liking to the quiet, friendless lad. Chriss Niven also wrote to his mother every week, and, though Appleby did not know this, had mentioned more than one difficulty out of which his comrade had pulled him.

It was a week later when Appleby, who had slipped away from the rest, sat somewhat moodily in a corner of a little ante-room opening out of a large one that was brilliantly lighted. The chords of a piano rang through the swish of dresses, patter of feet, and light-hearted laughter, for it was Mrs. Niven's birthday, and she had invited her son's and daughter's friends to assist in its celebration. Appleby was fond of music, and he drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair, and now and then glanced wistfully towards the doorway.

Under the glances of bright eyes that seemed to find his clumsiness amusing, and amidst the dainty dresses, he had grown horribly conscious that his clothes were old and somewhat shabby. The fact had not troubled him before, but he had never been brought into contact with pretty girls of his own age hitherto.

Niven, however, always looked well, and Appleby sighed once or twice as he watched him, and found it hard not to envy him. Chriss could do everything well, and he was to sail south in a great iron merchant ship by and by. Appleby had lived beside the warm tropic sea in his childhood and had loved it ever since, but now, when the sight of the blue uniform of his friend stirred up the old longing so that his eyes grew almost dim, he knew that he was to begin a life of distasteful drudgery in an office. Presently Mr. Niven, who had a lean face and keen dark eyes, came in.

"All alone, Tom. Have the girls frightened you?" he said with a smile.

"Well, sir," said Appleby quietly, "you see, when I tried to turn over the music for Miss Lester I couldn't quite guess the right time and it only worried her, while it didn't seem much use to stand about in everybody's way. I'm going back when they start a game."

Mr. Niven nodded, for the unembarrassed gravity of the answer pleased him. "That's right. There's very little use in pretending one can do things when one can't," he said. "And you are going into business, eh! I fancy, however, that Chriss told me you wanted to go to sea."

"Yes," said Appleby with a reluctance that did not escape the listener. "Still, it seems all the owners ask a good big premium, and of course there is nobody to lend me the money. The little my father left was spent on my education, and my guardian writes me that he has heard of an office where I could earn enough to keep me."

"How did you know they wanted a premium?" asked Mr. Niven.

"Because I went round all the shipowners' offices I could find in the directory, sir," said Appleby.

The merchant nodded gravely to hide his astonishment. "Your father died abroad, and your mother too?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said Appleby quietly. "At Singapore. I can only just remember them. I was sent back to England when I was very young – and never saw either of them again."

Mr. Niven noticed the self-control in the lad's face as well as the slight tremble in his voice which would not be hidden. It was also if somewhat impassive a brave young face, and there was a steadiness that pleased him in the grave, grey eyes, he wished his own son looked as capable of facing the world alone.

"And you would still like to go to sea? It is a very hard life," he said.

Appleby smiled. "Isn't everything a little hard, sir, when you have no friends or money?"

"Well," said Mr. Niven dryly, "it not infrequently is, and I found it out at your age, though not many youngsters do. Who taught it you?"

Appleby looked a trifle confused. "I," he said slowly, "don't quite know – but it seems to make things a little easier now. Of course I did want to go to sea, but I know it's out of the question."

The merchant looked at him curiously. "You will probably be very thankful by and by, but hadn't you better go back to the others? We'll have a talk again."

Appleby went out to take part in a game, and Mr. Niven sat looking straight before him thoughtfully until his wife came in.

"They are getting on excellently, and I am glad the affair is a success, because it is difficult to please young people now-a-days, and I want Chriss to have only pleasant memories to carry away with him," she said.

She glanced towards the doorway with a little wistfulness in her eyes as Chriss passed by holding himself very erect while a laughing girl glanced up at him, and Mr. Niven guessed her thoughts.

"It will be his own fault if he hasn't," he said with a smile. "It was, however, the other lad I was thinking of."

Mrs. Niven sat down and gazed at the fire for almost a minute reflectively. "You have had an answer from that relative of his?"

The merchant nodded. "To-day," he said. "He is evidently not disposed to do much for the lad, and has found him an opening in the office of a very third-rate firm. Appleby does not like the prospect, and from what I know of his employers I can sympathize with him."

"He has no other friends. I asked him," said Mrs. Niven. "Jack, I can't help thinking we owe a good deal to that lad, and you know I am fond of him. He has always taken Chriss's part at Sandycombe, and you will remember he thrashed one of the bigger boys who had been systematically ill-using him. Then there was another little affair the night before they left the school. Chriss told Millicent, though he didn't mention it to me."

"Nor to me," said Mr. Niven. "A new, senseless trick, presumably?"

The lady smiled a little as she told the story of Jimmy's duck. "The point is that the plan was Chriss's, but when they were found out Appleby took the punishment," she said. "Now I scarcely fancy every lad would have done that, or have been sufficiently calm just then to remember that the master, who it seems was very busy, would probably be content when he had laid his hands on one of them. It was also a really cruel blow he got."

"Did he tell you?" said Mr. Niven dryly.

"No," said the lady. "That was what pleased me, because though I tried to draw him out about it he would tell me nothing, but a night or two ago I remembered there were some of his things that wanted mending. The lad has very few clothes, but he is shy and proud, and I fancied I could take what I wanted away and replace it without him noticing. Well, he was fast asleep, and I couldn't resist the temptation of stooping over him. His pyjama jacket was open, and I could see the big, purple weal that ran right up to his neck."

"If he knew, he would never forgive you," said Mr. Niven with a little laugh. "But what did they do with the duck? Chriss would certainly have forgotten it."

"Appleby brought it away, and gave it to some poor body in Chester," said Mrs. Niven.

"That was the one sensible part of the whole affair, but I want to know why you told me."

"Well," said the lady slowly, "you know he wants to go to sea, and I feel sure his relative would be only too glad to get rid of him. Now it wouldn't be very difficult for you to get him a ship almost without a premium."

"A ship?" said Mr. Niven with a little smile.

"Yes," said the lady. "Chriss's ship. Chriss is – well, you know he is just a trifle thoughtless."

"I fancy you mean spoiled," said her husband. "Still, as usual, you are right. It is quite probable that Chriss will want somebody with a little sense behind him. Going to sea in a merchant ship is a very different kind of thing from what he believes it is."

Mrs. Niven sighed. "Of course. Still, about Appleby?"

"Well," said her husband smiling, "I think I could tell you more when I have had a talk with the owners to-morrow."

He nodded as he went away, and it was next afternoon when he sat talking with an elderly gentleman in a city office.

"We would of course be willing to take a lad you recommended," said the latter. "Still, I was not altogether pleased to hear that my partner had promised to put your son into the *Aldebaran*."

"No?" said Mr. Niven with a twinkle in his eyes. "Now I fancied you would have been glad of the opportunity of obliging me."

The other man looked thoughtful. "To be frank, I would sooner have had the son of somebody we carried less goods for," said he. "With the steamers beating us everywhere we have to run our ships economically, and get the most out of our men, and I accordingly fancy that while it would not have made him as good a seaman, your son would have been a good deal more comfortable as one of the new cadet apprentices on board a steamer."

Mr. Niven smiled dryly. "I have no great wish to make my lad a seaman. The fact is, there's a tolerably prosperous business waiting for him, but in the meanwhile he will go to sea, and it seems to me that the best thing I can do is to let him. He will probably be quite willing to listen to what I have to tell him after a trip or two, and find out things I could never teach him on board your vessel."

"Well," said the shipowner with a little laugh, "it is often an effective cure as well as a rough one."

Mr. Niven left the office with a document in his pocket, and on Christmas morning Appleby found a big, blue envelope upon his breakfast plate.

"I wonder what is inside it," said Mrs. Niven.

Appleby sighed. "It has a business appearance," he said. "It will be to tell me when I'm to go to the office."

"Hadn't you better open it?" said Mrs. Niven with a glance at her husband, and there was silence while Appleby tore open the envelope. Then the colour crept into his face, and his fingers trembled as he took out a document.

"I can't understand it," he said. "This seems to be an apprentice's commission – indentures – for me. The ship is the *Aldebaran*."

There was a howl of delight from Chriss, and a rattle as he knocked over his coffee, but Appleby sat still, staring at the paper, while belief slowly replaced the wonder in his eyes. Then he rose up, and his voice was not even as he said, "It is real. I am to go in the *Aldebaran*. I have to thank you, sir, for this?"

Mr. Niven laughed. "No, my lad," he said. "It was my wife's doing, and if you are sorry by and by you will have her to blame."

Appleby turned to the lady, and his eyes were shining. "It's almost too much," he said. "Chriss and I are going together. It is everything I could have hoped for."

Mrs. Niven smiled, though there was a little flush in her face. "Sit down and get your breakfast before Chriss goes wild and destroys all the crockery," she said.

Chriss laughed uproariously. "Crockery!" he said. "If we'd been at Sandycombe we'd have smashed every pane in the Head's conservatory. Tom, it's – oh, it's jim-bang, blazing, glorious!"

That was the happiest Christmas Appleby had ever spent, and he remembered it many a time afterwards when he kept his lonely watch peering into the bitter night from plunging forecastle and spray-swept bridge, or while he clung to the slanted topsail yard clawing at the canvas that banged above him in the whirling snow.

Then, when he knew the reality, he could smile a little at his boyish dream, but that day he only felt his blood tingle and every fibre in him thrill in answer to the calling of the sea. He was English, and the spirit which had from the beginning of his nation's history driven out hero and patriot, as well as cutthroat slaver and privateer, to scorch, and freeze, and suffer, do brave things, and some that were shameful, too, and with it all keep the red flag flaunting high in symbol of sovereignty, was in him also. All that day shield-ringed galley, caravel, towering three-decker, steel-sheathed warship, and ugly cargo tramp sailed through his visions, and they had for a background palms and coral beaches, mountains rolled in snow cloud, and the blink of frozen seas. They and their crews' story were a part of his inheritance, because, although the times have changed and canvas is giving place to steam, English lads have not forgotten, and the sea is still the same.

Appleby, however, had commenced to realize that going to sea is not all luxury when he stood on the *Aldebaran's* sloppy deck one bleak morning in February. It was drizzling, and the light was dimmed by a smoky haze, while the ship was foul all over with black grime from the coaling staites and the dust that had blown across her from a big elevator hurling up Indian wheat. It was also very raw, and Niven's face was almost purple with the cold, while the moisture glistened on his new uniform. A few bedraggled women and a cluster of dripping men stood on the dock wall above them. Other men tumbled dejectedly about the forecastle, falling over the great wet hawsers, while one or two who had crawled out of the mate's sight lay rather more than half-asleep in the shadow beneath it.

A grey-haired man with a sour face paced up and down the poop, raising one hand now and then when a dock official shouted, while Appleby sprang aside when another man he spoke to came down the poop-ladder and along the deck in long, angry strides. He wore a woolly cloth cap, knee-boots, and a very old pilot-coat, and he had a big, coarse face, with heavy jawbone and cruel eyes. Still, the very way he put his feet down denoted strength, and Appleby noticed the depth of his chest and the spread of his shoulders. Niven, who had not seen him, did not move in time, and the man flung him backwards.

"Out of the way!" he said.

Niven's face was flushed when he recovered his balance, and there was an angry flash in his eyes as he watched the man plunge into the shadow below the forecastle. In another moment several figures came scrambling out of it, and went up the ladder as for their lives, with the man in the pilot-coat close behind.

"If that's the new mate he looks more like a prize-fighter than a sailor," said Niven. "How does he strike you, Tom?"

"I think he's a brute," said Appleby quietly.

They said nothing further, for that was their first acquaintance with the under-side of life at sea, and their thoughts were busy, while in another minute the mate looking in their direction signed to them, and it did not appear advisable to keep a man of his kind waiting.

"Give these beasts a hand," he said when they stood among the seamen on the sloppy forecastle. "You can't be more useless than they are, anyway."

Niven stooped, and clawed disgustedly at the great wet hawser behind the swaying men, and one of them, who was dark-haired and sallow, glanced over his shoulder when the mate swung away.

"Ah, *cochon!*" he said.

Another, who had tow-hair, stood up and stretched his stalwart limbs. "Der peeg! Oh, yes. Dot vas goot," he said. "I tink der vas some troubles mit dot man soon."

A little man with high cheek bones and curious half-closed eyes loosed his grasp upon the rope and laughed softly. He also said something to himself, but as it was Finnish neither Appleby nor Niven were much the wiser.

It, however, occurred to them that the language they had listened to was not quite what one would have expected to hear on board an English ship. There were a few Englishmen on board her, but they did not talk, and for the most part leaned up against anything handy, or slouched aimlessly

about looking very unfit for work, which was not altogether astonishing considering the fashion in which they had spent the previous night.

Still the hawser was paid out at last, and Appleby stood up breathless, smeared with slime and coal-dust when the ropes astern fell with a splash, and there was a hoot from the bustling little tug. Somebody roared out orders on the quay above, paddles splashed, and the lad felt his heart give a curious little throb as the *Aldebaran* slowly commenced to move. She was a big iron barque loaded until her scuppers amidships were apparently only a foot or two from the scum of the dock.

He stood forward behind the maze of wire rope about the jibboom, which was not yet run out, on the forecastle, but just below him this broke off, and the deck ran aft sunk almost a man's height between the iron bulwarks to the raised poop at the opposite end of the ship. Half-way between stood a little iron house, and down the middle of the deck rose the three great masts, the last and smallest of them, springing from the poop. Behind it a man in shining oilskins was spinning the wheel. The deck looked very long and filthy, for the wheat-dust and the coal-dust were over everything, and bales, and boxes, and cases strewn amidst the straggling lengths of rope.

Then he heard a fresh shouting, and saw that the bowsprit was already raking through the open gate of the dock, and there were faces smiling down on him from the wall above.

"Chriss," he said, "look up."

Niven did, and Appleby swung his cap off when a hoarse and somewhat spiritless cheer went up. Mr. Niven was shouting something he could not catch, Mrs. Niven was smiling down at them with misty eyes, and the very pretty girl at her side waving a handkerchief.

Appleby glanced at his comrade out of the corner of his eyes and saw that Chriss's face had grown unusually red. Still, he was shouting lustily, and swinging his cap, while in the silence that followed the cheer a hoarse voice rose up —

Blow the men down,  
Blow the men down,  
Oh, give us time  
To blow the men down.

There was another scream from the whistle, and a roar from the mate, and while the last ropes were cast off the two lads ran aft along the deck. Paddles splashed, ropes slid through the water, and while the red ensign thrice swung up and sank above their heads the *Aldebaran* slid out into the Mersey. Once more the voices rang out hoarsely in farewell, and then while the groups on the quay grew blurred and dim they were sliding away with the ebb-tide into the haze and rain. Niven looked astern until the speck of waving handkerchief was lost to him, and then turned to Appleby with a little gulp.

"That's the last of them!" he said. "They're going back to dinner, and we – now I wonder what we're going to out there."

He pointed vaguely with a hand that shook a little across the dismal slate-grey waters beyond the bows, but Appleby understood him, for it was the unknown that was filled as yet with great and alluring possibilities the jibboom pointed to. Yet deep down within him he felt as Niven did, a regret and a yearning after the things he had left behind. It was very cold and wet on the *Aldebaran's* deck.

## CHAPTER III

### DOWN CHANNEL

The first day at sea is seldom very pleasant to anybody, especially on board a sailing ship, and the one the lads had looked forward with bright hopes to, dragged by dimly. For an hour or two painted buoy and rolling red lightship came crawling back towards them out of the rain, and then when the last of the Lancashire sandhills had faded over their starboard hand, there was only smoky cloud before them and a grey sea, across which little white ripples splashed.

Still, the tug was powerful and hauled them steadily along with a rhythmical splash and tinkle at the bows that rose and fell a little, and a muddy wake streaked with froth astern. Once or twice they caught a blink of the hills of Wales, but the vapours that unrolled a trifle closed in again, and the lads were glad they had not much opportunity for looking about them. There were huge ropes to be coiled up and stowed away, bales and cases to be put below, the jibboom to be rigged out, decks washed and everything cleaned down, and while the drizzle blew about them they stumbled amidst the litter and got in everybody's way. Now and then a seaman laughed at them or another growled. One or two they offered to assist shoved them aside, and it commenced to dawn upon Chriss Niven for the first time that he was of very little use in the busy world. The knowledge was not pleasant, but it was probably good for him.

Then the daylight died out, and while now and then coloured lights crept up ahead and grew dim again behind, one after another long streamers of brilliance whirled up across the sea. They, too, grew brighter, flashed, and blinked, and flickered, and faded away, and Appleby grew more chilly when he could find nothing more to do, until at last he sighed with contentment when somebody told him to go into the deckhouse if he wanted any tea.

When he entered it he saw a lamp that smoked a good deal swinging from a blackened iron beam, and two lads a little older than himself sitting on their sea-chests with enamelled plates on their knees, and a great can of steaming tea before them. They were just out of port, and having brought their own things they feasted for once royally on fresh bread and butter, sardines and marmalade. One of them who had a pleasant face filled up Niven's pannikin, and pointed to the bread.

"Wire in. You'll not have the chance very long," he said. "It's your job to go to the galley and bring the senna in, but we have let you off this time. I'd take those things you're wearing off, if I was you. We don't dress like gunboat commanders on board the *Aldebaran*."

"You brought this grub yourselves. They don't feed you very well," said Appleby, and the others laughed.

"No," said one. "None of the *Aldebarans* would get a prize at a cattle show, and you'd be glad to steal the dog's dinner in a week or two, only we haven't got one. You see a dog can't live on nothing as we're almost expected to do, and the old man's too mean to waste food on anything that can't handle sail."

"What's he like apart from his stinginess?" asked Niven.

"Well," said one of the others, "I have sailed with worse – a little – but the old man don't count for very much, anyway, because it's the mate who runs the ship, and the one we've got now's a terror."

"He's a pig-faced Geordie with a tiger's heart. I'd sooner live with a shark," said a lad who sat in a corner. "Hadn't been out two hours when he pitched one of the fellows forward down the hold. Of course it was tolerably full, and he didn't fall very far."

"What did the man do?" asked Appleby.

"Crawled away out of sight, and went to sleep – of course," said the first speaker; "none of them will be much good until to-morrow, but there'll be a circus or two on board this packet before we fetch Vancouver."

It was not very encouraging, but it was evident that they must make the best of it, and Appleby solaced himself with a long draught from his pannikin. The tea was hot and sweet at least, though there was very little else to recommend it, and it and the crumbly bread that tore beneath the knife put a little warmth and vigour into him. There was very little of the loaf left when all were contented, and following the example of the others, he and Niven crawled into their shelf-like bunks. Appleby flung off his jacket only because Lawson the eldest lad warned him that he might be wanted at any moment, but though his clothes were wet and his straw mattress might have been more cosy, he was glad to feel the warmth begin to creep back into his chilled limbs. The lamp creaked dolefully above him as it swung to and fro, casting a brightness that flickered and vanished on the brass of the ports. Moisture stood beaded on the iron beams, and the wooden floor was wet, while now and then one of the big sea-chests groaned as it moved a little. Nothing was quite what Appleby had expected, but he did not think there was anything to be gained by mentioning it, and his eyes were growing dim when a shout roused him. Lawson was out of his berth in a moment and struggling into a black oilskin.

"You should have had yours handy, but you'll have to turn out without it. They're getting sail on to her," hee said.

It seemed very black and cold when Appleby went out into the rain again. The wind had evidently freshened, and sang through the maze of cordage above him with a doleful wailing, while as he peered into the darkness a burst of bitter spray beat into his eyes. It was almost a minute before he could see again, and then he made out the reeling lights of the tug with a row of paler ones behind them, and not far away a great whirling blaze.

"That's the Skerries," said Lawson, who appeared at his elbow. "Yonder's Holyhead. Wind's freshening out of the south-east, and she'll about fetch Tuskar on a close jam down channel."

Appleby did not understand very much of this, but he had little time to wonder as to its meaning, for the mate went by just then, and Lawson vanished into the darkness when his voice rang out, "Fore and main topsails. Forward there, loose the jibs."

Dark objects went by at a floundering run, and Appleby followed some of them to the foremost shrouds which ran spreading out with the rattlings across them from the lower mast-head to the rail. He had swung himself up on to it, and was glancing down at the leaping foam below, when somebody grabbed him by the arm, and next moment he was staggering across the deck.

"You'll go up there when you're told," the mate's voice said. "We want a good deal more work out of you before you're drowned."

"He's a pig," said Niven, appearing close by, and then sank back into the shadow when a big hand reached out in his direction, while presently the two found themselves pulling and hauling amidst a group of swaying figures about the foot of the foremast. It ran up into the darkness black and shadowy, and dark figures were crawling out on the long yard above them that stretched out into the night, while there was a groaning and rattling that drowned the wailing of the wind.

"Gantlines!" said somebody. "A pull on the lee-sheet. Overhaul your clew," and black folds of canvas blew out and banged noisily above them. Then while the men chanted something as they rose and fell, the flapping folds slowly straightened out, and Niven looking up saw the topsail stretch into a great shadowy oblong. Then the men upon its yard seemed to claw at the next one, and there was more banging and thrashing as it rose, while the tug's whistle hooted, and hoarse shouts fell from the darkness and mingled with those from the poop.

"Forward," roared somebody. "Get the jibs on to her."

Neither Niven nor Appleby knew whether this referred to them or what they were expected to do, but there was nobody to tell them, so they followed two men forward, and stood panting a moment on the forecastle. It was rising and falling sharply now, for a long swell was running up channel, and they could dimly see a man crawling out upon the jibboom. This time they did not attempt to follow him, and when somebody drove them down the ladder a figure in oilskins thrust a rope into their hands.

"Hang on while I sweat it up," it said.

Appleby did not understand the manoeuvre, but when the man caught the rope beneath a pin and they took up the slack he gave them at every backward swing, a long triangular strip of canvas ceased banging, and the lads felt they were doing something useful when presently a second one rose into the blackness. Then they stood gasping, and watched the lights of the tug slide by. They could see the white froth from her paddles and the rise and fall of the black hull, while the voice of her skipper came ringing across the water.

"Good voyage!" he said. "You'll fetch Tuskar without breaking tack."

The tug went by, and Niven set his lips when with a farewell hoot of her whistle she vanished into the blackness astern. She was going back to Liverpool, and would be there before the morrow, while when another day crept out of the rain he would be only so much farther from home. He was not exactly sorry he had come, but by no means so sure that the sea was the only calling for Englishmen as he had been. Then the bulwarks they leaned upon lurched beneath them, and he was sensible that Appleby was speaking.

"She's starting now. Look at her. This is good, after all," he said.

Niven looked, and saw that black tiers of canvas had clothed the masts, though their upper portions still projected above it. They were also slanting, and the deck commenced to slope beneath him, while the long iron hull took on life and motion. There was a roar beneath the bows which rose and fell with a leisurely regularity, a swing and dip of the sloppy deck, and the spray began to blow in little stinging clouds over the forecastle. The wind also grew sharper, and at last Niven laughed excitedly as he felt the *Aldebaransweep* away faster and faster into the night.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Now one can forget the other things."

"She's lying up close," said Lawson, who came by. "Still, I'm glad the old man doesn't want the topgallants on her yet. Those are the next higher sails, and she's a very wet ship when you drive her. Look out. She's beginning her capers now."

As he spoke the bows dipped sharply, and from the weather side of the forecastle a cloud of spray whirled up. It blew in long wisps to leeward, struck with a patter along the rail, and before Niven, whose face was streaming, could shake himself, a rush of very cold water sluiced past him ankle-deep. Then the long hull heaved beneath him, and lurched forward faster still.

"I'm wetter than I was when we found Jimmy's duck, but this is great. She's just tearing through it," he said.

As he spoke a sing-song cry came out of the spray that whirled about the dipping forecastle, "Steamer's masthead light to starboard, sir."

Appleby, glancing over his right hand, saw a blink of yellow radiance beyond the swelling curves of the jibs. It was rising higher rapidly, and while he watched it, a speck of green flickered out beneath. Then a deep, organ-toned booming broke through the humming of the wind, and he saw a dark figure which he fancied was the mate swing up and down the poop, and another behind it stand rigid at the wheel.

"One of the Liverpool mailboats doing twenty knots, and it isn't any wonder their skippers are nervous when they meet a sailing-ship coming down channel," said Lawson at his side.

Then somebody gave an order on the *Aldebaran's* poop, and though it was not the usual one, any English sailor would have understood it. As it happened, however, the man who held the wheel was not a Briton, and next moment Appleby felt the ship swing round a trifle.

"Jimminy!" gasped Lawson. "The Dutchman's going to ram us right across her."

Next moment there was a bewildering roar from the whistle, and ringed about with lights the great bulk of the liner sprang out of the night. Towering high with her long rows of deckhouses punctured with specks of brilliancy and her two great funnels black against the sky, she was apparently heading straight for them.

Appleby saw all this in a second while he held his breath, and then there was a scuffle on the *Aldebaran's* poop. Somebody sprang towards the wheel, there was a thud, and a man reeled away from it, while high up in the darkness, canvas banged as the *Aldebaran* once more swerved a trifle. As she did so a man came staggering down the poop ladder, and with the white froth seething about her the liner swept by. Appleby gasped, and felt that he was shaking, while he saw that Lawson's face was a trifle white by the yellow glow that came out of one of the poop windows.

Then there was a roaring of orders, rattle of blocks, and hauling at ropes, and a curious silence by contrast when the *Aldebaran* swung forward with a springy lurch again, and Appleby saw the man who had come down the ladder, sitting apparently half-dazed upon the deck. His face was bleeding.

"Der port und der starboard I know. Also der loof, and keep her away, but der pinch her up I know not, und now I am very seeck," he said.

"I shouldn't wonder if he was," said Lawson dryly. "Still, though that's how accidents happen, it wasn't the stupid beggar's fault he didn't understand pinch her up. The old man wanted him to screw her a little nearer the wind, and luff, or a little higher would have been the usual thing."

"Pinch!" said the seaman. "I not know him, but oop I hear, und I oop mit him."

"And he'd have slung us across the liner's bows if the mate hadn't been too quick for him," said Lawson. "The fellow's head must be made of iron or that smack would have killed him. Well, these things will happen when you're fresh from port."

Appleby and Niven were glad to crawl into their berths again when the watch was over, and neither of them said anything, though that was not because they were not thinking. It was evident that going to sea was not quite all they had fancied it would be, and they had an unpleasant recollection of the Dutchman's bleeding face, and other tokens of the mate's temper. Still, they were tired and drowsy, and in another few minutes Appleby was sleeping too soundly even to dream of slavers and pirates as he had not infrequently done at Sandycombe. Niven, however, tossed and groaned, for his head was hot, and everything seemed to be spinning round, but at last the blinking light faded, and slumber banished the distressful nausea that tormented him.

There was a greyness low down to the eastwards when, swathed in streaming oilskins now, they stood where there was a little shelter beneath the weather-rail next morning. It was raining heavily, but the sky was no longer covered by the smoky haze, and here and there a patch of pale indigo showed between the streaks of driving cloud. The lads could see the white-flecked sea tops heave against it, and the rows of straining staysails, and great oblongs of the topsails across the masts, sharp and black above them as if cut out of ebony. They were not, however, especially interested in anything just then, for the *Aldebaran* was pitching close-hauled into a short head sea, and Appleby felt unpleasantly dizzy. Niven also clung very tightly to the rail, and his face, so far as it could be seen, was of a curious greyish-green, while he gasped each time the barque dipped her nose viciously and sent a cloud of spray blowing all over her.

Then for some ten minutes there was a deluge which blotted everything out, and they could only hear the roar of the rain. It ceased suddenly, and was followed by a great whirling of cloud, while the streaks of blue grew larger, and the topsails became grey instead of black as the light came through. The wind had also almost gone, but Appleby could see the figure of a man upon the poop with his head turned aft as though looking for something. In another minute he stood at the top of the ladder shouting orders, and the deck was suddenly dotted with scrambling men. They gathered in little groups about the feet of the masts and along the rail, and became busy flinging down coils of rope. Somebody shoved one into Niven's hands, and he and Appleby hauled among the rest as the long yards swung round until they were square across the vessel, and then pointed a trifle towards the other side of her. There was a banging and rattling overhead as the staysails came down, and a man laughed when the *Aldebaran* lay rolling in a momentary calm.

"It's not easy to pull a Geordie's tail when he's asleep," he said. "And you'd better go round the other road if he has a fancy you've got a bone."

Niven understood the speech was a compliment to the mate's watchfulness. "What is he making us do this for?" he asked.

"Well," said the seaman good-humouredly, "you'll find out these things by and by. Now we were working down channel close-hauled with the wind south-east over our port bow, but it has dropped away with the rain. The mate doesn't wait to see if another one will catch us with topsails aback, because he smells it coming, and it will be screaming behind us out of the north-west presently."

As he spoke one of the topsails swelled out, flapped and banged, then other great oblongs of canvas ceased their rustling too, and a flash of brilliant green swept athwart the sea. A patch of brass blinked in the sudden brightness, the rigging commenced to hum, and the *Aldebaran* moved, while once more the hoarse voice rose from the poop.

"Topgallants," it said, and then after a string of words Niven could not catch, "Main royal."

Instantly there was a bustle. Men went up the shrouds, swung high on the yards, letting little coils of rope run down, and a third big tier of sailcloth swelled out on either mast. Chain rattled, running wire screamed, the *Aldebaran* ceased rolling, and Appleby could see the sea smitten into white smoke rush past while he endeavoured to shake the kinks out of very hard and swollen rope. In the meanwhile the voice rose from the poop again, and when he had time to look about him two great pyramids of sail with a third of different shape behind covered the *Aldebaran* from the last feet of her mastheads to her spray-swept rail.

Then Appleby drew in his breath with a little gasp of wonder and delight. The towering tiers of canvas that gleamed a silvery grey now were rushing as fast as the clouds that followed them across blue lakes of sky. The great iron hull had become an animate thing, for there was life in every swift upward lurch and easy swing, and when he saw the foam that roared away in ample folds about the bows unite again astern and swirl straight back athwart the flashing green towards the horizon he realized for a few moments all the exhilaration of swift motion.

Presently, however, he was sensible of a horrible qualm under his belt, and looked at his hands with a little groan – one of them was bleeding from the rasp of the ropes, and the other swollen and more painful than if it had been beaten. He stood still for another second or two endeavouring to convince himself that there was nothing unusual going on inside him, and then staggered dizzily to the leeward rail. He found Niven there already, and for the next few minutes two very unhappy lads gazed down at the foam that whirled and roared beneath them as the *Aldebarans* swept out from the narrow seas before the brave north-wester.

## CHAPTER IV

### A LESSON IN SEAMANSHIP

It was a fine Sunday, and the *Aldebaran* rolling southwards lazily over a dazzling sea when Niven and Appleby lay on the warm deck with their shoulders against the house listening to Lawson who sat in the doorway reading. Pleasant draughts flickered about them as the warm wind flowed under the great arch of the mainsail's foot, and above it the sunlit canvas climbed, tier on tier, to the little royals swaying slowly athwart the blue. The barque was sliding forward on an even keel, but now and then she lifted her weather side with a gentle roll, and a brighter glare was flung up by the shining brine. Behind them the blue smoke of the galley whirled in little puffs, and glancing aft Appleby was almost dazzled by a flash from the twinkling brass boss of the wheel. Then when the poop went down he could see the figure of the helmsman forced up against the iridescent blueness of the sea.

Appleby wore a thin singlet and slippers, duck trousers and a jacket of the same material that had once been white and was a nice grey now. Niven's things were cleaner, but one rent trouser leg had been inartistically sewn up with seaming twine, and neither of them looked very like the somewhat fastidious youngsters who had once found fault with their rations in Sandycombe School. Their faces were bronzed from their foreheads to their throats, their hands were ingrained as a navy's, and almost as hard, and they could by this time have eaten anything there was nourishment in.

"There's no use reading that stuff to us. We can't take it in," said Niven.

Lawson grinned at Appleby. "A little thick in the head?" he said.

"No," said Niven. "My head's as good as those most people have, anyway. I was top of the list almost every term when I was at school."

Lawson's smile grew broader. "That's a bad sign," he said. "Now I never knew how much I didn't know until I came to sea, and you don't seem to have got that far yet. You see, there's a good deal you want to forget."

"Well," said Niven, "forgetting's generally easy. What would you teach a fellow who wanted to go to sea?"

Lawson rubbed his head. "How to get fat on bread and water would come in useful for one thing," he said. "Then it would be handy to know just when to say nothing when you're kicked, and when it would be better to put your foot down and answer with your fist. You see, if you do either of them at the wrong time you're apt to be sorry."

"Appleby knows that already," said Niven, whose eyes twinkled as he glanced at his friend.

Appleby made a grimace, and Lawson laughed.

"Then it's a good deal more than you do, though I expect the mate will teach you the first of it," he said.

"Now, when Cally put soft-soap in your singlet and sewed your trousers up you should have laughed fit to split yourself, as Appleby did. Cally tarred his hair for him, and there's some in yet, but any one would have fancied that he liked it."

Niven wriggled a little. "Oh, shut up! That's not what we want to know," he said.

"No?" said Lawson. "Then we'll get on to the healthful art and practice of seamanship. Am I to commence at the end, or half-way through? The beginning will not be much use to you."

"I'll climb down," said Niven. "Made an ass of myself, as usual. Now, do you want me to lick your boots for you? Begin at the beginning, and make it simple."

Lawson chuckled. "You'll get on while you're in that frame of mind, my son," he said. "Well, now, there are, generally speaking, two kinds of sailing ships – first the fore-and-afters, examples, cutter, ketch, and schooner, with their canvas on one side only of the mast. They're to be described

as tricky, especially when you jibe them going free, but when you jam them on the wind they'll beat anything."

"Jam them on the wind?" said Appleby.

Lawson nodded. "Close-hauled sailing. That's what I'm coming to," he said. "In the meanwhile there's the other kind, the one the Britisher holds to, while the Yankee who knows how to run cheap ships smiles, the square-riggers, examples, the ship and brig. Their sails are bent to yards which cross the masts, and, as you have found out, you've got to go aloft in all weathers to handle them, which is not one of their advantages. Then we come to the modifications or crosses between them, the barque, two masts square-rigged, fore-and-aft on mizzen, of which the *Aldebaran* is a tolerably poor example, topsail schooner, brigantine, which has yards on her foremast and fore-and-aft main, and barquentine with foremast square-rigged and two mainmasts carrying fore-and-aft canvas, though they call the last of them the mizzen. The other kind I didn't mention is the one that makes the money, and sails with a screw. Got that into you?"

"Oh, yes," said Niven, yawning. "Can't you get on? I knew it all years ago."

Lawson grinned. "Of course!" he said. "Well, I'll leave the mate to talk to you."

He went into the deckhouse, and returned with a sheet of paper and a little, beautifully-constructed model of a full-rigged ship. "I made it last trip to work out questions for my examination with," he said, but the deprecation in his bronzed face betrayed his pride, and Appleby, who saw how tenderly he handled the model, understood. "Now we come to the one and universal practice of sailing. I make this ring on the paper, and you can consider it the compass, or, and it's the same thing, one-half the globe. Here I draw two lines across it crossing each other, and we'll mark the ends of them North, South, East, and West. That divides the circle into four quarters, and the corners where the lines intersect are right angles, each containing ninety degrees, or eight points of the compass which has thirty-two in all."

He laid the paper on the deck, and when he had turned it so that the first line run from North to South, placed the model at the upper end of it, and twisted the yards and sails, which moved, square across the hull. "The wind's blowing from Greenland to the South pole, and she's going before it," he said. "Anything would sail that way – it's called running – even a haystack, and you trim the vessel's sails whether she's fore-and-aft or square-rigged at right angles to a line drawn down the middle of her hull. Well, we've reached the south end of the line – we'll say it's the south pole, and want to get back north again, but the wind is right against us now."

He picked up the model, and twisted the yards again so that they slanted sharply across the hull, making a small angle with its middle line. "Now she's braced sharp up, or close hauled – every sheet's hauled in – on the wind, and we'll start her heading north-east on the port tack. That is, the wind's on the port side of her, though we could have started on the opposite one heading north-west, if we had liked. Run that line along, and you'll find it makes an angle of four points of the compass, or forty-five degrees, with the wind, which makes it evident that by and by you come to the edge of the first quarter of the circle at east. Then, if we put the ship round with the wind on her opposite side, and sail at the same angle as far again, we come back to north, where the wind is blowing from, and when you grasp that you've got the principle of the whole thing. With the wind behind you all sails flowing, when you're working up against it, everything's flattened in, but you have to remember that all vessels don't sail equally close to the wind, and while a racing cutter will lie very close indeed, a shallow full-bowed hooker must have it almost on her side to keep her going. That's why I took four points as a handy example, because two tacks of forty-five degrees would bring us back again."

"But why doesn't the wind shove her away sideways when she's close-hauled?" asked Appleby.

Lawson nodded approval. "That shows you're following, it does," he said. "Still it don't amount to very much if the vessel's deep, because all of her that's in the water offers resistance to it. They all slide off a little, and that's the leeway."

"Well," said Niven, "when the wind's so to speak almost against her, what makes her go ahead at all?"

Lawson grinned. "What makes a kite go up against the wind? You see the sails of a close-hauled ship make about the same angle to it as a kite does. They didn't teach you that at school?"

"I think they did," said Appleby. "There's something very like it in the parallelogram of forces."

"The biscuit's yours," said Lawson. "Get that into you, and you know all the whys of sailing."

He yawned and bent over his book, repeating snatches of curious ditties about green to green and red to red, and steamers crossing, but Appleby remembered what he had heard, which was fortunate, because it was the only instruction that anybody ever gave him on board the *Aldebaran*. Then the cook banged on something in his galley, and Niven, who got up and stretched himself, went along to bring in the tea. He came back with a big steaming can and grinned at Appleby.

"They'll be getting very different tucker at home," he said. "Still, it will be beastly cold and wet up there just now."

His merriment was evidently a trifle forced, and another lad who lay poring over a book in a corner raised his head.

"Oh, shut up!" he said. "We've heard all that before, and you don't do it very well. If I could get back into the shop the governor found me I'd like to catch myself going to sea. Oh, great handspikes! Just listen to the brute."

A storm of venomous language came forward from the poop, and through the drowsy flap of canvas and stillness of the dazzling ocean there rang the strident voice of the mate. Lawson slowly shook his head.

"She was scarcely steering, and Biddulph has let her fall off," he said. "They've stood a good deal forward, but that mate of ours is pushing them too far."

Then there was silence that seemed deepened by the light flap and rustle of sailcloth and gurgle of shining brine, but the peace of the day had gone, and the shadow which crept into the four young faces was that which has darkened so many lives at sea. They had all been used to discipline, and did not resent it, while it had been made evident to two of them of late that on board a sailing ship toil that is brutal as well as perilous is often a necessity. They would also have undertaken it more or less cheerfully, but there had been added to it a ruthless tyranny, and Appleby's little sigh seemed to ask the question that downtrodden men have asked from the beginning – why such things must be? And, for he was young, he could not find an answer.

A little breeze sprang up after sunset, and the ship was sliding faster through a sea that blazed about her with lights of green and gold when Appleby hung about the deck, held still and silent by something in the harmonies of the night. There was no moon, but there was also no cloud in the sky, and the great stars the mast-heads swayed across hung set far back one behind the other in the blue, while the spires of canvas towered black and sharp under their cold light. Not a cloth rustled, but there came down from the gossamer tracery of rigging a little musical humming that suggested the chanting of an invisible choir.

Forward a black figure was visible on the forecastle. Here and there another showed along the dusky line of bulwarks, and now and then Appleby could see the dark shape of the mate standing high upon the poop. This, however, was not often, because he preferred to keep the great shadowy mainsail between himself and it. Night and sea were still and peaceful, and that sinister figure alone jarred upon their serenity.

Suddenly the harsh voice he feared broke the silence, and Appleby instinctively set his lips when he saw his comrade cross the deck. It was noticeable that Niven went at a trot, and if he had been told that one side of the poop is usually sacred to the officer of the watch knowing that haste was advisable he forgot. A moment or two later he stood panting at the head of the ladder, which rose about six feet from the deck, and the mate strode towards him with arm drawn back. Possibly something had ruffled his temper, which was at the best a bad one, that night.

"There are two ladders to this poop, and this will teach you which is yours," he said.

Then before Niven could speak the arm shot out, and the breathless lad reeled backwards with head swimming and a tingling face. The blow had possibly not been a very cruel one, but the *Aldebaran* swung her stern up just then, and the opening in the rails was close behind him. He went out through it backwards, caught his foot on the rung of the ladder, and pitching over came down with a sickening thud on deck. Appleby, who had seen it all, ran aft and knelt down beside him.

"Chriss, are you hurt?" he gasped.

There was no answer, and hearing a rattle on the ladder the lad looked up, and saw the mate standing close by. He had his hands in his pockets, but there was an unpleasant look in his face.

"Shamming. Take him forward," he said, and stooped as though about to shake the lad who still lay motionless.

He, however, straightened himself as Appleby rose up, and stood before him, quivering, with hand clenched and a blaze in his eyes.

"Get back! You have done enough," he said, and if Niven could have heard it he would scarcely have recognized his comrade's voice.

"Hello!" the mate said sharply. "Were you talking to me?"

"Yes," said Appleby hoarsely, but very quietly. "And I have a little more to tell you. You can't do these things with impunity, and we'll have you kicked out of the Company for this."

It was not, of course, a judicious speech, but Appleby was scarcely in a state to decide what was most fitting then. The mate moved a pace nearer him, and his hands were out of his pockets now, but he stopped close by Appleby, for the lad stood stiffly upright, his face grey with passion.

"I'll make you sorry. Get him out of this," he said.

Then Niven raised himself a little, and blinked dizzily at both of them. "I think I could get up if you helped me, Tom," he said.

Appleby shivered a little as he saw the red smear on the back of his head, but before he moved an elderly man with a sour face and grizzled hair came down the ladder and stopped in front of them. He glanced at Niven and then at Appleby, but it is probable that a scene of the kind was not quite new to him, and his face was expressionless.

"Well, what's it all about?" he said.

Appleby had but once or twice spoken to the captain, who was a grim, silent man, and not seen very often in fine weather. Whether he was contented with the mate's conduct was not apparent, but as usual it was the latter who handled the ship's company.

"You had better ask the mate, sir," said Appleby. "He knocked him down the ladder."

The skipper turned towards the other man, and the mate laughed a little.

"That's not quite right, sir," he said. "The lad can't take telling, and he came up the wrong ladder when I sang out for him. I guessed it was done out of impudence, and let him have it so it wouldn't hurt him much with the flat of my hand. She gave a lurch just then that threw him off his feet and down he went. Then this one began a rumpus, and told me he'll have me run out of the service."

The skipper stooped over Niven. "Head's cut – at the back," he said in an expressionless voice. "Get up, and go aft, my lad. I'll fix it for you."

Niven rose shakily, and obeying the skipper's pointing hand walked towards the poop with uneven steps. Then the latter looked at Appleby.

"What did he mean by that?" he said quietly.

Appleby understood the question, and though he fancied he was doing wisely made a blunder. "I think I can do all I told him, sir," he said. "You see, this ship is carrying Mr. Niven's goods, and one could fancy the Company is glad to get them."

"Niven?" said the skipper, more to himself than the others. "Most of the freight belongs to Clarke and Hall."

"They're dead," said Appleby, who had been told this. "There's only Mr. Niven in the business now."

The skipper looked thoughtful. "Now I remember," he said as he turned towards the mate, and stopped. "Well, this is my affair, Appleby, and I'm the only man who can question what the mate does on board this ship. If you do it again it will be the worse for you. Remember that."

Appleby touched his cap and moved away, and presently Niven came forward from the poop with his head tied up. He was still pale, and moved slowly, while he had little to tell his comrade.

"He put some stuff that smarted on the cut, but didn't ask any questions, and told me to lie down," he said. "I'm going to do it because I'm not myself yet. My head's all humming, and I don't seem to want to talk."

Appleby helped him into his bunk, and then went back to his watch, while he told Lawson all that had passed when he next had an opportunity. The elder lad listened gravely.

"You fancy the old man believed you?" he said.

"Yes," said Appleby. "It isn't my fault if he didn't. I did my best to make him."

Lawson shook his head. "Then I'm afraid you made a mess of things," he said. "You see, if the old man believed you the mate would."

"Of course!" said Appleby. "That was what I wanted."

"Well," said Lawson, "it's unfortunate that you did. Now the old man's tolerably tough, but he's not a fool, and, to give him his due, is content with getting two men's work out of every one of the crew. He knows the men who fill the ships up can make things nasty for the captain, and it's quite likely he'll talk straight to the mate, though he wouldn't to you, and that's not going to make the mate any fonder of you and Niven."

"I was hoping it would keep him quiet," said Appleby.

"It wouldn't," said Lawson. "All that Niven's father could do would be to get him turned out, and if the mate thought that likely he'd make it warm for you before he went, you see. If you've any pull on the owners it's not, as a rule, advisable to mention it at sea. It doesn't make anybody think the better of you."

Appleby groaned. "I've been an ass again," he said. "Still, I fancied he had killed Niven – and I had to do something."

Lawson smiled dryly. "There's only one thing anybody can do at sea, and that's to keep his mouth shut and out of the way of trouble," he said. "When you can't help things there's no use in kicking."

Appleby made no answer. It was a somewhat grim lesson, but it was one that sooner or later every lad must learn, and the result of it is the capacity for endurance which is not infrequently worth a good deal more than courage in action.

## CHAPTER V

### UNDER TOPSAILS

Appleby was not long in discovering that Lawson was right. Hitherto the mate had only stormed at him and his comrade as he did at the rest of the vessel's company, but now he seemed to single them out for abuse whenever he had an opportunity, and he managed to find a good many. It was true that he attempted no further violence, but they could have borne that better than the relentless petty persecution, for there was scarcely a difficult or unpleasant task within their strength that the lads were not set to do. Unpleasant duties are also by no means uncommon on board a sailing ship.

Still, Appleby had seen that to protest was useless and likely to make things worse, while because the mate was cunning as well as cruel it would have been difficult to make a definite complaint even if there had been anybody to listen to him, which, however, was not the case. So he set his lips and bore it, and so as he could endeavoured to restrain Niven, who would now and then break out into fits of impotent anger or lie silent in his bunk after some fresh indignity. Had the work been always necessary Appleby would have endeavoured to do it willingly, though it was now and then almost disgusting, but the mate probably knew this, and arranged things so that he should feel he was doing most of it only to please his enemy. Grown men have been driven to self-destruction or murderous retaliation by treatment of this kind, and after a few weeks of it both lads felt they could endure no more.

Meanwhile the weather grew colder and the work harder. That was not the worst time of the year for rounding Cape Horn, but they found it bad enough, for the *Aldebaran* met wild weather and she was loaded heavily, while on the afternoon she lay rather more than a hundred miles to the eastwards of the dreaded cape her crew were almost too worn out for duty. She was then heading about south-west upon the starboard tack, thrashing very slowly to windward under topsails, and flooding her decks with icy water each time she poked her nose into the seas, and she did it tolerably often, for the seas were very big. They came rolling down to meet her out of the south-west, blue-black in the hollows, which were streaked with foam and frothing on their crests, and Appleby would hold his breath when one larger than its fellows rose high above the starboard bow. Most often the *Aldebaran* would swing up her head in time and climb over the big wall of water with a swooping lurch, while the spray that whirled up from her bows rattled like grapeshot into her foretopsails and blew out in showers between the masts. Now and then, however, she went through, and then there was a thud and roar and her forecastle was lost from sight. It seemed a long while before she hove it up again streaming, and every man held on to what was handiest when the long deck was swept by torrents of icy brine. Then while frothy wisps blew away from the forecastle and every scupper on one side spouted she would stagger on again for perhaps ten minutes more dryly, because the long ocean seas are by no means all equally steep and high.

Appleby and Niven were holding on, shivering with cold and wet through in spite of their oilskins, by a pin on the weather rail, for the deck slanted sharply and the water was washing everywhere. Glancing forward they could see nothing but spray, and every now and then the frothing top of a larger sea hove up against a vivid glare of green. When they looked up, which it was not often advisable to do, they could see the mastheads raking across a patch of hard deep blue, athwart which clouds with torn edges whirled. There was little canvas on the slanted spars, two jibs that ran water above the bowsprit, two topsails on either mast, a staysail or two between them, and half the spanker on the mizzen. The sails did not look as if they were made of flexible canvas but cast in rigid metal.

Presently a wet man came clawing his way along, and stopped when Niven called to him.

"Did you hear what we had made?" he said.

The man nodded, and growled at the spray which beat into his face. "The stoard he heard the old man and the mate a-fixing it," he said. "She's worked off about another twenty miles since noon yestidday."

Niven groaned. "Only twenty miles!" he said. "That's another week before we can square away."

"Well," said the man with a little grim laugh, "I'd give her another fortnight when I was at it. She'll take all that to fetch round with this wind, any way."

The two lads looked at each other, and neither of them said anything when in a lull between two plunges the man lurched away, but that was because they fancied he was right and both were unwilling to admit all that they were feeling.

They knew a good deal about close-hauled sailing now, for during four long weeks the *Aldebaran* had been thrashing her way to windward in the face of stinging gales. Sometimes when the sea was a trifle smoother she would gain a little on every tack, and then a fresh storm would come roaring down, and when they had furled the higher sails with half-frozen hands she would do little more than hold the wind upon her side and of course make nothing at all in the required direction. Also they had often to heave her to under little rags of sail with the sea upon her bow while she blew away to leeward and lost in a few hours all they had won the preceding day.

Always the decks were flooded, and the men wet to the skin. The galley fire was frequently washed out, and they got cold provisions, often so soaked with salt water that they could scarcely eat them, while when sleep was possible they lay down as they were, all dripping, too worn out to strip off their clothes. It would not have been advisable to take them off in any case, for they might be turned out at any moment to furl upper topsails or haul down staysails in a sudden freshening of the gale. Canvas was furled and hoisted continually, because a ship will not sail to windward through a heavy sea unless she is sternly pressed, while her crew fight for every yard she makes.

Appleby even in his oilskins looked very gaunt and thin. His face was hollow and bronzed by exposure to bitter wind and stinging brine, while Niven, like many of the others, was troubled with painful sores from sleeping in salt-stiffened clothes. Their hands were stiffened and clawlike, their knuckles bleeding, and from the ceaseless rasp of ropes the undersides of their fingers were very like grain-leather. Worn out utterly and half-fed they were just holding out with the rest of the *Aldebaran's* company until they could thrash her far enough to the westwards to square away and run north into better weather on the other side of Cape Horn.

"Hallo!" said Niven presently. "That's a nasty cloud. I wonder what fresh beastliness it's bringing us."

Appleby, glancing to windward, saw that the glaring green beyond the seatops had faded out, and the horizon was smeared with grey. It also seemed to be closing in upon them rapidly, and overhead a black cloud with torn edges was swallowing up the strip of blue.

"More wind, any way. She'll scarcely bear upper topsails now," he said with a little groan. "Still, the old man's tolerably stubborn at carrying on."

Niven, glancing aft, could see the skipper's gaunt figure swung high upon the poop against a frothing sea as he too glanced to windward. He was probably as anxious as any one to get round Cape Horn, but it was only by carrying sail to the last moment and making the most of every lull he could hope to do it. Even as he gazed ragged ice fell pattering along the decks, and the daylight died out leaving a grey dimness behind it. Then for a few minutes sea and ship were hidden by the flying hail. It cut the lads' raw knuckles until they could have cried out in agony, thrashed their wet faces and rattled on their oilskins, while the rigging roared above them, and twice in succession the *Aldebaran* put her whole forecastle in. Then a great sea foamed in almost solid over her weather rail, and through all the uproar rang a high-pitched cry. The words were indistinguishable as they would have been a yard away, but the lads recognized it as the summons to shorten sail. For a minute or two they were busy about the deck, and then while the ship swayed over further the mate lurched by and grabbed the Dutchman, who was working awkwardly with one hand, by the shoulder.

"Lay aloft, and give them a hand up there, you skulking hog," he said.

"Mine arm," said the seaman, "der right one, she is nod of good to me."

Appleby remembered that the fellow had badly hurt his arm, and scarcely wondered at his reluctance to go aloft with only one hand to trust to as he glanced above. The upper topsail had been partly lowered down, but the loose canvas was thrashing between the yards, and these sloped down towards the whitened sea apparently as steeply as the roof of a house. Still, it was evident that every man was needed, for there were other sails to be handled and the *Aldebaran* was apparently going bodily over. She hove her nose up for an instant, and Appleby had a momentary glimpse of a jib that had burst its sheet thrashing itself to pieces above the bowsprit. Then sight and hearing was lost in a cloud of flying brine.

When he could open his eyes again he saw the mate lift his fist, and the Dutchman glance deprecatingly at the arm that hung at his side.

"Lay aloft," said the former, "before you get a damaged head as well as an arm."

The Dutchman shuffled towards the shrouds, and just then a half-heard shout came down from one of the black figures on the inclined yard. "We're beat. Send us another hand."

It was already evident to Niven that as the yard was higher than it should have been something was foul, and he could see that unless the men had help they would be hurled off it or the sail blown away. It was not his especial duty, but it was no time to be particular when the *Aldebaran* lay swept from end to end at the mercy of the squall, and he swung himself up into the shrouds close behind the Dutchman with Appleby following. The wind flattened them against the rattlings as they fought their way up, and then almost choked and blinded them as with the swinging foot-rope against their heel and stiffened hands on the slippery spar they crept outwards from the mast along the yard. They were not of very much use there, indeed, most often they were in the way, but they did what they could while the hail lashed their faces and the drenched and stiffened canvas banged about them so that to hear anything else was almost impossible. At times somebody shouted, but the words were blown to leeward and quite incomprehensible.

It was their business to roll up the great flapping sail, and lash it to the yard, but parts of it tore away from them, and blew out with a bang like a rifle-shot every now and then, while the long wet spar they leaned across increased the steepness of its slant. Niven glancing down a moment fancied that the *Aldebaran's* leeward rail was in the sea, and saw the rigid figure on the weather side of the poop waving a hand to them. He could, of course, hear no voice at all, but surmised the gestures meant it was high time their work was finished. Then the *Aldebaran* dipped her nose into a sea, and the cloud of spray she flung up hid everything, while in another moment a more furious gust shrieked about them. The yard slanted still further, and he fancied it was impossible the ship could recover.

His hands were stiffened and almost useless, his fingers were bleeding, and his breath was spent, while as he held on helpless for a moment there was a sound like thunder, and as a strip of canvas rent itself from the grasp of those about him he saw the Dutchman clawing desperately at the yard. The man slipped along it a foot or two, and Niven, seeing his fingers sliding, remembered he had an injured arm. He had also evidently lost his footing, for one leg was dangling, and the lad instinctively seized his shoulder. That left him one hand to hold on by, and he gasped with horror as he felt his fingers slipping from the yard and saw a great sea burst into a tumultuous frothing beneath him.

He was too cold and dazed to wonder if any of the others saw what was happening, and could remember only that if he loosed his hold the man he clutched would go whirling down to strike the iron bulwarks or plunge into the sea. So he set his lips, and while his arms seemed to be coming away from their sockets held on for a moment or two.

Then the hand he grasped the yard with slipped a trifle further, and with a sickening horror he felt his clawlike fingers yield, but dazed, half-blinded, and too overwrought with the struggle to think, he still clutched the Dutchman. In another moment the hand came away altogether, and man and boy went down.

Now a second or two earlier Appleby had noticed their peril, but could do nothing because there was a man between them and him. He smote the fellow's shoulder and shouted, but his words were blown away, and no one else had eyes for anything but the banging sail. It was too late before he could shout again, for with a little gasp he saw the two figures whirl downwards beneath him, until, because the *Aldebaran* lurched a trifle just then, the smaller of them struck a big wire stay with folds of loose canvas about it where it joined the mast, and lay for a second or two across it. The other fell on the top of the deckhouse, and then, while Appleby shivered, rolled off it and down on to the deck below. Almost as this happened Niven slipped from the hauled-down staysail and fell upon the house too, but apparently upon feet and hands together.

Then as Appleby endeavoured to get back to the mast so that he could descend, the man nearest it grasped him and he could not pass. The lad could not hear what he said, but he guessed its purport, and grew sick with horror as he saw that the man was right. There were others below to pick up the fallen if there was any life in them, and with the ship in peril every hand was needed on the yards. Also, while that fact might not have stopped him, he could not pass the man, who barred his way to the mast.

So he stayed, and did what little he could among the rest, until at last they had stowed the sail, and then went down in frantic haste, only to be driven forward by the second mate. The latter was a kindly man, but there are times when the injured or dying must take care of themselves at sea, and there was still strenuous work to do. Thus at least half-an-hour had passed, and the *Aldebaran* was blowing sideways about as fast as she forged ahead under lower topsails when Appleby reached the deckhouse breathless and dripping. It was almost dark inside it, for driving cloud had blotted the daylight out, but the swinging lamp diffused a sickly radiance which fell on his comrade as Appleby bent over his dripping bunk. Everything in the deckhouse was wet, as was Niven's face, but though it was drawn and white his eyes were open.

"Not quite all smashed up yet," he said with a little smile.

Appleby felt almost dizzy with relief, and his voice shook a trifle as he said, "But you are hurt, Chriss?"

"Well," said Niven feebly, though there was a little twinkle in his eyes, "it wouldn't be astonishing if I was, but I think a good lie down will put me right again. There was a big lump of the staysail under me, and I fetched the top of the house on my hands and toes. Couldn't get up just now, however, if I wanted to."

Appleby could think of nothing fitting to say, and patted his comrade's shoulder while he turned his head away. His eyes were a trifle hazy, and he felt that there are a good many things one cannot express in speech.

"The Dutchman?" he said presently.

Niven seemed to shiver, and shook his head. "I don't know. Couldn't take much notice of anything because I felt all in pieces myself just then, but I saw him come down," he said. "He just seemed to crunch up – as if he was an egg."

Lawson, who was sitting on his chest, made a gesture of impatience. "Now you shut up and lie still," he said. "Any one would fancy you had done enough to take a rest." Then he nodded to Appleby. "Get out. It's quietness he wants, and it's not going to make anything any better to remember what happened to the other fellow. I'll keep an eye on him, and you needn't worry."

Appleby, who knew Lawson could be trusted to do this, went out, and it was an hour or two later when he and the rest sat in the house again over a big can of tea which the cook had by some means contrived to supply them with. They still wore streaming oilskins, and the lamp that swung above them cast flickers of smoky radiance across their wet faces, while from outside came a muffled roar of wind and the crash of falling water as the *Aldebaran* lurched over the great smoking seas. Niven was evidently a little better, and smiled, though his face was awry with pain, when Appleby lifted his shoulders a little and handed him a biscuit soaked in tea.

"It's nice yellow jellies and grapes I'd be eating if I was laid up at home," said he.

"If you don't stop we'll make you," said one of the other lads. "Who has got any business to talk of those things at sea? What did the old man do to you?"

Niven grinned in a sickly fashion. "He asked me where I felt bad, and I told him everywhere," he said. "Then he and the steward pulled the clothes off me and prodded me with their fists. They didn't seem to find anything broken, but I was sore all over, and I'd sooner be whacked with a horse-girth than go through that again."

"Smacked with a horse-girth!" said Lawson, reflectively. "Now I've been kicked – with sea boots – a good many times, but that would be a new sensation. What does it feel like?"

"If you want to know you can ask Appleby," said Niven. "I fancy he could tell you."

Appleby laughed, for he saw his comrade was recovering. "But what about the Dutchman?" he said.

Lawson shook his head. "I only know the old man went forward to look at him, and he's tolerably bad. He came down bang on his shoulder, you see. Did the mate know he had only one arm that was any good to him, Appleby?"

"Yes," said Appleby slowly. "He was there when the man hurt it, and just before he went up I heard him tell him. I saw the mate double up his fist too – and the Dutchman had to go."

There was silence for a moment or two, intensified by the roar of wind, and the lads looked at one another with a curious grimness which seemed out of place there in their young faces.

"If he doesn't get better it's manslaughter, any way," said somebody. "Now we've had almost enough of this. What's to be done, Lawson?"

Lawson stared at the lamp for almost a minute before he answered. "If the man comes round we can't do anything," he said. "Of course we and the men could make a declaration about ill-usage at Vancouver, but the old man would back the mate up and we'd only be quietly sat upon. If the Dutchman dies it would be a little easier. The old man would have to put down all about it in the log, but he'd fix it the nicest way and then get two witnesses – the mate and the second mate – to sign it."

"Would the second mate do it?" said Appleby.

"I think he would have to," said Lawson dryly.

"Well," said one of the other lads, "where do we come in?"

"You," said Lawson, with a little, mirthless laugh, "don't come in at all, but there's one chance yet. When the men are paid off the old man's account of any death on board is read over, and they're asked if it's all correct and if the man was ill-used at all. If they could only stick to one story they'd get a hearing, and the Government would go into the thing."

"That doesn't sound difficult," said Appleby.

Lawson shook his head. "I'm afraid it's more than they could do," he said. "Every man would tell a different tale and get arguing with the rest until nobody could make head or tail of it, and the skipper who says nothing that isn't dragged out of him would come up on top again. Still, of course, there is just a chance of them being listened to, and that's going to make the mate a good deal nastier in the meanwhile."

Niven, who had lain silent, looked over his bunk. "He will not be nasty to me very long. I've had enough of the brute already. One could get ashore at Vancouver."

Lawson glanced at him impatiently. "Better shut up before you're sorry," he said. "There's only one thing to do, and that's to leave the old man to run the mate out quietly. He's a tolerably tough old nigger himself, but I fancy this kind of thing is a little too much for him. As I've told you before, there's very little use kicking about anything when you go to sea."

Then there was once more silence as the unpleasant veracity was borne in upon the rest. Nobody, it seemed, cared very much what became of them, and there was no one they could appeal to. They must take what came, and grin and bear it, however irksome it might be. The knowledge was especially bitter to Niven, who had possibly been made too much of at home, but Appleby had

already a vague suspicion that in any walk of life it would be much the same. Every man had rights, he knew, but he had discovered that it is very little use to make speeches about them when they are unobtainable, and generally wiser to wait in silence for an opportunity and then stretch out a firm hand and take them. Some lads find this out early, though there are men who never discover it at all, and these are not infrequently a nuisance to everybody.

## CHAPTER VI

### A FAIR WIND

Niven, though severely bruised and shaken, recovered rapidly, and one morning a fortnight after his injury sat under the partial shelter of the weather-rail rubbing tar into a long strip of worn-out canvas with his hands. He had more than a suspicion that the canvas would never be used, and sitting still in a bitter wind while he dabbled his stiffened fingers in the sticky mess was far from pleasant, but the mate frequently found him work of that kind to do, and Niven knew that when he gave an order it was not advisable to argue.

Appleby was sitting close beside him similarly occupied, and every now and then a cloud of spray which swept the rail stung their faces and rattled upon their oilskins. Icy water came on board, too, but because they sat well aft they escaped the frothing deluges which poured over the weather bow and sluiced down the slanted deck to lee. Here and there a dripping man scrambled out of the way of them or clung fast to something in the wilder lurches, for the *Aldebaran* was still hammering to windward under scanty sail.

There was, however, clear, cold sunlight, and the wet canvas swayed across a patch of blue, while the lads could see the froth of the rollers shine incandescent against the flashing green over the weather-rail. The *Aldebaran* was shouldering her way through them with heavy plunges that buried her forecastle at times. Then she would swing it up, streaming, high above the sea, and there was a general scramble clear of the water which came splashing everywhere. The sunlight showed that the men's faces were gaunt and worn. They had for more than a month held out stubbornly, living for the most part on uncooked and soaked provisions, toiling the watch through at shifting sail, and then flinging themselves down in their drenched clothing only to be turned out half-dazed by the sleep for which brain and body craved as the screaming gale freshened again. Now they had, thanks to what the steward had gleaned in the cabin and told the cook, reason to believe that if the *Aldebaran* could make a few more leagues to windward the next day would see them round Cape Horn.

Still, they had been almost as near before only to be driven back to the east again, and haggard faces were turned expectantly towards the hard blueness athwart which the seatops heaved over the weather-rail. Presently Appleby glanced up sharply as the shadow of a sail fell upon him.

"Hallo!" he said, and there was a curious eagerness in his voice. "The topsail leach has come between us and the sun."

"I don't see why that should please you," said Niven. "It only makes it colder, and it's bad enough already, especially when you've had nothing worth mentioning to eat for weeks."

"No?" said Appleby. "Well, if I'm right it means warm weather, dry clothes, sound sleep when your watch is done, and the galley fire lit all day."

Niven looked up. "Oh," he said with a little gasp. "The wind is backing round – or is he only screwing her up a little?"

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