

happened to be standing by, as Dick's feet touched the deck. "This may be the first time you have been on board a ship, but it is easy to see that it isn't the first, by a long way, that you have been on a rope. Could you go up again?"

"Yes, I should think so," Dick said. "I have never climbed so high as that, because I have never had the chance; but it ought to be easy enough."

The man laughed. "There are not many sailors who can do it," he said. "Well, let us see how high you will get."

As Dick was accustomed to go up a rope thirty feet high, hand over hand, without using his legs, he was confident that, with their assistance, he could get up to the main-top, lofty as it was, and he at once threw off his jacket and started. He found the task harder than he had anticipated; but he did it without a pause. He was glad, however, when the two sailors above grasped him by the arms, and placed him beside them on the main-top.

"Well, sir," one said, admiringly, "we thought you was a Johnny Newcome by the way you went up the ratlines, but you came up that rope like a monkey. Well, sir, you are free up here, and if you weren't it would not make much odds to you, for it would take half the ship's company to capture you."

"I don't want to get off paying my footing," Dick said, pulling five shillings from his pocket and handing them to the sailors; for his mother had told him that it was the custom on first going aloft to make a present to them, and had given him the money for the purpose. "I can climb, but I don't know anything about ropes, and I shall be very much obliged if you will teach me all you can."

CHAPTER II

A BRUSH WITH PRIVATEERS

DICK was surprised when, on descending to the deck, he found that what seemed to him a by no means very difficult feat had attracted general attention. Not only did half a dozen of the sailors pat him on the back with exclamations expressive of their surprise and admiration, but the other midshipmen spoke quite as warmly, the eldest saying, "I could have got up the rope, Holland, but I could not have gone up straight, as you did, without stopping for a bit to take breath. You don't look so very strong, either."

"I think that it is knack more than strength," Dick replied. "I have done a lot of practice at climbing, for I have always wanted to get strong, and I heard that there was no better exercise."

When, presently, Dick went aft to the quarter-deck, Captain Barstow said to him, "You have astonished us all, lad. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you going up that rope. I first caught sight of you when you had climbed but twenty feet, and wondered how far you would get at that pace. I would have wagered a hundred guineas to one that you would not have kept it up to the top. Well, lad, whatever profession you take to, it is certain that you will be a good sailor spoilt."

They had now been three weeks out, but had made slow progress, for the winds had been light, and mostly from the south-west. "This is very dull work," the doctor said to Dick one day at dinner. "Here we are, three weeks out, and still hardly beyond the Channel. There is one consolation: it is not the fault of the ship; she has been doing well under the circumstances, but the fates have been against her

thus far. I have no doubt there are a score of ships still lying in the Downs, that were there when we passed; and, tedious as it has been beating down the Channel, with scarce wind enough most of the time to keep our sails full, it would have been worse lying there all the time."

"Still, we have gained a good bit on them, sir."

"If the wind were to change round, say to the north-east, and they brought it along with them, they would soon make up for lost time, for it would not take them three days to run here. However, we shall begin to do better soon; I heard the captain say that he should change his course to-morrow. We are somewhere off Cork, and when he makes a few miles more westing, he will bear away south. If we had had a favourable wind, we should have taken our departure from the start, but with it in this quarter we are obliged to make more westing before we lay her head on her course, or we should risk getting in too close to the French coast; and their privateers are as thick as peas there."

"But we should not be afraid of a French privateer, doctor?"

"Well, not altogether afraid of one, but they very often go in couples; and sometimes three of them will work together. I don't think one privateer alone would venture to attack us, though she might harass us a bit, and keep up a distant fire, in hopes that another might hear it and bear down to her aid. But it is always as well to keep free of them if one can; you see, an unlucky shot might knock one of our sticks out of us, which would mean delay and trouble, if no worse. We had a sharp brush with two of them on the last voyage, but we beat them off. We were stronger then than we are now, for we had two hundred troops on board, and should have astonished them if they had come close enough to try boarding—in fact, we were slackening our fire, to tempt them to do so, when they made out that a large craft coming up astern was an English frigate, and sheered off. I don't

know what the end of it was, but I rather fancy they were taken. The frigate followed them, gaining fast, and, later on, we could hear guns in the distance."

"You did not join in the chase then, doctor?"

"Oh no; our business is not fighting. If we are attacked, of course we defend ourselves; but we don't go a foot out of our way if we can help it."

Three weeks at sea had done wonders for Mrs. Holland. Now that she was fairly embarked upon her quest, the expression of anxiety gradually died out; the sea air braced up her nerves, and, what was of still greater benefit to her, she was able to sleep soundly and dreamlessly, a thing she had not done for years. Dick was delighted at the change in her.

"You look quite a different woman, mother," he said. "I don't think your friends at Shadwell would know you if they were to see you now."

"I feel a different woman, Dick. I have not felt so well and so bright since your father sailed on his last voyage. I am more convinced than ever that we shall succeed. I have been trying very hard for years to be hopeful, but now I feel so without trying. Of course, it is partly this lovely weather and the sea air, and sleeping so well; and partly because every one is so kind and pleasant."

As soon as he *Madras* had been headed for the south, she began to make better way. The wind freshened somewhat, but continued in the same quarter. Grumbling ceased over the bad luck they were having, and hopeful anticipations that after all they would make a quick passage were freely indulged in. On the fourth day after changing her course, she was off the coast of Spain, which was but a hundred and fifty miles distant. At noon that day the wind dropped suddenly, and an hour later it was a dead calm.

"We are going to have a change, Dick," the doctor said, as he stopped by the lad, who was leaning against the bulwark watching a flock of sea-birds that were following a shoal of

fish, dashing down among them with loud cries, and too intent upon their work to notice the ship lying motionless a hundred yards away.

"What sort of a change, doctor?"

"Most likely a strong blow, though from what quarter it is too soon to say. However, we have no reason to grumble. After nearly a month of light winds, we must expect a turn of bad weather. I hope it will come from the north. That will take us down to the latitude of Madeira, and beyond that we may calculate upon another spell of fine weather, until we cross the Line."

As the afternoon wore on, the weather became more dull. There were no clouds in the sky, but the deep blue was dimmed by a sort of haze. Presently, after a talk between the captain and the first officer, the latter gave the order, "All hands take in sail."

The order had been expected, and the men at once swarmed up the rigging. In a quarter of an hour all the upper sails were furled. The light spars were then sent down to the deck.

"You may as well get the top-gallant sails off her too, Mr. Green," the captain said to the first officer. "It is as well to be prepared for the worst. It is sure to blow pretty hard when the change comes."

The top-gallant sails were got in, and when the courses had been brailed up and secured, the hands were called down. Presently the captain, after going to his cabin, rejoined Mr. Green.

"The glass has gone up again," Dick heard him say.

"That looks as if it were coming from the north, sir."

"Yes, with some east in it; it could not come from a better quarter." He turned and gazed steadily in that direction.

"Yes, there is dark water over there."

"So there is, sir; that is all right. I don't mind how hard it blows, so that it does but come on gradually."

"I agree with you. These hurricane bursts when one is

becalmed are always dangerous, even when one is under bare poles."

Gradually the dark line on the horizon crept up towards the ship. As it reached her the sails bellied out, and she began to move through the water. The wind increased in strength rapidly, and in half-an-hour she was running south at ten or eleven knots an hour. The thermometer had fallen many degrees, and as the sun set the passengers were glad to go below for shelter. Before going to bed Dick went up on deck for a few minutes. The topsails had been reefed down, but the *Madras* was rushing through the water at a high rate of speed. The sea was getting up, and the waves were crested with foam. Above, the stars were shining brilliantly.

"Well, lad, this is a change, is it not?" the captain said, as he came along in a pea-jacket.

"We seem to be going splendidly, Captain."

"Yes, we are walking along grandly, and making up for lost time."

"It is blowing hard, sir."

"It will blow a good deal harder before morning, lad, but I do not think it will be anything very severe. Things won't be so comfortable downstairs for the next day or two, but that is likely to be the worst of it."

The motion of the ship kept Dick awake for some time, but, wedging himself tightly in his berth, he presently fell off to sleep, and did not awake again until morning. His two cabin mates were suffering terribly from sea-sickness, but he felt perfectly well, although it took him a long time to dress, so great was the motion of the ship. On making his way on deck, he found that overhead the sky was blue and bright, and the sun shining brilliantly. The wind was blowing much harder than on the previous evening, and a heavy sea was running; but as the sun sparkled on the white crests of the waves, the scene was far less awe-inspiring than it had been when he looked out before retiring to his berth. The ship, under closely-reefed

main and fore top-sails, was tearing through the water at a high rate of speed, throwing clouds of spray from her bows, and occasionally taking a wave over them that sent a deluge of water along the deck.

"What do you think of this, lad?" Mr. Rawlinson, who was in charge of the watch, asked him, as, after watching his opportunity, he made a rush to the side and caught a firm hold of a shroud.

"It is splendid, sir," he said. "Has she been going like this all night?"

The officer nodded.

"How long do you think it will last, sir?"

"Two or three days."

"Will it be any worse, sir?"

"Not likely to be; it is taking us along rarely, and it is doing us good in more ways than one. Look there;" and as they rose on a wave, he pointed across the water behind Dick. The lad turned and saw a brig running parallel to their course, half a mile distant.

"What of her, sir?"

"That is a French privateer, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"But she has the British ensign flying, sir?"

"Ay, but that goes for nothing. She may possibly be a trader on her way down to the Guinea coast, but by the cut of her sails and the look of her hull, I have no doubt that she is a Frenchman."

"We are passing her, sir."

"Oh, yes; in a gale and a heavy sea, weight tells, and we shall soon leave her astern; but in fine weather I expect she could sail round and round us. If the French could fight their ships as well as they can build them, we should not be in it with them."

"Why don't we fire at her, Mr. Rawlinson?"

The officer laughed. "How are you going to work your guns with the ship rolling like this? No, lad, we are like two

muzzled dogs at present—we can do nothing but watch each other. I am sorry to say that I don't think the fellow is alone. Two or three times I have fancied that I caught a glimpse of a sail on our starboard quarter. I could not swear to it, but I don't think I was mistaken, and I called the captain's attention that way just before he went down ten minutes ago, and he thought he saw it too. However, as there was nothing to be done, he went down for a caulk; he had not left the deck since noon yesterday."

"But if she is no bigger than the other, I suppose we shall leave her behind, too, Mr. Rawlinson?"

"Ay, lad, we shall leave them both behind presently; but if they are what I think, we are likely to hear more of them later on. They would not be so far off-shore as this unless they were on the look-out for Indiamen, which of course keep much farther out than ships bound up the Mediterranean; and having once spotted us they will follow us like hounds on a deer's trail. However, I think they are likely to find that they have caught a tartar when they come up to us. Ah! here is the doctor. Well, doctor, what is the report below?"

"Only the usual number of casualties,—a sprained wrist, a few contusions, and three or four cases of hysterics."

"Is mother all right, doctor?" Dick asked.

"As I have heard nothing of her, I have no doubt she is. I am quite sure that she will not trouble me with hysterics. Women who have had real trouble to bear, Dick, can be trusted to keep their nerves steady in a gale."

"I suppose you call this a gale, doctor?"

"Certainly; it is a stiff north-easterly gale, and if we were facing it instead of running before it, you would not want to ask the question. That is a suspicious-looking craft, Rawlinson," he broke off, catching sight of the brig now on their port quarter.

"Yes, she is a privateer I have no doubt, and unless I am mistaken she has a consort somewhere out there to starboard.

However, we need not trouble about them; travelling as we are, we are going two knots an hour faster than the brig."

"So much the better," the doctor said shortly. "We can laugh at one of these fellows, but when it comes to two of them, I own that I don't care for their company. So the longer this gale holds on, the better."

The mate nodded.

"Well, Dick," the doctor went on, "do you feel as if you will be able to eat your breakfast?"

"I shall be ready enough for it, doctor, but I don't see how it will be possible to eat it, with the vessel rolling like this."

"You certainly will not be able to sit down to it—nothing would stay on the table a minute; there will be no regular breakfast to-day. You must get the steward to cut you a chunk of cold meat, put it between two slices of bread, and make a sandwich of it. As to tea, ask him to give you a bottle and to pour your tea into that; then, if you wedge yourself into a corner, you will find that you are able to manage your breakfast comfortably, and can amuse yourself watching people trying to balance a cup of tea in their hand."

Not more than half a dozen passengers ventured on deck for the next two days, but at the end of that time the force of the wind gradually abated, and on the following morning the *Madras* had all her sails set to a light but still favourable breeze. Madeira had been passed, to Dick's disappointment; but, except for a fresh supply of vegetables, there was no occasion to put in there, and the captain grudged the loss of a day while so favourable a wind was taking them along.

"Do you think we shall see anything of that brig again, doctor?" Dick asked, as, for the first time since the wind sprang up, the passengers sat down to a comfortable breakfast.

"There is no saying, Dick. If we gained two knots an hour during the blow (and I don't suppose we gained more than one and a half), they must be a hundred and twenty miles or so astern of us; after all, that is only half a day's run.

I think they are pretty sure to follow us for a bit, for they will know that in light winds they travel faster than we do, and if we get becalmed while they still hold the breeze, they will come up hand over hand. It is likely enough that in another three days or so we may get a sight of them behind us."

This was evidently the captain's opinion also, for during the day the guns were overhauled, and their carriages examined, and the muskets brought up on deck and cleaned. On the following day the men were practised at the guns, and then had pike and cutlass exercise. None of the passengers particularly noticed these proceedings, for Dick had been warned by the captain to say nothing about the brig; and as he was the only passenger on deck at the time, no whisper of the privateers had come to the ears of the others. The party were just going down to lunch on the third day when a lookout in the maintop hailed the deck,—

"A sail astern."

"How does she bear?"

"She is dead astern of us, sir, and I can only make out her upper sails. I should say that they are her royals."

Mr. Green ran up, with his telescope slung over his shoulder. "I cannot make much out of her, sir," he shouted to the captain; "she may be anything. She must be nearly thirty miles astern. I think, with Pearson, that it is her royals we see."

"Take a look round, Mr. Green."

The mate did so, and presently called down, "I can make out something else away on the starboard quarter, but so far astern that I can scarce swear to her. Still, it can be nothing but a sail."

"Thank you, Mr. Green; I daresay that we shall know more about her later on."

When the captain joined the passengers at table, one of the ladies said, "You seem interested in that ship astern of us, captain."