

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

his natural talent and acquirements will rise or sink him to, in proportion as they are plus or minus. It is a noble service, but has its imperfections, as everything in this world must have. I have little reason to speak in its favour, as far as I am concerned, for it has been hard bread to me; but there must be exceptions in every rule. Do not think of quitting the service until you have given it a fair trial. I am aware that you are an only son, and your father is a man of property, and therefore, in the common parlance of the world, you are independent; but, believe me, no man, however rich, is independent, unless he has a profession, and you will find no better than this, notwithstanding——"

"What?"

"That you will be, most certainly, sent to the mast-head to-morrow."

"We'll argue that point," replied Jack; "at all events, I will go and turn in to-night."

CHAPTER XIII

In which our hero begins to act and think for himself.

WHATEVER may have been Jack's thoughts, at all events they did not spoil his rest. He possessed in himself all the materials of a true philosopher, but there was a great deal of weeding still required. Jolliffe's arguments, sensible as they were, had very little effect upon him; for, strange to say, it is much less easy to shake a man's opinions when he is wrong, than when he is right, proving that we are all of a very perverse nature. "Well," thought Jack, "if I am to go to the mast-head, I am, that's all; but it does not prove that my arguments are not good, only that they will not be listened to;" and then Jack shut his eyes, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

The master had reported to the first lieutenant, and the first lieutenant to the captain, when he came on board the next morning, the conduct of Mr. Easy, who was sent for in the cabin, to hear if he had anything to offer in extenuation of his offence. Jack made an oration, which lasted more than half-an-hour, in which all the arguments he had brought forward to

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

Jolliffe in the preceding chapter were entered fully into. Mr. Jolliffe was then examined, and also Mr. Smallsole was interrogated; after which the captain and the first lieutenant were left alone.

"Sawbridge," said Captain Wilson, "how true it is that any deviation from what is right invariably leads us into a scrape. I have done wrong; wishing to get this boy out of his father's hands, and fearful that he would not join the ship, and imagining him to be by no means the shrewd fellow that he is in reality, I represented the service in a much more favourable light than I should have done; all that he says I told him I did tell him, and it is I who really led the boy into error. Mr. Smallsole has behaved tyrannically and unjustly, he punished the lad for no crime; so that between the master and me, I am now on the horns of a dilemma. If I punish the boy, I feel that I am punishing him more for my own fault and the fault of others, than his own. If I do not punish him, I allow a flagrant and open violation of discipline to pass uncensured, which will be injurious to the service."

"He must be punished, sir," replied Sawbridge.

"Send for him," said the captain.

Jack made his appearance, with a very polite bow.

"Mr. Easy, as you suppose that the articles of war contained all the rules and regulations of the service, I take it for granted that you have erred through ignorance. But recollect, that although you have erred through ignorance, such a violation of discipline, if passed unnoticed, will have a very injurious effect with the men, whose obedience is enforced by the example shown to them by the officers. I feel so convinced of your zeal, which you showed the other day in the case of Easthupp, that I am sure you will see the propriety of my proving to the men, by punishing you, that discipline must be enforced, and I shall therefore send for you on the quarter-deck, and order you to go to the mast-head in presence of the ship's company, as it was in the presence of the ship's company that you refused."

"With the greatest pleasure, Captain Wilson," replied Jack.

"And in future, Mr. Easy, although I shall ever set my face against it, recollect that if any officer punishes you, and you imagine that you are unfairly treated, you will submit to the punishment, and then apply to me for redress."

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

"Certainly, sir," replied Jack, "now that I am aware of your wishes."

"You will oblige me, Mr. Easy, by going on the quarter-deck, and wait there till I come up."

Jack made his best bow, and exit.

"Old Jolliffe told me that I should have to go," said Jack to himself, "and he was right, so far; but hang me if I hadn't the best of the argument, and that's all I care about."

Captain Wilson sent for the master, and reprimanded him for his oppression, as it was evident there was no ground for punishment, and he forbade him ever to mast-head another midshipman, but to report his conduct to the first lieutenant or himself. He then proceeded to the quarter-deck, and, calling for Mr. Easy, gave him what appeared to be a very severe reprimand, which Jack looked upon very quietly, because it was all zeal on the captain's part to give it, and all zeal on his own to take it. Our hero was then ordered up to the mast-head.

Jack took off his hat, and took three or four steps, in obedience to the order—and then returned and made his best bow—inquired of Captain Wilson whether he wished him to go to the fore or to the mainmast head.

"To the main, Mr. Easy," replied the captain, biting his lips.

Jack ascended three spokes of the Jacob's ladder, when he again stopped, and took off his hat.

"I beg your pardon, Captain Wilson—you have not informed me whether it was your wish that I should go to the topmast, or the top-gallant cross-trees."

"To the top-gallant cross-trees, Mr. Easy," replied the captain.

Jack ascended, taking it very easy; he stopped at the main-top for breath; at the main-topmast head, to look about him, and at last gained the spot agreed upon, where he seated himself, and taking out the articles of war, commenced them again to ascertain whether he could not have strengthened his arguments. He had not, however, read through the seventh article before the hands were turned up: "Up anchor!" and Mr. Sawbridge called, "All hands down from aloft!" Jack took the hint, folded up his documents, and came down as leisurely as he went up. Jack was a much better philosopher than his father.

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

The *Harpy* was soon under way, and made all sail, steering for Cape de Gatte, where Captain Wilson hoped to pick up a Spanish vessel or two, on his way to Toulon to receive orders of the admiral.

A succession of light breezes and calms rendered the passage very tedious, but the boats were constantly out, chasing the vessels along shore, and Jack usually asked to be employed on this service; indeed, although so short a time afloat, he was, from his age and strength, one of the most effective midshipmen, and to be trusted, provided a whim did not come into his head; but hitherto Jack had always been under orders, and had always acquitted himself very well.

When the *Harpy* was at Tarragona, it so happened that there were several cases of dysentery in the ship, and Mr. Asper and Mr. Jolliffe were two of those who were suffering. This reduced the number of officers; and at the same time they had received information from the men of a fishing-boat, who, to obtain their own release, had given the intelligence that a small convoy was coming down from Rosas as soon as the wind was fair, under the protection of two gunboats.

Captain Wilson kept well off shore until the wind changed, and then, allowing for the time that the vessels would take to run down the distance between Tarragona and Rosas, steered in the night to intercept them; but it again fell calm, and the boats were therefore hoisted out, with directions to proceed along the shore, as it was supposed that the vessels could not now be far distant. Mr. Sawbridge had the command of the expedition in the pinnace; the first cutter was in charge of the gunner, Mr. Minus; and, as the other officers were sick, Mr. Sawbridge, who liked Jack more and more every day, at his particular request gave him the command of the second cutter. As soon as he heard of it, Mesty declared to our hero that he would go with him; but without permission that was not possible. Jack obtained leave for Mesty to go in lieu of a marine; there were many men sick of the dysentery, and Mr. Sawbridge was not sorry to take an idler out of the ship instead of a working man, especially as Mesty was known to be a good hand.

It was ten o'clock at night when the boats quitted the ship; and, as it was possible that they might not return till late the next day, one day's biscuit and rum were put on board each,

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

that the crews might not suffer from exhaustion. The boats pulled in-shore, and then coasted for three hours without seeing anything; the night was fine overhead, but there was no moon. It still continued calm, and the men began to feel fatigued, when, just as they were within a mile of a low point, they perceived the convoy over the land, coming down with their sails squared, before a light breeze.

Mr. Sawbridge immediately ordered the boats to lie upon their oars, awaiting their coming, and arranging for the attack.

The white lateen sails of the gunboat in advance were now plainly distinguishable from the rest, which were all huddled together in her wake. Down she came like a beautiful swan in the water, her sails just filled with the wind, and running about three knots an hour. Mr. Sawbridge kept her three masts in one, that they might not be perceived, and winded the boats with their heads the same way, so that they might dash on board of her with a few strokes of the oars. So favourable was the course of the gunboat, that she stood right between the launch on one bow, and the two cutters on the other, and they were not perceived until they were actually alongside; the resistance was trifling, but some muskets and pistols had been fired, and the alarm was given. Mr. Sawbridge took possession, with the crew of the launch, and brought the vessel to the wind, as he perceived that at the alarm all the convoy had done the same, directing the cutters to board the largest vessels, and secure as many as they could, while he would do the same with the launch, as they brought them to; but the other gunboat, which had not yet been seen, and had been forgotten, now made her appearance, and came down in a gallant manner to the support of her comrade.

Mr. Sawbridge threw half his men into the launch, as she carried a heavy carronade, and sent her to assist the cutters, which had made right for the gunboat. A smart firing of round and grape was opened upon the boats, which continued to advance upon her; but the officer commanding that gunboat, finding that he had no support from his consort, and concluding that she had been captured, hauled his wind again, and stood out in the offing. Our hero pulled after her, although he could not see the other boats, but the breeze had freshened, and all pursuit was useless; he therefore directed his course to the convoy, and after a hard pull contrived to get on board

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

of a one-masted xebeque, of about fifty tons. Mesty, who had eyes as sharp as a needle, had observed that, when the alarm was given, several of the convoy had not rounded the point, and he therefore proposed, as this vessel was very light, that they should make short tacks with her, to weather the point, as if they were escaping, and by that means be able, particularly if it fell calm again, to capture some others. Jack thought this advice good. The convoy who had rounded the point had all stood out to seaward with the gunboat, and had now a fresh breeze. To chase them was therefore useless, and the only chance was to do as Mesty had proposed. He therefore stood out into the breeze, and after half-an-hour tacked in shore, and fetched well to windward of the low point; but finding no vessels he stood out again. Thus had he made three or four tacks, and had gained, perhaps, six or seven miles, when he perceived signals of recall made to leeward, enforced with guns.

"Mr. Sawbridge wants us to come back, Mesty."

"Mr. Sawbridge mind him own business," replied Mesty, "we nebber take all dis trubble to ply to windward for noting."

"But, Mesty, we must obey orders."

"Yes, sar, when he have him thumb upon you; but now, must do what tink most proper. By de powers, he catch me 'fore I go back."

"But we shall lose the ship."

"Find her again, by-and-by, Massa Easy."

"But they will think that we are lost."

"So much the better, nebba look after us, Massa Easy; I guess we have a fine cruise anyhow. Morrow we take large vessel—make sail, take more, den we go to Toulon."

"But I don't know my way to Toulon; I know it lies up this way, and that's all."

"Dat enough, what you want more? Massa Easy, 'pose you not find fleet, fleet soon find you. By God, nobody nebba lost here. Now, Massa Easy, let um go 'bout 'gain. Somebody else burn biscuit and boil kettle to-morrow for de gentlemen. Murder Irish! only tink, Massa Easy—I boil kettle, and prince in my own country!"

Easy was very much of a mind with Mesty: "For," argued Jack, "if I go back now, I only bring a small vessel half full of beans, and I shall be ashamed to show my face. Now it is true,

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

that they may suppose that we have been sunk by the fire of the gunboat. Well, what then? they have a gunboat to show for their night's work, and it will appear that there was harder fighting than there has been, and Mr. Sawbridge may benefit by it. (Jack was a very knowing fellow to have learnt so much about the service already.) "Well, and when they discover that we are not lost, how glad they will be to find us, especially if we bring some prizes—which I will do, or I'll not go back again. It's not often that one gets a command before being two months at sea, and hang me, now I've got it if I won't keep it; and Mr. Smallsole may mast-head whom he pleases. I'm sorry for poor Gossett, though; if Vigors supposes me dead, how he will murder the poor little fellow—however, it is all for the good of the service, and I'll revenge him when I come back. Hang me if I won't take a cruise."

"I talk to the men, they say they all tick to you like leech. Now dat job settled, I tink we better go 'bout again."

A short time after this decision on the part of our hero the day broke; Jack first looked to leeward, and perceived the gunboat and convoy standing in for the shore about ten miles distant, followed by the *Harpy*; under all sail. He could also perceive the captured gunboat lying to in-shore to prevent their escape.

"*Harpy* hab um all, by Gosh!" cried Mesty; "I ab notion dat she soon settle um hash."

They were so busy looking at the *Harpy* and the convoy, that for some time they quite forgot to look to windward. At last Mesty turned his eyes that way.

"Dam um, I see right last night; look, Massa Easy—one chip, one brig tree lateen—dem for us. By de power, but we make bon prize to-night."

The vessels found out by Mesty were not above three miles to windward; they were under all sail, beating up for the protection of a battery, not far distant.

"Now, massa, suppose they see our boat, dey tink something; keep boat alongside, and shift her when we go 'bout every time. Better not sail so fast now—keep further off till they drop anchor for de night; and den, when it dark, we take 'em."

All Mesty's advice was good, with the exception perhaps of advising our hero how to disobey orders and take a cruise. To

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

prevent the vessel from approaching too near the others, and at the same time to let her have the appearance of doing her best, a sail was towed overboard under the bows, and after that they watched the motions of the *Harpy*.

The distance was too great to distinguish very clearly, but Mesty shinned up the mast of the vessel, and reported progress.

"By Jesus, dare one gun—two gun—go it, *Harpy*. Won't she ab um, sure enough. Now gunboat fire—dat our gunboat—no, dat not ours. Now our gunboat fire—dat pretty—fire away. Ah, now de *Harpy* cum up. All 'mung 'em. Bung, bung, bung—rattle de grape, by gosh. I ab notion de Spaniard is very pretty considerable trouble just now, anyhow. All hove-to, so help me gosh—not more firing; *Harpy* take um all—dare gunboat hove-to, she strike um colours. By all powers, but suppose dey tink we no share prize-money—they find it not little mistake. Now, my lads, it all over, and," continued Mesty, sliding down the mast, "I tink you better not show yourself too much; only two men stay on deck, and dem two take off um jackets."

Mesty's report was correct; the *Harpy* had captured the other gunboat, and the whole convoy. The only drawback to their good fortune was the disappearance of Mr. Easy and the cutter; it was supposed that a shot from the gunboat must have sunk her, and that the whole crew were drowned. Captain Wilson and Mr. Sawbridge seriously regretted the loss of our hero, as they thought that he would have turned out a shining character as soon as he had sown his wild oats; so did Mr. Asper, because our hero's purse went with him; so did Jolliffe, because he had taken an affection for him; so did little Gossett, because he anticipated no mercy from Vigors. On the other hand, there were some who were glad that he was gone; and as for the ship's company in general, they lamented the loss of the poor cutter's crew for twenty-four hours, which, in a man-of-war, is a very long while, and then they thought no more about them. We must leave the *Harpy* to make the best of her way to Toulon, and now follow our hero.

The cutter's crew knew very well that Jack was acting contrary to orders, but anything was to them a change from the monotony of a man-of-war; and they, as well as Mesty, highly approved of a holiday.