

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

their oars and then pulled back to the mole with all speed, leaving the *Rebiera* in quiet possession of her prizes, which had already gained two miles in the offing.

The *Rebiera*, as soon as Jack perceived that the gunboats had retreated, was put before the wind, and soon closed with her captures, when she was hove-to till daylight with the three vessels in company. Gascoigne returned on board, prize-masters were selected, and Jack determined to keep them all with him, and take them to Palermo.

CHAPTER XL

In which there is another slight difference of opinion between those who should be friends.

THE two latteen vessels proved of considerable value, being laden with copper, hides, and cochineal. The galliot was laden with sweet-oil, and was also no despicable prize. At daylight they were all ready, and, to the mortification of the good people of Malaga, sailed away to the eastward without interruption.

"Me tink we do dat job pretty well, Massa Easy," observed Mesty, as he laid the breakfast-table.

"Nothing like trying," replied Gascoigne; "I'm sure when we stood into the bay I would have sold all my prize-money for a doubloon. How do I share, Jack?"

"Only as one of the crew, Ned, for you are a supernumerary, and our articles and agreement for prize-money were signed previous to our sailing."

"I ought to share with Mr. Oxbelly's class by rights," replied Gascoigne.

"That would be to take half my prize-money away. I shall want it all, Mr. Gascoigne, to pacify my wife for giving her the slip."

"Ah, very well; I'll get all I can."

For ten days they ran down the coast, going much too fast for the wishes of the crew, who were anxious to make more money. They seized a fishing-boat and put on board of her the four prisoners, which they had found in the vessels,

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

and arrived off Barcelona, without falling in with friend or foe. The next morning, the wind being very light, they discovered a large vessel at daylight astern of them to the westward, and soon made her out to be a frigate. She made all sail in chase, but that gave them very little uneasiness, as they felt assured that she was a British cruiser. One fear, however, came over them, that she would, if she came up with them, impress a portion of their men.

"As certain as I'm here, and Mrs. Oxbelly's at Southsea," said Oxbelly, "they'll take some of the men—the more so as, supposing us to be a Spanish convoy, they will be disappointed."

"They will hardly take them out of the prizes," observed Easy.

"I don't know that; men must be had for his Majesty's service somehow. It's not their fault, Mr. Easy—the navy must be manned, and as things are so, so things must be. It's the king's prerogative, Mr. Easy, and we cannot fight the battles of the country without it."

"Yes," replied Gascoigne, "and although, as soon as the services of seamen are no longer wanted, you find that there are demagogues on shore who exclaim against impressment, they are quiet enough on the point when they know that their lives and property depend upon sailors' exertions."

"Very true, Mr. Gascoigne, but it's not our fault if we are obliged to take men by force; it's the fault of those who do not legislate so as to prevent the necessity. Mrs. Oxbelly used to say that she would easily manage the matter if she were Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"I daresay Mrs. Oxbelly would make a very good Chancellor of the Exchequer," replied Gascoigne, smiling; "one thing is certain, that if they gave the subject half the consideration they have others of less magnitude, an arrangement might be made by which his Majesty's navy would never be short of men."

"No doubt, no doubt, Mr. Gascoigne; but, nevertheless, the king's prerogative must never be given up."

"There I agree with you, Mr. Oxbelly; it must be held in case of sudden emergency and absolute need."

"We'll argue that point by-and-by," replied Jack; "now let us consult as to our measures. My opinion is, that if I made

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

more sail we should beat the frigate, but she would come up with the prizes."

"That's the best thing we can do, Mr. Easy; but let us send a boat on board of them, and take out all the men that can possibly be spared, that there may be no excuse for impressing them."

"Yes," replied Gascoigne; "and as the wind is falling it is possible it may fall calm, and they may send their boats; suppose we separate a mile or two from each other."

"Dat very good advice, Massa Gascoigne," observed Mesty.

This plan was acted upon; only three men were left in the latteens, and four in the galliot, and the vessels, in obedience to the orders, sheered off on both sides of the *Rebiera*, who made all sail and started ahead of the prizes. This manœuvre was perceived on board of the frigate, and made them sure that it was a Spanish convoy attempting to escape. The fire-engine was got on deck, sails wetted, and every exertion made to come up. But about four o'clock in the afternoon, when the frigate was eight or nine miles off, it fell calm, as Gascoigne had predicted, and the heads of all the vessels, as well as the frigate, were now round the compass.

"There's out boats," said Mr. Oxbelly; "they will have a long pull, and all for nothing."

"How savage they will be!" observed Gascoigne.

"Never mind that," replied Jack; "Mesty says that dinner is ready."

After dinner they all went on deck, and found that the boats had separated, one pulling for each of the prizes, and two for the *Rebiera*. In less than an hour, they would probably be alongside.

"And now let us decide how we are to act. We must not resist if they attempt to impress the men?"

"I've been thinking upon that matter, Mr. Easy, and it appears to me that the men must be permitted to act as they please, and that we must be neuter. I, as a lieutenant in his Majesty's service, cannot of course act, neither can Mr. Gascoigne. You are not in the service, but I should recommend you to do the same. That the men have a right to resist, if possible, is admitted; they always do so, and never are punished for so doing. Under the guns of the frigate, of course, we should on. have to submit; but those two boats

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

do not contain more than twenty-five men, I should think, and our men are the stronger party. We had better leave it to them, and stand neuter."

"Dat very good advice," said Mesty; "leab it to us;" and Mesty walked away forward where the seamen were already in consultation.

Jack also agreed to the prudence of this measure, and he perceived that the seamen, after a consultation with Mesty, were all arming themselves for resistance.

The boats were now close on board, and English colours were hoisted at the gaff. This did not, however, check the impetus of the boats, who, with their ensigns trailing in the still water astern of them, dashed alongside, and an officer leaped on board, cutlass in hand, followed by the seamen of the frigate. The men of the *Rebiera* remained collected forward—Easy, Gascoigne, and Oxbelly aft.

"What vessel is this?" cried the lieutenant who commanded the boats.

Jack, with the greatest politeness, took off his hat, and told him that it was the *Rebiera* letter of marque, and that the papers were ready for his inspection.

"And the other vessels?"

"Prizes to the *Rebiera*, cut out of Malaga Bay," replied Jack.

"Then you are a privateer," observed the disappointed officer. "Where are your papers?"

"Mr. Oxbelly, oblige me by bringing them up," said Jack.

"Fat Jack of the bone-house," observed the lieutenant, looking at Oxbelly.

"A lieutenant in his Majesty's service of longer standing than yourself, young man," replied Oxbelly firmly; "and who, if he ever meets you in any other situation, will make you answer for your insolent remark."

"Indeed!" observed the lieutenant ironically; "now, if you had said you were once a boatswain or gunner."

"Consider yourself kicked," roared Oxbelly, losing his temper.

"Heyday! why, you old porpoise!"

"Sir," observed Jack, who listened with indignation, "Mr. Oxbelly is a lieutenant in his Majesty's service, and you have no right to insult him, even if he were not."

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

"I presume you are all officers," replied the lieutenant.

"I am, sir," retorted Gascoigne, "an officer in his Majesty's service, and on board of this vessel by permission of Captain Sawbridge of the *Latona*."

"And I was, until a few months ago, sir," continued Jack; "at present I am captain and owner of this vessel—but here are the papers. You will have no obstruction from us in the execution of your duty—at the same time, I call upon the two young gentlemen by your side, and your own men, to bear witness to what takes place."

"Oh, very well, sir—just as you please. Your papers, I perceive, are all right. Now you will oblige me by mustering your men."

"Certainly, sir," replied Jack; "send all the men aft to muster, Mr. Oxbelly."

The men came aft to the mainmast, with Mesty at their head, and answered to their names. As the men passed over, the lieutenant made a pencil-mark against ten of them, who appeared the finest seamen; and when the roll had been called he ordered those men to get their bags and go into the boat.

"Sir, as you must observe, I am short-handed, with my men away in prizes, and I, as commander of this vessel, protest against this proceeding; if you insist upon taking them, of course I can do nothing," observed Jack.

"I do insist, sir; I'm not going on board empty-handed, at all events."

"Well, sir, I can say no more," said Jack, walking aft to the taffrail, to which Oxbelly and Gascoigne had retreated.

"Come, my lads, get those men in the boat," said the lieutenant.

But the men had all retreated forward in a body, with Mesty at their head, and had armed themselves. Some of the seamen of the frigate had gone forward, in obedience to their officer, to lead the men selected into the boat; but they were immediately desired to keep back. The scuffle forward attracted the notice of the lieutenant, who immediately summoned all his men out of the boats.

"Mutiny, by heavens! Come up all of you, my lads."

Mesty then came forward, with a sabre in one hand and

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

a pistol in the other, and then addressed the seamen of the frigate—

"I tell you dis, my lads—you not so strong as we—you not got better arms—we not under gun of frigate now, and ab determination not to go board. 'Pose you want us, come take us—'pose you can. By all de power, but we make mince-meat of you, anyhow."

The seamen paused—they were ready to fight for their country, but not to be killed by or kill those who were their own countrymen, and who were doing exactly what they would have done themselves. The lieutenant thought otherwise; he was exasperated at this sensation.

"You black scoundrel, I left you out because I thought you not worth having, but now I'll add you to the number."

"Stop a little," replied Mesty.

The lieutenant would not take the Ashantee's very prudent advice; he flew forward to seize Mesty, who, striking him a blow with the flat of his sabre, almost levelled him to the deck. At this the men and other officers of the frigate darted forward; but after a short scuffle, in which a few wounds were received, were beaten back into the boats. The lieutenant was thrown in after them, by the nervous arm of Mesty—and assailed by cold shot and other missiles, they sheered off with precipitation, and pulled back in the direction of the frigate.

"There will be a row about this," said Oxbelly, "as soon as they come clear of the vessel. If the frigate gets hold of us she will show us no mercy. There is a breeze coming from the north-west. How fortunate! we shall be three leagues to windward and may escape."

"I doubt if she could catch us at any point of sailing; they may come up with the prizes, but can do nothing with them."

"No, the boats which boarded them are already returned to the frigate; she must wait for them, and that will give us a start, and it will be night before they can make sail."

"Fire a gun for the prizes to close," said Jack; "we will put the men on board again, and then be off to Palermo as fast as we can."

"We can do no better," said Oxbelly. "If ever I chance to meet that fellow again, I will trouble him to repeat his words. Trim the sails, my lads."

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

"His language was unpardonable," observed Jack.

"Since I've been in the service, Mr. Easy, I have always observed that some officers appear to imagine, that because they are under the king's pennant, they are warranted in insulting and tyrannising over all those who have not the honour to hoist it; whereas, the very fact of their being king's officers should be an inducement to them to show an example of courtesy and gentlemanly conduct in the execution of their duty, however unpleasant it may be."

"It is only those who, insignificant themselves, want to make themselves of importance by the pennant they serve under," replied our hero.

"Very true, Mr. Easy; but you are not aware that a great part of the ill-will shown to the service is owing to the insolence of those young men in office. The king's name is a warrant for every species of tyranny and unwarrantable conduct. I remember Mrs. Oxbelly telling one of them, when——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Oxbelly," interrupted Jack, "but we have no time to chat now; the breeze is coming down fast, and I perceive the prizes are closing. Let us lower down the boat, send the men on board again, and give them their orders—which I will do in writing, in case they part company."

"Very true, sir. It will be dark in half-an-hour, and as we are now standing in-shore, they will think that we intend to remain on the coast. As soon as it is quite dark we will shape our course for Palermo. I will go down and look at the chart."

CHAPTER XLI

Which winds up the nautical adventures of Mr. Midshipman Easy.

IN half-an-hour the prizes were again alongside, the men put on board, and the boat hoisted up. The frigate still remained becalmed to leeward, and hoisted in her boats. They watched until she was hid by the shades of night, and then wearing round stood away, with the wind two points free, for the coast of Sicily. The next morning when the sun rose

MR. MIDSHIPMAN EASY

there was nothing in sight. Strange anomaly, in a state of high civilisation, where you find your own countrymen avoided and more dreaded than even your foes!

The run was prosperous, the weather was fine, and the prizes did not part company.

On the sixteenth day the *Rebiera* and her convoy anchored in Palermo Bay. The wind was light in the morning that they stood in, and as Jack had a large blue flag with *Rebiera* in white letters hoisted at the main, Don Philip and Don Martin were on board and greeting our hero, before the *Rebiera's* anchor had plunged into the clear blue water.

The information which our hero received, after having been assured of the health of Agnes and her parents, was satisfactory. The disappearance of the friar had, at first, occasioned much surprise; but as the servants of Don Rebiera swore to his return without the black, and the letter of Don Rebeira, sent to the convent, requesting his presence, was opened and read, there was no suspicion against the family. A hundred conjectures had been afloat, but gradually they had subsided, and it was at last supposed that he had been carried off by the banditti, some of whom had been taken, and acknowledged that they had seized a friar, on a day which they could not recollect. The reader will remember that it was Mesty.

The *Rebiera* received pratique, and Jack hastened on shore with Don Philip and his brother, and was once more in company of Agnes, who, in our hero's opinion, had improved since his departure. Most young men in love think the same after an absence, provided it is not too long. The prizes were sold and the money distributed, and every man was satisfied, as the cargoes fetched a larger sum than they had anticipated.

We must pass over the "pros" and "cons" of Don Rebiera and his lady, the pleading of Jack for immediate nuptials, the unwillingness of the mother to part with her only daughter, the family consultation, the dowry, and all these particulars. A month after his arrival Jack was married, and was, of course, as happy as the day was long.

A few days afterwards Mr. Oxbelly advised departure, as the expenses of the vessel were heavy, and it was his duty so to do. Don Philip and Don Martin obtained leave to go to England with their sister and her husband. Nevertheless,