

her, but all so quietly that I shouldn't have known what they were about if I hadn't had a sight of their figures as they worked. I can tell you no more, sir, nor do I know how long ago it is since it happened," he added in a voice that expressed the bewilderment of his poor wits.

Captain Stagg listened; there was a pause; I believe that rage and amazement had for a few moments deprived him of the power of utterance, but he now let fly with the hurricane note of a bull.

"Call all hands! Turn up all hands! Where's the bo'sun? Lively now! My boat gone!" He rushed to the davits at which the boat had hung, I following. True enough, the black irons curved naked to the stars with the tackles (by which the boat was hoisted and lowered) overhauled and hanging down to the water's edge. The night was still very dark, though clear and richly spangled with stars; but the tardy moon would be rising shortly, and even as I swept with my sight the ebony rim of the sea, clear cut against the fainter dusk of the sky and the low wheeling lumi-

naries, I thought I could discern the weak lunar dawn in the east, a dim reddish suffusion in that quarter. There was not a breath of air, and the ship floated upon a surface of oil. Even as the captain stood looking over the side, his hard breathing sounding like the panting of a wounded man, the shrill alarm of the boatswain's whistle pierced the silence, followed by the tempestuous roar of "All hands."

At the wheel stood a motionless figure gripping the spokes. The captain rounded upon him.

"How long is it," he shouted, "since this boat was stolen?"

"'Bout half-an-hour, sir," answered the man slowly and sullenly.

"Were you at the wheel when she was lowered?"

"Yes," answered the man in the same sullen note.

"And were you at the wheel," roared the captain, "when the second officer was secured and gagged?"

"Yes," responded the fellow.



"And you stood there looking on—made no sign—didn't call for help! Mutiny, mutiny!" thundered Captain Stagg; and he rolled forward, shouting alternately "Mutiny! Where's the bo'sun? Mutiny, I say! Send the bo'sun here."

"Here I am, sir," shouted a voice on the quarter-deck.

"Aft with you with a couple of men and seize that man at the wheel and clap him in irons until I can attend to him," cried the captain. "Where are the midshipmen of the watch?"

A boy's voice responded.

"Muster all hands. See who it is that's missing."

And now began a scene of excitement, of hurry, of disorder, which my pen is almost powerless to do justice to. To the shrill notes of the boatswain's pipe and to the cries which accompanied it, the soldiers had come tumbling up from their quarters, and the decks were full of people, who got into one another's way, and who called questions one to another in alarmed voices, with the squeaky voices of midshipmen

threading the hubbub, whilst the shouts of the captain swept past the ear like blasts from a blunderbuss. Had an alarm of fire been raised, had a whole gale of wind suddenly swept down upon the ship, had some submarine convulsion happened under her and started a butt-end and set her leaking,—in short, had there occurred any tremendous incident or tragic disaster such as it is the business and the habit of a seaman to expect and encounter, I believe Captain Stagg—cordially as I disliked the fellow—would have been a man to meet it coolly; his orders would have been given with composure, and there would have been discipline and calmness in the ship. But the piratic seizure of one of his boats—the absconding of two of his sailors—the clear confederacy of the fellow who had been at the helm—above all, the enormous indignity, the cruel treatment to which his second officer had been subjected—here were conditions of this midnight business to drive him mad; and literally mad he seemed to be as he ran about bellowing here and there, roaring to the boatswain to tell him who were the missing men, to the chief mate to



ascertain if the boat was in sight, and so on.

The confusion was in a very little while prodigiously heightened by the arrival of most of the passengers, who came in an elbowing, half-dressed throng through the companion-way, most of them—ladies and gentlemen—calling out to know what had happened before they had fairly thrust their noses through the hatch. Colonel Mowbray spying me as I stood near the davits at which the stolen boat had hung, rushed to me to learn what was wrong with the ship. The scene at this instant is not to be described. Amid the darkness that almost blotted out the fore-part of the vessel I could perceive the half-clad figures of the passengers coming together in groups, dissolving, and then re-forming as they sped about the decks, questioning one another, and hunting for the captain, for the mates, for anybody able to answer their enquiries. I was telling Colonel Mowbray what had happened, when General Primrose's hard commanding voice echoed in the companion-way; his tall soldierly figure emerged, and he immediately began to cry out:

“Is Miss Primrose here on deck? Has any one seen Miss Primrose? She is not in her cabin and she is not in the saloon;” and by the starlight I saw him raise his hand to the side of his mouth the better to direct his short, passionate, almost despairful cry of “Geraldine! Geraldine! Are you here?”

“By heaven! then,” cried I to the Colonel as the truth rushed in upon my brain in a manner to stagger my wits, “I see it all now! It is an elopement! My cabin-fellow and Miss Primrose have run away—they have stolen this boat here and are out somewhere upon that black sea. What madness! Sheer suicide! And how on earth are they to be recovered?”

The Colonel could only utter short ejaculations of astonishment, and then fled with the news to his wife and to anybody else whom he could get to listen to it.

All the people had congregated on the fore-part of the poop where the captain was, and twenty of them seemed talking at once, so great was the hubbub. The General's voice rose strong; and equally strong were the ocean accents of Captain Stagg. I stood alone—no



one near me save the helmsman, and with the utmost effort of my vision I swept the great plain of liquid dusk stretching with the vagueness of a midnight thunder-cloud to its star-determined horizon: but there was nothing to be seen, no glint of phosphorus to indicate the dip of an oar, no minute, ink-like spot in the vapourish obscurity to signify the boat. "What madness!" I repeated again and again to myself, "what extravagance of delirious resolution! Unless we pick them up what will be their fate?"

I moved towards the crowd at the break of the poop to hear what was being said. The moon was then rising; a distorted shape of dull red light; weak, lean, and lonely in the immeasurable distance; and the cold, wide universe of starry solitude in whose heart our ship lay motionless grew colder and wider to every sense in one through the sheer contrasting effect of the confused notes of talk echoing along the vessel's decks. But by this time it had been guessed, it was now known, that the gentleman who had shared my cabin had eloped from the ship with Miss Primrose in

the stolen quarter-boat in company with two sailors. The crew had been mustered and all hands had answered saving the absent men. Some one shouted out my name, and a few steps carried me into the crowd—for a crowd we formed.

"I am here," I exclaimed.

The General and Captain Stagg came thrusting to where I stood.

"What can you tell me about my daughter, Captain Swift?" shouted Sir Charles.

"Nothing, sir," I answered. "The man who called himself Pellew was asleep when I went to my cabin. When I awoke three-quarters of an hour ago his bunk was empty. I came on deck to breathe the air, imagining nothing, suspecting nothing, on my word of honour as a gentleman and an officer, and found the second mate gagged and tied to the rail."

There was sincerity in my voice and my words carried conviction. No need to see my face to guess how thoroughly shocked and startled I was.

"Do you mean to tell me, sir," roared the captain, "that you, sleeping in the same cabin



with the rascal who has stolen my boat, had no notion of what was going forward?"

Maddened by this coarsely-delivered, most brutally affronting suspicion, I approached him by a single stride, and looking down at his face where it palely glimmered betwixt his square shoulders, I said between my teeth:

"Captain Stagg, if you repeat that question I will flog you round the deck with the first piece of rope that I can get hold of;" and unconsciously I lifted my hands in readiness to take him by the throat had he opened his lips.

He fell back a step, dismayed, confounded, utterly at a loss. The dead silence that had settled down upon us was broken by several strong expressions of sympathy with me from Burton, Elphinstone, and one or two others, and some one said loudly, "By Ged then, it wasn't to be borne." But though all this takes some time to describe, it had begun, it had ended, in the space of a few ticks of a clock. Anything that Stagg may have made up his mind to say or do as a reply to me was arrested or extinguished by Sir Charles crying out: "What start have they had?"

"Something within half-an-hour, sir," answered the still enfeebled voice of the second mate from the other side of the crowd.

"They are to be pursued and taken," cried the General. "Let the boats be lowered at once: there are three, and they can steer in three separate directions. Colonel Mowbray, a non-commissioned officer, and three men with loaded muskets will go in each boat in case resistance should be offered. Let this be done now quickly."

"There's no good in sending boats after what's not to be seen, Sir Charles," exclaimed Captain Stagg in a growling stubborn voice. "Mr. Freeman," he shouted, pretty sure that the chief mate would be within hearing of him, "get lanterns lighted and hung over the side, that the men who've run away with my boat may know where the ship lies in case they change their minds and wish to return."

"We are wasting valuable time," cried the General passionately; "I demand that you order the boats to be lowered, sir. My daughter must be recovered—my daughter must be recovered!" he repeated; and the plaintiveness



that his advanced years, his grief, his sense of disgrace, put into the cry rendered it affecting beyond expression.

"Sir Charles, there's no good to come of lowering the boats," exclaimed Stagg; "look how dark it is! The moon don't give any light. There's nothing to see. In what direction are the coxswains to steer then? The runaways pull three oars, and if the lady chooses to row there'll be four. That's one less than the other boats can pull; and then see what a start they've had."

"I don't care about that, sir," roared the General. "What! You tell me you mean to keep the boats idly hanging at the ends of those irons whilst my daughter is still within reach there—or there—or there!" he added, wildly pointing to port, and then to starboard, and then over the stern. "You tell me there is nothing to be done when we have soldiers and sailors willing to give chase—when the sea is as smooth as a pond—when each boat can hold a crew strong enough to frequently relieve each other at the oars, and when the male fugitives count but two seamen and a person who

is not a sailor, and unable perhaps to row. My God!" he cried, violently stamping his foot, "what precious time we are wasting."

"Sir Charles," I exclaimed, "if the captain will lower a boat I will volunteer for her to serve in any capacity in which I may be useful. Amongst us officers we should easily muster a crew, and I will guarantee that we capture the runaways if we only get a sight of them."

"I thank you, Captain Swift," said the General.

"Who will join me?" I shouted.

There was a chorus of "I will, I will, I will."

"No man touches my boats without my leave," bawled Captain Stagg; "one's as good as lost, and the seeking of her may lose me another. Gentlemen, all, only consider for yourselves. Land's sake, gents, cast your eyes over the rail and ask yourselves where you're agoing to steer, and how far you mean to row, and what'll be your chance of recovering this ship if you should lose sight of her, and drift too distant for lamps and rockets to catch your eye?"

"But what is to be done?" said the General.

"Is it to be endured that my daughter shall be



suffered to remain in an open boat all night, with the chance of perishing if stormy weather follows, when she may still be within reach? They may have put off without provisions or water, and what are to be her sufferings if they are not followed and recovered?"

"What can I do, sir?" answered Stagg in a note of mingled shouting and groaning. "I can't make the wind to blow; and without wind this ship won't move: and if she could be made to move, into what quarter of the horizon am I to follow the boat? Let a breeze come along and I shall know what to do. You don't suppose—the gentlemen don't suppose—that I'm going to lose a boat and two men for the want of looking for them. It'll be day-break within three hours of the time they started; and in three hours how far will they have got? Shall we call it twelve mile? Twelve mile off is to be seen from our mast-head, and so I tell ye, Sir Charles; and you leave me alone to have a bright look-out at the masthead all ready for the sun to rise. But to send the other three boats in chase! And in chase of what? Something that isn't to be

seen! That would be a lubberly trick. Doubt me, and I'll call all hands aft, and you shall hear what my mates and crew have to say to it; all of them sailor men—not soldiers!" he wiped his face and went to the rail to spit.

"I am afraid—I'm afraid there is but too much truth in what he says," exclaimed Colonel Mowbray, uttering the words timidly.

The General in silence stood towering amongst us—motionless, gazing in the direction of the little trickle of reddish wake that floated under the moon on the flawless indigo of the sea.

"The boat ought certainly to be pursued," said a subaltern with a lisp.

"I'm quite willing to do anything," said another.

"Three boats," said I, "should provide three chances to one; yet there is this to be said—should a breeze spring up, one or another of the boats might stand to lose the ship."

"The boat is sure to be in sight at dawn," exclaimed Colonel Mowbray.

The General walked right aft and stood alone there, near the wheel, gazing seawards.