

CHAPTER SIX

A SPECIMEN OF NAUTICAL ORATORY--CRITICISMS OF THE SAILORS--THE STARBOARD WATCH ARE GIVEN A HOLIDAY--THE ESCAPE TO THE MOUNTAINS

EARLY the next morning the starboard watch were mustered upon the quarter-deck, and our worthy captain, standing in the cabin gangway, harangued us as follows:--

'Now, men, as we are just off a six months' cruise, and have got through most all our work in port here, I suppose you want to go ashore. Well, I mean to give your watch liberty today, so you may get ready as soon all you please, and go; but understand this, I am going to give you liberty because I suppose you would growl like so many old quarter gunners if I didn't; at the same time, if you'll take my advice, every mother's son of you will stay aboard and keep out of the way of the bloody cannibals altogether. Ten to one, men, if you go ashore, you will get into some infernal row, and that will be the end of you; for if those tattooed scoundrels get you a little ways back into their valleys, they'll nab you--that you may be certain of. Plenty of white men have gone ashore here and never been seen any more. There was the old Dido, she put in here about two years ago, and sent one watch off on liberty; they never were heard of again for a week--the natives swore they didn't know where they were--and only three of them ever got back to the ship again, and one with his face damaged for life, for the cursed heathens tattooed a broad patch clean across his figure-head. But it will be no use talking

to you, for go you will, that I see plainly; so all I have to say is, that you need not blame me if the islanders make a meal of you. You may stand some chance of escaping them though, if you keep close about the French encampment,--and are back to the ship again before sunset. Keep that much in your mind, if you forget all the rest I've been saying to you. There, go forward: bear a hand and rig yourselves, and stand by for a call. At two bells the boat will be manned to take you off, and the Lord have mercy on you!

Various were the emotions depicted upon the countenances of the starboard watch whilst listening to this address; but on its conclusion there was a general move towards the fore-castle, and we soon were all busily engaged in getting ready for the holiday so auspiciously announced by the skipper. During these preparations his harangue was commented upon in no very measured terms; and one of the party, after denouncing him as a lying old son of a seacook who begrudged a fellow a few hours' liberty, exclaimed with an oath, 'But you don't bounce me out of my liberty, old chap, for all your yarns; for I would go ashore if every pebble on the beach was a live coal, and every stick a gridiron, and the cannibals stood ready to broil me on landing.'

The spirit of this sentiment was responded to by all hands, and we resolved that in spite of the captain's croakings we would make a glorious day of it.

But Toby and I had our own game to play, and we availed ourselves of

the confusion which always reigns among a ship's company preparatory to going ashore, to confer together and complete our arrangements. As our object was to effect as rapid a flight as possible to the mountains, we determined not to encumber ourselves with any superfluous apparel; and accordingly, while the rest were rigging themselves out with some idea of making a display, we were content to put on new stout duck trousers, serviceable pumps, and heavy Havre-frocks, which with a Payta hat completed our equipment.

When our shipmates wondered at this, Toby exclaimed in his odd grave way that the rest might do, as they liked, but that he for one preserved his go-ashore traps for the Spanish main, where the tie of a sailor's neckerchief might make some difference; but as for a parcel of unbreeched heathen, he wouldn't go to the bottom of his chest for any of them, and was half disposed to appear among them in buff himself. The men laughed at what they thought was one of his strange conceits, and so we escaped suspicion.

It may appear singular that we should have been thus on our guard with our own shipmates; but there were some among us who, had they possessed the least inkling of our project, would, for a paltry hope of reward, have immediately communicated it to the captain.

As soon as two bells were struck, the word was passed for the liberty-men to get into the boat. I lingered behind in the forecastle a moment to take a parting glance at its familiar features, and just as

I was about to ascend to the deck my eye happened to light on the bread-barge and beef-kid, which contained the remnants of our last hasty meal. Although I had never before thought of providing anything in the way of food for our expedition, as I fully relied upon the fruits of the island to sustain us wherever we might wander, yet I could not resist the inclination I felt to provide luncheon from the relics before me. Accordingly I took a double handful of those small, broken, flinty bits of biscuit which generally go by the name of 'midshipmen's nuts', and thrust them into the bosom of my frock in which same simple receptacle I had previously stowed away several pounds of tobacco and a few yards of cotton cloth--articles with which I intended to purchase the good-will of the natives, as soon as we should appear among them after the departure of our vessel.

This last addition to my stock caused a considerable protuberance in front, which I abated in a measure by shaking the bits of bread around my waist, and distributing the plugs of tobacco among the folds of the garment.

Hardly had I completed these arrangements when my name was sung out by a dozen voices, and I sprung upon the deck, where I found all the party in the boat, and impatient to shove off. I dropped over the side and seated myself with the rest of the watch in the stern sheets, while the poor larboarders shipped their oars, and commenced pulling us ashore.

This happened to be the rainy season at the islands, and the heavens

had nearly the whole morning betokened one of those heavy showers which during this period so frequently occur. The large drops fell bubbling into the water shortly after our leaving the ship, and by the time we had effected a landing it poured down in torrents. We fled for shelter under cover of an immense canoe-house which stood hard by the beach, and waited for the first fury of the storm to pass.

It continued, however, without cessation; and the monotonous beating of the rain over head began to exert a drowsy influence upon the men, who, throwing themselves here and there upon the large war-canoes, after chatting awhile, all fell asleep.

This was the opportunity we desired, and Toby and I availed ourselves of it at once by stealing out of the canoe-house and plunging into the depths of an extensive grove that was in its rear. After ten minutes' rapid progress we gained an open space from which we could just descry the ridge we intended to mount looming dimly through the mists of the tropical shower, and distant from us, as we estimated, something more than a mile. Our direct course towards it lay through a rather populous part of the bay; but desirous as we were of evading the natives and securing an unmolested retreat to the mountains, we determined, by taking a circuit through some extensive thickets, to avoid their vicinity altogether.

The heavy rain that still continued to fall without intermission favoured our enterprise, as it drove the islanders into their houses,

and prevented any casual meeting with them. Our heavy frocks soon became completely saturated with water, and by their weight, and that of the articles we had concealed beneath them, not a little impeded our progress. But it was no time to pause when at any moment we might be surprised by a body of the savages, and forced at the very outset to relinquish our undertaking.

Since leaving the canoe-house we had scarcely exchanged a single syllable with one another; but when we entered a second narrow opening in the wood, and again caught sight of the ridge before us, I took Toby by the arm, and pointing along its sloping outline to the lofty heights at its extremity, said in a low tone, 'Now, Toby, not a word, nor a glance backward, till we stand on the summit of yonder mountain--so no more lingering but let us shove ahead while we can, and in a few hours' time we may laugh aloud. You are the lightest and the nimblest, so lead on, and I will follow.'

'All right, brother,' said Toby, 'quick's our play; only lets keep close together, that's all;' and so saying with a bound like a young roe, he cleared a brook which ran across our path, and rushed forward with a quick step.

When we arrived within a short distance of the ridge, we were stopped by a mass of tall yellow reeds, growing together as thickly as they could stand, and as tough and stubborn as so many rods of steel; and we perceived, to our chagrin, that they extended midway up the elevation we

proposed to ascend.

For a moment we gazed about us in quest of a more practicable route; it was, however, at once apparent that there was no resource but to pierce this thicket of canes at all hazards. We now reversed our order of march, I, being the heaviest, taking the lead, with a view of breaking a path through the obstruction, while Toby fell into the rear.

Two or three times I endeavoured to insinuate myself between the canes, and by dint of coaxing and bending them to make some progress; but a bull-frog might as well have tried to work a passage through the teeth of a comb, and I gave up the attempt in despair.

Half wild with meeting an obstacle we had so little anticipated, I threw myself desperately against it, crushing to the ground the canes with which I came in contact, and, rising to my feet again, repeated the action with like effect. Twenty minutes of this violent exercise almost exhausted me, but it carried us some way into the thicket; when Toby, who had been reaping the benefit of my labours by following close at my heels, proposed to become pioneer in turn, and accordingly passed ahead with a view of affording me a respite from my exertions. As however with his slight frame he made but bad work of it, I was soon obliged to resume my old place again. On we toiled, the perspiration starting from our bodies in floods, our limbs torn and lacerated with the splintered fragments of the broken canes, until we had proceeded perhaps as far as the middle of the brake, when suddenly it ceased raining, and the

atmosphere around us became close and sultry beyond expression. The elasticity of the reeds quickly recovering from the temporary pressure of our bodies, caused them to spring back to their original position; so that they closed in upon us as we advanced, and prevented the circulation of little air which might otherwise have reached us. Besides this, their great height completely shut us out from the view of surrounding objects, and we were not certain but that we might have been going all the time in a wrong direction.

Fatigued with my long-continued efforts, and panting for breath, I felt myself completely incapacitated for any further exertion. I rolled up the sleeve of my frock, and squeezed the moisture it contained into my parched mouth. But the few drops I managed to obtain gave me little relief, and I sank down for a moment with a sort of dogged apathy, from which I was aroused by Toby, who had devised a plan to free us from the net in which we had become entangled.

He was laying about him lustily with his sheath-knive, lopping the canes right and left, like a reaper, and soon made quite a clearing around us. This sight reanimated me; and seizing my own knife, I hacked and hewed away without mercy. But alas! the farther we advanced the thicker and taller, and apparently the more interminable, the reeds became.

I began to think we were fairly snared, and had almost made up my mind that without a pair of wings we should never be able to escape from the toils; when all at once I discerned a peep of daylight through the canes

on my right, and, communicating the joyful tidings to Toby, we both fell to with fresh spirit, and speedily opening the passage towards it we found ourselves clear of perplexities, and in the near vicinity of the ridge. After resting for a few moments we began the ascent, and after a little vigorous climbing found ourselves close to its summit. Instead however of walking along its ridge, where we should have been in full view of the natives in the vales beneath, and at a point where they could easily intercept us were they so inclined, we cautiously advanced on one side, crawling on our hands and knees, and screened from observation by the grass through which we glided, much in the fashion of a couple of serpents. After an hour employed in this unpleasant kind of locomotion, we started to our feet again and pursued our way boldly along the crest of the ridge.

This salient spur of the lofty elevations that encompassed the bay rose with a sharp angle from the valleys at its base, and presented, with the exception of a few steep acclivities, the appearance of a vast inclined plane, sweeping down towards the sea from the heights in the distance. We had ascended it near the place of its termination and at its lowest point, and now saw our route to the mountains distinctly defined along its narrow crest, which was covered with a soft carpet of verdure, and was in many parts only a few feet wide.

Elated with the success which had so far attended our enterprise, and invigorated by the refreshing atmosphere we now inhaled, Toby and I in high spirits were making our way rapidly along the ridge, when suddenly

from the valleys below which lay on either side of us we heard the distant shouts of the natives, who had just descried us, and to whom our figures, brought in bold relief against the sky, were plainly revealed.

Glancing our eyes into these valleys, we perceived their savage inhabitants hurrying to and fro, seemingly under the influence of some sudden alarm, and appearing to the eye scarcely bigger than so many pigmies; while their white thatched dwellings, dwarfed by the distance, looked like baby-houses. As we looked down upon the islanders from our lofty elevation, we experienced a sense of security; feeling confident that, should they undertake a pursuit, it would, from the start we now had, prove entirely fruitless, unless they followed us into the mountains, where we knew they cared not to venture.

However, we thought it as well to make the most of our time; and accordingly, where the ground would admit of it, we ran swiftly along the summit of the ridge, until we were brought to a stand by a steep cliff, which at first seemed to interpose an effectual barrier to our farther advance. By dint of much hard scrambling however, and at some risk to our necks, we at last surmounted it, and continued our fight with unabated celerity.

We had left the beach early in the morning, and after an uninterrupted, though at times difficult and dangerous ascent, during which we had never once turned our faces to the sea, we found ourselves, about three hours before sunset, standing on the top of what seemed to be the

highest land on the island, an immense overhanging cliff composed of basaltic rocks, hung round with parasitical plants. We must have been more than three thousand feet above the level of the sea, and the scenery viewed from this height was magnificent.

The lonely bay of Nukuheva, dotted here and there with the black hulls of the vessels composing the French squadron, lay reposing at the base of a circular range of elevations, whose verdant sides, perforated with deep glens or diversified with smiling valleys, formed altogether the loveliest view I ever beheld, and were I to live a hundred years, I shall never forget the feeling of admiration which I then experienced.