

## CHAPTER XV. THE CARGO OF THE "FLYING SCUD."

In my early days I was a man, the most wedded to his idols of my generation. I was a dweller under roofs: the gull of that which we call civilisation; a superstitious votary of the plastic arts; a cit; and a prop of restaurants. I had a comrade in those days, somewhat of an outsider, though he moved in the company of artists, and a man famous in our small world for gallantry, knee breeches, and dry and pregnant sayings. He, looking on the long meals and waxing bellies of the French, whom I confess I somewhat imitated, branded me as "a cultivator of restaurant fat." And I believe he had his finger on the dangerous spot; I believe, if things had gone smooth with me, I should be now swollen like a prize-ox in body, and fallen in mind to a thing perhaps as low as many types of bourgeois--the implicit or exclusive artist. That was a home word of Pinkerton's, deserving to be writ in letters of gold on the portico of every school of art: "What I can't see is why you should want to do nothing else." The dull man is made, not by the nature, but by the degree of his immersion in a single business. And all the more if that be sedentary, uneventful, and ingloriously safe. More than one half of him will then remain unexercised and undeveloped; the rest will be distended and deformed by over-nutrition, over-cerebration, and the heat of rooms. And I have often marvelled at the impudence of gentlemen, who describe and pass judgment on the life of man, in almost perfect ignorance of all its necessary elements and natural careers. Those who dwell in clubs and studios may paint excellent pictures or write

enchancing novels. There is one thing that they should not do: they should pass no judgment on man's destiny, for it is a thing with which they are unacquainted. Their own life is an excrescence of the moment, doomed, in the vicissitude of history, to pass and disappear: the eternal life of man, spent under sun and rain and in rude physical effort, lies upon one side, scarce changed since the beginning.

I would I could have carried along with me to Midway Island all the writers and the prating artists of my time. Day after day of hope deferred, of heat, of unremitting toil; night after night of aching limbs, bruised hands, and a mind obscured with the grateful vacancy of physical fatigue: the scene, the nature of my employment; the rugged speech and faces of my fellow-toilers, the glare of the day on deck, the stinking twilight in the bilge, the shrill myriads of the ocean-fowl: above all, the sense of our immitigable isolation from the world and from the current epoch;--keeping another time, some eras old; the new day heralded by no daily paper, only by the rising sun; and the State, the churches, the peopled empires, war, and the rumours of war, and the voices of the arts, all gone silent as in the days ere they were yet invented. Such were the conditions of my new experience in life, of which (if I had been able) I would have had all my confreres and contemporaries to partake: forgetting, for that while, the orthodoxies of the moment, and devoted to a single and material purpose under the eye of heaven.

Of the nature of our task, I must continue to give some summary idea.

The forecastle was lumbered with ship's chandlery, the hold nigh full of rice, the lazarette crowded with the teas and silks. These must all be dug out; and that made but a fraction of our task. The hold was ceiled throughout; a part, where perhaps some delicate cargo was once stored, had been lined, in addition, with inch boards; and between every beam there was a movable panel into the bilge. Any of these, the bulkheads of the cabins, the very timbers of the hull itself, might be the place of hiding. It was therefore necessary to demolish, as we proceeded, a great part of the ship's inner skin and fittings, and to auscultate what remained, like a doctor sounding for a lung disease. Upon the return, from any beam or bulkhead, of a flat or doubtful sound, we must up axe and hew into the timber: a violent and--from the amount of dry rot in the wreck--a mortifying exercise. Every night saw a deeper inroad into the bones of the Flying Scud--more beams tapped and hewn in splinters, more planking peeled away and tossed aside--and every night saw us as far as ever from the end and object of our arduous devastation. In this perpetual disappointment, my courage did not fail me, but my spirits dwindled; and Nares himself grew silent and morose. At night, when supper was done, we passed an hour in the cabin, mostly without speech: I, sometimes dozing over a book; Nares, sullenly but busily drilling sea-shells with the instrument called a Yankee Fiddle. A stranger might have supposed we were estranged; as a matter of fact, in this silent comradeship of labour, our intimacy grew.

I had been struck, at the first beginning of our enterprise upon the wreck, to find the men so ready at the captain's lightest word. I

dare not say they liked, but I can never deny that they admired him thoroughly. A mild word from his mouth was more valued than flattery and half a dollar from myself; if he relaxed at all from his habitual attitude of censure, smiling alacrity surrounded him; and I was led to think his theory of captainship, even if pushed to excess, reposed upon some ground of reason. But even terror and admiration of the captain failed us before the end. The men wearied of the hopeless, unremunerative quest and the long strain of labour. They began to shirk and grumble. Retribution fell on them at once, and retribution multiplied the grumblings. With every day it took harder driving to keep them to the daily drudge; and we, in our narrow boundaries, were kept conscious every moment of the ill-will of our assistants.

In spite of the best care, the object of our search was perfectly well known to all on board; and there had leaked out besides some knowledge of those inconsistencies that had so greatly amazed the captain and myself. I could overhear the men debate the character of Captain Trent, and set forth competing theories of where the opium was stowed; and as they seemed to have been eavesdropping on ourselves, I thought little shame to prick up my ears when I had the return chance of spying upon them, in this way. I could diagnose their temper and judge how far they were informed upon the mystery of the Flying Scud. It was after having thus overheard some almost mutinous speeches that a fortunate idea crossed my mind. At night, I matured it in my bed, and the first thing the next morning, broached it to the captain.

"Suppose I spirit up the hands a bit," I asked, "by the offer of a reward?"

"If you think you're getting your month's wages out of them the way it is, I don't," was his reply. "However, they are all the men you've got, and you're the supercargo."

This, from a person of the captain's character, might be regarded as complete adhesion; and the crew were accordingly called aft. Never had the captain worn a front more menacing. It was supposed by all that some misdeed had been discovered, and some surprising punishment was to be announced.

"See here, you!" he threw at them over his shoulder as he walked the deck, "Mr. Dodd here is going to offer a reward to the first man who strikes the opium in that wreck. There's two ways of making a donkey go; both good, I guess: the one's kicks and the other's carrots. Mr. Dodd's going to try the carrots. Well, my sons,"--and here he faced the men for the first time with his hands behind him--"if that opium's not found in five days, you can come to me for the kicks."

He nodded to the present narrator, who took up the tale. "Here is what I propose, men," said I: "I put up one hundred and fifty dollars. If any man can lay hands on the stuff right away, and off his own club, he shall have the hundred and fifty down. If any one can put us on the scent of where to look, he shall have a hundred and twenty-five, and the

balance shall be for the lucky one who actually picks it up. We'll call it the Pinkerton Stakes, captain," I added, with a smile.

"Call it the Grand Combination Sweep, then," cries he. "For I go you better.--Look here, men, I make up this jack-pot to two hundred and fifty dollars, American gold coin."

"Thank you, Captain Nares," said I; "that was handsomely done."

"It was kindly meant," he returned.

The offer was not made in vain; the hands had scarce yet realised the magnitude of the reward, they had scarce begun to buzz aloud in the extremity of hope and wonder, ere the Chinese cook stepped forward with gracious gestures and explanatory smiles.

"Captain," he began, "I serv-um two year Melican navy; serv-um six year mail-boat steward. Savvy plenty."

"Oho!" cried Nares, "you savvy plenty, do you? (Beggar's seen this trick in the mail-boats, I guess.) Well, why you no savvy a little sooner, sonny?"

"I think bimeby make-um reward," replied the cook, with smiling dignity.

"Well, you can't say fairer than that," the captain admitted, "and now

the reward's offered, you'll talk? Speak up, then. Suppose you speak true, you get reward. See?"

"I think long time," replied the Chinaman. "See plenty litty mat lice; too-muchy plenty litty mat lice; sixty ton, litty mat lice. I think all-e-time: perhaps plenty opium plenty litty mat lice."

"Well, Mr. Dodd, how does that strike you?" asked the captain. "He may be right, he may be wrong. He's likely to be right: for if he isn't, where can the stuff be? On the other hand, if he's wrong, we destroy a hundred and fifty tons of good rice for nothing. It's a point to be considered."

"I don't hesitate," said I. "Let's get to the bottom of the thing. The rice is nothing; the rice will neither make nor break us."

"That's how I expected you to see it," returned Nares.

And we called the boat away and set forth on our new quest.

The hold was now almost entirely emptied; the mats (of which there went forty to the short ton) had been stacked on deck, and now crowded the ship's waist and forecastle. It was our task to disembowel and explore six thousand individual mats, and incidentally to destroy a hundred and fifty tons of valuable food. Nor were the circumstances of the day's business less strange than its essential nature. Each man of us, armed

with a great knife, attacked the pile from his own quarter, slashed into the nearest mat, burrowed in it with his hands, and shed forth the rice upon the deck, where it heaped up, overflowed, and was trodden down, poured at last into the scuppers, and occasionally spouted from the vents. About the wreck, thus transformed into an overflowing granary, the sea-fowl swarmed in myriads and with surprising insolence. The sight of so much food confounded them; they deafened us with their shrill tongues, swooped in our midst, dashed in our faces, and snatched the grain from between our fingers. The men--their hands bleeding from these assaults--turned savagely on the offensive, drove their knives into the birds, drew them out crimsoned, and turned again to dig among the rice, unmindful of the gawking creatures that struggled and died among their feet. We made a singular picture: the hovering and diving birds; the bodies of the dead discolouring the rice with blood; the scuppers vomiting breadstuff; the men, frenzied by the gold hunt, toiling, slaying, and shouting aloud: over all, the lofty intricacy of rigging and the radiant heaven of the Pacific. Every man there toiled in the immediate hope of fifty dollars; and I, of fifty thousand. Small wonder if we waded callously in blood and food.

It was perhaps about ten in the forenoon when the scene was interrupted. Nares, who had just ripped open a fresh mat, drew forth, and slung at his feet, among the rice, a papered tin box.

"How's that?" he shouted.



A cry broke from all hands: the next moment, forgetting their own disappointment, in that contagious sentiment of success, they gave three cheers that scared the sea-birds; and the next, they had crowded round the captain, and were jostling together and groping with emulous hands in the new-opened mat. Box after box rewarded them, six in all; wrapped, as I have said, in a paper envelope, and the paper printed on, in Chinese characters.

Nares turned to me and shook my hand. "I began to think we should never see this day," said he. "I congratulate you, Mr. Dodd, on having pulled it through."

The captain's tones affected me profoundly; and when Johnson and the men pressed round me in turn with congratulations, the tears came in my eyes.

"These are five-tael boxes, more than two pounds," said Nares, weighing one in his hand. "Say two hundred and fifty dollars to the mat. Lay into it, boys! We'll make Mr. Dodd a millionaire before dark."

It was strange to see with what a fury we fell to. The men had now nothing to expect; the mere idea of great sums inspired them with disinterested ardour. Mats were slashed and disembowelled, the rice flowed to our knees in the ship's waist, the sweat ran in our eyes and blinded us, our arms ached to agony; and yet our fire abated not. Dinner came; we were too weary to eat, too hoarse for conversation; and yet

dinner was scarce done, before we were afoot again and delving in the rice. Before nightfall not a mat was unexplored, and we were face to face with the astonishing result.

For of all the inexplicable things in the story of the Flying Scud, here was the most inexplicable. Out of the six thousand mats, only twenty were found to have been sugared; in each we found the same amount, about twelve pounds of drug; making a grand total of two hundred and forty pounds. By the last San Francisco quotation, opium was selling for a fraction over twenty dollars a pound; but it had been known not long before to bring as much as forty in Honolulu, where it was contraband.

Taking, then, this high Honolulu figure, the value of the opium on board the Flying Scud fell considerably short of ten thousand dollars, while at the San Francisco rate it lacked a trifle of five thousand. And fifty thousand was the price that Jim and I had paid for it. And Bellairs had been eager to go higher! There is no language to express the stupor with which I contemplated this result.

It may be argued we were not yet sure; there might be yet another cache; and you may be certain in that hour of my distress the argument was not forgotten. There was never a ship more ardently perquested; no stone was left unturned, and no expedient untried; day after day of growing despair, we punched and dug in the brig's vitals, exciting the men with promises and presents; evening after evening Nares and I sat face to face in the narrow cabin, racking our minds for some neglected

possibility of search. I could stake my salvation on the certainty of the result: in all that ship there was nothing left of value but the timber and the copper nails. So that our case was lamentably plain; we had paid fifty thousand dollars, borne the charges of the schooner, and paid fancy interest on money; and if things went well with us, we might realise fifteen per cent of the first outlay. We were not merely bankrupt, we were comic bankrupts: a fair butt for jeering in the streets. I hope I bore the blow with a good countenance; indeed, my mind had long been quite made up, and since the day we found the opium I had known the result. But the thought of Jim and Mamie ached in me like a physical pain, and I shrank from speech and companionship.

I was in this frame of mind when the captain proposed that we should land upon the island. I saw he had something to say, and only feared it might be consolation; for I could just bear my grief, not bungling sympathy; and yet I had no choice but to accede to his proposal.

We walked awhile along the beach in silence. The sun overhead reverberated rays of heat; the staring sand, the glaring lagoon, tortured our eyes; and the birds and the boom of the far-away breakers made a savage symphony.

"I don't require to tell you the game's up?" Nares asked.

"No," said I.

"I was thinking of getting to sea to-morrow," he pursued.

"The best thing you can do," said I.

"Shall we say Honolulu?" he inquired.

"O, yes; let's stick to the programme," I cried. "Honolulu be it!"

There was another silence, and then Nares cleared his throat.

"We've been pretty good friends, you and me, Mr. Dodd," he resumed.

"We've been going through the kind of thing that tries a man. We've had the hardest kind of work, we've been badly backed, and now we're badly beaten. And we've fetched through without a word of disagreement. I don't say this to praise myself: it's my trade; it's what I'm paid for, and trained for, and brought up to. But it was another thing for you; it was all new to you; and it did me good to see you stand right up to it and swing right into it, day in, day out. And then see how you've taken this disappointment, when everybody knows you must have been tautened up to shying-point! I wish you'd let me tell you, Mr. Dodd, that you've stood out mighty manly and handsomely in all this business, and made every one like you and admire you. And I wish you'd let me tell you, besides, that I've taken this wreck business as much to heart as you have; something kind of rises in my throat when I think we're beaten; and if I thought waiting would do it, I would stick on this reef until

we starved."

I tried in vain to thank him for these generous words, but he was beforehand with me in a moment.

"I didn't bring you ashore to sound my praises," he interrupted. "We understand one another now, that's all; and I guess you can trust me. What I wished to speak about is more important, and it's got to be faced. What are we to do about the Flying Scud and the dime novel?"

"I really have thought nothing about that," I replied. "But I expect I mean to get at the bottom of it; and if the bogus Captain Trent is to be found on the earth's surface, I guess I mean to find him."

"All you've got to do is talk," said Nares; "you can make the biggest kind of boom; it isn't often the reporters have a chance at such a yarn as this; and I can tell you how it will go. It will go by telegraph, Mr. Dodd; it'll be telegraphed by the column, and head-lined, and frothed up, and denied by authority, and it'll hit bogus Captain Trent in a Mexican bar-room, and knock over bogus Goddedaal in a slum somewhere up the Baltic, and bowl down Hardy and Brown in sailors' music halls round Greenock. O, there's no doubt you can have a regular domestic Judgment Day. The only point is whether you deliberately want to."

"Well," said I, "I deliberately don't want one thing: I deliberately

don't want to make a public exhibition of myself and Pinkerton: so moral--smuggling opium; such damned fools--paying fifty thousand for a 'dead horse'!"

"No doubt it might damage you in a business sense," the captain agreed.

"And I'm pleased you take that view; for I've turned kind of soft upon the job. There's been some crookedness about, no doubt of it; but, Law bless you! if we dropped upon the troupe, all the premier artists would slip right out with the boodle in their grip-sacks, and you'd only collar a lot of old mutton-headed shell-backs that didn't know the back of the business from the front. I don't take much stock in Mercantile Jack, you know that; but, poor devil, he's got to go where he's told; and if you make trouble, ten to one it'll make you sick to see the innocents who have to stand the racket. It would be different if we understood the operation; but we don't, you see: there's a lot of queer corners in life; and my vote is to let the blame' thing lie."

"You speak as if we had that in our power," I objected.

"And so we have," said he.

"What about the men?" I asked. "They know too much by half; and you can't keep them from talking."

"Can't I?" returned Nares. "I bet a boarding-master can! They can be all half-seas-over, when they get ashore, blind drunk by dark, and cruising

out of the Golden Gate in different deep-sea ships by the next morning. Can't keep them from talking, can't I? Well, I can make 'em talk separate, leastways. If a whole crew came talking, parties would listen; but if it's only one lone old shell-back, it's the usual yarn. And at least, they needn't talk before six months, or--if we have luck, and there's a whaler handy--three years. And by that time, Mr. Dodd, it's ancient history."

"That's what they call Shanghaiing, isn't it?" I asked. "I thought it belonged to the dime novel."

"O, dime novels are right enough," returned the captain. "Nothing wrong with the dime novel, only that things happen thicker than they do in life, and the practical seamanship is off-colour."

"So we can keep the business to ourselves," I mused.

"There's one other person that might blab," said the captain. "Though I don't believe she has anything left to tell."

"And who is SHE?" I asked.

"The old girl there," he answered, pointing to the wreck. "I know there's nothing in her; but somehow I'm afraid of some one else--it's the last thing you'd expect, so it's just the first that'll happen--some one dropping into this God-forgotten island where nobody drops in,

waltzing into that wreck that we've grown old with searching, stooping straight down, and picking right up the very thing that tells the story. What's that to me? you may ask, and why am I gone Soft Tommy on this Museum of Crooks? They've smashed up you and Mr. Pinkerton; they've turned my hair grey with conundrums; they've been up to larks, no doubt; and that's all I know of them--you say. Well, and that's just where it is. I don't know enough; I don't know what's uppermost; it's just such a lot of miscellaneous eventualities as I don't care to go stirring up; and I ask you to let me deal with the old girl after a patent of my own."

"Certainly--what you please," said I, scarce with attention, for a new thought now occupied my brain. "Captain," I broke out, "you are wrong: we cannot hush this up. There is one thing you have forgotten."

"What is that?" he asked.

"A bogus Captain Trent, a bogus Goddedaal, a whole bogus crew, have all started home," said I. "If we are right, not one of them will reach his journey's end. And do you mean to say that such a circumstance as that can pass without remark?"

"Sailors," said the captain, "only sailors! If they were all bound for one place, in a body, I don't say so; but they're all going separate--to Hull, to Sweden, to the Clyde, to the Thames. Well, at each place, what is it? Nothing new. Only one sailor man missing: got drunk, or got



drowned, or got left: the proper sailor's end."

Something bitter in the thought and in the speaker's tones struck me hard. "Here is one that has got left!" I cried, getting sharply to my feet; for we had been some time seated. "I wish it were the other. I don't--don't relish going home to Jim with this!"

"See here," said Nares, with ready tact, "I must be getting aboard. Johnson's in the brig annexing chandlery and canvas, and there's some things in the *Norah* that want fixing against we go to sea. Would you like to be left here in the chicken-ranch? I'll send for you to supper."

I embraced the proposal with delight. Solitude, in my frame of mind, was not too dearly purchased at the risk of sunstroke or sand-blindness; and soon I was alone on the ill-omened islet. I should find it hard to tell of what I thought--of Jim, of Mamie, of our lost fortune, of my lost hopes, of the doom before me: to turn to at some mechanical occupation in some subaltern rank, and to toil there, unremarked and unamused, until the hour of the last deliverance. I was, at least, so sunk in sadness that I scarce remarked where I was going; and chance (or some finer sense that lives in us, and only guides us when the mind is in abeyance) conducted my steps into a quarter of the island where the birds were few. By some devious route, which I was unable to retrace for my return, I was thus able to mount, without interruption, to the highest point of land. And here I was recalled to consciousness by a

last discovery.

The spot on which I stood was level, and commanded a wide view of the lagoon, the bounding reef, the round horizon. Nearer hand I saw the sister islet, the wreck, the Norah Creina, and the Norah's boat already moving shoreward. For the sun was now low, flaming on the sea's verge; and the galley chimney smoked on board the schooner.

It thus befell that though my discovery was both affecting and suggestive, I had no leisure to examine further. What I saw was the blackened embers of fire of wreck. By all the signs, it must have blazed to a good height and burned for days; from the scantling of a spar that lay upon the margin only half consumed, it must have been the work of more than one; and I received at once the image of a forlorn troop of castaways, houseless in that lost corner of the earth, and feeding there their fire of signal. The next moment a hail reached me from the boat; and bursting through the bushes and the rising sea-fowl, I said farewell (I trust for ever) to that desert isle.