

THE
OLD SEA CAPTAIN.

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THE ALCESTE FRIGATE, AND THE MALAY PIRATE.

CHAPTER XII.

Close hauled—A top-gallant gale—Ships of different kinds—The Alceste, Lyra, and the General Hewitt leave Plymouth—The Alceste, on her return, strikes on a reef of sunken rocks—Lord Amherst goes ashore, and afterwards embarks for Java—Captain Maxwell's steadiness, and resolution—Good conduct of the men—The Malay pirates—An alarm given by a baboon—The Pirates increase—The Alceste burned—Attack on the pirates—Arrival of the Ternate.

“How are you, boys? Close-hauled, I see; for you

are sailing almost in the eye of the wind. Tacks close down to windward; sheets hauled close aft; bowlines well out, to keep sails steady. But I hardly suppose you understand my signals."

"Not a word, Captain, can we understand."

"I guessed as much, my hearties! But as you have been facing the wind within a few points, in coming up the hill, so I have just described the state of a ship in such a situation. A ship is obliged to be close-hauled, to sail in the nearest possible point to the wind. You all look as fresh as figure-heads, newly painted. There is a breeze abroad, but it is but a top-gallant breeze; so that you have been but in little danger of foundering."

"What is a top-gallant breeze, Captain? It sounds like one of the highest breezes that can blow."

"No, no, boys! it is a breeze wherein a ship may carry her top-gallant sails, without fear of their being torn to ribands and shreds; a gale will not allow this. I have been reading over the first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel, wherein it says, 'Now, as he [the Saviour] walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him. And when he had gone a little farther thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets.' Now, I have been thinking, boys, how astonished Simon and Andrew, and James

and John, would have been, if, instead of their own bit of a fishing smack, in this chapter called a ship, they could have seen a merchantman of a thousand tons, spreading her broad sails to the winds!"

"Ay; it would have surprised them, indeed. But there were no such ships to be seen then."

"True, boys; ship is a general name given to vessels of different kinds. I told you something about merchant-ships, brigs, schooners, and sloops; as well as about cutters, gun-boats, bomb-ketches, privateers, frigates, and men-of-war."

"You did, Captain."

"Besides these, there are ships fitted out for particular purposes, such as fire-ships, guard-ships, hospital-ships, prison-ships, and many others: but, if I recollect right, you were to have an account of the wreck of the *Alceste* frigate; and, mayhap, I may as well hoist a sail now, as at any other time. If we once lose wind and tide, there is no knowing when we shall weigh anchor."

"Now, then, for the wreck of the *Alceste*."

"You must know, boys, that about the year 1815, or 1816, old England had a squabble with the Chinese about commerce. To settle matters, the British government sent out an expedition of three ships; one was the *Alceste*, a frigate of forty-six guns, Captain Murray Maxwell; another, the brig *Lyra*, commanded by Basil Hall; and the third, the General *Hewitt* Indiaman."

"Did they go out to fight the Chinese?"

"No, boys; fair-weather words are better than fighting in almost all squabbles. Do you remember the

text, 'A soft answer turneth away wrath : but grievous words stir up anger.' It is in the book of Proverbs, I believe."

"Yes, we remember it."

"Well, Lord Amherst went out in the *Alceste* to settle matters. The expedition left Plymouth, I think, in the month of February, 1816, with a numerous retinue. It goes to the heart of many a one, to see a ship get under weigh for a long voyage! There she goes, on her course, like a living thing on the water.

"The sails are set, the anchor weighed,
And straining eyes the bark pursue,
And friendly signs, at parting made,
Are faintly seen—the last adieu."

"The thought comes across those who stand on the pier, gazing on her retiring sails, 'Who can tell if she will ever enter a British port again?'"

"Yes; there are so many dangers on the seas."

"Lord Amherst had a safe voyage out, but did not get an interview with the emperor of China. What I am going to speak about all happened on returning home."

"Now we shall hear about it, then."

"On the 9th of February, just twelve months after she left Plymouth, the *Alceste* showed her rudder to Manilla, and proceeded on her homeward passage. The *Lyra* sailed to India with despatches. At about seven o'clock, or half past, on the morning of the 18th, the *Alceste*, after entering the straits of Gaspar, struck

with great violence on a reef of sunken rocks, about a league, or rather better, from Pulo Leat."

"Did they get their boats out? Did the ship go to pieces?"

"Don't go a-head, my hearties, in such a hurry! Though the Alceste is on the rocks, the old sea Captain must be cool and steady. The best bower-anchor was let go, to hold the ship fast. The pumps were useless. Trying times, boys! trying times! Lord Amherst and his suite entered the boats, and got to Pulo Leat without accident. But it was a sad desolate place; plenty of overgrown jungle, and tangled underwood; but no food or water to be seen."

"They might almost as well have remained in the ship."

"Captain Maxwell, and the rest of the officers, did remain there for a while, to secure what provision and stores they could; but the water was above the orlop deck, so that what they could get at was very little. Well, sailors must not flinch from their duty when trouble comes; that is the very time to show the stuff that they are made of. A raft was sent off to the island with some stores and baggage."

"Come, we are glad that they have got something."

"On the island, a space was cleared away under the trees, that a shelter might be obtained for Lord Amherst, and those with him, for the night. The party cut but a motley appearance, for they were but half dressed, while on the surrounding trees were hung garments of various kinds, long robes, check shirts, court-dresses, mandarin

habits, and tarry jackets. In shipwrecks, there is not much attention paid to such things as these, though they are thought of afterwards. Lord Amherst displayed great steadiness, fortitude, and good humour, sharing cheerfully the privations of the crew, drinking only a single gill of water, with a little rum, the quantity allotted to each man; and, in other respects, animating all around, by his example, to act like men. In searching for water, they found a human skeleton. This was not likely to raise their spirits, as the thought rushed upon them, that he might have died with thirst."

"How terrible! He had been shipwrecked, no doubt."

"Very likely. Those who went into the woods were obliged to notch the trees, that they might find their way back again. The boats they had were not able to carry half the crew of the ship; so it was soon settled, that Lord Amherst and his suite should embark on board the barge and large cutter, and make the best of their way to Java, and then send help to those left behind. As this was an enterprise of some danger, on account of the Malay pirates, a most ferocious set of fellows, that are, in those seas, almost as plentiful as porpoises, a guard accompanied Lord Amherst. The party left on the island, after the barge and cutter had quitted it, consisted of one woman and two hundred men and boys, and their situation was far from being a pleasant one."

"They had provisions, however; so they were not likely to be starved to death."

“Provisions they had, sure enough; but they suffered cruelly from thirst. The underwood around them abounded with ants, snakes, scorpions, and other reptiles; and they were not out of danger of the pirates. However, they made the best of their position. Captain Maxwell, calling his men together, told them that he expected the same discipline to be kept up among them on that desert isle, as on board ship; and that, while he lived, this should be the case. It was for the general welfare, that good order should prevail; and, therefore, he would punish all offenders, and report favourably of all who conducted themselves well. This officerlike behaviour had an excellent effect on the men. They saw that their commander shared their dangers and hardships cheerfully, and fairly divided the provisions among them.”

“Captain Maxwell was a very excellent officer.”

“He was, boys. A few hands were left in the wreck, to secure any stores that might float up; their provision was removed to a higher spot; and a spring was discovered, which supplied them with a little water; so that, in the next twenty-four hours, every man had a pint.”

“A pint of water, in a day and a night, is but a short allowance, Captain.”

“Right, boys. I told you, that they were not out of danger, on account of the Malays. On the next morning, the men on board the wreck had an unwelcome visit paid to them, for a fleet of Malay proas, filled with armed men, approached them.”

“What is a proa?”

“ A proa is usually a thin, long kind of a canoe, with the head and stern alike; the mast-yard and boom are of bamboo. The men on board the wreck, well knowing that their Malay visitors were merciless heathens, and justly concluding that their intentions were not of the most friendly kind, jumped into the boat, and rowed with all their might towards the shore. Not long after this, a report spread, that the Malays had landed, and no time was lost in preparing to receive them. A breast-work was hastily thrown up round the station, formed of stakes and branches of trees, and the men armed themselves as well as they could. They had, in all, about thirty muskets and bayonets, with between twenty and thirty cutlasses. These were divided as far as they would go; but the worst of it was, they had only between three and four score of ball cartridges.”

“ That was a poor supply, indeed, for they could only fire twice. How did the others arm themselves?”

“ With any weapons that they could lay hold of: some had swords or dirks, others had knives or chisels, and such as could get nothing better, armed themselves with poles, sharpened at the end. All this preparation was of little use the first day, for the Malays occupied themselves in getting all they could out of the wreck; and when, on the next day, some boats were sent to take possession of the ship, the Malays set it on fire. All that day, and through the night, the flames of the Alceste were raging from stem to stern. There were the flames in the air, and below was the reflection of them on the water.”

“ It was all over with the Alceste, then!”

“ Why, not quite, boys; for after that, they went to her with the boats, and got from her some casks of wine and beer, some barrels of flour, with fifty boarding pikes, eighteen muskets, and a small quantity of ammunition. Another thing happened, too, that was a great comfort to them all—a well was discovered. This was of more use to them than a score puncheons of wine and spirits would have been.”

“ It must have been a great comfort, indeed.”

“ Many odd circumstances took place, and one of them was this : During the night, an alarm was given, and a marine on duty fired his piece at the supposed enemy, which turned out to be only a large baboon, which had fallen with a broken bough from a tree.”

“ Ha! ha! that would surprise the marine, no doubt. No wonder that he discharged his piece.”

“ It was not long before the Malay pirates were busy again. Two proas, towing a canoe each, first made their appearance : but these were soon met by the boats, when one proa was taken, and several of the pirates shot, while five of them; who had leaped into the water, were drowned. After this, fourteen proas appeared, with other vessels; and, in a little time, these were doubled. Dangers thickened around the English party; but they behaved like men, and never gave way to fear. They called their encampment Fort Maxwell, after their commander; and though short of provisions, and otherwise much tried, they were determined to defend it bravely. Things seemed coming to a crisis. The pirates had

increased in number, and twenty of their largest vessels approached the landing place, the Malays uttering horrid yells, and firing off one of their swivels."

"Oh! those terrible Malays!"

"Captain Maxwell knew very well how necessary it was to put a bold face on the matter. He addressed his men with an animating speech, telling them, that he had confidence in them, and he knew that they would act like Britons. Every heart seemed warmed by his words, and a deafening shout followed his cheering appeal."

"How many of the cruel Malays were there in all?"

"Why, ten more proas had arrived, so that the Malay force amounted to more than six hundred men."

"Six hundred against two hundred! That was a fearful odds."

"It was, boys; and what would have been the end of the affair, nobody knows, had not an officer, on the look out, discovered a distant ship. It stood towards the island, under all sail. You may judge what spirit this gave to the party. The British colours were speedily hoisted on a tree on the hill, to attract attention, and, very soon after, the sail was seen by the pirates. Now was the moment for Captain Maxwell and his men to bestir themselves. They made an attack on the Malays, who lost no time in running to their vessels, and hoisting their sails, like cowards as they were."

"Ay, ay! they were afraid of that distant sail."

"No doubt, boys, that had something to do with their movements. They fired off a swivel, but it did

no mischief; and thus the matter was brought to an end."

"And did the distant ship come to their relief?"

"She did, boys; and proved to be the Ternate, one of the company's cruisers, despatched by Lord Amherst, to bring them away from the island. Had not the pirates been attacked, and driven away, they might, after all, have prevented Captain Maxwell and his party from holding communication with the ship; for, owing to the wind and current, the Ternate could not approach the island nearer than within about three or four leagues: however, by the assistance of the boats of the ship, and their own, making use also of the raft constructed by them, every man of the party got safe on board the Ternate."

"Then, they did get safe, at last, in spite of the cruel Malays."

"They did, boys; and it puts in a clear light the value of order and discipline. If you think of what took place on the raft of La Meduse, about which I told you, where, mostly for the want of order and discipline, only nine persons were saved alive, out of a hundred and fifty, you will be struck with the difference. Good conduct, boys, all over the world, is the best sailing course. But the old sea Captain must now put his figure-head in another shape. Helm's-a-lee! about ship! We must again part company. Whether the voyage of life be fair or stormy, keep up your spirits, boys; and, whenever you are hailed with the question, 'Where are you bound to?' let your reply always be, 'To a better country!'"