

FICTION

James Otis

Commodore Barney's Young Spies

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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COMMODORE BARNEY'S YOUNG SPIES

A Boy's Story of the Burning of the City of Washington

By JAMES OTIS

Author of "Across the Delaware," "At the Siege of Havana,"
"Life of John Paul Jones," "With Warren at Bunker Hill,"
etc., etc.



With six page illustrations
By J. WATSON DAVIS

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Darius cried out in my ear; but I heard him not, I was insane with the scene of carnage.
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FROM LOSSING'S "WAR OF 1812."

"Evidently ashamed of the barbarism committed by British hands, Vice-Admiral Cochrane attempted to palliate it by a pitiful trick. After the destruction of the capital, and the invaders were safely back on their vessels in the Patuxent,

Cochrane wrote a letter to Secretary Monroe, in which he said to him, 'Having been called upon by the Governor-General of the Canadas to aid him in carrying into effect measures of retaliation against the inhabitants of the United States for the wanton destruction committed by their army in Upper Canada, it has become imperiously my duty, conformably with the Governor-General's application, to issue to the naval force under my command an order to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as may be found assailable.' Cochrane then expressed a hope that the 'conduct of the executive of the United States would authorize him in staying such proceedings, by making reparation to the suffering inhabitants of Upper Canada,' etc. This letter was antedated August 18, or six days before the battle of Bladensburg, so as to appear like a humane suggestion, in the noncompliance with which might be found an excuse for the destruction of the national capital. It did not reach Mr. Monroe until the morning of the 31st of August, a week after Washington was devastated, when that officer, in a dignified reply, reminded the vice-admiral that the wanton destruction by the British of Frenchtown, Frederick, Georgetown, and Havre de Grace, and the outrages at Hampton by the same people, had occurred long before the destruction of Newark."

COMMODORE BARNEY'S YOUNG SPIES.

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN JOSHUA BARNEY.

It is two years since what we called the "War of 1812" came to an end, and I, Amos Grout, once owner of the oyster pungy, Avenger, propose to set down here that which happened to my friend, Jeremiah Sackett, and myself, during the year of grace, 1814, when, so others have said, we did good work for our country, although at the time neither of us was more than fifteen years old.

This I do for two reasons, first because I am proud of what we two lads succeeded in doing, and hope that at some day, when, mayhap, both Jerry and I are dead, other boys may read of the part we played, and be encouraged thereby to work out their own plans for the good.

Secondly, because I would have it known that through a scheme of his, two boys, living on the shore of Chesapeake bay, succeeded in doing what experienced men might have failed at, and I am eager to have others realize my friend's worth.

So much for the reason as to why I, a seventeen-year boy, with none too many advantages in the way of book education, am thus attempting to write a tale for others, and now, that whoever should chance to read this may feel acquainted with us, it is for me to introduce my friend and myself in regular story-telling shape.

We lads lived in Benedict, Charles County, Maryland, near the mouth of Indian Creek, when the war broke out, and while many of the people of our town were not pleased with the idea of fighting the Britishers again simply to establish the rights of our American seamen, Jerry and I were hot in favor of it, for, in 1810, my friend's brother Tom was taken by the king's officers out of his vessel while she was off the capes, on the false ground that he was born in England. The poor fellow was forced to serve in the English navy three years, leading a dog's life, as can well be imagined, since he would never say that he was willing to serve his majesty to the best of his ability.

Therefore it was that when we invested our savings in a small sloop-rigged pungy, with the idea of making a living by fishing, we named her the Avenger, with never a thought that she might one day do something toward avenging poor Tom's wrongs.

Jerry's parents and mine were poor people, who could not afford to give their sons what so many fortunate lads have—a good education, fine clothes and money to spend. We were obliged to do all we could to aid our families, and had been wage-earners since our tenth birthday.

It would be too long a story if I should attempt to set down all that my friend and I did by way of gathering up money enough to pay Nicholas Trundy one hundred dollars for his pungy, which was then going on six years old. It was a big lot of money for two lads to save, after contributing to the support of their families, and we were near to four years doing it.

It was a proud day for us when the little vessel became our property, and we painted out the name "Handsome Susan," to put in its place in big red letters, "The Avenger."

She was about twenty-four feet long, with a cuddy in which were four small bunks, and had been in the oyster business since being launched, as we intended she should remain there.

We bought her early in the spring of 1812, when the people were talking strongly for or against war; but it never entered our minds that we might get mixed up in the fighting, for who could ever have dreamed that the Britishers would come to Benedict? It was enough to satisfy us that the oyster business was fairly good, and that we could often earn, with the pungy, as high as three dollars a day, not counting the time occupied in running up to Annapolis or Baltimore.

During the second year of the war we did not do as well; but there is no good reason why I should go into all the details of what would not be entertaining save to an oysterman. It is enough if I jump over to the spring of 1814, when we made a trade with an old sailor by name of Darius Thorpe, whereby he was to sail with us for one-third of the profits after all expenses had been paid, and this bargain was a good one for us lads, since he was a master-hand at dredging, being able to work all around either Jerry or me.

Besides being an expert fisherman, old Darius was an artist at story-telling, and there was hardly an evening during the first two months he was with us, when we did not sit in the cuddy long after we should have been asleep, listening to the old man's yarns.

Then, as everybody knows, about April, Captain Joshua Barney was ordered to fit up a fleet of small boats to protect the towns of the bay, for by this time we were having mighty good proof that the United States was at war with England, and it stands to reason that we lads were eager to know all that was possible concerning this officer, who had been the most successful of the privateers sailing out of Baltimore.

We were on our way to Annapolis with half a load of oysters when the news was given us by the captain of the Oriole, while he quoted the prices he got for his cargo, and since the Avenger was creeping along lazily, with about one-quarter as much wind as she needed, we had plenty of time in which to discuss a matter that seemed to be of very great importance to us.

"There won't be any foolin' when Joshua Barney gets here, no matter how big or how little his fleet is," Darius said as he laid at full length on the deck sunning himself, and in a twinkling it flashed across me that the old man may have sailed with or under the gentleman who was to command such a naval force as could be gathered in the Chesapeake bay, therefore I asked:

"Do you happen to know the captain, Darius?"

We always called the old man by his first name, because he insisted so strongly that we should; said it made him feel at home, and sounded a good deal like putting on airs to tack on the "Mister."

"Know him?" the old man cried, rising lazily on one elbow and swinging half around to look at me as I sat on the rudder-head. "I know him lock, stock an' ramrod, lad. The last deep sea cruise I went on was with him. He's a snorter, that's what he is, an' I've heard his whole story a hundred times over. I tell you, lads, there's nothin' in a book that can come up with Josh Barney's doin's."

"Give us the full yarn, Darius!" Jerry cried. "We're like to be loafin' around here a good many hours, if this wind holds soft as I reckon it will, an' we may as well make the most of the time."

Darius was always ready to spin a yarn, which was much in his favor according to my way of thinking; but he couldn't seem to rattle the words off easy like except when his mouth was full of tobacco, therefore Jerry and I could always tell whether the story was to be long or short, by the amount of roughly-cured plug he stowed between his jaws.

It was a mighty big chew he took while making ready to tell of Captain Barney, and I must say for Darius, that he never spun a yarn which interested me more than the one I count on setting down here.

"Josh Barney was born somewhere along 1759 in Baltimore," the old man began slowly, as if determined to give a regular biography of the captain. "His folks let him go to school till he was ten years old, an' then he began to shift for himself by goin' into a store; but, bless you, he never was made for that kind of work, an' before two years passed he found it out. Went over to Baltimore one day on a visit, an' wound up by shippin' on a pilot-boat; but even that wasn't what he hankered for, an' finally his father shipped him as apprentice to Captain Tom Drisdale, on a brig for a voyage to Ireland."

"I was in hopes your yarn had somethin' about his runnin' away to go to sea," Jerry said in a tone of disappointment.

"You'll find these 'ere runaway sailors don't 'mount to very much, except in story books, an', besides, Josh Barney wasn't that kind of a chap. Drisdale made the passage, an' then went up to Liverpool, where he got a chance to sell the brig. Barney worked his way home before the mast on a full-rigged ship--I don't jest remember her name. When he struck Baltimore again it was to find that the old man Barney had been killed accidentally by the youngest boy of the family, who was foolin' with a loaded pistol, an' Joshua had to shift for himself, seein's his father didn't have none too much money, an' a big family. The lad shipped for Cadiz as ordinary seaman; made the voyage all right; had a little cash to leave with his mother, an' then signed as an A 1 on a brig bound for Italy."

"It don't make very much difference to us how many voyages he made," Jerry interrupted. "What we want to know is the kind of a man he is."

"If you can put a stopper on your jaw a bit, you'll soon find out! The mate of the brig was sent into the forecandle, not bein' up to his work, an' Josh Barney took his place. Then the captain took sick, an' lo an' behold, before the lad had turned sixteen years old, he was in command of the brig. Owin' to the freights that offered, he sailed for Alicant, an' made port just as the Spaniards were fittin' out an expedition against Algiers. The brig was chartered as transport, an' he earned big money for the owners, gettin' back to the mouth of the Chesapeake in '76, when the British sloop of war King Fisher hove him to an' took all his papers an' weapons; but let him keep on to Baltimore, where the brig was laid up. Then Barney had more money, an' considerable of it, for his mother."

The old man paused to take in another cargo of tobacco, and then continued:

"Young as he was, the lad found a chance to ship as master's mate on the sloop Hornet, William Stone commandin', an' in one day, so it's said, he, carryin' a flag an' with a drummer an' two fifers, enlisted a full crew for the Hornet, all from Baltimore, which goes to show that the people there thought he amounted to somethin'. Barney sailed in Hopkins' fleet to the Bahamas, where the town of New Providence was taken, an' the commodore scooped in all the ammunition to be found on the island. A little while after that, he shipped on the schooner Wasp, which convoyed off the coast the vessel in which Benjamin Franklin was goin' to Europe to help pull this country through, an' when they came back into the Cape May channel they found the king's ships Roebuck an' Liverpool—one of forty-four guns an' the other of twenty-eight—waitin' for 'em. There was lively times for a spell, until the Wasp contrived to slip into Wilmington creek, where she laid till half a dozen row galleys came down from Philadelphia to attack the British ships. Then the schooner came out, an' while the fightin' was goin' on, captured the brig Tender, one of his majesty's armed vessels what poked her nose in to help the big fellows. They say Barney fought like a tiger, an' with his captain wounded, brought the little schooner an' her prize through the fog into port.

"Then they gave him a lieutenant's commission, an' sent him off in the sloop Sachem, all of which happened before he was seventeen years old. He soon found a chance to fight, an' after an action of two hours, captured an English brig. After that they took the sloop Race Horse, cuttin' her up so badly she sank, an' the next to come their way was a snow from Jamaica, which the lad counted on bringin' into port, he bein' put on board as prize master. Then he had a bit of bad luck; the snow was re-captured, an' Barney made prisoner, as stands to reason; but he was exchanged at Charleston, an' rode horseback to Baltimore."

"How do you happen to remember all these things?" Jerry asked, thinking, perhaps, that Darius was giving us more guff than truth.

"Remember it?" the old man repeated sharply. "Why I've sailed with Captain Barney, an' every mother's son of the crew knew the story, for it ain't often that a lad of seventeen gets such a record, so we couldn't help keepin' it in mind, besides which, I've got lots of stuff in my pocket that's been printed about him. Well, in '77 he shipped on the Andrew Doria for the defense of the Delaware River, an' when that scrimmage was over, he found himself drafted to the frigate Virginia, when, as everybody knows, he was taken by the Britishers again, an' held for nearly a year before bein' exchanged for the lieutenant of the Mermaid. Then he went out in a letter of marque—meanin' a privateer—with Captain Robinson; they had but twelve guns, a mighty small stock of powder, an' only thirty-five men, but bless you those fellows thought nothin' of tacklin' the British privateer Rosebud, full of men an' guns. Forty-seven of the enemy were killed or wounded, an' aboard the Yankee only one was wounded. They sailed to Bordeaux, took on a cargo of brandy, shipped seventy men, mounted eighteen guns, an' on the voyage home had a runnin' fight lastin' well on to two days, when they captured their game.

"Then it was that Barney got married, an' about a month afterward, when drivin' in a gig from Philadelphia to Baltimore, he was robbed of every cent he had in the world. He never told anybody of his loss; but turned back to Philadelphia, took service aboard the Saratoga, sixteen guns, an' made a big voyage, capturin' one ship of twelve guns, another of thirty-two, an' two brigs. Then he was taken by the Intrepid, an' mighty barbarous treatment he got for well on to a year, when the young officer escaped, an' after he got home the government gave him command of the Hyder Ally, with which he soon took the British ship General Monk, as this 'ere bit of paper will show."

Darius took from his pocket a well-worn slip cut from some newspaper, which purported to be an extract from the Hyder Ally log-book, and as it was mighty interesting to me, I'm going to set it down here just as it was printed.

"April 8th, 1782, at 10 A.M. laying at anchor under Cape May (Delaware) discovered three sail standing in from sea with a light wind from the eastward; at 11 perceived that they were a frigate, a ship, and an armed brig. At meridian the frigate stood for Cape Henlopen channel, the ship and brig standing in for Cape May; made a signal for our convoy to get under weigh, and followed the convoy. At 1 P.M. the ship and brig came into the bay, by Cape May channel, the frigate coming around under Cape Henlopen; prepared for action, all hands to quarters.

"At three-quarters past one, the brig passed us, after giving us two fires; we reserved our fire for the ship, then fast coming up; we received very little damage from the brig, who stood after our convoy; she mounted sixteen guns, and was formerly the American privateer 'Fair American', commanded by Captain Decatur, and equal to us in force.

"At 2 P.M. the ship ranged up on our starboard quarter, and fired two guns at us; we were then at good pistol-shot; we then attempted to run her on board, by laying her across the starboard bow, but our yard-arms locked, which kept us too far off to board; at the same time poured in our broadside from great guns and small arms.

"Our fire was briskly kept up for twenty-six minutes, when she struck her colors. Immediately sent our first lieutenant on board, and stood up the bay, the frigate at this time under a press of sail in chase after us, and the brig ahead in chase of our convoy; again prepared for action, and stood after the brig, but on her perceiving that the ship had struck, she stood for the frigate, and got aground; we were obliged to pass her, as the frigate gained on us.

"At 4 P.M. the frigate came to anchor in the bay, (supposed for want of a pilot.) We then spoke the prize for the first time, and learned she was his Majesty's ship the General Monk, Captain Rodgers, of nineteen nine-pounders, but fighting twenty guns, and had on board, when the action began, one hundred and thirty-six men, of whom thirty were killed, and fifty-three wounded. Of sixteen officers on board, fifteen were killed or wounded. The captain received three wounds.

"We had on board the Hyder Ally four killed and eleven wounded. The Hyder Ally mounted twelve six-pounders, and four nine-pounders, with a complement of one hundred and fifteen men. During the action we fired thirteen broadsides from our cannon, and from sixty to seventy rounds from our muskets.

"Proportion of metal: The General Monk ten nine-pounders, fired ninety weight of shot at one broadside. The Hyder Ally, six sixes and two nines, fired fifty-four weight of shot at one broadside. Proportion--fifty to ninety."

"That all came from the log-book, an' you'll find Captain Barney didn't try to blow his own horn," Darius said as I ceased reading. "But I happened to go on board the General Monk when she got into Philadelphia, an' saw the killed an' wounded bein' brought ashore in hammocks. The prize looked tough; her decks were covered with blood, an' three of the bow ports were knocked into one. She was sold, bought in by the government, an' Barney took command of her, sailin' for France, with despatches to Benjamin Franklin. Then the war came to an end, an' he settled in Kentucky somewhere. Here's a newspaper story of what happened after that," and Darius gave me another slip of paper, the matter on which I read aloud to Jerry, as follows:

"In 1789 Captain Barney, finding his health impaired by his services, embarked for Carthage in a small brig belonging to himself and partner. Thence he went to Havana, and then home. In 1792 he sailed again, and arrived at Cape Francois. While there the town was burnt, and he was obliged to fight his way. He brought off fifty or sixty miserable women and children. His vessel was captured by an English privateer brig, two others in company. Three officers and eleven men were put on board, and all the Americans taken out except Barney, the carpenter, boatswain and cook. They were ordered to New Providence. The keys of the treasure chest were demanded, but Barney would not deliver them, which occasioned much abuse and ill treatment. He had concealed a small blunderbuss, and his men some other arms, with which they re-took the ship. The Englishmen were made to work the vessel until they arrived at Baltimore. Barney was compelled, for his own safety, to sleep on the quarter-deck in an arm-chair. He again sailed for Cape Francois in 1793; on his return, he was again captured by an English brig, and taken to Jamaica. When he arrived in Kingston he was committed to prison, and bills were found against him for piracy. His ship and cargo were condemned. Once more he escaped, and on his return was offered command of a frigate; but declined. In 1795 he entered the French service, remaining in that employ until 1800."

"Now you can see what kind of a man it is who'll be in command here on the Chesapeake," Darius said triumphantly when I ceased reading. "The Britishers won't find it all plain sailin' while he's around, and I'm allowin' he'll make things hum."

It pleased me to know that we would have a live man to protect us, for if all the rumors were to be credited, the time had come when we needed protection mighty bad; but with all Darius' storytelling, it never came into my mind that we would know this wonderful Captain Barney, except by hearsay.

We continued at our oyster business without being troubled in any way by the war, although small fights were going on all around us during the early part of the summer.

More than once had we seen the flotilla under command of this same Captain Barney, who was come to be a commodore now. In it were twenty-six barges and pungies, with nine hundred men, all of whom saw more of service from May to July than they had ever dreamed of.

The commodore did indeed make things "hum," as Darius had predicted. He attacked anything and everything that was British, never seeming to care one whit whether he was outclassed or not, and succeeded in doing the enemy a big lot of injury. It is well known that once, during a full four hours, he kept his small fleet under the fire of a frigate's guns, hoping to capture her.

Then the Britishers began to understand that if they wanted to have things their own way in the Chesapeake, it would be necessary to first do away with Commodore Barney, and they began operations in great shape, although at

the time we who were most interested in that locality had little idea of what was coming.

Now after this fleet of barges and pungies began their work, Jerry seemed to have something of import on his mind; but never a word would he say in explanation to Darius and me, until our business grew so dull that it was only with great difficulty we could earn enough to pay the running expenses, and then it was that the lad came to the front with a scheme which he thought great, while neither of us so much as dreamed of what the carrying out would result in.

"It's no use freightin' oysters to Baltimore, when we can't sell 'em for enough to pay for the use of the pungy, to say nothin' of our time in dredgin'," Jerry began one afternoon about the first of August, when we were coming down the bay with our pockets nearly as empty as the Avenger's hold.

"But we do get a dollar now an' then," I said with a laugh, "which is more than could be done if we turned idlers. Half a loaf is way ahead of no bread at all."

Darius nodded gravely as if to show that he agreed with me fully, and Jerry cried with more of anger than good humor in his tones:

"But I'm countin' on havin' a bit of meat now an' then. I could eat a razor-back this minute without stoppin' to take off the bristles; but there isn't money enough on board to buy the smallest ham."

"How are you goin' to mend matters, lad, while the price of oysters keeps down as it is now?" Darius asked, beginning to understand that Jerry had something in his head which might serve us.

"I'm told that Commodore Barney keeps his men jumpin' so lively at fightin' that they don't have time for anythin' else," the lad said slowly, as if speaking to himself, and I wondered if he counted that the commodore could raise the price of oysters.

"I reckon that's the straight truth," Darius replied. "It ain't his way to keep cats that don't catch mice."

"Then why is it we can't make a trade to help supply the commodore with fish an' oysters? Even though he didn't give very much for the freights we brought in, it wouldn't be a case of losin' three or four days out of every ten runnin' up to Baltimore."

Even then I failed to understand his scheme, and said as much, whereat the lad cried impatiently:

"You must be thick-headed, Amos Grout, if you can't see what I'm drivin' at. The matter has been in my mind these two months past, so now I propose that we go to Commodore Barney--he surely will hear what we've got to say--, an' try to make a trade. He buys more'n half of all his provisions, for the men of the fleet don't get time to do much fishin', an' we could let ourselves an' the pungy outright, or agree upon a price for what we bring in."

It wasn't at all a bad scheme, now that our regular business was so dull; but I questioned if the commodore would listen to such as we were, long enough to understand what kind of a bargain we had to offer.

"I'll go bail that you won't have any trouble in gettin' speech with Joshua Barney, an' for so long as the business warrants, pervidin' you can catch him when he's got a few spare minutes on his hands," Darius said quickly, and from his tone I understood that he heartily approved of Jerry's scheme.

"But where shall we find the fleet?" I asked, and to the question Jerry made answer:

"We've been countin' on runnin' in to see our folks at Benedict, an' I warrant that there we'll get news of the commodore. If not, it won't cost so very much time to have a look around the lower end of the bay."

"Yes, an' be snapped up by some bloomin' Britisher," I said, having no desire to mix in where people were fighting with such playful weapons as cannon and rifles.

"We should be able to keep out of the way of danger," Jerry replied, as if he had thought out the whole scheme, and I then understood that he had been mooning over it the past two months, determined to spring it on us when the price of oysters dropped below what would be decent wages.

Well, we didn't come to any conclusion that day, owing to my standing back and throwing cold water; but we were bound to touch at the home port, and Jerry bided his time until we were where information regarding the fleet could be had.

CHAPTER II.

AT BENEDICT.

I had not supposed that the people of Benedict would know very much concerning what was going on at the lower end of the bay; but the Avenger was hardly more than at anchor when I understood that we could have gone to no better place in order to learn what was being done.

We had but just come to anchor, not having time to set foot on the shore, when Jim Freeman rowed over to us, his eyes bulging and every freckle on his face standing out like pips on a gooseberry.

"What did you put in here for?" he cried before yet coming alongside. "Are you hankerin' to have your pungy burned or sunk?"

"What's the matter, Jim?" Jerry cried. "You're actin' like as if somethin' had gone wrong!"

"Gone wrong?" Jim exclaimed, and it did really look as if his eyes would roll right down on his cheeks. "The whole bloomin' bottom has dropped out of everything. The Britishers are comin' into the bay thicker'n spatter, an' I don't see how you got in here without bein' caught!"

"In here?" I cried in amazement. "Have you lost your wits that you think the Britishers would come into the Patuxent river?"

"I reckon it's you that are needin' wits!" Jim cried as he scrambled over the rail. "So you think they wouldn't come into the Patuxent, eh?"

"Certainly not, and for the very good reason that there's nothing here they want."

Jim looked at me in pity, and I afterward understood that there was good reason for his so doing.

"How long have you been up Baltimore way?"

"Near to ten days," Jerry replied, hoping to hasten Jim in the telling of the news with which he was near to bursting. "We had hard work to sell our oysters at any price, an' then it fell a dead calm with weather hot enough to tan a nigger."

"Then there's little wonder that you boys are way behind the times as to what has been goin' on 'round here," and Jim threw out his chest as he swelled with the importance of being the first to impart startling news. "In the first place," he said, speaking slowly as if to prolong his enjoyment at giving information which would not be pleasing to hear, "Admiral Cochrane, the Britisher, has passed the capes with twenty-one vessels, an' Commodore Malcolm is below with a fleet loaded with soldiers. Tom Harrison swears there were more'n ten thousand men."

"Somebody has been stuffin' you, Jim," I said, not crediting his news.

"Then they've stuffed Commodore Barney too, an' when he runs I allow the rest of us had better be huntin' a hole."

"Commodore Barney don't run!" Darius cried angrily, for he never allowed anything disparaging to be said in his presence of the man whom he believed to be the greatest naval commander who ever lived.

"Perhaps he don't very often; but he has this time," Jim said in a tone so decided that we could not but believe he was convinced of the truth of his own words.

"Did you see him?" Darius demanded, and I expected that when he answered this question Jim's story would fall to pieces; but the lad replied bold as a lion:

"Of course I did! All the boats laid here after the fight in St. Leonard's bay, an' it was only yesterday they scooted up the river!"

Here was news with a vengeance, and I no longer felt the same desire to punch Jim's head which had come over me when he first came aboard with what I believed was a cock and bull story.

Then, with first one and another asking questions, we learned from Jim that while we were in Baltimore the British frigate Loire had chased Commodore Barney's flotilla into St. Leonard's bay, and blockaded it there until Colonel Carberry's artillery came down from Frederick and drove the enemy away.

Then, having learned of the enormous force at the mouth of the bay, Commodore Barney sailed to Benedict, where he remained four and twenty hours, or till word was brought that ten or twelve of the enemy's vessels were bound up

the bay, bound most likely for Baltimore or Washington, when he sailed for Nottingham, further up the river.

Darius was more concerned than either of us, for he firmly believed that Joshua Barney would not have beaten a retreat without first having been positive that an overwhelming force was near at hand, and if there were Britishers near enough to drive the commodore away, we had got ourselves in a pickle by coming up the river.

The first thought which came to my mind was that the Avenger was in great danger of being captured in short order, for I made no question but that the enemy would pursue Barney, and we were where we could not escape, save by way of the bay.

Jerry, however, had the idea that all these man[oe]uvres would further his scheme, and he said as if being thoroughly well satisfied with the situation:

"We can run up to Nottingham, as well as the commodore, and once there I reckon it will be possible to make our trade."

"But if the fleet is forced to remain there, all hands will be idle, and the commodore won't care to hire us while several hundred men are loafing around the decks," I suggested, and Jerry's jaw fell.

But Jim had not exhausted his budget of news, although it was impossible for him to give us anything more very startling.

"The commodore had only got eight pungies an' five barges of the fleet--"

"Where are the other boats?" Darius demanded sharply.

"Somewhere on the Delaware side; they went off on a cruise before the Britishers hove in sight. He has taken on the schooner Scorpion, which was here at anchor, an' I heard one of the officers say that there was about five hundred men in this part of the fleet."

"I'm goin' ashore," Darius said abruptly. "It ain't no ways certain to me that Jim has heard this thing right, an' I count on gettin' down to facts."

Jerry and I were eager to land, and, without even stopping to thank Jim for the news he brought, we went over the rail into our canoe, pulling in hot haste for the shore.

Never waiting to speak with such few loungers as were to be seen near the water front, I went directly to my own home, and there found more tidings of war.

My father had joined Commodore Barney, as had nearly all the able-bodied men of Benedict, agreeing to remain in service while our section of the country was menaced by the enemy, and mother seemed to have the idea that I would follow his example.

Jerry's father had gone with the fleet, and, as she said, only those who had been opposed to the war with England, remained at home. After greeting me, and telling what little she knew of the situation, mother set about getting together the few things I owned which might be needed on a long cruise, and I was ashamed to say that as yet I had had no idea of going to fight the Britishers.

Don't let it be understood I believed the United States could have done other than declare war in 1812, or that I had any secret liking for the Britishers. I simply believed that I did not have the backbone of a fighter, and preferred to stand at a distance while the more eager went ahead; but yet I was not really a coward, as I think was afterward proved.

However, just then it made me feel rather uncomfortable to have mother gathering up my few belongings, and telling me what to do in event of receiving such or such a wound, and, with my brain all in a whirl, I went out of doors under the pretense that it was necessary I should have a talk with Darius and Jerry.

Once alone by myself, behind the corn-crib where no one would be likely to see me, I tried to sum up the situation so far as I was immediately concerned, and it did not look cheering. We had sailed the Avenger down the bay and up the river never sighting a single craft, although it appeared that the British were swarming near about our very course. It was not probable we could run to the southward without coming across some of their vessels, especially if they were reckoning on pursuing Commodore Barney, and even though we did get to the mouth of the river in safety, where could we go? The big fleets were at the entrance of the bay, and had not come there for nothing; the enemy was counting on attacking Washington or Baltimore, it seemed certain, and by going to the northward we would likely find ourselves out of the frying-pan into the fire.

It seemed very much to me as if we had lost the Avenger, whichever way we turned, and my heart grew heavy, for

once she was gone Jerry and I were badly off.

Hardly knowing what I did, I went toward my friend's home, and met him coming my way, a look of excitement and eagerness on his face.

"Well, it seems as if we were in for it!" he cried when we were come within hailing distance, and I asked irritably:

"In for what?"

"A bit of fightin', of course. You wouldn't be willin' to stay here with the cowards Commodore Barney left behind, would you?"

"There are a good many things I had rather do than poke my nose into a hornet's nest," I replied, feeling as if Jerry was in some way my enemy because he appeared to be so delighted with the situation.

"What did your mother say?" he asked, giving no heed to my grumpiness.

"Nothing much; she is getting things ready for me to go away, and without so much as asking if I counted on leaving."

"She knows, as I do, that you wouldn't remain behind," the lad cried, showing as much joy as if we were thinking of visiting a peepshow. "Come on; Darius is waitin' for us. We must try to get a supply of provisions, for it's likely they haven't any too large a store in the fleet."

Then was the moment when I should have declared bluntly that I had no idea of putting myself in a position to be shot at if it could be avoided; but I hadn't the courage to tell him that I would not leave Benedict immediately, although I was fully determined not to go up the river.

Jim Freeman and a couple of other boys strolled along, having been in search of us. They also took it for granted that the Avenger would join Commodore Barney's fleet, and were come to ask that the three be allowed to go with us.

"It won't do, Jim," Jerry said, taking it upon himself to act as spokesman, although I figured as captain of the pungy. "We can't feed ourselves, the way things look now, an' it don't stand to reason we should add to the crew."

"But I'll bring enough to eat," Jim persisted, and turned to me as he said, "I've done you many a good turn, Amos, an' you won't lose anything by givin' me lift now."

"Do you call it a lift to be put where the Britishers can kill you?" I asked angrily, for if these lads were so eager to have a hand in the fighting as to beg for a chance, it would be all the harder for me to declare that I wouldn't join the fleet.

"We might carry you as far as Nottingham, if you'd agree to ship on some other craft after we got there," Jerry said without stopping to ask my permission.

"That we'll do, an' be glad of the chance," Jim replied, acting as if really overjoyed by the permission to run his nose into danger. "We'll be on board in half an hour; you can't get under way before then?"

"No; we shall likely be here an hour or more," Jerry said as if he was the sole owner of the Avenger, and when the foolish boys ran away at full speed, he began to figure as to where we could get a small store of food.

I held my peace, angry and timorous, until we were come to the water front, where we found Darius awaiting us, and he, as could be seen at a glance, was of the same mind as Jerry.

"I've found two hams an' a side of bacon!" he cried triumphantly, pointing to the articles which were in the canoe. "If you fellows can scare up some meal, we'll be fixed for a spell. Did you see Jim Freeman an' his crowd?"

"Yes; they're goin' to Nottingham with us," Jerry replied, and the old man asked me:

"How soon can we get under way?"

I hesitated; it was on the tip of my tongue to say that I would not stir a hand in the matter, nor should the Avenger leave her moorings; but, fortunately, I remembered that we couldn't hold the pungy there to be destroyed when the enemy came up the river, and, to tell the absolute truth, I was ashamed to declare bluntly that I had no idea of casting in my lot with such a firebrand as Commodore Barney.

"We ought to leave here in an hour," Jerry said, making answer because he thought I was trying to figure how long it would take us to make ready. "Amos won't need more than ten minutes to get what stuff his mother is puttin' up for

him, an' I'm goin' round by the mill to see if they will trust us for half a bushel of meal."

He was off like an arrow as he spoke, and Darius had no idea that I was hesitating as to the course to pursue, for an old fighter like him supposed it would be a pleasure for me to voluntarily go into the worst kind of a row.

It was fortunate indeed for me that the old man never suspected what was in my heart, otherwise I would have been shamed in my home to such an extent that I could never go there again; but all that came to mind later. Just then I felt as if I was being cruelly wronged by those who should have stood my friends.

Darius would have told me yet further of what Commodore Barney had done in the past; but I cut him short by saying like a spoiled child:

"I don't care to hear anything more about him; just now it strikes me that we'd better be thinking of ourselves."

The old man looked really distressed, and but for the fact that my heart was sore, I could have laughed because of the mistake he made. Darius really believed that I was grieving over being thus obliged to leave my mother and the children, and he said soothingly:

"I come somewhere near knowin' how it is, lad. At such a time as this the least home talk that's made, the better, for it kind'er unstrings a fellow. You wait here, an' I'll go after what dunnage your mother is gettin' together; she'll understand that a short partin' is the best."

I could not have stopped him, for he was off before I had time to so much as open my mouth, and there I stood leaning against the canoe, giving the people of Benedict to believe I was eager to be fighting for my country.

Jim Freeman and his companions came along a few moments after Darius left, and in order to have some occupation, rather than from a desire to serve them, I offered to put the three aboard the Avenger.

They talked of nothing but what they would do once the enemy gave them an opportunity, until I asked petulantly:

"Is everybody in Benedict as eager to shed blood as are you?"

"Not much," Jim cried with a laugh. "There's Elias Macomber, for example--he's an Englishman, you know, an' hasn't been in this country more'n four years. He's makin' a lot of wild talk 'bout what he'll do to us folks when the Britishers come up the river."

"What reason has he to make any fuss?" I asked, rather for the sake of saying something, than because I desired information.

"Well, I suppose all hands have roughed into him pretty bad, on account of things he's said, an' now he counts on showin' what his countrymen can do."

Now it was that I began to feel glad because of having said nothing in opposition to joining Commodore Barney's fleet. By hanging back while all the others were taking up arms, I would be ranging myself on the side of Elias Macomber, which would have caused me to be ashamed of myself, for he was by no means a reputable citizen.

However glad I might be because I had refrained, or been prevented, from saying that which would have made it appear as if I took sides with the British, I was in nowise reconciled to the idea of going where the bullets were like to be flying, and, after putting Jim and his friend aboard the Avenger, I pulled back to the shore in anything rather than a cheerful frame of mind.

Darius was waiting for me, and he must have run every step of the way from the river to my father's home. He had with him a small bundle wrapped in one of mother's blankets, and said as he pulled the bow of the canoe up on the mud:

"I reckon it is jest as well that I went after your dunnage, lad, for your mother was ready to have a cryin' fit, which she couldn't perlitely let come on while I was there; but I'll warrant the water would have run had you been alone with her."

"She can't be feeling terribly bad, otherwise she wouldn't have been so anxious to have me go," I said sulkily.

"I don't know about that, my boy. It stands to reason she had rather anything else happened, than that you should stay at home when this part of the country needs every hand that can be raised in defense. She feels sore because you are goin'; but I'll go bail she'd have felt ten times worse had you said you'd stay back with such as Elias Macomber."

I wasn't in a proper frame of mind to appreciate all that the old man said, and continued to consider myself as being abused, although not to such an extent as before I heard about Elias Macomber.

It was noised around in the village, told most likely by Jim Freeman, that we were going to Nottingham to join the commodore, and while Darius and I stood by the canoe waiting for Jerry, we were literally besieged by women, whose husbands or sons were with the fleet, nearly all of whom wanted to send some message, or this or that article which had been forgotten at the time of departure.

I believe of a verity that Darius and I charged ourselves with no less than twenty errands by word of mouth, and as for packages, why we had the bow piled full, until it seemed as if we were to carry something by way of reminder for every man under Commodore Barney's command.

Near-by where we stood were also gathered four men whose sympathies were entirely with the British, and among them, as a matter of course, was Elias Macomber.

These worthless ones who would injure the country which had provided them with a home, food and clothing, to say nothing of the comforts of life, evidently counted on ruffling our feathers, believing it would be safe to do so now that nearly all the men were gone from the village, and they began by talking loudly of the sorry spectacle which the commodore and his followers would present when Admiral Cochrane and his vessels came up the river.

I feel certain that Darius would have held his peace, for he was not naturally a quarrelsome man, had they made sport of everybody in the American army and navy, save Joshua Barney; but a word against him was to the old man much as a red flag is to a bull, and in a twinkling the trouble began.

"The man who says aught against the commodore must answer to me for his words," Darius said angrily as he strode toward the four who were trying to bait him. "I'll not stand here and listen to such talk!"

It was Elias Macomber who showed his lack of sound sense by making reply:

"We didn't ask you to stand here; but if you choose to do so, it's more than likely you'll hear a good many things which may not please you."

"Hold your tongue as to Barney, or it'll be the worse for all hands!" Darius cried angrily, and at that moment Jerry appeared, staggering under a bag which must have contained a full bushel and a half of meal.

I shall always believe Elias Macomber held the idea that Darius was a feeble old man, otherwise he would have kept his tongue between his teeth, for he was far from being brave; but however that may be, he replied hotly:

"I do not count on choosin' my words when I speak of such a bag of wind as Josh Barney has shown himself to be!"

It seemed to me as if the words had not been fully spoken before Darius launched out, and, in, less time than it takes to tell it, was in the midst of a hot, one-sided fight, for the Tories all pitched into him, regardless of the fact that his quarrel was with Elias.

It stands to reason that I could never remain idle while a shipmate was getting the worst of it, particularly when his adversaries were men for whom I entertained no friendly feelings, and the scrimmage was hardly more than begun when I took a hand, standing close by the old man's side.

As I aimed a blow at Elias I saw, out of the tail of my eye, Jerry drop his meal as he came forward at full speed, and at almost the same moment a loud splashing in the water caused me to glance quickly in the direction of the puny.

Jim Freeman had jumped overboard to do his share toward teaching Macomber a lesson, and when he arrived the odds would be even.

Of course it was a disgraceful spectacle; but it could not have been avoided, so far as I was concerned, and I did my best, fighting as vigorously as if I had been the one to urge upon my companions the necessity of joining the fleet.

It is not well that I give too much space to this brawl when there are so many other adventures, in which a fellow might well take pride, to be recorded, therefore I will only say that we had no very easy task to down these admirers of King George and the Prince Regent; but finally succeeded, thanks to the assistance of Jim Freeman.

It is doubtful which side got the worst drubbing, although we claimed a victory because the others ran; but positive it is that the four of us had all the punishment needed, and were forced to wash our faces more than once before we could look at each other without a certain feeling of shame.

"What made you tackle the whole of 'em?" Jerry asked the old man. "If the rest of us hadn't been near at hand, they'd wiped you out."

"I'd tackle twenty if they dared say anything against Joshua Barney!" Darius cried as he shook his fist in the

direction where our adversaries had last been seen. "I'd rather get the toughest pummellin' such as them could give, than keep my mouth shut while they was slurrin' their betters!"

We were actually obliged to use force with him, otherwise the old man would have gone in pursuit of the British-lovers, and it was only by tumbling him into the canoe head-foremost, holding him down by sitting on him once he was there, that we could make Darius listen to anything like reason.

"Let up on me, an' I'll keep quiet," he said after we had threatened to continue the drubbing begun by the Tories; "but this much I promise, that after the commodore has made shoestrings of that conceited admiral, I'll come back here an' have it out with Elias Macomber."

"We'll let it go at that," Jerry said as he released his hold of Darius and went back for the meal, while Jim wrung the water out of his clothing as best he could, for the fellow had not stopped to throw off coat or shoes when he jumped overboard to take a hand in the scrimmage.

It was near to half an hour before we were ready to go on board the Avenger, and by that time it was too late to make any protests against following the commodore.

My comrades took it for granted that I was equally eager with them to be where I could do my share of fighting the Britishers, and so stirred up was I by the game of fisticuffs ashore that I actually forgot to be frightened by the prospect of taking part in a battle.

We got our anchor and made sail on the Avenger without delay, and thus, in less than an hour from the time of making port, we were off again on what proved to be a series of wild adventures.



CHAPTER III.

ELIAS MACOMBER.

Of a verity Elias Macomber did me a good turn when he started the quarrel with Darius Thorpe, for up to this time I had been sadly lacking in patriotism, as may have been learned from that which is already set down in these pages.

Until this day it had been as if the war did not concern me or mine, save as it affected the price of oysters, and when I saw this lad or the other who had enlisted, I said to myself that another foolish one had been found who willingly engaged to go where he might be killed.

Within a very few moments after the fight between Elias Macomber and his crew of British-lovers had come to an end, I began to view the situation of affairs as an honest lad should.

The country which protected me in my home—that territory which had been bought, or redeemed, by the blood of brave men, and even of women and children, from the savage Indians and a merciless king, was in danger, and if I did not rush to its defense how might I expect my heritage of a free land could be preserved to me and those who came after me?

Like a picture I saw before me those brave men and women who had battled against the forces of nature as they made homes in the wilderness; then struggled against the bloodthirsty Indians to protect their little all, and were finally called upon to fight a powerful nation in order to hold themselves free in the land already redeemed by sweat and blood.

Once that was presented to my mental vision I ceased to regret having been forced to thus set off for the purpose of joining Commodore Barney's fleet, and rejoiced that my comrades had prevented me from showing the white feather when even my loving mother urged me forward. I forgot all the fears which had assailed me, and thought only of what it might be possible for me to do in order to show myself worthy the land of my birth.

In a word, I had in a few seconds been transformed from a cowardly lad who would shirk his duty lest, perchance, he receive some bodily hurt, to a boy burning with the desire to do whatsoever lay in his power toward checking the advance of an enemy who was bent upon carrying on the war by destroying the property of peaceful settlers.

Unless my comrades read what I have here set down, they will never know how near I was on that day at Benedict, to proving myself a false-hearted American lad.

The afternoon was considerably more than half spent when we left home for the eighteen-mile sail up the river, and I saw little chance of our coming upon the fleet before morning, unless we kept the pungy under sail far into the night, for the breeze, what little we had of it, came from the westward, and we could not make more than two miles an hour against the current.

Therefore it was that I said to Darius when we were half an hour or more from port, after Jim Freeman and his friends had wearied themselves by cutting monkey-shines on the deck in order to prove their joy at thus having an opportunity to do whatsoever they might in defense of their country:

"With so light a wind we are like to be forced aground when it is so dark that we cannot give the shoals a wide berth, because of not seeing them," and the old man replied, saying that which was in my own mind:

"It'll be a case of comin' to anchor, lad, after the sun has set, for we had best make haste slowly rather than jam the pungy up where a day may be spent in tryin' to float her."

"But suppose the British are close at hand?" I asked, for now I was hot with the desire to make certain of keeping so far ahead of the enemy that I could take part in whatsoever might be done by way of fighting.

"They will be more helpless than we, after night has come, for we know the river fairly well, while they are strangers to it."

If it had not been that we lads were about to take part in the war I might have refused to accept Darius' advice so readily, for, it must be confessed, I am overly headstrong and apt to go contrary when one makes the least show of driving me; but in the business we were about to embark upon, I knew it was safe to follow the old man, since he had had long experience in such matters, the telling of which would be more entertaining than will be the account of our adventures.

It was destined, however, that the Avenger should come to anchor even before the river was shrouded in darkness,

for we were not more than four miles above our own town of Benedict, when the wind, died away completely, thus forcing us to make fast somewhere, unless we were minded to drift back to our starting point.

In my ignorance, I would have anchored the pungy in the stream, hoisting a riding light, and turned in feeling that everything was safe and snug; but to this Darius made decided objection.

"Keep out of the channel," he said emphatically. "We know beyond a peradventure that the enemy is astern of us, and there is no tellin' when he may come--"

"He will wait for wind before goin' very far up the river," I interrupted, and thus showed my ignorance of anything concerning warfare, for the old man replied:

"It wouldn't be strange if he should send a boat in the night to make certain of the water, and get such other information as might be useful. This 'ere pungy would be captured by half a dozen men as easily as if the whole British fleet was close by."

"Are you of the opinion that we should haul in to the bank?" I asked very humbly, understanding that if we would run safely it might be better to give Darius the command.

"Let her drop back beyond the point, an' then sneak in as far among the trees as her spars will permit," he said, and this we did, pulling her around by aid of the canoe until we were nicely hidden from all save by closest scrutiny.

Right glad was I by this time that Jim Freeman and his two friends had come aboard, for they were willing lads, who strove to do all they might in the way of work, and we who belonged on the Avenger had an easy time of it.

Jim took it upon himself to get supper, and he had brought with him such a tempting store of provisions, all of which he turned over to the party, that our meal that night was a veritable feast. I had never but once before had such an appetizing repast, and that one exception was when oysters were scarce, and a Baltimore dealer gave us a dinner at the hotel in addition to the regular price of the cargo.

When our hunger had been satisfied, and the cuddy put to rights, we lads would have spent the time spinning yarns, or in some other such amusement; but Darius put his foot down strongly against it.

"Remember that you are liable to be made prisoners of war at any moment," he said gravely. "Wise men do not hide themselves and their vessel, an' then talk and laugh that strangers may know where they are hidden."

"Do you really expect to see Britishers on the river this night?" Jim Freeman asked with a laugh, and, much to my surprise, the old man said emphatically:

"I surely do, if all we heard at Benedict be true, an' I have little doubt of it. The enemy count on destroyin' Commodore Barney's fleet, an' know that it can be found up this stream. It will be strange, 'cordin' to what I know of such business, if the admiral does not send out spies before shovin' any armed vessels up here."

It can well be supposed that such talk as this insured silence among us; we had hardly begun to understand that we might be very near a British prison unless every precaution was taken; but the old man's words, and manner of speaking them, brought us to a better realization of the situation.

We almost held our breath, fancying the enemy might be close aboard, until Darius, talking in a whisper, said:

"I'm countin' on seein' or hearin' the Britishers 'twixt now an' mornin', an' it strikes me that we might do a good stroke of work for Joshua Barney, by lookin' after a prisoner or two. It wouldn't be no ways strange if we could nab 'em, pervidin' they put themselves in a fair position to be taken."

I was dumfounded by such a proposition, and it is not impossible that my knees began to shake as I thought of attempting such a thing. Then I suddenly remembered that we had no weapons aboard, except an old musket which we used to shoot into a flock of ducks now and then, and I said with a laugh:

"Do you expect that the Britishers will surrender if we simply invite them? Our one musket wouldn't make much of a showin' against a boat-load of men."

"All that has been in my mind, lad, an' I reckon it won't be hard to put ourselves in right good shape. If any British spies count on comin' up the river, it wouldn't be till after dark, an' we've got no right to expect they'd be around this way much before midnight. Now I'll paddle back to the village, an' see if I can't scare up two or three muskets. It won't take me more'n an hour for the whole job."

Darius said this as if asking advice; but I could make no reply, and my companions held their peace, therefore, after

waiting a few moments without hearing any comment, the old man set about carrying his plan into execution.

Noiselessly he hauled the canoe alongside, went over the rail into her, and took up the paddle, as I stood near the bow waiting for his command to cast off the painter.

"Keep quiet, whatever happens, an' don't fuss if I'm kept quite a spell, for if there's anythin' to be learned, I shall make mighty little account of time. Cast off, lad, an' be certain that nothin' goes up or down the river without your seeing it."

I obeyed the command, and in an instant the canoe glided into the obscurity of the shadows cast by the overhanging trees.

With the disappearance of Darius there came upon me the full sense of my responsibility, for I was the one to whom the others would look in event of trouble, and I knew full well how poorly fitted I was by experience to be in command of the puny.

The knowledge of my own short-comings at least served one good turn, since it made me more than usually cautious, and without delay I set about preparations for obeying the command given by Darius.

All my companions were on deck, and calling them aft to the cuddy companion-way, I said in a whisper:

"You heard the words of Darius. Now I propose the work shall be done in this fashion: All hands will remain on duty, not in a group, but stationed equal distances apart at the rail, each one to watch and listen to the best of his ability. No fellow shall speak with his neighbor, nor can he move about lest the sound of footsteps on the deck give an alarm."

Then I took up my station near the stern, and in the gloom I could see the forms of my companions while they ranged themselves as I had suggested, neither of them making more noise than so many mice.

From that moment not a sound could be heard from the deck of the Avenger. That which Darius said had aroused us all to the danger, and even though we had only a crew of lads, I felt confident no blunder would be charged against us.

It was dreary work waiting there in the darkness, listening intently for the lightest unusual noise, and believing that an enemy was, or soon would be, close at hand. The gurgling of the water in an eddy; the leap of a fish, or a bit of drift-wood striking against the side of the puny, sounded in our ears loud as thunder, and we heard the ordinary night rustlings of the forest as if it was something strange to our ears.

Then came that which caused us to bend far out over the rail, trying to pierce the gloom with our eyes, for the measured stroke of oars could be heard, and it was a positive relief to me, even though it betokened the coming of strangers.

I felt certain an enemy's boat was approaching, because had any one living on the river been coming up at that time of night, paddles would have been used instead of oars. I knew of no one nearabout Benedict who would have rowed a boat against the current when she could have been handled so much more readily the other way.

Nearer and nearer came the splashing of water, as if more than one oarsman was at work, and when it seemed as if the boat must be close upon us, I heard a low voice, but could not distinguish the words.

Immediately the noise of the oars ceased, and then came the words, not loud, but clear enough for us who were listening so intently to hear with reasonable distinctness:

"On which side of the river were we to pick the man up?"

"The left, sir; the same side as the village."

The Avenger was lying near the right bank of the river, such position having been taken because of the trees, and not through good judgment.

"One of you men get ashore, and see what can be found. If this is the place agreed upon, and he said he would be about three miles above the village, there should be a road running on a line with the river."

There was no question in my mind but that the speakers were Britishers from one of the fleets, and that some of our people had agreed to play the traitor by giving information, or piloting the boat. But, if such was the case, where was Darius? He had not had time to reach Benedict before this boat came past there, and might already be a prisoner on his way to the nearest English vessel.

Even though he had gained the village while the strangers were yet below it, then was his danger the greater, for he might unwittingly come directly upon them when he returned. Whichever way I looked at the matter I saw cause for grave fear, and the perspiration came out in big drops on my forehead, for without him we would be in a bad

predicament.

While these thoughts were running through my mind I gave due attention to what might be going on at the opposite side of the river, for I was convinced that the boat was nearly in a straight line across from where we lay.

I could hear such noises as told that one of the crew was scrambling ashore amid the underbrush, and I heard a man cough; but after that all was still until at least fifteen minutes were passed, when there was a faint sound of voices from a distance, and then the rustling of the foliage as if one or more was forcing a passage through the tangle of vines.

"Hello!" came in a hoarse whisper from the boat, and some one ashore replied:

"It's all right, sir."

From what could be heard I knew that a man, or men, were making their way to the boat from the highway, and then, when it seemed as if he or they were aboard, the voice which had given the command, said in greeting:

"So you're come at last, Macomber. I had begun to believe we were mistaken as to the rendezvous."

"I was delayed in the village, for your orders were that I must get away without its being known, and there are many inquisitive ones in Benedict."

My heart gave a great bound. So it was Elias Macomber who was playing traitor, for even though he was born in England, the United States was his home by adoption, and to our people he was bound in honor.

If Darius could only get weapons so that we might capture the boat's crew, what joy would be mine to carry the base hound to Commodore Barney as a prisoner!

Elias was speaking in a low tone and rapidly to some one--whom I had no doubt was a British officer--, and I could only catch a word here and there; but it was enough to let me know that he was reporting all he had heard concerning the movements of the flotilla.

"At Nottingham yesterday," I heard. "Thirteen barges an' pungies, with the schooner Scorpion. Five hundred men all told. Well armed, an' knowin' how to use their weapons."

It was by such fragments of conversation as set down above that I knew Elias Macomber was giving all the information in his power to the enemy, and I resolved that some day he should pay the penalty of the crime, even though I was forced to pursue him single-handed.

When all the story had been told the officer asked:

"Can you give us a place on the river where we may lay by during the day? I am minded to have a look at the boats before going back to make report."

I bent forward eagerly to hear the reply:

"At a mill, five miles above here, you will find a friend by name of Esseck Harland. He can give you all that may be needed."

"You shall go with us to make certain he takes us in."

"Very well, sir; but in that case I cannot get back home before morning."

"You should be able to pull eight miles with a current in a few hours, and I will pay for the hire of a boat."

"Very well, sir," Macomber replied in a tone of content, and I laughed inwardly with joy, for he would be our prisoner to a certainty if he came down the river alone.

Then the word was given for the oarsmen to resume their work, and we heard the light splashing of water as the boat was pulled up-stream.

After that all was silent once more, and Jerry came tip-toeing aft to whisper in my ear:

"Do you think Darius managed to give them the slip, or did they capture him?"

"It seems to me that the officer would have told Elias if he had taken a prisoner," I replied, and such fact gave me great satisfaction. "At all events he must be here soon if nothing has happened to his disadvantage."

Even as I spoke the canoe came out of the shadow, gliding lightly and noiselessly as thistledown, and we knew that Darius was safe, for the time being at least.

"Did you run across the boat when you went down?" I asked in a whisper as he came over the rail, and he stood silent as if with surprise.

"Didn't you see a boat?" Jerry asked impatiently, and the old man replied:

"I met with nothing either goin' or comin' an' I've brought back two muskets with a mighty small lot of powder an' ball; but it's better'n nothin'. What do you mean by a boat?"

Then we told him what we had heard, and when I mentioned the name of the traitor, he brought his hand down on his leg with a resounding thwack that might have been heard some distance away, as he said incautiously loud:

"We'll have that snake, lads, if we don't do anythin' more, an' he shall have a chance to see how the commodore looks when the Britishers come up the river!"

"Then it is for you to take command of the Avenger, Darius. The boat has not been gone from here above ten minutes, therefore it is likely to be some time before the traitor comes down stream."

"We won't wait here for him, lads. There's breeze enough stirrin' now to send the pungy against the current, an' we'll push ahead."

Sheltered by the trees as the vessel had been, we were ignorant of the fact that a night breeze was springing up, until the Avenger swung out into the stream, and then we found it as Darius had said.

The little craft could make about two miles an hour against the current, which, as I reckoned, was about what the boat could do with a couple of men at the oars, and I suggested to the old man that there was danger we might over-run our game.

He gave heed by sending all hands, save me, into the bow as lookouts, and steered a zig-zag course, which reduced our speed a full third.

"I don't believe I've ever heard of this Essek Harland you tell about," the old man said to me in a whisper, and, understanding that he desired all the information I could give concerning the miller, I replied:

"He's of much the same kidney as Elias Macomber, except that he was born in this country. A mean native of North Carolina, who starves his slaves, and makes them work twice as many hours as they should. He runs the mill, and it is said that all those who carry grist to him keep a sharp watch lest he take out too much toll. If he hides the Britishers, or gives them any information, it will be because they pay him, for he will do any mean thing for money."

"Have you ever heard it said whether he was for or against the war?"

"No, and I haven't heard his name spoken for a year or more. It would make little difference with him which side he was on, if the opposite party offered money they could buy him."

Then we fell silent again during half an hour or more, when Darius said:

"You shall tell me when we are within a mile of the mill; it won't be safe to run any nearer unless we have overhauled that snake of a Macomber."

I was so well acquainted with the river as to know every crook and turn for at least ten miles above Benedict, and when it seemed certain the pungy had run three miles or more, I kept a sharp look-out on the banks in order to comply with the old man's request.

It was just when I believed we were close upon the spot where the Avenger should be stopped, that Jerry came tip-toeing aft, waving his arms to attract our attention.

"Macomber has hove in sight!" Darius whispered. "Take the tiller, an' head her for his canoe!"

As he spoke he darted into the cuddy, returning a few seconds later with two muskets, and these he carried with him well forward.

I strained my eyes in vain for a view of the canoe, which should be coming right fast, with a favoring current, and had not yet made her out when Darius hailed:

"In the boat there! Whereabouts are our people?"

The old man had disguised his voice, and the traitor must have believed that we were a party of British coming to join those whom he had piloted, for he paddled alongside fearlessly, as he replied:

"Up the river half a mile or so."

"Can you show us the way?"

"Ay, that I can; but it will delay me in--"

He ceased speaking very suddenly, for at that moment Jerry incautiously came toward the port rail, and even though the night was dark, it was possible to see that he was neither a British soldier nor sailor.

Quickly he seized the paddle to shove off; but Darius thrust the muzzle of a musket in his very face, as he cried sharply:

"Pass up your painter, or I'll shoot! Quick, or your life is gone in another second!"

Elias Macomber was a coward, as we knew full well, but I never believed he would give in quite as readily as he did. He passed up the painter as meekly as any cooing dove, and when Darius ordered him to come over the rail, he made all haste to obey the command.

When we gathered around the cur, however, for all of us were so eager that we could not keep out of sight any longer, and he saw who had captured him, he let go a cry of anger that was like unto the whoof of a bear, as he struck out with both fists savagely.

He would have showed better sense had he taken matters with a bit more grace, for before he could land a blow on either of us, Darius floored him with the butt-end of the musket, and during a minute or two he laid like one dead.

"You struck too hard!" I cried in alarm, for even though the man was a traitor, it seemed terrible to take a human life.

"Not a bit of it," the old sailor said quietly as he set about lashing the fellow's arms and legs. "He ain't the kind that can be killed so easily. Get off the hatch, for we must have him out of sight before coming up to the mill."



"Pass up your painter, or I'll shoot!" Cried Darius. Page 56.

Five minutes later our prisoner was snugly stowed aft, near the cabin bulkhead, and we had brought the pungy to anchor lest she over-run the port we counted on making.

CHAPTER IV.

A LIVELY TUSSLE.

Darius would have it that the traitor had not been seriously hurt by the blow on the head; but when he failed to show any signs of consciousness after we stowed him away in the hold, I grew alarmed, and, calling on Jim Freeman for assistance, set about trying to bring him to life, for of a verity I believed him dead.

It was not until we had worked over him ten minutes or more that I could see any change, and then suddenly he opened his eyes, blinking in the rays of the lantern Jim was holding close by his face.

"What happened to me?" he asked wildly, and as my fears that he had been killed were banished by the words, so did my anger against him return.

"You were known to have been giving information to the enemy, and piloting English spies to a hiding-place," I replied sharply. "We took it upon ourselves to cut your career as a traitor short, and while the job was being done you got a clip on the head that knocked you senseless."

While I was speaking the cur looked me full in the face, as if trying to make out who I was; but I believe he feigned ignorance only that he might have time in which to decide upon a course of action.

I could see by the look in his eyes, when his mind was made up as to how he should steer, and a moment later he said with a start of pretended surprise.

"Is it you, Amos Grout? I was afraid I had fallen into the hands of enemies!"

"You are not among friends, and that is certain," I replied, boiling with rage because the miserable cur would try to pull wool over my eyes, for I well knew what tack he was about to take.

"And are you willin' to hold enmity simply because we had a bit of a scrimmage over differences of opinion? I thought all that was settled on the spot."

"So it was," I said curtly.

"Then why have you tied me up in this fashion?"

"Listen to me, Elias Macomber," I cried. "Do you think for a moment that you can deceive any one aboard this craft. We heard all you said to the British officer who is in the Patuxent with a boat's crew spying, and know where you took him to pass the night. We sailed up the river for the purpose of capturing you, and here you remain until we can deliver the meanest traitor in Maryland over to Commodore Barney."

Now the cur was frightened, and with good cause. He would have said something more, thinking, I dare say, that it might yet be possible to blind me; but I refused to listen.

"I only came here to learn if you were alive, and now that matter has been settled, I count on leaving you. Don't be so foolish as to think you can wiggle out of the scrape by lying, for when you made your talk with the Britisher this pungy was on the other side of the river, her spars hidden by the trees. We heard nearly every word that was spoken."

"An' you're gettin' out of this part of the trouble mighty easy, if Amos insists you shall be left alone," Jim added angrily. "If I had my way, all hands of us would take a turn at thumpin' you, an' then the account between us wouldn't be square."

"Come on, Jim," I said impatiently. "It is doing no good to parley with such as him. Leave the traitor to himself until the commodore directs what shall be done."

Elias called after us imploringly as we went out of the hold; but I had no desire to remain longer with the cur, and we put on the hatch in order that, if he did succeed in freeing himself of the bonds, he would yet be imprisoned.

On gaining the deck I looked around for Darius, but he was not to be seen, and Jerry, understanding for whom I searched, said:

"The old man has gone ashore. He counts on lookin' around the mill, so that we may know exactly how to get at work when the time comes."

"At work?" I repeated in bewilderment. "What does he reckon on doing now that we have caught the traitor?"

"It is in his mind that we can make prisoners of all the boat's crew, an' if that could be done, we'd be takin' with us such as would insure a hearty welcome from the commodore."

"We had better let well enough alone," I replied irritably. "If Commodore Barney won't be pleased to see him when we offer our own services, the use of the punga, and the biggest traitor in Maryland, then there's little reason to try to purchase his favor."

"You've agreed that Darius should run this thing to suit himself, an' he's doin' it. I believe he's right, too! If there's a chance to take a few prisoners, it would be downright folly to let it slip."

"And do you expect that we can capture at least half a dozen well-armed Britishers?"

"There are as many of us, when you come to figgerin' up the fightin' force, an' the advantage of takin' them by surprise will overbalance the difference in weapons."

It was useless to argue with Jerry, as I understood by his tone, therefore I turned away, saying to myself that by trying to bite off too big a piece in the way of taking prisoners, we might find the tables turned very suddenly to our disadvantage.

Jim Freeman and his friends seemed to be of the same mind as Jerry, and I said nothing to them lest I be accused of faint-heartedness, when everything was apparently going our way.

We waited in silence for the coming of Darius, allowing the Avenger to remain in the stream where some of the boys had anchored her while I was caring for the prisoner, and not until nearly midnight did the old man put in an appearance.

Jim Freeman was on the lookout well forward, and that he did his duty well was shown by the fact that he came aft with the word that a canoe was drifting down the river while the craft was yet some distance away.

Jerry and I, each with a musket, went forward to make certain the newcomer was a friend rather than an enemy, and when we hailed softly, Darius replied with a low hissing sound which was familiar to us all.

He made fast, came inboard, and entered the cuddy without speaking, therefore we followed, knowing full well that he had something of importance to impart.

When we were all together, unable to see each other because of the darkness, Darius said softly, in a tone of triumph:

"I've found the Britishers, an' can put my hand on the whole gang without much trouble. There are but three men an' the officer, who, I reckon, will be the only fellow to make much fuss when we get at work. Now I'm countin' that one of Jim's friends shall be left on board to look out for the punga, an' make certain the traitor don't kick up any row. Three of us will have a musket each, an' the other two can do mighty good work with belayin' pins."

"Where are the men?" Jerry asked.

"In the loft of the mill. The officer is havin' a right sociable time with Essek Harland, an' if the miller's bottle holds out, I reckon them two won't be in shape to make much trouble. Jim is to say which of his party shall stay aboard, an' the sooner the rest of us get to work the better, for I want to begin the scrimmage in a couple of hours."

It was evident that my opinion as to whether the attempt to capture the Britishers should be made, was not to be asked, and yet I must follow where Darius led, or give my comrades good reason for calling me a coward—or worse.

The old man settled it that he and Jerry should arm themselves with belaying pins, and the two muskets he brought back from Benedict, together with our old fowling-piece, was distributed among the rest of us.

Jim Freeman named Dody Wardwell as the one to keep ship and look after the prisoner, and Darius instructed the watchman to be free with his blows in case Elias tried to pick up a row.

"If he undertakes to yip even once, give him a dose over the head that will put him to sleep, an' it won't be much harm if you kill such a cur as he is. Keep your wits about you, lad, an' remember that the prisoner is the one who can make the most trouble."

Then the old man saw to it that each of our weapons was loaded, after which he led the way to the rail where the canoe was made fast.

The little craft would not carry more than three, therefore two trips were necessary in order to land us all, and when we stood on the bank Darius proposed that Jerry paddle the boat up to the mill.

"Why do we want her there?" I asked, thinking he was providing for a means of escape. "We couldn't all take passage in her, and in case we need to get away in a hurry, it might be done easier by striking into the woods."

"I'm not thinkin' how we can get her off, for if the plan fails to work there's little chance any of us will need the canoe," Darius said grimly, and I began to understand that he might be more of a fighter than would suit me. "It may be we shall want to send some prisoners down to keep Macomber company, an' then a small craft will come in handy, for their boat is hauled up high an' dry among the bushes; she is so heavy that it would be a long job to float her."

Jerry was so impatient to be in the thick of danger that he hardly waited for the old man to conclude his long-winded speech, and before the last word had hardly been spoken he was paddling up stream at a rate which told that he would arrive at the rendezvous some time in advance of us who were to walk.

Neither was Darius willing to waste much time, and when Jerry was lost to view in the darkness he struck through the underbrush toward the highway, leading the party, while I brought up the rear.

It can well be fancied that we moved with the utmost caution, for people do not set out on such an enterprise as we were bent upon with any great blowing of horns, and although none of us were what might be called woodsmen, I flatter myself that we did not bungle the job very badly.

Hardly more than a quarter-hour had passed when Darius left the underbrush to cut across toward the river, and within five minutes more we were halted near the southeast corner of the mill, not having heard or seen anything of those whom we hoped to make prisoners.

Jerry joined us almost immediately, having been on the lookout during five minutes or more, and he reported that there had been no signs of life in the vicinity since his arrival.

"We who carry the clubs will go ahead, an', if it so be possible, do the biggest part of the work, for our weapons ain't the kind that make much of any noise," Darius whispered. "Jim Freeman will stand guard at the door of the mill, but he is not to shoot unless it becomes necessary to prevent the Britisher or the miller from takin' a hand in the scrimmage, pervidin' there is one. Now follow me, lads, an' remember that we must get the three sailors under our thumbs, once we've started, no matter what turns up."

We stole up to the big door on the northwest corner, the only entrance to the building, and, as I had expected, found it fastened on the inside. One would hardly have supposed that the Britishers in hiding would neglect to make themselves as secure as possible.

It appeared that Darius was not disappointed, for after pushing gently at the door, and motioning for Jim to stand in front of it, he led the way along the northerly side of the mill to a portion of the under-pinning which had given way, disclosing an aperture through which a mule might have been driven.

"Keep close at my heels," he whispered, and then he plunged into the darkness, we obeying his command to the letter, for a mis-step might throw us into the mill-race, which we could hear rippling close at hand.

One would have said that the old man had always lived in this place, so directly and swiftly did he go to the desired point, which was a portion of the flooring where was a trap-door, evidently used to dump the refuse, for suddenly we found ourselves climbing up a heap of what appeared to be husks and cobs of corn.

It was a simple task to gain entrance to the building in this manner, for Darius had only to force the trap-door up with his shoulder, and in a twinkling we were standing on the lower floor, near-by what I took to be the hopper.

Touching each of us in turn that we might be warned to follow closely, Darius led the way to the easterly end of the building, where he halted at the foot of a flight of stairs.

Now he marshaled his force according to the weapons. Jerry was behind him; I came next, determined to use my musket as a club so long as it could be done, rather than take the risk of killing a man, and in the rear of me was Josiah Coburn, one of Jim Freeman's party.

Now it must be understood that we could see nothing; the darkness was so intense that one could almost feel it, and yet we proposed to blunder in upon enemies who would probably shoot without warning in the direction of the slightest suspicious noise.

It was not a cheerful adventure, and I hold myself well excused for being frightened, so that I followed the leader's orders implicitly to the best of my ability.

Just at this point, when we were trembling with suppressed excitement, and, as in my case, fear, Darius remembered

that he had not unlocked the outer door in order that Jim might hide within the building, and we were forced to stand at the foot of the stairs while he groped his way back to remedy the neglect.

It seemed to me that we remained there hardly daring to breathe, a full half-hour, although I suppose now that it was no more than five minutes, and then our leader was returned.

Pushing his way to the head of the line once more, we began the ascent of the stairs, each fellow stepping cautiously; but despite all our efforts each board sent forth loud protesting creaks as we bore our weight upon it, and the only wonder was that the Britishers did not awaken sooner.

The noise we made in ascending the stairs seemed to me loud enough to alarm the inmates of the house near at hand, and, therefore, I was neither startled nor surprised when some person at one end of the second floor, cried out:

"Who is there? What's the row?"

"Can't you give your shipmates the same show for a watch below that you've got?" Darius asked with a regular deep-sea note in his voice, and this it was that gave us a slight advantage, since the men did not open fire.

"How did you get here?" the same voice asked, and again the old man answered as if speaking to shipmates:

"The bloomin' swab that piloted you here, gave us the course. Where are you?"

"Over here," and the voice came from the westerly end of the building, thus showing that we must walk the entire length of the mill before coming upon our adversaries. "What ship are you from?"

My heart stood still as this question was asked, for I knew only too well that Darius was wholly ignorant as to what British vessels had entered the bay; but the old sailor never hesitated, as he replied:

"What other than the flag-ship, you lubber?"

"No, I'll be burned if you are!" the man cried loudly, and I heard him spring to his feet. "She's in the Potomac river long before this! Rouse up, my bullies, an' let's have a look at these beach-combers."

During this brief conversation we had been advancing swiftly in the direction from which the sailor's voice could be heard, and when his comrades were ready to receive us, we could not have been a dozen paces distant from the three.

I felt, rather than saw, that Darius sprang forward; there was a dull thud, a groan, and a cry from one of the other Britishers which told that the battle was on, but the number of active enemies had been reduced by one, for there could be no question but that Darius had put his man out of the fight for some time to come.

I ran forward with my companions; but it was impossible to use the musket, even had I been eager to shoot, because of the darkness, and as I swung the weapon from side to side, striving to feel my way, some one clutched me by the throat.

"Here's one of 'em!" I managed to scream before the fellow's fingers shut off my wind, and then I had my hands full trying to save my own life.

I managed to hit my adversary two or three solid blows which weakened his hold somewhat, otherwise I would have been strangled in short order, and then I fought as I never did before, but sadly at a disadvantage, as can be imagined.

How long we swayed to and fro, I striving to reach the enemy's face with my fists, and he trying to strengthen his hold on my throat, I know not; but certain it is that I held him in fairly good play five minutes or more before the report of Jim Freeman's musket told that the Britishers were about to receive reinforcements.

Even as I fought with my adversary I understood that the English officer, and, probably, the miller, aroused by the noise of the scrimmage, were coming to the rescue, and the thought flashed through my mind that in a few moments more the battle would be decided in favor of his majesty's forces.

Just at that moment a heavy body pushed past me; I heard that sickening sound which tells that a living object has been struck a powerful blow, and instantly the hands relaxed their grasp on my throat.

"That makes the third one; we've got the upper hands of all up here, an' you lads are to make the Britishers fast the best you can in the darkness, while I 'tend to the visitors."

It was Darius who spoke, and when this had been said I understood that he was running toward the stairway.

Now it was possible to see faint gleams of light coming through the cracks of the floor, and I realized that the

newcomers had with them a lantern.

The report of Jim's musket had been followed by the discharge of a pistol, and I heard the lad running across the floor at full speed.

I did not have sense enough to obey the old man's command in regard to the prisoners; but stood there like a simple, staring at the moving rays of light, and wondering how long it would take the British officer to shoot us all down.

Then, to my great surprise, I heard a voice from the head of the stairs, on the floor where we were, cry loudly:

"This way, sir! We've got the best of two bloomin' Yankees, an' the other is sneakin' in some corner!"

There came the sound of hurried footsteps, and then the light of the lantern so far illumined the head of the stairway that I could see Darius, lying at full length on the floor, within a few inches of the opening.

Just for one second I stood as if stupefied, and then I understood what the old man would do.

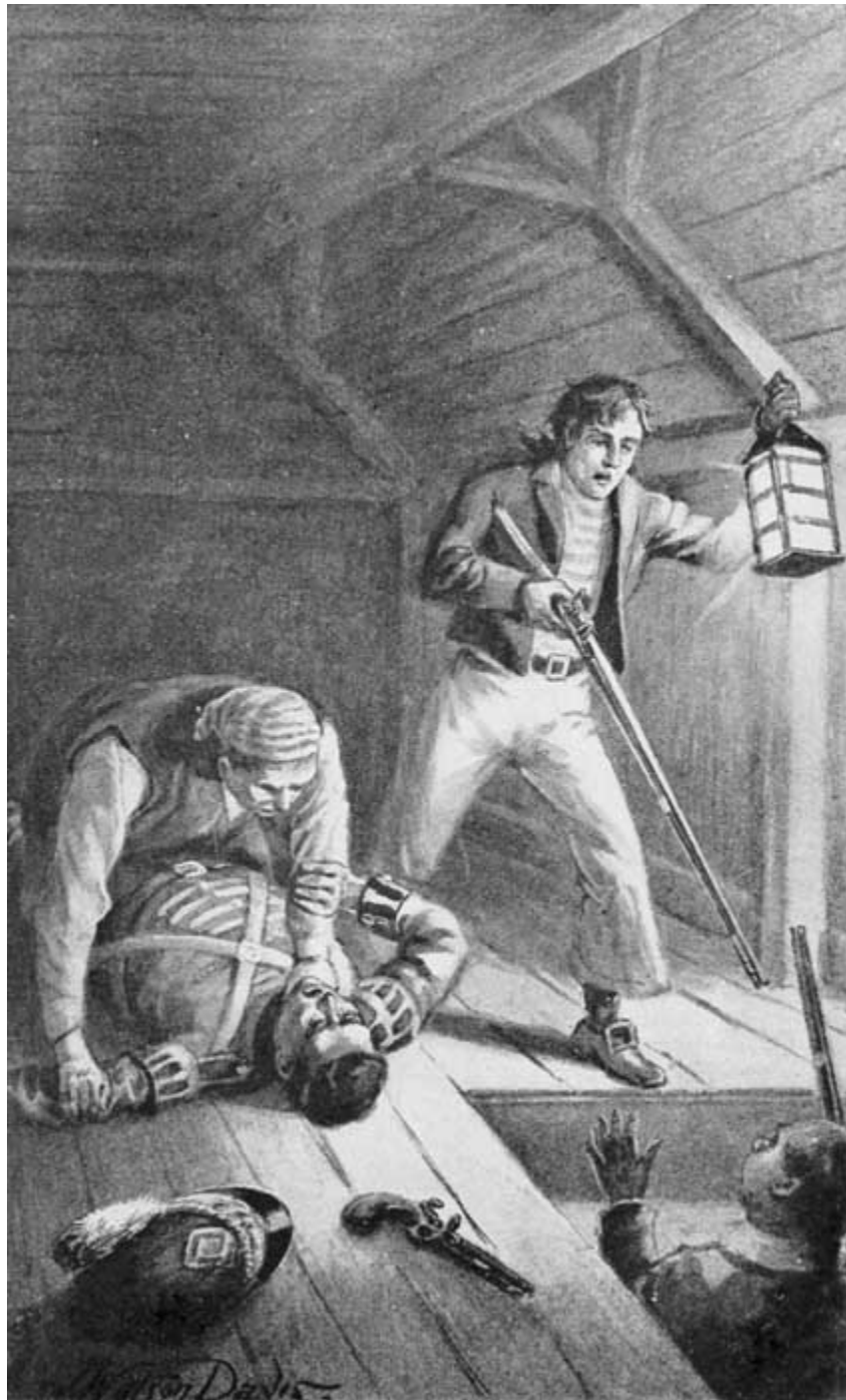
The British officer ascended swiftly; but before his head was fairly above the top of the stairs Darius stretched out his long arm, seizing the gentleman by the throat even as my adversary had seized me.

Now I had my wits about me; running forward swiftly I caught the lantern before the officer could let go his grasp on it, and thus made it possible to have a view of what was going on.

Darius hauled his captive up, much as if he had been a bale of merchandise, and as he was dragged to the floor I saw one whom I believed to be the miller, directly behind him, within three steps of the top of the stairs.

With the lantern in my left hand, I thrust forward the barrel of my musket full in his face, as I said sharply:

"Throw down that gun, or I'll fire!"



With the lantern in my left hand, I thrust forward the barrel of my musket full in the face of the miller. Page 72.

The man was armed in much the same fashion as was I; but he had little stomach for fighting, as could be seen when he dropped the weapon immediately I spoke, and when it fell clattering to the floor below, Jim Freeman came into view from behind a pile of bags.

"Can you look after the miller, Jim?" I cried, and the lad replied as he came bounding up the stairs:

"Ay, let him go, an' I'll blow the whole top of his head off if he dares to look crosswise!"

I knew Jim's musket must be empty, since he had not had time to recharge it after firing that which served as an alarm; but I took the chances of the fact being discovered, and turned with the lantern held high above my head to view the scene.

Near at hand Darius was kneeling on the British officer's chest, industriously engaged in strapping the latter's arms to his body with the prisoner's waist-belt.

In the distance Jerry and Josiah knelt beside a form which was stretched out frightfully limp, as if life had departed; but I observed that they were securing the man's hands and feet with portions of his trousers.

Beyond them a short distance was a second Britisher, tied tightly with what appeared to be strips torn from his own clothing, and midway between them and Darius, was a third body, evidently that of the man who had attacked me; but he remained motionless, and, having heard the blow which struck him down, I could well understand why he did not give any very violent signs of life.

It did not appear that I was needed elsewhere, therefore I turned my attention to the miller, who was standing like a statue, not daring to lift a finger lest Jim should "blow off the top of his head."

"Come here," I said to him. "Come here while my friend trusses you up in proper fashion. What can you find there to tie him with, Jim?"

"Plenty," Jim cried gleefully as he picked up from the floor a couple of bags and began cutting them into strips. "Here's enough an' to spare, of what is better than rope."

The venture had come to a most successful end, providing there were no others in the vicinity whose love for the British would prompt them to interfere, and I was amazed, even amid the excitement of victory, that we had come off ahead when it seemed certain the enemy could overcome us easily.

Darius, having bound his captive, stood up facing me, and from the expression on his face one never would have supposed that he had just come unscratched out of as lively a tussle as I ever took part in. It was as if he had been stowing oysters in the hold of the Avenger, and was stretching his back before going at it again.

"You've done a big thing," I said, holding out my hand to congratulate him. "To you belongs all the credit of having taken these prisoners, and when we meet Commodore Barney I shall insist that he hears the whole story, for I doubt if every old sailor has head enough to put such a venture through in good shape."

It could readily be seen that the old man was pleased by the praise; but he made as if it was of no consequence.

"You lads have done your full share, an' if any credit is to be given it goes to the whole crowd."

"Not a bit of it!" Jerry cried, looking up from his task of binding the sailor with whom I had fought. "It's as Amos says; but for you this never would have been done, an' it won't be my fault if all the men of the fleet don't hear of it."

"We're not out of the woods yet," Darius said, as though he would change the subject. "If I'd had half the head you give me credit for, we'd run the pungy up here, instead of leavin' her a mile away."

"Josiah can go after her," I suggested, "and by the time we're ready to put our prisoners aboard she should be here."

This proposition suited the old man, and Jim's friend left the building at full speed, while I asked Darius to make certain the miller was trussed up in proper fashion.

"What'er you goin' to do with me?" Essek Harland cried with a whine. "I ain't to be blamed for what's been done this night! How can I help it if a crowd of Britishers take possession of my mill?"

"Talk that over with Elias Macomber; he's aboard the pungy," Darius replied in a matter-of-fact tone as he proceeded to bind the man with strips of bags provided by Jim.



CHAPTER V.

WITH THE FLEET.

The British sailors did not make any talk on returning to consciousness and finding themselves bound hand and foot. The officer, however, after recovering from the bewilderment which appeared to have come over him because of having been taken prisoner in such an unceremonious fashion, protested against being tied like a criminal.

"Will you give your word to make no attempt at escape?" Darius asked; but this did not suit the Britisher, for most likely he was reckoning on a rescue by those of the people who favored the king, and there were not a few of such vermin on the Patuxent river.

"I refuse to give my parole, save to an officer of the American army or navy," he said stiffly, and Darius replied cheerily:

"Then you see that we've got no other course save to deal out the same dose for all, 'cause we're not countin' on losin' any of you."

"What are you goin' to do with me?" the miller asked, and I took it on myself to make reply:

"You'll get the same treatment as Elias Macomber, and however harsh it may be, you won't have it as tough as is deserved. These others are prisoners of war; but you two are traitors and spies, therefore must expect to fare according to your deserts."

"That's about the size of it, Amos," Darius said as he went from one to another of the prisoners to make certain they were secured properly, and in condition to travel. "I reckon, lad, that we might as well be gettin' the crowd down to the shore, for unless the wind has died away entirely Josiah Coburn should be here mighty soon."

"How would it do to take along a supply of meal?" Jerry asked. "If it so be that we don't come up with the fleet by noon to-morrow, we'd be short of provisions, with so many to feed."

"Right you are, lad. We'll take from Essek Harland's meal-chest as much as may be needed, an' surely he can't make any complaint when he gets his share."

While Jerry was rummaging around to discover the miller's store, we got the prisoners down-stairs, finding it no slight task because two of the sailors, in a spirit of pure mischief, refused to walk, and we were forced to tote them like so many barrels of flour. By the time they were at the foot of the stairs, however, both were willing to provide their own means of transportation, for we did not handle them with any too much care.

Essek Harland whimpered and whined like the cur that he was, until we came to suspect he might be making a noise in order to give an alarm to somebody in the vicinity, when Darius reduced him to silence by threatening to put a gag in his mouth.

We had no more than got in fairly good marching shape when Josiah came up with the Avenger, the wind being strong enough to push her along about as fast as a man could walk.

Then well on to an hour was spent before the prisoners and the meal were stowed in the hold of the pungy, and I counted that it was near daybreak when we started up the river toward where Commodore Barney's fleet was supposed to be.

It struck me that we should meet with a warm reception from the commander, when we delivered up to him the Britishers and the traitors, for by capturing the spies we had delayed the coming of the enemy for a few hours at least.

And in thinking of this I came to ask myself how we were to present ourselves? Whether as lads who wanted to make a bargain to supply the fleet with fish, or as recruits? Ponder over it as I might, it was impossible to come to any satisfactory conclusion, and I decided that before committing myself in any way I would ask the advice of my father, whom I was likely to find on some of the vessels belonging to the flotilla.

It was Darius who broke in upon my perplexing thoughts by asking:

"Well, what do you think of it now, lad? We couldn't have done the job any browner if we'd had on board a full cargo of rifles an' ammunition."

"Ay, Darius, it has been well done because you were on hand; but I question if another might have worked the scheme as well."

"There are thousands who'd make less bungle of it," the old man replied, and I could see that he was well pleased because of being praised, even by a boy. "All that's needed is a little backbone; but if the other fellow happens to have more'n you've got, then things are apt to go wrong."

"Thanks to your arrangement of the affair, the enemy didn't have a chance to show his pluck; but we'd have been in a bad box if you hadn't made the Britishers believe, for a minute or two, that we were their friends."

Darius laughed heartily as he thought of the brief conversation with the sailors, and then said with a chuckle:

"If I'd only known the name of a vessel belongin' to their fleet, we'd been right on top of 'em before bein' found out; but as it was we got well alongside when the trouble began."

Then Jerry came aft to take part in the conversation, and we spent a good half-hour praising each other and chuckling over the good fortune that had been ours.

We might have continued at such pleasing occupation a very long while, but that day began to break, and there was too much work on hand to admit of further foolishness.

Darius gave up the tiller to me, and went below to look after the prisoners, returning five minutes later with the British officer, who, much to my surprise, was no longer fettered.

"This gentleman has decided that he can give his parole to us as well as to brother officers," Darius said by way of introduction. "He has pledged his word to make no attempt at escape, therefore we will give him the liberty of the ship."

"Which won't mean much for one who has been accustomed to the luxury found on board some of his majesty's vessels," I added, trying to show that I had some semblance of good breeding. "An oyster pungy isn't the most beautiful craft in the world."

"V'ery true," the officer replied with a friendly smile; "but there is a vast difference between the hold and the deck of an oysterman."

"Yes, I can fancy that to one unaccustomed to such things, the Avenger seems like a foul ship below."

"So your vessel is named the Avenger?" and the gentleman looked at me quizzically. "Isn't that rather high-sounding for a peaceful fisherman?"

The officer was so different from what I had fancied a Britisher might be, and had such a friendly air, that I made no hesitation in telling him how the pungy got her name, and after the explanation he ceased to laugh at it.

"I can well believe that some of your people have been abused," he said in a kindly tone; "but there are always two sides to a story, and the commander of one of the king's ships may believe that he is doing absolutely that which is right and just, when in your eyes he commits a most grievous wrong."

I had sense enough to understand that if I attempted to argue with the officer on the causes of the war I should speedily find myself in deep water, therefore I made reply:

"It is not for me to measure words with such as you, sir. I know that Jerry's brother, who had never stepped foot on other than American soil, was forced to serve in one of your ships, being carried forcibly and secretly away, to the great distress of all who cared for him."

"And in that case his majesty's officers did a most grievous wrong," he said frankly, and then as if to turn the subject of conversation, he asked, "When do you expect to come up with Barney's fleet, for I understand you are in search of it?"

"If the wind holds, we should be there by noon, providing Commodore Barney is yet at Nottingham."

With this the gentlemen turned away to take note of what was being done, for Darius had brought the three sailors on deck, they also having solemnly pledged themselves to refrain from attempt at escape.

Jerry was making preparations for cooking breakfast, which would be no small job with so many to be fed, and Jim Freeman was helping him. It was to be a good wholesome meal, better than we of the Avenger had enjoyed for many a day; because there was to be a plentiful supply of fried ham with corn-dodgers, which last Jerry could make better than any person I ever knew, except my mother.

The British sailors were taking things comfortably, being seated on the deck well forward, and apparently enjoying the sail up the river, even though they were going as prisoners rather than passengers who could come or depart at will.

Darius remained in the hold some time, and when he showed himself again as if his work was done, I asked what he had been about.

"I've been makin' them two sneaks fast to a stanchion, where they won't have any too good a time. I reckon we've got to treat 'em somewhere near decent, though it goes mightily agin the grain. How is breakfast comin' on? I could eat the toughest mule that ever walked!"

Fortunately for him Jerry announced at this moment that the meal was ready, and Darius would have it that I should eat in the cuddy with the officer; but I insisted he was the one who could best do the honors aboard the Avenger, when we had seamen as guests, and literally forced him to act the host.

Dody Wardwell and Josiah Coburn were detailed to feed the prisoners, including the curs in the hold, and Jerry, Jim and I ate on the deck aft, where I could at the same time keep the pungy in the channel.

Jim brought out some of the stores he had taken from home, and we lads had a veritable feast, with the cause of success to give flavor to food which could not be improved upon even though it had been served on a king's table.

It is needless for me to set down all that was said during the forenoon when we sailed very slowly up the river, chatting in friendly fashion with our prisoners--meaning such of them as were allowed to remain on deck-- or discussing our plans for the future among ourselves, and as we did this last we almost unconsciously reckoned Jim and his friends as belonging to the pungy. In fact, after what they had done toward helping out on the night's work, it was no more than right they should be allowed to consider themselves as a portion of the Avenger's crew, if so be their desire ran that way.

It was half an hour past twelve o'clock when we came in sight of the flotilla anchored off Nottingham, and seemingly blocking the river until it would have been difficult for anything larger than a canoe to pass through.

"Where shall we find the commodore among all that crowd of vessels?" I asked in perplexity, and Darius replied promptly:

"He's like to be aboard the Scorpion, unless havin' gone ashore. At all events, it's there we should look for him."

Fortunately for us, the schooner was anchored nearer down stream than the remainder of the craft, and there was no difficulty in running the Avenger alongside.

"You shall do the talking, Darius," I said as Jim Freeman passed a hawser, and his friends dropped the sails.

"I'll look after that part of it so far as tellin' Joshua Barney who you are; but after that you'll take the tiller, for the owners of a vessel are the ones to show themselves."

Just then a kindly-faced gentleman came from the schooner's cabin and looked about as if asking how we dared to make fast alongside. He was one whom I would have picked out for a good friend, rather than a desperate fighter, therefore my surprise was great when Darius whisked off his hat, made a great flourish as he bowed in sailorman fashion, and said:

"We're here to report for duty, an' it please you, Commodore Barney, though you wasn't more'n a captain when I sailed under ye. We've brought a few British prisoners, an' a couple of traitors."

"Why, bless my heart, its Darius Thorpe!" the commander cried as if well pleased at seeing the old sailor, whereupon Darius bowed again, grinning with delight until it seemed as if he would split his mouth from ear to ear.

"It's the same old shell-back, sir, only he's turned oysterman, bein' too stiff in the joints for much deep-sea work."

"When your joints grow stiff, Darius, I shall begin to look after mine; but up to the present time they're fit for a hornpipe almost any day. Is that your craft?"

"No, sir; she is owned by these two lads," and he pointed to Jerry and me.

"And you have taken prisoners on your own account?" the commodore asked, looking directly at me as he advanced nearer the rail, therefore I felt called upon to reply.

"It was really Darius who took the prisoners, sir," I made answer. "He planned the work, and did most of the execution; the rest of us simply obeyed his orders, with the result that we have this officer," and I pointed to the gentleman who was standing well forward as if to be out of ear-shot, "with three sailors, all on parole. In addition, there are, in the hold, two men living on the river, whom we found giving information to the enemy, and aiding them in their spying."

"Come aboard, and let me hear the particulars," the commodore said kindly, and yet the words were a command.

I beckoned to Jerry, and, observing it, the commander said:

"Come with the lads, Darius Thorpe, it may be that I have particular need of you."

We three clambered on to the schooner's deck, following the commodore into the cabin which was not fitted up very much better than our cuddy, save that it had a fair-sized table with chairs, and here we seated ourselves as comfortably as if about to have speech with our equals.

"Now tell me how it happens that you are on the Patuxent river taking prisoners here and there without due warrant from the government at Washington," the commodore said with a smile, and I began by explaining why we started in search of the fleet, not forgetting to make mention of the fact that we had hoped to find a sale for fish or oysters.

Then I gave a detailed account of all that had happened to us, winding up by saying:

"We count that you'll take the prisoners from us, sir, because we haven't overly much food for so large a number, and if it so be you can buy such as we can catch, it shall be at whatever price you set."

"Do you think, lad, that I would encourage you to spend your time fishing when you have already shown yourselves capable of bigger things? I can use Darius to good advantage, and I doubt not but that he may need you and your vessel. Are you minded to serve your country, lad?"

"Ay, sir, if it so be she needs me; but lads like Jerry and me may be of more service as fishermen than as soldiers."

"Regarding that I am not so certain, because of the proof you have brought; it strikes me that your pungy and her crew will well serve my turn. You may deliver the prisoners to an officer whom I will send aboard, and later in the day we will have another chat."

Then the commodore arose to his feet in token that the interview was at an end, and we lads went out, Joshua Barney saying to Darius as he went up the companion-way stairs:

"Since your joints are so stiff it may be a good plan for you to stay aboard the sloop during the remainder of the day, and then you'll be on hand when I'm ready to see you."

I was both surprised and pleased to know that the old man stood so well with the commander, I had looked upon Darius Thorpe as a broken-down sailor; but Commodore Barney appeared to have a far different idea on the subject.

Darius was actually puffed up with pride when he gained the deck of the Avenger. His face was as red as a beet, and his mouth open so wide that I could have tossed a quart of oysters into it without spilling one.

"Well, lads," he cried, turning on Jerry and me insistently, "you've seen the biggest man in this country, an' what do you think of him?"

Neither Jerry nor I could do less than praise the commodore, for he had treated us in a friendly fashion; but although we spoke our minds emphatically, declaring that he was a very pleasant gentleman, Darius was not satisfied.

"I tell you he's the greatest man in the country," he repeated, and I am not certain but that he would have insisted on our saying the same over and over again if an officer from the schooner had not come to receive the prisoners.

The officer and the sailors went over the rail on being told that they were to change quarters; but it was necessary that the traitors be brought from the hold, and I proposed that Darius and Jim Freeman attend to such duty, for I had no desire to set eyes on Elias Macomber again.

"Let's you and I deliver some of these packages and messages with which we are charged," I suggested to Jerry. "By so doing we shall meet many old friends, and I would, if possible, have speech with my father before seeing the commodore again."

"Why?" Jerry asked as if in surprise, when we went into the cuddy to get the articles which were to be delivered.

I was at a loss to make reply. It would not be pleasant to tell the lad that I wanted my father's advice before agreeing to serve under the commodore, since he might believe that to be a coward's trick, therefore I said after some hesitation:

"It is for him to say what I shall do; surely a fellow's father should decide anything of this kind."

"But your mother the same as told you to come."

"Ay, and I am here; now I will see my father, which is but natural. Do not spend so much time in idle words for I

would be out of the punga before those curs are brought from the hold."

We had our arms full of packages by this time, and it did not take us long to load them into the canoe, after which we paddled among the fleet having a bundle or message for some person aboard nearly every craft in the river.

It was not until our work was nearly done that I came upon my father and he received me as if expecting I would come.

"When did you arrive at Benedict?" he asked.

"Yesterday noon, sir."

"You couldn't well have got here earlier because of the wind. I allowed you would join us as soon as possible."

"Then you think, father, that I should serve under the commodore, taking the chances of losing the punga after having paid so much money for her?"

"Don't you?" he asked sharply, and I could do no less than reply as he expected I would.

Thus it was settled beyond peradventure that the Avenger and her crew should become a portion of Commodore Barney's flotilla, and I really felt better in mind after the question had been definitely decided.

We stopped long enough to give father a detailed account of our adventures, and by the way he slapped me on the back after the story was brought to an end, I knew that he felt right well pleased because I had begun serving my country in such a satisfactory manner.

When we returned to the Avenger after our round of visits, we found Jim Freeman and his friends keeping ship in great style. They were looking as proud as peacocks, and I failed to understand the meaning of it all, for ordinarily they were meek lads, until Jim whispered:

"The commodore is a mighty nice man."

"Ay, that he is," I replied, thinking that Darius had been drilling the crew in our absence to sing the praises of Joshua Barney both in and out of season.

"We're goin' to have a chance to do some big things."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because when Darius gave the word that the punga had better be hauled down stream a bit an' anchored, the commodore put a stop to it, by allowin' that he wanted this craft where he could put his hand on her."

"And because of that you think that we are to play an important part in this portion of the war, eh?"

"It looks like it for a fact," Jim replied, strutting to and fro, and I could not but laugh outright, for the idea that we might be called upon to do more than any others seemed ridiculous.

Matters began to wear a different look a moment later, however, when an officer came over from the Scorpion, and said that the commodore would have speech with Jerry and me.

"Where is Darius?" I asked, looking around without seeing the old man.

"He's been aboard the schooner this last half hour an' I've taken particular notice that everybody else is kept out of the cabin," Jim replied. "That's one reason why I'm so certain we'll have a soft time of it while we stay with the fleet."

"Don't stand there chewin' things over in your mind," Jerry said impatiently as I loitered near the helm. "It strikes me that when the commander of a fleet sends for a couple of lads they should step out right lively."

Jerry was right, and I meekly followed him to the commodore's cabin, where we saw Darius hob-nobbing with Joshua Barney as if they were two old cronies.

We lads saluted in as sailorly a fashion as was possible, for we were not well up on such manners, and the commodore said abruptly as he handed me a folded paper:

"Here is a guarantee from the government, through me as the commander of the naval forces in this section, that if your vessel is captured or destroyed by the enemy while you are under my orders, you are to be paid the sum of four hundred dollars."

I was dumfounded. Of course it was pleasing to know that we would be paid a good price in case we lost the

Avenger; but why such an arrangement should be made at this time was way beyond me, until Darius said:

"Wouldn't it be a good idee, sir, if you was to tell the lads what is expected of 'em? I'm not allowin' they'd go contrary to what I said; but it would be pleasanter all around if they got the business from your lips."

"It shall be as Darius says," and the commander half-turned in his chair to face Jerry and me. "I propose that you shall continue to act as oystermen; but without spending much time at the labor. In other words, I want information from the enemy, such as you can gather, and have spent considerable time explaining where and how you may communicate with me. That part of the business need not be repeated. This much you should know: Darius has said that you would do, so far as possible, whatever I might set for you. Now I want your pungy to drop down the river at once; you are to act as if engaged in the peaceful occupation of fishing for oysters, and try to sell your cargo to the enemy. In other words, lads, you are to spy out the disposition of the British ships when they advance, for I am convinced that as yet they remain in the lower bay."

If I had been faint-hearted before, what shall be said of my condition now? In plain words, the commodore proposed that we turn spies, and if we were caught while thus engaged, we would make a speedy trip to the nearest British yard-arm with a rope around our necks!

Jerry did not appear to realize the dangers of the undertaking proposed, and when the commodore suggested that we had better get under way at once, he started toward the companion-way as if about to embark on some pleasure excursion.

"Are we to take on any weapons?" I asked, remembering the crippled muskets, and how dangerous it might be to discharge them.

"Oystermen do not carry modern arms," Joshua Barney said curtly. "Go exactly as if you were performing your regular work, as indeed you are, except that the price received for your wares does not cut any figure."



CHAPTER VI.

FEEDING THE ENEMY.

It was evident that Commodore Barney did not propose to spend any more minutes with us explaining the proposition he had made, and, indeed, it really was high time he attended to others, for no less than four gentlemen of importance in Nottingham had sent a request for an interview.

When the commander arose to his feet, after settling the question as to whether we should be prepared to defend ourselves in case the occasion required, I started up the companion-way stairs, beckoning for Jerry to follow.

Darius Thorpe, although he had been only a sailor, understood somewhat of manners among people of gentility, and he saluted properly--which we had forgotten to do--while awaiting an opportunity to ascend the stairs.

It was as if we no longer had an existence, so far as Commodore Barney was concerned. We were not yet out of the cabin when he called an orderly to say that he would see such or such a man immediately, and began turning over papers on his table without even glancing in our direction.

Once on board the Avenger I stopped to face my comrades, thinking that now has come the time we should discuss the matter which was of such vital importance to ourselves; but Darius said impatiently:

"Why do you stop here, lad? Give the word for gettin' under way, so the commodore may see we know how to obey in sailorman fashion, an' if there's any talkin' to be done we'll have plenty of time for tongue waggin' while runnin' down the river."

"But surely you're not proposing that we shall start without knowing where we are going, or what is to be done?" I cried, showing quite as much impatience as he had.

"That's jest what I do propose! We can whittle out a plan while the puny is slippin' down stream, as well as if she was made fast here."

"But what about Jim Freeman and his party?"

"There's no reason why they shouldn't go with us; six isn't any too many for the crew of an oysterman."

"But do you count on taking them without first explaining the situation? It strikes me that when a fellow sets about that which may put his neck in a halter, he is entitled to something by way of an understanding."

"If that's all which blocks our makin' sail, I'll soon put an end to it," and Darius beckoned to Jim and his friends, who were standing well forward that they might not seem to be listening to that which possibly was not intended for their ears.

The lads came aft quickly, knowing full well by the expression on our faces that something serious was afoot, and the old man said bluntly:

"The commodore wants us to spy on the British fleets. If we're caught on their anchorage, or nosin' around the ships, pretendin' to be what we're not, it's a case of hangin', an' salt won't save us. If you lads want to stay aboard, takin' the same chances we do, well an' good; if not, you'd better go ashore in quick order, for we shall be under way mighty soon."

"Shall we be helpin' the government the same as if we stayed aboard one of the vessels to do our share of fightin'?" Jim asked, and Darius replied:

"Yes, an' a good deal more. If you were taken prisoner after bein' in a fight, it's only a case of goin' to jail on one of his majesty's ships; but if you're taken while on such work as has been given out to us, it's a hangin' for sure, with you at the loose end of the rope."

No one could say that Darius had not put the matter plainly, and I expected to see Jim draw back; but to my surprise he said stoutly:

"I reckon we fellows can stand it if you do; we'll stay, an' the commodore shan't have a chance to say that we didn't hold up our end of the business."

Surely I could make no protest of any kind after Jim had announced himself so firmly, and, in order to make it appear that I was really eager to set forth on this dangerous expedition, I said quickly:

"Cast off there! Darius, take the tiller! Tail on the halliards, lads!"

We got under way in fine style, and as the pungy swung around with the current, I saw my father waving his hat from the craft to which he belonged, and thus knew he understood we were bound on some service for the commander.

Nor was he the only one who bade us a mute adieu. Half the members of the fleet made some quiet demonstration in token of good wishes, and just then it seemed almost a fine thing to be thus voluntarily going into extraordinary danger for the benefit of one's friends and acquaintances.

I am well aware that by writing down all my thoughts I have pictured myself as a weak-kneed lad, and one who delighted in making a show of authority, as has been seen when I was disgruntled because Jerry or Darius took it upon themselves to say that this thing or that should be done, without first consulting me, and yet I hold it is only fair I give the same plain dealing concerning myself as I try to in the case of my companions.

Now, however, as we were setting out on a cruise from which not one of us might return, I was more than glad to surrender up to Darius the charge of the Avenger, and I was determined that he should keep it, taking whatsoever of honor might come to the commander, contenting myself with being simply a member of the crew who would ever strive to obey all orders promptly, whatever might be the situation. And in so doing I counted myself to be wise.

The old man remained at the helm speaking not a word, and chewing vigorously as we worked the pungy down the reaches in face of a head wind, not very strong at that, but the current favored, therefore we had the satisfaction of knowing that with all our pulling and hauling we were doing better than two and a half miles an hour.

I had expected Darius would propose that we hold a consultation as to our future course; but he gave no sign of so doing and Jerry finally asked:

"Where are we headin' for?"

"Fishin'."

I turned away, thinking the old man had given an idle answer to evade questions; but Jerry was not to be turned down so readily, and he said with a laugh:

"We've given over the fishin' business for quite a spell, I reckon. 'Cordin' to my way of thinkin', an' seein's how this cruise may turn out to be anything rather than a picnic, I allow that all hands should know what is to be done."

"That's my idee to a dot, lad, an' I'm tryin' to think up some kind of a plan so that when you fellows begin to figger, I can put in my oar with some show of sense."

"But where do you reckon that we're bound for?"

"Fishin', lad. Where else can we be bound?"

I turned again, understanding now that the old man was serious, and asked him if he supposed we could do any spying on the British fleet while we were wasting time getting oysters or fish.

"Didn't the commodore allow that we should keep right on bein' oystermen?" Darius asked with just a shade of impatience. "How do you expect we can sneak around the British fleet unless we've got some excuse for goin' there? It was in Joshua Barney's mind, the way I looked at it, that we might sell oysters to the fleet, which would account for our bein' among the vessels, an' to do that we've got to put in a cargo."

It was plain enough, now that the old man had spoken of it, and I understood that we had a bit of dredging before us in order to make ready for the more important portion of the work.

"But after we get a load, Darius? Shall we sail boldly down the bay, asking the Britishers to buy?"

"That's what I've been tryin' to make out. All of you can figger it 'cordin' to your own idees, an' then we'll talk it over."

Surely this was putting it fairly, and we tried to follow the old man's advice, or, at least I did; but without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. The only plan I could put together was that we first get our wares and then blunder ahead trying to sell them, trusting to luck for the rest.

We were a silent crew for some time, as each fellow tried to think up some brilliant scheme, and then, when midnight was nearly come, we had arrived off Benedict.

"Why not go ashore for an hour?" Jerry suggested, and all of us gladly agreed, I in particular, because I wished to see my mother once more now there was no petulance in my heart on account of her willingness to have me go into

danger.

Darius had no relatives, or even very near friends, in the village, therefore he volunteered to keep ship, and Jim Freeman set us ashore in the canoe, taking two at a trip, after which each fellow went his way.

My mother was overjoyed at seeing me so soon again, even though I aroused her from sleep to open the door, and asked so many questions that I could do no less than tell her all which had happened since I last saw her.

She was frightened at learning what we were about to do, and showed it plainly; but never a word did she speak against the project.

"If it is your duty, Amos, I have nothing to say, although I wish most heartily that others had been pushed forward into danger, and in thus speaking I am selfish, for then some other mother's heart would ache. Be as prudent as you can without being cowardly, my boy, and may God be ever with you. It is believed in the village that Elias Macomber has gone to join the British, because he has not been seen since last night; but if he should escape, Amos!"

"There is little fear of that, mother," I replied confidently. "Commodore Barney is not the man Darius has pictured him, if he allows such a villain to escape."

After this we talked of family matters until I went up stairs to look at my sisters and brother who were asleep. Then the visit was come to an end, and I went out into the night with a heavy heart; but determined that my family should have no cause to blush for me.

I was the first to arrive at the shore, and, lying at full length in the canoe, I waited until my comrades returned from their visit.

Jerry and Jim came in company, and appeared to be excited over something, therefore to draw them on without asking any questions, I repeated what my mother had said concerning Elias Macomber.

"Ay, that was the talk in town this forenoon," Jerry replied; "but now people are saying that he came back just before sunset--"

"Back here to Benedict?" I cried in amazement.

"Ay, Jim's mother saw him as he went by her house on the way to his own. She saluted him, but he made no reply--"

"But to be here he must have escaped!" I interrupted, unable to hold my peace. "The commodore would not have set him at liberty without telling us!"

"That goes without sayin', an' now what shall we do?" Jerry asked as if he had some plan in mind.

"What can we do, except to get away before he brings some of his cronies down here to make a row?"

"Jerry wants to catch him over again," Jim replied, since my partner did not speak. "If he's alone in his house it wouldn't be such a dreadful hard job, surely not as compared with what we did at the mill."

It seemed as if our own safety demanded that we give some especial attention to the traitor, and I proposed that we consult with Darius at once.

This was agreeable to my companions, and we boarded the Avenger without delay, rousing the old man to bitter wrath when we told that Elias had escaped.

"Somebody will smart for bein' so careless!" he cried. "Joshua Barney ain't the man to overlook anythin' of that kind. Do you allow there may be traitors in the fleet? It looks mightily like it when a coward like Macomber can give 'em the slip inside of twelve hours, for if he was seen in this town at sunset, he must have been at liberty by noon, ay, even before we got under way!"

"Jerry thinks we might catch him again, by going at once to his home," I said, impatient to make the attempt or set sail, for I was not easy in mind at lying there while the villain was free.

"And Jerry is right!" Darius, exclaimed, darting into the cuddy and returning in a twinkling with the old muskets. "See that these are well loaded, lads, an' if we can lay hands on that cur again, I'll attend to it that he don't walk off like a gentleman at large within any very short time."

Well, we found the weapons in fit condition for immediate use, and paddled ashore in a hurry, finding Josiah and Dody waiting for us. They also had heard that Elias was in the village, and we knew beyond a peradventure, even if we had not been certain before, that the cur had slipped away from those who should have guarded him with their lives.

It was not a long walk to Macomber's house, and on arriving there we found the building closely shuttered as if deserted; but we were not for taking outside indications as facts.

Although knowing full well that we were not proceeding in accordance with the law, since we had no authority for forcing an entrance into a dwelling, we burst open the rear door, and made thorough examination of the place.

The household goods were tossed and tumbled about as if some one had lately been there having little time to spare; but no living thing could be found.

The traitor had no children, therefore flight with his wife would be comparatively easy, and I was convinced that he had gone down the river intending to claim protection from the enemy.

"That's what he has done!" Darius said emphatically when I gave words to my belief. "It stands to reason that he went away in a boat, an' there's just a chance we may come up with him yet! Let's get on board, lads, an' if the Avenger knows how to sail we'll bring it out of her this night."

Then we returned with all speed to the shore; but I had little hope we could overtake the traitor, because he had at least three or four hours the start, and a canoe might be paddled twice as fast as the pungy would sail with such a light wind.

Darius, however, seemed certain we would overtake him, and urged us lads to greater speed or more severe exertions until the little vessel was under way, gliding down the river but little faster than the current would carry a canoe even though no paddles were used.

So eager in the chase was Darius that he would not allow either of us to go below, but insisted that all hands remain on the lookout, lest we over-run the game, and losing no little time as he swung the Avenger in close to this bank or that where the overhanging foliage afforded a hiding place for a small boat.

Not until daylight did we arrive off St. Leonard's bay, and it goes without saying that we had seen nothing of our traitor, neither had we come across a craft of any kind.

"He's bound now to go on until he overtakes the British fleet," Darius said angrily when the coming of daylight revealed the shores to us. "We'll have the best of him once we're out of the river!"

"You can't keep up the chase much longer if we count on gettin' a cargo of oysters," Jerry suggested, and the old man declared that he would never throw over a dredge until it became certain that Macomber had really escaped us.

But after some reflection he was willing to take back his words, knowing we could not go very far into the lower bay without some excuse for being there, and also realizing that we must never pursue Elias within sight of any vessel of the fleet, otherwise he might give such information as would cut short our career in this world.

With the coming of the new day the wind came out of the west with a force that gave promise of providing the pungy with a goodly sized bone in her teeth, and in case Macomber was no more than two hours in advance there was yet some possibility of overtaking him.

We usually dredged for oysters off Hog Point, or Parker's creek, therefore in a short time we would be on the fishing grounds, unless we took the risk of standing across the mouth of the Potomac on the chance of seeing the traitor, and I did not believe he would venture to make that long stretch while the breeze was so strong.

By the time we arrived at the mouth of the river there was no necessity of discussing the situation, for the chase had surely come to an end.

However great his need of coming up with the British, Elias Macomber knew too much to trust himself in a canoe on the open bay while the wind held as it did, and we knew beyond a peradventure that if he had not already gained the fleet, he was hiding on shore somewhere.

It would be folly to spend time in such a needle-in-the-haystack business as looking for him on shore when we had no clue to guide us, as even Darius was forced to admit, and, therefore, we set about the work in hand, which was the dredging of oysters enough to give us excuse for seeking out the enemy.

It seemed to all of us that we were in more danger through information which Elias might give, than we would have been while playing the spy with him safely cared for on one of the vessels of Commodore Barney's flotilla, and we went about the work as if it was possible to feel the chafing of British halters around our necks.

We began dredging exactly as we would have done had we been trying to get a cargo for the Baltimore market, and never a sail did we see during all that day, a fact which told us that the enemy was not yet ready to open his campaign.

Not until well into the night would Darius allow that we had a sufficient quantity of oysters to warrant us in finding purchasers, and even then there was no more than fifteen bushels aboard.

"It will do for a starter," Jerry said when Jim Freeman proposed that we spend one more day dredging.

"But the first Britisher we came across would buy as many as we've got," Jim objected, and Jerry replied with the air of one who has thoroughly turned the matter over in his mind:

"So much the better. We shall then have established ourselves in the business, and can come back for another cargo. There will be less suspicion of us the second time."

"I reckon you're right, lad," Darius said decidedly. "We can't expect to gather much of any news the first pop, an' if we get acquainted, it will be a long step in the right direction."

As a matter of course, the old man's opinion settled the question, and we hauled around for a run down the bay, double reefing the mainsail and jib, as was proper when you take into consideration the fact that we had the same as no cargo aboard to give the pungy stiffness.

Up to this time neither one had made any proposition as to how we were to begin operations, and I naturally concluded that we would sail boldly up to the first craft we saw, asking if we could sell them oysters, therefore I suggested, when we were standing off on a course that would bring us on to the Tangier Islands:

"If we keep up this rate of speed, we may come upon the enemy while it is yet night."

"Ay, lad, an' I'm thinkin' it would be a good plan."

"But people don't go out sellin' things before daylight," I said with a laugh.

"I'm countin' on bein' properly interduced," Darius replied with a grin. "If we're hailed, an' ordered to lay by till mornin', we shall have one ship's crew that'll listen to us."

I did not understand this explanation more than if it had been given in Latin; but the others appeared to be satisfied, and I held my peace rather than display ignorance.

We kept our course a couple of hours, and, then, directly in a line with the Tangiers, I saw the loom of what appeared to be a large ship.

"There's one of the fleet," I said in a whisper to Darius, who was at the tiller, and he replied in a matter-of-fact tone:

"Ay, lad, I'm allowin' she's the Severn or the Narcissus, both of which made it hot for the commodore in the Patuxent."

"How large are they?"

"The Severn should be carryin' thirty-eight guns, an' the other four less, if I remember rightly."

"I had rather we made our first attempt with a smaller vessel," I said, feeling decidedly uncomfortable in mind now we were so near beginning the dangerous work.

"Bless you, lad, we might as well be overhauled by a frigate as a sloop, so far as the chances of bein' found out are concerned; but we're goin' through this business as slick as we did at the mill."

Darius held the Avenger straight for the enemy, and when we were come within half a musket-shot I heard the hail we had been expecting:

"Sloop ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" Darius cried.

"What craft is that?"

"An oyster pungy with part of a cargo which we're hopin' to sell, sir. Can we do any business with you?"

"Heave to, an' lay alongside until daylight."

"Very well, sir," the old man cried, and then he let fly a lot of orders to us of the crew which would have shamed a landsman to utter, for of a verity no sailor could have understood them.

However, by giving no heed to what he said, we brought the Avenger into position; but I soon saw that the tide was

setting us away from the Britisher, and suggested that we let go the anchor.

To this the old man would not agree.

"Obey orders if you break owners," he said with a grin, and I knew he had some reason for thus being so foolish.

However, to make a long story short, we remained hove to until day dawned, and then we were within a cable's length of a large ship, while a mile or more further up the bay was the vessel that had first hailed.

"Ahoy on the sloop!" came from the second ship, and Darius replied in the tone of a countryman:

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Why are you loafing around here?"

"We came down to sell some oysters; but the chap on t'other craft told us to heave to, an' we've been driftin' 'round here ever since. I dunno whether we ought'er go back to him, or try to sell you what few bushels we've got."

"When did you take them?"

"Last night. Oh, they're fresh enough, if that's what you're thinkin' of. Don't you want to try 'em?"

"What is the price?"

"Ten cents a bushel; that's what we ought'er get up to Baltimore, an' I reckon we might knock off a little if we don't have to run there to unload."

Then, without waiting for permission, Darius began giving us fool orders intended to get the pungy under way, and we came lumbering around under the ship's starboard, where we could have been blown into the next world with no more labor than the lighting of a match.

Darius lifted one of the hatches and leaped into the hold ordering us to "bear a hand lively that the gentlemen might taste the oysters," and passing up a basket full, shouting to me so loudly that he could readily have been heard on the ship:

"Pass 'em over the side, Bubby dear, an' be careful how you fool 'round the rail!"

I should have laughed at his manner of speaking but that I knew he was playing a part, and I did my best to obey the command.

The sailors of the ship, eager for anything by way of a change of food, held out both hands invitingly for the fish, and I contrived to swing the basket aboard.

Then it was that I saw an officer take charge of the fish, calling for the after steward to come forward, and a moment later some one cried:

"Where's your captain?"

I sung out for Darius; but he pretended to misunderstand, and replied:

"They can have the lot for eight cents a bushel. Ask 'em if I shall begin takin' 'em out?"

Then it was that I fancied he had some good reason for wanting to remain out of sight, and I looked around in alarm to see what had caused the trouble.

CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Jerry was at the tiller; Jim Freeman and his friends stood near me at the main-hatch ready to obey the commands of Darius, and since all hands of us, with the exception of Josiah Coburn, really were oystermen, knowing no other business or trade, there was little reason for the Britishers to have any suspicions regarding us.

It was evident, however, that Darius had seen something to cause him alarm, otherwise he would not remain in the hold, having a care to keep out of sight while he might be seeing much which would please the commander to hear about.

So far as I could make out, the Britishers regarded us as ignorant fishermen who were trying to earn a very slim livelihood by selling oysters at a price which would hardly pay enough to provide food for a crew the size of ours.

Three or four of the petty officers were making very awkward attempts to open the shells with a marlin-spike, while the idle crew, having nothing better to do, watched the proceedings on their ship as well as aboard our craft.

I was not looking for an explanation of the old man's behavior among the seamen, therefore gave little heed to the old shell-backs who lined the starboard rail from the fore-castle-deck to the mainmast.

Gaze intently as I might, it was impossible to see anything which could have caused Darius uneasiness, and I dismissed the matter from my mind with the belief that he remained hidden from view simply to avoid being recognized as an old sailor whom it would pay to impress into his majesty's service.

It was just when I was growing a trifle more cheerful in mind because of having banished the fears which assailed me when the old man leaped so suddenly into the hold, that one of the officers called out:

"Here, you Bubby, come aboard and show us how to open these shell-fish!"

"Will one of your men stand by for our line, sir?" I asked, because the puny was bobbing around on the small waves ten feet or more from the ship's side, and I was not minded to take the chances of jumping for the rail when there was good possibility of landing in the water.

The Britisher said something to the knot of men forward, and several of them stepped forward, overhanging the rail, while Jerry made ready to pass one of the small hawsers.

I stopped only long enough to get one of our oyster-knives from the cuddy, and by that time the Avenger was alongside the ship, rubbing against the huge fenders which had been swung out.

At the moment there was no thought of fear in my mind because I was thus venturing into the very jaws of the lion; I had it in mind only to play my part well, and believed that by showing the gentlemen how easily the shells might be opened, I would be forwarding our business.

Much to my surprise, when I would have clambered aboard the ship, whose rail towered many feet above ours, one of the sailors leaned far over to give me aid when it was not really needed. He grasped both my hands in a grip as of iron, holding me back when it appeared that he would pull me aboard, and while I was thus hampered, I heard him whisper:

"Tell Darius Thorpe to be to the eastward of the Tangiers this night!"

Having thus spoken, he hauled me inboard quickly, disappearing immediately among the throng of men which literally covered the ship's deck.

"Well, Bubby, have you gone daft?"

This aroused me to the consciousness that I was playing my part very badly, and I quickly went to the after-hatchway where was our basket of oysters around which several officers were standing.

Without speaking I whipped out the oyster-knife, and, using the combing of the hatch as a bench, set about opening the shells as rapidly as the most expert could have done.

The gentlemen were so astonished at seeing me do readily what they had failed at, that I had a good two dozen fat oysters ready for the eating before any one made an attempt at swallowing them.

From that out, until the basket was emptied, I was kept busy, and although I searched with my eyes while thus engaged, it was impossible to single out the sailor who had sent the message to Darius.

When there was nothing before me but shells, and one of the officers asked if my father was going to send more aboard, I thought it would be more in keeping with my part to act like a lad who was eager to receive money for his cargo, therefore I replied that we would send the whole load aboard at the rate of eight cents a bushel.

To this proposition the gentleman agreed, and I called out for the others to begin slinging the baskets up, counting on lending a hand to take them over the rail; but I was not allowed to abandon my job of oyster-opener.

I worked as lively as I ever did in my life, and it surely seemed as if I would not be allowed to go on board the Avenger until the entire cargo had been eaten, therefore I called for Jerry to help me, after our small lot had been dumped on the ship's hold.

Darius did not come out of the hold. He had good excuse for remaining there while we were unloading; but once the puny was empty I greatly feared suspicions might be aroused by his remaining hidden from view.

Not until Jerry and I had opened a full two bushels, and given one of the cooks a few lessons in the manner of holding a knife to the best advantage while shucking, were we allowed to cease the tiresome labor, for it must be known that we did not claim to be experts at such work.

One of the officers paid us for the cargo, and agreed to take as many every other day while they remained at that station.

As if eager to know how long we might find a ready market thereabouts, I asked if he could tell me when there was a possibility of the ship's being moved; but he shut his mouth as close as any of our oysters, saying that it was enough for us to know that they would patronize us while they remained there, consequently I did not succeed in getting any information for Commodore Barney.

I explained my reasons for asking such a question, by saying that it would be a waste of time for us to sail down the bay when the fleets were not there, because our only other market was at Annapolis or Baltimore, and he said with a laugh:

"When we're not here you can look for us further north, and we will take your oysters wherever we go."

I observed that we were on board the Narcissus, and thus understood that Darius had made no mistake when he gave that name to the ship, therefore my admiration for the old man's knowledge of nautical matters increased, for only an experienced seaman could have thus recognized a craft he had seen but once before.

By setting down so much when our business was concluded, it would appear as if we loafed on the deck of the ship some time, whereas we were given to understand that our room was better than our company immediately the transaction was completed, and in a very few seconds after the officers allowed Jerry and I to cease the labor of shucking, we were aboard the Avenger, getting under way.

"Look at the name they've given that old bargee!" one of the gentlemen on the quarter-deck cried with a laugh as the puny swung around until the letters on her stern could be read. "These Americans may be hot for vengeance; but I take notice that they're ready to feed the enemy if there's a dollar to be made."

All this seemed very funny to the Britishers, and they cracked many a quip and joke at our expense, as I guessed by the roars of laughter which could be heard so long as we were within earshot.

Darius came on deck once we had filled away; but he kept his hat pulled well down over his face as he walked aft from the main-hatch, and when he had taken the tiller I asked:

"What were you afraid of that you kept under cover so close?"

"It was a mighty snug shave, lad," he replied with a long indrawing of the breath. "I knew one of the men on the fore-castle deck, 'cause I was shipmate with him on the privateer Honest Ben, when Joshua Barney was in command. I'm not sayin' that he'd given me away; but I feared he might sing out on seein' me."

"What is his name?"

"Bill Jepson. He's a Baltimore man; but whether he's there owin' to fallin' in with a press-gang, or on account of his own free will, it's hard to say, though I never believed Bill would willingly have served the king."

"He wants you to be to the eastward of the Tangiers this night," I said, and the old man started as if he had been

struck by a bullet.

"How do you know, lad?"

Then I told him when the sailor had had speech with me, and again repeated the message.

"That shows as how poor Bill was pressed into the service," Darius said sympathetically, "an' now he's countin' that an old shipmate will lend a hand."

"Which of course you will do!" I cried hotly.

"We must make some kind of a turn to favor him; but we're here on the commodore's business, an' the question is whether we'll be warranted in doin' what may turn all the plans upside down. Bill reckons to slip over the side, an' swim ashore. If we're roundabout here, the Britishers will count it for certain that we had a hand in the desertion, an' the Avenger may be taken from us before we've got well into our work. The king's officers ain't nowadays easy in handlin' them as tries to get the best of 'em."

"But if the man swims for the islands expectin' to find us, and we're not there, he'll be retaken."

"Ay, lad, an' most likely dance at the yard-arm for desertion."

"Then of course we must help him," and I beckoned to Jerry, knowing full well he would fall into my way of thinking.

Before anything could be said between my partner and me, however, the Avenger had come off the Severn, and we received preemptory orders to heave to.

"Why didn't you remain alongside, as you were told?" an officer asked angrily when the puny was at a standstill, and Darius replied:

"The current carried us down the bay durin' the night, an' when mornin' came the captain of that other ship ordered us alongside, sir. He bought our cargo an' agreed to take more, so if you'd like to trade with us, we can have fifteen or twenty bushels here by to-morrow night, in case the wind holds."

I could see that two or three of the gentlemen on the quarter-deck put their heads together, as if talking about us, and then the one who had first spoken ordered us to lay alongside.

"They're goin' to search us, an' it may be I'll have an invite to stop aboard quite a spell." Darius said half to himself as he swung the puny around preparatory to obeying orders.

"Then why do we go alongside? It wouldn't take many minutes to run out of range," I said excitedly.

"They'd sink us in a twinkling, an' even though I knew we might give 'em the slip, it shouldn't be done, 'cause we couldn't come here again, which never'd suit the commodore."

The possibility that any of our crew might be pressed into service on board the ship frightened me, as may be imagined; but I understood even while making the suggestion, that we could not hope to escape, and the fate of poor Tom Sackett was pictured before me.

There was no way out of it, however, but my knees were very weak when we ranged up under the starboard guns, waiting like criminals until his majesty's officers should work their will regardless of right or wrong.

Darius was the one who stood in the most danger, for it could readily be seen that he was an old sailor; but he never turned a hair. One would have said to see him that nothing was more pleasant than to thus be overhauled, and he made a most awkward flourish by way of a bow when we were come into position.

Jim Freeman passed a hawser, and when it was made fast a midshipman, who acted as if he owned the whole of Chesapeake Bay, came aboard with two marines.

The little whipper-snapper poked his nose into the cuddy, and pretended to be nearly overcome by the odor of the place, therefore he sent the marines below to overturn everything in the bunks, as if believing we had somebody hidden there.

The soldiers came up with our three old muskets, and the little whifflet demanded in a tone of authority to be told why we went so well armed.

"We carry 'em, sir, so's we can get a mess of ducks now an' then," Darius replied as respectfully as if he had been speaking to the king. "They ain't any great shakes of guns, seein's how all of 'em are rusted pretty bad; but we

oystermen can't afford anythin' better."

One would have thought the little ape had found three or four thirty-two pounders, by the way he passed them up over the rail for the inspection of the officers on the quarter-deck, and then he turned his attention to the hold.

I heard the gentlemen laughing as they looked at our weapons, and in a twinkling the pieces were thrown down on the deck with so little care that the hammer of one was broken off short to the lock, but those who served the king had little care how they destroyed the property of those whose crime consisted in being born Americans.

The midshipman got one whiff from the hold, which I'm free to admit wasn't pleasing, and the soldiers were sent below while he stood with a handkerchief decked out with lace held to his nose, as if in danger of fainting.

As a matter of course nothing was found below, save a lot of mud and some oyster shells. A blind man might have seen that so far as the vessel was concerned she could be nothing more than an honest oysterman; but the whifflet forced the marines to search over every portion of the hold, and while this was being done one of the officers asked how many bushels we sold to those of the *Narcissus*.

Darius replied to the question, speaking as nearly unlike a sailor as possible, and not until he had stated the price, showing British silver as proof of the amount received, was the curiosity of the gentleman satisfied.

Then the midshipman clambered over the side of the ship to make his report, and the moment had come when if any of our number were to be taken from us, we would be made aware of it.

I stood by the side of Darius trembling with apprehension, and even amid my fear I took note of the fact that Jerry was feeling far from comfortable in mind, while the old man chewed incessantly on a huge piece of tobacco that caused his cheeks to swell out as if on the point of bursting.

Although we had good cause for being frightened, nothing came of it, and never did words sound more sweetly in my ears than when one of the officers said:

"You can get on about your business; but don't make the mistake again of trying to get below us without first reporting."

"We wasn't countin' on goin' very far away, sir," Darius replied awkwardly. "There's good fishin' to be found around the islands here, an' I was reckonin' on gettin' the drags out."

"Very well, but see to it that you heave to when coming nearabout, and remain until getting permission to proceed."

"Yes sir, I'll do it for certain," Darius cried, and as one of the Britisher's crew cast off our hawser, we filled away, standing to the northeast.

There was not one aboard the *Avenger* who did not realize what a narrow escape we had had from being forced to serve the king, and I dare venture to say that all hands drew a breath of relief as the puny sailed beyond range of the big guns.

"Where are you bound?" Jerry asked when he was sufficiently master of himself to note the course.

"I reckon we'll run over to Pocomoke; we'll find oysters in that locality, such as they are, an' there's no need of running too far away from the market."

"You're goin' to lend Bill Jepson a hand!" I cried joyfully, for it would have gone far toward breaking my heart to turn a deaf ear to the poor fellow's appeal.

"That's just what I ain't so clear about," Darius replied thoughtfully. "Suppose we talk the matter over a bit."

I called Jim Freeman and his friends aft, knowing full well what their opinion would be, and when we were together, repeated the story as I had told it to the old man.

Then Darius explained that by helping a sailor to desert from one of the enemy's ships, we might get into serious difficulties, to say nothing of losing the sloop, and he also put it very plainly that in going outside the task set us, we stood a good chance of disappointing the commodore.

It was Jerry who put the matter to my liking, when he said:

"There are chances in favor of our bein' able to do this without interferin' with the work set for us by the commodore; but there isn't much hope for the sailor if he swims over to the Tangiers an' fails of findin' us waitin' for him. You say he'll be hanged if they catch him tryin' to desert. I don't believe I could sleep well nights if we should leave this place,

an' he met with his death."

All hands of us felt much as did Jerry, and after thinking the matter over a moment Darius said slowly, as if choosing well his words:

"You lads must understand that I'm as hot for helpin' Bill as you can be; but we're doin' our little part in a war, an' at such times the life of one man don't count for very much when the good of others is concerned. To tell the truth, I couldn't really say what we ought'er do if I studied the thing over for four an' twenty hours. You lads own this 'ere pungy, an' I allow you have the right to say somethin' as to what shall be done with her, though you the same as put the craft out of your keepin' when you took a guarantee from the commodore that so many dollars should be paid in case she was lost. We'll consider it as settled, an' now get to work. Swing out the drags, an' we'll let the Britishers see that we're fishin', even though it ain't noways likely we'll get much here."

I am free to confess that Darius' words made me a bit uneasy in mind regarding our deciding the matter, for I knew full well that he had spoken no more than the truth. It would be hard on Bill Jepson if we gave him the cold shoulder; but by trying to lend a hand we might be doing others a wrong.

However, the question had been decided, and there was little sense in crying over spilled milk, for I was not minded to make any effort at bringing about a change of opinion, therefore I turned to with the others that we might appear to be industriously fishing.

Darius stood to the eastward until we were in Pocomoke bay, and there we stood a good show of getting fifteen or twenty bushels before it would be time to be at the rendezvous appointed by Bill Jepson.

During all this while we had the enemy's fleets in fairly good view, for the vessels appeared to be to the northward of New Point; but, as a matter of course, it could be of little benefit to the commodore to know how many vessels there were, if we could not give him any idea of their weight of metal.

It was nearly noon before we got breakfast, and when the meal was come to an end we had struck some small oyster beds, therefore we were kept jumping from that time until dark, and then had on board a good twenty bushels of fair stock. Not enough from a money-making point of view; but plenty to serve our purpose, for it might not be well to let the Britishers think we could take on a cargo quickly.

Now the greater portion of this time we were in view of those aboard the two vessels we had visited, and by using their spy-glasses it would have been possible for them to make out what we were doing.

Once the night began to shut in, however, we were out of sight, and Darius said as we hauled in the drags for the last time:

"Now we'll run over for the Tangiers, lads, an' stay there till two or three o'clock in the mornin'. If Bill don't show up by that time we must count that he couldn't get away, or was caught in the act."

"Are you simply reckoning on laying off the islands?" I asked, understanding that a man might swim ashore at one point while we were at another, and easily fail of finding us.

"I reckon that some of us will take to the canoe, an' cruise off the western shore lookin' for him. His best time for makin' the try will be when the last dog-watch goes off duty at eight o'clock, or again at midnight. It won't be easy to paddle 'round so long; but it's a man's life that you're after."

"Jerry and I will go in the canoe," I said, thinking it no more than right for us to perform the greatest share of the labor since we were held, by Darius, responsible for making the attempt to aid the sailor.

We made a hearty supper that night, eating the last of the ham, and frying a generous quantity of oysters with it, and then the pungy was hove to on the westward side of the large island, as near inshore as we dared to run.

I proposed that she be anchored lest the wind set her on the beach; but Darius claimed that it was necessary for us to be ready to leave at a moment's notice, and promised to have an eye on the craft all the while we were absent.

Then Jerry and I took to the canoe, with good prospect of half a night's work before us, and paddled around to the eastward, after which we set about going back and forth for a distance of a quarter of a mile, since that seemed to be the place a man naturally would make for.

We could see the riding lights of the ship plainly, and although it would require considerable labor to swim so far, it should be readily done by one who was at all familiar with the work.

"We'd find ourselves in a pretty hobble if a boat put off from the ship just now," Jerry said in a low tone, and I was

angry with him for having offered such a suggestion. There was enough in the venture to make a fellow nervous, without conjuring up all the possibilities at a time when one needed to have his wits about him.

"We won't think of anything except trying to pick the poor man up," I said sharply. "This isn't the kind of work that suits me, and I'm not so cold-blooded that I can picture out all the trouble which may come upon us."

"A fellow can't help thinkin'," Jerry replied grumpily, and I said yet more curtly:

"He needn't talk about it to mix others up." Then, angered with myself for having spoken so petulantly, I added, "To tell the truth, Jerry, I am as frightened as a lad well can be, and don't dare to talk overly much lest I should show the white feather in a way to make you ashamed of me."

"You can't be any worse off than I am," my partner replied, and then we both laughed softly. An acknowledgment of our timorousness seemed to hearten us, and we worked the paddles in a more whole-souled fashion.

As I have said, we decided to pull back and forth on a line about a quarter of a mile long, and all the while kept a sharp watch in the direction of the vessel, for a swimmer's head on the water is not a very large object to see in the night.

We did not dare indulge in much conversation, and during an hour we had not spoken once; but then I said, thinking to spare ourselves useless labor:

"If he slipped off at eight o'clock, he should have been here by this time. We may as well lay still till midnight."

I had hardly ceased speaking when we heard a sound as of some one whistling softly, and nothing more was needed to tell us that Bill Jepson had succeeded in slipping away from the ship.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE DESERTER.

Even after knowing that the deserter was near at hand, we had considerable difficulty in locating him, and not until after making a complete circle around the swimmer could I see his head.

As we came alongside he grasped the gunwale to rest himself, and asked:

"Are you from the oysterman?"

"Ay, shan't we take you aboard now? The pungy is on the other side of the island."

"The canoe would be overturned if I attempted to come over the rail. Paddle into shoaler water, an' I'll try it."

"Tired out?" I asked as we worked the craft toward the shore, he still holding by the gunwale.

"Nothin' to speak of when its a case of escapin' from the Britishers. I'd tried this a week ago if I hadn't known that the first search would be made on the island, an' I didn't dare take the chances of findin' them as would help me off."

We were not many moments in coming to the beach, and then Bill Jepson clambered over the stern, not being hampered overly much by wet clothing, since he had come off with nothing save his trousers and shirt.

"I was willin' to leave all my dunnage, providin' I could say good by to the bloomin' ship. When we put in here I counted on seein' friends 'most anywhere, for I hail from Baltimore way; but Darius Thorpe's was the first friendly face I came across. A good honest sailorman is Darius, an' I knew he wouldn't leave me in a hole if it was possible for him to lend a hand."

Jepson had nothing startling to tell relative to his escape from the ship. When the watch was changed he quietly slipped over the side, dropping into the water without making any disturbance, and swimming beneath the surface, coming up to breathe only when it was absolutely necessary, until he was a full half-mile from the Severn.

As we paddled around the island, putting in our best strokes, for we had no desire to be found in that vicinity when it was discovered on the British ship that one of the crew had deserted, I asked Jepson how he chanced to be aboard the enemy's vessel, and while his story related to a cruel wrong, it was in no wise exciting, or unusual.

Five months before the declaration of war he was taken from an American merchantman on the flimsy pretext of being an English citizen, and since then had led what he called "a dog's life" aboard several of the king's ships. Never before had he seen an opportunity to escape, and now he knew full well that, if caught, he would be hanged.

Now that we had the man I began to question as to what should be done with him, for it was certain we must not take the chances of keeping him aboard the Avenger, and I could well understand that he might not want to remain if we were to fish in that vicinity.

It seemed almost as if he read that which was in my mind for he said after a long time of silence:

"I'm only half free now, for your pungy will be searched if you go anywhere near the Narcissus again, an' the question is, how I am to get to the mainland?"

"We could put you ashore in Maryland," I suggested.

"Yes, an' I'd starve to death before gettin' anywhere, unless you ran further up the bay than I allow you've any right to go," he said with a laugh which had in it nothing of mirth.

"What's the sense of stewin' over that part of it now?" Jerry asked. "Wait till you get aboard the pungy, an' I dare say Darius will have a plan all worked out."

"He's a good one, is Darius, an' when he settles on a thing it comes mighty near bein' sound. We'll wait, an' I'll spell one of you lads with a paddle, if you'll give me a show."

"After swimming so far I reckon you'd better lay still," I replied, and from that time until we ran alongside the Avenger not a word was spoken between us.

If I had expected to see anything affecting in the meeting between the two old shipmates, I was mistaken.

Darius, who was on the lookout for us as may be supposed, said when he saw that the canoe had three occupants:

"So you got him, eh? Well, Bill Jepson wasn't born to be drowned, that's certain."

Then the old man passed us a line, and the deserter said as he went over the rail:

"I knew I could depend on you, Darius."

"You made a mistake this time, Bill, for if the boys hadn't hogged up agin it, I'd left you to do the best you could, seein's we're down here on a bit of work for Commodore Joshua Barney, whose fleet is in the Patuxent river, as perhaps you have heard."

"Well there! I knew you wouldn't be foolin' round here oysterin' while able seamen are likely in good demand. I'd be well fixed if I could run across the commodore just now."

"That's what I've been thinking'. Of course it don't stand to reason you can stay here a great many hours."

"I must be off before daylight, an' am countin' on your tellin' me where."

"What do you know about the Britishers?"

"Considerable which has been picked up from the marines who've been on duty aft. There won't be any move made for two or three days, an' then they're goin' to strike Washington an' Baltimore at the same time. Sir Peter Parker goes to our home, an' Captain Gordon will run up the Potomac. Leastways, that's what we of the gun-deck have heard, an' you know that what leaks through the sentries is most generally to be counted on."

"Ever been up the Patuxent river?" Darius asked abruptly.

"Only two or three times."

"Well that's where you ought'er be, tellin' the commodore all you know, an' if the three of you agree, here's a plan we'll try."

Darius looked at Jerry and me as he spoke, therefore I understood that we were counted as two of the three to whom he referred.

"I'm agreeable to anythin' you figger out, Darius," Bill Jepson said as he wrung the water from his scanty clothing.

"Well then, Amos an' Jerry shall take you in the canoe, an' start for Nottingham within the next ten minutes. Since they left to look for you I've been fixin' up a sail for the craft, an' with a breeze like this you ought'er be well across the Potomac by sunrise."

"Don't you need the lads with you?" Jepson asked as Jerry and I looked at each other in surprise, and, perhaps, displeasure.

"Yes; but not so much as I need to hear from the commodore after he knows what you've got to say."

"The Britishers are certain to search this craft 'twixt now an' to-morrow night, an' seein' the canoe is gone, may smell a rat," the deserter suggested.

"I reckoned all that in with my figgerin'. If you start for the Patuxent river I shall run over to the Delaware shore an' pick up a boat somewhere."

"They knew how much of a crew you had when the oyster bargain was made."

"Well, what if the boys went ashore to go home for a couple of days? That yarn will go down, I reckon, an' if it don't I'll have to take the chances for the sake of gettin' you to Joshua Barney as soon as it can be done."

Darius had evidently considered the plan well, and I understood that nothing would turn him from it unless one of us flatly refused to carry it into execution, which, considering all the importance of getting information to the commodore, I was not prepared to do. At the same time, the idea of going back to Nottingham in no better craft than our canoe, was by no means to my liking.

"If you've got it worked out, Darius Thorpe, an' allow it should be done, I'm ready," Bill Jepson said, "an' it ain't no ways strange that I should be willin' to jump at anythin', considerin' I'm like to go to the yard-arm if captured now."

The old man looked inquiringly at Jerry, and my partner said slowly much as if not being exactly certain what he thought of the scheme:

"I'm willin' to go if it so be you want to keep the pungy here; but 'cordin' to my way of thinkin' the chances are

against our gettin' there in the canoe."

"You can do it if the wind don't breeze up, an' it ain't likely to at this time of the year." Then, as if considering the question settled absolutely, Darius cried out to Jim, "Have you stowed everythin' in the canoe?"

"Ay, sir, an' I've taken all the provisions for them, so we'll be left to suck our thumbs when we get right hungry."

Darius not only planned the journey while we were absent; but had gone ahead with the preparations as if advised in advance that we would agree to it.

"Well, there was no use in hanging back, since the thing must be done, and I had sense enough to know that if we were going to make the venture the sooner it was begun the better chance we had for succeeding, therefore I went over the rail into the canoe, where I found a small sprit-sail, a package of food, and one musket with powder and balls sufficient for two or three charges.

"We've done the best we could by you, lad," Darius called out as he saw me examining the cargo. "You'll soon be where you can lay in a good supply."

"Yes, if we don't go to the bottom first," I replied just a trifle sharply, whereat Darius replied with a laugh:

"I'll trust you for that part of the business. Bill Jepson should be a master hand with a paddle, an' take it all in all, you're bound to push ahead right fast."

"How are we to find you again?" Jerry asked.

"The commodore will attend to that part of it. We'll stay here foolin' around as agreed upon, for a week--unless we get important news before then--, an' if you haven't shown up I'll allow that Joshua Barney set you about other business."

Jerry and Bill Jepson took their places in the canoe, the latter stepping the small spar to which the bit of canvas was rigged, and as I ran a paddle out over the stern to take the place of a rudder, I was astonished at feeling that the little craft was making remarkably good headway.

Almost at the same moment we started, the pungy was hauled around for the Delaware shore, and in less than five minutes she was lost to view in the darkness.

"How is she doin'?" the old sailor asked as he leaned over to watch the rush of water along the side.

"Better than we could shove her with the paddles," I replied, not feeling overly inclined to talk very much.

"Then I can't see but that everything is as smooth as grease, an' what's better'n all else, we're leavin' the bloomin' Britishers astern in a way to make my heart glad. The wind is likely to increase before it lessens, so we'll be a good bit on our way by sunrise."

"Ay," Jerry said grimly; "but if you've lived in Baltimore you know what the mouth of the Potomac is when the breeze comes strong, an' I don't allow that this canoe would make any too good weather of it in a heavy sea."

"She should be able to do it all right," Jepson said carelessly, and then he set about filling a pipe he had borrowed from Darius, as if there was nothing in the world to cause him trouble.

After he had lighted the tobacco he must needs ply us with questions regarding Joshua Barney, to which we could make no very satisfactory replies because of our ignorance; but he seemed to think it his duty to keep a conversation going, regardless of the fact that both Jerry and I showed plainly our disinclination to do very much tongue-wagging.

When an hour had passed, and the canoe was walking along in right smart style, surprising me by her performance under sail, for I had never supposed she could be used in such fashion, Bill Jepson said suddenly:

"Look here, what's the use of all hands standin' watch? Give me the paddle, an' I'll steer while you lads get a bit of sleep. I'll call you when its time to take your trick at the helm."

At first I was inclined to hold my place; but thought differently when I saw Jerry curling himself up in the bow for a nap, and gave the paddle to the sailor, saying as I did so:

"I don't count on sleeping very long; but if you should come up to the Potomac before I turn out, it would be a good idea to call me."

"I reckon you think that because I'm a deep-water sailor I ain't fit to be trusted with one of these Chesapeake cockle

shells; but bless your heart, lad, I've always knocked about in 'em, an' you shall see that I'll handle you tenderly enough."

I laid down in the bottom of the boat, under the thwarts, and contrived to make myself so comfortable that in less than five minutes I was sleeping soundly.

When next I became conscious of anything there was at least two inches of water under my back, and the spray was coming over the starboard side at a rate that threatened speedily to founder the little craft.

Jerry, being in the bow which stood higher out of the water, had not been disturbed.

"What's the matter?" I asked in alarm, crawling out from under the thwarts with no little difficulty.

"Matter? Nothin' as I knows of," Bill Jepson said as if surprised that I should have asked such a question. "What made you think anything was wrong?"

"Why we're half full of water, man, and if it keeps coming in at this rate it'll soon be a case of swimming!"

"It's a bit dusty, that's all; but the canoe is doin' her work like a lady. We're well nigh across the Potomac, an' just a hummin'."

The day was breaking, and in the gray light of early dawn I could see the little craft laboring under her rag of a sail in a manner that sent my heart into my mouth, although I'm not given to being timorous on the water.

"We must get in some of that sail," I cried, forced to yell at the full strength of my lungs in order to be heard above the rollicking sea song in which Bill Jepson was pouring forth his musical soul.

"Let her go as she is; I'll answer for it that no harm will be done." Bill said with a laugh as he cut short his song. "We wouldn't be in as good shape with the paddles, an' that's a fact."

By this time Jerry had awakened, and he, like me, had the idea that we were storming through it at a hotter pace than the canoe could safely stand; but the sailor insisted that nothing was wrong, although he did suggest it might be a good idea if we baled the craft a bit, and we were forced to act upon his advice in order to save ourselves from being swamped.

The canoe rode more easily when the liquid load had been taken from her, and I came to the conclusion that perhaps it might be as well to let Bill Jepson have his way since we were cutting down the miles in great shape, and speed was the one thing necessary for us just at that time.

We were forced to use the baling dishes about every ten minutes before crossing the mouth of the river, and then the little craft made better weather of it, to the great relief of both us lads.

No one would ever have suspected that Bill Jepson was a deserter who would surely be hanged if the Britishers caught him. He sang, told stories of a wild and terrible kind, mimicked the officers of the *Narcissus*, and explained what the Americans would do when the enemy came up the bay, going into the details of the naval maneuvers as if perfectly familiar with all the defenses, instead of being wholly ignorant of everything connected with the war save from an English standpoint.

It was not a very appetizing breakfast which we had that morning, for the food, stowed in the stern of the boat, was soaked with water; but to lads who had never been accustomed to luxuries a little thing like fasting did not seem to be of much importance.

The breeze, which had been freshening all night, increased with the rising of the sun, and Jerry and I, unwilling to suggest that the sail be reefed, saw the little craft humming along under the guidance of Bill Jepson, when, had we dared assert our authority, she would be creeping with no other motive power than the paddles in the hands of two tired boys.

At noon we landed on the southerly side of Hog Point, where I knew a fisherman lived, and went toward the house hoping we might be able to get something in the way of provisions, for I had in my pocket the money which had been paid by the officers of the *Narcissus*.

Bill Jepson remained in the canoe, to "keep ship" as he said, and Jerry and I walked through the small growth of timber nearly encircling the building, with never a thought of keeping ourselves concealed from view; but yet remaining silent for the very good reason that we had nothing of interest to say to each other.

Thus it was by mere chance that our approach was almost noiseless, and when we were come within view of the

dwelling, from whence we could hear the hum of voices, none of the inmates were aware of our presence.

This man--Jenkins was his name--had a wife and one child, as I well knew, therefore hearing the sound as of several voices, I naturally looked out from the underbrush before showing myself, for there was in my mind the thought that he might have a party of Britishers as visitors.

One man, and he the owner of the dwelling, was lying on the grass just outside the window, talking with another who was seated within the building, whose head and shoulders only could be seen; but one glance at the face was sufficient to cause me to draw suddenly back as I motioned to Jerry to advance where he could have a view of Jenkins' visitor.

It was Elias Macomber who sat at the window, talking with his host on the outside, and we could readily overhear the conversation.

Under ordinary circumstances I hold that an eavesdropper is the meanest kind of a person; but considering all the facts of the case, it seemed just then that it was our duty to learn all we might.

As we came up Jenkins was evidently opposing something which the traitor had said, for when we were in position to listen, Macomber cried sharply:

"I shall watch out for the British fleet, an' board the first vessel that heaves in sight. I reckon I can tell the admiral somethin' which he'll like to hear."

"But, Elias," Jenkins remonstrated, "even though you don't believe in the war, surely you wouldn't do that which might work harm to your neighbors?"

"I'm an Englishman!"

"By comin' here an' settlin' down, you turned into an American, or should have done so. I claim that a man has no right to hold himself an Englishman when he moves into another country to live, never expectin' to go back to the old home. All your interests are here, an' by holdin' true to the United States you are benefitin' yourself."

"That's all rot. I work for what I get here, an' have no man to thank for it."

"But the laws of the country protect you; all the advantages to be had from the town where you live are yours, the same as others, an' when you take them you have no right to do harm to the land which feeds you."

"It's no use tryin' to argue me out of it, Jenkins, for you don't know how I've been treated in Benedict. I'll give the British commander all the information in my possession, an' it's enough to be of importance."

Just then a woman's voice from the inside of the house summoned Mr. Jenkins to some household duty, and I drew back among the foliage yet further, dragging Jerry with me.

"We'll stay right here till we get our hands on that cur!" my partner exclaimed when we were so far from the house that there was no danger the words would be overheard, "an' if Commodore Barney's men can't keep him a prisoner, we'll turn to an' see what kind of a fist we make of the job!"

I was of Jerry's mind; but there was nothing that could be safely done in broad day, and we went softly back to the shore that we might hold counsel with Bill Jepson.

We found the sailor sleeping peacefully on the warm sand; but had no compunctions about disturbing his slumbers, and after he was fully awake it became necessary to tell him the story of what we had done in the Patuxent, that he might the better understand the situation.

"So the spy is here, an' counts on stayin' till the Britishers come up the bay, eh?" the old sailor said half to himself. "What have you lads got in your heads?"

"We're goin' to get our hands on him once more, an' then take precious good care he don't have a chance to tell the Britishers what he knows concerning the commodore's fleet," Jerry said hotly.

"An' you count on doin' that first of all, eh?"

"Sure; that cur shan't have a chance to give us the slip!"

"But he said he'd stay till the fleet came up."

"Well?"

"That won't happen for three or four days yet, if all I've heard be true."

"It makes no difference to us when the vessels come. What we want is Elias Macomber!"

"What would you do with him, supposin' he was here this minute?"

"Carry him to Commodore Barney, of course."

"Can the four of us get along in the canoe?"

Jerry and I looked at each other in perplexity. It was a fact that the little craft would not carry four, particularly when one was a prisoner who might struggle against being taken up the river, and yet it seemed to me as if we were in duty bound to effect the capture.

"Now this is the way it looks to me," Bill Jepson said slowly, as if talking with himself, "though, of course, I ain't countin' on interferin' with you lads in any way: What I've got to tell the commodore is of more importance than the yarn Macomber can spin for the admiral, an' Darius Thorpe seemed to think I couldn't see the old man any too soon. Now if this 'ere sneak is goin' to wait where he is till the fleet comes, what's to prevent our keepin' on as we started, an' then comin' back to pull him in? This wind will set us up the river in great shape, an' within four an' twenty hours we should be at Nottingham, unless the town has been moved from where I saw it last."

I understood at once that the sailor's advice was good, and should be followed, yet it went sadly against the grain to go away from that place leaving the cur free to do us harm if the opportunity presented itself.

Jerry had much the same struggle in his mind as I, but, watching his face, I soon saw that he was ready to act upon Bill Jepson's suggestion, and without waiting for him to give his thoughts words, I said:

"Very well, if we're to go up the river first, there is no time to be lost. We must paddle the canoe close inshore until we get around the point, so that we may not be seen from Jenkins' house, and then we'll push her for all she's worth."

We no longer remembered that we were hungry; but jumped to the task as if every moment was precious, as indeed was the case if we would make Elias Macomber a prisoner for the second time.

As I had said in regard to paddling around the point, so we did, but once the canoe was so far beyond that she could not be seen from the dwelling, we hoisted the sail, and I dare venture to say that Bill Jepson might have run her rail under without hearing any word of protest from Jerry or me, so eager were we to be on the return voyage.



CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

It was as if the elements favored us in the race to Nottingham and indeed I counted it a race in which were pitted against us the British fleet and Elias Macomber.

The wind held strong, the day was cloudless, and the canoe, clumsy craft as I had always looked upon her, sailed like a bird. Bill Jepson insisted on holding the steering paddle, and we were well content to have him at the helm, for he held her so nearly to the course that our wake stretched out behind us straight as an arrow.

Under almost any other circumstances we would have made at least a short stop at Benedict; but now it was out of the question, and we sailed by at full speed, being hailed by several of our acquaintances who urged that we come to for a moment, but we resisted all such entreaties.

I knew that my mother, on being told we had refused even to so much as have speech with our friends as we passed, would understand we were on urgent business, and have no thought that I had slighted her.

When, in due course of time, we passed the mill from which had been taken the prisoners, it bore the appearance of being deserted, therefore we had good reason for believing that Macomber was the only one of our capturing who succeeded in making his escape.

It was late in the night before we came upon the fleet, and were brought to by a hail from the guard-boat.

The commodore was yet with the flotilla on board the Scorpion, so the sentinels told us; but they were minded to prevent our having speech with him at that unseemly hour.

Had Jerry and I been alone I believe of a verity we would have been forced to wait until morning before seeing Joshua Barney; but Bill Jepson could not be put aside as easily as two lads, and he roared out as if he had been an admiral of the blue at the very least:

"Tell him that Darius Thorpe has sent word from the lower bay, an' it must be delivered straight away."

In the darkness, when it was impossible to see him, no one could say that Bill was not a person of the greatest importance, and the sentinels, judging from his voice, must have concluded that he, or the man whose name he gave, was some one high in authority, therefore they not only allowed us to approach the schooner, but went before to announce our arrival.



"I remember your face, my man;" said the Commodore. "Come aboard at once." Page 153.

The commodore was not the kind of an officer to keep any one in waiting simply that due respect might be shown to his station; but came on deck half-dressed, bidding one of the sailors to hold a lantern that he might see who we were.

"So you lads have come back in haste, eh?" he said, on recognizing Jerry and me. "Have you by chance lost the pungy?"

"No, sir; she is in the lower bay oysterin', with Darius in charge," I made haste to say.

"And who is this you have with you?"

"Bill Jepson, sir, who has served under you twice; but is now a deserter from his majesty's ship, Severn, having been pressed into the British service nigh to three years ago," the sailor replied, rising to his feet at imminent risk of overturning the canoe.

"I remember your face, my man. Come aboard at once, all hands of you."

We clamored over the rail, having made the canoe fast, and entered the commodore's cabin.

"When did you desert from the Severn?" Joshua Barney asked, showing more of excitement than I had ever seen him display.

"Last night, sir, an' it may be by so doin' I've upset some of your plans; but when I asked for help it never struck me that Darius might be there on special business."

"Tell me all the story," the commodore said, motioning toward me, and without delay I gave him a full account of what we had done, save that then I said nothing regarding Elias Macomber.

Then he questioned Bill Jepson regarding what he knew, and, if I am any judge of such matters, he got considerable valuable information.

The sailor was able to give him the names of nearly all the vessels in the two fleets, together with their probable weight of metal, and repeated the gossip which had leaked from the Severn's cabin through the marines on guard.

The commodore listened intently, making many notes as Bill spun his yarn, and when it was come to an end he said:

"You did well to steer for here at once; but I am inclined to believe that the enemy will move very soon. Is there anything else to be said?"

"I would like to speak about Elias Macomber, sir?" I made bold to say.

"That was the prisoner who escaped? One of them got away, and there is good reason to suspect that he received aid from some of our men. We have no time to look into the matter now; but it shall be thoroughly sifted later, and if there be a British sympathizer among us, it will go hard with him."

Then I gave him all the information we had concerning the traitor, and wound up by asking if there was any reason why we should not go back and re-take the cur.

"You may as well make the attempt, although I question if he can tell the enemy anything which is not already known. The utmost he could say would be that our force is small, and so much the British learned at St. Leonard's bay. However, I would like to have the fellow; but am not willing you should run into any danger for the purpose of effecting the capture."

"I believe that Jerry and I will be able to get hold of him, and we will go back at once, unless you have other work for us."

"There is nothing especial that you can do here. Warn Darius Thorpe to be ready for an immediate move on the part of the enemy, and tell him to make sail for the Patuxent at the first signs of activity. You lads had better get some sleep before setting off again. Go forward, and see that you have a hearty meal at once. Jepson, you will remain aboard the schooner."

Bill thanked the commodore, and the three of us went into a sort of forecabin which had been rigged up in the forward part of the vessel, where, after considerable arguing, we succeeded in getting so much food as satisfied our hunger, which was no small amount.

Then we turned in by lying down on deck, which was preferable to getting into a bunk on such a hot night.

As a matter of course we were aroused right early, even before any signs of a new day could be seen; but the three hours of sleep refreshed us wonderfully, and we were ready to set off down the river.

We managed, at the expense of considerable argument, to get a supply of provisions from the cook without awakening Commodore Barney, and, after a warm parting with Bill Jepson, cast off the canoe.

Because the wind was blowing straight up the river it was impossible to use a sail, save at the cost of considerable time, and we took to the paddles, which seemed like mighty hard work after our experience with the rag of a sail.

Don't let it be thought that we begrudged our labor; I would have paddled till the skin was worn from both hands for the sake of re-taking Elias Macomber, and looked pleasant all the while; but when a fellow has been flying over the water with no effort of his own save to keep the little craft on her course, he cannot but contrast that pleasure with the dreary work of shoving her ahead with an ashen blade.

Again we felt obliged to pass our homes without stopping. It would have taken a full hour, hurry as we might, to go

ashore and speak ever so briefly with those who would greet us, and in that length of time Elias Macomber could, possibly, join his friends the Britishers.

"We'll keep well over on the eastern shore, where there is less chance of bein' seen, an' do our best at the paddles," Jerry said as we discussed the matter just before coming within sight of the village. "I'd give a good deal to see mother an' the children; but it seems as if we had no right to loiter."

I was of his mind, and we hugged the opposite bank of the river, keeping under the screen of foliage as much as possible, until there was no danger of being recognized.

During all that day and far into the night we paddled. Now and then one would stop to rest his arms; but the other continued the labor, therefore the canoe did not come to a stop from the time we left the fleet until we were arrived at Hog Point.

There we run her bow on the shore while we ate a hearty meal, and discussed the question as to whether it would be better to approach the house from the northerly or the southerly side.

I was in favor of going ashore where we then were; but Jerry won the day by suggesting that if we ran around on the other side, it would be possible to see if the British came up the bay, and this last was quite important to us in case we were forced to spend much time waiting for a fitting opportunity to catch our game.

After refreshing ourselves with food, we paddled around the point without danger of being seen, because it was so late in the night, and landed at the same place as before, knowing that from there we would have no difficulty in finding the dwelling.

After pulling the canoe up amid the bushes, and hiding her as well as was possible in the darkness, we laid down on the ground, falling asleep almost immediately we had stretched ourselves out at full length, and not until the first beams of the rising sun shone across our faces did we awaken.

It was but natural that we should look down the bay before doing anything else; but we saw nothing to disturb us. A small craft was coming slowly up, for the breeze was light; but to her we gave little or no heed.

We began the day by eating breakfast. Then we saw to it the boat was so nearly concealed by the foliage that she would not be seen save after careful search, and we set out to reconnoiter the premises.

We advanced cautiously, stopping every half dozen paces to listen lest we inadvertently stumble upon the owner of the plantation, or his guest, and after spending half an hour in such slow progress, we came in view of the place.

Elias Macomber was pacing to and fro in front of the dwelling, as if weary of his voluntary confinement, and gazing seaward every few seconds, for from that side of the house it must have been possible to get a full view of the bay.

"We might get our musket, an' rush up on him now," Jerry whispered, and I replied as I believed Darius would have done:

"We don't know how well armed Jenkins may be, nor what he will be willing to do in aid of his friend. My idea is that we should wait here until the owner goes to his work, leaving the traitor with the women folks, and even then the task won't be an easy one, for we must come out in sight of all hands a full three minutes before arriving at the house, however fast we run."

"We should have brought the musket with us on this trip," Jerry grumbled, and I soothed him by saying:

"There is really no time lost. The first thing to be done was to make certain the scoundrel yet remained here; that has now been ascertained, and I will go for the weapon while you stand watch. We mustn't be in too much of a hurry, or we may spill the soup."

Jerry was satisfied to act as sentinel, and I walked leisurely back to the shore, believing that much time must elapse before we would get the desired opportunity.

Arriving at the shore I spent some minutes searching for the canoe, so well had we hidden her, and once getting the musket and ammunition in my possession I strolled down to the beach where I could have a view of the bay.

Only the single small vessel was in sight, and I was on the point of turning away, thinking it useless to gaze long at her, when something in the rig of the craft struck me as being familiar.

I looked again; laid down the weapon and gazed yet more intently, until finally there was no longer any question in my mind.

The vessel was none other than the Avenger! If Darius was yet on board why had he left his post of duty? If anything had happened to him, why had Jim Freeman taken it upon himself to leave the lower bay?

The more I tried to solve the problem the stronger became the probability, in my own mind, that some serious disaster had overtaken our comrades, and I ran at full speed, giving little heed as to whether the advance might be heard by Macomber, until I was come to where Jerry remained crouching in the grass, his eyes fixed upon the dwelling.

"You're makin' a terrible row!" he said angrily, never looking around. "Fortunately the cur has just gone inside, or he might have heard you."

"Jerry!" I said, speaking with difficulty because of heavy breathing after having run so fast. "The Avenger is close at hand; she is the craft we saw! Something must have gone wrong!"

Jerry turned his head very quickly now, forgetting for the instant his desire to make a prisoner of Elias Macomber.

"What do you think can have happened?" he asked, and I replied impatiently:

"That we shall only find out by boarding her. Come to the beach at once!"

"But what about our work here?" and now it was the pungy that went from his mind, leaving there only the great desire to accomplish the purpose for which he had come.

"Never mind that now! It may be we won't want to fool around here on his account! Come quickly, Jerry, for she was close at hand before I started!"

It was actually necessary to shake the lad before I could arouse him to a full sense of the situation; but once that had been done, he followed me readily enough, even urging that I move faster.

The pungy was no more than half a mile away when we reached the shore, and we launched the canoe without delay, paddling straight out in her course.

As she came up I could see Darius at the tiller, with Jim beside him, and the other two fellows lounging forward.

Nothing had happened to the crew, that much seemed certain, and I was at my wits' end to account for the Avenger being apparently heading for home.

When we were come within hailing distance I shouted, never thinking that I might be heard by those on the Jenkins plantation:

"Why are you coming back? What has happened?"

"Where is Bill Jepson?" Darius cried.

"With the fleet."

"When did you leave him?"

"Yesterday. What is the matter?"

"Come aboard an' I'll tell you," the old man replied as he threw the pungy up into the wind, and we did not waste many seconds in going over the rail.

"Now what is it?" I asked impatiently when I stood facing Darius.

"The Britishers are gettin' under way, an' it kind'er looked as if the oyster business wouldn't be any good after they'd left moorin's. If there'd been any wind, you'd be seein' 'em by this time. What brought you ashore at Hog Point?"

"Elias Macomber is there, living with Jenkins the planter. We stopped on our way up thinking to get some provisions, and not only saw the cur, but heard him say he was waiting for the Britishers, to whom he could give a lot of information."

While I had been speaking Darius brought the pungy into the wind again, and she was standing directly away from the man we had been so eager to capture.

"Here!" Jerry cried sharply. "You must heave to till we get that villain."

"How many people do you reckon are in the house?" Darius asked as he twisted off a large piece of tobacco.

"We've only seen Macomber and Jenkins."

"Don't know anythin' more about the situation?"

"We haven't had time to learn anything more; but it don't stand to reason there are other men."

"They've both of 'em got wives, who'd fight if it come to a pinch. No, lads, the best you could count on in the way of time would be a full day, an' we can't afford to waste an hour."

"But it wouldn't be wastin' time if we finally caught him," Jerry cried hotly.

"That's where I don't agree with you, lad. The son of a sea-cook can't give the Britishers any very valuable information, whereas we can tell the commodore that which may be the means of savin' our whole fleet. I'd like to lay Macomber by the heels as well as you would; but I don't believe in usin' a salmon to catch a sprat. We'll run across him some day; but jest now its our duty to get up the river in short order. We'll try the canoe with a little bigger canvas, an' if she sails faster than the pungy you shall go ahead, for an hour now is worth a full day next week."

I was not convinced that the business of catching the traitor before he could give his information to the Britishers, was less important than that of carrying to the commodore word of preparation for departure on the part of the fleet, more particularly since not a vessel had as yet hove in sight; but when it came to arguing a point with Darius I generally got the worst of it, therefore I held my peace, although it went sadly against the grain to do so.

Jerry did not give in so readily; but insisted on heaving to the vessel, declaring that he and I would do the work alone, while the Avenger went on up the river.

"You'll do nothin' of the kind, lad," Darius said emphatically. "There's no tellin' what Joshua Barney will decide on when he hears the word I have for him, an' I don't count to leave you down here at Hog Point to be gobbled up by the Britishers, for you're already under suspicion of havin' had a hand in Bill Jepson's desertion."

"What do you mean?" I asked in surprise.

"Jest what I said. The officer from the Severn declared that you two lads could tell what had become of Bill."

"I had actually forgotten that we aided a deserter," I cried. "Tell us what happened after we left the Avenger?"

"Well," Darius said slowly, stopping to twist off a huge piece of tobacco, and otherwise trying to make his yarn a long one so that we might round Hog Point in the meanwhile. "We run over to the Delaware shore, as I counted on doin', tryin' to find a boat; but it was no go. We didn't see anythin' that would float, an' of course we couldn't fool 'round there very long after sunrise, else the Britishers would see us, so I made up my mind that the best plan was to face the music right soon.

"We ran down for the Narcissus; but was hove to by the Severn, an' a lieutenant with four marines came aboard. Bless your heart, lad, but they did search the pungy from stem to stern, even shovelin' the oysters over as if thinkin' we might have Bill under 'em. Then the officer went on board, an' that little nincompoop of a midshipman boarded us. 'Where's your crew?' he squeaked, an' I said innocent like, 'They're all aboard, sir.' 'You're a liar!' says he, 'when I was here last there were five lads on deck, an' now I see only three.' 'Oh the other fellows have gone home,' says I. 'They only came out with us for a lark.' 'Where's your boat?' says he. 'She belonged to them,' says I. 'You're a liar,' says he. 'Yes, sir,' says I, which same was true, an' off he goes madder'n a wet hornet.

"Then the lieutenant comes aboard after I saw a lot of 'em on the quarter-deck talkin' fit to kill, an' he asks me when you went home. I told him you lived on the Delaware shore, an' you skipped when the pungy got near shore. 'You're a liar,' says he, an' I agreed with him same's I had with the midshipmite. 'The boys have helped a deserter from the Narcissus,' says he, 'an' have carried him to the mainland. I've a mind to seize your vessel.' I tell you what it is, lads, 'bout that time I thought the Avenger was a goner, for Britishers in American waters are mighty apt to do whatever comes into their minds."

"Well, did that settle it?" I asked as Darius ceased speaking, much as though his story had come to an end.

"No, we had three or four officers come aboard later, an' I ain't certain but that we'd lost the pungy if signals hadn't been sent up on the flag-ship, which I took to be a command to prepare for gettin' under way. Leastways, them as was botherin' us scuttled over to their own craft in short order, an' then there was a heap of knockin' about in gigs an' barges, with nobody givin' any attention to us. We'd been hove to half a musket shot from the ship, an' when I saw they had other fish to fry an' plenty of 'em, I run close aboard as I yelled like a countryman, 'Any orders for us, sir?' It was quite a long spell before anybody answered, an' I'd sung out two or three times, when that little midshipman squealed, 'You are to go about your business with that pungy, an' we'll overhaul you again when we have more time!'"

"Then you started for the Patuxent the best you knew how," I said, thinking I understood just what should have

been done under the circumstances.

"I wasn't such a bloomin' fool," Darius replied. "We run down to the Narcissus bold as lions, an' I told 'em we'd brought some more oysters; but they threatened to fire into us if we didn't sheer off, an' then I coaxed for 'em to take what cargo I had, offerin' to sell at six cents a bushel, till they must have thought I was a stark natural fool."

"But why didn't you get away when you had the chance?" Jerry asked in surprise.

"I didn't want 'em to think I was anxious to go, an' meanwhile I had my eye on what they was doin', which told plain as the nose on your face that the signals were as I had thought. I almost cried when I said I'd have to run all the way to Baltimore to sell the oysters, an' the best I got from them was more threats. Then we could steer straight up the bay without givin' rise to suspicion that we was jest naturally hankerin' to come."

"You played a fine trick on 'em!" I cried, filled with admiration at the old man's method of getting away from unpleasant neighbors. "It couldn't have been done better."

"I'm not so certain of that," Darius replied, but I could see that he was pleased by the praise. "I didn't have time to think up anythin' different, for the whole business come about so sudden like. Howsomever, we've got news that Joshua Barney needs to hear, an' our cruise to the lower bay will pay if we can get to Nottingham half a dozen hours ahead of the Britishers, which seems to be a settled thing with this wind."

Then I told him that the commodore felt convinced the enemy would advance sooner than was generally believed, and he said in a tone of admiration:

"There's a man for you! He can smell more'n the most of folks can see, an' when he says it's in his mind that a thing is so or so, you can set it down as comin' mighty near to bein' a fact."

Then the old man asked concerning our interview with the commodore, and by the time we had come to an end of our story Hog Point was so far astern that there was no longer any thought in my mind of returning.

I was trying to make the best of the situation, when Jerry said fretfully:

"It was a big shame that we couldn't have taken Elias Macomber when he was there ready to drop, like a ripe peach. We might have walked right up to that house when we first saw him, an' the thing could have been done."

"But we mightn't have walked back again, if there had happened to be two or three more in the building than we counted on. Never mind, Jerry, we'll have the traitor before we're many weeks older, and what's more, we'll take him ourselves, never asking any man for assistance."



CHAPTER X.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

When we were come near Benedict I was not minded to pass it for the third time without stopping to see my mother, and I said to Darius:

"There seems to be no good reason why Jerry and I should not visit our homes, leaving you to continue on with the news. We can take the canoe, and paddle up the river to-night."

"It is your place to remain aboard the Avenger," the old man said almost sharply.

"What can we do more than would be done by you?" Jerry asked in surprise.

"Nothin', so far as sailin' up the river is concerned; but with the news we're takin' to the commodore, it is more'n likely there'll be a quick change, when you might be needed."

"There can't be anything very serious happen 'twixt now and to-morrow morning," I persisted, yet holding to my scheme. "We wouldn't be more than twelve hours behind you under any circumstances."

"Not if everything was in your favor; but how if you met a boat-load of Britishers such as we captured the other night? It ain't safe to be foolin' round the river alone just now, an' that's a fact."

"Meaning that there is more of fear in your mind lest we come upon spies of the enemy, than expectation Commodore Barney might need our services?" I asked, and the old man finally admitted that perhaps such was the case.

Then, in my pigheadedness, I declared we would stop in the village, and he gave proof of what he could do when things did not go exactly to his liking.

"I shall stop you from leavin' the pungy!" he said doggedly, without looking towards us.

"Do you mean to say, Darius Thorpe, that you'd prevent us from goin' ashore?" Jerry cried hotly.

"That's exactly the size of it, lad. I never'd let a shipmate of mine run his nose into danger when there was nothin' to be made by so doin'."

"But how would you stop us?" Jerry asked, his anger rapidly giving way to mirth as he pictured to himself Darius, the man whom we had hired to help us in the fishing, setting himself up to say what we should or should not do.

"I'd knock you down, with a belayin' pin if it was handy, but if not, with my fist, knowin' Joshua Barney would uphold me in bringin' back at any price the same crew I took away."

I felt certain that the old man believed it his duty to do exactly as he had said, in case we persisted in going contrary to what he thought was prudent, and I also came to realize that to his mind the danger was great, otherwise he never would have spoken in such a strain.

However, I did not let him know what was in my mind; but stood well forward when we sailed past Benedict, as if I was too angry to have further speech, and, probably, acted like a sulky school-boy thinking that I was upholding my dignity.

When we had run past the village, however, and there was no longer any possibility Jerry and I would attempt to go ashore, Darius humbly asked us to come aft, and once there he explained in a friendly way why we, who had virtually bound ourselves to serve under Commodore Barney, should report to him before attending to pleasure or personal matters. He also made it plain that at this time, when we knew beyond a peradventure the enemy was about to make an attack, it was absolutely necessary every American who had agreed to aid in the defense, should be ready for duty at a moment's notice.

In fact, he showed us so clearly that he was in the right and we wrong, that I was ashamed of having given way to the sulks, and told him so, whereat he said:

"Then we'll drop the whole thing right out of our minds, an' now that it's over, I'll bet you two or three cents' worth of silver spoons that we'll be in Benedict on service, sent there by the commodore, before four an' twenty hours have passed."

I would have asked him how that might be, but just then Jim Freeman sung out for me to have a look at the cable,

which was considerably chafed, and I did not get an opportunity of continuing the conversation.

Again we came up to the fleet in the night; but Darius did not hold any long parley with the occupants of the guard-boat who hailed us, simply saying as he steered the Avenger straight for the Scorpion:

"Private service for the commodore."

We ran alongside the schooner, made the hawser fast ourselves, since the single militiaman standing guard at the top of the cabin companion-way did not see fit to aid us, and while this was being done Darius leaped on board the vessel, saying in a loud tone:

"We're come on board to report to the commander."

"You can't see him now," the soldier said stiffly, presenting his musket as if intending to use it in case the old man persisted in advancing.

"Now look here, you lop-sided lobster," Darius cried at the full strength of his lungs, "you report to the commodore that the Avenger is alongside, or there'll be trouble 'twixt you an' me."

It is not probable the old man expected that he could bully the sentinel, who had had his orders as a matter of course; but by bawling so loudly that he could have been heard on every craft of the fleet, he awakened Joshua Barney, which was exactly what he aimed at doing.

"Who's kickin' up this row?" the commodore asked sternly as he poked his head above the hatchway.

"The crew of the Avenger, sir, come to report."

"Get below here at once," and the commander spoke as if impatient to hear that report.

I had counted that Darius should go alone to the interview; but he insisted on being accompanied by Jerry and me, therefore we followed him into the cabin.

The old sailor did not spend much time in saluting; but in the fewest words possible told what he had learned, and the commodore did not appear surprised by the information.

"It tallies with what I have already heard," he said grimly. "How long will it take the enemy to run up to the mouth of the river?"

"They should be there to-morrow night, for there are some fast sailers in the fleet, sir."

"Find the swiftest canoe in the fleet; put on board rations for twenty-four hours, getting them from this schooner, and run down the river without delay. If your own crew is not huge enough to insure quick work, call on for what men you need. Can you leave in thirty minutes?"

"In five, sir, if we knew where to find the canoe. We're ready, an' I'll keep the same crew."

The commodore ran on deck, hailed the guard-boat, spoke a few words in a low tone, and returned to us, saying as he did so:

"Rout out my cook, and tell him what you want. Say that I give him five minutes in which to have your provisions on deck. If necessary, in order to learn all which should be known here, send a portion of your crew back with the boat, and do the remainder of your work ashore. In case I am not here when you get back, report to Lieutenant Frazier, and take his orders as you would mine."

All this the commander had said hurriedly, as if the moments were precious, and, having come to an end, he began writing at the table, giving no more heed to us than if we never had an existence.

We left the cabin without delay, and while Darius went forward to have speech with the commodore's cook, Jerry and I clambered on board the punga to let Jim and his friends know of the new duty to which we had been assigned.

"Its a case of keeping on as spies," I said, after repeating the commander's words. "You're to be ready at once; but who's to look after the Avenger is something that hasn't been told us."

There was no time to say anything more, for at that point the guard-boat came alongside, having in tow a long canoe which looked as if a single stroke of the paddle might send her on a long voyage.

"Here is the swiftest craft on the river, and her owner's heart will be broken if you allow the Britishers to get hold of her;" the officer in charge of the boat said as he passed me the painter of the canoe.

"Do you know what we are to do with the pungy?" I asked.

"My orders are to anchor her further up stream after you have gone. Don't leave anything valuable aboard, for there's a good chance you'll never see her again."

"We don't own anything valuable, except the pungy herself, and I fancy she wouldn't be very precious save to two lads like Jerry and me who may never own one again if anything happens to her," I said with a laugh, for, strange to say now, when we were about to set off on the most dangerous portion of our work, I failed to feel the slightest fear.

At this moment Darius and the commodore's cook came on deck, each bearing in his arms a certain amount of cooked food, and this the old sailor threw without care into the bottom of the new canoe, himself following with the utmost haste.

"Come on, lads, if you count on gettin' any sleep this night," he cried impatiently as he took up one of the paddles.

"Are we to go without weapons?" I asked.

"We shan't need them. If we meet the Britishers it will be in such force that half a dozen of the best rifles ever made would do us no good, and there will be none others on the river with whom we shall want to interfere."

"But we might run across Elias Macomber," I urged, not minded to go empty-handed on such a perilous voyage.

"It is too late to fool around with spies now," Darius said sharply. "They've done us all the mischief possible, an' it's a case of standin' before an open enemy."

I had no desire to argue further within hearing of the commodore, and scrambled down into the boat, where my comrades were seated ready to begin the voyage.

Now indeed was Darius the leader of the party, and after the conversation in regard to the muskets, I was prepared to obey him without a murmur.

It is a large canoe which will carry six people comfortably, without sign of being overloaded, yet the boat we were in did it, and I would not have hesitated to put in a couple more had it been necessary, while she paddled as easily as a craft half her size.

"It's a great little boat," Darius said approvingly as we began the voyage with a burst of speed which absolutely surprised me. "I reckon we could show our heels to the best that can be found on the river."

"Where are we goin'?" Jim Freeman asked, impatient to know more regarding our purpose.

"That's what I can't say, lad. We'll run down till we see somethin' of the Britishers, even though we come off the Tangiers again; but I'm thinkin' we'll do well if we make Hog Point this trip."

Jim would have asked more questions; but that Darius cut him short by saying gruffly:

"There's a decently good reason for believin' that the enemy may show himself any minute now, an' if we don't want to get into trouble it'll be safe to hold our peace. There'll be plenty of time for tongue-waggin' later."

It can be fancied that we remained silent after such a remark and the old man kept four of us at the paddles constantly, himself doing twice as much work as any other, while the helmsman occupied that post only in order to rest himself, the steering blade being shifted from one to the other accordingly as we grew tired.

For the fourth time we passed Benedict without making a stop, but on this occasion I made no protest, and when we had run a mile further down the river we came upon a pungy belonging to our village, the master of which was evidently doing his best to get all the speed possible out of the craft.

"Better put back!" he shouted nervously, and Darius gave the word to cease paddling as he asked:

"What's the news?"

"The Britishers are comin' this way thicker'n spatter, an' I made up my mind it was time to get under cover."

"Where were the foremost ships when you saw them?"

"Less'n a mile below Hog Point; it looked like there was more'n a hundred vessels."

"You'd better not count on stoppin' long at Benedict," Darius cried as he motioned for us to take up the paddles again, and before the captain of the pungy had time to ask a question, we were beyond earshot.

"It may be the fleet that's bound for Baltimore," I suggested, not being prepared at that time to believe the enemy would attempt to take large vessels far enough up the river to disturb our fleet.

"I allow some of 'em are headin' Baltimore way," Darius replied grimly; "but you'll find that a good many of the fleet will make a try at stirrin' up Joshua Barney."

I knew the old man believed all he said, because from this out when we were come to a bend in the river we would steer the canoe close up to the bank, and slow down until he made certain that the next reach did not have in it any of the enemy's craft.

In this cautious manner we ran down stream perhaps five miles below Benedict, when, on rounding a bend, we saw no less than four armed vessels, with a dozen or fourteen barges, not more than a mile away.

"Back water, lads!" Darius cried sharply, swinging the canoe's stern around with the steering paddle. "Here's where we find our work. I'd like it better if you wasn't so nearly fagged out; but I reckon we can make five miles more before you give in."

He had turned the canoe while speaking, and we were running up stream in less than two minutes after having sighted the Britishers.

"Five miles should bring us to Benedict," I suggested.

"Ay, lad, an' that's where we'll make the first stop."

"But do you count that the enemy will get as far up as the village?" I asked in surprise mingled with no little consternation, for this was bringing the war home to us with a vengeance.

"Some of the ships may find the bottom; but they'll get a few of 'em there. Take the helm, Amos, an' I'll pull at the paddles."

Thus far, since we took service under Commodore Barney, all of Darius' predictions had turned out to be correct, therefore I was fully prepared to believe all he said regarding the danger which threatened my native village.

The old man would not allow us to indulge in conversation after the retreat was begun.

"Don't waste your breath by talkin'," he said peremptorily. "We'll need all our wind to take us to Benedict, an' once there I'll give some of you a chance for tongue-waggin'."

Within two miles of the village we passed the pungy we had met while going down stream, going by her as if she was standing still, and Darius shouted:

"Keep right on up the river! The Britishers won't stop this side of Benedict, an' you can only save your vessel by joinin' Barney's fleet."

"If all I've heard be true I'm as like to lose her where he is as in most any other place," the captain cried, looking here and there anxiously as if believing it possible he might find a few puffs of wind lying around loose.

I was in good shape when we arrived finally at the village, because of having remained at the steering paddle; but the other fellows were well-nigh exhausted, and when we ran the bow of the canoe up on the shore, not one of them made a move toward changing his position.

"Get your wind, lads, as soon as may be, for we'll pull half a mile or more up-stream before settlin' down here for any length of time," the old man said, leaping ashore smartly as if he had just awakened from the most refreshing slumber, and while hurrying up the bank he added sharply, "Stay where you are, all hands, until we finish this business."

What it was he counted on finishing I could not so much as guess, and my companions were too weary to speculate upon the matter just at that moment.

We saw him speak with this or that person who came out of the shops or buildings as he appeared, and immediately it was as if he had disturbed a colony of ants. Men and women began running hither and thither in terror, and not a few carried with them household goods of such small value that it was a sheer waste of time to lug them around. In a twinkling the entire village was in a commotion, and no one appeared to have time to spend on us who had brought the disagreeable news.

Darius remained beyond our range of vision perhaps ten minutes, and then he appeared with the four Byard brothers trailing behind him, whereupon Jerry, who had no particular love for these lads, asked fretfully:

"What do you reckon he counts on doin' with that trash? If he needed more of a crew, it strikes me he might have found better material."

We soon learned what purpose the old man had in mind, for on nearing the place where our canoe was drawn up, the Byard family went a short distance down stream in which direction their own craft was moored, and began making her ready for a voyage.

"One of you lads must go to the commodore with news of what we have seen," Darius said, speaking quick and sharp as if to prevent us from holding any parley on the subject. "The Byards are to be paid for paddlin' the best they know how from here to Nottingham, makin' no stop on the way, an' he who goes will only need to act as helmsman."

"Are the remainder of the party to stay here?" I asked, not minded to take myself out of the way when so much of excitement might soon be witnessed.

"Sure. We who stay will be ready to make the quickest trip on record, once we've found out all that's to be known. Who will go to the commodore?"

No one replied, and by this time the Byards had their canoe afloat.

"We'll draw lots," Darius said after finding that neither of us was willing to volunteer for the service. "The one who pulls the shortest twig starts without delay or grumblin', an' I'm free to tell you that those who stay behind with me are like to have the toughest night's work they ever put in."

While speaking he had been breaking into bits a small twig, and five of these he held in his clenched hand.

"Make your choice quickly, for we can't waste many seconds over this business," the old man cried impatiently, and we obeyed his command, I hoping most sincerely that the lot would fall to some other than myself, for I was willing to risk the hard work in order to remain with the leader.

It was Jim Freeman who drew the short twig, and his face was pulled down very long when he found that he had been selected.

"Into the canoe with you!" Darius cried, "an' listen well to what I say. Tell the commodore that we came upon the advance ships of one fleet five miles below Benedict, and are waitin' here to make certain what they will do. He is to give these Byard boys three dollars for takin' you to Nottingham. Make the best time possible, for the fate of all our vessels in the river may hang on you're gettin' there quickly."

The Byards dug their paddles deep in the water as if determined to obey orders as promptly as possible, and in twenty seconds from the time Darius ceased speaking the canoe was around the bend of the river, Jim waving us a mournful adieu as he disappeared from view.

"Joshua Coburn is to go with me to hide the boat further up-stream," the old man said with the air of a general giving his commands. "The others may stroll around the village; but in half an hour every one must be here on the shore to meet me."

I gave no heed to my companions; but ran at full speed toward home, answering curtly the greetings from the neighbors as I passed, and soon I was where every fellow longs to be--in mother's arms.

She, good soul, had heard from those who saw us, that we passed the village more than once; but never a word of complaint because I had not stopped to see her.

The first question was whether I had come to Benedict under orders of the commodore, or if I was taking time to visit her which should be devoted to some other purpose.

I speedily soothed all such fears, and frightened her by saying that Darius believed the Britishers would make a halt at the village.

At first it was my belief that she should take the children and go far into the thicket; but she, good soul, soon convinced me that such a course would be unwise, since it was not known how long the enemy would remain, and she could not stay in the forest very many hours with the young ones.

"We will wait here, Amos dear. The British cannot be so barbarous as to make war upon the helpless. If you or father was near at hand, and I could go to you, the situation would be far different."

Then she insisted that I should tell her all I had been doing, and by the time that long story was come to an end I had need to join Darius on the shore, having stayed the full length of the furlough he gave us.

It was not certain but that I could see my mother again before we went up river; therefore our parting was not as sorrowful as it would have been had I known all the perils which were to be encountered ere I looked upon her dear face again.

The village was in even a greater state of confusion and bustle than when I first passed through it. A full half of the people were on the point of running away, taking with them as many household belongings as could be carried or transported in carts or boats. A large number stood on the streets undecided what course to pursue, and asking each person they saw for advice, while not a few were apparently bent on following the example set by my mother.

I was appealed to for the latest news by a full score before I could reach the rendezvous; but to all I had the same reply, that I was in government service and could not delay.

I was the last of our party to arrive at the shore; the other lads were standing near Darius, looking uncommonly glum, and I could well understand the reason for the sadness.

"Did you hide the boat?" I asked, and the old man replied:

"Ay, a little better than half a mile up stream, where we can come at her conveniently in a hurry. We have just been talkin', however, about takin' stations on the opposite bank, where it will be possible to see what is done without gettin' in the way of the enemy."

That seemed to me a very good idea, for there might be many chances against our slipping away after the British had landed, and I urged that the change of base be made without delay.

It was if Darius had only waited for my opinion. Immediately after I gave it he led the way along the road which followed the course of the river.

Within an hour we had the canoe hidden on the opposite shore, and were seeking for some spot directly across from the village where we could see all that was done.

It was some time before we found exactly what we wanted, and then it was in the midst of a small clump of trees on a gentle rise of the land, a full two hundred feet from the shore.

Here, by trimming away some of the branches, we could have a full view of the river and settlement, in addition to being at a safe distance from the enemy, who would hardly land on that side of the stream.

"We've got into position none too soon," Darius said as he pointed over the trees on the opposite shore, where we could see the upper spars of what appeared to be a reasonably large vessel moving through the water slowly. "Within ten minutes we shall know whether it's a case of watchin' 'em come to anchor an' landin', or takin' to our heels to gain the canoe before they can get that far up the river."



CHAPTER XI.

THE BRITISH FORCES.

After we were in a position to see all that might be going on immediately opposite, and for a mile or more down the river, we could make out the spars of several ships which appeared to be at a stand-still, and at once the question was raised as to whether they were aground or at anchor.

"You lads shall stay here, never venturin' to leave the hidin'-place unless the Britishers themselves drive you out, an' I'll take a little trip down stream to see what is goin' on. If the enemy has come into the river without a pilot, I'll go bail that more than one of his vessels has taken the ground."

Then the old man stole softly through the underbrush, and we gave but little heed to his departure, so intent were we on the wondrous panorama spread out before us.

The first craft to heave in sight was an armed brig, the decks of which were brilliant with red uniforms and glittering weapons, and immediately astern of this vessel were a dozen or more barges, and two pungies.

Then came boats filled with soldiers, one astern of the other until it surely seemed as if every craft in the Chesapeake had been brought here to make up the procession, which was more imposing than anything I had ever seen.

It was the glittering, fanciful side of war, which would be transformed into something hideous immediately the actual work was begun, for then one lost sight of the pomp and parade, seeing only the ominous stains of blood, and unable to hear aught save the shrieks of the dying and the groans of the wounded.

Then, to our great surprise, we found that the Britishers were making preparations to take possession of the village. The armed brig was moored stem and stern in the channel where her full broadside could be brought to bear upon the settlement, and the three barges, each having on board a twelve-pounder, were rowed up to the beach on which no less than four hundred soldiers, with weapons ready for use, stood as if to repel an attack.

"They are makin' a mighty lot of fuss." Jerry said with a laugh. "A corporal's guard could capture Benedict without turnin' a hair, an' yet look at that crowd!"

It was truly astonishing that so many men should have been brought to take possession of our little village. Boat-load after boat-load came up the river, landing their living cargoes in the cove where we lads had always kept our canoes, and before the disembarkation had been concluded, the shore of the river was literally covered with soldiers, marines, and, strangely enough, companies of negroes who were decked out in uniforms of the British army.

Since that day I have seen statements made by the enemy's officers to the effect that five thousand men were landed at Benedict, and for what purpose we lads were unable to imagine.

I had never seen such a throng of people before; the town was over-run, and the woods above and below seemed to be packed full of armed men.

Fortunately for us, none attempted to come on our side of the river; but all stood in something approaching a military formation as if expecting an immediate attack.

As a matter of course all us lads were greatly alarmed lest our families should come to harm amid such a gathering; but we could not have afforded them any relief had we been at home, and it was necessary to choke back our anxieties as best we might, though it was difficult at times to prevent the tears from coming into a fellow's eyes.

The troops and guns had been landed before Darius returned, and, what seemed to me strange, no other vessels of any size had put in an appearance. There were pungies, barges and row-boats enough to entirely choke up the river; but nothing larger than the armed brig which had first arrived.

When the old man came back we learned why the fleet had apparently shrunken to such small proportions as compared with the size of the army.

"Nearly every vessel is aground," he said when he approached our hiding-place with every evidence of having traveled long and rapidly. "The river is black with 'em from here to the point, an' some are likely to stay quite a spell on the mud unless mighty quick work at lighterin' is done. I allowed the Britishers had better sense than to run ships up here where there's about half water enough to float 'em."

"But what is the meaning of their landing so many men?" I asked. "There are twice as many as would be needed to

capture the whole of Charles and Calvert counties."

"It's Washington they're aimin' at," the old man said confidently, "though why they've stopped here I can't figger out, unless it is that so many of the ships are aground. Whoever is responsible for this end of the Britishers' movement has made a big blunder."

"Will they do any harm to the townspeople, think you?" I asked anxiously.

"It don't stand to reason they would. There may be some plunderin' by the rank an' file; but that's to be expected. You're thinkin' of your mother an' the children, eh? Well, don't worry; they won't come to harm, an' on that I'll go bail."

"There's no tellin' how soon some of that crowd will come over here," Jerry suggested. "There ain't room enough on that side of the river for all hands of 'em, an' they'll begin to spread out pretty quick."

"That won't bother us any, for we're goin' to pull up stakes," Darius replied quietly.

"Are we to join the fleet?" I asked.

"It's the proper thing just now, I reckon, seein's there ain't likely to be anythin' new around here till the enemy pushes on up the river, which will be when he has floated some of his vessels."

Even after making this statement Darius appeared to be in no hurry to move on. He sat amid the foliage watching the throngs on the opposite side of the river until half a dozen officers came down close to the water's edge, having in their midst one in civilian's garb.

"There's a friend of yours," the old man said quietly as he motioned toward the group, "an' you can eat my head if I don't guess what's up."

My face flushed with answer as I looked in the direction indicated, and there saw in earnest converse with the Britishers, Elias Macomber, the traitor.

"He has joined his friends without losin' any time. I wish I could get my fingers around his throat for a couple of minutes!" Jerry cried, shaking his fist in impotent rage.

"An' I reckon you'll soon have that chance, lad," Darius said, calm and serene as a summer's morning. "Watch out now, an' you'll get an idee of the whole business, which will go to show that you didn't lose anythin' much when you left him at Hog Point. It wouldn't surprise me a little bit if he's had a good share in sendin' the ships aground, for he couldn't have told within ten feet, of the water to be found in the channel."

I failed to understand very much of what the old man referred to; but kept my eyes fixed on the opposite shore, and saw that Elias was making ready to embark in a canoe, which was hauled up near at hand.

"He's goin' back to see how many vessels are aground," Jerry suggested, and Darius added placidly:

"You'll find that he's bound up river spyin', an' we count on goin' in the same direction."

Now I understood! Elias was to reconnoiter the river for his very good friends, and we could catch him on his return, as we had done once before.

I was near to crying aloud with joy when I realized that once he set out as Darius predicted, nothing could save him from our clutches, therefore I literally held my breath as he took his seat in the canoe and pushed off.

Just for one instant my heart sank within me, for it seemed as if he was bound down river; but it appeared that he was simply making a flourish to exhibit his skill with the paddle, and then he pulled up stream, thereby doing Jerry and me the greatest possible favor.

"Yes, he's our meat," Darius said with an odd smile as I looked at him questioningly. "He'll go somewhere near the fleet, to make certain it yet remains at the place where he made his escape, an' we won't press the villain. Give him plenty of time to get well away from his friends."

Then the old man settled back amid the foliage as if counting on remaining quite a while, and I no longer thought of anything save the pleasing fact that we would once more present to Commodore Barney the miserable renegade.

Darius soon learned that it would not be well to prolong his halt; we could see the soldiers pointing toward the thicket in which we were hidden, as if suggesting it as a pleasant camping place when the day was so hot as to bring perspiration to a negro's face, and a few moments later some of the lighter boats were pushed out from the shore.

"I reckon it's time for us to make a move," Darius said as he arose to his feet lazily. "We may as well be movin' toward the canoe, though I had counted on stoppin' here till it was a bit cooler."

According to my way of thinking we had no more than time enough in which to get away, for now at least an hundred soldiers were coming across, and in case we were discovered lurking amid the underbrush there would be such a hue and cry that we could not hope to escape.

Darius, however, would not move one whit more quickly because of my urging; in fact, it seemed much as if he walked the slower to test my nerves, and instead of parleying with him further, Jerry and I went ahead at full speed, having due care, of course, to caution.

It pleased me when the old man was obliged to quicken his pace to a run, for before we were well out of the thicket the foremost of the boats had gained the shore.

We pressed on rapidly until coming to where our canoe was hidden, and there we halted, not wanting to embark until Elias had had plenty of time in which to get well up the river, for, to me at least, his recapture was more important than the task of carrying information to the commanding officer.

Lying within the shade of the trees, and so far up river that we could neither see nor hear the swarm of soldiers which had lighted upon Benedict, we took things easy for a couple of hours, keeping sharp watch, however, to make certain that no craft passed us, and then Darius gave the word to get under way.

By this time it was night, but the young moon and the stars in a cloudless sky, lighted up the water-way clearly, and we had no fear that Macomber could give us the slip, unless he returned by land.

We paddled leisurely, for our news was not of such a nature that an hour or two sooner or later would make a difference so far as Commodore Barney's plans were concerned, and had gotten such a distance on our journey that I began to fear the traitor had struck across the country, when we hove him in view half a mile or more ahead.

He was still running up the river, but I questioned if he intended to take any chances on being discovered, for such as he would rather manufacture information out of his head than encounter danger.

Darius, who had been using one of the paddles, now took the helm, and the canoe was swung inshore where she would be partially hidden by the shadows of the foliage, for we did not care to start in open chase because he would probably take to the woods on discovering us, and then our chances of making the capture would be small indeed.

When our quarry rounded a bend in the river, shutting himself out from view, we bent all our energies to the paddles, sneaking inshore immediately we opened him up again, and thus we rapidly lessened the distance until at the third turn of the shore we were less than thirty yards astern.

"Now give it to her, lads!" Darius said sharply. "Put all your strength to the blades, an' we'll heave him to in short order!"

As we rounded the bend, the water foaming from the boat's bow much as it would have done from the stem of a ship under full sail, Macomber was but a short distance ahead, and Darius cried:

"Push her along, lads! Now's our time!" Then, bringing the paddle to his shoulder as if it had been a musket, he shouted, "Drop that oar mighty quick, Macomber, or I'll fire!"

The traitor, thus receiving the first intimation that an enemy was near at hand, glanced backward quickly, and, seeing the supposed weapon leveled full at him, threw down his paddle with an exclamation of mingled fear and anger.

We shot up alongside him like an arrow from the bow, all hands of us reaching out to grasp the gunwale of his canoe, and as we thus made fast Darius grasped the fellow by the throat.

"You may as well give in quietly," the old man said, tightening his grasp until it would have been impossible for the man to make the lightest outcry. "If you flounder about much all hands will go into the water, an' once there I give my word that you won't come to the surface, for we don't count on losin' you the second time."

The scoundrel was as meek as any lamb, and when Darius told me to fasten his arms together with my belt, he held them out obediently.

I took a double turn around his elbows, and Darius ordered him to step into our canoe, which he did without hesitation, but once there, seated on the flooring of the boat with his back against the old man's knees, he glowered at us like an angry cat.

"We reckoned you wanted to see Barney's fleet, when you put off from Benedict, an' it ain't jest right to make you paddle a heavy canoe so far," Darius said grimly. "You're goin' back with us, Master Macomber, an' this time you'll stay."

"Not very long," the reptile said with a snarl. "Admiral Cochrane declares that he'll destroy Barney's fleet Friday, an' dine in Washington Sunday. So you see I'm not likely to stay with you any great while after the British come up the river."

"That is as may be; now I'm countin' that when your admiral gets as far up the river as Nottingham, if he ever does, you'll be somewhere else, for we've taken you in charge."

"My time will come, an' then I'll pay off a good many old scores," Macomber cried with a look on his face which was not pleasant to see.

"If it does you any good, keep right on thinkin' so," Darius replied mildly, "an' in the meantime we'll keep our eyes on you. Give way, lads, the sooner we're with the fleet now, the better it will be."

We had no more than settled well to work when Darius ordered us to cease paddling, as he half rose to peer steadily ahead, and, quite naturally, all of us glanced in the same direction.

A canoe carrying four men was coming down stream, and while I was asking myself if we might not have come upon more British spies, the old man settled back with a sigh of relief.

"It's the Byard boys goin' home," he announced, and then, as the other canoe came within hail, he gave them information of what was happening at Benedict.

"It don't look as if we'd better go back there," Sam Byard said thoughtfully when Darius had come to an end of his news. "I reckon the Britishers might make trouble for us, eh?"

"They'd be apt to if it was known you'd just come from our fleet," the old man replied with a laugh. "The best thing you can do is to turn around an' follow us. Did you get your money?"

"Oh yes, the commodore handed that over all right."

"Where is Jim Freeman?" I asked.

"The commander allowed it wouldn't be many hours before all hands of you came back, so he went aboard the punga to keep ship."

"There!" Darius said triumphantly. "You can see how near Joshua Barney comes to the truth when he makes a guess! I believe he could stay at Nottingham without ever gettin' a report from anybody, an' tell just what the enemy was doin'!"

"He'll have a chance to see what they're doin', as soon as some of the ships can be floated!" Macomber said with a laugh which was not pleasant to hear.

"Which is more'n you can say for yourself if there's any danger of the Britishers comin'," Darius retorted. "You're our meat, Master Traitor, an' will stay in the same keepin' till we've settled our part of what you call old scores."

Then the word to buckle down to the paddles once more was given, and the Byard boys pulled their craft around to follow in our wake.

An hour later we were alongside the Scorpion again, and this time it was not necessary to parley with those on the guard-boat, for, on recognizing us, they sheered off, leaving our canoe to go where we pleased.

Neither did the guard on the schooner hesitate to arouse the commodore, and within one minute after arriving, Darius was explaining to the commander all that had taken place at Benedict.

"It must be they counted on coming further up the river," the commodore said half to himself when the story was come to an end, and Darius took it upon himself to add:

"I allow there wouldn't have been any stop if the fleet hadn't gone ashore; then the men were landed to prevent you from makin' an attack."

"That seems reasonable; but they'll be here soon enough, for it is to this place they must come in order to strike the direct road to Washington."

Then it was that Darius bethought himself of what Macomber had said, and he repeated the words, adding in conclusion as he laid his hand on the prisoner's shoulder, for as yet we had not left the canoe:

"We've brought this cur back, sir, an' hope he won't find it as easy to slip away a second time. He left Benedict to spy on you, as we saw from the other side of the river, so we gathered him in."

The commodore looked at the man as one would at a snake, and then said curtly:

"You'll have to keep him on board your vessel, Darius. Our facilities for taking care of prisoners are not what they should be. Do whatsoever you will with him, so that we can make certain of putting our hands on him when the matter is to be settled. You had better take up your quarters on the pungy, and if you're needing provisions, my cook will supply you until rations are dealt out."

Then the commodore turned on his heel, returning to the cabin, and we pulled around the fleet hunting for the Avenger.

Not until after getting speech with the officer in charge of the guard-boat did we find the craft, and when we came alongside Jim Freeman acted as if beside himself with joy. One would have said that we had been separated a full year by the way he welcomed us, and when his eyes fell on Elias Macomber it was as if he had lost his senses.

Well, we took the prisoner aboard the pungy, securing him in the hold by lashing his hands behind him, and making them fast to a ringbolt, thus giving him a chance to sit down; but he could neither stand nor stretch out at full length.

"It won't be none too comfortable; but it's the best we can do now," Darius said to the prisoner as if apologizing for not making him more secure. "At all events, I reckon you'll be here in the mornin', an' then we may make a change."

The main hatch was put on and fastened down with the bar, after which we went into the cuddy, ready for anything in the way of provisions that Jim could set before us.

He was not overly well supplied, having been on board only a few hours, but we contrived to make a hearty meal, and while eating Jim heard all we could tell him regarding the occupation of Benedict by the British forces.

It was past midnight when we turned in, so tired that all hands fell asleep within two minutes after making ready, and it seemed to me that I had not fairly closed my eyes when we were awakened by a vigorous pounding on the side of the vessel.

Darius had his head out of the companion-way before it was possible for me to get on my feet, and I heard a strange voice cry sharply:

"It is the order of the commodore that every vessel in the fleet move up to Pig Point without delay. Rations will be served there at noon to-morrow."

Then I heard the sound of oars as the messenger-boat was pulled to the next craft, and Darius said hurriedly:

"Lads, I'll admit that there are a good many vessels in this 'ere fleet what can sail clean around the Avenger; but let's show the commodore that there's no crew under him who will obey orders more smartly. Turn out lively, my bully boys! Jim, you an' Dody get home the anchor, an' the rest of us will tail on to the halliards!"

Darius had a willing crew if there was any opportunity to win the praise of the commander, and he was not yet at an end of giving his orders when we began work.

I venture to say that within sixty seconds from the time we were hailed, the Avenger was making way, rubbing past this craft and that as she literally forced a passage through the fleet, and all this before any signs of life could be seen on the other vessels. Even the Scorpion was yet lying idly at her moorings.

"That's what I call a good start, lads," the old man said when we were well clear of the flotilla, and the pungy forged ahead in good style under the force of a fairly strong night breeze. "We're first under sail, an' it'll go hard if we don't come to anchor off Pig Point ahead of any one else."

"Why do you suppose this move is being made?" I asked, for it smacked much of running away from the enemy, to retreat so far up stream, and Darius had made us believe that Joshua Barney never retreated.

"The commander has got some good plan in his head, an' it'll come out before we're many days older," the old man replied confidently.

"But surely we're tryin' to get away from the enemy," Jerry suggested.

"Ay, it has that look just now, I'll admit; but you'll see some big scheme in it very soon, or I'm a Dutchman, which I ain't."

"There's a boat dead ahead, with four men rowin' an' one steerin'," Jim Freeman, who had stationed himself in the tow as a lookout, came aft to report.

"Some smarty who's tryin' to make the anchorage first," Darius growled; "but with this wind we can sail two miles to his one, so it won't be that craft which will beat us in."

By this time we were well up with the boat, and to our surprise it was Commodore Barney himself who hailed:

"Sloop ahoy! Pass a line, and I'll come aboard."

He got the line smartly enough, and when he came over the rail Darius saluted, as he said:

"We counted you were aboard the Scorpion, sir."

"That schooner won't get off for ten minutes or more, and I allowed that the other vessels would be handled in the same leisurely fashion, so, I pulled ahead, thinking to be at the rendezvous before the flotilla was well under way. You lads obeyed orders smartly."

"It's a way they have, sir," Darius said with a grin, as he looked over the rail to see that the commodore's boat was being towed where she would be the least drag on the pungy.

Then it was that I tried to play the host, by asking the commander if he would go into the cabin.

"It isn't a very nice place, sir; but it's clean, and you may be able to get some sleep."

"I'll venture to say it's as good a sea-parlor as I, or any other man, deserves, lad; but I'm not needing sleep just now, therefore will stay on deck."

Then he fell to pacing the starboard quarter, as if he had been on his own ship at sea, and we lads gathered well forward in order that he might see we understood somewhat of the respect due a commander.



CHAPTER XII.

SUSPENSE.

It is now in my mind to set down what may be dry reading for some who chance to see this labor of love on which I am engaged, and yet if any one desires to know exactly why it was the Britishers could destroy the capital of our country, and come off very nearly scot-free, it is absolutely necessary to become familiar with all our means of defense at this time.

Therefore it is that I shall copy that which was published many years later, by Mr. Lossing in his "War of 1812," and in so doing the reader will ask how it is that I am writing this poor apology for a tale in the year of grace 1814, and yet putting into it facts which were made public many years later?

The answer to the riddle is not as puzzling as it would seem. I am now man grown, with children of my own. Many years ago I put together this story, and to-day, desiring that my own boys may read it, I am running over the leaves to add here or there that which may make plain what I, a lad of seventeen years, overlooked at the time, or believed to be of little importance. How strange it is that the same thing appears entirely different when viewed from the standpoints of a man and a lad!

This is what Mr. Lossing says concerning the time of which I wrote when everything was fresh in my mind, and the sense of a wrong done this country by England still rankling deep in my heart:

"On the 6th of August (1814) the small British squadron in the Chesapeake was reinforced by a fleet of twenty-one vessels under Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, the senior commander on the American station. These were soon joined by another under Commodore Sir Charles Malcolm. These vessels bore several thousand land troops commanded by General Ross, an Irish officer, and one of Wellington's most active leaders. Washington and Baltimore appear to have been chosen objects of attack simultaneously. A part of the British naval force, under Sir Peter Parker, went up the Chesapeake toward Baltimore, and another portion, under Captain Gordon, went up the Potomac.

"At that time Commodore Barney, with a flotilla of thirteen armed barges and the schooner Scorpion, with an aggregate of about five hundred men, was in the Patuxent river. His vessels had been chased out of the Chesapeake, and blockaded in St. Leonard's Bay. Of this confinement they were relieved by some artillery under Colonel Henry Carbery, with which he drove away the Loire, the blockading frigate, when the released flotilla went up the Patuxent, first to Benedict, and then to Nottingham, that it might be within co-operating distance of both Washington and Baltimore.

"Seeing this, the British determined to capture or destroy it, and on the 18th of August a force of a little more than five thousand men, composed of regulars, marines, and negroes went up the Patuxent, and landed at Benedict with three cannon, under cover of an armed brig. Most of the other large British vessels were below, some of them aground, and all too heavy to ascend the comparatively shallow stream.

"Barney, then at Nottingham, promptly informed the Navy Department of the movement, and of a boast of the British admiral that he would destroy the American flotilla, and dine in Washington on the following Sunday. General Winder, by direction of the War Department, immediately ordered General Samuel Smith's division (the Third) of the Maryland militia into actual service. He also called upon General John P. Van Ness, commander of the militia of the District of Columbia, for two brigades, to be encamped near Alexandria; and he sent a circular letter to all the brigadiers of the Maryland militia, asking for volunteers to the amount of one-half their respective commands.

"By his orders, his adjutant-general, Hite, issued a stirring appeal to the citizens to come forward, 'without regard to sacrifices and privation,' in defense of the national capital. Winder also asked General Stricker, of Baltimore, to send to Washington his volunteer regiments of infantry and his rifle battalion.

"The veteran patriot, General Smith, promptly responded to the call of the government. He at once issued a division order, in which he gave notice of the invasion, and directed the whole of General Stansbury's brigade to be held in readiness for active service, adding, 'the third brigade is now under the pay of the United States, in its service, and subject to the Articles of War.' That corps General Smith declared to be 'the finest set of men he ever saw.' They paraded at four o'clock the same day, and on the following morning General Stansbury left Baltimore for Washington with thirteen hundred of his corps. Another force, under Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Sterett, consisting of the Fifth Regiment of Baltimore Volunteers, Major Pinkney's rifle battalion, and the artillery

companies of Captains Myers and Magruder, left Baltimore on the evening of the 20th, and joined Stansbury on the evening of the 23d.

"With wise precaution, General Smith ordered the Eleventh brigade and Colonel Moore's cavalry to hold themselves in readiness to march to Baltimore at a moment's warning, for it seemed probable that the enemy would strike at both cities simultaneously.

"The British in the meantime had moved up the Patuxent from Benedict, the land troops being accompanied by a flotilla of launches and barges that kept abreast of them. The naval forces were under the command of the notorious marauder, Cockburn. They reached Lower Marlborough on the 21st, when Barney's flotilla, then in charge of Lieutenant Frazier and a sufficient number of men to destroy it if necessary, moved up to Pig Point, where some of the vessels grounded in the shallow water.

"For the defense of Washington the whole force was about seven thousand strong, of whom nine hundred were enlisted men. The cavalry did not exceed four hundred in number. The little army had twenty-six pieces of cannon, of which twenty were only six-pounders. This force, if concentrated, would have been competent to roll back the invasion had the commanding officer been untrammelled by the interference of the President and his Cabinet."

All that was written when the facts of the case were well known, and now the story shall be taken up as I wrote it when a boy.



It was not all plain sailing from Nottingham to Pig Point, for the water was shallow, and there were many places where it was necessary to handle even a puny very tenderly in order to avoid taking the ground.

While Darius was not well acquainted with the stream, he had a sailorly eye for bad places, and never made the mistake of trying to jump the little vessel where she was likely to be held hard and fast.

Many times were we forced to take to the canoe in order to pull the Avenger's nose around more sharply than could be done by the helm, and when it came to such labor of pulling and hauling the commodore lent a hand as if we had been his equal in station.

And we did work lively, for a fact, hoping to have our anchor down before any other craft could arrive, therefore no one complained when Darius called on us for labor which might have been saved at the expense of three or four minutes in time.

The commander was even more eager than were we, to arrive at the appointed rendezvous speedily, and we could readily guess that some big change was to be made in the general plans, although what it might be we came far from guessing, since all of us, save Darius Thorpe, believed he was simply running away from the enemy.

Well, we succeeded in doing as we wished in regard to beating out the remainder of the fleet, for when we came to anchor off the point and snugged everything down Bristol fashion, there were no signs that a single craft was following.

Commodore Barney was chafing because of the delay, as could be seen by the way in which he paced the deck, rubbing his hands from time to time as he gazed down stream in vain for some token of the laggards.

"It's only a deep water sailor who obeys smartly, Darius," the commander said, halting in his nervous walk to face the old man, and Jerry and I, who were seated on the main-hatch, pricked up our ears, for it seemed positive we were to learn somewhat of future doings.

"These younger men know too bloom'n' much, that's what's the matter with them," Darius said in reply. "I'll go bail that half the crowd we left at Nottingham believed they knew better'n you when the start should be made, an' stopped to curl their hair before makin' sail."

Commodore Barney laughed heartily at the old man's growling, and then said suddenly:

"I count on leaving you second in command under Frazier, and it may be as well for you to understand matters in case I don't get a chance to speak with you at any length after the Lieutenant arrives."

"You count on *leavin'* me, sir? Does that mean you're goin' away right soon?"

"Ay, when my force comes up. There is no question but that the enemy is making the attack on our flotilla to cover his designs on Washington. He can have the fleet if he comes thus far. I hope by daylight to be on the march for the Wood Yard, where Winder is encamped, and count to take with me all the men that can be spared, for force enough will be left behind to destroy the fleet in case the enemy appears. Lieutenant Frazier is to be in charge of those who remain here, and you will act as his second in command. This is my plan: You shall have seventy men or more, and as soon as we leave you will make every craft ready for the torch; see to it that there are combustibles on board in sufficient quantity to insure a clean job when fire is applied. After that has been done, you will wait for the British. Once it becomes certain that you cannot save the fleet, start your fires, and put out for the American army, which will likely be near Washington by that time."

"We've got some good boats with us, sir," Darius said thoughtfully.

"Ay, my old shell-back, and that is why I am determined that they shall not be of service to the enemy. You who remain behind will have more danger to face than those who move in advance, and because of that it is necessary you keep the force well in hand. See to it that every order, however trifling, is obeyed on the instant, and in event of any disposition to shirk a command, or to loiter after the word has been given, deal with the culprit as you would on shipboard. Quick work is the only thing which will save you from being killed or made prisoners."

When the commander spoke this last word the thought came to me that I had, for the moment, entirely forgotten Elias Macomber, and I was puzzled to know what could be done with him while we were destroying the fleet, if it so chanced we were forced to such an extremity.

I spoke with Jerry about it; but he had no suggestion to offer, save that I had better refer the matter to Joshua Barney.

"He's forgotten all about Macomber, as we did, an' now is the time to find out what we shall do with him. It would hurt me mighty bad to let the cur join his British friends simply because we couldn't take care of him."

This last idea nerved me to do that which I would have shrunk from at any other time, and, approaching the commander, I asked:

"What is to be done with our prisoner, sir? Jerry and I couldn't help hearing what you said to Darius, and we don't want to let such as him have a free foot after capturing him twice."

"Don't fear for that, lad," the commodore said with a kindly smile. "Give your man breakfast now, so that he may be in condition to march, and when you see that we are ready to set off, bring him to me. I will see to it that he has a caretaker who won't wink at an escape."

Then the commander fell to pacing the deck again, and I called Jim Freeman and Dody Wardwell into the cuddy that they might cook breakfast for all hands, including Elias Macomber.

Jerry insisted that the cur ought to be sent on his way with an empty stomach; but to that I would not have agreed even though the commodore had failed to give especial orders to the effect that he be fed.

By the time our cooking operations were well under way, the foremost of the fleet began to heave in sight, and from that moment Joshua Barney had something more to do than pace the Avenger's deck.

We learned very soon that the Scorpion had run aground, which fact delayed several of the smaller boats, since Lieutenant Frazier called upon many of the men for assistance; but all reports ran to the effect that the fleet would unquestionably be at the rendezvous by early dawn.

We drew lots to see who should feed the prisoner, and Josiah Coburn selected the unlucky slip, which was a great relief to me, for I question if I could have put food into the villain's mouth with any very good grace.

We were yet at work on the breakfast when my father came aboard, the barge to which he was drafted having been the third to arrive, and it made me feel mighty good when he complimented us on our smartness in handling the Avenger.

We two went well forward where we might converse privately, and I did not think I was betraying any confidences when I told him of the commodore's plans. He was in nowise surprised, and said as one would if talking to a particular friend:

"I guessed that something of the kind might be in the wind when the word was given to get under way. It would have pleased me better, Amos, if you had been detailed to go with the advance."

"Why so, sir?" I asked, secretly rejoicing because he was treating me as if I had been of his own age.

"Because those who remain to destroy the fleet will be in great danger. You cannot begin the work until the enemy is close upon you, otherwise it might be said that valuable property had been sacrificed needlessly, and your risk will be greater than mine."

"That is as it should be, sir," I replied, forgetting that I had ever been weak-kneed or lukewarm in the cause. "For mother's sake you should be the one to go home, if both cannot."

"You have ever been a good boy, and a dutiful son, Amos. I shall pray that God will spare your life, whatever He may will shall become of me."

Then my father kissed me, and I never remember of his having done such a thing before, after which he went over the rail hurriedly, as if not caring to look me in the face.

It was not a particularly cheerful conversation which we had had, and yet I was wondrously heartened because of it. The possible danger was very far from my mind as I dwelt upon father's words and his good-bye. It was as if I had suddenly come to know him in a different fashion than ever before.

Commodore Barney used the Avenger as his flag-ship while we were waiting for the Scorpion, and our deck was literally crowded with men who had been summoned to receive orders. He even ate breakfast with us, doing the greater portion of the eating holding converse with one or another, and it can well be fancied that we were proud because of having made possible such an honor for our puny.

The day was just breaking when the Scorpion, attended by all the other laggards, came up the stream. The schooner was anchored alongside our puny, and the commodore and Lieutenant Frazier had a private interview in the cabin of the larger vessel, after which word was given for the men to disembark.

The captain of each vessel had received orders to go ashore with so many men, therefore we saw no confusion when the final moment arrived.

Jerry and I made ready the canoe in order to take Elias Macomber out of the vessel, and, seeing us thus engaged, Lieutenant Frazier said as if in surprise:

"I thought all you lads had been ordered to remain behind?"

"So we have, sir," I replied, and then I explained what we would do, whereupon he called for a couple of men from the Blushing Susan to attend the prisoner, we going with the party to make certain he was delivered up in good order.

Commodore Barney had not forgotten the matter, as could be seen when he came forward with the cur, and he handed Elias to a man from Nottingham, with this injunction:

"You are answerable for him until we arrive at General Winder's camp. If he attempts to escape, shoot him without compunction; but give him fair treatment so long as he obeys orders."

Then the commander nodded to us, as if we were old acquaintances, and the march was begun, every man stepping out briskly, as if it pleased him to aid in the defense of the national capital.

It really gave me a sensation as of homesickness, to be thus left behind. Although sixty or seventy men yet remained, they were so scattered among the fleet that it seemed as if we of the Avenger were the only ones left to watch the enemy.

"You may as well take up your quarters on the schooner," Lieutenant Frazier said to Darius when the detachment was lost to view in the distance. "All of her crew are gone, therefore we shall have plenty of room."

"I shipped with the boys, an' I reckon I'd best stay with 'em, sir, though I thank you kindly for the offer," Darius replied, and the Lieutenant added quickly:

"I meant the invitation for the entire crew of the puny. Some of them can do the cooking while we stay here, which won't be very long I'm thinking."

And thus it was we made a change of quarters, which neither pleased nor displeased me even though the cabin was decidedly finer than our cuddy, because I had come to have a certain affection for the shabby puny which cost us so much labor in the buying.

According to Lieutenant Frazier's laying out of the work, there was nothing for us of the Avenger to do save care for the schooner, and prepare the meals.

Six men were sent down the river in canoes, to watch and report the movements of the enemy, that we might have timely warning of their near approach, and the remainder of the party which had been left behind were set about getting ready for the destruction of the fleet, if that should become necessary.

One may think that Jerry and I had no reason to feel badly if our punga should be burned, since we had the guarantee from Commodore Barney which would insure our receiving much more money than she cost us, and yet we did feel badly, because it then seemed to us as if we could never get another craft quite so much to our liking. A fellow cannot live on board a vessel many months, sailing her in all kinds of weather, and depending upon her for a livelihood, without having a certain sentimental attachment for the fabric different from that felt for all others of its kind.

However, I had quite persuaded myself that the British would not come so far up stream simply in order to destroy the flotilla, for it did not seem as if the outlay would be repaid by the result, whichever way it might be viewed. I had it in mind that when they learned how shallow the river was above Nottingham, the plan would be abandoned, therefore I felt comparatively secure from harm as we idled away the hours.

The fact that Darius was so uneasy should have convinced me of the full danger, for the old man was not one who borrowed trouble. He fretted because he was forced to remain with the boats, instead of acting as spy, and nothing save the fact that Joshua Barney had placed him second in command could have kept him at Pig Point when it seemed to him that he might be able to accomplish much elsewhere.

When the first of those who had been sent down stream returned, I also began to feel uneasy in mind. The report came that the entire force of Britishers was embarking on barges and small boats, with half a dozen 6-pounders and as many mortars, which showed that it was expected we would make some resistance, and it angered me to hear the men talking as if we were to do no more than set the flotilla on fire when the enemy hove in sight.

"It seems to me that we might worry them some," I said to Darius, when he had spoken in much the same tone as the others. "Forty or fifty men posted along the shores would make them a little trouble, I reckon."

"Ay, lad, an' effect about as much as so many wasps. We might shoot down a few men; but could not even delay the advance, an' what would be gained? Their five thousand soldiers would make it mighty warm for our people on the shore, an' when it came to killin', I'm thinkin' they'd be able to do the most execution."

Before he ceased speaking I understood how foolish had been my words; but I was burning with such a desire to inflict some injury upon those to whose account could be laid the destruction of our property, that I was not really responsible for the speech.

It was on the evening of the day when Joshua Barney left us, that I began to be sensible of the suspense in which one would necessarily be at such a time. If the enemy came upon us suddenly, it might be possible for them to capture all hands of us, as well as carry away the boats, and this last would be considered more of a disaster than the first.

Twenty of our men were posted at different points on both sides of the stream to act as sentinels, and the remainder distributed among the fleet in such a manner that the flames could be started in very short order.

Neither Lieutenant Frazier nor Darius proposed to turn in on this night. They were to keep on the move from one sentinel to another, in order to make certain each man was doing his duty, and we lads were ordered to have a meal prepared for them at midnight.

Shortly after sunset another of our people came up the river with the report that a portion of the enemy's force had started and it began to seem as if a night attack had been determined upon.

It can well be fancied that we of the Avenger had very little desire for slumber, although, had we been so disposed, all of us might have had a good night's rest, and also had the midnight meal ready when it would be required.

We paced to and fro after the lieutenant and Darius had left, speaking only in whispers, as if it might be possible the enemy could hear us, and each moment expecting that the alarm would ring out.

The suspense was to me most painful, and I said to Jerry:

"Almost anything is better than this. I wish we were not so well aware of their coming."

"If the fleet is to be burned, an' we know the enemy has started to come up here, I can't see what is to be gained by waitin'," and my partner spoke in a tone of petulance. "We shall do no good stayin' here, and it may be that some of us could be of service elsewhere."

"It's no use for you fellows to grumble," Jim Freeman said with a laugh, he having come up just in time to hear the

useless words. "The orders are to wait till the Britishers show themselves, an' I reckon neither Lieutenant Frazier nor Darius would like to take the responsibility of doin' anythin' else. You two will make a good thing out of this business, in case the Avenger is burned, eh?"

"We've got a guarantee for more than she cost; but at the same time I'd rather have her than a better one," Jerry said promptly, and I put my hand in his, for he had spoken that which was in my heart.

Then we fell to talking for at least the tenth time of how the work of destruction would be accomplished, and while we were thus engaged Darius came alongside.

"You lads can turn in," he said as he clambered over the rail. "Mitchell has just come up the river with the news that the Britishers are makin' camp less'n two miles below. We shan't see 'em to-night; but they're likely to be here mighty early in the mornin'."

"Some of us must stay up to do the cooking," I replied, thinking of the meal the lieutenant had ordered.

"I'll call you in case Frazier don't change his mind about it, but I reckon he'll be willin' to wait for breakfast."

"Are you going to stay on board?"

"I shall be here off an' on; just now we're goin' to inspect each craft, so's to make certain the flames can be started quickly, for there's no longer any chance but that the fleet must be destroyed."



CHAPTER XIII.

BURNING THE VESSELS.

It seemed to me much like disastrous defeat to burn the flotilla on the approach of the enemy, without making any effort whatsoever to defend it, and for the time I believed that Darius and all those who bragged so much about Commodore Barney's fighting qualities, were making idle talk, otherwise he would have attempted to hold his own, no matter how great the odds against him.

At the time I failed to realize that our fleet of small boats amounted to nothing, as compared with either city which the British was threatening, and that the commodore never showed himself to be a better fighter than when he allowed the enemy to spend their time with a lot of boats of little value, while he was marching his men across country to aid in the defense of Washington.

One can readily fancy that we lads were not much inclined for sleep when Darius brought word that we might turn in.

It was definitely known that the British were only two miles away, and would make no prolonged halt until after striking a blow at our fleet. In fact, it was possible they might approach within an hour, the halt having been called only to make us believe they would not attempt to do any mischief during the night.

We gathered aft, but with no desire to go below, and stood there leaning far out over the rail with eyes and ears open for some token of the coming foe.

It was possible to distinguish even in the gloom a boat which was pulled from one craft to another, stopping only a few seconds at each vessel, and we knew the lieutenant and Darius were making their rounds.

Again we questioned the wisdom of waiting until the enemy was close at hand before beginning the work of destruction, never realizing how important it was to keep the Britishers at the task of destroying the fleet so long as possible that the defenders of Washington might have opportunity to make ready; but we actually grew impatient because the torch was not applied at once.

Before Lieutenant Frazier brought the inspection to a close, one of the men who had been sent to spy out the enemy's movements, came aboard the Scorpion to make a report. From him we learned that the British were really encamped for the night, and there seemed little possibility any move would be made before daylight.

Even with this assurance we lads had no desire for slumber, and were on deck listening and watching when Darius returned.

"Why didn't you turn in?" he asked almost sharply, and I replied, striving to speak in such a tone as would give him to understand that we were not to be dictated to regarding our individual actions while off duty.

"We prefer to remain awake. Even though the enemy was not so near, I question if either of us would care to go into the hot cabin, unless orders were given to the effect that we must do so."

"Well, I have it in mind to get forty winks when I'm able. We may be kept on the move pretty much all the time after leavin' here, an' it stands a man in hand to bottle up what sleep he can."

"I thought you counted on moving around all night?"

"So I did before we knew that the Britishers had settled down for a spell; but now there's no need of more watchers than are already on duty," the old man said as he disappeared through the companion-way hatch, leaving me fully sensible of the fact that I had proven myself a prig and a fool by trying to assert my right to do as I pleased.

We could see boats moving slowly to and fro a short distance down the river, and thus knew, the guard having been largely increased, that if an enemy came our way during the hours of darkness, he must be seen by the sentinels some time before we on the schooner could distinguish him in the gloom.

Then Jim Freeman and his friends followed Darius' example, by going into the cabin, and but for what had passed between the old man and me I would have gone with them. As it was, I felt bound to remain, and Jerry, understanding the situation, although he refrained from speaking of it, stayed with me like the true friend that he always has been.

Before midnight my eyes grew heavy with slumber, and I said to my partner, as I led him well forward where we could not be overheard in case any of those in the cabin were awake:

"It would seem as if you and I were left to look after the schooner, and surely some one ought to be on duty, even

though the spies have reported that the enemy has encamped for the night."

"Well, that's about what we're doin', ain't it?" Jerry asked, and I fancied he was trying not to laugh.

"Yes, and yet I'm getting mighty tired. I propose that we stretch out on the deck a few minutes, just to rest our legs."

"Won't that be deserting our post?" Jerry asked gravely.

"I don't think so, because we can hear all that is going on, and while it is so dark there isn't much chance of seeing anything."

"But suppose we fall asleep?"

"I'll see to it there's no chance of that," I replied, finding it hard work to repress a yawn, and then Jerry's mirth could be controlled no longer.

"What are you laughing at?" I asked sharply.

"At you, Amos! You haven't made a bloomin' success of it whenever you've tried to put on airs over Darius; somehow he always contrives to get the best of you. If you hadn't pulled him up with a sharp turn, we'd be below havin' a good snooze with the other fellows; but now we're ashamed to go, consequently we'll camp on deck."

I was angry, and yet I knew he had spoken only the truth. However, it seemed too late to mend matters, and without making any reply I laid down under the rail, fully determined to be more of a gentleman in the future.

There had been in my mind a promise not to close my eyes in slumber that night; but no sooner was I at full length on the deck than I crossed over into dreamland, and knew nothing until the report of a cannon, seemingly near at hand, brought me to my feet very suddenly.

"What's happening?" I cried loudly, and from the after rail Jim Freeman replied:

"The enemy are comin' into position. They began to show up nearly half an hour ago; but I thought there was no need to waken you till the work was begun."

Those who had turned in, as sensible fellows should have done, were awake and on the alert in due season, while I who believed the safety of the schooner devolved upon myself, slept until the Britishers were ready to begin operations.

The day had dawned, although it was a full half-hour before the sun would show himself. Down the stream, within long range of our fleet, were eight or ten barges, each carrying a cannon, drawn across the river in such manner as to make the flotilla a good target, and the gun which had aroused me was evidently fired for the purpose of testing the position.

I ran aft to where Jim and his friends stood, asking eagerly:

"What are our people going to do?"

"The word has just been given to start the blaze, and the lieutenant believes that we can hold the Britishers in check until the vessels are well afire. We're to form on the shore, and oppose the force which you see yonder."

Gazing in the direction of Jim's outstretched finger, I could make out a line of red-coated men on the southerly shore some distance below the barges, and it was not difficult to guess that they intended to move up, once an action was begun, to where they could fire at us from the bank.

The British commander evidently believed we would fight to prevent the fleet from being destroyed, and, therefore, was forcing his men to perform a great deal of unnecessary work.

Looking around at the boats and vessels of our fleet I could see that the work of destruction had already begun. From the hatch of the Avenger, which craft was lying thirty or forty yards further up stream than the Scorpion, a thin thread of blue smoke was ascending lazily on the clear air, and on five or six other pungies the same ominous token of approaching ruin could be seen.

Then it was that I saw little knots of our men pulling for the northerly shore, and, on gaining the bank, stave in the hulls of their canoes to such purpose that the little craft could not again be made serviceable.

I understood then that each squad was under orders to land immediately the task assigned them had been performed, and wondered if the schooner was to be reserved until the last.

"Does the lieutenant count on saving the Scorpion to hold the Britishers in check?" I asked of Jim, and for reply he pointed toward the main hatch, from out of which Darius was just emerging.

"Have your canoe ready!" the old man cried, addressing Dody Wardwell, who was holding the painter of a small craft which lay under the stern. "I allow that we'll need to leave here in mighty quick time, for when the fire starts it'll run from stem to stern like a flash."



As we pulled away I glanced back at our fleet and saw that the vessels were well on fire. P. 233.

Even as Darius spoke I saw a curl of flame from the forward hatch, and then a long, glowing tongue leaped up toward the cordage.

While I stood watching it, fascinated by the eager lapping of the destroying element, the enemy opened fire from the barges, sending solid shot amid the fleet which had already been deserted. At almost the same moment that line of red, which had been motionless, could be seen flashing here and there amid the foliage, telling that the advance of the land force had begun.

Glancing back at our fleet after making certain that the Britishers were coming toward us, I saw that the vessels were well on fire, although unquestionably many of them might have been saved had efforts been made immediately to that end.

"In five minutes more salt won't save 'em," Darius said in a tone of satisfaction. "Them bloomin' red-coats started a little too late. Come on, lads! It looks as if we were the last to leave the fleet, an' there isn't overly much time on our hands. Into the canoe with you!"

We obeyed the order without delay, more particularly since the flames were already coming out of the Scorpion's after companion-way, and while paddling for the shore I saw that our people were drawn up in line ready to meet the enemy in case it became necessary to prevent them from interfering with the work of destruction.

"Are we the only ones to go unarmed?" I asked, noting that all of those ashore appeared to have weapons in their hands.

"I reckon we'll find what may be needed when we join our people," Darius replied. "The guns an' ammunition were taken out of the vessels last night, for powder ain't a nice thing to have around when you're foolin' with fire."

It must be borne in mind that while we were thus speaking the cannon on the barges were being served with spirit, and more than one solid shot had gone crashing through a burning vessel; but none had come near enough to us to cause any particular alarm.

When we were ashore I saw that there would be no scarcity of weapons among us, and, in fact, several of the men were forced to carry two muskets because of the supply which had been left behind by those who marched away under the immediate command of Commodore Barney.

We lads succeeded in getting a good outfit, with quite as much ammunition as could be carried comfortably, and by the time we had taken our places in the line, the enemy's shots were beginning to come dangerously near some of us.

A cannon ball cut down a sapling within four feet of where Lieutenant Frazier was standing, and another crashed among the splintered canoes on the bank, while from the distance came those sounds which told of bullets striking amid the foliage.

The soldiers were almost within effective range, and the shot from the barges was by no means comforting, while we could accomplish nothing by remaining idle.

I wondered why the retreat was not begun, if we were to make one, and felt as if I had a personal grievance against the lieutenant because he failed to give that order which would permit of our getting away from such a disagreeable situation.

"Growin' uneasy, lad?" Darius asked with a grin, as I involuntarily ducked my head when a solid shot passed over us.

"It strikes me that we can't do any great amount of good by standing here," I replied irritably.

"The lieutenant is a reg'lar little man who believes in obeyin' orders, no matter what happens. Joshua Barney left word that we were not to move from here till all the vessels were well afire, an' here I reckon we'll stay quite a spell longer."

"But they are all burning," I said, turning to look at the fleet, each craft of which appeared to be enveloped in flames.

"Yes, they've started well; but if I was the one who had been left to decide when there was no longer a chance of savin' 'em, I'd hold here a spell longer, as the lieutenant is doin'."

"Do you believe it possible that we could save the schooner now?" and I pointed toward the Scorpion, along whose spars the flames were creeping rapidly.

"Two or three hundred men might do it if they set to work this minute, though it would be a tough job," the old man said as he gazed at the flames which were already sending forth heat enough to render our position too warm for comfort, and at that instant a musket ball came humming past the end of his nose, causing him to spring backward very suddenly.

"Growin' uneasy, Darius?" I asked, and the old man laughed good-naturedly as I thus passed him some of his own coin.

"It's gettin' warm all around; but I reckon we've come mighty nigh to the limit set by the commander."

Then it was that the man next beside me cried aloud as he held up his right hand from which the blood was beginning to flow from a bullet wound.

I was too angry to be frightened just then, for it seemed as if Lieutenant Frazier was remaining too long under fire, and a moment later came the welcome command.

I dare venture to say that, with the exception of Lieutenant Frazier and Darius, every man moved more readily and quickly than he ever did before, until we were a good mile from the scene of destruction, striking directly across the country for Upper Marlboro.

Now and then it was possible to catch glimpses of the flames, which towered above the tops of the nearby trees; but we heard nothing of the enemy, which seemed to me strange until I mentioned the fact to Darius when he came up, after loitering in the rear with the lieutenant as if to show his contempt for the Britishers.

"I allow there's plenty of sense in their stayin' where the fleet is burnin'," the old man said quietly. "They saw only a few men leave when it had been said that Joshua Barney had five hundred with him. Now what more natural for them to suppose that we are tryin' to lead 'em into an ambush--for the Britishers still believe we fight in Injun fashion? Then again, it ain't likely the foot soldiers are carryin' rations, havin' the boats with 'em, an' it would be poor judgment to send a lot of men into the woods empty-handed, so to speak."

"Then you do not believe we shall be pursued?"

"If we are it'll be a fool trick," the old man replied, and then he fell back to the rear in response to a signal from the lieutenant.

After he had thus given his opinion, which I believe to be shared by Lieutenant Frazier, it was in my mind that we would tramp leisurely across the country until coming up with Commodore Barney's force; but immediately we appeared to be out of danger word was given to quicken the pace.

Now it was that the officer and Darius marched in advance, the former having given the word that we were to keep close at his heels, and during two hours I traveled faster than I ever did before. It seemed as if the musket, which had seemingly been a feather's weight when we started, weighed more than twenty pounds at the end of the second hour, and I was so nearly winded that it was as if I could go no further without first taking some rest.

Jerry was no less fatigued than I, and did not hesitate to say he believed the lieutenant was making us march thus fast simply to gratify some foolish whim.

Then we were come to Upper Marlboro, after fording the stream, and the pleasure I felt at being allowed to sit down that I might rest my aching feet was so great that it cannot properly be described.

While Jerry and I were grumbling because of what seemed to us unseemly haste, Jim Freeman, who had been lying down a short distance away, came over to where we were sitting, his eyes bulging as if he had seen two or three ghosts at the very least.

"What do you suppose?" he said excitedly.

"I heard the lieutenant telling Darius that a big force of Britishers was marchin' up from Nottingham on the west side of the river, bound for Washington!"

"How did he know that?" Jerry asked sharply.

"A man who was sent back by Commodore Barney on a scout, got here about the same time we did, an' he reported to the lieutenant. But that ain't all; some of the folks livin' 'round here say that a small force--near three hundred--landed on the west side of the river after the enemy went into camp last night, an' is mighty near this place now!"

"'Cordin' to that it would seem as if we come pretty close to bein' surrounded!" Jerry exclaimed.

"That's just what Darius said," Jim replied, "an' the lieutenant told him he'd been afraid all along that we'd run into some such kind of a muss. Commodore Barney warned him to be on the watch for what appears to be happenin', an' it begins to look as if we might have trouble mighty quick."

"There can't be a great deal of it for the Britishers, if their smallest force is three hundred, for they'd make short work of us," I said with an inward quaking. "I've been blaming the lieutenant for making us march so swiftly, and now I wish he had pushed us on twice as fast."

I had hardly more than ceased speaking when the command was given to fall into line once more, and the men

obeyed eagerly, for the word had been passed around that our small force was in most serious danger.

Every man among us was tired, I venture to say, yet we literally over-ran the lieutenant, who was setting the pace, and pressed forward like a flock of sheep pursued by dogs.

It was nearly noon when we arrived at what is known as the Wood Yard, where General Winder had encamped and thrown up some slight entrenchments, and where Commodore Barney was to have joined him; but now the place was deserted, save for one man whom I remembered having seen on our fleet.

As we soon came to know, he had been sent back from Long Old Fields by the commodore to quicken our movements, and both Jerry and I heard that which he said to the lieutenant when we came up.

It seems that the American troops from all quarters were hastening to Washington, and Commodore Barney had given orders that we hurry forward with the least possible delay.

"The commodore told me to say that unless you kept your men moving night and day you would be captured, for no less than three British forces are known to be on the way here from the Patuxent," so the messenger said, and Lieutenant Frazier asked if he knew what body of the enemy was coming up the Potomac.

"A portion of the British fleet under Captain Gordon is already to be seen from High Point," the man replied, and then he withdrew some distance with the lieutenant as if to give him private instructions.

There is no need for me to set down the fact that our small force was in a state of the greatest excitement. From no less than three sources we had learned that the enemy was so near as to make capture seem certain, and our only hope of safety was to press forward at the best possible speed until arriving at Washington, where we were told the commodore had already arrived.

It was a good deal like being out of the frying-pan into the fire, for in case we contrived to elude those who were close in the rear, we must come face to face with a yet larger body of the enemy when we did our feeble best toward defending the city.

I was getting quite a big taste of warfare, and it was by no means to my liking, although I had by this time come to understand that I must not put such ideas into words lest my companions accuse me of showing the white feather.

We had marched eleven miles with only one halt of fifteen minutes, and now, instead of going into camp as had been supposed, we were to press forward, marching night and day, for a distance of at least fourteen miles; but even though it had been twice as far I would have gone on with at least a show of cheerfulness, so great was my fear of being taken prisoner.

We halted at the Wood Yard half an hour, and then were going ahead once more; but at a less rapid pace, for we could not be expected to travel many hours at the same speed which had been kept up since leaving the burning fleet.

We ate as we marched, munching the corn-bread and bacon as best we might, and falling out of line to get a drink of water whenever we came to a brook or spring.

At the end of the first hour we were halted for ten minutes, and then the advance was continued until it seemed to me that I could not put one foot before the other.

"I suppose I shall hold out as long as the rest of you do; but it seems as if I'd got to drop down right here," Jerry said to me as we trudged along side by side on as fatiguing and dispiriting a march as I have ever known since. "It's better for a fellow to kill himself by walkin', than be sent back to a prison on board one of the British ships."

I tried to cheer the dear lad, although I myself was needing encouragement most woefully, and perhaps I succeeded somewhat by saying:

"Our fathers would set us down as cowards and drones, if the men went in with the report that we couldn't travel twenty-five or thirty miles without knocking under."

"You're right, Amos!" and Jerry stepped out briskly. "We should be able to do more of this kind of work than Darius, who has spent all his life aboard ship, an' yet there he is, humpin' along chipper as a sparrow."

I turned to look at the old man, who was in the rear, marching in good order, and acting as if on some pleasure excursion which he hoped would not come to an end too soon. It shamed me to see him so jolly when I was feeling so sore.

From that moment, whenever I felt as if it was impossible to take another step, I looked at Darius, and forced myself

to forget weariness or hunger.

It was nearly sunset when we were come to Long Old Fields, where a portion of General Winder's army had encamped the day previous, and here we were met by another messenger from the commodore.

This last man had as large a store of fresh provisions as could be hauled by one mule, and within five minutes after coming up with him we were getting supper, giving no heed to anything save the fact that we had food in plenty for at least one meal.

Later, Darius told me that the second messenger repeated orders for us to press forward without unnecessary delay; but when our hunger was appeased the lieutenant gave the word that we would be allowed to remain in camp a full two hours, and this was no sooner made known than the majority of us stretched our tired bodies on the ground for a time of sleep.

Jerry and I lay side by side, and when we were first in the proper position for sleeping I spoke to my comrade, but he made no reply. The dear lad had actually fallen into slumber at the very instant his head touched the ground.

Perhaps I remained awake while one might have counted twenty; but I am confident it was no longer than that, and then I closed my eyes, not to open them again until conscious of a heavy blow on the soles of my feet.



CHAPTER XIV.

AT WASHINGTON.

The first thought in my mind, on being aroused from deep slumber by a heavy blow on my feet, was that the enemy had come upon us, and a battle had been begun while I remained unconscious.

Springing up quickly, my eyes hardly half-open, I made ready to defend myself with no other weapons than those provided by nature, but nothing more formidable confronted me than Darius Thorpe, whose mouth was stretched wide in a grin, as if he saw something exceeding comical in thus disturbing a fellow's slumbers.

"This is no time for horse-play!" I cried indignantly. "Having but two hours for rest, it would seem that such jokes might be dispensed with."

"I don't allow that I'm jokin'," the old man replied gravely, the smile disappearing from his face as he understood that I was thoroughly angry. "You have used up your allowance of time in sleepin', an' now it's a case of gettin' into line."

"I haven't had a five-minutes nap!" I cried, firmly believing that I spoke the truth.

"It's a good two hours since we came to a halt, but even though the time wasn't up, we'd have to get into motion, for another messenger has arrived from the commodore, an' there won't be any more loafin' 'twixt here an' Washington."

"What is the news?" I asked, beginning to be ashamed of myself because of having lost my temper.

"General Ross, commandin' the British forces on land, has arrived at the Wood Yard, an' the chances are that, with troops accustomed to long marches, he will push on without much of a halt. Even if we were not needed in Washington, it would stand us in hand to move mighty quick."

Then Darius continued his task of awakening the sleepers, and I made ready for another march when it seemed as if the word to halt had but just been given.

When we set out again all of us from the Avenger were side by side, and, although it may seem childish to say so, the fact that I had friends at either hand gave me renewed strength of body as well as of mind.

It is not well that I make any further attempt at following step by step what was supposed to be a hurried movement to reinforce our comrades of the flotilla, but which in reality was neither more nor less than a hasty retreat. It is enough if I say that late in the night following the day when Commodore Barney's fleet was destroyed, we arrived at the marine barracks in Washington, where was the force which had accompanied our commander.

Just then we were too tired and foot-sore to give any heed to our friends who had been impatiently awaiting the arrival of us who had been left behind on a dangerous duty. We only asked permission to lie down anywhere in order to rest our aching limbs, and this we were able to do, as a matter of course.

When morning came, however, and we were awakened by the bustle and confusion which would naturally arise when five or six hundred men are quartered in four buildings forming a square, we gave little heed to the stiffness of joints and blistered feet which remained as mementoes of that long march, as we greeted those for whom we had greater or less affection.

The first person whom I saw was Bill Jepson. He had been searching through the barracks for Jerry and me, and I really believe the old fellow was heartily pleased at seeing us once more.

"Well, my bullies, how about that famous ship Avenger, Amos Grout commander, and Darius Thorpe general supercargo?" Bill cried in a voice of thunder as he shook hands with each of us in turn, beginning with me, and ending with Dody Wardwell.

"What there is left of her might be found at the bottom of the Patuxent, if you hunted long enough," I replied, feeling a bit saddened by the loss of the pungy, and not having had time before to think very much about her fate.

"The whole fleet went up, eh? Tell me about it," and Bill seated himself on the edge of a bunk as if expecting to hear a long yarn.

There wasn't much to be told, as is known by any one who has had the patience to read what has been set down here; but I gave him a full account of all we had done, and wound up by complaining of the long march we had been forced to take.

"Don't let a little thing like that distress you, matey, for unless the Britishers whip us out of our boots here in Washington, I'm thinkin' we'll have to scratch gravel a good many times before this 'ere war is ended. Where's Darius?"

We could give him no information concerning the old man, save to say that he was with us when we went to sleep the night previous, whereupon Bill said with a laugh:

"I reckon he's tellin' the commodore how this little business should be carried on, though he claims that the man never lived who could give Joshua Barney points."

I had no particular desire to hear about the commodore or Darius, therefore I asked if he knew anything concerning Elias Macomber, and as I mentioned the name Bill burst into a hearty laugh.

"Know anythin' about him, lad? I reckon I do, seein's I helped lodge him in jail, an' how the hound whined for a chance to escape! He promised me more dollars than I could carry in my hat, if I'd give him five minutes the start; but so long's he didn't let on where he'd get the coin, or how it might be passed over to me, I couldn't make any dicker."

"Then there's no need to worry any more about his getting away," I said to myself, whereat Bill Jepson looked grave, and I made haste to say:

"One might think from the look on your face that you believed his chances for escape were good?"

"He'll stay where he is while we hold possession of the city, an' of that you may be certain, lad; but in case the British----"

"You are not thinking that the enemy can take Washington?" Jerry cried in amazement.

"Ay, lad, an' if the truth was known, I'm not the only one who is believin' much the same thing."

"But all the people in this country would come here to defend the city!" I exclaimed, thinking for the moment that Bill Jepson was trying to play upon our fears.

"They haven't done it so far," and the sailor looked grave again. "As near as I can hear we've got about seven thousand men near about, an' more'n three-quarters of 'em are so green that it would be dangerous to let the cows have a whack at 'em."

"Have the Britishers a larger force?" Jim Freeman asked.

"No, lad, not quite so many when you come to number 'em up; but they are all trained soldiers, every one the match for three of ours in a reg'lar battle, no matter how well the Americans can fight. Then again, what with the President an' all the big bugs takin' a hand, we've got too many commanders. Leave the whole business to one man--say Joshua Barney, for example--, an' I believe we could hold our own."

To us youngsters who had come expecting to aid in a successful defense of the city, this kind of talk was not particularly cheerful, and I would have welcomed any change in the conversation; but Bill Jepson had used his eyes to good advantage during the short stay in Washington, and was determined that we should receive the benefit of what he had seen and heard.

"Last night Mr. Monroe, the secretary of state, sent a despatch to the President, an' I saw a copy of it while on duty at the commodore's quarters. It read like this: 'The enemy are advanced six miles on the road to the Wood Yard, and our troops are retiring. Our troops were on the march to meet them, but in too small a body to engage. General Winder proposes to retire till he can collect them in a body. The enemy are in full march to Washington. Have the materials prepared to destroy the bridges.' That was signed with Mr. Monroe's name, lads, an' after so much, he wrote, 'You had better remove the records.' Now do you think I'm so far out of the way in sayin' that there's a good chance of our gettin' the worst of it?"

Just at that moment, to my great relief of mind, my father appeared in the doorway of the barracks, and I sprang to meet him.

How good it was to see his dear face once more! What a sense of relief came over me because he was near! I was yet so young as to believe that no harm could come to a fellow while his father was near, and on the moment all the fears which had been aroused by Bill Jepson passed out of mind.

It is not necessary for me to set down that conversation between my father and me while it related to the dear ones at home, or our own two selves; but when we had spoken our fill on such matters it was but natural we should come back to the situation in which our troops were placed, and, greatly to my surprise, I found that my father despaired of success in much the same measure as did Bill Jepson.

"We can only do our best, lad, and for your mother's sake we'll pray that both of us may go back to Benedict; but if only one, then it should be you, who have promise of so many more years of life than I."

We were yet speaking of matters much too private to be set down in a story like this, when the command came for all the men of Commodore Barney's force to fall into line, and on the instant we understood that we were to join the small army led by General Winder.

I know not how it was we were so confident as to our destination, except that the general and our commander had been long in consultation before this day; but certain it is we felt positive all of us were about to retrace our steps.

And now, while our men are scurrying to and fro making ready for another march before having recovered from the one just ended, let me set down here what I afterward read in print, for it will serve to explain why we did not do that which the country expected, and even demanded:

"Winder's situation was an unenviable one. With a comparatively strong foe on his front, ready to fall upon him or the capital he was expected to defend, he had only about twenty-five hundred armed and effective men in camp, and many of these had been from their homes only three or four days. They were undisciplined and untried, and surrounded and influenced by a crowd of excited civilians, to whose officious but well-intended information and advice the general was compelled to listen. In addition to this intrusion and interference of common men, he was embarrassed by the presence and suggestions of the President and his Cabinet ministers, the most of them utterly ignorant of military affairs. Better would it have been for Winder and the country if these civilians, from the President down, had kept away from the camp and the field, and prudently preserved silence."^[A]

As a matter of course, we of the rank and file knew very little concerning the trials of the officer who was charged with the defense of the city; but we did understand that our force was not sufficient in either discipline or numbers to cope with that which we must meet, yet I did not hear a word of grumbling or fear as we made ready for the march.

It was as if a full knowledge of the danger served to inspire us with courage.

We set out within ten minutes after the order had been received; but I did not see Commodore Barney until we had retraced our steps to Long Old Fields, and there we found the small army throwing up a slight breastwork, as if believing that an attack was imminent.

"This looks as if you an' I might see more of war than may be pleasant," Jerry whispered to me as we stood in line waiting to be dismissed. "It is all very well to fight when you're on board a good vessel; but runnin' around on shore, marchin' here till you can do no more than move, an' then marchin' back again, is a little better than I hanker after."

"It's too late to talk like that," I replied, smiling as I remembered how eager my partner had been to go as a soldier when I was hanging back. "We're like to see an hundred times worse than this before we're many hours older."

"Ay, an' there's never one here, save you, Amos, who shall have an inklin' of the fact that I'm growin' mighty sick of my bargain."

Then we were dismissed, to find such tents and rations as General Winder's force could spare us, for our baggage-train was yet on the road, and while we were thus engaged Jim Freeman shouted to us.

"Darius has got a tent for our crowd; it's close by the commodore's, an', what's better, the old sailor has been rummagin' 'round till he's got all the grub we'll need for some time to come."

"Where are Dody and Josiah?" I asked.

"Holdin' down the tent till we can take possession; there's so much pullin' an' haulin' after rations an' quarters, that it ain't safe to leave anything alone."

I supposed that we would be ordered to aid in throwing up the breastworks, therefore it stood us in hand to learn where we belonged, before the labor was begun, and without delay we followed Jim.

Indeed we had been fortunate in having Darius to care for us, since, thanks to him, none at Long Old Fields, save the officers, were quartered as well as we.

In a few moments the canvas tent, strewn with our belongings, had quite a home air, and we lost no time in making an attack on the store of provisions which the old sailor had gathered for us.

We were eating hurriedly, lest we should be ordered to take up the picks and shovels before our hunger could be satisfied, when Darius came in looking thoroughly fagged and worn out.

"But for you we'd been without a shelter to-night," I said as he threw himself on the ground near me.

"An' that would have made little difference, lad, for the open air in a summer's night is ahead of any canvas house. Howsomer, the tent serves as a place where we can keep our belongings without fear some of these clodhoppin' imitations of soldiers will get away with 'em."

"I suppose we shall be called upon to take a hand in throwing up breastworks?" I suggested, and a more cheerful look came over the old man's face than I had seen since word was given to fire the fleet.

"We who have just come in will be allowed to take it easy, if the Britishers don't interfere, till mornin', when, if there's time left us, we'll turn to at throwin' dirt."

All of us lads settled back with a certain sense of comfort and satisfaction difficult to describe. There were many in that small army who were hungry, because of the delay and confusion in sending out supplies, and yet more who would lie down with nothing to shelter them from the heavy dew, while we were well protected, and with a goodly food supply, all of which spoke well for the forethought and ability of Darius Thorpe.

"I'm goin' to turn in, if so be we've got nothin' to do till mornin'," Jim Freeman said as he suited the action to the words, and Josiah and Dody followed his example.

I was not minded to close my eyes in slumber until after having heard from the old sailor all he could tell, although it goes without saying that I was tired enough to be able to sleep standing up.

"Have you heard anything new since we arrived?" I asked, and Darius replied in a low tone, as if afraid his words might be overheard by some one on the outside:

"The commodore says we shall have a battle within eight an' forty hours, an' you know how well he can smell out such things. It seems certain we can't meet the enemy here, unless more men are sent, an', as I take it, we shall march hither an' yon till we come to the fight fit for nothin' but to turn in."

"Where are the British now?"

"The main body is at Upper Marlboro; but there are a couple of columns movin' about in a way that betokens mischief for some of us 'twixt now an' mornin'."

"What have you been doing? I didn't see anything of you after we started back for this place."

"I came on ahead, ridin' part of the way, with the commodore, an' we've been on the move pretty much ever since. General Stansbury is at Bladensburg, an' General Winder counts on goin' there to-morrow for a conference, leavin' our commodore in command here."

"But what have you been doing to tire you so thoroughly?" I persisted.

"Nothin' exceptin' tag around at Joshua Barney's heels, an' he's a reg'lar tiger at walkin', whereas it puts me in bad shape."

"Why not lie down while you may, and get some sleep?" I asked.

"Because I'm under orders to go back to the commodore. You lads turn in, an' I'll creep under cover whenever it's possible."

Having thus evaded my question as to what he had been doing, the old man went out of the tent, leaving Jerry and I gazing at each other, but not daring to speak the thoughts which were in our mind.

If Commodore Barney and Darius Thorpe were so anxious as to what might be the result of our meeting with the enemy, surely we two lads, ignorant of everything pertaining to warfare, save marching, had cause for alarm.

We sat facing each other a full ten minutes without speaking. It was possible to hear the laborers as they threw up the slight breastwork which could be of but little service save to mark our position, or the hum of conversation as the idlers paced to and fro near the tent, and all these sounds was token that we were a tiny part of the living machine with which nations waged war.

"There's no sense in sittin' here like a couple of dummies," Jerry finally said. "We'd best be gettin' all the sleep we can, an' then we'll be the better prepared for what is before us."

It would have pleased me well to find my father and have a talk with him; but I did not feel warranted in leaving my comrades at such a time, therefore I acted at once upon Jerry's suggestion.

It was not a difficult matter to fall asleep, after the long march, and until late in the night I enjoyed a most refreshing slumber, when the entrance of Darius awakened me.

"What is the time?" I asked.

"Near to midnight."

"Have you been working all this while?"

"Movin' around with the commodore, that's all," Darius replied, as he laid down beside me, and a moment later his heavy breathing told that the weary old man was resting after nearly twenty hours of labor.

Try as I might, it was impossible to close my eyes in sleep immediately. My thoughts would stray back to Benedict, and the more my mind dwelt upon mother and the children the less inclined did I feel for slumber.

I twisted and turned while my tent-mates slept more or less noisily, until by the cries of the sentinels I knew it was two o'clock in the morning, and then the idea that in a few hours I must be at work with no chance for rest, caused me to feel drowsy.

Save for the measured tread of the sentinels, and their calls from time to time, the silence of the encampment was profound, and I was idly saying to myself that it seemed difficult to fancy one was in the midst of more than two thousand men, when suddenly came a sharp cry from a distance, followed by another and another until the long roll of the drums rang out on the night air like distant thunder.

"What is it?" I cried, as Darius sprang to his feet.

"The call for all hands," the old man said as he groped around for his musket and ammunition. "The Britishers have shown themselves, hopin' to take us by surprise, most like. Move lively, lads, for Joshua Barney's followin' must be the first in line."

How we contrived to arm ourselves and get out of the tent into the midst of a throng of apparently bewildered men, I know not; but certain it is we found ourselves there following Darius, who was the only one I saw that evidently had his wits about him. Left to ourselves we would have wandered aimlessly around the encampment, as did many hundred of the men; but the old sailor, who surely should have been born a soldier, led us to the proper place as if he had always served his country on land instead of water.

We found our people from the flotilla in fairly good formation, ready to repel an attack, while the raw militia were scurrying to and fro like frightened sheep, and such fact made me feel proud that I was a member of "Barney's seamen."

"You've done well, lads," the commodore said approvingly, while he moved to and fro in front of us to make certain that we were all there. "We'll show these landsmen before this little scrimmage is over, that we old shell-backs are not web-footed when it comes to obeying orders."

Then it was that I began to understand why those who served under Joshua Barney were so proud of, and had such confidence in, him. There was in the ring of his voice, in his way of looking at a fellow, and his every movement, something which bespoke him a friend, and from that moment, I became as ardent an admirer of the fighting captain as ever was Darius Thorpe.

Of a verity I believe a full fifteen minutes elapsed before all our people were in line of battle, which spoke badly for what might happen in case the enemy planned a surprise, and then we learned that the alarm was a false one.

"Some weak-kneed sentinel was frightened at his own shadow," the commodore said, speaking quietly to his men. "But it hasn't done us any harm to be routed out in short order, for now we can see how necessary it may be to know our stations. Turn in, my hearties, and get what rest you can before we stand up in front of the red-coats to give them a lesson which they're needing."

Then we went back to our tent; but not to sleep. There is a mighty lot of excitement in turning out at night to be shot at, and Darius was the only member of our party who felt inclined to lie down.

We sat under the canvas talking in whispers, lest we disturb those near at hand, and the old sailor was soon giving good proof that he had sailed over into dreamland.

Of what did we talk? I can't really tell; but you might put yourself in our places, and say if you would not naturally speak of those most dear when you knew beyond a peradventure that within a few hours at the most you would be standing face to face with death.

When the day broke we stole softly out of the tent that Darius might get all the sleep possible, and, building a small fire, toasted the strips of bacon which made up the greater portion of our rations.

Then all hands sat around the tent to prevent any one from awakening the old man without good and sufficient cause, until sunrise, when word was passed from one to another that orders had been given to load all tents on the baggage-wagons, for the army was to move within an hour.

Then it was that we felt obliged to call Darius, and he came up on his feet at the first word, having all his wits about him at the moment of awakening, as is the habit of sailormen.

"Goin' to move, eh?" he said, when we told him of the order. "Then I'm thinkin' the next halt will be at whatsoever place General Winder has picked out for a battle-field. Look after the tent, lads, while I get a word with the commodore."

He marched off in the direction of headquarters, and we set about the task, I observing while passing among the militia, that the men as a rule were looking mighty glum, which augured ill for their performances if indeed a battle was near at hand.

Lossing's "War of 1812."

CHAPTER XV.

BLADENSBURG.

If I would tell all that was done in and around Washington by our people, and then have space in which to set down that which we lads were able to accomplish after the British had worked their will, very much of what then seemed highly interesting to us of the Avenger, must be passed over with but few words.

Perhaps it is well that it should be so, for we moved here and there without apparent aim or purpose until every man and officer was on the verge of exhaustion, and then, when it required no slight effort simply to remain on our feet, we were forced to meet the British army, which had advanced by short stages to the end that the men should be in the best physical condition for that struggle which decided the fate of the nation's capital.

We had no sooner struck our tents than word was brought that the President was on his way from the Potomac to review our troops, and at such information Darius grumbled loud and long, therefore we lads knew full well that Commodore Barney was opposed to such monkey-shines, otherwise the old sailor would not have dared to voice his complaints so stoutly.

When we might have been resting preparatory to the extraordinary fatigues that were before us, all our little army were forced to remain in line a good two hours, when President Madison was ready to begin the review, after which we marched and countermarched in front of him when three men out of every four were unable to understand the words of command.

It was a most ridiculous performance, as can well be fancied, and if the chief magistrate of the land was well pleased with the result, it is more than can be said for the officers in command.

By the time this mockery of a review had come to an end, scouts arrived with information that the main body of the enemy was still resting comfortably at Upper Marlboro, whereupon we were allowed to remain in line while the general sent couriers to the different commanders under him, directing them to move in the direction of the British camp.

We remained on parade from shortly after sunrise until ten o'clock in the forenoon, when we were as tired as if from a long march. Then we were dismissed; but since all the tents had been carried away in the baggage-wagons, there was nothing for us to do save lounge around in the open field exposed to the burning rays of the sun.

Nothing more was done in the way of throwing up breastworks, therefore we who had been the last to leave the fleet, were not called upon to handle pick or shovel.

An hour before noon General Winder, escorted by a troop of Laval's cavalry, left the encampment, and it was reported that he had gone to hold a conference with General Stansbury at Bladensburg.

All our rations, save what each man had held back in his pockets, were with the baggage-train, therefore we did not make a very hearty meal at noon, and perhaps it was as well, for while we were eating the small amount of food at our disposal two companies of Maryland militia, under command of Major Peter, came into camp on the double quick, with every evidence of terror on their faces.

Immediately the long roll was sounded, and as we fell into line once more, expecting to see the enemy advancing, word was whispered around that Major Peter, scouting in the direction of Marlboro on the Wood Yard road, had skirmished with the Britishers, and been driven back.

Commodore Barney and General Smith, who had command of the militia in the absence of General Winder, set about making preparations for battle, and Major McKenney was sent in hot haste to inform our commander of the position of affairs.

We remained under arms, and in momentary expectation of being engaged in a life or death struggle, until near sunset, when General Winder arrived, and without loss of time we were headed for Washington at a sharp pace, thus being forced to march over the same ground three times without having seen the enemy once.

We arrived for the second time at the capital about midnight, and were posted near the Eastern Branch bridge, there to get such repose as might be possible while we did guard duty on that side of the city.

In order to show that my grumbling had good foundation, I am going to set down here a portion of General Smith's report, as I heard it read a week later:

"The arrival at the Eastern Branch bridge terminated the four days of service of the troops of this District. They have

been under arms, with but little intermission, the whole of the time, both night and day; have traveled, during their different marches in advance and retreat, a considerable tract of country, exposed to the burning heat of a sultry sun by day, and many of them to the cold dews of the night, uncovered. They have in this period drawn but two rations, the requisition therefor in the first instance being but partially complied with, and it being afterward almost impossible to procure the means of transportation, the wagons employed by our quartermaster for that purpose being constantly impressed by the government agents for the purpose of removing the public records when the enemy's approach was known, and some of them thus seized while proceeding to take in provisions for the army."

On that night after our arrival we heard that the British were advanced within two miles of Long Old Fields. We who comprised the command under General Winder were worn and dispirited; Laval's horsemen were exhausted, and Stansbury's men at Bladensburg were tired out by long marches, lack of sleep and scarcity of food.

As if to make bad matters worse, our general fell from his horse near about daybreak, and really was not fit to remain in the saddle, although he pluckily kept on duty, not the least of which were many conferences with the President and members of his Cabinet.

At sunrise, after our force had indulged in less than two hours' sleep, Laval's scouts brought in positive information that the British General Ross was marching directly toward Bladensburg; half an hour later messengers came from General Stansbury with the word that the enemy was in his front, and urging that reinforcements be sent at once.

It was a case of making another march without breakfast, and, for the matter of that, we had had no supper the night previous.

There was more than one grumbler when we obeyed the summons to "fall in;" but the men under Commodore Barney held their peace after our leader urged that we act "like patriots, and not like children who had come out expecting to enjoy a holiday."

Well, off we posted for Bladensburg, a good eight miles from where we had halted, and I for one hoped that the battle, since there must be one, would be on at once, for it seemed better to be shot at than worn down by apparently aimless running to and fro.

We of the flotilla arrived near Bladensburg shortly after noon, and were stationed about a mile from the village on the Washington road. There we found two eighteens and three 12-pounders, all ship's guns, mounted on carriages, which had been drawn to the spot by the marines from the navy yard, and with these we were supposed to hold our position, having no other support than a crowd of raw militia in front of us.

Our force, meaning those under Commodore Barney's command, numbered, as I have already said, about five hundred, and although we had no knowledge of military tactics, we knew enough to obey our officers to the best of our ability, which was considerably more than could be said for very many of the troops near at hand.

I cannot set down that which followed, in proper fashion so that it could be understood by those familiar with the game of war; I only know what happened near my comrades and myself, for the crew of the Avenger had taken good care to stand side by side at this time when one or all of us might meet death through the medium of British lead.

For myself, I can say this: that when I looked around at the mass of men--five thousand strong I have since heard--and saw them wrangling over this trifling matter or that, openly disputing some command, or boldly leaving an assigned position to take up one which pleased them better, I had more fear of what might come to us through the cowardice or ignorance of our own people, than regarding the ability of the enemy to cut us up.

Darius made his preparations for the conflict by stuffing a huge piece of tobacco into his mouth, after which he proceeded to read us a lecture on behavior while under fire.

"Remember this," he said with the air of one who knows it all, "it isn't every bullet that finds its billet, an' the toughest time is just now, when we're waitin' for what all hands know is bound to come. Think of the folks at Benedict, an' kind'er figger out what they'd say if you went home after showin' yourselves cowards under fire. There are worse things than bein' killed or wounded in battle, an' the hardest is to live knowin' every youngster on the street has the right to call you a white-livered sneak what ran away when danger came. Stand here behind Joshua Barney, for I warrant he won't give you a chance to get in front of him, an' you'll be doin' about right."

When the old man had come to an end of his instructions, we would have conversed among ourselves, speaking much, no doubt, of the folks at home; but he sternly bade us hold our tongues, thinking that we would not be heartened by such talk, and straightway began to tell us a yarn of how he and Bill Jepson had fought under Commodore Barney, when the enemy was a ship of thirty-two guns, and they in a schooner carrying only twelve 10-pounders.

The yam had not yet come to an end when a commotion among the men in front of us caused me to crane my neck to look in the direction many were pointing, and there I saw the lines of red marching directly toward us in perfect order, as if on parade.

At almost the same moment the enemy began to throw rockets among our people, and these, exploding, hurled bullets' in every direction.

Within two minutes from the time I first saw the Britishers, no less than five men near me were stricken down, and the sight of the gaping wounds, together with the moans of the sufferers, gave me a sensation of faintness which was well-nigh overpowering.

"Stand steady you lads from the Avenger!" Darius cried sharply, warned, no doubt, by the sight of our pale faces that we were growing sick in more ways than one. "Somebody must get hurt, else the battle would never be over, an' we're here to spoil the Britishers' fun, which we shall do mighty soon. Joshua Barney is only waitin' for the proper time, an' when he gives the word to begin work, there'll be a change of tune."

At that moment, and before a gun had been fired, the militiamen in front of us broke into a run toward the rear, many of them throwing down their muskets as they took part in a most disgraceful retreat.

For the credit of our flotillamen, and the marines, I must set it down that not one of them wavered when the retreat was begun, and after the last of the cowards was in the rear I heard the commodore shout:

"Now's your time, lads! Give it to 'em hot an' strong, but make every charge count!"

Then our ship's guns were discharged, and the faintness left me as I saw the missiles cut down long lanes in the red-coated ranks; the smell of burning powder must have got into my brain, for from that moment I knew nothing save that my musket was to be loaded and discharged as rapidly as possible.

Men fell around me by the score, yet I gave no heed to the evidences of suffering. Once, a man shot through the head, pitched forward directly into my arms, covering me with blood as he sank dead at my feet, and yet, unused though I was to such scenes, it caused me no other feeling than that of anger because he had spoiled my aim.

I knew nothing of what was going on immediately in front of me, save that the red line, now broken by many a gap, was before my eyes; that it advanced, fell back and advanced again, sending among us such a shower of bullets that the buzzing in the air was like unto a swarm of angry bees.

Once Jerry tried to say something to me, but I pushed him back petulantly, so strong a hold had the fever of battle upon me. My musket barrel grew hot to the touch, and it was no longer possible to charge it properly. Without compunctions I exchanged weapons with one of the dead men at my feet, and continued the work, shouting aloud in vengeful joy when I saw an enemy fall by my hand.

Darius cried out in my ear; but I heard him not, nor did I heed the fact that he wanted to speak with me. I was insane with the scene of carnage, the salty odor of blood, and the choking, stifling fumes of burning powder.

Then, suddenly, Darius pulled me back by the coat-collar, forcing me to run with him, and as we went swiftly past our guns toward the rear, I asked what he was doing.

"The word had been given to retreat!" he cried. "Do the best you can with your legs, lad, for there'll be no quarter given if we are taken. We of the flotilla, with the marines, have borne the brunt of this whole battle for the last half hour, an' we've left our mark on the red-coats, even if we are turnin' tail now!"

"But the commodore?" I cried, now getting back a portion of my scattered senses.

"Wounded ten minutes ago, an' taken off the field, I hope. It was in my mind to help him; but he ordered me to go back to duty, an' I went, for when Joshua Barney gives the word, even though he's half dead, it's safest to obey without makin' much talk. Captain Miller of the marines was shot down at about the same time."

Then I had sense enough to see that all my comrades of the Avenger were close about me, none of them appearing to be hurt, and while we ran to save ourselves from being made prisoners, let me set down that which was written less than a week after the battle of Bladensburg, for, as it turned out, we had fought a regular battle.

"No troops remained in line, except the party under Commodore Barney, and two detachments on his right, that were well posted. Having been so roughly handled, the enemy made no attempt to advance directly in front of the seamen and marines, but, after forcing the troops on their right from the field, by a demonstration in that direction, they prepared to turn the rear of Barney in order to surround him.

"While these movements were going on in front, a party of light troops had been thrown out on the enemy's right, and the militia having abandoned the ground, they were also beginning to close upon the Americans that stood. By this time Commodore Barney, Captain Miller, and several other officers were wounded, and, victory being impossible against odds so great, an order was given to commence a retreat.

"The defense had been too obstinate to admit of carrying off the guns, which were necessarily abandoned. All the men retired, with the exception of the badly wounded; among the latter, however, were Commodore Barney and Captain Miller, who both fell into the enemy's hands.

"Of the marines, nearly one-third were among the casualties, and the flotilla-men suffered considerably, though in smaller proportions. The people of the flotilla, under the orders of Barney, and the marines, were justly applauded for their excellent conduct. No troops could have stood better, and the fire of both artillery and musketry has been described as to the last degree severe."

Jerry, who reads each day what I write, says that by putting down the account of what we of the flotilla did, I am blowing my own horn; but I do not so consider it, since the fact is a matter of history, and if we won praise on that disastrous day, then we should boast of it to the end that the picture may not be so black.

And now to return to us of the Avenger who were fugitives, without any idea of where safety might be found.

Strange to say, not one of us had been wounded, while many a better man close beside us had met his death.

Darius took it upon himself to lead our party, and right willing were we to have him act as commander, though I question if he really knew where he was going when we left the bloody field.

There is no shame in my heart when I set it down that we ran from the enemy, and did our level best at that game; the order to retreat had been given after we had done all that might have been expected from well seasoned troops, and to have remained longer would have been a useless sacrifice.

By instinct, rather than deliberation, Darius led us southward, close on the heels of several hundred men, all of whom were quite as eager as we to keep out of the enemy's clutches.

To the best of my knowledge the British did not pursue; they had won a victory, but in so doing received quite as much of a drubbing as was needed, and officers as well as privates were willing to remain on the hard-earned field.

I believe it was a full hour before Darius would allow us to slacken the pace, and then we were well among the foremost of the fugitives.

By this time we were so nearly winded that it was impossible to continue the flight without a breathing spell, and the old man allowed us to halt when we were close upon the city.

We could see that our people were bearing to the west, in order to give Washington a wide berth, and, when it was possible to speak because of my heavy breathing, I asked Darius where he proposed to go.

"That's what I haven't rightly made up my mind on," the old man said thoughtfully. "It stands to reason that the enemy will, sooner or later, try to make as many prisoners as possible, an' I'm allowin' that those fellows ahead are bound to have a hot time of it before they're many hours older. If we could only get down the river!"

"But we can't, an' that much is certain," Jerry said petulantly.

"Perhaps you've got another scheme in your head, since the oyster business turned out so well," and it is possible that I spoke sharply, realizing with bitterness just then that but for my partner's proposition to sell fish to the fleet I might never have discovered I owed my country a duty, and, consequently, would not at that moment be hunted down, or in danger of it.

"Perhaps I have," Jerry replied quietly, giving no heed to my disagreeable manner of speaking.

"What is it, lad?" Darius asked curiously. "I take it that at such a time as this a bit of advice, no matter from whom it comes, is well worth listenin' to."

"Why not go straight into Washington, an' stay there till we find a chance to slip down the river?"

"Into Washington?" Jim Freeman cried in alarm. "Why the Britishers have promised to burn the town!"

"I know that, an' it ain't likely any of our people will go there because of that same thing."

"An' yet you allow that we should stick our noses into the mess?" Darius asked.

"Ay, because the Britishers never will suspect that any who took part in the fight would go there. It should be possible to find a hiding-place somewhere in the town, an' it strikes me we wouldn't be in as much danger as if we kept with the crowd."

I began to think that there was more in Jerry's scheme than appeared when he first suggested it, and Darius seemed to be considering the matter very seriously.

"In the first place," my partner continued, warming to the subject when he saw that we were interested, "it would be necessary to get there before the Britishers took possession, an' it might be we could pass ourselves off as fellows who had stayed in the town like cowards, rather than take the chances of bein' shot."

"It's a pretty good scheme, lad, an' I for one am willin' to try it," Darius said abruptly as he rose to his feet. "If the others think as I do, we'd better be movin'."

After the old man had thus spoken there was not one of us who would have ventured to object, for he had shown that in any business of this kind he knew more than all of us put together, therefore we made ready to set out; but before the first step had been taken we saw coming toward us from the direction of Bladensburg, a man riding a mule, and waving his arms as if to attract our attention.

"Go on," I said petulantly. "We can't afford to hang around here very long if we count on finding a hiding-place in the city, and that is only one of the country people who wants to sell his mule."

"I reckon we'll wait a bit," Darius replied firmly. "Unless I'm way out of my reckonin', yonder man was in the fight, an' has scooped up one of the baggage-wagon mules to help him along."

"But our party is too big for safety now, and what will it be if we allow every straggler to trail on behind? We might as well follow the other fugitives."

All this I said like a peevish child, and no sooner had I ceased speaking than Darius seized me by the shoulder, forcing me to turn until I had a full view of the newcomer.

"Look at the man," the sailor cried sternly, "an' then say whether you will allow every straggler to trail on behind us when the road is as free to one as another?"

In an instant I was covered with confusion and remorse. The man to whose company I had objected was none other than my own father, and as he approached I could see that he was wounded in the right leg.

There was nothing I could say just then to show my comrades how deeply I regretted having spoken in such a tone, therefore I ran forward to greet him who, a moment previous, I had been eager to leave behind.

My comrades joined me as I saluted my father much more warmly than I might have done but for the unkind words I had spoken, and in a few seconds we heard all the story he could tell.

He had been wounded quite severely during the early part of the battle, and went to the rear in search of the surgeons. Failing to find those whose duty it was to be near the scene of action, and unable to walk any further owing to loss of blood, he laid down under one of the baggage-wagons which had been used to transport ammunition.

Here he bandaged his wound as well as possible, and was about to set out once more in search of aid, when the final retreat was ordered. Unable to walk, he would soon have been made a prisoner, or, perhaps, in the heat of the moment, received worse treatment, when the idea of escaping on one of the mules occurred to him.

Cutting the traces he rode off, taking a course to the north in his ignorance of the country; but, discovering his mistake, he turned about, and the first persons he saw were those of our party.

Without wasting any time we told him of Jerry's scheme, and he, having nothing better to propose, agreed to make the venture, more particularly because he stood sadly in need of some attention, since the wound had been only rudely bandaged.

Darius claimed that he could treat it after a sailorly fashion, provided we found clean water and cotton cloth, and declared that it would heal as well after such treatment as if any save a skilled surgeon had dressed it.

As a matter of course we kept the mule, for it was necessary my father should ride, and after the delay needed in which to explain matters, our little party started toward Washington, knowing full well that we were going where it was certain the enemy would soon come.

Although I had agreed to Jerry's scheme, and was willing to do whatsoever the majority of my companions decided

was for the best, I could not but believe that ours was as rash a move as fugitives ever made, for of a verity it was thrusting ourselves into the jaws of the lion.

Now that my father was with us, having his wound as proof that he had taken part in the battle, we could no longer hope to pass ourselves off as cowards who remained at home while others were fighting for us, and in event of being captured in the city I believed we would receive rougher usage than those taken prisoners on the battle-field.



CHAPTER XVI.

IN HIDING.

I question if my companions were any less uneasy in mind regarding our seeking a refuge in the city about to be occupied by the British, than was I; but no one ventured to say exactly what he thought lest it serve to check our courage, and of a verity we needed that in abundance if we were to make a success of Jerry's scheme.

Darius and I walked either side of the mule on which my father rode, where we might be ready to give the wounded man assistance in case his strength failed him suddenly; but neither of us dared discuss the possibilities of the future.

When we were come nearly to the city my father asked me if we had any money with which to purchase food, and I replied by showing him the two silver coins remaining of the amount paid by the Britishers for oysters.

Darius had the same number of pieces in copper, and Jim Freeman was the capitalist among us, he having no less than two shillings.

We had funds in plenty for the purchase of such food as would satisfy our hunger during two or three days, and the only matter which gave us any uneasiness was regarding a shelter, which had now become absolutely necessary since father joined us, for it went without saying that he must not be seen.

When Jerry conceived the scheme we were attempting to carry into execution, he believed, as did I, that Washington would be almost wholly abandoned by the citizens, and, in fact, it was reasonable to suppose that when the news of the defeat was brought to the city nearly every one would seek safety in flight, therefore we counted on being able to take shelter in any building which took our fancy.

While yet in the outskirts of the town, however, we understood that we were mistaken. So far as I could see, the inhabitants remained within their homes, probably under the belief that the enemy would behave like civilized people rather than as barbarians, and our chances for finding a hiding-place seemed small.

Having no acquaintance with the city, we walked on at haphazard until having come within a short distance of a tavern near the Capitol, hard by a large building which looked not unlike a rope walk.

It was in my mind that we could do no better than stop at the tavern, trusting that our small store of money would suffice to pay for one room in which all of us might gather; but to this Darius made most decided objection.

"It is the last place for us to choose," he said decidedly. "Even if the house is not taken as quarters by some of the officers, it will be visited by the rank and file, and we might as well be in the open air. Yonder smoke-house would suit our purpose better."

It seemed to me that in a city said to contain nine hundred buildings we could do better than hide in a smoke-house, and so I said, claiming that we would be in no more danger by making ourselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, than if we huddled into some corner.

Jim Freeman and Jerry seemed to be in my way of thinking; but Darius declared that unless we could content ourselves with such a hiding-place as was not likely to attract the attention of the enemy, we might count him out of the scheme.

"But what can be done with the mule, if we take to the smoke-house?" I cried, believing I thus had an argument which he could not well answer.

"Turn him loose, of course. He is government property, and would give stronger proof of our havin' been with the army than your father's wound. Besides, should the soldiers hear him, an' you can't reckon on keepin' that kind of a beast quiet, they'd be bound to have him out, if only for the sake of sport."

Then Darius went toward his chosen place of refuge, leaving us to follow or not as best pleased us, and the result can well be imagined.

We would not cut loose from the old sailor who, because of his experience in such circumstances, was best calculated to advise and aid, therefore we followed him meekly, but with many a mental complaint.

When we were come to the rough building, which was hardly larger than the cabin of the Scorpion, Darius lifted my father from the animal's back as if he had been no more than a child, and carried him into the place that was less inviting than the hold of the Avenger after we had taken out a cargo of oysters.

Placing him in one corner where he might sit with his back against the boards, the old sailor went outside and drove the mule in the direction of the tavern, himself following until he was lost to view, much to our surprise and disquietude.

"Now what is he about?" Jerry asked petulantly. "I thought we were to stay here?"

"It seems that we are," I replied with a mirthless laugh; "but it appears that Master Thorpe counts on being better lodged."

"Do you suppose he allows to stop at the tavern while we're to stay in this smoke-house?" Jim Freeman asked in a tone of dismay, and I, sore at heart because my advice had not been followed, replied bitterly, thereby setting myself down for at least the twentieth time as a simple:

"We can be certain he'll look after himself, no matter how we may fare."

Then we stood waiting in silence until it should be certain that Darius had really abandoned us, when my father said, striving to suppress any evidence of the pain which he suffered:

"You lads are making a big mistake if you think Darius Thorpe would leave you at such a time as this. He has ever had the name of holding to a comrade, and he'll not steer another course while we're in so much danger."

Five minutes later I was covered with shame because of my unkind words, when we saw the old man returning with as much hay as he could stagger under.

"Here's what will make our cripple a bit more comfortable," he said cheerily as he thrust his burden through the narrow door. "Pile it well up under him, an' I'll go back for the rest of the supplies."

None of us lads made any comment when Darius returned toward the tavern; but that all hands were conscious of the same sense of shame as had come over me, I understood by the expression on their faces.

When the old man joined us the second time he had in his arms the larger part of a ham, some strips of cotton cloth, and a jug of water.

"How did you get all that stuff?" Jerry asked in surprise.

"Traded the mule. When I was drivin' the beast off it struck me that he might be made to serve us a bit, so I drove a bargain."

"Did you give the people to understand that he was yours?"

"Not a bit of it, lad; I ain't tryin' that kind of business even when I'm hungry. I told the truth; but claimed that the beast was under my protection, an' I'd be willin' to leave him for the few things we might need. It ain't certain but I'd got what I asked for without the mule, though it was better to have a reg'lar trade made. Pitch into the ham, and later, it may be we can get some bread."

We did not wait for the second invitation; but began chipping off bits of the meat, eating greedily regardless of the fact that it was uncooked, when I saw that Darius was making no effort toward getting his share.

"Why don't you eat?" I asked as I gave my father a small handful of the uninviting food.

"I'm the surgeon now, an' till this job is finished I reckon I can contrive to get along without more in my mouth than a piece of tobacco. It's mighty lucky I laid in a good supply before we left Pig Point."

The true-hearted old sailor had provided us lads with a meal, and now proposed to dress my father's wound before attending to his own wants, which must have been greater than ours because he had performed more work.

I resolved then and there, that however much against him might be appearances, I would never believe him guilty of any mean act toward his comrades, and in the future he should have the full half of anything which might come into my possession.

Darius washed and bandaged father's wound; raised the bed of hay that he might recline more comfortably; fastened the door in such a manner that there would be no token on the outside of our occupancy, and not until all this had been done did he give heed to his own necessities.

"We're not so bad off here as we might be," the old man said in a tone of content as he whittled away at the small remnant of ham, while we lads were stretched at full length on the hay. "I'm allowin' that whatever happens, the Britishers won't look in a smoke-house for American soldiers or sailors, an' we can stay here snug as bugs in a rug,

barrin' bein a little hungry, till Amos' father is in better condition to travel."

"But it will be a long while before that wound is healed!" Jim Freeman exclaimed in dismay.

"Yes, I reckon it'll be quite a spell, pervidin' the Britishers stay in the city; but if they go it won't be a hard job to find a boat that'll take us to the Patuxent. But there's little call to make much talk about movin', for we can't leave one of the crowd, no matter what happens to the rest of us."

By the time all this had been done it was sunset. The retreat from Bladensburg had been begun about four o'clock in the afternoon, and we were not so badly off to be in Washington and housed so soon after the defeat.

The one distressing question was whether the enemy would make search in the city for such as we?

After he had eaten all the scraps of ham remaining on the bone, Darius set about making a more thorough examination of our refuge, beginning with the small shutter at the top of the building which was used when, the meat having been cured, it was desired to clear the place of smoke.

"What are you doing up there?" my father asked when the old sailor clambered on the logs to get at the shutter.

"Makin' sure we can keep a lookout in case things get too hot," Darius replied with a laugh. "I'm allowin' this shutter can be swung open a crack without its bein' noticed from the outside."

He had no more than opened the window when an exclamation burst from his lips, and without delay I clambered up beside him.

From this point of vantage we had a fairly good view of what was going on near about the Capitol building, and my heart beat fast and furiously with fear as I saw the enemy advancing.

"There seems to be the biggest part of the British army," Darius said, pointing in the direction of the burying-ground, where I could see the soldiers bivouacking for the night; but nearer at hand were two officers, evidently high in command--General Ross and Admiral Cockburn, as I afterward learned--, with an escort of three or four hundred men, riding directly toward us.

Within full view of our hiding-place was a dwelling standing near the government building, and as we gazed I saw the flash of a musket come from this house, when the horse on which the general was riding fell dead, carrying the officer to the ground with him in what looked to be an ugly fall.

"That's a fool trick!" Darius cried angrily when no other sign of attack could be seen or heard. "A crazy man must have fired that shot, which can do no other good than to make the enemy hot to inflict some punishment!"

We saw a score or more of the escort rush to the assistance of the officer, while the remainder of the soldiers were wheeled about to face the dwelling.

I was confident that they would fire a volley into the house, and, indeed, I could well have excused such a course, considering the provocation; but instead of this a squad of men were told off to enter the building, as we saw when the force ran forward on the double-quick with fixed bayonets.

By this time, as may well be imagined, all our party, with the exception of my father, were clinging to the timbers of the building that a view might be had of what was going on outside, and Darius, ever mindful of others, took it upon himself to keep our invalid informed of what was being done.

"They've sent a squad of men to clean out the house, I reckon," the old sailor said for father's benefit. "The officer ain't hurt so but that he can mount a spare horse which a colonel has just brought him. Now the two in command are pointin' out the different buildin's; looks as if they were pickin' out their quarters. There's one thing certain, fine birds like them won't want to sleep in a smoke-house, so we ain't likely to be turned out right away."

I interrupted the report by exclaiming aloud in my excitement, for I saw smoke issuing from the dwelling, which I afterward learned was the home of Mr. Robert Sewall, and then it was I understood for what purpose the squad had been sent.

"They've fired the house," Darius continued to my father, "an' without givin' them who may be livin' there a chance to carry anythin' out. Soldiers are stationed to prevent the people from tryin' to fight the flames, an' it wouldn't surprise me if we saw a pretty hot time in this town."

At this moment a squad of men was sent to the rope-walk, another to the tavern hard by our place of refuge, and a third to the next building, which from the sign on its front I knew to be the National Intelligencer newspaper.

After what we had seen it was not difficult to guess the purpose of these soldiers, and Darius said to my father:

"They're firin' the rope-walk now, an' it looks as if the whole city might go."

"Surely the British wouldn't do so barbarous a deed!" my father exclaimed. "War isn't carried on in that way these days."

"It seems to be goin' so now. There comes the smoke from the tavern, an' men are stationed to prevent the people from savin' anything. How about it, lads? If we had spent our last cent hirin' a room there, the smoke would be forcin' us out by this time, an' we'd soon find ourselves prisoners in the hands of such as stand ready to burn a city where are mostly women an' children!"

"It's not certain but that we'll be forced out as it is!" I exclaimed. "When the tavern barns get afire this smoke-house stands a good chance of burning."

"It may be, lad; but the wind draws in on the other side, an' I'm allowin' that this shanty, small as it is, won't come to harm, though if it does go, we'll try to keep our upper lips stiff so the villainous red-coats shan't have a chance to crow over us very much."

We saw the men comprising the escort now break ranks, each going, apparently, where he pleased, and Darius cried in anger:

"It is to be a reg'lar sack of the city, such as we're told they had in the old times, when men were reckoned as bein' little better than brutes! Work like this will count big for the Britishers before the other nations of the world! There goes a crowd of soldiers into the little shop beyond the tavern; they're plunderin' it in piratical style! See 'em throw the goods out into the street! The red-coats from the encampment, scentin' booty, are comin' up by the hundreds!"

From where we were perched it was possible to see three shops, and by the time the tavern was well afire no less than five hundred men had robbed these, tramping into the dirt such goods as they did not want to carry away, and then the buildings were set on fire.

Verily it was a barbarous sack of the city!

Then it was, when the flames from the buildings of which I have spoken were mounting high in the sky, that I observed the commander order up a full company of soldiers. It was possible to see, for although night had come the fire lighted up surrounding objects as at noonday, that he gave them orders at great length, after which they started off toward the Capitol at full speed.

"They're goin' to burn the government buildin's!" Darius cried for my father's benefit. "A hundred or more have been detailed to do the work, an' the commanders are watchin' proceedin's like that chap, I forget his name, who played on the fiddle while Rome was burnin'. An' all this is bein' done by the high an' lofty Britishers, who count on settin' the pace for the whole world!"

Jim Freeman and Dody Wardwell, who could not find perches near the window that they might look out, now opened the door regardless of consequences, and stood gazing at as cruel a scene as can well be imagined.

Women and children, driven back by the red-coats, stood tearfully watching the destruction of their homes, forced to see every cherished article destroyed, and, more than that! I saw a soldier tear from the hands of an old lady a small box which he opened, took some things therefrom which I judged were pieces of jewelry, and threw the remainder into the flames.

The smoke-house was as hot a place as I care to remain in very long at a time, and as well filled with smoke as when put to the use for which it was originally intended. Even Darius had doubts about the small buildings escaping the flames, and said to my father:

"Keep watch for the first show of fire, Master Grout, an' we'll see that you're posted as to what is bein' done outside. If we have to leave here, it'll be a good idee to draw off toward the rope-walk; there's no one near by that place, an' we may contrive to steer clear of the enemy."

Now it was that long tongues of fire curled above the government building, swaying this way and that in the wind like fiery serpents, until the inflammable portion of the nation's Capitol was ablaze.

It seemed as if our smoke-house was completely surrounded by burning buildings. Had the Britishers given any attention to such an insignificant structure as we were concealed in, Jim and Dody must have been discovered, for they gave no heed to hiding themselves as they stood literally transfixed with horror at the terrible scenes.

Not until all the buildings were so enveloped in flames that there could be no possibility of saving them, did the two officers ride away, and then it was to go in the direction of their encampment.

I gave no further heed to the barbarians; but watched with a sort of fascination the destroying element until Darius cried:

"There's more mischief afoot! See, a full regiment are under marchin' orders!"

"What can they do now?" I asked helplessly. "Everything around here is in flames; the entire city is ruined!"

"There's the President's house, an' a good many fine dwellin's at the other end of the town," the old sailor replied. "Unless I'm way out of my reckonin', you'll see more fire before there's less."

The barns of the tavern were now burning; but the wind drew in with greater force, a draft having been formed by the flames, I suppose, and while our refuge was as hot as it well could be, the more intense heat was carried in the opposite direction.

"I reckon this 'ere smoke-house will stand while many a better buildin' goes down," Darius announced. "We're gettin' the biggest part of the heat from the stables now, an' I don't see any signs of fire on these logs. You lads stay here with our invalid, an' I'll sneak 'round outside a bit. There may be a chance to get somethin' in the way of rations if the men break into more shops, as is likely."

Then the old man slipped down from his uncomfortable perch, stopped at the door to warn Jim and Dody that they must not stray far away, and disappeared behind the ruins of the tavern.

It gave me a certain sensation of loneliness to have Darius go at that time. Although it was late in the day to make such a discovery, I had come to understand of how much assistance he was to us lads, and how helpless we would be without him; but, as a matter of course, I could not presume to dictate as to his movements.

The one singular thing to me in this wanton work of destruction, was the fact that not all the buildings in this portion of the city had been given over to the flames. It seemed as if the British commander had singled out certain dwellings to be burned, while the others were unmolested, save in two cases where I saw soldiers bringing out plunder which was valueless to them, and had been taken only in a spirit of cruelty.

Perhaps an hour was spent by the enemy in our immediate vicinity, and then that quarter of the city was deserted by all save the homeless ones, or those who mourned over the loss of property.

The conflagration was still sufficient to light up the streets and fields near by, therefore we could not venture out save at the risk of being seen; but I question if any especial attention would have been given us, except in the case of my father, had we gone boldly forth.

Had he not been with us I should have proposed that the moment was come when we might be able to slip down the river unobserved, for who would give heed to a party of lads when the capital city of the United States was in flames? With my father, however, we were forced to remain in hiding, for his wound was sufficient evidence that he had taken part in the battle of Bladensburg, and this would insure his being seized as a prisoner of war.

Jim and Dody, however, went across to where two shops were in flames, and returned a few moments later with a piece of bacon which had been trampled upon in the street, a bag of dirty flour, and, what was better than all, three loaves of bread, the whole of which had been thrown aside by the Britishers when they plundered the buildings.

It was quite a store for our empty larder, unsavory though the bread and flour looked; but hungry lads, and particularly those who are fugitives, cannot afford to be squeamish in regard to their food.

In less than half an hour after the regiment marched from the encampment toward the upper end of the city, we saw the flames rising in great volume, telling that there was no idea in the minds of the victors to spare anything which could readily be destroyed.

As a matter of course, we did not then know what was being done; but later we learned that the President's mansion, the Treasury buildings, the Arsenal, and the barracks, where three thousand troops could be quartered, were all laid in ashes under the orders of General Ross and Admiral Cockburn.

Before midnight the conflagration in the portion of the city where we had sought refuge, had so far subsided, because there was nothing left for the flames to feed upon, that only glowing embers, and the blackened walls of the Capitol could be seen; but the night was turned into day because of the fires at the other end of the town.

We lads were weary with watching the wicked work; Jim and Dody had toasted a large piece of bacon over the

embers of the tavern; we had partaken of a second meal rather because the food was at hand than owing to hunger, and now all hands felt the need of sleep, even though we were literally surrounded by enemies.

But Darius had not returned, and we could not give ourselves up to slumber while he remained absent.

At first I fancied that he was watching the work of the Britishers; but when my father began to show signs of alarm because the old sailor did not return, my anxiety was great.

If any of the red-coats came upon him, they would suspect that he had been among that company of seamen and marines who had inflicted so much injury upon them during the day just passed, and it was not difficult to understand that he would speedily be made a prisoner.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISSING.

I am minded to set down here what I afterward saw printed, concerning the doings in other portions of Washington, the particulars of which we were ignorant at the time.

"While the public buildings in Washington were in flames, the national shipping, stores, and other property were blazing at the navy yard; also the great bridge over the Potomac, from Washington city to the Virginia shore.

"Commodore Thomas Tingey was in command of the navy yard, and, before the battle, had received orders to set fire to the public property there in event of the British gaining a victory, so as to prevent its falling into the hands of the invaders. Tingey delayed the execution of the order for four hours after the contingency had occurred.

"When, at half-past eight in the evening, he was informed that the enemy was encamped within the city limits, near the Capitol, he applied the torch, and property valued at about a million of dollars was destroyed.

"The schooner Lynx was saved, and most of the metallic work at the navy yard remained but little injured. The fine naval monument was somewhat mutilated, but whether accidentally at the time of the conflagration, or wantonly by the British, who went there the next day to complete the destructive work, is an unsettled question.

"At the same time, the Long bridge over the Potomac was fired at both ends. The Americans on the Virginia side thought a large body of British troops were about to pass over, and fired that end to foil them, while the British on the city side, perceiving, as they thought, a large body of Americans about to cross over from the Virginia side, fired the Maryland end of the bridge. The value of the entire amount of property destroyed at Washington by the British and Americans was estimated at about two million dollars."

While we awaited the coming of Darius Thorpe, and believing that the city of Washington would be totally destroyed before the Britishers had gratified their desire for vengeance, Jerry started a subject which caused me to be more uncomfortable in mind than I had been concerning the absence of the old sailor.

"The enemy are bent on burnin' all the government buildin's in the city, even if they do no more, an' what about the jails?"

I was at a loss to fully understand the question; but my father replied:

"They won't go so far as to burn the prisoners, lad. All that crowd of evil-doers will be set at liberty, and I reckon they'll be the only Americans who can rejoice because of the English victory at Bladensburg.

"Then in that case," Jerry said grimly, "we can set it down as a fact that Elias Macomber is paradin' the streets with his good friends the British, boastin' of his suffering at the hand of the Americans."

I started up in very unpleasant surprise. Until this moment I had given no heed to the cur whom we had captured twice, since we left the burning fleet at Pig Point; but now I realized that my partner was right. There could be no question but that Elias Macomber was a free man once more, and all our efforts to bring him to justice had only resulted in giving him an opportunity to pose as a martyr!

"Well, he's got a chance to pay off old scores now, if he only knew it," Jim Freeman suggested. "How happy the villain would be if he knew where he could find us in hidin'!"

"Don't talk about him," I said petulantly. "It makes me heartsick to think that after all our work he is in fine feather, strutting around the city as one of the best friends the British had in this section. Speak of something else. What of Bill Jepson? Does any one know if he came out of the battle alive?"

"I saw him not more than five minutes before the order was given to retreat," my father said. "He had been sent back to the wagons for ammunition, and appeared to be having a royal time."

"We'll hope he got away at the last, for if he's taken they'll hang him as a deserter," I said, and then, finding it impossible to prevent my thoughts from straying to our missing comrade, I added, "Darius wouldn't have stayed away so long unless something serious had happened. We ought to go in search of him."

"Where would you look first?" Jerry asked. "If the Britishers got their hands on him we stand little chance of seein' the poor fellow, for they'll keep him a close prisoner."

"It doesn't seem possible that we can accomplish very much," I said with a long drawn sigh; "but we must do as he

would if one of us was missing."

"And what would that be?" my father asked.

"I wish I knew, sir. He surely would search for us, as we must for him; but I am all at sea as to how the work should be begun."

Every member of the party was eager to be doing something, but so far as having any plan in mind, they were all like me, and we sat there staring at each other like a lot of frightened rabbits until I could remain idle no longer.

"I'm going out somewhere!" I cried. "Almost anything is better than sitting here in suspense, when it may be that he has simply fallen into difficulties from which we might extricate him."

"But what of the British?" my father asked, and I replied recklessly:

"We must take our chances as to them, sir. It does not seem probable that two or three lads would be looked upon by them with suspicion, for there must be many wandering around the city this night."

"Who will go with you?"

"That's for me to do," Jerry said promptly. "The other fellows will stay here with you, sir, and the door must not be opened without good reason. Keep under cover while we are gone," he added to Jim, "an' don't let one of the boys so much as stick his nose outside. Come on, Amos, the longer we stand here talkin' about it the greater will the danger appear."

Then he stepped outside quickly, and I followed his example, closing the door behind me lest father should attempt to say something in the nature of a farewell, which I knew would unnerve me, because I believed it was exceedingly dangerous for any of our party to move around the city.

When we were alone in the night, where the shadows were distorted by the dancing glow of the live embers on every hand, Jerry said grimly:

"It was foolish to make any talk about what we would do toward findin' Darius, while we were in the smoke-house, because we might have argued till mornin' without comin' to any conclusion; but now that we've started out I'd like to know how we're goin' to work?"

I could make no satisfactory reply to this question, and plainly told him so. We had nothing to guide us on the search. The old man had given us no idea of where he might go, and all we knew was that he disappeared beyond the burning tavern.

"He wouldn't have followed the Britishers," I said after a long pause, "therefore it seems foolish to look for him at the other end of the city. If we only knew what he went after!"

"I reckon the first thing in his mind was to get food, and he might have thought that could be done where the shops were bein' robbed."

"And then would come to his mind the question as to how we might get down the river while father is unable to walk," I added, believing that by thus trying to make out what Darius was most likely to do we could hit upon a plan for the search.

"The only way we'd be able to leave this city by water, if we wanted to get home, would be on the Potomac river, an' he'd need a stout canoe for such a voyage."

We were not coming to any understanding by this line of thought, therefore I harked back to the belief that he might have followed the Britishers to the upper end of the city, and proposed, knowing of no better course, to walk in that direction.

The day was beginning to dawn. No soldiers were to be seen on the streets, and I began to believe that the invaders, wearied with their work of destruction, had returned to the encampment near the burying-ground.

We came upon the ruins of the President's mansion; the fire had eaten out the interior of the building, but the walls were yet standing, and near about, apparently having neither purpose nor business there, were an hundred people or more, all gazing at the evidences of the most approved method of making war by the British standard.

We mingled with these idlers to make certain Darius was not among them, and then went toward the other ruins on a like errand, but with no success.

It was sunrise, perhaps a little later, when we stood near the ruins of the barracks, where a number of negroes were digging amid the glowing embers with the hope of finding weapons which might be restored to a condition of usefulness after being subjected to such great heat.

One of these searchers for useless treasure straightened up as we approached, and I saw that he was an old man, who looked as if he might have been a gentleman's servant.

"Do you live here in Washington, uncle?" I asked, and the old darkey replied:

"I'se ain't no ways conditioned fur to answer dat question, sah, kase I dunno whar massa am ter be foun' dese yere queer days wha' we'se habin'."

"Who is your master?"

"Massa Clayton, sah. He's foolin' 'roun' wid some ob dem militious men; but I ain't foun' out wedder he whipped de Britishers, or ef dey done gone got de bes' ob him."

"I reckon you can say that he has got the worst of it up to the present time, for your 'militious' men didn't make any great showing," I said with a laugh, and then there came into my mind the memory of Elias Macomber. "Tell me, uncle, where did the American soldiers keep their prisoners?"

"Right hyar, sah; I'se done seed de barracks jail many a time."

"Were you around here when the building was fired?"

"Yes sah, I stood right hyar when de ossifers rode up."

"Did they set the prisoners free?"

"Sure enuf, honey, more'n twenty ob dem, an' I'se tellin' you dat dem white men was mighty glad fo' to get clear so easy like."

"Come on, Amos," Jerry said impatiently. "You can do no good talkin' with the old darkey, for he doesn't know anything concerning our business."

I recognized that fact fully, and yet I lingered to ask one more question, never fancying of how much importance the answer might be to us.

"Where do the British keep their prisoners? Surely they must have brought in some since the battle, and these barracks would have been a prime place for anything of the kind."

"Dey is pilin' de 'Mericans inter dat stone house back ob whar de arsenal uster was 'fore it got set on fire las' night."

"Where is that, uncle?" Jerry cried excitedly, and the old darkey replied as he pointed out the direction:

"Ober yander, sah, des whar you'se kin see de red roof."

Now it was that I understood what was in Jerry's mind, and only with difficulty could I restrain myself from running forward at full speed.

If Darius had been captured, then it was in the "stone house" he must be confined, and I believed our search would be at an end if we could look into every portion of that building.

There were many loungers near about, and no one might say how many were British spies or sympathizers, therefore we remained looking at the men who were digging amid the ruins until feeling certain our departure would not attract undue attention.

There were many lads of about our age idling on the streets, watching simply from curiosity the movements of the enemy, and I said to myself that if we were careful to do nothing which might cause suspicion, we could walk wheresoever we pleased without fear of being taken for lads who, under Commodore Barney, had given the invaders such good battle for the possession of the hill at Bladensburg.

"Now we know where Darius is!" Jerry exclaimed when we were where there was little danger our words would be overheard.

"How can you be so certain of that? He might have come to grief in many another way than that of being gobbled up by the enemy."

"In any other case I'll warrant he'd have contrived to send some word to us. I'm convinced he's in the 'stone house.'"

"In which event I'm afraid we can't be of much assistance to the poor fellow. The Britishers will take good care that their prisoners don't escape."

"I'm not so certain about that," Jerry replied stoutly. "In case we have time enough, it should be possible to do somethin'. If we could let him know that we're near at hand I'll go bail he'd cook up some kind of a plan."

While thus talking we had been walking at a reasonably rapid pace toward the ruins of the arsenal, and were now arrived so near that it was possible to see the red-coated sentries pacing to and fro in front of the building. At one side a number of soldiers were bivouacked, probably that they might be on hand in case the prisoners attempted to rise against the keepers, and here, there, everywhere were curious ones--perhaps some interested as were we--gazing at the small building where were so many brave fellows, most likely penned up like cattle.

"The greater number of those idlers must be townspeople, and since they are allowed to loiter around the buildin' there's no good reason why we shouldn't do the same," Jerry said as I came to a halt, and he had hardly more than spoken before he stepped back very suddenly, pulling me with him.

"What's the matter?" I asked in alarm, for at such a time one's fears rise rapidly.

"Look at that fellow who is standin' on his tiptoes to look in at the window!" my partner whispered, and obeying, I saw that miserable cur whom we had twice captured, and who had contrived to escape us the same number of times.

"Elias Macomber!" I cried involuntarily.

"Ay," Jerry replied, "an' now I can read you the whole riddle. Darius came around this way when the prisoners were set free; Macomber saw him, and gave information to the enemy, thus causin' the old man's arrest. Now the villain is tryin' to get a glimpse of the sailor in order to crow over him!"

I had no doubt but that the lad had come very near the truth in his guessing; but I did not speculate upon it very long, for the question in my mind was whether we could be of any service to the old man who had served us so truly and faithfully.

"What's to be done?" Jerry asked as we stepped behind a clump of bushes in a nearby garden where we might not be seen by the fellow who would have rejoiced if he could have put us in the same place with Darius.

At the moment Jerry spoke I had never an idea as to what might be done; but I replied as if the plan was plainly mapped out in my mind:

"You shall go back to the smoke-house and tell father and the lads what we have learned. Say that we may not be back until dark; but they are to stay under cover no matter what happens, short of being discovered by the British. I'll watch here till Macomber goes away, for he isn't likely to play at that game all day, and you should be back within an hour."

Jerry started off without stopping to argue the question, and I was left alone to keep in view the man who could do us so much mischief if he had an inkling that we were in the vicinity.

Twice he spoke with the sentinel, as if asking some favor, and each time the man shook his head decidedly, therefore I concluded that the cur had tried to enter the building that he might jeer such of the prisoners as had been friends of his in the past.

Then he peered in at the window again, never making an effort to look through any other, and I concluded that from such position he could see the prisoner he had most reason to hate, which, of course, must be Darius.

I did not dare remain in one position all the while, lest some one see that I was spying upon the prison and grow suspicious as to my motives, while Macomber was so intent upon gazing at his enemies that I might have brushed past him without attracting attention.

Therefore it was that I paced to and fro, never taking my eyes from the cur, however, and making certain there was a place of concealment near at hand into which I could dart at a moment's warning.

Not until fully half an hour had passed did he abandon his fruitless efforts, and then he walked in the direction of the British encampment as if with some fixed purpose in his mind, which, I had no doubt, was to ask for a permit to visit the prisoners.

Had he gone toward any other quarter of the city it would have pleased me to see him go; but now I was sorely

distressed in mind, for his way led the same course Jerry must pursue when returning from the smoke-house, and it would be the irony of fate if the two should come face to face.

However, that was an evil which I could not mend, and, therefore, I put the matter from my mind so far as possible, while I set about doing the only thing which seemed to promise a chance to have speech with our comrade.

I proposed to take Macomber's place at the window, and if it was possible to see Darius inside, there was no question in my mind but that I could contrive to attract his attention.

There was no little danger in making the attempt, because I might thus arouse suspicion in the mind of the sentry, or be seen by an officer who would insist on knowing why I was there; but it was the only way by which I could have speech with Darius, if indeed he was a prisoner, and I determined to take the chances.

I lounged across the street as if having no particular purpose in view; walked past the end of the building twice, peering about me like a simple, and then stepped up to the window.

One glance inside and I saw the man for whom I had been searching. He was lying at full length on the floor, chewing tobacco most industriously, and seated tailor-fashion beside him was Bill Jepson.

There were very many militiamen in the room; but these two old shell-backs seemed to hold themselves aloof from the others, and I could well understand that this exclusiveness was because of the cowardice shown by many of the toy soldiers the day previous.

Neither Darius nor Bill seemed to be paying any attention to what was going on around them, and I began to realize that it might not be as simple a matter to attract their attention as I had supposed.

I did not dare do anything which would cause the sentry to be curious, or be noticed particularly by those who were passing in either direction, therefore the most I ventured was to drum idly on the glass with the tips of my fingers, which was not a difficult task since the iron bars were so far apart that I could thrust my entire arm between them and the window-sash.

Darius was not as heedless to the surroundings as he appeared. No sooner had I begun to tap ever so gently than he looked up, and after one quick, meaning glance, rose leisurely to his feet, speaking softly meanwhile to Bill.

The latter never so much as looked toward me; but the two moved here or there as if weary with remaining long in one position, and all the while they were approaching the window.

Then Darius leaned against the sash, with Bill facing the middle of the room, as he talked with many gesticulations to his companion.

I noticed that the old man bent over as if weary, until his face was very near the glass, and while Bill waved his arms as if in the midst of a heated argument, I saw Darius' lips move.

"On the roof--to-night--bring rope--ten o'clock."

No less than three times were these words repeated, I reading them from the motion of his lips, for as a matter of course he did not dare to speak so loud that I could hear him.

Then I went through the same motions with *my* lips, in order to make certain there could be no mistake, and Darius nodded his head in token that I had the words correctly.

Now it was my business to get away from the prison as soon as possible, for Elias Macomber might return at any moment, and I backed into the street while gazing at the top of the building, looking, most likely, the greenest lad that ever visited a city.

While thus acting the simple I was making ready for whatsoever plan Darius wanted to carry into effect, for I studied the outside of the jail until I could tell within a foot of how much rope would be needed.

The "stone house" was three stories in height, with an ordinary pitched roof from which projected four chimneys--two at each end. From the eaves to the ground I judged it was not less than thirty feet, and from the eaves to the nearest chimney, measuring at whichever corner you chose, was ten feet. To that length add three feet for a turn around the chimney and two half-hitches, and one had the length of rope Darius wanted--say forty-three or four feet.

I noticed that on the side of the roof nearest the street was a trap-door or scuttle very nearly in the middle, well up toward the ridge-pole, and it must be that our comrades would come through that, since I saw no other way by which they could get outside.

Without doubt those two old shell-backs had made a careful survey of the place within ten minutes after being imprisoned, and had a plan for escape mapped out ready to be carried into execution, providing any aid could be had from the outside.

By the time I had backed entirely across the street I had a picture of the jail in my mind which could be recalled at any moment, and as I turned to saunter away I came face to face with Jerry.

"Have you been over there?" he asked, motioning toward the "stone house."

"Yes, and have the same as talked with Darius and Bill Jepson. Let us get out of sight where we shan't be watched. I was afraid you would run into Macomber; he started off some time ago, and I got it into my head that he was going to the British encampment."

"I reckon that's where he was bound for. I kept my eyes open mighty wide both goin' an' comin', therefore saw the cur while he was a long distance away, otherwise we might have run into each other as you an' I did."

"All right at the smoke-house?"

"Snug as bugs, an' your father is as chipper as a sparrow."

Then I led the way up what appeared to be a lane in the rear of some dwelling, until we were where we could talk without danger of being seen or heard.



CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ESCAPE.

Jerry was thoroughly astonished, after I had told my story, because we had had such plain sailing when there was nothing to start us on a course for the missing comrade. We had gone out blindly, and by sheer accident ran upon our man without trouble or delay.

"It heartens a fellow to have things happen this way," my partner said in a tone of satisfaction. "There's no question but that we're in a bad box, take it all around, for after the British get settled down in the city they will most likely look about for such as us, therefore our work must be done quickly, an' by your hittin' the nail square on the head it looks as if we might pull through all right."

The future did not look so promising to me. Darius and Bill undoubtedly knew that they could gain the roof of the "stone house" during the night; but even then they were far from being free, and I questioned if it would be possible for us to loiter around the building after sunset without attracting the attention of the sentries.

However, it was not for me to throw cold water, because a fellow needs all his courage when he would do that which lay before us, and it was well Jerry should feel confident as to the result.

Therefore it was that instead of discussing how we could set about rendering the necessary aid, I began by questioning as to how the rope might be procured, and, as a matter of fact, it was by no means a simple matter to get one of the desired length.

"We've got to buy it, of course," Jerry said quickly, and as if it was possible for us to make such purchases at any time.

"In the first place we haven't money enough," I suggested, "and secondly, how many shops will you find open in this city?"

These questions were sufficient to let Jerry understand that it was not all plain sailing before us, and after some reflection he said:

"Suppose we go back to the smoke-house? There we can talk it over with the others, an' at the same time get something by way of breakfast."

There was plenty of time at our disposal, since Darius had set ten o'clock that night as the hour when we could aid him, and I welcomed my partner's proposition; but instead of going directly to the place of refuge, I insisted on making a long detour to lessen the chances of running across Elias Macomber.

That the cur had gone to the encampment hoping to get a permit to see the prisoners, in order to gloat over their misfortune, I had no doubt, and if he was successful I felt equally certain he would go to the jail by the shortest route. In event of failure, however, and I was positive he would fail, the villain might wander anywhere while working off his disappointment, therefore it stood us in hand to be exceeding cautious.

As it proved, however, we had seen the last of that miserable British-lover, and after Jerry saw him on the street, he passed out of our lives for many months.

I believed of a verity that we walked at least three miles, cutting across lots here, or traveling many rods out of our course there, until it seemed as if we had traversed every lane and obscure passage to be found in the city. But we arrived safely at last, which repaid us for all the extra work; we had seen no one who gave any heed to us, and when we sneaked into the smoke-house from behind the ruins of the tavern, I felt positive no one saw us.

It can well be supposed that our comrades gave us a hearty welcome, and when I explained how much had been accomplished, they became quite as certain of ultimate success as Jerry; but the question of procuring a rope put the matter in a different light.

We counted every penny belonging to the party, and had less than three shillings, while the length of rope we needed would cost three or four times as much.

"It's certain we can't buy one, even though all the shop-keepers in the city stood ready to wait upon us," I said after we had ascertained the amount of capital on hand. "Now what is to be done?"

No one answered for many minutes, and then Jim Freeman proposed that if we couldn't get what we needed in any

other way, it would be admissible to steal the rope, in view of the use to which it would be put.

Dody Wardwell thought we might go to a shopkeeper who dealt in such goods, and, telling the story, beg what was needed.

It was my father who solved the riddle.

"I don't believe we are warranted in stealing," he said, "no matter what might be accomplished, neither do I think it safe to confide in any stranger whom you should meet; but the begging proposition, if carried out properly, comes nearer filling the bill than anything else."

"What do you call doin' it properly?" Jerry asked.

"There must be oystermen in port, either here, at Georgetown, or Alexander, and the chances are you would know some of them. Go round the water front, and see what can be found. Then try the other towns, and I'll guarantee you can strike an acquaintance somewhere. After that everything is simple, for you may borrow a rope without fear that information will be lodged against you."

"Come on, Amos!" Jerry cried, springing to his feet in excitement. "Your father has hit upon the very plan, an' we were thick-headed not to have thought of it at first!"

There was no time to be lost, more particularly in case we should be forced to visit the two towns mentioned; but I believe that we would really be forwarding the business if we delayed long enough to get something to eat, and my comrades were of the same opinion.

Jim had tried his hand at making bread by mixing flour and water together, and baking the stuff in an old tin pan over the embers of the tavern ruins. It was possible to eat the mixture, and that was the best that could be said, therefore we satisfied our hunger with raw bacon and imitation bread, which did not require very many minutes.

Jim and both the other fellows were eager to go with Jerry and me; but they would not be able to forward matters, and it seemed like taking too many risks to make our party so large, therefore we decided that they must stay in the smoke-house as before, a decision which was not to their liking, although neither of the lads made any protest.

Then Jerry and I set out, after listening to such advice as my father had to give, and began the search on the Eastern Branch.

There were but few vessels in port; the greater number of those that remained when the enemy entered the Potomac had run up the river as high as possible lest they be destroyed, and we did not find an oyster pungy until we were well over toward Georgetown.

It was then near noon, and Jerry and I decided that if the captain of the boat before us looked like an honest seaman, we would take the chances of telling him so much of our story as might be necessary, rather than run the risk of not finding another craft of the kind.

There were no sign of life on deck; but as we went over the rail the companion-way hatch was opened a few inches, and some one cried:

"What's wanted? This vessel is hauled up for repairs, an' there's nobody here but me--the keeper."

"Will you let us come below for a short time?" I asked, and the hatch was closed very suddenly as the voice cried emphatically:

"No; my orders are to allow no company here."

"Let me have a try at the old idiot," Jerry said in a low tone as he went toward the companion-way, and the voice from below replied, thus showing that he could hear very well even though the hatch was closed:

"The 'old idiot' don't want any truck with boys, so keep off or I'll make it hot for you!"

"Listen to me, shipmate, and then perhaps you'll sing a different tune," I said, going close to the companion-way where it might not be necessary to raise my voice. "We are a couple of oystermen from Benedict, in trouble, and are looking for some one to lend a hand."

"Tell me your names?"

I gave the desired information, and added:

"We owned the pungy Avenger, which was burned at Pig Point when the enemy came up the river."

The hatch was opened in a twinkling, and when we descended to the cuddy I was both surprised and overjoyed by seeing Robert Hanaford, an oysterman from St. Leonard's bay.

"Shut that hatch," he said nervously, and Jerry did as he was bidden. "I got caught in the river, like a fool, an' am now expectin' the bloomin' Britishers will burn the craft when they fall short of like amusement in the city. Tell me how you happened to be here?"

I told him so much of our story as seemed necessary, and when I was come to the retreat from Bladensburg, he said grumpily:

"I reckon you two lads an' Darius Thorpe are bigger fools than I am. It was accident that brought me into this scrape, whereas you got into a muss with your eyes wide open. Where's Darius?"

"The Britishers are holding him prisoner, and count on sending him down to the fleet, I suppose."

"He'll rot there, unless he offers to serve the king, in which case, seein's how the enemy needs good sailors, they'll give him a show that a dog wouldn't welcome."

"Did you ever run across Bill Jepson from Baltimore?" I asked at random, not knowing exactly how to lead up to the request for a rope.

"Ay, that I have, lad. Bill an' me run on this same pungy more'n two years. I've heard it said that one of the king's press gangs gathered him in."

Then I told the captain how we had helped Bill to desert, and wound up the story by sayin:

"Bill is a prisoner with Darius, and will be hung when the Britishers learn who he is. There's a show to help both the sailors out of the scrape; but we're needin' six or eight fathom of good manilla rope, an' haven't got the money with which to buy it."

"How do you count on usin' it?" and Captain Hanaford leaned forward in a manner which told that he was thoroughly excited.

Then I told him all we had accomplished that morning, and explained what Darius proposed we should do, whereupon he cried heartily:

"Take anything I've got, lads, an' if it so be I can lend a hand, count on me to the finish. I'll risk even the pungy to help a sailorman out of a hole, an' a good deal more'n that when it comes to bein' Bill Jepson who's in trouble!"

Now that we were assured of getting what was needed, there was no need of great haste, and I told the captain the remainder of our story, even to describing where father and the lads were hiding.

"Whether you get Bill an' Darius out of jail or not, you'll be wantin' to go down the river, lad, so why don't you bring all hands aboard? I've known your father this many a day, an' would like to do him a good turn. We'd be a little crowded, I reckon; but some of you youngsters can bunk in the hold, an' if the Britishers don't burn the pungy, she'll be a sight better than a smoke-house."

"What about provisions, captain?" Jerry asked.

"I've got enough an' to spare, unless we're held here a couple of weeks. I didn't count on doin' any fightin' in this 'ere war; but when it comes to lendin' shipmates an' neighbors a hand, you'll find that Bob Hanaford is willin' to go down to his last cent."

I realized what a blessing it would be if we could get father on board the pungy, where he would have a comfortable bunk to lie in, and such nursing as Captain Hanaford might give when we lads were absent; but how to get him down to the boat was a puzzle.

"Supposin' you free Darius an' Bill to-night, what'll you do with 'em?" the owner of the pungy asked, and I replied mournfully:

"We hadn't got as far as that in our plans. Of course they must be taken out of the city."

"An' the British fleet is loafin' down in the river somewhere 'twixt here an' the bay," the captain added.

"Ay, but if we can get hold of a boat, it shouldn't be such a hard job to slip by the vessels on a dark night."

"Would you leave your father behind?"

"Certainly not; he must go with us."

"Then you ought'er have him down here on the river before beginnin' work. I'll tell you how it might be fixed, lad. Allowin' that there ain't any more burnin' of houses to-night, I could help him through the streets, if it so be he can make any fist at walkin'. The other lads would set out on their own hook, an' it should be we'd come together on this 'ere craft, unless the Britishers are overhaulin' everybody that's aboard. I don't know how things may be runnin', for I haven't been outside this cuddy since the fires began."

I told him that Jerry and I had not been interfered with on the streets, and I believed he could go where he pleased, provided it was not too near the encampments.

"Then I'll try it, lads, an' start for your hidin' place within an hour. Can you give me the bearin's?"

The captain was reasonably familiar with that portion of the city, and there was no doubt in my mind but that he could find the smoke-house without any difficulty.

Then we overhauled his spare rope in the hold, selecting a length of half-inch manilla which had been used no more than enough to make it pliable, and carried it to the cuddy.

It would not be safe to lug the rope through the streets in the daytime, lest some over officious person should insist on knowing what we proposed to do with it. We would be forced to take a long walk in order to fetch it; but that was of little consequence compared with the additional security such a plan seemed to afford.

Then we separated, Captain Hanaford agreeing to be at the smoke-house within an hour, and when Jerry and I went over the side of the pungy it was with lighter hearts than when we came on board.

It is true that the most dangerous portion of the undertaking was yet to be performed; but everything had turned so favorably for us since we set out in search of Darius, that we could not but feel a wonderful degree of courage regarding the remainder of the task.

Jerry was so well pleased that he would have talked about what we were to do even on the street; but I insisted that we should hold our peace until it was impossible any one could overhear us, and in silence we made our way toward the place of refuge.

It is needless for me to attempt to describe the joy of our comrades when we told them of the friend we had met, and the plans which had been laid.

My father showed plainly by his face the relief of mind because of the possibility that he might have different quarters.

"I haven't grumbled, because I knew you lads had about all you could stagger under," he said when we told him that Captain Hanaford was bent on trying to get him aboard the pungy. "I can't stay in this place very much longer, without taking big chances of going under, for the wound needs careful attention; but if I can be with Bob Hanaford everything will come around shipshape, because he knows by experience what a gunshot hurt is like."

"Do you think it will be possible to keep on your feet for such a long distance?" I asked anxiously, because until this moment I supposed my father was getting on as comfortably as a man in his condition could reasonably expect.

"I'll manage that part of it, lad; the knowledge of what is to be gained will keep me up."

Well, there is no good reason why I should try to set down all we said while waiting for the owner of the pungy, and when he finally arrived, having had little or no difficulty in finding the smoke-house, it was as if a great and beneficial change was immediately apparent.

The captain's first act was to rebandage my father's wound, Jerry getting him a supply of fresh water from the well at the ruins of the tavern, and when that was done he set about making arrangements for our moving, taking upon himself the entire direction of affairs, much to my relief.

His first act was to explain to Jim, Dody and Josiah the location of the pungy, sending them off at once, with explicit directions as to the streets through which they should pass. The lads were to go into the cuddy without loitering on deck, and keep the hatch closed and bolted until his arrival.

Jerry and I were to stay in the smoke-house until it was time to begin work in behalf of Darius and Bill, while the captain and my father were to set out as soon as it was sufficiently dark to screen them from view of the curious ones.

Jim and his friends started without delay, welcoming any change after being shut in from the open air so long, and when they were gone the captain announced that he would bring the rope to the jail shortly before ten o'clock.

"I ain't sayin' but that you two lads could work the thing as well without me; but I'm achin' to have a hand in settin' them two old shell-backs free. You'll find that I won't be in the way, even if I don't do any good."

It was a big relief to know that we were to have his assistance, and I so gave him to understand.

After father had been made as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances, we lounged around waiting for the night to come; but never saying another word concerning what we hoped to do.

I for one was too nervous regarding the possible outcome to care about holding converse even with friends, for there was in my mind a very vivid realization of what would be the result in case we failed while trying to get the sailors from the roof of the "stone house," or if they were discovered when getting through the scuttle.

It seemed very much like death for all hands concerned if the slightest slip was made, and when a fellow believes he stands near a violent end he is not given to speech.

The moments dragged so heavily that it seemed to me the night would never come. Once during this painful time of waiting Jerry spoke of the possibility that Jim and his friends might lose their way, or be taken in charge as suspicious persons; but I could not arouse myself to feel any anxiety concerning them. My thoughts were with those two old sailors in jail, and the part which the British sentries might play while we were trying to effect their release.

Finally, after it was as if we had spent a full day in the smoke-house, the sun went down, and it was yet quite light when Captain Hanaford announced that he and my father might safely make the start.

"We've got to steer a roundabout course," he said, "an' I reckon it'll be plain sailin' from now till dark. Stay where you are, lads, an' don't so much as poke your nose out till half-after-nine."

"How shall we be able to tell the time?" I asked, rather for the sake of saying something, than because I wanted information.

"You will hear the sentinels at the encampment often enough to give you a fair idee. Get there as near as possible to the hour set, an' you'll find me close at hand."

Then he went out, my father leaning heavily on his arm, and Jerry and I faced each other in the gloom, heeding not the fact that we had had nothing to eat during nearly eight and forty hours, save the chips of ham and the unsavory mess prepared by Jim; thinking only of what we were to do, and the many chances against success.

It was Jerry who broke a long silence by saying with an attempt at cheerfulness:

"I don't know of any reason why we should moon 'round here like a couple of chumps. It won't help matters any, an' surely it don't improve my courage."

Then I forced myself to take part in conversation, speaking of this or that trouble or adventure in the past; but never once of what might be before us in the future, and thus the time passed until we believed we were warranted in setting forth.

With all due regard to prudence, we went by the most direct course to the "stone house," never seeing a Britisher on our way, and it must have been at least a quarter-hour before the time set, when we were come to where it was possible to have a good view of the roof of the jail.

The night was dark, with heavy, ominous looking clouds hanging low in the sky; but yet we could have distinguished the form of a man on the top of the building.

We were half hidden by the clump of bushes in the garden of the dwelling where I had been screened from view of Elias Macomber, when we saw a man approaching leisurely, and looking from side to side in search of some one.

I recognized Captain Hanaford, and stepped out to meet him, asking how he and father had managed to get along.

"He pulled through all right, lad, an' was lyin' in my bunk happy as a cricket when I left."

"But you've forgotten the rope!" I exclaimed, and the captain opened his coat to show me the line wound around his waist in such a fashion that one might have come close upon him without suspecting that he carried anything.

He stepped behind the bush to unwind it, and while he was thus engaged I distinctly saw the form of a man emerge from the scuttle-hatch on the roof of the jail.

"They're coming out!" I whispered excitedly, and then glanced hurriedly around to learn where the sentries were stationed.

To my surprise I could not see a single person, save the soldier who appeared at the corner once in every two or three minutes as he paced his beat at the end of the building. It seemed extraordinary that there should be no others in sight; but such was the fact, and surely we had no reason to complain because the enemy was careless.

A few hours later I understood the reason for this seeming neglect of the prisoners.

My comrades were ready for the work on hand immediately I gave the alarm, and swiftly the three of us crossed over, I wondering if it would be possible for us to throw the rope to the roof where the sailors could catch it.



As soon as the line was made fast a man slipped down quickly followed by another. P. 335.

As we neared the building I saw that Darius had already made arrangements for getting one end of the rope into his possession.

A bit of cloth was swinging to and fro at the corner of the jail when I arrived, and taking hold of it curiously, I saw that it was made fast to a string formed of two or three strands of yarn.

The old sailor had unraveled their socks in order to procure that which would enable them to haul up the rope.

There was no need of word or signal. Captain Hanaford made fast one end of the half-inch manilla, gave the yarn-twine a jerk in token that all was ready, and then we payed out on the rope to make certain it went up without kinks.

In less than three minutes a man slipped down the line at a rate of speed that must have heated his hands in great shape, and he was hardly more than on the ground before the second prisoner followed.

We had effected the escape, and it now remained to get under cover in the shortest possible space of time.

"It won't do to run; but you can keep close at my heels," the captain said as he set off at a walk which fully equaled running, and we followed very closely, I literally holding my breath as I tried to realize that the task which had seemed so formidable a few moments previous, had been accomplished with the greatest ease.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE UNEXPECTED.

There is little need for me to set it down that we neither slackened pace nor halted until we were in the cuddy of the pungy.

Not a member of our party spoke until we descended the companion-way stairs, and faced the lads and my father, who had lighted a candle as a sort of welcome, and then Darius exclaimed:

"Well I'm blowed if you don't look kind'er cozy here! Who'd think this crowd had been hob-nobbin' with the Britishers for the last two or three days? Bob Hanaford, where did the lads run afoul of you, an' why didn't you get your pungy down river before the enemy's fleet came up?"

There was a deal of handshaking and congratulations before we settled down to anything like rational talk, and then Jerry and I told how we found the captain, and what had happened since Darius left the smoke-house.

Then it was the old man's turn to give an account of his misadventures, and this he did after refreshing himself with an enormous piece of tobacco.

"I went out, leavin' you people in hidin', with the idee that if many shops were to be robbed by the soldiers I might get somethin' to eat out'er the general wreck. First off nothin' came my way, an' then I ran square across a basket of ship's bread. Thinks I, this is good enough for one trip, an' I gathered the stuff under my arm, puttin' for the smoke-house under full sail without bein' noticed by the red-coats, who were havin' too lively a time to give me much attention. As luck would have it, the thought never came into my mind that I had need to look for anybody but Britishers, an' before I was halfway to port I struck up agin that sneak, Elias Macomber.

"Then it was I understood that the red-coats wasn't the only snags in the road, an' I gave him one clip on the jaw that I counted would knock him down an' out; but my calkerlations was wrong. Instead of toppin' over as a decent man would have done after gettin' the full weight of my fist, he began to screech an' yell fit to raise the dead. My legs moved mighty lively jest then, for a blind man could have seen what might happen; but the Britishers had me foul before I'd more'n got well started. No less than six grappled me, an' I hauled down my flag, 'cause there wasn't any sense in makin' a bad matter worse.

"Them soldiers must have had orders in advance to lug any prisoners they might take, to the shanty back of the arsenal, for they steered a straight course for the place without stoppin' to ask any man's advice, an' what chafed me more'n everythin' else was that rat of a Macomber, close at my heels, as he told what he would do now that his friends had taken possession of the country. I contrived to give him one kick on the shins which I'll guarantee he remembers this minute, an' then he kept well back in the rear. That's the end of the yarn, lads."

"But where did you meet Bill?" I asked.

"In the jail. He was brought up with a sharp turn durin' the retreat, bein' so stuffy that he kept well in the rear, instead of pushin' ahead as he might have done."

"Did Macomber succeed in getting into the prison?"

"He wasn't inside, an' that's a fact; but he stood at the window, an' kept shoutin' all kinds of threats till one of the sentries drove him away, havin' had too much of his yip."

"You saw me quickly enough."

"Well, you see, lad, I had my eye on the window, countin' to throw my shoe through the glass when he showed his ugly face again, hopin' that he'd get cut a bit, an', besides, I somehow had it in my head that you an' Jerry would flash up sooner or later."

"But how did you contrive to come at the scuttle?" Captain Hanaford asked.

"That was plain sailin'. Bill was one of the first put into the place, an' knowin' he'd take a trip to the yard-arm when the Britishers found out who he was, he naturally took advantage of the chance to snoop 'round a bit. We had the run of the whole buildin', seein's there wasn't many of us, an' when he went in the prisoners didn't number more'n twenty. He found a key in the door that led up to the attic, which seemed to be a sort of store-room, an', thinkin' it might come in handy if the others didn't know the lay of the land, he locked the bloomin' place, havin' done so without bein' seen. When I came he didn't know anythin' about the scuttle; but we figgered that if there wasn't one, we could get up stairs

an' pull bricks enough out of the chimney to give us a hole. There wasn't any need of doin' that, however, 'cause we found the hatch bolted on the inside, an' the rest was easy. The only thing about the whole business which bothers me is, why the Britishers didn't have a good look around before turnin' the buildin' into a jail."

"The drubbin' they got at Bladensburg, even though they did win the battle, confused them," my father said with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"It strikes me that we'd better get the pungy under way mighty soon," Captain Hanaford interrupted. "It can't be a great while before some of the crowd sees the rope we left danglin' from the chimney, an' then you may set it down as a fact that this city will be searched in a way that won't be comfortable for us."

"But where'll you go, Bob?" Bill Jepson asked. "The British fleet is in the river, an' to sail up stream strikes me as bein' dangerous, for they can send light boats after us, an' this draft won't make much fist of runnin' away from them in such a breeze as you've got now."

"I had an idee the wind was gettin' up," the oysterman said as he opened the hatch a few inches, and at that instant a gust swept into the cuddy bringing with it a full pail of water.

"A good, nice little thunder squall," the captain said in a tone of content, "an' if it comes from the right quarter, we're in luck."

Darius was on deck in a twinkling, and I followed him, hoping that we might be able to leave our mooring, for at such a time it would not be a very difficult matter to get so far up stream as to baffle pursuit.

At the moment, however, it seemed as if our good fortune had deserted us. The wind was drawing down the river with a force that shut off all hope of sending the pungy against it, and the rain came in such torrents that the deck was awash in short order.

"It's a case of stayin' where we are, or takin' the chances of runnin' down river when you couldn't see a nigger under your nose," Darius said as he and I re-entered the cabin wet to the skin, although we had not been exposed to the fury of the tempest above two minutes. "I'm willin' to run a good many risks; but puttin' this pungy under sail, with half a dozen frigates somewhere on the course, is a little too steep for me."

Captain Hanaford was exceeding anxious to be under way; but he understood that nothing could be done while the storm raged with such fury, and we sat in the darkness, discussing what might be done when the morning came.

It was finally decided that we would take all the risk of going down stream as soon as the tempest abated, for there were many creeks along the shore where we might run under cover to avoid the fleet, or, if the worst came, we could go on shore, abandoning the pungy.

In order that Captain Hanaford might be willing to take the chances of losing his vessel, I showed him the guarantee we had received from Commodore Barney, and promised that when we got the money from the government he should share equally with us.

"I'm ready to do whatsoever is agreed upon without askin' you lads to pay for my pungy in case I lose her," he said stoutly. "There ain't any certainty I'd been able to keep her if you hadn't come aboard, for if the Britishers will burn nigh on to a whole city, they won't stop at a few oyster-boats, if there's any fun to be had in settin' 'em afire. I don't jest hanker, though, to fool around with a lot of frigates, an' that's a fact."

"We won't fool with 'em," Darius said decidedly. "It stands to reason they must be below Fort Washington, else we'd heard the firin' when they tried to come past. Now 'twixt here an' there we should find a creek where a pungy like this could be hidden."

"I know of a place about eight miles from here," the captain said thoughtfully, and Bill Jepson cried cheerfully:

"Then that settles the whole business. We'll get under way when this 'ere squall is over, and before daylight be where we can keep out of sight till the fleet comes up. Once they're this side of us we shall be in clear water."

But Bill was not calculating on the force of the "squall." I have seen a good many summer storms; but never one to equal that on the night of August twenty-fifth, in the year of grace 1814.

We could hear now and then ashore, even amid the howling of the wind and the crashing thunder the rending of wood as houses were unroofed, and from the terrible uproar which came later we believed the trees growing near where we lay were being torn up by the roots, as was really found to be the case when morning dawned.

The pungy rocked to and fro as if in the open bay, straining at her hawsers until it became necessary to pass extra

ones, otherwise she would have been swept from her moorings.

Those of us who went on deck to do this work were wetted in an instant as if we had jumped overboard, and at times it became necessary to hold fast by the rail, otherwise we would have been literally blown into the river.

There was no possibility of getting under way that night, and all hands kept watch in the cuddy until day broke, when, and not until then, did the storm abate.

The wind had aided the Britishers in working havoc. From the deck of the pungy I saw no less than four houses, the roofs of which had been torn off, and one negro shanty was in ruins. As far as we could see the trees were uprooted, and the river ran so full of wreckage that I wondered we had not been swamped off hand.

"We'll stay here a few hours longer, I reckon," Darius said to me as he pointed toward the fragments of buildings and trees with which the river seemed literally to be choked. "If this pungy struck fair on somethin' like that yonder, she'd founder for a fact."

The veriest landsman who ever lived would have understood that it was folly to think of getting under way just then, and my heart grew heavy as lead in my breast, for I firmly believed that before another hour had passed the enemy would be out searching for the prisoners who had escaped, in which case all hands of us stood a good chance of seeing the interior of that "stone house."

As we stood on deck, regardless of the possibility that some of the enemy might come that way, a man ran down the street toward the water's edge, waving his arms about and otherwise acting as if nearly beside himself with joy or grief.

"What is the matter, friend?" Captain Hanaford cried at the full strength of his lungs, and the man made quite a lengthy reply; but all we could hear of it was this one exclamation:

"The British!"

"Are they comin' this way?" the captain demanded, screaming until his face was crimson, and Bill Jepson suddenly dropped out of sight through the companion-way.

"They've gone!" the man replied, and we could now hear his words more distinctly because he was coming nearer each instant.

"Gone where?" Captain Hanaford cried impatiently. "Can't you tell us what has happened?"

"The British have cleared out bag an' baggage--went durin' the storm!"

"What?" Darius screamed, and we looked at each other incredulously, for surely it could not be possible that the enemy had evacuated the city so soon.

"Come on board an' tell us what you know!" Captain Hanaford cried. "It is of the greatest importance for us to learn exactly the situation of affairs."

The stranger did not accept the invitation to come on board; but he halted within easy speaking distance and thus told the story, which seemed incredible:

"Last night the people livin' near the encampment were warned, on pain of death, to remain within doors from sunset till sunrise. Those who were curious enough to look out of the windows saw that the camp fires had been increased, an' supposed reinforcements were comin' in; but this mornin' neither hide nor hair is to be seen of the red-coats, an' a planter comin' in from nearabout Long Old Fields, reports that the soldiers are marchin' in the direction of Nottingham. An' that ain't all, for the troops that stayed at Bladensburg after the battle, are on the way to Upper Marlboro, 'cordin to the report of an old darkey who came into town not half an hour ago."

Having thus unfolded his budget of news, the man hurried on to spread the glad tidings, leaving us who were aboard the pungy in a state of mingled bewilderment and joy.

"I can't understand it," Darius said after a brief pause, during which we had looked at each other questioningly. "I'm goin' to take the chances of findin' out for myself."

The old man went over the rail as he spoke, and I would have followed, but that he said sharply:

"Stay where you are, lad. We ain't dead certain 'bout that yarn, an' if it's a case of gettin' into trouble, it better be one than two who pays for nosin' 'round a British camp."

Captain Hanaford felt certain the news must be correct, for our informant had the appearance of being an honest

man, and nothing could have been gained by spreading such a story.

"We'll cook the best breakfast to be had, by way of rejoicin'," he said, "an' after that's been done all hands shall come into a council of war, to decide if we're to make the venture down the river."

"If the enemy has really evacuated the city, it is reasonable to suppose that the fleet will go back down the bay," I said, thinking myself very wise in such matters. "It strikes me that the way home lies open before us."

My companions were of the same opinion, and a very merry party we were on the oyster puny that morning as we tried in vain to guess why the enemy had left so suddenly, when there seemed to be nothing to prevent him from taking possession of all the country round about.

Before the feast was ready to be eaten Darius returned, and a single glance at his face was sufficient to show that the good news was true.

"They've gone, an' there's no mistake about it," he announced, as he sprang over the rail lightly as any boy. "I went to the place where the troops were encamped, before bein' willin' to believe they'd turned tail so suddenly. Now I'd like to know if that very friendly gentleman Elias Macomber, has been left behind, or if he followed the force? If he's in this city I could make it mighty interestin' for him."

"Never mind the sneak, Darius!" my father cried. "There is no need for you to punish him, because if the British go away he'll find it very uncomfortable around here, and that's enough to serve the cur out for all he has done."

Darius did not appear to think that Macomber's misdeeds could be atoned so easily; but he kept his opinion to himself, and joined us in what was at the same time a feast of rejoicing and thanksgiving.

Not until the meal was come to an end did we begin the discussion as to how we should get home, and then Captain Hanaford opened the question by asking:

"Now, lads, are we to run up stream into the mud, or take our chances of findin' the British fleet 'twixt here an' the bay?"

Darius immediately proposed that we strike out for the Chesapeake, using the same argument I had, that since the retreat of the soldiers there was little chance the vessels would make any effort at running past Fort Washington.

Bill Jepson, who could not be blamed for feeling a bit nervous at going any nearer a British vessel of war than was absolutely necessary, believed that it would be safer for us to go back to Benedict by land, keeping at a respectful distance in the rear of the enemy; but his plan was not considered, because it would be impossible for my father to travel on foot, and I, at least, was not disposed to part company with him.

We spent a full hour discussing the situation, and then it had been decided that we would run boldly down the river, nearly all of us feeling confident that there were no longer any British vessels to block our way.

There was nothing to delay us in making the start as soon as the river should be clear of the tokens sent by the storm, except Darius' desire to make systematic search for Elias Macomber; but to this all of us objected so strongly that, much against his will, he was forced to give over the idea.

For my part I had seen enough of the British-lover; we had captured him twice, which was our full share of such business, and if we did spend time hunting him down, providing he yet remained in the city, what could we do with the villain? He had forfeited all rights of citizenship in our section of the country, and I had no doubt that wherever he went his sins would find him out. It was better we leave him alone, from whatever standpoint I viewed it.

Captain Hanaford decided that the river would be clear of drift by morning, therefore we were agreed to set sail then, and, as a means of passing the time pleasantly, we lads went over to the "stone house" to see how the old shell-backs managed to escape so readily.

We found the building open and abandoned. The enemy had taken the prisoners away, and we were not hindered in going over it thoroughly.

When that inspection was ended, we viewed the ruins in the different parts of the city, paid a visit to the smoke-house, and returned to the puny late in the afternoon, well satisfied to bring our visit to the capital to the earliest possible close.

On that evening Captain Hanaford brought aboard a surgeon, who cared for my father's wound, and, what was better, declared that he saw no reason why it should not heal speedily, leaving him none the worse for having received it.

We were eager to be under way, as may be supposed, and as soon as the day dawned on the 27th of August, we cast off from the dock, feeling that the good God had been very kind in permitting us to return to our homes when so many had been left at Bladensburg to fill soldiers' graves.

It was as if everything favored us at the start of the homeward journey. The river was free from the drift of all kinds which had covered its surface; the wind was blowing gently from the north, and the day gave promise of being clear.

The pungy slipped along as if conscious that she, like ourselves, had escaped from great dangers, and was longing for another cargo of oysters in her hold.

Bill Jepson acted as if he had suddenly lost his senses. He sang the wildest kind of songs, danced two or three hornpipes, and then insisted on Darius joining him, while Jim Freeman furnished the music by whistling fast and furiously. As a matter of fact, all of us, even including my father, were disposed to be exceeding jolly now that we were homeward bound with the belief that the enemy was no longer in a position to annoy us.

We lads talked of the pungy we would buy when the government paid us for the Avenger, and laid many a plan for the future when Jim, his two friends, Jerry, Darius and I would begin oystering again, in a craft capable of carrying three or four times the cargo we had been able to squeeze into the old boat which had been sacrificed at Pig Point.

Then, when it was near noon, we had come within sight of Fort Washington, and as we rounded the bend Captain Hanaford gave vent to an exclamation of surprise and fear, which was echoed by Bill Jepson.

At some considerable distance down the river it was possible to see the upper spars of seven vessels of war which were slowly approaching the fortification from the southward.

"It's the British fleet!" Captain Hanaford cried as he shoved the tiller hard down, thereby swinging the pungy's nose into the mud of the eastern bank. "We were bloomin' fools to think that the enemy had all run away!"

"It's the fleet under Captain Gordon, an' I can tell you just how strong it is," Bill Jepson said as he rubbed his head nervously. "There are two frigates of thirty-six an' thirty-eight guns; two rocket ships of eighteen guns each, two bomb vessels of eight guns each, an' one schooner carryin' two guns."

"The schooner would be enough to bring us up with a sharp turn, therefore I hold that it don't make any difference how many frigates are behind her," Darius cried. "The question is whether the fort can prevent their comin' up the river?"

No one aboard could say what might be done by those in the fortification, or how strongly it was garrisoned; but later I read the following in one of the newspapers, and will set it down here so that what happened while we were on the river may be the better understood.

"The only obstruction to the passage of the fleet on which the Americans might place the least reliance, was Fort Washington, on the Maryland side of the Potomac, about twelve miles below the national capital. It was a feeble fortress, but capable of being made strong. So early as May 1813, a deputation from Alexandria, Georgetown and Washington waited upon the Secretary of War, and represented the importance of strengthening the post.

"An engineer was sent to examine it. He reported in favor of additional works in the rear, while he believed that the armament of the fort, and its elevated situation, would enable a well-managed garrison to repulse any number of ships of war which might attempt to pass up the river. Nothing more was done.

"In July, 1814, when a British fleet and army were in the Chesapeake, the authorities of Alexandria again called the attention of the Secretary of War to the feeble condition of Fort Washington. The secretary did not believe the enemy would push for the capital, and nothing was done. The Alexandrians appealed to General Winder, who recommended the strengthening of the post. Three of the banks in Alexandria offered to loan the government fifty thousand dollars for the construction of more defences for the District. The money was accepted, but nothing was done to Fort Washington. When the battle of Bladensburg occurred, and the seat of government was left to the mercy of the invaders, Fort Washington was as feebly armed as ever, and its garrison consisted of only about eighty men, under Captain Samuel T. Dyson."

CHAPTER XX.

DODGING THE ENEMY.

As I have said, Captain Hanaford shoved his tiller hard over, throwing the puny around until her nose struck the mud, and it was a question of getting her off the bank in the shortest possible space of time, unless we were minded to lay there when the action began, for none of us doubted but that an engagement was close at hand.

"It's a case of runnin' back up the river," Bill Jepson said nervously, "An' the sooner we get about it the better."

Darius was not of the same opinion, as was shown when he said, after waiting a moment to learn if any other had an opinion to express:

"I'm willin' to agree that we're bound to put back a bit, so's to be out of the way when the iron begins to fly; but I don't hold that we should run very far off until findin' out how things are goin' to turn."

"You might settle that question after the puny is afloat," my father said grimly. "Just at present we're in a bad place if there's to be any firing done, and when we're off the mud you'll have plenty of time in which to discuss the situation."

"That's about the size of it," Captain Hanaford added emphatically, and then he ordered us lads into the small boat that we might pull the puny's bow around.

Any one who has ever run an oysterman such as we have in the Chesapeake, knows that when a craft of that build takes ground ever so lightly, it is not a simple matter to float her, especially when there's no cargo that can be shifted to bring the stern down and the bow up.

We lads worked our prettiest with the paddles after making fast to the vessel's nose, and, finding that we were making no headway, the three able-bodied men began pushing with poles which are kept aboard for such purpose, until she slid slowly into deeper water.

Then it was a case of clawing away from the fort, which was not easy, since the wind that had brought us down so finely, now blew directly in our teeth, and the puny was a master-hand for sliding off when you tried to tack.

As a matter of course it was necessary to stand over toward the opposite shore, which was not a pleasant piece of business since it carried us within view of the enemy; but we had no choice in the matter.

"If we get back as far as Alexandria by sunset we'll be doin' mighty well, unless you bring her around an' try to slide up," Bill Jepson said grumbly; but she did not make any better headway because of his being disgruntled.

"We'll have to take things as they are, matey," Darius said grimly. "If the old hooker won't carry us out of harm's way, we can take to the shore at any time, which is a bit of consolation you'd better keep pasted in your hat."

"This breeze will fine down within an hour," Captain Hanaford said as if speaking to himself, "an' then it'll be a case of anchorin', no matter where we----"

He did not finish the remark, for at that moment it was as if the earth and sky had come together with one deafening crash; then followed three or four reports like unto peals of thunder near at hand, and those of us who chanced to be looking astern, saw the fort actually leap into the air, while from the mass of earth and stone came a shower of fragments such as literally obscured the light of the sun for an instant, after which it fell upon us with a crash that caused the puny to rock to and fro like an egg-shell.

While one might have counted fifty I stood dazed, unable to understand what had happened, and bleeding from a dozen scratches caused by the fall of fragments which absolutely covered the deck of the puny to a depth of two or three inches. Then I understood that the fort had been blown up, Captain Dyson believing he could not hope, with the small force under his command, to withstand an assault from the fleet.

As we afterward came to know, his instructions from the War Department were to the effect that he should destroy the fortification rather than take the chances of its being captured by the enemy; but what seemed strange to me then, and does now, was the fact that he had not fired a single gun in defiance. Surely he might have discharged his pieces once, in the hope of doing a little damage, before setting a match to the magazine.

Of all our party in the puny, not one escaped more or less severe bruises or scratches, and the wonder is that the vessel was not sent to the bottom off hand.

However, we were yet afloat, and the river was open for the passage of the Britishers, therefore it may be understood

that we could not afford to spend many minutes in speculations upon what might or might not have been done.

Within three minutes from the time of the explosion, Darius and Bill Jepson were in the small boat making fast to the bow of the pungy, and when Captain Hanaford shouted to ask what they counted on doing, the old sailor replied:

"There's a creek half a mile further up stream, an' if you can get any headway on this apple-bowed lugger, we may be able to hide before the Britishers come in sight."

It was absolutely certain that we could not hope to escape by sailing, because any four-oared boat in the British fleet would have overtaken us in a twinkling, therefore, unless it might be possible to hide, we were in a bad scrape, from which I saw no relief save at the expense of abandoning the pungy.

How we worked to push the vessel through the water! Darius and Bill plied the paddles with every ounce of strength in their bodies, while we on deck trimmed the sails to a nicety, shifted everything movable to bring her into better trim for sailing, and even swung the two long sweeps outboard.

We five lads manned the enormous oars with which the pungy was provided to help her around, or when she drifted too near inshore, and I dare venture to say that we did quite as much toward forcing the craft ahead as the two old shell-backs did by towing.

Fortunately for us, the Britishers did not appear to think it necessary to move up the river swiftly, knowing full well that all the towns above were at their mercy whenever they arrived; but the fleet hove to off the ruins of the fortification while some of the officers landed to ascertain the amount of damage done. It was this last which gave us the opportunity of which we stood so sorely in need, otherwise we were taken prisoners beyond a peradventure.

By dint of pulling and paddling we contrived to get the pungy into the creek of which Darius had spoken, before the enemy came in sight again, and then it was a case of hauling her so far inland that she would be hidden from view by the foliage.

It can well be supposed that we did not waste any time at this last work; the perspiration was running down our faces in tiny streams when the craft was finally as far up the narrow water-way as she could be taken, and then all hands were so exhausted that we threw ourselves on the deck to regain breath and strength.

All the while that we had been in strenuous flight my father stood at the helm, thus giving Captain Hanaford the chance to aid us, otherwise the task would not have been accomplished so quickly.

But even when we were thus snug, unless, perchance, the Britishers took it into their heads to search the river banks, our work was by no means done.

It was now necessary that we should know if the enemy went up stream, and after we had rested no more than five minutes, when a full hour would have been hardly enough to put me in proper trim again, Darius said:

"Come, Amos, you an' I will stand the first watch. Bill an' Jerry can spell us in a couple of hours."

"What do you count on watching?" I asked curtly.

"The Britishers, of course. We'll paddle down to the river, an' lay there till the fleet goes one way or the other."

It would have been a long watch had we remained on duty until the entire fleet sailed in one direction; but as to that we were happily ignorant, and I took my place in the canoe believing the enemy would sail past our hiding place in a very short time.

We allowed the canoe to drift down the creek until we were come within a few yards of the river, and then, well hidden by the undergrowth, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible where we could command a full view of the channel.

"It doesn't appear to be as easy to get back home as we counted on," I said, by way of starting a conversation, and Darius replied confidently:

"This 'ere stop won't put us back very much, though it'll make a power of extra work, for I count to be slippin' down river within a couple of hours at the longest."

Then the old man fell silent, and I was not disposed to wag my tongue, because of looking ahead to the meeting with mother and the children, which now seemed so near at hand.

We had been on watch an hour or more when the enemy appeared. The schooner was leading the way slowly, being towed by boats, with the men taking soundings every fifteen or twenty yards in order to show the channel to the two

frigates close astern, and another hour went by before the three vessels had passed our hiding-place.

Then we watched eagerly, expecting to see the rocket-ships and bomb-vessels appear; but they did not heave in sight, although it seemed to me as if they should have been close behind the larger ships in order to take advantage of the labor being performed by those on board the schooner.

When half an hour had passed, and the river, so far as we could see in either direction, was free from craft of any kind, Darius bestowed a resounding slap upon his leg as he cried angrily:

"What an old fool I am, to be sure! In two years more, if I keep on runnin' down hill, I won't be able to tell my own nose from somebody's else, even when it's pulled."

"What's the matter now?" I asked in surprise.

"What's the matter, lad? Can't you see that only part of the fleet is goin' up stream? If the other ships counted on leavin' anchorage they'd been in the wake of the frigates. We're shut in here between two ends of the British force, an' likely to stay quite a spell."

There could be no question but that he was right, and I sat staring at him like a stupid, the dreams in which I had been indulging disappearing like mist before the morning sun. Of a verity mother and the children were further from me than when we had crouched in the smoke-house at Washington with General Ross' army close at hand.

"What *can* we do?" I asked at length.

"That's a question easier asked than answered," the old man replied as if he had come to an end of his ideas. "While your father is wounded beyond the power of walkin', we're anchored to the pungy, so to speak."

"What would you do if he was in good shape?"

"It couldn't be such a terrible tough voyage to strike across the country from here to Benedict, leavin' the pungy in the creek till the Britishers get tired of foolin' around in the Potomac; but it's no use to spend breath on what can't be done. Our crew will hang together, whatever comes. Let's go an' report; it won't do us any good to stay here."

We paddled slowly back to our comrades, and when we had told them the situation of affairs they were in as much of a muddle as had been Darius and I.

"There's no tellin' how long the frigates will stay 'round Washington," Captain Hanaford said, and then, as a sudden thought came to him, he added, "I'm gettin' the best of this scrape, I reckon. If the pungy was where you lads found her, she'd fare badly when the bloomin' Englishmen get where they can make mischief."

"I'll stay here and keep ship, while the rest of you walk across lots to Benedict," my father suggested; but Darius refused to hear any such proposition, declaring as he had when we were in the canoe, that our party should hang together to the last.

"So far as bodily harm is concerned, we're safe here till the cows come home," the old man said thoughtfully, "an' that oughter make us feel reasonably good, seein's how, one spell, it looked a deal like bein' killed, or stayin' in a British prison-ship. We're a mighty poor crowd if we can't manage to lay still a week or two."

It did really seem as if we had reason to be ashamed of grumbling when matters had been so much worse, and I mentally resolved that I would make the best of the situation, even though we were forced to remain in hiding a full month.

My father did his best at cheering us by saying, and with a deal of reason in his speech, that the enemy would not dare remain shut up in the river very long, lest the American fleet come to the mouth of the river and blockade him, or with a superior force, force him to surrender.

"It's Captain Gordon of the Sea Horse, who is in command," Bill Jepson said, "an' you can count that he won't be caught nappin'!"

"Then we can reckon on bein' free to leave this creek within three or four days at the outside, and after that it'll be a question of dodging the Britishers into Chesapeake bay, which shouldn't be a hard task."

Taking this view of the matter, and knowing we had provisions in plenty, all hands began to look at affairs in a more cheerful light, with the result that ours was soon a jolly party, with but one aim, which was to make the time pass as pleasantly as possible.

During the remainder of that day we talked of all that had occurred since Commodore Barney left Pig Point, and

speculated upon the result of an attack upon Baltimore.

That night we turned in without standing watch, and next morning came a light, drizzling rain which forced us to keep under cover unless we were willing to toddle around on the wet decks, which was not particularly cheerful amusement.

By three o'clock in the afternoon we had talked until our tongues were tired, and every topic of conversation was exhausted. Then we fell silent, with none too pleasing thoughts for company, until Darius sprang to his feet with an exclamation that aroused us all.

"What bloomin' idjuts we are to think we must needs wait here till the Britishers come down the river!" he cried excitedly.

"I thought it was settled that we couldn't well do anything else," Captain Hanaford said in mild surprise.

"So it was; but the sun was shinin', with every prospect of a fair night."

I looked at the old sailor in bewilderment. It seemed as if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses, for there was nothing to be made of his words.

"What's crawlin' over you, Darius?" Captain Hanaford asked. "Has anythin' happened suddenly?"

"Yes, an' that's a fact! Here we are lyin' up here in a nasty storm as if we was bound to stay, when it's only a case of haulin' the pungy into the channel, an' lettin' her drift past the vessels below the fort. I'll wager an apple against a doughnut that we'll go by slick as fallin' down hill, 'cause it'll be darker 'n Sam Hill to-night; there ain't any moon to break the blackness, an' unless we come plump on to the enemy, they'll never be any the wiser."

I could see that the older members of the party believed as did Darius; but to me it seemed like taking needless chances, when by remaining in hiding a few days we might set sail without hindrance, for if our pungy was seen, there could be little doubt but that she would be sunk off hand.

However, it was not for me to start any argument with my elders who understood such matters far better than did either of us lads, and I held my peace, expecting that an argument would ensue.

To my great surprise no further word was spoken regarding the plan; but Captain Hanaford pulled on his oiled-coat as he said curtly:

"It'll be a good two-hours' job to pull the pungy into the stream, an' won't be handy work after dark."

Darius and Bill made ready to accompany him on deck, and, to my great surprise, I found that these three, at least, believed the plan of trying to drift past the British ships in the darkness one which should be carried into effect.

I looked at my father; but he appeared to think all was as it should be, and for the moment I was dumfounded at the idea of taking so many and such great chances simply to save idling a few days.

When the men went on deck we lads followed, as a matter of course; but never one of us was called upon to perform any part in the labor.

The creek was too narrow to admit of turning the pungy, therefore it became necessary to tow her out stern first, and this the three men did quite handily, with Darius and Bill Jepson in the boat, and Captain Hanaford on deck, to keep the branches of the trees from fouling with the rigging.

Half an hour before sunset the little vessel was at the mouth of the water-way where she could be put into the stream with but a small amount of labor, and Captain Hanaford ordered Jim Freeman and Dody Wardwell to turn to at getting supper.

While the meal was being prepared the captain and the two old sailors talked about the probable location of the enemy's ships, and when the conversation was come to an end I learned that they counted on letting the pungy take her own course, after rounding the point on which the fort had been located.

It was to be a piece of blind luck all the way through, and I made up my mind that if the vessel was afloat after we passed the ships, it would be a sure case of interposition of that divinity which watches over fools.

I seemed to be the only one, however, who was borrowing any trouble on account of the proposed venture, and it can well be fancied that I held my peace, although I did a power of thinking.

When supper had been eaten, and the last spark of fire in the cook-stove extinguished lest it should be seen by the enemy, all hands went on deck.

Of a verity the night was black enough, if that was the only thing wanted to insure success. Standing at the tiller I could not even make out the loom of the mainmast, and as for saying whether the puny was in the stream or the river, it was impossible.

Darius and Bill Jepson went about their portion of the task, however, as if it was broad day.

The puny was pulled out into the current, the old sailors came over the rail, and we were fully committed to the venture.

I had supposed that some portion of the sails would be spread to give us steerage-way if nothing more; but in this I was mistaken. A square of white canvas could be more readily seen in the darkness than the entire hull of the puny, which was painted black, therefore we would go through with only the empty spars to give an alarm, if so be the enemy caught a glimpse of us.

We had hardly more than started when the rain began to fall heavily, and Bill Jepson said with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"Everythin' is workin' our way. There ain't a barnacle aboard the ships that'll stand up an' take all this water when he can keep himself dry by seekin' the shelter of the rail."

"But suppose we run plump on to them?" I asked in a whisper.

"Then it'll be a case of doin' some tall an' lively hustlin', lad, an' no man can say what ought'er be done till we're in the scrape."

"Can you make out the shore on either side?" I asked.

"Yes, by stoopin' low so's to sight the sky over the tree-tops, you can contrive to get an idee of whether we're in the middle of the stream; but you can't do much more."

"I might stand on my head without being able to tell which was land and which water."

"I reckon that's true," Bill said with a laugh; "but when you've knocked around at sea as long as I have, you'll learn to see through ink, bottle an' all."

"Stop that noise!" Darius whispered harshly. "You're not even to breathe loud from this out, an' walkin' across the deck will make trouble with me for the man or lad who does it."

Thus it was that each fellow felt obliged to remain wherever he stood when the order had been given. We could well understand the reason for such caution, and were not disposed to go contrary to the command.

I peered into the gloom intently, hoping I might distinguish the shadows of the trees ashore; but it was impossible, and from that moment I remained with my eyes shut, as one involuntarily does when the blackness is intense.

How slowly the time passed! I tried to get some idea of the minutes by counting up to sixty, allowing that number of seconds had gone by; but failed in so doing because my anxiety was so great that I did not keep the reckoning.

It seemed as if an hour had fled, although the current should have carried us among the fleet in less than half that time, when I was startled by hearing a voice close by my side, apparently.

"It's a bloomin' nasty night, matey."

"Right you are," was the reply. "It's jest my luck to be muckin' 'round here when the lads from the other ships are havin' high jinks in one of the Yankee cities."

Then it was that I realized we were within a few yards of a ship, and by some stroke of good fortune had missed fowling her.

It surely seemed as if they must see us, although I could not make out even a shadow of her, strain my eyes as I might, and in case we were discovered, the end would come very rapidly, as I then believed.

From that moment it was as if I did not breathe, so fearful was I of giving some alarm which would betray our whereabouts.

The pattering of the rain on the water raised no slight noise, and this was favorable to us. Our tiller had been lashed, so that there might be no possibility the rudder-head would creak in its socket, and every rope was brailled to guard against its flapping.

Had ours been the ghost of a ship and those on board a phantom crew, we could not have glided down stream more silently; but the danger which had been ever present in my thoughts was that of coming in collision with one of the ships.

We had already passed the first in safety; but there were three others, and in fear and trembling I admitted to myself that we could not hope to slip by them all.



CHAPTER XXI.

IN PORT.

The moments passed in silence, save for the hissing of the rain-drops as they mingled with the water of the river, and I was saying to myself that of a verity we must have drifted safely through the fleet without touching a ship, when that came which I had been fearing.

Suddenly I felt a shock; then a noise as of wood grinding against wood, and I knew we had fouled the enemy!

While one might have counted five the pungy rubbed against the side of the ship, and then came the hail:

"Ahoy there! Ahoy!"

"What are you hailing?" a strange voice cried, and he who had first broken the silence replied:

"There's a craft of some kind alongside, sir!"

Then it was as if a swarm of bees had been let loose. The enemy's ship was alive with moving, buzzing beings, some of whom cried out this or that order, and others called down maledictions on the head of the man who had needlessly aroused them.

"There's nothin' here, sir. Sam was dreamin'," I heard the voice of a sailor cry, and almost at the same instant came the rattling of fire-arms as they were being handled, sounding so near aboard that it seemed as if a portion of the enemy had leaped upon our decks.

"Make ready! Fire!" sounded the command, sharp and quick.

Then came a sheet of flame which lighted up surrounding objects until we could distinctly see the deck of the bomb-vessel, and the eager men thronging her deck.

This illumination was but as the lightning's flash, and then we could hear the angry hum of the bullets as they swarmed above our heads.

We had been seen, and I believed that a broadside would follow in short order, yet at the same time I realized that our good fortune had followed us when it sent the pungy afoul of a bomb-vessel, instead of a craft which had her guns ready trained for service.

Now had come the time, however, when we were to remain idle no longer.

I heard Darius call Bill Jepson, and knew by the noises which followed that the two sailors were taking to the canoe in order to tow the pungy, and at the same time Captain Hanaford cast off the lashing of the tiller as he ordered us to run up the canvas.

Work? I have never moved so lively before nor since, as I did then when I felt positive that within a very few seconds our deck would be swept by grape and cannister.

At such moments of supreme danger one's senses are unnaturally acute, and while I gave strict attention to all that was taking place aboard the pungy, it became possible to understand what the enemy was about.

The other vessels of the fleet were making ready to take a hand in our destruction. From every quarter we could hear cries of command, mingled with the noise of men running to and fro, and just when the pungy began to feel the effect of the canvas which was clapped on her in such a hurry, a rocket went up, illumining the scene for ten seconds or more.

Then it was I saw that we had passed three of the ships, having come to grief on the last in the line, and had no time to take further note of the surroundings when the guns of all four craft belched forth with a mighty roar that caused the pungy to tremble, but the impact of the shot did not follow.

Thus suddenly aroused, and in the intense darkness which had been dispelled only long enough to dazzle a fellow's eyes, the gunners had not been able to take accurate aim, otherwise we must have gone to the bottom like a stone.

"They won't have time to try that game more than once again before we'll be well out of their way," I heard Darius say, and I knew we had sufficient speed to render useless the work of towing, otherwise the two sailors would not have come aboard.

Now three rockets were sent up in rapid succession, and while the light lasted I knew that the British gunners were

taking aim at us; but we had slipped so far down the river by this time that there were some few chances in our favor, however closely they might shoot.

"Down on your faces!" Darius cried, and I dropped like a stone, understanding that such an order had been given to lessen the chances of our being hit; but at the same time the thought came to me that it was better to be killed by a round-shot which would cut a man's life short instantly, than mangled by a splinter.

Then came the flash of burning powder; the mighty roar of big guns; the hurtling shot striking the water on every side, and the pungy reeled and quivered as if she had struck a rock.

"One ball went home that time!" Darius cried, and I knew by the sound that he had leaped to his feet, running with all speed into the cuddy.

From below I made out the tiny gleam of the match as Darius lighted a lantern, and did not need to be told that he was gone to learn what injury our vessel had received.

Immediately the cannon had been discharged Captain Hanaford was on his feet, grasping the tiller as if it was possible to steer the pungy while the blackness continued so dense that one might fancy he could feel it, and then came the glare of more rockets.

This aided the helmsman of ours more than it did the British gunners, since it gave him an opportunity to see exactly where his vessel was; but as to that I gave no heed. All my mind was centered on the distance between us and the enemy.

I could have cried aloud with joy, and am not certain but that I did, on seeing that we were drawing away with more speed than I had believed was in the clumsy craft, and, what was of greater importance, the pungy was rounding a bend which, once passed, would put us beyond reach of the guns.

The rockets had been fired just in the nick of time, otherwise we would have gone ashore on the western bank.

For the third time we heard the thunder of the guns; but the shot must have passed astern of us, for I did not hear either the splashing of water or the splintering of our wood-work to tell where they struck.

Then Darius came on deck with an announcement that relieved me of nearly all my fears.

"The pungy has a solid shot above the water-line well forward; but there's no need of pluggin' it, for the ball didn't get through the timber. I reckon we've done the trick, eh, captain?"

"We're off for a fact, an' unless we strike the mud 'twixt here an' the bay, we've seen the last of that lot of Britishers."

Now it was that all hands of us were ordered forward to act as look-outs, and the pungy danced along in the darkness, as if rejoicing at her escape from a peril that had well-nigh proved her ending.

It is impossible for me to set down what we said or did when it was seen that we had really escaped from as dangerous a venture as human beings ever embarked in. I dare say we acted like a party of simples, and certain it is that the older members of the crew were no less boisterous in their rejoicings than we lads.

And now there remains but little more to be said, for the homeward voyage was short.

At midnight the rain ceased falling; the clouds were partially dispersed, and we had sufficient light to enable us to navigate the little vessel without difficulty.

In four and twenty hours, without having come across an enemy, or anything to cause alarm, we were in Benedict once more, Captain Hanaford having sailed past his own home in order to land us, and well was it for all hands that we did not arrive the day previous, because not until then did the fleet under Admiral Cochrane, with the land forces under General Ross, take their final departure, leaving the little village looking as if a herd of cattle had been pastured there.

It only remains for me to say, since this story has nothing to do with my movements after we were returned from service under Commodore Barney, that in due time the government honored the commodore's guarantee, thus enabling Jerry and me to purchase a pungy much larger and better than the Avenger, and at the same time have quite a substantial sum of money to give our parents.

And all this I have written in the cuddy of the new boat, which we have named the "Joshua Barney," while Jim Freeman, Dody Wardwell, Josiah Coburn, Darius and Jerry have discussed each portion as it was set down, for we are shipmates in the oyster business, sharing the profits as well as the work, until a stranger would find it difficult to say which is the captain or which the cook.

Now that my portion of the work has come to an end, I shall copy here that which will serve to wind up the yarn in proper shape.

Referring to the close of the battle of Bladensburg, a newspaper writer says:

"The English sharp-shooters had straggled about, and were doing much mischief; Barney's horse fell between two of the guns, pierced by two balls; several of his officers were killed or wounded, the ammunition wagon had gone off in the general confusion and retreat of the army; the enemy began to flank out to the right, under cover of a thick wood, and had nearly surrounded the commodore. His men were nearly exhausted, having undergone a three-days' march without a regular supply of provisions. He had received a wound in the thigh some time before, and was faint from loss of blood, when he ordered a retreat, which was effected in good order by the men and such officers as could follow. He retired a few yards with the help of three of his officers whom he had ordered away, and fell from weakness, in which situation he was found by the enemy.

"General Ross and Admiral Cockburn came to him and tendered every assistance. He was carried in a litter to the village of Bladensburg, and the next day, in the company of his wife and son, was taken home in a carriage. A week later he was formally exchanged for two British colonels. The ball had been probed for by the English surgeons, but without effect, and it was not found until after his death, which is said to have been caused by the wound."

And now regarding the fleet which we dodged, Mr. Lossing says in his "War of 1812."

"The British squadron appeared before Fort Washington on the 27th of August, three days after the capture of the capital. Captain Dyson either misunderstood General Winder's order, or was influenced by mortal fear, for he blew up and abandoned the fort without firing a gun. No doubt the British fleet could have been kept below by the heavy cannon of the fort. Dyson chose not to try the experiment, and for his injurious conduct he was dismissed from the service.

"The British squadron now had nothing to fear, and without interference the frigates sailed on, anchoring off Alexandria on the evening of the 28th. On the morning of the 29th it assumed a hostile attitude a hundred yards from the wharves, and was well prepared to lay every building in the town in ashes. The citizens sent a deputation to Captain Gordon to ask upon what terms he would consent to spare the town. He replied that all naval stores and ordnance; all the shipping and its furniture; merchandise of every description in the city, or which had been carried out of it to a place of safety; and refreshments of every kind, must be immediately given up to him. Also that the vessels which had been scuttled to save them from destruction must be raised, and delivered up to him. 'Do all this,' he said, 'and the town of Alexandria, with the exception of public works, shall be spared, and the inhabitants shall remain unmolested.'"

"These were harsh and humiliating terms, and the inhabitants were allowed only one hour for consideration. They were powerless, and were compelled to submit. The merchandise that had been carried from the town and the sunken vessels could not be given up to the invader, so he contented himself by burning one vessel and loading several others, chiefly with flour, cotton and tobacco. With these in charge, the squadron weighed anchor and sailed down the Potomac."

THE END.

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In point of publication, "Darnley" is that work by Mr. James which follows "Richelieu," and, if rumor can be credited, it was owing to the advice and insistence of our own Washington Irving that we are indebted primarily for the story, the young author questioning whether he could properly paint the difference in the characters of the two great cardinals. And it is not surprising that James should have hesitated; he had been eminently successful in giving to the world the portrait of Richelieu as a man, and by attempting a similar task with Wolsey as the theme, was much like tempting fortune. Irving insisted that "Darnley" came naturally in sequence, and this opinion being supported by Sir Walter Scott, the author set about the work.

As a historical romance "Darnley" is a book that can be taken up pleasantly again and again, for there is about it that subtle charm which those who are strangers to the works of G. P. R. James have claimed was only to be imparted by Dumas.

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Details of the establishment and destruction of the Moravian "Village of Peace" are given at some length, and with minute description. The efforts to Christianize the Indians are described as they never have been before, and the author has depicted the characters of the leaders of the several Indian tribes with great care, which of itself will be of interest to the student.

By no means least among the charms of the story are the vivid word-pictures of the thrilling adventures, and the intense paintings of the beauties of nature, as seen in the almost unbroken forests.

It is the spirit of the frontier which is described, and one can by it, perhaps, the better understand why men, and women, too, willingly braved every privation and danger that the westward progress of the star of empire might be the more certain and rapid. A love story, simple and tender, runs through the book.

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