

Literature, &c.

A SEA CHASE.

'Hoist the peak of the mainsail, Jupiter; that rascal is gaining on us fast.' 'Ow massa, de creak and bend like a bamboo a'ready.' 'I can't help it—we must try; 'tis our only chance.'

The game was fast becoming desperate. We were flying before a perfect hurricane, and had reluctantly taken in sail after sail, until we were now carrying but a small storm jib and a half set mainsail. The Water Lily was as pretty a little schooner, of some sixty tons, as the eye of a sailor would wish to look upon; and though I knew her spars were as fine bits of wood as Bermuda could turn out, yet it was with no little anxiety that I watched the increased yielding of the mainmast to the wind, as the long peak was pointed to the sky, spreading under it a broad white sheet of canvass. But it was our only chance of escape from our pursuer.

A brig of about 200 tons was on our track; her low, black hull, and gracefully cut canvass, proclaimed her a clipper, and we had too little reason to doubt that she was a slaver and a pirate. This was the second day she had evidently been in chase of us. She hove in sight off the Isle of Saona, on the windward corner of St Domingo, and had ever since pursued us, with the full determination to make us her prize. So long as the wind was moderate, we had pretty well kept our ground, but since the gale had risen to such a height as to force us to take in sail after sail, and had stirred up such a sea that the poor Water Lily could scarce get through, the brig had gained on us rapidly.

As soon as I expected she was in pursuit of us, I had determined to try a rather dangerous mode of escape, but one which, from its danger, I had hoped would be successful. We had passed the wide bay that closes into that of St Domingo; and instead of standing out into the open sea to double Cape Mongon, a high bluff point, formed by the range of the Boucco mountain, running down to the sea, I had kept the schooner's head close in to the land, determined to try to baffle our pursuer among the shoals and rocks that extend off this point. The schooner, being so much smaller, I thought might pass where the brig would be afraid to venture; but, to my great disappointment I now saw that my calculations were wrong, for we were just coming upon the shoal that stretches from the small island of Beata to the point, and our persevering pursuer still kept straight upon our track. In vain we all gazed to catch the slightest deviation in her course, or the smallest alteration in her sails. Onward she came careering before the gale, under fore-top-gallant and top-sails; her fore-sail was half clued up, to allow her gib and stay-sail to draw, and perhaps to enable the helmsman more truly to shape his course in our wake; and as this time (1812) the Western Archipelago was infested with pirates, as formidable and savagely cruel, I began to feel an uncomfortable apprehension that my earthly career, with its hopes, its fears, its ambitions, and its disappointments, was fast drawing to a close. The Water Lily mounted four twelve pound carronades;—formidable enough weapons when used at close quarters; and they had on former occasions proved useful friends in repelling an attempt to take her by boarding when becalmed on this same coast of St. Domingo. But our four guns and my crew of ten negroes, even though headed by their sable chief, Master Jupiter, would have proved but a mouthful to the blackguard who was now fast bearing down upon us. Old Jupiter knew this right well; and though he offered a sort of remonstrance at my order, he hastened to see it executed; and that done, he took his stand by the weather shrouds, holding the peak baulyards, once turned over the belaying pin in his hand, and anxiously watched the motion of the seasoned spar, as it yielded to the heavier pressure of some passing gust, and then stood again stiff and erect, as in mockery of the howling storm. With a dozen such men as Jupiter, I would not have felt much hesitation in attempting to fight the pirate. He was about six feet two in height, and proportionately stout. Some fifty summers had passed over his head, and I daresay he had been in as many scenes where a man's life depends on his own arm. From a kidnapper of negroes on the coast of Africa, he had passed through the several stages of piracy, chains, and slavery, and was now first lieutenant of the Water Lily, in the service of Messrs. — of Jamaica, and spent his time in running the schooner

between the islands on mercantile and trading speculations. And as the old grizzly-headed negro now stood, with nothing on but a pair of duck trousers and a checked handkerchief on his head—his muscular form and tremendous arms scarred and seamed with marks of former broils—you would have imagined him a fit representative of the merciless gang now in pursuit. Yet Jupiter, whatever he had been, was now an honest, and a faithful servant. He loved me like a father; he had been long together, and I had a sincere regard for the faithful old fellow. The only ornament, he possessed, I believe, was a long knife, beautifully ornamented in the blade, which was fitted into a silver case, and studded with silver knobs over its shagreen handle. He always wore this knife, secured by a silver chain round his neck, and thrust into the waistband of his trousers. There was a mystery connected with it that I could never fathom. The answer I always got was, 'Neben mind, massa, old Jupiter hab him secret too: maybe he tell you some day,' and with this answer I was forced to concur.

The brig was by this time within less than a mile of us, and every moment was shortening the distance. The sea was running fearfully high, and the spray flew from the tops of the waves, as they curled before the wind like a snowdrift. Our little schooner seemed but a mere cockle shell amongst the waters; she was at one time borne aloft on the crest of some towering wave, that foamed hissing and boiling around her, as it were in utter vexation that we could not fly along with it from our pursuer, and again, as the mass of water rolled away from under us, we sank down into the deep valley of waters, and for the moment the sail actually flapped in emptiness of wind ere we were again hurled onward by the next vast billow that swept past, foaming and hissing like its predecessor.

It was truly a wild scene, and, without the additional excitement of a pirate astern, was enough to have created anxiety in the mind of the stoutest hearted blue jacket.

Our pursuer was now near enough to try the range of her guns; but, thanks to the rolling of the sea, and consequent unsteadiness of the mark, her shot had as yet passed harmlessly over our heads or fallen short. But this was not to last long. And as we were borne upwards by a huge sea, bang went the gun, and whir whistled a shot, seemingly close to us. 'What think you of that Jupiter?—the fellow is coming too close.' 'Tink massa! me tink some of us lose our grog soon,' I thought so too.

We were rapidly closing in with the land, and a high bluff point lay over our lee bow, on the other side of which I knew that the sea took a turn inwards at right angles, forming a large bay, where the whole navies of the world might have rode at anchor, sheltered from the gale that was now blowing. Towards this point I now kept the schooner's head; and had resolved should no other chance of escape present itself, of which at present I saw little, to run round the shelter of the point, and in smooth water wait for the pirate, and endeavour to repel her attack. I mention this to my able sub, Master Jupiter and was glad to find he entirely approved.

'Ay, ay, maybe we lick 'em dam rascal after all. Old Jupiter lub more for fight nor be shot dis way like a runaway nigger. Bang went another gun, whirr flew the ball, and our lee-main-shrouds were as cleanly cut through as if a knife had severed them.

The brig had now got within a quarter of a mile of us, and I saw that our chase was fast drawing to a close. The headland was close over our lee bow, and there seemed no alternative but to sell our lives as dearly as we could, for I scarce dared to hope we would succeed in beating off the brig. The one gun that had been brought to bear on us still banged away; its shot flying sometimes near, and sometimes at a safe distance from us, and we were still creaking and straining under the canvass we had been able to stretch. Our men were now set to loading the carronades, and arms and ammunition were distributed—old Jupiter impressing upon the negroes that the least they could expect, if captured, would be chains and a sale to a new master, and the most likely fate they would meet would be walking the plank. They were so engaged when a shot from the brig struck us just beside the helm, where I was standing, and ploughed up the planks in a deep furrow, half the length of the vessel, upsetting in its course one of the carronades, and pitching the negroes that were engaged in loading it head over heels, like so many ninepins. A shower of splinters from the deck, and one poor fellow was hit severe-

ly—a ragged bit of wood penetrating deep into his thigh. He was taken below and I felt in the loss of even one man that my chance in the desperate game was lessened.

We could now distinguish the deck of the brig crowded with men; and when I considered the little chance we had in a struggle against such fearful odds, I hesitated for a moment whether it would not be more advisable to run the schooner ashore and trust to biding ourselves among the thick bushes that skirted the sea. I wavered in my idea of fighting, but we were now close upon the point. 'Come Jupiter, let go the peak baulyard, and come and stand by the mainsheet, we'll have to jibe to round that headland, and show as little canvass as possible or we'll carry away our mast.' Down came the peak as Jupiter let go the baulyard, and he turned to come aft to stand by the sheet. Bang went the heavy gun from the brig. The report was followed by a sound which I can best express by the word smash, and a short groan. Old Jupiter doubled up and fell upon his face, I rushed forward to pick him up, but saw that the poor fellow's career was over. A large, ragged, horrible hole appeared about the middle of his back, and the broken handle of the knife, fastened with the chain, protruded from the wound. It was a sickening sight. The negroes crowded round the body and gazed upon it seemingly horror struck. We lifted him up, but there was no sign of life—the huge ball had struck him in the pit of the stomach, just on his favourite knife, and had shivered it, carrying the fragments completely through his body. For the moment I was paralysed and forgot everything in sincere grief for the loss of my old servant, my faithful friend. But another shot from the brig roused me as the ball whistled past. 'Come lads, there is no time to cry; but we'll revenge poor Jupiter—we'll fight that devil.' 'Ay ay, massa, we'll fight that debbil,' echoed the men. I seized the helm, which had been quitted in the horror of the moment, and cast my eyes round to see where we were, when—could I believe my sight?—we had opened up the bay, when a large ship stood out beating towards us, under top gallants, and topsails, bearing at the mizen peak the union jack. Hurrah—it is—it is an English frigate. She had taken refuge from the gale in the bay, and bearing the firing, was coming to see what it was. 'Run Caesar, Jack, Sambo, run below and fetch up the English ensign—run ye rascals.' And right willingly they ran to execute my orders. The signal halyards were rove through the peak of the mainsail, and, as it was banging against the mast, the cord would not run. The frigate was meeting us like the wind, and came on dashing and plunging through the sea most nobly. It seemed utterly incredible that she could carry so much canvass beating up against such a gale; but though her lee scuppers were buried in the sea as she helled over to the storm, yet she dashed onwards, defying alike the wind and the sea. Bang went her gun, and the shot skipped off a wave ahead of us. 'No no, Master Skipper, we can't broach to in such a gale, and with your leave we'll do all we can, which is just to run before it; but we'll shew you our colours.' And I jumped on the stern sheets and extended in my hands the ensign. We were understood, and the frigate continued her course, closing in upon us as if to speak.

It was a glorious scene to see so gallant a vessel straining and tearing through the sea, as if rejoicing in the gale that threatened momentarily to send yards and sails in shivers to leeward. And to us the sight was doubly glorious, for in the presence of that ship we felt we were saved. Onward she came. I stood with the speaking trumpet in my hand, ready to hail her. She was within a hundred yards; still dashing onwards, and I own I began to have some dread lest the vast mass, that came roaring up to us, might crush us into the 'yeast of waves.' But she was under too perfect command to cause any danger of a collision, just as she seemed to be upon us, her bows fell away, and she passed close under our stern. 'Schooner aboy!—what brig astern?' roared the hoarse voice of the commander. 'Pirates,' I answered, 'Dash—plunge—hiss, and she swept away past us, leaving a broad, white streak upon the water, to mark for an instant her track.

Her decks were crowded; every halyard, clue-line, sheet, and downhaul, was manned by a cluster of sailors. Here then, was the secret of this vessel's ability to carry so much sail in the teeth of such a gale of wind. Had the finger of the anxiously watching sailing master but moved as a signal, in an instant every stitch of canvass would have been off

the masts. This is the secret, and this is the advantage of men-of-war. They are well and ably manned, and can face danger with the knowledge that they are always prepared to avert it. They may carry sail to the very verge of rashness, for they can shorten it in an instant.

But where was our pursuer? The brig, too, saw the frigate, as she came out from behind the point. Her crew had been too long in the habit of avoiding such craft not to know too well that now was the time, if ever, there existed a terrible necessity to try the virtues of their beautiful vessel. At first there seemed some confusion on board the brig but the captain's course was soon taken; his hope lay in following our plan and trying to escape the frigate among the rocks and shoals through which we had just passed. The helm was put down, and the graceful brig came round to the wind on the opposite track from the frigate, bending over to the increased pressure until her fore-yard dipped into the wave. She plunged bows under into the sea, and seemed scarcely able to rise again, under the mass of water that rushed over her decks. For an instant, I thought she was over, but she struggled on; and though her crew might be seen clinging to the weather bulwarks and shrouds, no hand was stretched, and no order was given, or if given could not be executed, to reduce the canvass which threatened to drive them to the bottom. It was impossible that she could long stand under so much sail—she was literally buried in the sea—and after dragging her yardarms through the waves for a few minutes, the main top-mast snapped, and top gallant and top sail fell on the other side. A feeling of something like pity crept over us as we watched the death struggles of the graceful brig. The piratical crew were forgotten, and we gazed on the beautiful craft as if she had been a thing of life, and was using her own faculties in these super-human struggles for self-preservation; and when her main top-masts went over, an involuntary expression of regret burst from us all.

The pirate captain was no laggard, however, when there was work to do. He had lost all chance of getting to wind-ward, but another and more desperate chance still remained. In an instant the helm was put up, the yards squared, and the now maimed brig resumed her course before the wind. The foresheets were brought home, and the fore top-sail yard was manned with active hands to run out studding sail booms. The frigate instantly wore, and the two now ran before the wind, the pirate a little astern, and the frigate gradually closing in upon her. The brig commenced her fire, and poured a broadside among the frigate's spars, in the hope that some lucky shot might wound a spar or rend a sail; and either a wound or rent would, with the wind that was blowing, have ensured the snapping of a spar or the splitting of the sail into ribbands. Some little damage might have been done, but the frigate seemed not to heed it; she came on as regardless of the discharge as if the guns had contained but blank cartridge. She rapidly neared the brig, and fired a gun to bring her to. It was answered by a second discharge of her broadside, but it was a scattered firing. Confusion and terror began to affect the conscience stricken crew. This discharge, however, broke the fore-top gallant yard of the frigate; and the breaking of the spar would have told heavily against her had the chase been prolonged. The latter had, however, no alternative but to return the fire of the brig; and most fearfully it was returned. Gun after gun blazed from the frigate's star-board broadside, until every cannon was discharged. The iron shower told with fearful effect upon her opponent; several of the poor fellows that were struggling to get out the studding sail booms, dropped one after another from their hold. The cordage, which had before been tight and trim, now flew wildly and loosely to the gale; the foremast, deprived of its stays and braces, and probably severely wounded, waved unsteady for a few moments before the breeze, then snapped close by the deck, and fell forward with a crash, carrying with it sails, yards, and its whole tracery of cordage; and the poor brig, so shortly before so graceful and so perfect, bounding like an antelope over the wave, and bidding seeming defiance to the storm, now rolled heavily in the trough of the sea, a mere log upon the water.

The chase was over. The Water Lily had been flying on its course; for having got rid of our pursuer we did not change it, and we soon lost the frigate and her prize under the horizon. Poor Jupiter was rolled in his hammock and dropped into the roaring sea in deep regret. Not