

MILES WALLINGFORD

BY JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

CHAPTER XIX

The sea waxed calm, and we discovered two ships from far making main to us. Of these, that of Epidaurus this: But on they come—Oh, let me say no more! Gather the sequel by what went before."

Comedy of Errors.

It was high time for the Dawn to be doing. Of all the ships to leeward, the Speedy, the vessel we had most reason to apprehend, was in the best condition to do us harm. It was true that just then we might outlast her, but a man-of-war's crew would soon restore the balance of power, if it did not make it preponderant against us. I called to my mate, and we went aft to consult.

"It will not do for us to remain any longer here, Moses," I began; "the English are masters of the day, and the Speedy's officers have recognized this beyond all doubt, and will be on our heels the moment we can."

"I rather think, Miles, her travelling, for some hours to come, is over. There she is, however, and she has our crew on board her, and it would be a good thing to get some of them, if possible. If a body had a boat, now, I might get down with a flag of truce, and see what terms could be made."

I laughed at this conceit, telling Marble it would be wise to remain where he was. I would give the Speedy four hours to get herself in tolerable sailing trim again, superfluous to us, in pursuit. If in no immediate hurry, it might occupy her four-and-twenty hours.

"I think she may be disposed to follow the other French frigate, which is clearly making her way toward Brest," I added, "in which case we have nothing to fear. By George! there goes a gun, and here comes a shot in our direction—you can see it, Moses, skipping along the water almost in a line between us and the frigate. Ay, here it comes!"

All this was literally true. The Speedy lay her bows toward us, and she had just fired the shot to which I alluded, and which now came bounding from wave to wave, until it struck precisely in a line with the ship, about a hundred yards distant.

"Hallo!" cried Marble, who had leveled his glass toward the frigate. "There's the deuce! pay down there, Miles—no boat pulling this way, for life or death, and another 'er it. The shot was intended for the leading boat, and not for us."

This brought my glass down too. Sure enough, there was a small boat pulling straight for us, and of course directly to windward of the frigate; the men in it exerting every nerve. There were seven seamen in this boat; six at the oars, and one steering. The truth flashed on me in a moment. These were some of our own people, headed by the second mate, who had availed himself of the circumstances of one of the Speedy's boats being in the water without a crew, to run away with it in the confusion of the moment. The Black Prince had taken possession of the prize, as we had previously noted and that with a single boat and the cutter in pursuit appeared to have been immediately acquainted with Marble, with my views of the matter, and he seized on the idea eagerly, as one probable and natural.

"Them's our fellows, Miles!" he exclaimed; "we must fill, and meet 'em half-way!"

It was certainly in our power to lessen the distance the fugitives had to run, by standing down to meet the leading boat. This could not be done, however, without going within reach of the English guns; the late experiment showing unanswerably, that we lay too near in the drop of the water, as it was. I never saw men in greater excitement, than that which now came over us all in the Dawn. Fill, we did, immediately; that, at least, could do no harm; whereas it might do much good. I never supposed for a moment the English were sending boats after us, since only the wind that was blowing would have been easy for the Dawn to leave them miles behind her, in the first hour. Each instant rendered my first conjecture the most likely to be true. There could be no mistaking the exertions of the crews of the two boats; the pursuers seeming to do all they could, as well as the pursued. The frigate could not longer fire, however, the boat being already in a line, and there being equal danger to both from her shot.

The reader will understand that large ships seldom engage, when the ocean will permit, without dropping one or two of their boats into the water; and that warm actions at sea rarely occur, without most of the boats being more or less injured. It often happens that a frigate can muster only one or two boats that will swim, after a combat; and frequently only the one she had taken the precaution to lower into the water, previously to engaging. It was owing to some such circumstance that only one boat followed the fugitives in the present instance. The race must necessarily be short; and it would have been useless to send a second boat in pursuit, should one be found, after the first two or three all-important minutes were lost.

The Dawn showed her ensign, as a sign we saw our poor fellows struggling to regain us, and then we filled our main-top-sail, squaring away and standing down toward the fugitives. Heaven! how that main-yard went round, though there were but three men at the braces. Each of us hauled and worked like a giant. There was every inducement of feeling, interest and security to do so. With our present force, the ship took easily by the head to sea; while the seven additional hands, and they our own people, who were straining every nerve to join us, would at once enable us to carry the ship direct to Hamburg.

Our old craft behaved beautifully. Neb was at the wheel, the cook on the fore-castle, while Marble and I got ropes cleared away to throw the runways, as soon as they should be near enough to receive them. Down we drove toward the boat, and it was time we did, for the cutter in pursuit, which pulled

ten oars, and was full manned, was gaining fast on the fugitives. As we after the manner of the crew of the sterns, our men had shipped the crest of a sea, and they were now laboring under the great disadvantage of carrying more than a barrel of water, which was washing about in the bottom of their cutter, rendering her both heavy and unsteady.

So intense was the interest we all felt in the result of this struggle, that our feelings during the battle could not be compared to it. I could see Marble move his body, as a sinner in a boat is apt to do, at each jerk of the oars, under the notion it helps the party along. Diogenes actually called out, and this done times at least, to encourage the men to pull for their lives, though they were not yet within a mile of us. The constant raising and setting of the boats prevented my making very minute observations with the glass; but I distinguished the face of my second mate, who was sitting aft, and I could see he was steering with one hand and bailing with the other. We now waved our hats in hopes of being seen, but got no answering signal, the distance being still too great.

At that moment I cared nothing for the gun of the English ship, though we were running directly for them. The boat—the boat was our object! For that she steered as unerringly as the motion of the rolling water would allow. It blew a good working breeze; and, what was of the last importance to us, it was a westerly gale, so that the ship did not move, notwithstanding, though the rate at which we drew nearer to the boat ought to have told us better. But anxiety had taken the place of reason, and we were all disposed to see things as we felt, rather than as we truly found them.

There was abundant reason for uneasiness, the cutter stern certainly going through the water four feet to the other's three. Manned with her regular crew, with everything in order, and with men accustomed to pull together, the largest boat and rowing ten oars to the cutter of the Black Prince would have beaten materially in an ordinary race, more especially in the rough water over which this contest occurred. But, nearly a tenth full of water, the boat of the fugitives had a greatly lessened chance of success, and of course, we then knew no more than we could see, and we were not slow to perceive how fast the pursuers were gaining on the pursued. I really began to tremble for the result; and this so much the more, as the larger cutter was near enough by this time to permit me to discover, by means of the glass, the ends of several muskets rising out of her stern-sheets. Could she get near enough for her officers to use these weapons, the chance of our people was gone, since it was not to be even hoped they had any arms.

The end approached. The Dawn had been of course on her, Marble and Diogenes having dragged down the main-topgallant-sheets and hoisted the sail. The water foamed under our bows, and the boat was soon so near it became indispensible to haul our wind. This we did with the ship's head to the windward, without touching the rigging, though we had sufficiently to throw the wind out of all the square sails. The last was done to deaden the vessel's way, in order that the fugitives might reach her.

The struggle became frightful for its intensity. Our men were so near we could recognize the firing cutters, and the anxiety that was in my second mate's countenance. Each instant the pursuers closed, until they were actually much nearer to the pursued than the latter was to the Dawn. For the first time, now, I suspected the truth, by the heavy movement of the firing cutters, and the fact that the second mate was constantly bailing out of her, using his hat. Marble brought up the muskets left by the privateersmen and began to renew their primings. He wished to fire at once on the pursuing boat, she being within range of his lead; but this I would not permit him to do, as it would have exposed the ship to the English attempt to board her, but did not dare to anticipate that movement.

Nearer and nearer came the boats, the chasing gaining always on the chased; and now the Black Prince and the Speedy each had a shot quite over the heads of the three frigates, rather increasing than lessening that distance, however, as they drifted to leeward, while we were slightly luffing, with our yards a little braced up, the leechees lifting. Neb steered the ship, and he had an eye for the boats as well as for the sails—knew all that was wanted, and all that was to be done. I never saw him touch a wheel with so delicate a hand, or one that better did its duty. The Dawn's way was so much deadened as to give the fugitives every opportunity to close with the Dawn, which was steadily coming up abreast of their course in readiness to meet them.

At this instant, the officer in the Black Prince's cutter fired into that of the Speedy, and one of our men was thought the poor fellow's arm was broken, for I could see him lay a hand on the injured part, like a man who suffered pain. He instantly changed places with the second mate, who, however, seized his oar, and began to use it with great power. Three more muskets were fired, seemingly without doing any harm. But the leading boat lost by this delay, while its pursuers held steadily on. Our own people were within a hundred and fifty yards of us—the English less than twenty behind them. Why the latter did not now fire, I do not actually know; but I suspect it was because the muskets were all discharged, and the race was now too sharp to allow their officer to reload. Possibly he did not wish to take life unnecessarily, the chances fast turning to his side.

I called out to Marble to stand by with a rope. The ship was slowly drawing ahead, and there was no time to be lost. I then shouted to my second mate that he should be of good heart, and he answered with a cheer. The English hurrahed, and we sent back the cry from the ship. "Stand by in the boat, for the rope!" I cried. "Heave, Moses—heave!"

Marble hove from the main-chains, the rope was caught, and a motion of hand told Neb to keep the ship off, until

everything drew. This was done, and the rattling of the clew-garnet blocks announced that Diogenes was hauling down the main-tack with the strength of a giant. The sail opened, and Moses and I hauled in the sheet, until the ship felt the enormous additional pressure of this broad breadth of canvas. At this instant there was a cheer from the men erect, waving their hats, and looking toward the pursuing cutter, then within a hundred feet of them, vainly attempting to come up with a boat that was now dragging nearly two rows under, and feeling all the strength of our tow. The officer cheered his men to renewed exertion, and he began to load a musket. At this moment the low-line slipped from the thwart of the boat, and we shot away, as it seemed to me, a hundred feet, on the end of the very next second. There was not time for the Americans to get seated at their oars again, before the other cutter grappled. All that had been gained was lost, and, after a near and close chase of recovering the most valuable portion of my crew, I was again left on the water with the old four to manage the Dawn!

The English lieutenant knew his business too well, to abandon the ship while there was a chance of recovering her. The wind lulled a little, and he thought the hope of success worth an effort. Merely taking all the water out of the Speedy's cutter, as I have already said, at first he dashed on, and I unwilling he should, for I wished to speak him. The main and fore-sheets were eased off, and Neb was told to keep the top-sails lifting. This favored, he soon got within fifty yards of us, straining every nerve to get nearer. The officer pointed a musket at me, and ordered me to heave-to. I jumped off the trailla, and, with my body covered to the shoulders, pointed one of the French muskets at him, and warned him to keep off.

"What have you done with the prize crew put on board the Speedy, the other day?" called out the lieutenant. "Sent them adrift," I answered. "We've had enough of prize crews in this ship, and want no more."

"Heave to, sir, on the pain of being treated as a pirate," he called out. "Ay, Ay," I shouted, Marble, who could keep silent no longer, "first catch a pirate. Fire, if you are tired of your cruise. I wish them bloody Frenchmen had stopped all your grog!"

This was neither dignified nor polite, a good natured man, I thought, for the names of the late combatants, and the losses of the different ships, but this was too cool for our pursuer's humor, and I got no answer. He did not dare to fire, however, finding we were armed, and, as I suppose, seeing there was no prospect of his getting easily on board us, even should he get alongside, he gave up the chase, returning to the captured boat. We again filled and trimmed everything, and went dashing through the water at the rate of seven knots.

The frigates did not fire at us, after the guns already mentioned. Why they cannot possibly have done so, I do not know, but that they had too many other things to attend to, besides seeing the little chance there was of overtaking us, should they even happen to cripple a spar or two.

Great was the disappointment on board the Dawn, at the result of the final chase, and the result of the day. Marble swore outright; for no remembrance of mine could cure him of indulging in this habit, especially when a little excited. Diogenes grinned defiance, and fairly shook his fists at the boat; while Neb laughed and half cried in a breath—the sure sign the fellow's feeling were keenly roused.

As for myself, I felt as much as any of the party, but preserved more self-composure. I saw it was now necessary to quit that vicinity, and to take some definite steps for the preservation of my little bark, and property. There was little to apprehend, however, from the frigates, unless indeed it should fall calm. In the latter case, they might board us with their boats, which an hour or two's work would probably enable them to do again. But I had no intention of remaining in their neighborhood, being desirous of profiting by the present wind.

The sails were trimmed accordingly, and the ship was steered northwesterly, on a course that took us past the three vessels-of-war, giving them so wide a berth as to avoid all danger from their batteries. As soon as this was done, I remained travelling her road at a good rate, I beckoned to Marble to come near the wheel, for I had taken the helmsman's duty on myself for an hour or two; in other words, I was doing that which, from my boyish experience on the Hudson, I had not the least doubt, would be to his advantage, the pleasure, of every shipmaster to do, namely, steering! Little did I understand, before practice taught me the lesson, that of all the work on board ship, which Jack is required to do, his trick at the wheel is that which he least likes to do, unless indeed it may be the office of stowing the jib in heavy weather.

"Well, Moses," I began, "this affair is over, and we've the Atlantic before us again, with all the ports of Europe to select from, and a captain, one mate, the cook and one man to carry the ship where we please to take her."

"Ay, ay," he has been a bad job, this last. I was as sure of them lads, until the lieutenant fired his musket, as ever I was of a good landfall with a fair wind. I can't describe to you, Miles, the nature of the disappointment I felt, when I saw 'em give up. I can best compare it to that which came over me when I discovered I was nothing but a bloody hermit, after all my generalizing about being a governor and a lord high admiral of an island all to myself as it might be."

"It can't be helped, and we must take things as we find them. The question is, should it be done with the ship? What you say will be after us with the news of the Yankee, on board of whom they put a prize crew, being adrift without the men; and there are fifty cruisers ready to pick us up. The news will spread all over the Channel. As a week, and an opportunity of getting through the Straits of Dover will be so small as not to be worth naming; nay,

these fellows will soon repair damages, and might possibly overtake us themselves. The Speedy is only half crippled."

"I see—I see. You've a trick with you, Miles, that makes a few words go a good way. I see, and I agree. But an idea has come to my mind, that you're welcome to, and after turning it over, do what you please with it. Instead of going to the eastward of Scilly, what say you to passing to the westward, and Channel? The news will not follow us thataway, for some time; and we may meet with some American, or other, bound to Liverpool. Should the worst come to the worst, we can pass through between Ireland and Scotland and work our way round Cape Wrath, and go into a port of destination. It is a long road, I know, and a hard one in certain seasons of the year, but it may be travelled in midsummer, comfortably enough."

"I like your notion well enough, Marble, and an ready to carry it out, as far as I am concerned. It must be a hard fortune, indeed, that will not throw us in the way of some fisherman, or coaster, who will be willing to let us have a hand or two, for double wages."

"Why, on that point, Miles, the difficulty is in the war, and the hot press of our destination. The English will be shy in visiting the opposite coast, and good men are hard to find, just now, I'm thinking, floating about the coast of England, unless they are under a pennant."

"A hand, or two, that can steer, will be an immense relief to us, Moses, even if we are obliged to go aloft. Call Neb to the wheel, then, and we'll look at the chart, so as to lay our course."

All was done, accordingly. In half an hour, the Dawn was steering for the western coast of England, with everything set we thought it prudent to carry. We were away from the spot where they lay, the frigates had sunk behind the curvature of the earth, and we lost sight of them altogether. The weather continued good, the breeze steady and fresh, and the Dawn did her duty admirably. Neb began to grow impatient, and found them less arduous than had been apprehended. The direction of the wind was so favorable, that it kept hope alive; though we trebled our distance by going round the British Islands, instead of passing directly up Channel. Twenty-four hours were necessary to carry us as far as the Land's End, however; and I determined to be then governed by circumstances. Should the wind shift, we always had the direct route before us; and I had my doubts whether putting a bold face on the matter, resting close in with the coast, and then appearing to be bound for London, were not the wisest course. There certainly was the danger of the Speedy's telling our story, in which case there would be a sharp lookout for us; while there was the equal chance that she might sight nothing for a week. Eight-and-forty hours were necessary to carry us as far as the Land's End, however; and I determined to be then governed by circumstances. Should the wind shift, we always had the direct route before us; and I had my doubts whether putting a bold face on the matter, resting close in with the coast, and then appearing to be bound for London, were not the wisest course. There certainly was the danger of the Speedy's telling our story, in which case there would be a sharp lookout for us; while there was the equal chance that she might sight nothing for a week. 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