



The Mutiny of the "Helen Gray."

BY GEORGE MANVILLE FENN.

(Continued from page 237.)

I could hardly keep down an exclamation as all this now stood out clear as day, and a horrible sensation of misery came over me as I thought that I ought to have spoken to the captain.

The captain—his wife—that little child! "No, no," I said the next moment, "they would not—they could not do that!" And feeling it was impossible that the most savage human being could injure that little child, I began thinking of what I could do.

The first thing was to get hold of some weapon, but I could think of nothing but a captain's bar, and to get that I must go by the hatch, where I could still hear the clinking of the chain-cable.

I was creeping on all-fours to the side, so as to keep under the shelter of the bulwarks, and try to get to the poop-deck, when from that direction I heard a faint sound, and something seemed to tell me that it was the captain coming on deck, to see why the ship's course had been altered, and try to trap any of the watch not attending to his duty.

I could not see, but I felt sure that he would turn short round to the right and ascend the steps to the poop-deck, so as to pounce on the man at the wheel.

I did not finish my thought, but sprang forward to help him, but as I took my first step I heard a sound, a faint cry—a gasp or two—a groan, a quick rustling sound, and a splash.

By that time, with a cry of rage, I had reached the spot, making a bound amongst the Malays.

"Mr. Denson, Jamieson, Stacey," I yelled, and then my feet glided on something slippery and wet on the deck, and I fell.

Before I could recover myself and spring up, I was seized by the arms, a little figure was on my chest, and two hands were at my throat.

"It's all over," I thought. "God forgive me, and protect that poor woman and her child."

But at that moment there was a quick authoritative whispering, a face was bent down over mine, hot breath was on my cheek, and while I felt that these people could almost see, cat-like, in the dark, a voice I knew as Ismael's said something in Malay, and to my intense surprise I felt myself turned over on my breast, while my wrists were rapidly and tightly bound behind me by one man, and another secured my ankles and then my knees.

Then there was another order, and I was rolled over close under the bulwark, and lay there in the darkness trying to make out what was to follow, and trembling horribly for the fate of Mrs. Barton and her child, for I felt no doubt now that it was the captain who had been killed.

But though I lay listening, the only sound I could hear was the soft pat of a bare foot now and then, and the low guttural talking of the Malays.

Still, that told me a great deal, for they had ceased to whisper, and by that I knew that they felt no more fear of discovery.

"Great heavens," I thought, "where are the rest of the crew? They can't all be murdered."

We were twenty all told on board, without the captain's wife and child, and as I lay there in agony I tried to reckon up what might have been.

There were, of course, fourteen without the Malays; and counting the captain, I seemed in a confused way to be able to account for four murdered and thrown over the side. Then as I was left lying there it left nine to account for, including Joe Stacey, who must have gone on deck; and I shuddered as I felt that perhaps the poor fellow who had always been friendly to me might have been one of the unfortunate four.

CHAPTER V.

If ever poor wretch prayed fervently for morning, I did, as I lay there, but daylight, always long in coming near the equator, seemed to lag more heavily than ever then. But all at once, when I felt as if I could bear my position no longer, it suddenly seemed as if I was looking up at a dim mist, which grew more and more grey, and from out of it the masts, sails and rigging began to loom. Then the long-boat, lying on its chocks over by the galley, began to appear, and as I lay there something on its edge moved.

I stared at it hard and it disappeared. Then as it grew lighter it rose again, and I was sure that one of the Malays was in the boat watching me, but the next moment a sob rose up in my throat, and I felt as if I was going to cry like a child, for I had seen a faint gleam as the head moved, and I knew it was the bald patch on Joe Stacey's grizzled crown.

I had not long to wait now for relief. There were footfalls just beyond my head, and directly after Ismael, Dullah, and two others of the Malays stood about me, but quite transformed in appearance, for though they still retained their sailor's shirt and trousers, each had put on a sarong, a plaid cotton kilt, three of them had little natty checkered caps of the make worn by our cavalry, and Ismael had a red silk handkerchief twisted about his black head.

But there was something else which took my attention. Each man had an ugly-looking kris stuck in the folds of the sarong, and as I wondered how they had been able to make this change, I remembered that we had put in at Penang, and that they might have got them there.

I tried to be firm as Ismael drew his kris, for it seemed to me that my time had come.

But I was not kept long in doubt, and my determination was thrown away, for Ismael cut the cord about my wrists, Dullah did the same by my legs, and they sheathed their weapons.

Ismael made a sign to me to rise, and I tried to obey, but my legs were perfectly numb, and I sank back, looking up at him with a feeling of horror that I could not conceal.

"Not kill you," he said, quietly, as he laid his hand on my shoulder, and I could not help wincing, for there was a mark of blood on his shirt-sleeve. He then turned away from me, gave some orders to his companions, one of whom went to the wheel, for a breeze was springing up, and the vessel careened slightly over, and began to glide along about half a mile from what was evidently a densely wooded shore, back from which, some miles to the south, stood up a rounded hill, which looked like an extinct volcano. The mist melted away before the sun, and the filmy clouds soon disappeared, leaving all bright and clear.

"What does it all mean—what are they going to do?" I said to myself, and then I felt a wondering as to the fate of my companions, and stood there listening for some sound from the cabin.

This was not long in coming, for I heard the rattling of a handle, then a beating on the door of the inner cabin, and Ismael walked swiftly by my head, and I came back to put his face close to mine.

"You stop," he said. "I am captain now."

His words were very few, but full of meaning to me, and I

felt my heart sink as I thought of my helplessness, and watched him go into the captain's cabin.

"Yes," I heard him say sharply. "You want?"

"Why is this door fastened?" I heard Mrs. Barton say.

"Where is the captain?"

He is gone. You make no noise," was all the answer she had, but the tone of Ismael's voice was so imperative that Mrs. Barton said no more. Then giving me a sharp look as he passed me, the Malay called to a couple of his men in his own tongue, gave them an order, pointing upward to the rigging, and they made an angry reply, which I soon interpreted to mean that they could not do what he wanted alone, and the three went forward together.

Now was my opportunity, and leaving the bulwark I crossed over and stood with my back to the mainmast, and then seated myself as if weary, bending forward, and resting my chin on my hand so as to cover the side of my mouth.

"Joe," I whispered, but there was no reply.

I tried again a little louder.

"Hullo! What cheer?"

"Hut! Don't speak; only listen. Tell me first; are you hurt?"

"No. That you, Jack Roberts?"

"Yes. Can you cover yourself? I think they're coming aloft."

"Ay. All right."

"Can you hear me?" I said after a pause during which I had gazed forward, trembling lest our voices should have been noticed.

"Ay, lad."

"Where are the others?"

"Don't yer know, lad?" came back, and then after a pause, "dead, overboard, all but us."

I had heard a step off to my left, and with my head hanging down uttered a low sigh. "Oh, dear me!" I muttered aloud, and as I rested my head on one hand I began to rub my ankle softly with the other.

The next moment Ismael was alongside and he looked at me searchingly, but seemed satisfied, turned, and called to his companions, and four of them went aloft and began to shorten sail.

I soon had evidence of what this meant and that the Malays were well acquainted with the coast, for somewhere about mid-day I saw Ismael join the man at the wheel, and stand with his hand sheltering his eyes, gazing out to sea. Then the wheel was rapidly turned, and the vessel careened over more and more as she curved round and began sailing straight for the low forest-covered shore, now a mile away, as if the object were to run her aground opposite to the wooded mount whose summit rose beyond the trees.

But I was wrong. From where I stood, for I had risen, I made out at last that there was an opening hidden by a mangrove-covered spit, and towards this we were gliding fast; and at last, just as I was saying to myself that we had made good sailors of these men to some purpose, the vessel glided in by an oblique opening, passing for some hundred yards between a long narrow spit of mangrove-covered, muddy land and the forest, so that we seemed to be sailing right in among the trees till we passed round a wooded bluff which quite shut us off from the sea.

I could see now that we had entered the estuary of a muddy river, up which, as it wound in and out, we glided pretty swiftly, for a strong tide was running, which carried us with it for quite a couple of hours before it began to slacken, when Ismael gave the word, one of the anchors was let go, and the vessel swung round.

As soon as the vessel was moored the Malays began to busy themselves at the galley, and as I looked about me I could see how hopeless our condition had become. That these people would at the turn of the tide take the barque higher up the stream I had no doubt, and as I noted how completely we were cut off from the sea, and evidently in a part never visited by Europeans, I asked myself what was to be the fate of that poor woman in the cabin and her helpless child.

I was leaning over the bulwark watching the river, which was slowly beginning to run down, when I shuddered and felt as if here before me was an utter denial of the possibility of an escape, for not fifty feet away there were two muddy-looking knobs just above the surface of the water, and as I stared at them I could see that in each of these knobs there was a hideous-looking eye; fifteen inches or so in from was the end of a horrible snout slowly turning from right to left as if the eyes were on the look-out for prey.

I could see no more, but in imagination there, beneath the muddy water, was the great bulky body and powerful tail of an eighteen-foot-long crocodile, and as I turned shuddering away I could see the heads of six more, and another muddy-looking monster slowly crawling out of the river on to a mud bank on the other side.

Escape was impossible by the river, I felt, and what, I asked myself, would be the fate of a man who tried to force his way through a thick jungle, a place, for aught I could tell, haunted by tigers.

My musings were ended by the coming of Dullah, who brought me some of the food one of their number had prepared, and he smiled and showed his teeth as he handed me a bottle of wine, one just taken from the captain's cabin.

"Look here," I said, for we were out of hearing of the others; "what are you going to do?"

"You will see," he said, laughing and nodding his head.

"Our ship now."

"But look here, Dullah," I whispered: "your people won't hurt that poor woman and the child?"

He gave me a curious look.

"Eat," he said; "going to take her some."

He went away forward to the galley, and after making sure that I was not observed, I whispered:

"Joe, lad—look out!" and threw a couple of biscuits and part of the meat Dullah had brought into the boat.

Then I stood listening and making belief to eat, but I could hardly swallow a morsel.

"He must have some drink," I said to myself. "What can I do?"

I hesitated for a few minutes, and then, feeling that I was to a certain extent free to act, I walked forward to where the breaker stood nearly full of water, but before I was there two of the Malays, headed by Ismael, came running to intercept me. I did not stop though, but went on, picked up the pannikin, dipped it full of water and drank heartily, every draught seeming to send a thrill of new life through my body. Then, with the Malays watching me, I dipped the tin full again, and walked back with it to where I had left the bottle and the food.

"Force is no good here," I said to myself, as I began to munch one of the biscuits. "One can't play lion, so I must play fox."

I could not keep my eyes off that bottle, for it seemed to me to offer a way of escape—one way, for other ideas were buming in my brain.

I emptied the pannikin of water into the bottle, gave it a shake, filled the pannikin again, this time with wine and water, and then thrust the cork back into the neck.

I was seated on the deck, but I now rose up, bottle in hand, and stood it just above my head, beneath the boat, eating the white, and glancing carelessly about to make sure that I was not watched.

All seemed safe. So hesitating no longer, I raised my hand quickly, took the bottle and pitched it over the side of the boat, stooping down the next moment to pick up the pannikin to drink.

As I was in the act of raising it, a side glance showed me that I was observed, for Ismael came round from the other way, and the perspiration oozed from every pore as I stood there in dread lest Joe should make a sound.

To warn him, I forced myself to speak, and turning to the Malay:

"You will not hurt that poor lady and her child?" I said.

"You ask?" he said, with a little laugh, as he spoke to me with his dark, oily eyes half closed. "I know what I shall do. You like the little girl?"

"Yes," I said, eagerly.

The Malay laughed and pointed to the food.

"Eat," he said, and then laying his hand on my breast, it almost seemed as if I had been thinking aloud, for he pointed down at the river. "No swim away," he said. "Look—Mugger!"

I followed the direction of his pointing hand, and could see the prominent brow of one of the loathsome reptiles slowly floating down with the tide.

He laughed as he saw me shudder, and gripping my shoulder hard he pointed to the jungle.

"Tiger," he said. "You stop; friends."

He held out his hand as he released my shoulder, and as I stepped back, feeling that it was a hand stained with the blood of my messmates, I felt my nerves tingle, and as if I should like to strike him full in the grinning mouth; but his eyes were fixed full on mine, and knowing that if we were to escape it must be by matching cunning against cunning, I placed my hand in his.

"Hah!" he ejaculated, with a satisfied look.

"And you will not hurt those two?"

He half closed his eyes again, and smiled and nodded.

"I am chief," he said slowly. "You wait see."

CHAPTER VI.

It was wonderfully still there on that glassy river. Now and then there was a splash which I knew was made by one of the crocodiles, and from time to time a parrot shrieked in the jungle, or there was a barking sound, which came, I found, from a great flapping bird with a huge beak.

On board I could hear a low muttering from the men, who kept walking about the deck, three keeping watch while the others lay down under the awning to sleep.

Whenever the Malays came silently round my way I trembled lest Joe should make a sound and betray his presence, but the day wore on, and I prayed for the darkness, under cover of which I hoped to contrive a way for him to escape below, perhaps for us all to get off in one of the small boats, though for the life of me I could invent no plan.

I wanted to get speech with that poor woman in the cabin, to try and give her a word or two that might tell her there were two friends on board ready to risk anything to save her and her child, though I dreaded the meeting and the question I knew must come: "Where is my husband?—Where is the father of my child?"

I sat on there, with my head down on my breast and my eyes closed as if asleep, thinking.

Could I write?

Yes, I could write, for I had, well frayed and worn now, the little notebook in which I had set down engagements before I became a common sailor and started on this voyage.

I took it out of my trousers pocket and wrote a few lines on one leaf.

"Try and be hopeful. You have friends on board."

I tore this out and doubled it up, placing book and note back in my pocket as I sat on, trying to solve the difficulty of delivering it, but no idea came.

In spite of the terrible position and the anxiety, sleep mastered me at last, and I was roused by a hand laid upon my shoulder.

"Get up and help."

I sprang to my feet and followed the Malay to where his men were getting up the anchor. It was close upon sunset, and I saw that the tide had turned, and that it was evidently their intention to let the vessel float farther up the stream, to make sure of the valuable prize.

As soon as the anchor was raised from the soft mud the vessel began to glide slowly up the river. The night grew perfectly dark, and the river mist thickened, but for a long time I did not dare to stir lest one or other of the Malays should be close at hand; but at last, I nerved myself to my task, listened till the muttering of conversation told that the enemy were busy, and quickly drawing myself up I glided over the side of the boat and lay down.

"Joe," I whispered.

"Ay, ay, lad," came from close at hand, and with my lips to his ear told him that when he heard me talking he must drop down on deck and get below into the hold.

"Get among the water-casks," I said, "and I shall know where to find you."

He pressed my hand in answer, and I asked him then for news.

"Don't ask me, lad," he whispered, with a low groan. "They were too cunning for us. Only you and me's left to tell the tale, and they think I went overboard. Skipper's wife!"

"Safe so far."

"And that poor bairn?"

"Safe, Joe. We must escape with them if we have to kill all first."

"I'm ready," he whispered.

I pressed his hand again, and was going to climb out, when as I raised my head over the side of the boat, I could see a faint glowing space of light approaching, and my name was pronounced quietly. Then the glowing light disappeared, and by the sound I knew that the Malay Ismael had run aft and gone into the cabin, suspecting that I was trying to communicate with the prisoners.

Quick as light I was out of the boat, down on deck, and walking quickly forward to where the other Malays were together keeping a look-out ahead as we still floated up with the tide.

"Where's Ismael?" I said, quietly.

Dullah pointed aft in the darkness, and with my hands in my pockets I slowly sauntered down on the other side of the deck to come directly after upon the chief hurrying to his men.

"Ah!" I said, stopping short, "you are there. Give me one of those. I haven't had a smoke to-day."

I heard him draw a long breath as he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out three cigars, which he placed in my hand.

I took them quietly enough, bit off an end, and the next moment if Joe Stacey had been looking over the side of the boat he would have seen Ismael's dark face and my fair one illumined, as end to end we puffed at our cigars till mine was well alight.

"You can sleep in your old place," he said. "The hatch will be open."

"All right!" I said, quietly; "but," I added, as if by an afterthought, "shall I be safe?"

"If one of my brothers killed you," he said through his teeth, "I should kill him."

"Hah!" I ejaculated, as I stood smoking; and then to myself, "If Joe is keen he'll get below now," and to give him time I said aloud:

"Won't she get ashore? We're very close."

"The river is narrow now, but deep. If she touches the shore, what then? Allah will help us to get her off."

"Where are we going?" I said.

The Malay uttered a low laugh, and I could get no answer to my questions, but I left him at last, hopeful that Joe had seized the opportunity; and when, after finishing my cigar I climbed up, my hand touched the bottle, but my fellow sufferer was gone.

With the first sensation of hopefulness I had yet enjoyed, I thrust that bottle into my breast, and went forward into the fore-castle to write another letter, and wait for the turn of the tide, for I began to see a way of escape.

I went below, as I said, to my bunk in the fore-castle, and sat down in the pitch darkness to think. We were still gliding up the river with the tide, and I knew that it would be easy to tell when it was high water, for the anchor would be let go, and when the tide turned would be my time.

For what? Wait a bit and you shall hear.

I had my notebook out, and after a good deal of thought of how to say the most in a few words, and of how blind people managed to form letters in a line, I sharpened my pencil, and then took the cork out of the bottle, and set it up to drain while I wrote slowly and carefully:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]