

THE  
CRUISE OF THE MIDGE.

BY  
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AUTHOR OF 'TOM CRINGLE'S LOG.'

'Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,  
Of moving accidents by flood and field.'—OTHELLO.



XXI-2752

LONDON:  
FREDERICK WARNE AND CO.,  
BEDFORD STREET, STRAND.

# THE CRUISE OF THE MIDGE

## CHAPTER I.

### GAZELLES AND MIDGES—THE MIDGE'S WINGS ARE SINGED.

BORN an Irishman, the son of an Irishwoman ; educated in Scotland, the country of my father, an ancient mariner, who, as master and supercargo, had sailed his own ship for many years in the Virginia trade ; removed to England at the age of seventeen, in consequence of his death ; I had, by the time I arrived at majority, passed four years of my mercantile apprenticeship in my paternal uncle's counting-house, an extensive merchant in that modern Tyre, the enterprising town of Liverpool ; during which period, young as I was, I had already made four voyages in different vessels of his to foreign parts—to the West Indies, the Brazils, the Costa Firme, and the United States of America.

Being naturally a rambling, harum-scarum sort of a young chap, this sort of life jumped better with my disposition than being perched on the top of a tall mahogany tripod, pouring over invoices, daybooks, journals, and ledgers, with the shining ebony-coloured desk jammed into the pit of my stomach below, and its arbour of bright brass rods constantly perverting the integrity of my curls above ; so at the period when the scene opens, I had with much ado prevailed on my uncle to let me proceed once more on a cruise, instead of a senior clerk, in charge of two of his ships, bound to the African coast, to trade for ivory and gold dust, and to fill up with palm oil and hardwood timbers.

I had no small difficulty in carrying this point, as the extreme insalubrity of the climate, the chance of being plundered by the semi-piratical foreign slavers, to say nothing of the danger of a treacherous attack on the part of the natives themselves, weighed heavily against my going in my worthy uncle's mind ; but I had set my heart on it, and where 'there's a will there's a way.'

I will not conceal, however, that after all, when it came to the point, I do not believe he would have allowed me to depart, had it not been for a prank of mine, which put him into a towering passion with me about this time.

On the occasion of a rejoicing for one of our great victories, being hand-and-glove with all the skippers and mates of the vessels belonging to the concern, I smuggled up to our house on Everton Terrace, unknown to my uncle, two boat guns, six-pounder carronades, and a lot of fireworks, by bribing the brewer's man to carry them for me in his cart. Having achieved this part of my plan, with the aid of two young tars, I contrived to mount the guns in the summer-house, immediately beneath the dining-room window ; and having loaded them, I set fire to slow matches, fitted to the touch-holes, just as the dinner-bell rang ; and then calmly took my place at table facing mine uncle.

The old gentleman was rather a quiet-going codger, and during meals seldom annoyed his neighbours with too much conversation. In the present case, he had eaten his soup, his 'bit of fish, and was just raising his first glass of wine to his lips—when *bang* went one of my carronades, and smash fell the glass—the madeira flowing all down his lap. He had not recovered his equanimity, when *bang* went gun No. 2, and up shot a whole constellation of rockets and Roman candles from the garden, whereat he fairly sprang off his chair, as if the explosion had taken place in the cushion of it, or he had been hoisted out of his socket by some sort of catamaran.

His first impulse was to run to the open window ; whiz ! a *live* rocket, or large squib, flew in over his shoulder, and nearly popped down the throat of the old serving-man, who stood like a statue open mouthed before the sideboard, petrified with astonishment ; as it was, it scorched the powdered curl over his left ear, missing his head by a mere hair's breadth.

The guns I could account for, but the erratic course of this missile surprised me exceedingly. At one fell swoop, it had cleared the sideboard of glasses, decanters, silver waiters, and the sinumbra lamp ; driven my revered uncle to the top of the table for refuge ; and then, as if still unsatisfied with all this mischief, it began to jump about under it, blazing and hissing like a fiery serpent, first in this corner, then under that chair ; while old Peregrine, the

waiting-man (whose ice had at length thawed), and I were dancing after it; knocking our heads together, and breaking our shins against chairs and the edges of the table, making glasses and decanters ring again, in a vain endeavour to seize hold of the stick. The row soon brought up the other servants, groom, cook, housemaid, &c., &c., &c., towards whom, as if possessed with some spirit of mischief, it fizzed through the door, in its transit, nearly taking one of the female domestics in reverse, whereat they all began to scream as if they had been murdered; then up stairs it rattled, as if desirous of visiting the drawing-room floor, poking its snout into every cranny, hissing and wriggling its tail, and putting the entire array to flight with its vagaries. It was too absurd to see a whole household of grown people thus chasing a live sky-rocket like so many children—'up stairs, down stairs, and in my lady's chamber'—so presently we were all, excepting the rocket itself, brought to a stand-still, by fits of laughter.

Although it was clear the heroic firework was not to be captured alive, yet at length, like the vapouring of a passionate man, it spluttered itself out, and was captured; stick and all, by the old cook, whose propriety it had invaded; and I returned to the dining-room.

My uncle had by this time reseated himself at the table, looking as black as thunder, with old Peregrine planted once more behind his chair, as stiff as if he had literally swallowed the rocket-stick. I sat down, feeling not a little awkward; the dead silence becoming every moment more and more irksome. The old gentleman seemed to suffer under this as well as myself, and to have come to the conclusion that it would be more sociable even to break out into a regular scold, than hold his tongue any longer.

'So, Master Benjamin, a new piece of practical wit of yours, I presume.'

'Indeed, my dear sir, I am very sorry—the guns I plead guilty to; but who can have fired the rockets?'

'Ah—as if you did not know,' quoth uncle Peter.

'Indeed, uncle, I do not, unless the fuses have caught from the wadding of these cursed guns,' which in fact was the case. 'I am sure I wish they had been at the bottom of the Mersey since they have made you angry, uncle.'

There was another awful pause—during which, in came a message from Mr. Pigwell, one of the neighbours, to ask if any accident had occurred. 'No, no,' said uncle Peter testily—'no accident, only a small mistake.'

Another dead lull—presently the old servant, who had gone to the lobby to deliver the message, returned into the room, and as he placed a fresh bottle of wine on the table, he said—'The man says Mrs. Pigwell has got a sad fright, sir—taken in labour, sir.'

'There, Master Benjamin, there—I am sure

I wish you had gone to the coast of Africa before this had happened—I was an old soft-hearted fool to stand in the way.'

'Well, my dear uncle, it is not too late yet,' said I, a good deal piqued. Not a word from him—I am sorry to see you have taken such offence where none was meant. It was a piece of folly, I admit, and I am sincerely sorry for it.' Still silent—'Jennings is still at anchor down below—I can easily be ready to-morrow, and there is no appearance of the wind changing—so, pray, do let me go.'

'You may go to the devil, sir, for me;' and off he started, fizzing, worse than the rocket itself, with rage to his dressing-room, where he often used to pass an hour or two in the evenings alone.

I sat still, guzzling my wine in great wrath. Enter Peregrine again. I was always a favourite with the old fellow, although he had been seriously angry at first, when he saw that my absurd prank had put his old master so cruelly out. Now, however, I perceived he was anxious to make up for it.

'Lord, Master Benjamin, your uncle is in such a taking you never seed—why, do you know, the first thing he did when he went to his dressing-room was to hang his wig on the lighted candle, instead of the pillar of the looking-glass; and then we were all in darkness, you see—so, in groping my way out, I popped my foot into the hot water in the foot-pail that he had ordered up, and this scalded me so, that forgetting where I was, I could not help swearing a bit, Master Benjamin; on which he opened the door, and thrust me out, neck and crop, calling me a blasphemous old villain—although we all know he is not slack at a good rousing oath himself when his bristles are up; but to call me an old blasphemer—*me!* who have served him faithfully for thirty years, in various parts of the world—a blasphemous old villain, indeed!'

I saw no more of my uncle that night, and when we met next morning at breakfast, I was rejoiced to find the gale had blown itself out.

When I sat down, he looked across the table at me, as if expecting me to speak, but as I held my peace, the good old man opened the conference himself.

'Why, Benjie, my boy, I have been laughing over our fright, yesterday; but have done with your jokes, master, if you please, and no more about that infernal coast of—'

'Mr. Pigwell has just called, sir,' quoth old Peregrine, entering at this moment—and desires me to say that Mrs. Pigwell is brought to bed, sir, and *all* doing well, sir, notwithstanding the fright.'

'Glad of it, Peregrine—my compliments—wish him joy. But *all*, what do you mean by *all*?''

'She has got twins, sir.'

'The deuce! I twins!'

'Yes, sir, *three* on 'em, sir.'

'An Irish pair,' said I.

'Two girls and a boy.'

'Hillo,' I continued—'why, I only fired *two* guns!'

'Oh, Pilgarlic goes for the rocket,' cried my uncle, laughing; 'but *there* spoke your mother, you Patlander, you—*there* shone out Kilkenny, Benjie. Oh dear, oh dear—two girls and a boy—old Pigwell's young wife brought to bed of—two carronades and a rocket—ha, ha, ha!'

We walked down to the counting-house together as lovingly as ever, but my star was now in the ascendant, for there we found Captain Jennings, who informed my uncle that he had been obliged that morning to land Mr. Williamson, the clerk, who was about proceeding in charge of the expedition, in consequence of his having been taken alarmingly ill.

This was most unfortunate, as the wind appeared on the eve of coming fair.

'We shall have a breeze before next flood, that will take us right round—the Head. I hope you won't detain us in the river, sir?' quoth Jennings.

My uncle was puzzled what to do, as it so happened that none of the other youngsters at the moment in the employ had ever been away in such a capacity before; so I availed myself of the opportunity to push my request home, and it was finally fixed that forenoon that I should take Mr. Williamson's place.

A very old friend of my deceased father's, Sir Oliver Oakplank, was at this time the senior officer on the African coast, and as the time was approaching when, according to the usual routine of that service, he would be departing on the round voyage for Jamaica and Havanna, before proceeding to England to refit, it was determined, if I could arrange the lading of our ships in time, that I should take a passage with him, for the twofold object of seeing an uncle, by my mother's side, who was settled in Jamaica, and from whom I had expectations; and making certain speculations in colonial produce at Havanna.

As I had the credit of being a sharpish sort of a shaver, and by no means indiscreet, although fond of fun, I had much greater license allowed me in my written instructions than my uncle was in the habit of conceding to any of my fellow quill-drivers, who had been previously despatched on similar missions. I had in fact a roving commission as to my operations generally. The very evening on which I got leave to go, the ship rounded the Rock Perch, and nothing particular occurred until we arrived at the scene of our trading. I very soon found that neither the dangers nor difficulties of the expedition had been exaggerated; on the contrary, the reality of both very far exceeded what I had made up my mind to expect. First of all, I lost more than a half of both crews in the course of two months, and the master of one of the ships amongst them; secondly, I was plundered and ill-used by a villanous Spanish slaving polacre, who attacked us without rhyme or reason while

lying quietly at anchor pursuing our trade in the Bonny river. Not dreaming of any danger of this kind, except from the natives, we allowed the Dons to come on board before we offered any resistance, and then it was too late to do so effectually; however, at the eleventh hour, we did show some fight, whereby I got my left cheek pierced with a boarding pike or boathook, which I repaid by a slashing blow with a cutlass, that considerably damaged the outward man of the Don who had wounded me. I verily believe we should have all been put to death in consequence, had it not been for the Spanish captain himself, who, reminding the villains that it was not fighting but *plunder* they had come for, made them knock off from cracking our crowns, and betake themselves to searching for dollars, and boxing us all up in the round-house until they had loaded themselves with everything they chose to take away. However, notwithstanding this mishap, I finally brought my part of the operation to a successful issue, by completing the loading of the ships, and seeing them fairly off for England within the time originally contemplated. I then joined the commodore at Cape Coast, where I met with a most cordial reception from him, and also from my cousin, Dick Lanyard, one of his lieutenants.

Through the kind offices of this youngster, I soon became as good as one of the Gazelles; indeed, notwithstanding I was the commodore's guest, I was more in the gun-room than anywhere else; and although not quite *selon les règles*, I contrived, during the time the frigate remained on the coast after I joined her, to get away now and then in the boats, my two months' experience in the rivers having rendered me an accomplished pilot; and being in no way afraid of the climate, I thus contrived to make one in any spree where there was likely to be fun going, even more frequently than my turn of duty would have entitled me to, had I been really an officer of the ship.

Unless there be something uncongenial or positively repulsive about one, a person in my situation, with a jovial hearty turn, and a little money in his pockets to add a streak of comfort to a mess now and then, becomes to a certainty a mighty favourite with all the warrant and petty officers, boatswain's mates, old quartermasters, *et hoc genus omne*; and I flatter myself that had I gone overboard, or been killed in any of the skirmishes that, with the recklessness of boyhood, I had shoved my nose into, there would have been as general a moan made for me along the 'tween decks, as for the untimely demise of poor Dicky Phantom, the monkey.

My friend, the aforesaid Dick, had been for six months fourth lieutenant of H.M.S. *Gazelle*, on board of which, as already mentioned, Sir Oliver Oakplank had his broad pennant\*

\* A broad red swallow-tailed flag, carried at the main-royal masthead, indicative of the rank of commodore.

hoisted, as the commander-in-chief on the African station.

The last time they had touched at Cape Coast they took in a Spanish felucca, that had been previously cut out of the Bonny river, with part of her cargo of slaves on board.

She had cost them a hard tussel, and several of the people had fallen by the sword in the attack, but more afterwards from dysentery and marsh fever, the seeds of which had doubtless been sown in the pestilential estuary at the time of the attack; although there is no disputing that they were much more virulently developed afterwards than they would otherwise have been, by a week's exposure in open boats to the deleterious changes of the atmosphere. The excellent commodore, therefore, the father of his crew, seeing the undeniable necessity of lessening the exposure of the men in such a villainous climate, instantly wrote home to the Admiralty, requesting that half-a-dozen small vessels might be sent to him, of an easy draught of water, so that they might take charge of the boats, and afford a comfortable shelter to their crews; at the same time that they should be able to get over the bars, without damage, of the various African rivers, where the contraband Guineamen were in the habit of lurking. To evince that he practised what he preached, he instantly fitted out the captured felucca on his own responsibility, manned her with five-and-twenty men, and gave the command of her to the third lieutenant.

She had been despatched about a fortnight before in the direction of Fernando Po, and we had stood in on the morning of the day on which my narrative commences, to make Cape Formosa, which was the rendezvous fixed on between us. About three o'clock, P.M., when we were within ten miles of the cape, without any appearance of the tender, we fell in with a Liverpool trader, bound to the Brass river to load palm oil and sandalwood. She reported that the night before, they had come across a Spaniard, who fired into them, when they sheered to with an intent to speak him. The master said that, when first seen, the strange sail was standing right in for the river ahead of us; and, from the noises he heard, he was sure he had negroes on board. It was therefore conjectured that she was one of the vessels who had taken in part of her cargo of slaves at the Bonny river, and was now bound for the Num or Brass river to complete it. They were, if anything, more confirmed in this by the circumstance of his keeping away and standing to the south-west the moment he found they were hauling in for the land, as if anxious to mislead them by inducing a belief that he was off for the West Indies or Brazil. This was the essence of the information received from the Liverpool-man; but from the description of the Don, taking also into account the whereabouts he was fallen in with,

I had no doubt in my own mind of his being the very identical villain who had plundered me. The same afternoon we fell in with an American, who rejoiced our hearts by saying that he had been chased by a vessel in the forenoon answering the description of the felucca. Immediately after we hoisted about, and stood out to sea again, making sail in the direction indicated. In consequence of our overhauling this vessel, the commodore had put off his dinner for an hour; and when all the ropes had been coiled down, and everything made snug after tacking, he resumed his walk on the weatherside of the quarterdeck, in company with Mr. David Sprawl, the first lieutenant.

The commodore was a red-faced little man, with a very irritable cast of countenance, which, however, was by no means a true index to his warm heart, for I verily believe that no commander was ever more beloved by officers and men than he was. He had seen a great deal of service, and had been several times wounded; once, in particular, very badly by a grape-shot, that had shattered his left thigh, and considerably shortened it, thereby giving him a kick in his gallop, as he himself used to phrase it, until the day of his death. He was a wag in his way, and the officer now perambulating the deck alongside of him was an unfailing source of mirth; although the commodore never passed the limits of strict naval etiquette, or the bounds of perfect good breeding in his fun. The gallant old fellow was dressed in faded nankeen trousers—discoloured cotton stockings—shoes, with corn-holes cut in the toes—an ill-washed and rumpled white Marseilles waistcoat—an old blue uniform coat, worn absolutely threadbare, and white and soapy at the seams and elbows; each shoulder being garnished with a faded gold lace strap, to confine the epaulettes when mounted, and that was only on a Sunday. His silk neckcloth had been most probably black once, but now it was a dingy brown; and he wore a most shocking bad hat—an old white beaver, with very broad brims, the snout of it fastened back to the crown with a lanyard of common spunyarn; buttoned up, as it were, like the *chapeaux* in Charles the Second's time, to prevent it flapping down over his eyes. He walked backwards and forwards very quickly, taking two steps for Sprawl's one, and whenever he turned he gave a loud stamp, and swung briskly about on the good leg as if it had been a pivot, giving a most curious indescribable flourish in the air with the wounded limb in the round-coming, like the last quiver of Noblet's leg in an expiring pirouette.

Lieutenant Sprawl, the officer with whom he was walking and keeping up an animated conversation, was also in no small degree remarkable in his externals, but in a totally different line. He was a tall man, at the very least six feet high, and stout in proportion; very square-shouldered; but, large as he was,