

# THE TWO MIDSHIPMEN.

A TALE OF THE EAST AFRICAN COAST.



In the afternoon of a certain sultry day in the month of June two handsome bronzed midshipmen accompanied by a native guide, might have been seen wending their way in an easterly direction along the banks of the Kingani river, which discharged itself into the Indian Ocean, close to the town of Darra Salaam on the east coast of Africa. These two midshipmen, named Harry Vaughan and Oswald Graham, carried guns in their hands and game-bags slung over their shoulders; and their guide—an undoubted negro with shiny black skin, blubber lips and frizzled hair—was equipped in the same manner, but in addition to a gun he carried a heavy rifle and a quantity of ammunition. A peep into the game-bags would have disclosed the fact that there were only a few quail and wood-pigeons in them, in spite of the fact that the afternoon was now fast drawing to a close, and that the young sportsmen—who belonged to H.M.S. (Galatea, then lying at the Darra Salaam anchorage—had been ashore in quest of game ever since sunrise. The fact was that these young gentlemen had conceived the ambitious project of shooting hippopotami—which animals abound in the Kingani river—and the greater part of the day had been spent in various ambushes on the banks of the stream close to the usual haunts of these unwieldy great animals, with the result that two of the monkeys had been slaughtered. It had been found, however, impossible to secure the carcasses of the slain creatures owing to the strength of the current; and, much to the chagrin of our midshipmen friends, they found themselves forced to return without being able to triumphantly bear back any trophies of their prowess to exhibit to their messmates in the Galatea. Their native guide, Booboo, was equally disappointed at the turn affairs had taken, though, as he kept perpetually observing to his young masters during the homeward tramp: 'Massa! You no make bobbery 'bout dis ting, for sho'. Next time de Galatea make anchor at Darra Salaam, Booboo get one big canoe ready and take Massa up de river—oh! eber so many mile up; and dere am tousand of 'potamus waiting for Massa shoot. Booboo get plenty frynd up dere, and s'all make easy to bring de 'potamus body on s'ore.'

'But suppose we never come back to Darra Salaam, Booboo,' young Graham observed after one of these speeches. 'I believe we are off to Bombay next week, and may not return to the Coast of Africa again.'

'Oh, yes! Massa come back for sho,' the negro answered, 'else all de country am fill up wid de rascal slave dealer, who now am make hide der ogly head. Oh, yes! Galatea come back to coast in de monsoon and make plenty prize money; and den Massa want to shoot 'potamus. Booboo am ready wid de big canoe, and dere am spot plenty mosh, Massa, make sure.'

'Well, we won't forget you, Booboo, if the Galatea does come back,' observed Oswald Graham. 'We've had a stunning day of it, anyhow; haven't we Harry?'

'I should think so!' returned his companion. 'Oh, how jolly it is to get ashore in these wild jungles with one's gun, instead of being cooped up on board ship!'

'And though we didn't manage to get any trophies,' continued the other, 'we shot the hippopotami stone dead, for I saw them being washed down the river. I don't think it was bad for our first attempt at big game.'

'We've got some quail and wood-pigeons to show the fellows,' said his messmate, peering into his game-bag, 'which is lucky, or we should have been a good deal chaffed.'

Harry Vaughan and Oswald Graham, as my readers will doubtless have conjectured, were sworn chums, and had already been serving together on board the Galatea (which was an 8-gun sloop) for two years. They were at the time of our story sixteen years old, and were handsome, well-grown boys, devoted to sport and manly exercises of all kinds. Their firm friendship had never been marred by disputes or quarrels, and Captain Madden, who commanded the Galatea, looked upon them as the two most promising young officers in the ship.

Darra Salaam, where the Sultan of Zanzibar has a residence, is situated upon the coast only a few degrees south of the equator, and so the whole region in its neighborhood is extremely hot, especially up the rivers, where, owing to the dense overhanging jungles and multitudinous mangrove bushes, the cooling influences of the life-giving sea breezes are almost unfelt. The rude track which our midshipmen friends were returning by as a rule followed the sinuous course of the river; and, though, the fierce rays of an almost vertical sun were intercepted by the umbrageous trees overhead, which 'wove twilight o'er the path,' the air was so stagnant and so permeated with the pestilential vapours which arose from the alligator-haunted mud-banks of the stream, that the heat was more than usually oppressive on this particular afternoon; so much so that even our two midshipmen, who had spent a couple of years in the tropics, and were therefore to a certain extent acclimatised, began to feel its debilitating influence.

'I say, Oswald, old chap,' exclaimed young Vaughan at length, 'I vote we rest under the shade of those bamboos and take it easy for half an-hour. This heat is almost unbearable.'

'Right you are, Harry. You know we needn't be on board till 8 o'clock, so we've heaps of time.'

Even the almost naked Booboo was not sorry to avail himself of the midshipmen's proposal, and the trio were soon stretched upon a convenient piece of grassy sward under the shade of the lofty, motionless bamboos, listening to the never-ceasing quaint chorus of bird and insect cries emanating from the gloomy depths of the surrounding jungle.

Suddenly Booboo, who was squatting upon the ground in negro fashion, started, and appeared to be listening intently.

'What's up, old Booboo?' asked Graham. 'Do you see a fetch in the jungle?'

'No fetch, Massa, but I tink one leopard am prow about amongst de trees. Booboo not bery sure, but plenty mosh tink his eye not deceive.'

'A leopard! What a spree it would be to shoot it!' exclaimed Oswald Graham excitedly, as he seized his gun; 'shall we go after it, Harry?'

'It would be jolly fun to knock over a leopard,' answered his chum, 'but to tell you the honest truth, I'm rather fagged, and should prefer resting here. If you like to follow the beast up with the rifle, Oswald, and take Booboo with you, I'll stop here till you come back. I suppose you won't be gone long, old man?'

'Ten minutes at the outside,' answered his friend, 'but I wish you would come too.'

'I'm too lazy really, and have got a bit of a headache, and as we have only the one rifle, you may as well make use of it.'

Seeing that his friend was really indisposed for more sport, and intending to return immediately, should it turn out that Booboo had raised a false alarm, Oswald took the rifle from the negro, carefully examined it, and then, followed by his sable attendant, plunged into the recesses of the forest, Booboo marking a tree here and there as they proceeded, in order to obviate any difficulty in finding the way back.

Leaving Harry Vaughan stretched out drowsily under the clump of bamboo, we shall follow the fortunes of Oswald and the negro.

'Booboo,' said the midshipman, as he forced his way through the tangled brake, 'did you actually see the leopard?'

'I see de tip of nu tail, Massa, as he wriggle nu way troo de jungle, and I tink him no trabel bery far dis hot afternoon—berly foolis leopard else, massa.'

'Well! I only hope I'll bag him,' observed Oswald; 'his skin would make a lovely rug for the mater.'

Booboo now advised silence, and the two glided stealthily along, making as little noise as possible.

A few minutes had passed in this way, when, just as the midshipman had entered a particularly dense piece of jungle, he heard a rustling sound among the underwood close by, and in another second a large and handsome leopard sprang out almost under Oswald's nose, and before that startled young gentleman could raise his rifle to fire, had bounded off in the opposite direction, sheltered from observation by the great boles of the forest trees.

'Well, that is a sell!' said the midshipman, in a disappointed tone.

'Nebber you gib him up, Massa,' exclaimed Booboo, encouragingly; 'I tink him lie low in de forest, not bery mosh distant.'

Oswald followed up eagerly on the animal's trail, but for once that artful stalker of the wild denizens of the forest, Booboo, was at fault; for the spotted cat did not again expose himself incautiously to view, nor could the slightest sound be detected to give a clue to his whereabouts.

At length, hot, and in a not very amiable temper, Oswald halted and consulted his watch.

'I told Harry I should not be away more than ten minutes,' he exclaimed, 'and we have been exactly twenty. I'm very sorry, Booboo, but I must go back at once; I had no idea how the time had flown.'

The negro made no objection, and the two made their way back in silence to the spot where Harry Vaughan had been left half asleep.

On coming in sight of the clump of bamboos, Oswald was surprised to see that his friend was not stretched out under their grateful shade. Nor was there any trace of gun or game-bag. Thinking, however, that he might be searching for birds' nests or plants somewhere close by, he gave a loud Australian coo-ee, which might have been heard a mile away.

There was no response.

'My goah! What am de meanin' of dis?' exclaimed Booboo, in an alarmed tone; 'can de foolis leetle officer make bathe in de river? Dat case he am gobble up by de hongry alligator! What can do, Massa Graham?'

But Oswald had already rushed to the river's brink, and was anxiously scrutinizing its turbid surface—abutting his friend's name again and again in loud and agonized tones.

But there was no answer to these repeated cries, and, overcome by his feelings, Oswald sunk down upon the muddy bank and buried his face in his hands. He felt bitterly that he ought never to have left his friend alone in the forest, and that at any rate he ought to have returned in ten minutes, as he had promised. He had broken his word, and it was probable that his messmate's death had resulted from his thoughtlessness.

He was aroused by Booboo, who put his dingy hand upon his shoulder.

'Massa no gib way in dis fashion,' said the honest negro. 'I tink now that Massa Vaughan hab lost him way in de jungle, and we must make search and shout like de mad ting. Soon s'all find leetle officer, Massa, you makee sure.'

Oswald felt that this was good advice, and rousing himself with an effort, he resolved to leave no stone unturned in the endeavour to find his missing chum, and immediately set off with Booboo and penetrated a considerable distance in every direction into the forest, shouting loudly at intervals. Still there was the same mysterious silence, and no trace of the absent midshipman could be discovered.

Disconsolate and weary, and prey to the most gloomy forebodings, Oswald returned to the clump of bamboos and proceeded to narrowly examine the ground to see if there was any trace of footmarks. He was busily engaged in this task when a sudden shout from the negro made him look up.

What he saw made him feel sick at heart. Booboo had extracted from some mangrove bushes, close to the margin of the river, Harry Vaughan's game bag and a phib helmet

which he had been wearing, and was holding them up to view.

In a moment Oswald had sprung to the negro's side, with a face as pale as death and said: 'Booboo, what is the meaning of this? Is it possible that some cruel natives can have taken my friend prisoner? Are there any robbers about in these jungles?'

The poor negro had turned almost green with anxiety or fright while the midshipman was rapidly pouring out these questions. At length he gasped out: 'Robber, Massa! No such ting am known on dis part of de coast; but, Massa!'—here Booboo convulsively clutched the young midshipman's arm—'I bery mosh afraid dat some rascal Arab slaver man hab catchee leetle buccra officer and take him in dere canoe up de river. De Arab man, Massa, no care what him do to white or black man!'

'Then what shall we do?' exclaimed the midshipman, aghast; 'where do you suppose they—?'

Oswald stopped short, for his eyes had fallen upon two negroes who at a rapid pace were paddling a small canoe down the river. So strong was the current that the little craft appeared to fly; and the occupants, as they caught sight of the midshipman and Booboo, gave several loud shouts, and appeared to be endeavouring to steer the canoe in the direction of the clump of bamboos. Fearing that their intentions might be hostile, and that they were only the advance guard of a large force, Oswald seized his gun and held it pointed menacingly in their direction. Booboo did the same.

It soon became apparent, however, that the two negroes were friendly, for they made signs of amity, and appeared to be unarmed. In a few seconds they had run their canoe ashore close to the spot where our friends were standing, leaped out, and immediately accosted Booboo in some native dialect. Oswald, of course, understood not a word that was uttered, but he gathered from the vehement manner and numerous gesticulations of the speakers that they were imparting some important intelligence.

And so it proved.

Booboo listened in silence to his compatriots' story, and, as soon as it was finished, turned to Oswald with a scared and anxious face:

'Massa! these two men hab just come down the river and dey say about one mile up de stream dey met soberd canoe, which am belong to one large slave show dat it make anchor long way up. In one of de largest of dese canoe dey see one buccra leetle officer who am tied wid de coir rope, and look all like one white corpse. De slaver man shout to dem to keep out of de way, and say dat if they tell de 'tory of what him see in de canoe to any of de white man, dat der troat shall be cut at anoder time. De Arab no try to catch him at dat time, Massa, as de current am bery strong, and dey can do noddin. Now, Massa, it am quite plain dat dis leetle officer am Massa Vaughan, and de Arab teef hab carry him off when him sleep under de tree. Ah! de rascal teef what buy and sell de human flesh!' and Booboo shook his black fist angrily in the direction in which he believed the slavers to have gone.

Oswald had immediately made up his mind what he should do. Darra Salaam, where the Galatea was at anchor, was only two miles distant, and he would at once return to the ship and report what had happened. The negroes offered the use of their canoe, which was sufficiently large to hold four; and in the space of ten minutes or so she had been sent spinning down the river and guided alongside the sloop, when Oswald quickly gained the quarter-deck and informed the officer of the watch of what had happened.

A few minutes later the Galatea's blue-jackets were busily engaged in manning and arming boats, for it had been determined to at once despatch a powerful force up the river in order to rescue Harry Vaughan and capture the slaver. Every one worked with feverish energy, for it was well understood that the unfortunate young midshipman's life depended upon the celerity with which the expedition could be got underway. Captain Madden had decided himself to command the flotilla of boats, leaving the first lieutenant in charge of the Galatea. The force was to be conveyed in the steam pinnace, two cutters and the jolly-boat, and was to consist of fifty blue-jackets armed with cutlasses and revolvers, and twenty marines with their rifles and bayonets. The steam pinnace, which was to be commanded by the Captain in person, would take the other boats in tow, and was armed in the bows with a 9-pounder Armstrong gun.

In an hour's time all preparations had been made, steam was up in the pinnace, all the men took off for the expedition were in their places, and as Captain Madden, standing erect in the stern-sheets, gave the order 'Shove off forward!' a loud and hearty cheer was given by the men on board the sloop, which was energetically reciprocated by their comrades of the flotilla. The twin-screws turned ahead, and in a few minutes the line of boats was well inside the mouth of the river.

Oswald Graham had been told off—much to his own gratification—to accompany the Captain in the pinnace, and Booboo and the other two negroes, who were to act as pilots and interpreters, went in the same boat. The cutters were commanded by junior lieutenants with midshipmen under them. The tide had fortunately begun to flow when the expedition started—which was considered a good omen, and much facilitated the passage up the broad but tortuous Kingani river.

A bright outlook was kept by the officers, for it was thought probable that an attack might be made upon the boats at any moment, especially as there were many convenient creeks overhung with mangroves and palms, where canoes could easily lie in ambush without fear of discovery.

Oswald was full of excitement, and longed to cross swords with the cowardly slaver's men who had so cunningly and impudently kidnapped his chum. One terrible fear oppressed him, and that was that the Arabs, on learning that a relief expedition had been organised, would murder Harry Vaughan, and then retreat up the river, out of reach of an attack.

The sun began to get low in the heavens, and as the twilight in tropical regions is exceedingly brief, Booboo advised that before darkness set in the flotilla should anchor for the night. This, however, Captain Madden would not hear of. He was determined to push on at all hazards and promised the negroes a handsome reward if they safely piloted the boats before midnight to the spot where the slave show was supposed to be lying. It might be feasible to make a night attack, and so take the rascals by surprise.

As was soon brought forcibly home to the naval officers,