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W. F. MARSHALL,
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CHAPTER I. THE END OF THE ISLANDER.

Our meal was a merry one. Holmes could talk exceedingly well when he chose, and that night he did choose. He appeared to be in a state of nervous exaltation. I have never known him so brilliant. He spoke on a quick succession of subjects—on miracle-plays, on medieval pottery, on Stradivarius violins, on the Boddien of Ceylon, and on the warships of the future—handling each as though he had made a special study of it. His bright humor marked the reaction from his black depression of the preceding days. Athelney Jones proved to be a sociable soul in his hours of relaxation, and faced his dinner with the air of a bon vivant. For myself, I felt elated at the thought that we were hearing the end of our task, and I caught something of Holmes' gaiety. None of us alluded during dinner to the cause which had brought us together.

When the clock was cleared Holmes glanced at his watch and filled up three glasses with port. "One bumper," said he, "to the success of our little expedition. And now it is high time we were off. Have you a pistol, Watson?"

"I have my old service revolver in my desk."

"You had best take it, then. It is well to be prepared. I see the cab is at the door. I ordered it for half-past six."

It was a little past seven before we reached the Westminster wharf and found our launch awaiting us. Holmes eyed it critically.

"Is there anything to mark it as a police boat?"

"Yes—that green lamp at the side."

"Then take it off."

The small change was made, we stepped on board, and the ropes were

snapped off. Jones, Holmes and I sat in the stern. There were two men at the rudder, one to tend the engines, and two burly police inspectors forward.

"Where to?" asked Jones.

"To the tower. Tell them to stop opposite to Jacobson's yard."

Our craft was evidently a very fast one. We shot past the long lines of loaded barges as though they were stationary. Holmes smiled with satisfaction as we overhauled a river steamer, and left her behind us.

"We ought to be able to catch anything on the river," he said.

"Well, hardly that. But there are not many launches to beat us."

"We shall have to catch the Aurora, and she has a name for being a clipper. I will tell you how the land lies, Watson. You recollect how annoyed I was at being balked by so small a thing?"

"Yes."

"Well, I gave my mind a thorough rest by plunging into a chemical analysis. One of our greatest statesmen has said that a change of work is the best rest. So it is. When I had succeeded in dissolving the hydrocarbon which I was at work on, I came back to our problem of the Skolites, and thought the whole matter out again. My boys had been up the river and down the river without result. The launch was not at any landing stage or wharf, nor had it returned. Yet it could hardly have been so easily hidden from the eyes of a possible hypothesis if all else failed. I knew that this man Small had a certain degree of low cunning, but I did not think him capable of anything in the nature of delicate finesse. That is usually a product of higher education. I then reflected that since he had certainly been in London some time—as we had evidence that he maintained a continual watch over Pondicherry Lodge—he could hardly leave at a moment's notice, but would need some little time, if it were only a day, to arrange his affairs. That was the balance of probability, at any rate."

"It seems to me to be a little weak," said I. "It is more probable that he had arranged his affairs before ever he set out on his expedition."

"No, I hardly think so. This lair of his would be too valuable a retreat in case of need for him to give it up until he was sure that he could do without it. But a second consideration struck me: Jonathan Small must have felt that the peculiar appearance of his companion, however much he may have postulated him, would give rise to gossip, and possibly be associated with this Norwood tragedy. He was quite shrewd enough to see that. They

had started from their headquarters under cover of darkness, and he would wish to get back before it was broad light. Now, it was past three o'clock, according to Mrs. Smith, when they got the boat. It would be quite bright, and people would be about in an hour or so. Therefore, I argued, they did not go very far. They paid Smith well to hold his tongue, reserved his launch for the final escape, and hurried to their lodgings with the greatest haste. In a couple of nights, when they had time to see what view the papers took, and whether there was any suspicion, they would make their way under cover of darkness to some ship at Gravesend or in the Downs, where no doubt they had already arranged for passage to America or the colonies."

"But the launch? They could not have taken that to their lodgings."

"Quite so. I argued that the launch must be no great way off, in spite of its invisibility. I then put myself in the place of Small, and looked at it as a man of his capacity would. He would probably consider that to send back the launch or to keep it at a wharf would make pursuit easy if the police did happen to get on his track. How, then, could he conceal the launch and yet have her at hand when wanted? I wondered what I should do myself if I were in his shoes. I could only think of one way of doing it. I might have the launch over to some boatbuilder or cooper, with directions to make a trifling change in her. She would then be removed to his shed or yard, and so be effectually concealed, while at the same time I could have her at a few hours' notice."

"That seems simple enough."

"It is just these very simple things which are extremely liable to be overlooked. However, I determined to act on the idea. I started at once in this harmless seaman's rig and inquired at all the yards down the river. I drew blank at fifteen, but at the sixteenth—Jacobson's—I learned that the Aurora had been handed over to them two days ago by a wooden-legged man, with some trivial directions as to her rudder. There isn't aught amiss with her rudder," said the foreman. "There she lies, with the red streaks. At that moment who should come down but Mordcau Smith, the missing owner?"

"He was either the worse for liquor, or I should not have known him, but he followed out his name and the name of his launch. 'I want her to-night at eight o'clock,' said he—'at eight o'clock sharp, mind, for I have two gentlemen who won't be kept waiting.' They had evidently paid him well, for he was very flush of money, chuckling shillings about to the men. I followed him some distance, but he subsided in an ale house, so I went back to the yard, and, happening to pick up one of my boys on the way, I stationed him as a sentry on the launch. He is to stand at the water's edge and wave his handkerchief to us when they start. We shall be lying off in the stream, and it will be a strange thing if we do not take them, treasure and all."

"You have planned it all very neatly, whether they are the right men or not," said Jones; "but if the affair were in my hands I should have had a body of police in Jacobson's yard, and arrested them when they came down."

"Which would have been better. This man Small is a pretty shrewd fellow. He would send a scout on ahead, and if anything made him suspicious he would lie snare for another week."

"But you might have stuck to Mordcau Smith, and so been led to their hiding-place," said I.

"In that case I should have wasted my day. I think that it is a hundred to one against Smith knowing where they live. As long as he has liquor and good pay, why should he ask questions? They thought over every possible course, and this is the best."

While this conversation had been proceeding, we had been shooting the longer series of bridges which span the Thames. As we passed the city the last rays of the sun were gliding the cross upon the summit of St. Paul's. It was twilight before we reached the tower.

"That is Jacobson's yard," said Holmes, pointing to a bristle of masts and rigging on the Surrey side.

"Gaze gently up and down here under cover of this string of lighters." He took a pair of night glasses from his pocket and gazed some time at the shore. "I see my sentry at his post," he remarked, "but no sign of a handkerchief."

"Suppose we go down stream a short way and lie in wait for them," said Jones, eagerly. We were all eager by this time, even the policemen and stokers, who had a very vague idea of what was going forward.

"We have no right to take anything for granted," Holmes answered. "It is certainly not to one that they go down stream, but we cannot be certain. From this point we can see the entrance to the yard, and they can hardly see us. It will be a close night and plenty of light. We must stay where we are, see how the folk swarm over yonder in the daylight."

"They are coming from work in the yard."

"Dirty-looking rascals, but I suppose every one has some little immortal spark concealed about him. You

would not think it, to look at them. There is no a priori probability about it. A strange original is man!"

"Some one calls him a soul concealed in an animal," I suggested.

"Inwood Reule is good upon the subject," said Holmes. "He remarks that while the individual man is an insoluble puzzle, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty. You can, for example, never foretell what any one man will do, but you can say with precision what an average number will be up to. Individuals vary, but percentages remain constant. So says the statistician. But do I see a handkerchief? Surely there is a white flutter over yonder."

"Yes, it is your boy," I cried. "I can see him plainly."

"And there is the Aurora," exclaimed Holmes, "and going like the devil! Full speed ahead, engineer. Make after that launch with the yellow light. By heaven, I shall never forgive myself if she proves to have the heels of us!"

She had slipped unseen through the yard entrance and passed behind two or three small craft, so that she had fairly got her speed up before we saw her. Now she was lying down the stream, near in to the shore, and at a tremendous rate. Jones looked gravely at her and shook his head.

"She is very fast," he said. "I doubt if we shall catch her."

"We must catch her," cried Holmes, between his teeth. "Heap it on, stokers! Make her do all she can! If we burn the boat we must have them!"

We were fairly after her now. The funnels roared, and the powerful engines whirled and clanked like a great metallic heart. Her sharp, steep prow cut through the still river water, and sent two rolling waves to right and left of us. With every throb of the engines we sprang and quivered like a living thing. One great yellow lantern in our bows threw a long, flickering funnel of light in front of us. Right ahead a dark blur upon the water showed where the Aurora lay, and the swirl of white foam behind her spoke of the pace at which she was going.

We dashed past barges, steamers, merchant vessels, in and out, behind this one and round the other. Voices hailed us out of the darkness, but still the Aurora thundered on, and still we followed close upon her track.

"Tie it on, men, pile it on!" cried Holmes, looking down into the engine-room, while the fierce glow from below beat upon his eager, aquiline face. "Get every pound of steam you can!"

"I think we gain a little," said Jones, with his eyes on the Aurora.

"I am sure of it," said I. "We shall be up with her in a very few minutes."

At that moment, however, as our evil fate would have it, a tug with three barges in tow hindered in between us. It was only by putting our helm hard down that we avoided a collision, and before we could round them and recover our way the Aurora had gained a good two hundred yards. She was still, however, well in view, and the inquiry as to twilight was settling into a clear starry night. Our boilers were strained to their utmost, and the frail shell vibrated and creaked with the fierce energy which was driving us along. We had struck through the pool past the West India docks, down the long Deptford Reach, and up again for round the Isle of Dogs. The dull blue front of our resolved little now clearly enough into the dusky Aurora. Jones took a pair of night glasses out of his pocket and gazed intently at the figures upon her deck. At this point, by the way, with something like a throb, he knew where he stood. Beside him lay a dark mass which looked like a Newfoundland dog. The boy held the tiller, while against the red glow of the funnels I could see old Smith, stripped to the waist, and shovelling coals for dear life. They may have had some doubt at first as to whether we were really pursuing them, but now as we followed every whirling and turning which they took there could no longer be any question about it. At Greenwich we were about three hundred paces behind them. At Greenwich we would not have been more than two hundred and fifty. I have counted many creatures in many countries during my chequered career, but never did sport give me such a wild thrill as this mad, flying man hunt down the Thames. Steadily we drew in upon them, yard by yard. In the silence of the night we could hear the panting and clanking of their machinery. The man in the stern still crouched upon the deck, and his arms were moving as though he were busy, while every now and then he would stoop up and measure with a glance the distance which still separated us. Now we came and nearer. Jones yelled to them to stop. We were not more than four hundred paces behind them, both boats flying at a tremendous pace. It was a close race of the river, with flanking level upon one side and the melancholy Flan-

donard wharves upon the other. At our hail the man in the stern sprang up from the deck and shook his two eluded fists at us, cursing the while in a high, cracked voice. He was a good-sized, powerful man, and as he stood pointing himself with legs astride I could see that from the thigh downwards there was but a wooden stump upon the right side. At the sound of his strident, angry cries there was movement in the huddled bundle upon the deck. It straightened itself into a little black man—the smallest I have ever seen—with a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, disheveled hair. Holmes had already drawn his revolver, and I whipped out mine at the sight of this savage, distorted creature. He was wrapped in some sort of dark ulster or blanket, which left only his face exposed; but

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