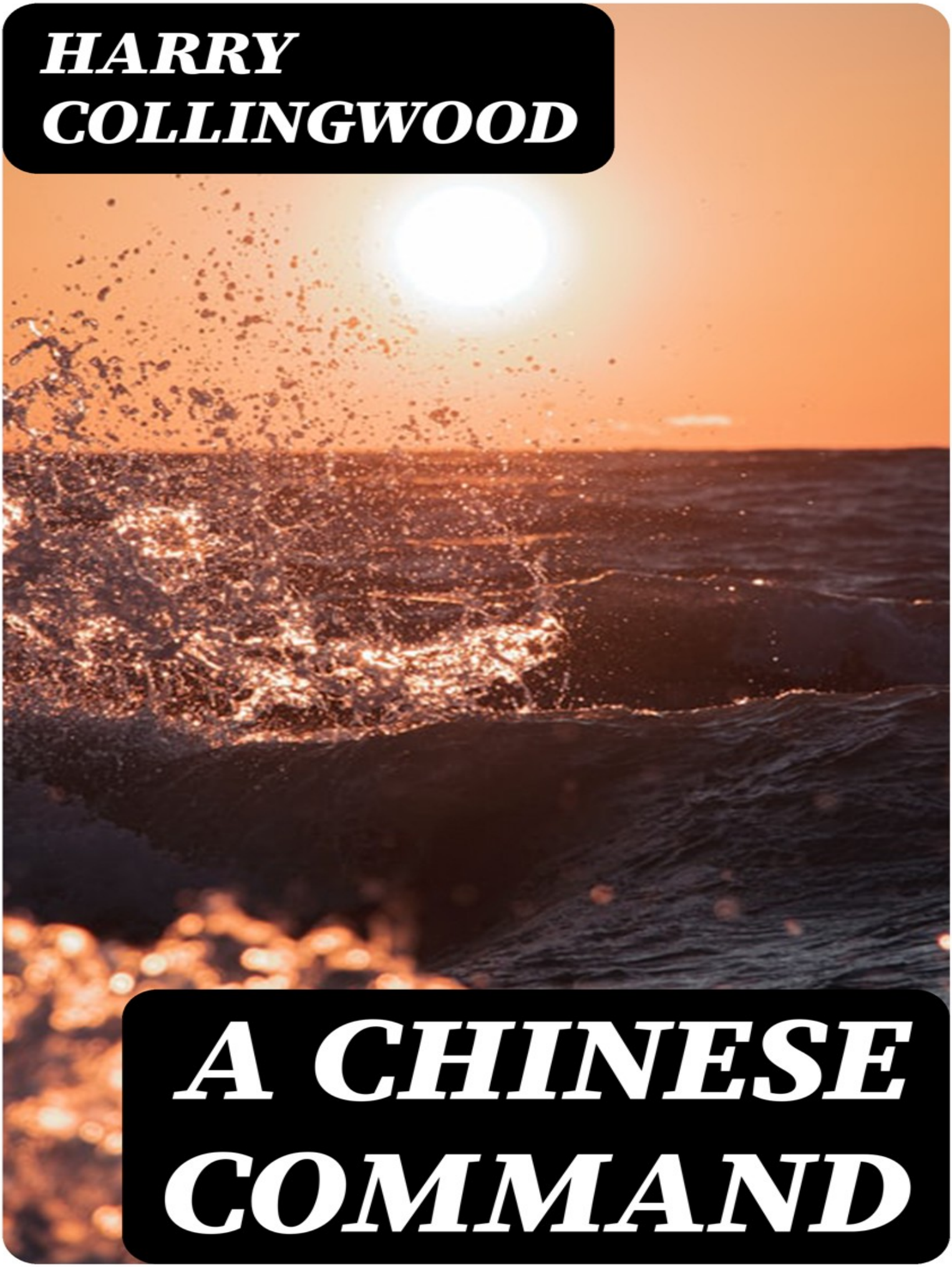
HARRY COLLINGWOOD
A CHINESE COMMAND

Harry Collingwood

A Chinese Command

A Story of Adventure in Eastern Seas

EAN 8596547361435

DigiCat, 2022
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"A Chinese Command"

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Chapter One.

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The Outcast.

A furious gust of wind tore down the chimney, blowing the smoke out into the small but cosily-furnished sitting-room of the little cottage at Kingston-on-Thames, and sending a shower of sparks hissing and spluttering on to the hearth-rug, where they were promptly trodden out by a tall, fair-haired young giant, who lazily removed his feet from a chair on which they reposed, for the purpose.

This operation concluded, he replaced his feet on the chair with deliberation, re-arranged a cushion behind his head, leaned back luxuriously, and started hunting in his pocket for matches wherewith to light his pipe, which had gone out.

“Beastly night for a dog to be out, much more a human being,” he soliloquised. “Poor old Murray’s sure to be drenched when he gets back, as well as frozen to the bone. Let’s see—is everything ready for him? Yes, there are his slippers warming before the fire—hope none of those sparks burnt a hole in ’em—likewise dry coat, shirt, and trousers; that ought to do him all right. I hope to goodness the poor old chap’s got some encouragement to-day, if nothing else, for he’s fearfully down on his luck, and no mistake. And,

between me and those fire-irons there, I'm getting almost afraid to let him out of my sight, for fear he'll go and do something foolish—though, to be sure, he's hardly that kind of fellow, when one comes to think of it. However, he should be in very soon now, and then I, shall learn the news."

Having delivered himself of this monologue, Dick Penryn lit his pipe, took up the book he had been reading, and was soon deep in the pages of Théophile Gautier's *Voyage en l'Orient*.

Dick Penryn and Murray Frobisher, the friend to whom he had been alluding, were chums of many years' standing. They had been born within a few months of one another—Frobisher being slightly the elder—in the same Devon village; had attended the same school in Plymouth—Mannamead House, to be exact; had gone to the same college together, and had passed into the British Navy within a year of one another—Frobisher being again first in the race.

Then, for some years, fortune smiled upon both. Each won golden opinions from his superiors; and by the time that the lads were twenty-three years of age they had attained the rank of lieutenant, and showed signs of rising rapidly in the service.

Everything was going splendidly, and both Dick and Murray were enjoying temporary rank as commanders of torpedo-boats during the winter manoeuvres of 1891-92, when suddenly, without any warning, Fate turned her face away from one of the chums and plunged him from the pinnacle of light-hearted happiness to the depths of misery and despair.

One evening, while a portion of the defending fleet was lying in Portland Roads waiting to be joined by the other division, news was brought in by one of the scouting destroyers that the attacking fleet had been seen at the entrance to the Channel, steering a course which undoubtedly had Portland as its objective. If that naval base was to be “saved”, it was urgently necessary to send eastward in haste to Portsmouth, to bring up the other half of the defending squadron; otherwise the attackers would have things all their own way, and the south-west coast of England would lie at the mercy of the “enemy.”

The destroyer *Spitfire*, which had just brought the news, would naturally have been selected to carry the message under ordinary circumstances—one of the rules of the game being that the telegraph might not be used by either side; but unfortunately, while still a considerable distance from Portland, she had commenced to run short of coal, being obliged to steam at half-speed for a number of hours, and finally arrived in the harbour on the sweepings of her bunkers. Hence there was greater need for haste than ever; and, as it would have taken longer to re-bunker the *Spitfire* than for T.B. 42, Murray’s ship, to raise steam, the young commander was sent for in hot haste by his admiral, hurriedly given his instructions, and told to raise steam and make for Portsmouth with the news in “something less than a pig’s whisper.”

Delighted at receiving this important commission, Murray Frobisher had hurried back to his little ship, helped the astonished stokers with his own hands to raise steam, and at midnight on a dark, blustering night, with half a gale

blowing from the south-east, the sea running steeply, and a heavy driving rain lashing right in their faces, he and his little crew cleared from Portland Roads, dashed across Weymouth Bay at a reckless speed—considering the height of the sea—and doubled Saint Alban's Head.

Murray found that the storm in the bay was a mere trifle compared with that which he was now facing; so, for safety's sake, and to avoid being blown ashore, he was compelled to stand off the coast a good deal farther than he had originally intended. He knew that he was in a position of some danger, and, besides being himself additionally on the alert, he posted an extra look-out, with orders to keep his eyes wide open for the first signs of light or loom of moving ship upon that black, rushing waste of water.

T.B. 42 was behaving splendidly, and Murray was just congratulating himself that, in spite of the violence of the wind, his little craft was fighting her way to her destination at a good honest twelve knots an hour, when, with a shriek like that of a thousand warlocks, the wind and sleet whirled down in a burst of vicious fury that struck the boat like a solid wall, rendering it a matter of physical impossibility for any human being to face it until after its first violence was exhausted.

It was during those few fateful moments that the catastrophe occurred. As the gust veered away astern, and the breathless, half-frozen seamen on deck were again able to direct their eyes ahead, there came a wild cry from the look-out forward of: "Port your helm, sir; port your helm!" followed, before Murray could spring to the assistance of the quartermaster at the wheel, by a splintering crash, the

rending sound of steel rasping through steel. Then the little craft heeled over to starboard, until Murray felt himself sliding bodily down the steeply inclined deck towards the sea; while above, right over his head, as it seemed, he could dimly perceive the outline of a great, towering metal stem that still surged and sawed onward and over Number 42, relentless as fate itself.

A second later, and the catastrophe was complete. The colliding steamer lifted with the ’scend of the waves and crashed down yet again upon the hapless torpedo-boat, and young Frobisher found himself in the raging sea, clinging instinctively to something—he knew not what—that had come away in his hands as he flung them out wildly to prevent himself from sliding off the deck. As his head appeared above the brine after the plunge, he heard certain dreadful cries which he never forgot as long as he lived. They were the death shrieks of his unhappy crew, imprisoned below among the bursting steam-pipes and boilers, the cascade of white-hot coals from the furnaces, and the crumpling wreckage of machinery and torn plates; and he knew that his trim little ship and his gallant comrades were gone from him for ever.

As it happened, those on the look-out on board the liner, with the storm behind them and their eyes consequently clear, had seen the boat at the instant when the collision had become inevitable; and the captain had promptly rung his engines astern, brought his ship to a standstill, and lowered his boats in an endeavour to rescue the survivors. But the only person rescued was the unfortunate Murray himself, and even he was hauled on board more dead than

alive, grieving that it had not been his lot to share the fate of his crew.

Upon his recovery he was called upon to face a court martial for the loss of his ship; and—strange were the ways of the Judge-Advocate—was dismissed that Service which, confronted by a less-harsh officer, he might have remained to honour. And since that miserable moment the unhappy man had been living upon his slender savings, endeavouring meanwhile to obtain employment of any sort that would keep the wolf from the door.

At the moment when this story opens, Murray Frobisher was down to his last few sovereigns, and had therefore been unfeignedly glad to accept the invitation of kind-hearted Dick Penryn, his former comrade-in-arms, to share the cottage at Kingston where, having no ties of any kind, that young gentleman was staying during his spell of shore leave. And it was Murray whom Penryn was momentarily expecting on this stormy, cold, and dismal evening in March, 1893, just a year after the catastrophe in the Channel which had ruined his career in the British Navy, and all but broken his heart.

Dick Penryn had scarcely finished another page of his very fascinating book when he heard the front door of the cottage open. A furious gust of wind tore through the little house for a moment, causing even the occupant of the easy chair to shiver in sympathy with his friend; and then the door was shut with a slam, and he heard Murray Frobisher’s well-known footsteps ascending the stairs. But there was not the former light-hearted spring in them. Murray was coming upstairs slowly and heavily, like a man carrying a

ponderous burden, and Dick heaved a sharp sigh as he murmured to himself, “No luck again to-day, evidently; else *we* should have had Murray coming up here full steam ahead. Poor old boy! I wonder what on earth will happen to him if he doesn’t get a berth soon? A man can’t go on like this for ever without losing heart; and there are already signs that the boy is beginning to lose hope. I wish to Heaven there was something I could do for him; but unfortunately I have not a particle of influence; I am absolutely powerless.”

At this moment the door of the little room opened, and Murray stood framed in the opening, looking at his friend with an expression in which weariness, disappointment, and a certain suggestion of relief were curiously blended. If Dick Penryn was what some people were in the habit of calling a giant, then Murray Frobisher could only be considered gigantic. Standing fully six feet four inches in his boots, broad in proportion, weighing fully sixteen stone, with dark, olive complexion bronzed almost to the shade of an Arab’s by exposure to the weather, and with clean-shaven cheeks and lips, and close-cropped, wavy black hair, the man was a truly magnificent specimen of humanity, compelling the attention of all with whom he came in contact.

“So you’re back at last, Murray,” shouted Penryn, leaping out of his chair, and speaking more cheerfully than he felt that the occasion warranted. “Come inside, man; come inside! Don’t stand there in the doorway letting in all the draught; goodness knows it’s cold enough without that!” And as Murray closed the door behind him, and slowly pulled forward a chair to the fire, he proceeded: “And what’s

the news to-day, old man? Any luck of any sort; or has it been the usual style of things—offer your services and have them declined with, or without, thanks?”

“Well,” answered Murray in his deep bass tones, stretching out his half-frozen hands to the blaze, “I hardly know what to think about to-day. It certainly has been a little different from the usual run of things, but not very much. During the whole of the morning, and for the better part of the afternoon, luck was dead against me, as usual. Then, about four o’clock, there came just one little ray of light to brighten the darkness.”

“Capital!” broke in Dick, cheerfully. “Every little helps, you know. Straws show which way the wind blows, and all the rest of it. Tell us about this ray of light of yours.”

“Well,” answered Frobisher, with a wry smile, “I don’t know that it was very much of a ray, after all; but I’ll tell you what happened. I had been running up and down office stairs from before nine o’clock until about three in the afternoon, without result, and I became heartily sick of it; and just by way of a change, I made up my mind to take a run down to the docks and see whether there was anything doing there.

“I got down at about three-thirty, and, feeling pretty hungry—for I had had nothing to eat since breakfast—I went into a small place within hail of the dock gates, and asked for some bread and cheese and beer. The landlady, a kindly old soul, seeing, I suppose, that I looked cold, and as though I could do with a rest, showed me into a little sanctum labelled *Captains’ Room*, where, I was glad to see, there

blazed a fine big fire, before which stood two or three very cosy-looking arm-chairs.

“Throwing myself into one, I began to discuss my frugal luncheon with considerable appetite, and had nearly finished when the door opened, and in came the most curious-looking little man I have ever set eyes on. That he was a seaman was perfectly apparent to the meanest intelligence, and I at once set him down as the first officer—as they call themselves nowadays—or perhaps even the skipper, of a tramp steamer. He was certainly not more than five feet in height, but his breadth of shoulder and depth of chest were so enormous as to amount, literally, to a deformity; and I should judge that his strength must be herculean, as the novelists say. He was bronzed to the colour of deep mahogany, and had a heavy black moustache and a beard which grew right up to his eyes—deep-set, black, and as brilliant as diamonds. Added to this he wore gold ear-rings, and, altogether, was as like my conception of one of the pirates of old, about whom we used to read in our young days, as any man possibly could be.

“From the moment the man entered the room I began to feel deeply interested in him, and could scarcely refrain from staring at him openly. ‘Here,’ I said to myself, ‘is a personality; a man who has knocked about the world during most of his life; a man who has seen things and done things, some of which, probably, would not bear too close scrutiny.’ For he gave me the impression of being a person who would make a good, stanch friend, but who would prove to be a thoroughly bad and dangerous enemy.

“Apparently he was a bit surprised to find anybody else in the captains’ sanctum at that time of day; and, after the first hasty glance, it seemed as though he, too, was taking more than usual interest in your humble servant; for every time I raised my eyes to take a quiet look at him, I found his black, glittering orbs fixed on me, with that curious, unblinking stare that you may have noticed among certain species of birds. Seriously, Dick, I can tell you that he kept this staring business up so long that I was beginning to feel quite uncomfortable, and had made up my mind to finish my meal as soon as possible and continue my journey down to the docks, when I heard him give vent to a kind of grunt, which might have expressed satisfaction, dissatisfaction, disgust, or any other feeling for aught I could judge.

“Then, taking his eyes off me, this curious customer tugged the bell and ordered the servant to bring him a glass of ‘rum hot’, and a bit of cold meat and bread; from which, when it arrived, he began to make a meal, eating as though it were the first time he had touched food for several days. Indeed, he ate so fast and so wolfishly, that by the time I had finished my own meal, and had rung the bell for the bill, my piratical friend was also pushing away his plate with a sigh of satisfaction, and asking for his bill. Both reckonings having been paid, I was on the point of leaving the room when the stranger, whose name I afterwards learned was Drake—a quite appropriate name, I thought, for such a freebooter-looking character—put out a great, hairy paw as though to prevent me, and remarked, in a deep, rumbling voice:—

“‘One moment, young gentleman. Unless you are in a great hurry I’d like to have a word or two with you.’

“Naturally, Dick, I was a little astonished,” proceeded Murray, “but I must confess that I had become vastly interested in the little man, and, as offers of employment sometimes come from the most unlikely sources, like a drowning man clutching at a straw I determined to hear what he had to say. Possibly it might lead to something; and in any case I felt that I should do no harm by listening to him.

“‘I think I can spare you a few minutes,’ I remarked. ‘What is it you wish to see me about?’

“‘You’re a seaman, aren’t you?’ he said, answering my question with another.

“‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘I am.’

“‘Navy man, too, unless I’m much mistaken,’ was his next remark.

“‘Well,’ I said, rather hesitatingly, ‘I was a Navy man—a lieutenant—not so very long ago, but I had the misfortune to lose my ship under circumstances for which, I must say, in justice to myself, I think I was hardly to blame. However, the members of the court martial took a different view of the case, and I was, to put it bluntly, dismissed the Service. Since then I have been looking out for other employment—something in my own line, if possible; but if not, then anything that I can lay my hands on. But so far, I am sorry to say, I have met with nothing but rebuffs. Nobody on the face of this earth appears to need a man with my qualifications just now.’

“‘Ha, ha!’ chuckled the little man, rubbing his hands gleefully. ‘Just as I thought when I first set eyes on you. Here, says I to myself, is a seaman, sure enough—I could tell that at the first glance—a Navy man, too, by the way he carries himself, and no longer in the Service by the general—er—um—not on active duty at the moment, I mean to say,’ he ended, rather lamely, with an apologetic cough.

“I felt myself going red round the ears, Dick, and might have been inclined to be angry had anyone else spoken thus. But there was something about my little pirate that assured me he did not in the least intend to be offensive, so I only laughed, rather ruefully. If my ‘out-of-work’ condition was so apparent as to be noted by even a common seaman, it was no wonder, I told myself, that I so often came out of private offices with the words, ‘Nothing to suit you, I’m afraid, Mr Frobisher’, ringing in my ears.

“‘Well,’ I said, ‘granted that I am an ex-naval officer looking for a job, what bearing has that upon your business with me? For I suppose you must have some idea that you and I can do business together, since you started the conversation.’

“‘What bearing?’ he repeated. ‘Well, I’ll just tell you. As it happens, I’m looking at this moment for exactly such a man as you appear to be. My name’s Drake—Captain John Drake, of the tramp steamer *Quernmore*, two thousand five hundred and sixty tons register, to be exact—and, from what you’ve just said, I think I could make a pretty good shot at your tally. Should I be very far wrong if I said that you were ex-lieutenant Murray Frobisher?’

“‘On the contrary,’ I answered, ‘you would have hit the bull’s-eye dead in the centre.’

“‘I was certain of it,’ he smiled; ‘and again I say, more emphatically than ever, that you’re the very man I’m looking for. If you’ll take that chair and pull up to the fire, I’ll take the other and we’ll have a bit of a palaver.’

“Having seated ourselves comfortably, Drake at once proceeded:—

“‘I may tell you, Mr Frobisher, that for the past twenty years I have been captain of this same steamer, trading between eastern ports all the while; and as this is the first time I have been back to old England during the whole of that period, I don’t think I’m very far wrong in saying that I know as much about the East as any man living—perhaps a good deal more. And there’s not very much going on out there that I don’t know about. Sometimes, even, I get to know about things before they begin to happen, and am able to make my plans and put a little money in my pocket thereby.

“‘This is one of the occasions upon which I have managed to get wind of something in advance, and in this case also I can see my way to making quite a nice little pile of money. First of all, however, I must ask you to pledge your word that, if after I have told you my plans you don’t feel inclined to come in with me, you’ll do nothing to upset those plans in any way whatever.’

“I gave him the required promise, perhaps just a little too readily, and Drake resumed his story.

“‘It so happens that my last port of call was—well—a small seaport in Korea; and, while there, I heard some news

that made me sit up and take notice, as the Yankees say. It seems that, for some time past, the Government of Korea has been playing some very hanky-panky games: taxing the people until the burden has become unbearable; punishing the smallest offences with death by torture; confiscating the goods and money of every man who dared to allow himself a few more luxuries than his neighbours; and, in short, playing the very mischief all round. Naturally, even the mildest-mannered worm will turn under too much of that kind of thing, and the average Korean is anything but mild-mannered; so that, a little while ago, a party of officials decided that they had had quite enough of it, and proceeded quietly and methodically to foment a rebellion against the Government.

"'When I left Korea, things were very nearly ripe for the outbreak; but it would have been suicidal folly for the rebels to have attempted anything of the kind without proper arms to back it up, for the Korean soldiery are naturally on the side from which they draw their pay—that is to say, the side of the Government—and they also happen to be particularly well armed just now. It was therefore necessary for the would-be rebels to procure weapons before any successful revolt could be undertaken, and one day I was interviewed by one of the officials on the subject of supplying the rebel army with modern rifles.

"'To make a rather long story short, the upshot of the interview was that I was commissioned to supply the rebels with one hundred thousand rifles, with the necessary ammunition, at a price which, if the venture is successful,

will make it possible for me to give up the sea altogether and live ashore at my ease.’

“‘Yes, yes,’ I interrupted, rather impatiently; ‘this is interesting enough in its way, Captain, but I fail to see where it concerns me.’

“‘I was just coming to that,’ returned Drake, ‘when you interrupted me. I was unfortunate enough to lose my chief officer overboard in a hurricane in the Indian Ocean on the way home—a circumstance which upset me and my plans very considerably, for he was a fine seaman, had been with me many years, and knew all my little ways. In order to bring off this venture successfully, I must replace him, for there will be difficult and dangerous work ahead; and I need a man as much like my old chief as possible, a man who is willing to go anywhere and do anything; a man who has the brains to organise, and the muscle and courage to keep his own end up in a fight.

“‘I have often heard of you, Mr Frobisher, as being just that kind of man; and I followed the whole account of your misfortune and the proceedings of the court martial in the newspapers. When I learned that they had dismissed you from the Service, I considered it a most shocking error of judgment, and told myself that, had you been in my employ, you would not have been so harshly treated. I would have liked at the time to make a try to secure your services, but I had my own chief officer with me then, and consequently had nothing to offer you. But now things are different. You need employment; I need your services, and am prepared to pay you well for them and give you a share of the profits. One of the conditions attaching to my contract is that I

deliver the rifles and ammunition into the hands of the rebel officers at—at a small town a considerable distance inland from the coast; and as I cannot leave my ship, the duty of conveying the cargo inland would devolve upon you. This is where the dangerous part of the business comes in, and I shall make allowance therefore in the rate of pay I propose to offer you.

"'If you will join me—to get down to hard facts—I will give you forty pounds a month, from the day you sign on with me until you leave the ship on her return to England, or until you leave her out in the East, if you care to do that. There are plenty of chances for such a man as yourself out there. And, in addition, I agree to give you a share of one-twentieth of my profits, which I estimate should amount to about twenty thousand pounds sterling. Therefore, one thousand pounds, over and above your pay, will be your share of the enterprise. Now, I've said all I have to say; I've put the proposition before you; I've told you that it's likely to be both profitable and dangerous: what do you say to joining me as my chief officer?'

"I tell you, Dick, I was too amazed to reply for a few moments, and my brain was in such a whirl that all I could presently say was that I would think the thing over, and meet him again at the same place to-morrow to give him a reply. The money part of the business naturally appeals very strongly to one, but the amount seems almost too good to be true. There would be at least six months' pay at forty pounds a month, and a thousand on top of that, if the expedition should prove successful; so that, all being well, I should have a little capital in my hands to work with at the

end of that time, and might be able so to invest it as to make myself independent, for the remainder of my life, of anything like the experiences of this past year.

“On the other hand, I am inclined to look a little doubtfully upon this gun-running, or smuggling, business. It is all utterly at variance with Navy traditions; and I would rather starve than set my hand to anything that has even the appearance of being in the least degree dishonest. Still, I am bound to say that, from all I can learn, it looks as though the Korean rebels have a genuine grievance, and that the country might be all the better for a drastic change of government; so that I am really very undecided what to do, Dick. One thing is certain—I must get employment of some kind; and if you are seriously of opinion that I can accept Drake’s offer without soiling my hands I shall most certainly do so. I have considered the matter pretty thoroughly myself on the way home, and, to tell the truth, I have almost persuaded myself that I may accept.”

Dick Penryn, who during this narrative had been leaning back in his chair smoking, and listening attentively, took his pipe from his mouth, tapped the ashes out slowly and thoughtfully against the bars of the grate, and sat up straight. Then, after a lengthy pause, he delivered judgment.

“Well, Murray,” he said, “I’ve listened most attentively to your yarn, and I’ve been trying to look at the matter from an unprejudiced and independent standpoint. Of course, as you very truthfully say, anything in the nature of gun-running or smuggling is totally opposed to all our Navy traditions. At the same time, you are, unfortunately, no longer in the

Navy; to all intents and purposes you are now a private individual, at liberty to take up any calling, profession, trade, or whatever you care to term it, that offers you a chance to make a living. Employment of some sort you certainly must have; and so long as that employment is honest—I might almost say in your particular case, so long as it is not *dis*honest—I think you will be wise to take the first thing that offers.

"You have been out of harness for over a year now, and your ready cash must be running pretty low, I should think; besides, this is the first offer that has come your way since you left the Navy, and if you do not accept it while you have the opportunity, it may perhaps be another year or more before you are given another chance. Personally, I do not see anything wrong with Drake's proposal. It is a purely business enterprise. Certain folk require certain goods, and Drake contracts to supply them. In order to carry out his agreement he needs your help, and is willing to pay very handsomely for it; so my advice to you, my son, is that you take what is offered, and be thankful. Of course I need not say that if the arms had been intended for any country at war, or likely at any time to be at war, with England, such a thing would be absolutely impossible for you to contemplate for a moment; but as things are—well, I have no hesitation in saying that under similar circumstances my conscience would not worry me very much."

At this very clear and definite expression of opinion, Frobisher's anxious expression vanished. He had evidently been a little afraid that his friend might not look altogether favourably on the scheme; and he was not so deeply in love

with it himself that he would have felt inclined to follow it up had Dick voted against it or pronounced it of too “shady” a character for a gentleman to meddle with. But since Dick’s views coincided so completely with his own, he felt that there could be no longer any room for hesitation.

“I’m glad indeed to hear you say that, Dick,” he exclaimed, jumping up. “It decides me absolutely. Tomorrow I’ll run down to the docks, see Drake on board the *Quernmore* instead of waiting to meet him at the hotel as I had arranged, and tell him I have decided to accept his offer. I would go down to-night if it were not so late; for now that I’ve made up my mind I should feel pretty bad if meanwhile he happened to meet someone else who had not so many scruples as myself, and who needed a job badly enough to accept the opening on the spot, without taking time to think it over.

“However, I don’t think Drake will interview anybody else until he has had my answer, for he certainly seemed anxious enough to secure my particular services; so I’ll hope for the best and leave things in the hands of fate. And now, Dick,” he went on, passing his hand across his forehead, “I’ve had a long tiring day, and have a rather bad headache into the bargain; so, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll toddle up to bed and get to sleep; for I want to be up early in the morning. Good night, old man!”

“Good night, Murray, my hearty!” replied his friend. “I hope you’ll sleep well, and have pleasant dreams. You ought to, after this piece of good luck. By the way, when does Drake want you to go aboard?”

“Oh, to be sure; I quite forgot to mention that. He told me that if I decided to join him he would require me to be on board as soon as I possibly could. Indeed, he hinted that if I could make it convenient to turn up tomorrow evening and sleep aboard the ship, he would be more than pleased. You see, he has his cargo pretty nearly loaded, and hopes to be able to get away at midday the day after to-morrow; so the sooner I am on board the sooner I shall be able to take some of the worry and trouble and work off his shoulders.”

“Great Scot!” exclaimed Dick, jumping up, “he wants you to join as soon as that! Why, I fully expected that you wouldn’t be leaving under a week at the least. So to-night will be your last sleep in the old bed, for some months to come, at any rate—for I want you to make this place your home again as soon as ever you return. Make the most of it, therefore. You don’t know where you may have to lie, in what queer places you may have to sleep, before you get back. Well, I suppose I’ll see you in the morning at breakfast; and at any rate you’ll be back here after you’ve interviewed Drake, in order to pack your traps, say good-bye, and so on?”

“Yes, you’ll see me at breakfast, Dick; and I shall be back as soon as possible after I have seen the skipper, to pack and to say good-bye. By gad, Dick!” he went on, with a little burst of emotion, “but I’m more than sorry to have to leave you. You’ve been a mighty good chum to me, and as long as I live I’ll never forget your kindness. I wish to goodness you were coming along too.”

“So do I, old chap,” answered Penryn, gripping his friend’s hand; “but as to ‘goodness’ and ‘kindness’ to you,

and all the rest of it—why, that's all rot, you know. Any man would do the same for his pal."

"Not every man, Dick," returned Murray, soberly. "If you only knew it, there are not a great many of your sort knocking about nowadays. Good night, again, old chap."

Frobisher slept well, and was not visited by any dreams, sweet or otherwise. We are sometimes told that dreams are sent to us as warnings, as forerunners of events that are to happen to us in the future; but if this is really true it seems strange that Murray's sleep should have been so deep and dreamless. For had that young man been able to foresee but one half of the strange and terrible adventures that were in store for him, it is scarcely to be doubted that he would, in spite of his long period of unemployment, have gladly allowed Captain Drake to take somebody else in his place, notwithstanding the offer of the forty pounds a month salary, and the thousand-pound bonus at the successful termination of the venture.

Chapter Two.

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Eastward Ho!

So soundly and dreamlessly did Frobisher sleep that he did not wake until the clear notes of the dressing bugle—a solemn farce which Dick insisted upon his servant performing when ashore—had almost finished ringing through the little cottage.

Punctually at 8 a.m. the old marine who acted as Dick's servant when he was ashore, and as general housekeeper and caretaker when he was afloat, sounded the bugle as a signal to his master that it was time to turn out; and the neighbours in the houses round about—who, by the way, referred to Penryn as "that very eccentric young man"—had come to look upon the instrument somewhat in the light of a town clock; so much so that several of them set their watches by it, and one old gentleman was in the habit of leaving his front door and sprinting for the eight-fifteen train to town punctually upon the first note.

Frobisher sat up in bed with a yawn, and was half-way to the bath-room before he was sufficiently wideawake to recollect that this morning was different from the three hundred and sixty-five odd preceding mornings. But as he remembered that at last he had secured the offer of regular and profitable employment—although not quite along the lines he had hoped for—he let out a whoop of rejoicing that made the cottage ring.

Having completed his toilet, Frobisher came downstairs whistling, to find Penryn standing in front of the fire, warming his coat tails and sniffing hungrily, while from the direction of the kitchen came certain savoury smells.

"'Morning, Murray!"

"'Morning, Dick!" was the response. "What's for breakfast this morning?"

"Don't know," answered his friend, "but it smells like eggs and bacon, and steak and mushrooms, and chops and kidneys on toast. I hope so, at any rate, for I'm hungry this morning, and feel quite ready for a snack."

“Snack!” laughed Frobisher. “Is what you have just mentioned your idea of a snack? It sounds to me more like the menu of an aldermanic banquet. By the way, I didn’t know the parcel-postman had arrived yet; he’s early, isn’t he?”

“Oh,” replied Dick, turning rather red, “I thought I’d put that away. No, the postman hasn’t been. That’s just something I went out for, early this morning, for—oh—for a friend of mine.”

“Sorry, old man,” said Murray, “I didn’t mean to be inquisitive. By the way, is there a train to town somewhere about nine or half-past? I should like to catch it if there is.”

“One at nine twenty-three,” answered Dick. “You’ll catch it easily. And now, here’s Tom with the breakfast; bring yourself to an anchor, and let’s begin. I’m as hungry as a hunter. How about yourself?”

“Rather better than usual this morning,” laughed Frobisher. “A little hope is a splendid thing for giving one an appetite.” And with this remark both the young men fell to with a will.

The meal finished, Frobisher hurried off to catch his train; travelled up to London; crossed the city; and took another train down to the docks. Arrived there, he enquired the whereabouts of the steamer *Quernmore*.

“Over there, sir,” a policeman told him, pointing to a spot about two hundred yards distant; and thither the young man made his way, halting presently at the shore end of a gangway leading on to the steamer, to take a good look at the craft that was to be his floating home for so long a period.

Certainly, he told himself, if one might judge by appearances, Captain Drake had ample justification for being proud of his steamer; for she was as pretty a model of a craft as Frobisher, for all his long experience, had ever set eyes on. Indeed, one would almost have been excused for assuming that, but for her size, she might have been a private yacht at some period of her existence. Flush-decked, with a graceful curving run, a clipper bow with gilt figure-head, and a long, overhanging counter, the hull painted a particularly pleasing shade of dark green down to within a couple of feet of the water-line, and polished black below that, she made a picture completely satisfying to the eye of the most exacting critic. She was rigged as a topsail schooner, and her funnel was tall, oval-shaped, and cream-coloured. Indeed, anything less like the traditional tramp steamer, and more resembling a gentleman's yacht, it would have been difficult to find.

By the look of her, too, thought Frobisher, she should be able to show a pretty fair turn of speed, if she were put to it —sixteen knots at the least, the young lieutenant judged— and the idea occurred to him that possibly, some time in the future, the lives of her crew might depend upon those few extra knots of which she appeared capable.

However, it would not do to stand there admiring the ship. "Business before pleasure," the young man reminded himself; and, involuntarily straightening himself up as though about to board a man-of-war, Frobisher marched across the gangway, and asked the first seaman he met whether Captain Drake was aboard.

“He’s in the chart-house at this moment, sir,” answered the man; “I’ll take you to him.” And a minute later Frobisher found himself ducking his head in order to get in through the low chart-house door-way.

“Hillo! it’s you already, is it?” exclaimed Drake, looking up from a chart over which he was poring. “I didn’t expect to see you until this afternoon. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I hope you’ve come to tell me that we are to be shipmates for this cruise,” he added, eagerly. “If I can’t persuade you to come in with me, I shall be obliged to sail shorthanded, for I’ve no time to do any more looking round now.”

“Then you can make your mind easy,” laughed Frobisher. “To tell you the simple truth, I believe I had practically made up my mind to sail with you before I said good-bye to you yesterday. Yes, I’m coming, skipper; and I hope, for both our sakes, that the voyage will turn out as successfully as you desire.”

“Good man!” heartily ejaculated the skipper, thrusting out his hand. “That’s the best news I’ve heard for a long while. Now, where’s your dunnage? I’ll show you your room, and you can settle down right away.”

“My dunnage isn’t down yet, skipper,” replied Frobisher, smiling. “I came down just to tell you what I had decided, intending to go back and fetch my traps this afternoon.”

Drake looked rather blank at hearing this. “That’s a pity,” he remarked, thoughtfully, half to himself. Then, addressing Frobisher: “Well, trot away back, and get them down here as quickly as you can, will ye? Certain events have happened since I saw you yesterday that make me anxious to leave at

the very earliest moment possible, and I've already made arrangements to clear directly after I had seen you this afternoon."

"I'll be off at once, skipper," returned Frobisher, "and be back again not later than one o'clock." And the young man darted out of the chart-house, across the gangway, and out of the dock premises like a sprinter, leaving Drake staring open-mouthed after him.

"He certainly can take a hint quicker than any man I've ever met," said that worthy, as he resumed the study of his chart.

Two hours later Frobisher was back in Kingston, had packed his belongings, and was saying good-bye to his old friend, Dick Penryn.

Neither of the men felt very happy at parting, and both, after the manner of their kind, tried to conceal their real feelings by an exaggerated show of indifference. Thus it was that their farewells were brief, almost to curtness, and to the point; and it was only as Frobisher was actually on the door-step that Dick pushed into his friend's hands a parcel—the same parcel that had caught Frobisher's eye that morning. It was heavy, and the recipient could not guess, even remotely, as to its contents; but he thanked Dick heartily, tucked the package under his arm, and got into the cab which had been sent for.

One last firm hand-grip, two rather husky good-byes, now that the actual moment for parting had come, and the pair were separated—one bound for the far, mysterious East, the other to return in a few days to the ship he had come to look upon as his real home.

It was with a few minutes in hand that Frobisher leapt out of his cab at the dock gates, and collected his few belongings. He paid the cabby, and, with his customary swiftness of movement, turned and started to trot quickly through the gates towards the *Quernmore*; but as he did so, he collided violently with another man, causing him to sit down suddenly on the hard cobbles, while Frobisher himself dropped one of his portmanteaux.

The fat policeman on duty at the entrance chuckled loudly; Frobisher laughed and picked up his bag, as he murmured an apology; but the victim on the cobbles appeared to be saying unpleasant things venomously in some language quite unfamiliar to the young lieutenant—who knew a good many—and this caused him to pause an instant and look at the man.

He was a brown, or rather, yellow man; and for a moment Frobisher took him for a Chinaman. But a second glance convinced the latter that he did not belong to that nation, nor to the Japanese, although he was undoubtedly of Eastern extraction.

Murray had no time to waste in conjectures, however, and with a hearty English “Sorry, old man!” he proceeded to the *Quernmore*, where Drake himself conducted him to his state-room.

Frobisher would have left his unpacking until the evening, and gone on duty at once; but Drake informed him that there was no need. All the cargo was aboard; the crew—specially selected men—were all in the forecastle; and there was nothing to be done until three o’clock, when Drake would get his papers, and the tug would arrive to help him