

THE BOX OF SPECIE.

BY CLIFFORD ASHDOWN.

“**N**OW then, sir, if you're coming!”

Mr. Pringle, carrying a brown gladstone, was the last to cross the gangway before it was hauled back on to the landing-stage. The steam ceased to roar from the escape-pipes, impatiently tingled the bells in the engine-room; then, pulsating to the rhythmic thud of her screws, the liner swung from the quay and silently picked her way down the crowded Pool. As reach succeeded reach the broadening stream opened a clearer course, and the *Mary Bland* moved to the full sweep of the ebbing tide; a whitened path began to lengthen in her wake, for nearing Tilbury the Thames becomes a clean and wholesome stream, and its foam is not as that of porter.

The day had been wet and gusty, and although, when he stepped aboard, the declining sun shone brightly, there was a touch of autumn rawness in the air which induced Pringle to seek a sheltered corner. Such he found by the break of the poop, and here he sat and watched the stowing of the cargo, the last arrival of which encumbered the after-deck. By the time Tilbury was in sight all had been sent down the after-hatch but three small cases, which the mate and purser, who stood superintending operations, appeared to view with a jealous eye.

They were clamped with iron, of small size (about fourteen inches long by seven wide and four deep), and Pringle, even from where he sat, could read the direction in bold, black letters on the nearest:—

THE MANAGER,
IVORY AND PRODUCE COMPANY,
CAMEROONS.

These were obviously for transshipment, since the *Mary Bland's* route was but London to Rotterdam. It was to Rotterdam that Pringle was bound. The journey was not undertaken for pleasure; he was *en route* for Amsterdam on business of peculiar interest, and not unconnected with precious stones, Amsterdam, as everybody knows, being the headquarters of the diamond-cutting industry. But this by the way.

The men were about attaching the chain-tackle to the nearest of the three boxes when the captain came half-way down from the bridge.

“Haven't you got that specie stowed, Mr. Trimble? It'll be dark presently.” He addressed the mate with just a little anxiety in the tone.

“All right, sir,” interposed the purser. “We just wanted to get the deck clear before I opened the strong-room.”

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"Go ahead, then," and the captain returned to the bridge.

The purser disappeared below, and presently came his voice from the after-hatch :

"Lower away, there!"

With much clanking and rattling of the chain, a case swung for a moment over the gulf, and then disappeared. A second followed, and a third was about to join them, when a voice from somewhere forward called :

"Steamer on the starboard bow!"

As the sun went down a grey mist, rising from the Cliffe marshes, had first blotted out the banks and then steamed across the fairway, which but a few minutes before had shown a clear course through the reach. It was quite local, and a big ocean tramp, coming slowly up stream, was just emerging from the obscurity as the *Mary Bland* encountered it.

"Hard a-starboard!" roared the captain, as he gave a sharp tug at the whistle lanyard. The man at the wheel spun it till the brass-work on the spokes seemed an endless golden ring. "Bang, clank! bang, clank!" went the steam steering-gear with a jarring tremor on deck, answered by the furious din of the engine-room telegraph as the captain jammed the indicator at "full speed astern." And on came the tramp, showing bulkier through the mist.

"All hands forward with fenders!" and the men by the after-hatch scurried forward, the mate at their head. Slowly the vessels approached amid a whirr of bells and frantically shouted orders, their whistles hooting the regulation blasts. Suddenly, as but a few yards intervened, they obeyed their helms and slowly paid off, almost scraping one another's sides as they slid by, while at half-speed the *Mary Bland* plunged into the fog, her syren continuing the concert begun by the now silent tramp. All at once there was a loud shout from the water, and a chocolate coloured topsail, with a little dog-vane above it, rose on the port-bow. Once more the captain's hand wrenched the telegraph to "full speed astern," but it was too late. There was a concussion, plainly felt all over the steamer, a grinding and a splintering noise, and the topsail with its little weathercock dog-vane had disappeared. The after-coming crowd rushed back again to find the *Mary Bland* drifting with the tide through an archipelago of hay-trusses.

"Where in thunder are yer comin' to?" sounded in plaintive protest from the nearest truss. "Ain't there room enough roun' Coal-ouse point for the likes of you?"

"What have we run down, Mr. Trimble?" demanded the captain, his hands quivering on the bridge rail in a spasm of suppressed excitement.

"I think it's a hay-berge, sir. It looks like a man floating on a truss over there on the port-beam," said the mate, pointing in the direction of the voice.

"Get a boat out then, lively, and pick him up! And send that look-out man to me—I want to speak to him."

The men were already handling the falls, and, as the hapless look-out man slouched aft, the first officer, jumping into the boat with four sailors, was lowered to the water, and rowed towards the survivor of the barge.

All this time Pringle had remained near the after-hatch. When the collision seemed imminent he was about to follow the general movement to the centre of interest, when a light suddenly flashed on the port side, and, even as he gazed in wonder, ceased as abruptly as it rose. He stopped and looked about him; the gathering gloom of the evening seemed deeper after the momentary light, everyone was forward, the deck quite deserted, and the box of specie for the time ignored. Not altogether, though. A sailor was coming aft, detailed, no doubt, to watch the treasure where it lay. Noting how stealthily he approached, Pringle drew back into his corner and watched him. The man walked on tiptoe, with every now and then a backward glance; and, for all the dimness of the fog and the oncoming night, he stalked along, taking advantage of every slightest shadow. Clearly he imagined that everyone was forward; he never gave a glance in Pringle's direction, but moved "the beard on the shoulder." On he stole till he reached the deserted box, and there he stopped and crouched down. Faint echoes were heard from forward, but not a soul came anywhere near the after-hatch. The captain was, of course, on the bridge; but, having relieved his feelings at the expense of the look-out man, was now absorbed in trying to follow the progress of the mate among the hay trusses.

Presently the light shot up again, and now a little closer. As it flickered and oscillated, Pringle saw that it came from a slender cylindrical lamp, supported by a sort of conical iron cage topping a large, black-coloured buoy, which floated some twenty feet off from the *Mary Bland*. The sight appeared to nerve the sailor to action; it seemed, indeed, as if he had waited for the buoy to reveal itself. Drageing the box

aside as gently as its weight allowed, he seized the chain placed ready for the tackle-hook, and tried to raise it. Again and again he made the attempt, but the weight seemed beyond his single strength. In the midst the light flared out once more; it was just opposite the ship, and as the buoy slowly dipped and turned, with a curtsey to this side and to that, the word "OVENS," in large white capitals, showed upon it before the light went out and all was dark again. With a wrench and a groan, the man tilted the box on end; then, bracing himself, he raised it first to a bollard, and with a final and desperate heave to the gunwale. And then a curious thing happened. When presently the light shone the chest had disappeared, but, as if tracing its descent, the man hung over the side, his feet slipping and squirming to get a purchase, and as the light passed the sound of his struggling continued in the darkness. At the next flash he was gone—all but a hand, which still gripped the gunwale, while his feet could be heard drumming furiously against the vessel's side; and now, as his fingers slipped from their agonising hold, he gave a shriek for help, and then another and another. Pringle darted across the deck, but the unfortunate wretch was beyond help; his hand wedged fast in the chain, he had been dragged overboard by the momentum of nearly a hundred-weight of specie. And as he plunged headlong in the river the beacon shimmered upon a fountain of spray, a few jets even breaking in cascade against the sides of the buoy.

The cries of the drowning man had passed unnoticed. The boat had reached the barge just as the truss began to break up in the swirl; the passengers were cheering lustily, and Pringle walked quietly forward and mingled unperceived with the crowd. While rescued and rescuers climbed on board, the captain telegraphed "full speed ahead," and the *Mary Bland* resumed her voyage, so prolific of incident.

A group of passengers were discussing the proper course to have pursued had the collision with the tramp steamer actually occurred. A burly man with a catarrhal Teutonic accent maintained that the only sensible thing to do would have been to scramble on board the colliding ship. "At the worst," said he, "she would only have had two or three of her fore compartments stove in, whilst we stood to have a hole punched in our side big enough for an omnibus to drive through. We should have sunk inside of ten minutes, whilst they

would have floated—well, long enough to have got us comfortably ashore." In this discussion Pringle innocently joined, with an eye on the captain, who paced the bridge in ignorance of the new anxiety in store for him. Meanwhile, the purser had remained at his post in the strong-room. He awaited the further storage of the specie; but, although he could hear the men returning to the hatchway, not a shadow of the box appeared. At length he cried impatiently:

"Lower away, there—oh, lower away!"

"There ain't no more up 'ere, sir," said one of the men, as he put his head over the coaming.

"No more!" repeated the purser in hollow tones from the depths. "Send down that third box of specie—the money, I mean. Ah, you jackass! Don't stand grinning there! Where's the box you were going to send down when that cursed hooker nearly ran into us? Where's Mr. Trimble?"

"'E's with the captain, sir. Ain't the box down there? Didn't we send it down atop of the other two 'fore we went forward?"

Bang! went the strong-room door as the purser, without further discussion, rushed up on deck.

"Where's that third box of specie, Mr. Trimble?"

The captain and the mate stared down at him from the bridge without answering.

"These idiots think they sent it down; but I've only received two, and it's nowhere about the deck."

The captain gasped and turned pale.

"When did you last see it?" he asked the mate.

"Just before we got into the fog."

The captain suppressed an oath.

"Go down with the purser, Mr. Trimble, and see if it's fallen down the hatch."

Twenty minutes saw the mate return, hot and perspiring.

"Can't see a bit of it, sir," he reported; "and, what's more, Cogle seems to have disappeared as well!"

"Cogle?"

"Yes, sir. He was working the crane, but no one has seen him since. He can't have jumped overboard with the specie."

"Rot! Why, that box held five thousand sovereigns according to the manifest, and couldn't weigh an ounce less than three-quarters of a hundredweight altogether! You can't put a thing like that in your pocket, can you?"

The mate glanced doubtfully at the

passengers on the saloon-deck, but none showed such a bulging of the person as might be expected from a concealed box of specie.

"How would it be to put back to Gravesend and inform the police?" he suggested. "Cogle must have tumbled overboard in the ruction."

"It's no good putting back," the captain decided gloomily. "That specie was delivered right enough, and I'm responsible for it. It can't have fallen overboard, so it's on the ship somewhere—that I'll swear. Can't you suggest anything?" he added testily, as the mate continued to cast a suspicious eye on all around.

"Why not search the passengers' luggage?"

"Search your grandmother!" returned the captain contemptuously. "How can I do that? Hold on, though—I'll send you ashore as soon as we get to Rotterdam, and we'll ask the police to stand by while the Customs fellows search the luggage. Not a mother's son leaves this ship except the passengers; and as to the cargo, our agent'll see after that." And he went below to "log down" the events of the day whilst they were fresh in his memory.

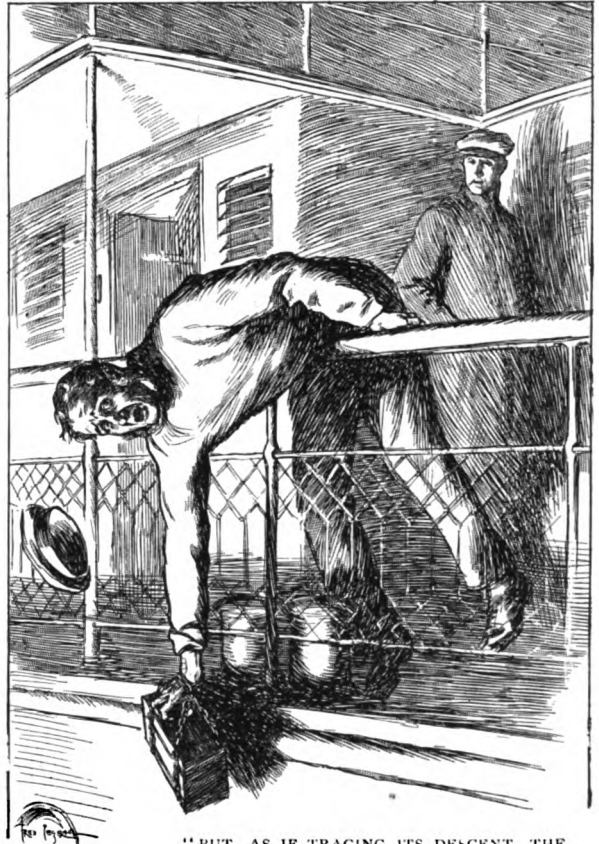
The one person who could have thrown any light on the mystery remained silent. Pringle had resolved to be the dead man's legatee. It would be a large order, no doubt, to fish the chest up again, but the light marked a shoal thereabouts, and the depth was unlikely to be great; and, thinking the affair over, Pringle had little doubt that it was the sight of the buoy, a *fixed water-mark*, which had determined the man to jettison the specie where he did.

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As soon as he got back to London again, Pringle devoted some time to a careful study of Pearson's "Nautical Almanac." From this useful publication he learnt that at the time the *Mary Bland* was on her exciting course down the river it was the first of the ebb-tide—that is to say, about three-quarters of an hour after high-water. Now, inasmuch as a buoy is moored by a considerable length of chain, it is able to drift about within a circle of many feet; hence Pringle, to ensure success in his search, must choose a state of the tide identical with that prevailing when the box disappeared. At

the same time, he proposed, for obvious reasons, to work at night, and preferably on a moonless one. At length he found that all these conditions were present about seven in the evening of the tenth day after his return.

Pringle, among his varied accomplishments, could handle a boat with most



"BUT, AS IF TRACING ITS DESCENT, THE MAN HUNG OVER THE SIDE."

yachtsmen; and, leaving his chambers in Furnival's Inn for a season, he took up his residence at Erith. Here, attired in yachting costume, he spent depressing hours among the forlorn and aged craft at disposal, until, lighting on a boat suited to his purpose, he promptly hired it. It was some eighteen feet long, half decked, and carried standing lug and mizzen sails; but its chief attraction to Pringle was the presence of a small cabin in the fore-peak, and to the door, as soon as he had taken possession, he fitted a hasp and staple, and secured it with a Yale padlock. His next thought was of the dredging tackle, and this he collected in

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the course of several trips to London. In the end, when the day of his enterprise dawned, two fathoms of chain, with half a dozen grapnels made fast to it, together with a twelve-fathom rope and a spare block, were all stowed safely in the fore-peak.

"Nice day for a sail, sir," remarked the boat-keeper, as Pringle walked along the landing-stage soon after two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Yes; I want to take advantage of this north-west wind." And, getting into the boat, he was rowed towards the wooden railway-pier, off which his boat lay.

"Well, I didn't think you were a gent to take advantage of anyone," chuckled the man. He had a green memory of certain judicious tips on Pringle's part, and he spoke with an eye to other favours of a like kind. Pringle smiled obligingly at the witticism, and made a further exhibition of palm-oil as they reached the yacht. Scrambling aboard he cast loose, and, hoisting the mizzen, paddled out into the stream and set the mainsail.

The tide was running strong against him, but the wind blew fairly fresh from the north-west and helped him on a steady course down the river. The sail bellied and drew, while the intermittent *cheep-cheep* from the sheet-block was answered by the continuous musical tinkle under the fore-foot. By six o'clock Pringle had got out of the narrower reaches, and it was nearly dark as he passed Tilbury. A slight mist began to steal across from the marshes, but, with a natural desire to avoid observation, he showed no light. His course was now easier, for the tide began to turn; but although he kept an intent watch for the buoy it perversely hid itself. He was just about to tack and run up stream again, concluding that he must have passed the spot, when suddenly the occulting light glimmered through the mist on his port-beam. Shooting up into the wind, he headed straight for the buoy, and as his bow almost touched it the light blazed clearly. On the way down he had rigged up the spare block on the bumpkin about a foot beyond the stern, and through it rove his twelve-fathom rope, securing it by a turn round a cleat, the two-fathom chain with the grapnels fast on the other end. And now his real work began. He heaved the chain and grapnels overboard, and began to tack to and fro and up and down upon the course he judged the *Mary Bland* had taken as she passed the buoy.

The night was chilly, and Pringle was proportionately ravenous of the cold-meat

sandwiches he had stuffed into his pockets on starting—he knew better than to reduce his temperature by the illusory glow of alcohol. It was very monotonous, this drifting with the stream and then tacking up against it, his cruising centred by the winking light; and every now and then he would shift his ground a few feet to port or starboard as the grapnel fruitlessly swept the muddy bottom. Presently, while drifting down stream, the boat lost way, and looking over the stern he saw the rope taut as steel-wire. The grapnel had caught, and in some excitement he hauled on the rope. As the hooks came in sight he saw by the intermittent flare that they were indeed fast to a chain—not the crossed chain round the specie-box, but a sequence of ten-inch stud-links, green, encrusted with acorn barnacles, and with a significant crack or two—in short, a derelict cable. Taking a turn of rope round the cleat, he hauled the links close up to the stern, and freeing them at the cost of a couple of grapnel-teeth, the cable with a sullen *chunk* dropped back to its long repose on the river-bed. But valuable time had been lost; he must avoid this spot in future. Drifting some way off, once more he flung the grapnel overboard, and then resumed his weary cruise.

Time sped, and at least two hours had passed before the boat was brought up with a jerk—the grapnel had caught this time with a vengeance. At first he hauled deliberately, then with all his power, and as the grapnel held he tugged and strained until the sweat rained *pit-a-pat* from his brow. This, he thought, could be no cable—an anchor perhaps? He took breath, then threw all his weight upon the rope, but not an inch did he gain. He was almost tempted to cut the rope and leave the grappling-iron fixed, when all at once he felt it give a little, and slowly came the rope inboard—inch by inch, hand over hand. Already was he peering for the first glimpse of the chain, when right out from the water grew a thing so startling, so unlooked for, that at the sight the rope slipped through his fingers, and it vanished. But the shock was only momentary. His was a philosophical mind, and before many feet had run overboard he was again hauling lustily. Again *the thing* jerked up—to some no doubt a terrifying spectacle; it was a boot, still covering a human foot, and lower down a second showed dimly. Coarse and roughly made, they were the trade-marks of a worker, and Pringle asked no sight of the slimy canvas, shredded and rotten,

which clung to the limbs below, to be assured that here was the victim of the tragedy whose sole witness he had been. His arms trembled with the immense strain he was putting on them, and, rousing himself, he hauled with might and main to end the task. Presently, a shapeless, bloated thing floated alongside; and when a box, securely hooked by its crossed-chains, showed clear, the sodden mass floated out to its full length, and as the rope jerked of a sudden it broke loose and floated off upon the tide. Unprepared for so abrupt a lightening of the weight, Pringle slipped and fell in the boat, and the box sank with a noisy rattle of the chain across the gunwale. In a moment he was on his feet, and, cheered by the prospect of victory, his fatigue vanished. Very soon was the chest at the surface again; then, by a mighty effort and nearly swamping the boat, he dragged it into the stern-sheets. It was a grisly relic he found within the cross-chains. Gripped hard, the arm had dislocated in the awful wrench of the accident; then later, half severed by an agency of which Pringle did not care to think, the work had finally been accomplished by the force which he had just used.

Looking away, he drew his knife, and, hacking the fingers from their death-grasp, sent the repulsive object to the depths from which he had raised it. Exhausted and breathless as he was, with characteristic caution, Pringle unshipped the block, and cutting the grapnel-chain from the rope dropped it over the side. He had just stowed the box at his feet, when a sudden concussion nearly flung him to the bottom of the boat.

"Hulloa, there, in the boat!" hailed a peremptory voice. "Why don't you show a light?"

Peeping round the lug-sail, Pringle beheld a sight the most unwelcome he could have imagined—a Board of Trade boat, with three men in it, had nearly run him down.

"I've been fishing, and lost my tackle. The night came up before I could beat up against the tide."

"Where have you come from?" inquired the steersman, an officer in charge of the boat.

"From Erith, this afternoon."

"Fishing for tobacco, likely," the other remarked, grimly. "Throw us your painter. You must come with us to Gravesend, anyhow."

Pringle went forward and threw them the painter, and stepping back made as if to

strike the lug-sail, when the officer interposed.

"Hold on there!" he exclaimed. "Keep your sail up—it'll help us against the tide."

Pringle, nothing loth, sat down behind the sail. The officer had not yet seen the box, and for the present the sail helped to conceal it. The address-letters and shipping marks were still legible on the case, and any way it was impossible for him to account for its possession legitimately. It was about nine; they would soon be at Gravesend, and once there discovery was inevitable. How on earth was he to escape from this unpleasant situation? Should he sink the box again? But the night was dark, and looking round he could see no friendly buoy or other mark by which to fix the spot in his memory.

Right ahead of them a steamer was coming down with the tide, and the officer edged away towards a large barge at anchor. Nearing her, Pringle noticed she had a dinghy streaming astern, and as they plunged into the deeper gloom she cast he had a sudden inspiration. Catching the dinghy's painter with his boat-hook, he hauled her alongside, cut the painter, and gradually drawing it in secured it to the cleat in his stern. At once the rowers felt the extra load, and the officer hailed him to trim his sheet. Swiftly making his rope fast to the box-chain, he rove the other end through the ring in the dinghy's bow and knotted it tightly; then, with every muscle taut, scarce daring to breathe in fear of a betraying stertor, he dragged the box over the stern and let the rope run out. With the box depending from her bow, the dinghy sagged along with more than half her keel out of water, and the rowers were audibly cursing the dead weight they had to pull.

"Keep her up there, will you? I'd better come aboard and teach you how to sail!" growled the officer over his shoulder.

Pringle hauled the dinghy close up, cast off her painter, and deftly clambered over her bows, which for an agonising moment were nearly awash.

"Is that better?" he shouted. And the two boats so quickly shot away from him that he barely caught the cheery answer as, freed from the incubus of dinghy, man, and specie, the escort rowed on to Gravesend.

The tide fast lengthened the space between, and Pringle drifted back until the light of the patrol-boat was lost among those ashore; then, with his slight remaining

strength, he hauled upon the rope and tumbled the box into the dinghy.

Thud-thud! thud-thud! thud-thud!

A steamer was approaching, and looking round he saw the mast-head lights of a tug with a vessel in tow. Handling the dinghy's sculls, he paddled to one side and waited. On came the tug; at the end of a long warp there followed a three-masted schooner, with an empty boat towing astern of her. As soon as the ship came level with him he pulled diagonally across, and as the boat glided by, seized her with his hand, and for a while the craft-ground and rubbed against each other in the swell as he held them side by side. But the precaution was needless: the crew of the homeward-bound were too busy looking ahead to notice anything astern. Going forward and fishing up the painter from the dinghy's bows, he crept back with it, clawing along the boat's gunwale each way, and rove it through the boat's stern-ring. As he made fast, the dinghy swung round to her place in the rear of the procession; and, settling down aft beside the precious box, Pringle was towed up stream. Gravesend was soon astern, and for the present he felt no fear of the patrol. Whether did they credit him with the feat of swimming off with some contraband object, or with merely falling overboard, they would never have suspected his presence in the dinghy that trailed behind the three-master's boat.

The voyage seemed endless, and as hour lengthened into hour he killed some time by scraping the address and stencil marks from the box. At first he thought they were bound for the Pool; but when the tug began to slow up, about two o'clock, he found they were off the Foreign Cattle Market at Deptford. The tide was now running slack, and, casting off from the boat, he rowed under the stern of a lighter at the end of a double column, all empty, judging by their height above the water; and, throwing his rope round one of the stays of her stern-post, he lay down in the dinghy to rest. Soon, wearied with his long night's labour and soothed by the ripple of the tide, as turning and running more strongly it eddied round the lighter, he dropped into an uneasy doze. A puffing and slapping noise mingled with his slumbers, and then, as three o'clock struck loudly from the market, he awoke with a start. At once he had a drowsy sense of movement; but, regarding it as a mere effect of the tide, he tried to settle some plan for the future. Any attempt to go ashore with the box at Deptford he knew

would render him suspect of smuggling, and would land him once for all in the hands of the police. Safety, then, lay up the river, and the higher the better. He was thinking of sculling out into the stream and of running up with the tide, even at the risk of being challenged by another patrol, when it suddenly struck him that the shadowy buildings on either bank were receding. He stared harder, and took a bearing between a mast and a chimney-stack, and watched them close up and then part again. There was no doubt of it—he was moving! Presently they shot under a wide span, and dimly recognising the castellated mass of the Tower Bridge he knew that fortune was playing his game for him—or, as he might perhaps have read in manuscript, had his literary agency possessed any reality, "the stars in their courses were fighting for him."

The wind had died away and the night had grown warmer, but although he could have slept fairly in the boat—indeed, would have given worlds to do so—he dared not give way to the temptation. The lighters were bound he knew not whither; he must keep awake to cast off the moment they stopped. To fight his drowsiness he turned to the box again, and spent a little time in furbishing the surface, and finally, detaching the now useless chain, he dropped it overboard.

Gradually, as bridge succeeded bridge, the sky lightened, and a glow behind told the speedy dawn. Up came the sun, while the train of lighters dived beneath a grey stone bridge, and on the left a tall verandahed tower, springing from out a small forest, coruscated in warm red and gold. Pringle started up with a shiver, exclaiming, as the gorgeous sight pictured the idea:—

Wake! for the sun, who scattered into flight

The stars before him from the field of night,

Drives night along with them from heaven, and strikes

The Sultan's Turret with a shaft of light!

Beside the tower a huge dome blazed like a gigantic arc-lamp, and shading his eyes from the glare Pringle made out the familiar lines of the palm house at Kew. This was high enough for his purpose; and while the flotilla, in the wake of a little fussy, bluff-bowed tug, sped onward, he cast off from the barge and sculled leisurely up stream. The exercise warmed him after his long spell of frigid inaction; he turned towards the Surrey bank, and skirting the grounds of the Observatory, ran ashore just beyond the

railway-bridge. A ragged object, asleep on the towing-path, woke up as the boat grounded, and mechanically scratched itself.

"Mind the boat for yer, guv'nor?"

He looked like a tramp. From his obviously impecunious condition he was not likely to be overburdened with scruples.

"Yes; but find me a cab first, and bring it as near as you can."

As the man, scenting a tip, rose with alacrity, Pringle tumbled the box on to the shingle. It now showed little trace of its adventures, was already dry upon the surface, and, clear of the markings, bore an innocent resemblance to a box of ship's cocoa.

It was nearing seven when the emissary returned.

"Keb waitin' for yer up the road by the corner there," he reported.

"Give us a hand with this box, then," said Pringle. "It's quartz, and rather heavy."

"Why, but it's that!" ejaculated the man as he lifted one end with an unwonted expenditure of muscular force.

"Now, look here," said Pringle impressively, as they reached the cab. "I shall be back about noon, and I want you to look after the boat for me till then. That will be five hours—suppose we say at two shillings each?"

The tramp's eyes glistened, and he touched his cap-peak.

"Well, here's half a sovereign." Pringle shrewdly discounted the unlikelihood of the



"'IS THAT BETTER?' HE SHOUTED" (p. 395).

man's rendering any part of the service for which he was being paid in advance.

"Right yer are, guv'nor," agreed the tramp cheerfully, and slipped towards the river-bank.

The cab, with Pringle and the box inside, had scarcely disappeared round the corner when the tramp made off at a tangent towards Kew, and was seen no more. As to the boat, with a dip and a rock as the tide rose, it floated off into the stream, and resumed its travels in the opposite direction.

