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How the "Nimble" Coaled

By A. CLARKE LITTLE.

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Five miles from Noumea lay the small British fleet: one battleship, two cruisers, and two destroyers. On the declaration of war by France three weeks before, these had been detached from the Pacific squadron with orders to engage a French fleet known to be somewhere between Australia and New Zealand, only waiting the inevitable commencing of hostilities to swoop down upon the defenseless colonies.

Nor had they far to seek for foe; for at sunrise one morning, in the Coral sea, a line of smoke was seen far away on the port bow. The course was changed a point or two, and gradually out of the distance rose ship after ship till ten were counted—great battleships, cruisers and gunboats; two each of the British. Yet when the British were distinguished and "clear for action" was signaled, a great cheer of triumph went up from each of the British.

But the Frenchmen had no taste for a general action, though the odds were all in their favor. Suddenly shifting their course they turned and ran to the southeast. A stern chase is a long chase even in these days of steam; and though the slower of the British ships applied the last possible ounce of pressure under forced draught, the foe made the best of the good start.

All day the chase lasted, and towards sunset the sandy coast line of New Caledonia stretched before the pursuers, yet never a shot had been fired. Then, in answer to a signal from the flagship, the two destroyers, "Nimble" and "Tracker," forged ahead of their slower consorts and attacked the last of the great French battleships.

Round and round the ponderous giant circled its two tiny tormentors, as it strove to beat them off with its heavy guns, one shot from which would have sent either to the bottom like a stone. Unscathed the destroyers passed through the rain of fire—their speed and size defying the vaunted gunners of France, as they scattered deadly torpedoes around the bulky foe.

Encumbered by torpedo nets, hurriedly run out under a hail of bullets from the destroyers' machine guns, the movements of the great battleship became still slower, and the two small vessels opened fire with their four-inch guns. Shot after shot found its mark and soon the enemy, blazing in half a dozen places and abandoned by her comrades now safe under cover of the batteries at Noumea, was driven ashore, a total wreck; her crew escaping in their boats.

So far the victory rested with the British, but the French fleet had escaped, with the loss of a battleship, certainly; still it lay safe in the harbor, protected by the two formidable forts on either side of the entrance.

To enter the harbor and force an engagement under the heavy guns of the shore batteries was out of the question, so to reduce these our admiral set to work. Day after day the ships circled round within two miles of the shore, firing steadily with their heavier guns at the great earthworks. Clouds of dust and great masses of earth flew into the air as shot after shot took effect, greeted by ringing cheers at first, till the slight growl so common that the British ears learnt to regard it as a natural consequence of their shooting, and only an angry growl was heard when a shot fell short or went wide of the mark.

For all the reply our fire drew, the batteries might have been abandoned. Not a gun was visible, and only when one of the more venturesome of the smaller craft stole closer in was it that the tornado of heavy shot and shell which welcomed it gave evidence that the Frenchmen were at their posts and alert.

Such damage as was done in the day was more than made good by an army of natives and convicts forced to work at night, despite an occasional shell dropped in their midst by the help of a searchlight.

Our admiral was not the man to throw away his ammunition or to wear his seamen out with unnecessary labor, so beyond such shooting as was necessary to keep them in practice, the bombardment ceased and the fleet settled down to a blockade.

Hardly was the investing line drawn out of gunfire when columns of smoke, moving over the winding channel betrayed a movement on the part of the foe. Expectation ran high as our seamen stood to their guns, and the ships drew off the shore in the hope of enticing the Frenchmen from the shelter of his batteries. But of action there was little, for after exchanging a few shots the foe once more retired to the security of the harbor.

Day by day these tactics were repeated, with the sole object of wearing the British out by the state of tension in which they lived, and exhausting their coal supply, now rapidly decreasing under the constant necessity of keeping up full steam.

Such was the state of affairs on the evening of the nineteenth day of the blockade. Lazily ships rolled in the heavy swell as officers and men gasped in the heat and languor of sunset, with its cool offshore breeze, the only respite of the four and twenty hours.

Listlessly in that idle hour the same everlasting topics were discussed by the men weary of waiting and worn with watching, yearning for action, action of any sort. Would the foe come out and fight, or would the admiral run the gauntlet of the terrible batteries and attack the Frenchmen where they lay, before his coal was exhausted? Or, dreadful prospect, would the fleet abandon the blockade and run to Sydney to recoup? Something must be done, and that quickly, too; or the coalfless fleet would be completely at the mercy of its powerful opponent.

Suddenly listlessness gave way to keen excitement, and the low murmur of sleepy conversation ceased. Men sprang to their feet, swarming to ship side and mounting every coga of vantage from which a view of the distant horizon could be gained. Something was going to happen at last! Far away, where men sea and copper sky touched, was a black cloud of smoke. It might mean anything—another French fleet, or reinforcements for our own, a dispatch boat with prompt orders to attack at once, news of the war in other parts, or letters from home.

While men watched and speculated, the growing cloud approached rapidly, heading straight for the fleet, till soon the low hull of a destroyer was clearly seen, then the British flag; and half an hour later, just as the sun set and tropical darkness fell swiftly over land and sea, it stopped a cable's length from the flagship. A few minutes later the signaling officer of the "Nimble" reported that her commander was wanted on board the flagship.

The admiral was pacing his cabin with an anxious look as the lieutenant entered,

Greeting him cordially he went straight to the point. "Mr. Joyce," he commenced, "I have just received an important dispatch which has led to my deciding on abandoning the blockade of Noumea, for a time at least. The state of affairs here must have been cabled to France before we cut the wire. It seems that the French are endeavoring to unite their various small squadrons and try conclusions nearer home.

"With this object in view, a fleet of about our own strength is making its way here to raise the blockade. Under the guns of the shore batteries, and with only one ship to three, we should have a poor chance. Now I propose to slip quietly away to-night, and try to find the relieving fleet while I have coal enough, and return here to continue the blockade; that is if the Frenchmen have not seized the opportunity to escape. Then, send each ship in turn to coal at Sydney. Do you grasp the situation?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, how to keep the French in Noumea without reducing my command to such a strength as might lead to an indecisive battle with the relieving squadron, for that must be smashed at any cost, is the difficulty.

"I propose to leave one destroyer here. From the information which I have received I think that we might be back again in three days. The probability is that the French will regard our absence as a trick to lure them away from shore, and will not come out. Should they do so, it will be the duty of the destroyer to delay them as much as possible by a bold fight. Each hour they are delayed increases my chance of dealing with the two squadrons.

"Now, it rests between you and Johnstone as to who remains, and I have given you the first chance. Of course, you miss the prospect of a general action, a brilliant opportunity for distinction."

The admiral paused for a reply, and the lieutenant weighed the chances. To continue the blockade meant being out of an important action certainly. On the other hand, Noumea, he would be left to act upon the discretion of the French, who knew very well that the speed of the "Nimble" as well as her shooting would enable her to give a good account of herself, though all the Frenchmen attempted to fight their way out.

"Thank you, sir," he replied, "as you have been good enough to give me the choice I prefer to remain here."

"Thank you. That is as I should wish it to be. Keep well out of range of the batteries, take care of your coal—I wish there were more of it—and if the Frenchmen attempt to run, trust to your speed. Hang on to their heels and delay them as much as possible. Now, good-bye!" and the bluff old sailor hurried the lieutenant out of his cabin.

In the darkness of the tropical night four British ships stole silently out to sea, whilst the little "Nimble" moved rapidly backward and forward, casting her searchlight on battery and harbor.

Three days had passed, and to the disgust of all on board the "Nimble" not a movement had the Frenchmen made. The admiral might be back at any moment with the rest of the fleet to share their laurels. But to the joy of all, next morning a great cloud of smoke hung over the channel, fed by tall moving columns that rose high in the sultry air from a score of funnels, as the foe moved slowly down in strengthening numbers.

Rapidly the "Nimble" closed towards the harbor mouth, whilst every gun on shore opened fire, churning the water around her with heavy shells, which never found the tiny mark as it flew towards the foe at thirty-four knots an hour. Unscathed the destroyer ran the gauntlet of those terrible guns, turning and twisting like a hunted hare as she advanced to give battle to a fleet.

Already the first of the Frenchmen, a ponderous battleship, had cleared the narrow channel where but one could pass at a time, and was making its way to the north, hugging the coast, with a cruiser following close in her wake. When within striking distance, the "Nimble" discharged torpedo after torpedo in rapid succession from both her tubes, now at the retreating ships, now at the head of the channel through which the other companions must pass to gain the open.

Anxious eyes on board followed their course as they sped shoreward, but whither the deadly engines went no man could tell. Suddenly, as the third ship lay between the two forts which guarded the entrance, the water under the very bows rose in a mighty column, carrying the ship with it, till for an instant it seemed to stand on end. Then, with a fearful plunge it fell, and slowly sank head first, blocking the channel. A great cheer rose from the deck of the "Nimble," as she dashed through the ring of fire which girt her, leaving six of the foe prisoners.

Though two large ships had gained the open, they showed no inclination to leave the shelter of the batteries, but opened fire from close in shore on the destroyer, which now gave them her undivided attention. In spite of the heavy fire concentrated upon her, the "Nimble" gradually closed upon them still untouched, thanks to her speed and the skillful manner in which she was handled. Her supply of torpedoes was almost exhausted, but one only had so far found its mark, and the four-inch gun, with which she replied to the fire of the foe, was powerless to penetrate their thickly-plated sides.

So the unequal battle went, till, in a lucky moment, one of the destroyer's last torpedoes grazed the stern of the battleship and carried away her steering gear. Helplessly the great vessel swerved for one fatal instant straight across the bows of her consort, which was dangerously close. A collision was inevitable, and for a moment, as if by mutual consent, the battle ceased. Then, whilst men held their breath and watched the smaller vessel struck the larger amidships with terrible force, for an instant the two hung together in the embrace of death, the bows of the one buried in the side of the other, then slowly separating commenced to sink.

Some ten feet from the bows of the cruiser were torn away. Rapidly the whole of the fore part disappeared till the stern stood straight up, the screw revolving with a sickening whirl plainly heard on board the "Nimble," which forbore to fire, for the sea was alive with dark objects—the heads of men struggling for life.

The larger ship fared little better. A few boats were filled with wounded, but panic reigned supreme on board. Over her sides swarmed the crew, and in less than five minutes she had followed her companion to the bottom, carrying the bows full of wounded still hanging to the davits.

Some few of the survivors were picked up by boats from the shore, but hundreds perished as the "Nimble" bore away from the batteries which redoubled their fire,

after the short interval of silence which followed the appalling disaster.

Well had the "Nimble" carried out her instructions. The attempt to run had cost the Frenchmen three ships. Yet on the evening of the day succeeding the glorious action, her commander sat alone in his cabin full of gloomy forebodings. The foe had lost no time in removing the obstacles which imprisoned them. In the night following the action divers had been busy at work, and in spite of the "Nimble's" fire the wreck had been blown to pieces. Once more the channel was open, and now the "Nimble" lay at the mercy of the foe, who would certainly attack when they discovered her helpless condition, as they must with the return of daylight.

Her coal bunkers were empty! "Headway for another six hours," was all that the chief engineer could promise. All that day, eager eyes had scanned the empty horizon, for the return of the admiral, who had been absent five days, was now as anxiously hoped for as it had been dreaded before the action, yet never a sign of ship had been discovered at sunrise.

An unusual silence reigned throughout the "Nimble"; that silence which is characteristic of the British bull-dog at bay, and bodes evil to his foe. All on board knew that the morrow would bring forth another battle—a battle to be fought to the bitter end against terrible odds, without the slightest hope of victory, falling the timely arrival of the admiral. Yet never a man thought for a single moment of the prospect of escape, which the loss of the coal and the darkness of the night offered.

The commander's gloomy thoughts were interrupted by a tap on the door, followed by the entry of a delicate-looking youth. Cherry was the "Nimble's" junior officer, and he possessed a pink and white complexion unchanged by months of exposure to tropical sun, which many a London belle would have envied him. But to the sensitive youth his complexion was an ever present source of distress, which had won him the name of "Cherry Blossom," amongst his gunroom comrades.

"If you please, sir," the youth began, nervously, "I have come to make a suggestion."

"Well, my boy, sit down and fire away. What is it about?"

"It's about coal, sir. I want to swim ashore and get you some. That is, if you will allow me to go."

"Buy it off the French and arrange with them not to run away or fight until the 'Nimble' has been inside and filled her bunkers? I am much obliged to you for the offer, Cherry, but I am afraid the French would not sell us any just now. Then they might keep you once they had you there, and I can't afford to lose an officer just now."

"No, sir; I propose to steal it and bring it back to the ship with me," was the unblushing reply. "I noticed a lot of barges full of coal a little way up the harbor the night the boats were looking for the cable. Now if you will let me have a boat to take me close in shore, I will swim the rest of the way and cut as many of the barges adrift as I can. The tide will carry some of them well out to sea before daylight, and the 'Nimble' can pick them up."

There was a tone of conviction in the youth's calm yet eager voice which told the commander that the desperate resource had been well thought out by the proposer, who clearly had the nerve and confidence to carry the adventure through.

That the youth might lose his life without attaining his object he realized. Still there was just the chance that a barge might cut away and prove the salvation of the "Nimble." The venture was indeed a forlorn hope, but their only chance.

"Have you thought about the sharks?" he asked, after a long pause. "They lay in wait for you, feeding on the corpses of the Frenchmen."

"Yes, sir; but if you will keep the searchlight going over the water I do not think they will touch me."

Again the commander thought. It seemed like sending the lad to certain destruction. Yet on the morrow he would probably be killed or drowned with his companions. Perhaps, though, he might be captured in the harbor and so escape the fate likely to be his lot otherwise. Then as he thought with a shudder of the "Nimble's" empty bunkers, he hesitated no longer.

A few hours later a boat left the side of the "Nimble" under cover of darkness. With muffled oars it stole silently shorewards. In the stern sat Cherry, clad in the scantiest of bathing costumes, a sharp knife and a strong file suspended from his waist.

Half a mile from shore he slipped overboard and struck out for the mouth of the harbor. Aided by the strong current which was setting in from the sea he was soon in the narrow channel. Fortunately there was no moon, and all was silent as the grave as he swam noiselessly onward, making for the point where he had seen the coal barges. Soon some black forms loomed in front, and paddling to the side of the nearest he paused to listen. All was quiet, and in another moment he had swung himself noiselessly on board.

It was full of coal and was only fastened to another similarly laden by a rope fore and aft. Passing from one to another he counted a dozen or more, each one of which might have held a hundred tons, enough to keep the "Nimble" going for another week. His heart leaped within him as he pictured even one of them floating alongside the destroyer.

With eager haste he cut loose the stern of the outermost, then crawled quietly forward to cast off in front, but whilst groping about in the dark, feeling for the moorings, the space between the barge and the next rapidly widened. The tide was still rising and the heavy stern floated out with the strong current which still set inwards. Round swung the great barge till it lay right across the stream, then slowly moving inwards brought up against another with a grinding crash that sent the young officer's heart into his mouth. Crouching low on the coal, he listened breathlessly for some minutes, but not a sound save the noise of the rising tide broke the silence of the night.

Three o'clock struck, still the tide rose. Had he miscalculated? Already each moment was precious, for the barges must be out of range of the batteries before sunrise if the coal was to be saved. It was two miles to the harbor mouth, and another three miles drift; to sea would be necessary to place them in safety. Five miles in three hours. Was the current strong enough to carry them along at such a rate?

Still the tide rose and the precious moments seemed hours to the anxious watcher. Half past three! In another half hour the gunroom would be on the move he knew; for he had often heard the distant sound of the reveille from the deck of the "Nimble." At last the tide turned, and the barge on which he sat began to drift outwards. Running forward he cut the mooring, and springing on to another thrust it out into the current with his feet, where it was lost in the darkness. One was enough for his purpose, but the night got ashore or be sunk by the guns of the battery. Moving quickly from barge to barge he cut loose half a dozen and forced them

into the stream, taking his place on the last, which he steered with a long oar.

How the other barges fared he knew not; for they had disappeared in the darkness when he slid down the channel, but at what rate he could not judge, for not an object ashore or afloat could be distinguished. With the great oar thrust over the stern, he turned the unwieldy craft broadside to the rapid current and so floated on without collision or accident.

Suddenly a bugle call rang out and was answered by others from far and near, from fort and battery, ship and camp. It was a signal. The garrison was turning out for the day's work, and he was, to judge by the martial sounds which came from all sides, still far up the harbor. Though the sun would not rise for another hour he might be distinguished at any moment. Fortunately a thick white fog covered the surface of the water, so thick that only half the length of the barge on which he stood could be seen.

Under cover of the fog the barge glided towards the sea still unobserved. But the greatest danger of all was to be faced. The narrow entrance, barely a hundred yards wide, guarded by a fort on either side, was yet to be passed. If the fog did not lift, and he kept the middle of the channel, he might still escape with his precious freight. But to keep the middle was the difficulty. Without a single object to guide him he could only trust to chance, so turning the barge round once more he drifted, oar in hand, eyes and ears strained.

Drifting silently along, a faint sound of footsteps caught his ear, and grew gradually more distinct, then a sharp order in French rang 'through the fog. The moment after a solid wall rose high on his left, towards which the barge was rapidly drifting. Another instant and it would be crashing against the side of the fort. Springing forward, he required all his strength to save it off with hands and feet. He was emptied, a party of soldiers approached the edge of the parapet directly overhead, and changed the sentry. By the light of the lantern, which one of them carried, he could see each man clearly, and gave himself up for lost. A moment later and the relief passed on, leaving only the one sentry. The man leaned on his rifle and stood silently gazing downwards, his eyes turned to the barge; but not a sign did he give that he had discovered its presence, for though he could be plainly seen at his elevated post, his eyes could not penetrate the thick white fog which lay low on the water.

Hardly daring to breathe, Cherry pressed the unwieldy craft away from the wall, while the current bore him onward. Soon to his joy the open sea was reached, and he drifted, he knew not where, still surrounded by the friendly fog.

All too soon came the dawn. With the rapidity of the tropics night gave place to day, and the sun shot upwards, rolling the fog away like a curtain. In an instant land and sea were bathed in the brilliant light of the rising sun, and with one rapid glance Cherry took in the situation.

Far out to sea, well beyond the range of the shore batteries, lay the "Nimble," motionless, without the faintest sign of smoke from her funnel, the last ounce of coal had been consumed. Between himself and the destroyer floated two dark specks; two of the coal barges he had cut adrift. The other three had probably run aground. Behind him and not a mile distant was the island, with its batteries. Hiding himself as best he could among the coal, he watched the shore with some misgiving. Nor was the feeling misplaced, for a boat appeared at the harbor mouth and came bounding towards him, propelled by four oars.

And lo! he looked towards the "Nimble." Two boats had left her side. One was heading for the nearest barge, and the other was racing towards him. He had been seen by his friends, and might even now be saved if he could but hold the enemy in check till help arrived. The French boat had not half the distance to go, and would gain his barge some minutes before the English. Meanwhile the batteries had opened fire on the two more distant ones and the British boats.

Another minute and the foe would be within striking distance. Cherry about him for some weapon. Nothing met his gaze, but the long oar with which he had steered, and the coal on which he lay. Seizing a heavy block, he sprang to the side and, raising it over his head, with both hands hurled it with all his might into the crowded boat. One of the rowers dropped his oar overboard and fell forward on his face in the bottom of the boat.

Dismayed at this unexpected attack, the rowers paused for a moment, and the boat was left as a wreck. Before Cherry had placed another of his occupants ashore to combat. But the respite was a short one, for with a yell from its crew the boat dashed alongside once more. The odds were still four to one, but the young officer had the advantage of standing some five feet above his opponents. Of this he made the most, showering down blocks of coal, as they struggled to gain a footing, with such good effect that the boat once more shoved off and made for the shore.

But now a more formidable foe entered the lists. The batteries turned their attention to the nearest barge and the boat flying to its rescue. Shot after shot struck the water about it, each coming nearer and nearer, till at last one fell in the middle of the coal and exploded, blowing the barge to pieces, and Cherry knew no more.

It was not till next day that he found himself conscious again, and in his berth on board the "Nimble." He was faint and weak and seemed to be bandaged from head to foot. A slight movement, as he attempted to turn, sent a spasm of pain shooting through his leg and forced a cry from his lips. At the cry, the surgeon who was sitting by his side, looked up.

"Ah! that's better," he said, deftly turning the patient to an easier position. "Now lie still and tell me how you feel; you youngsters have nine lives!"

"What has happened? Did the 'Nimble' get the coal?" Cherry asked eagerly.

"Well, I suppose you will not be satisfied till you know all about it. Here is the commander, and he will no doubt tell you everything. After that, mind, there is to be no more talking."

"Yes, my boy," the commander replied, as he took his hand, "thanks to you we managed to recoup; but it was touch and go for the 'Nimble' as well as for you. We saw you as soon as it was daylight, and sent one boat straight to you. It was only just in time, for the barge you were on was knocked to pieces, and you were picked up unconscious."

"The other boat picked up the other two barges and brought them alongside. Fortunately it was perfectly calm, and we managed to get most of the coal into the bunkers, which were quite empty. The Frenchmen saw our helpless position and soon came crowding round. In half an hour we had headway on the 'Nimble' once more, and so stood out to sea coaling and fighting as we went. A shell sent one of the barges to the bottom before it was half empty, but we secured all that was in the other before casting it off."

"We had drawn the Frenchman a long way off, when suddenly the admiral appeared on the scene, fresh from his victory over the relieving fleet. Two of our ships

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