

*John Solomon—
Supercargo*

By ALLAN HAWKWOOD
(Henry Bedford-Jones)

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I THE CATTLE-WHARF AT DEPTFORD

CHAPTER II JOHN SOLOMON

CHAPTER III THE ROAD TO MELINDI

CHAPTER IV WHO MURDERED HANS SCHLAK?

CHAPTER V THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

CHAPTER VI THE LADY PROFESSOR

CHAPTER VII HAMMER STARTS SOMETHING

CHAPTER VIII IN THE OPEN

CHAPTER IX HAMMER BEGINS TO SEE

CHAPTER X AT MELINDI

CHAPTER XI JOHN SOLOMON PREPARES FOR ACTION

CHAPTER XII UNDER SUSPICION

CHAPTER XIII ACCUSED AND ACCUSER

CHAPTER XIV OFF AT LAST

CHAPTER XV DR. KRAUSZ PROVES OBSTINATE

CHAPTER XVI THE PLACE OF SKULLS

CHAPTER XVII THE PIT OF ADDERS

CHAPTER XVIII "THAHABU!"

CHAPTER XIX THE "DAPHNE" AGAIN

John Solomon—Supercargo

CHAPTER I

THE CATTLE-WHARF AT DEPTFORD

Frederick L. C. Harcourt, Viscount Ratcliff, was extremely natty in his flannels, buckskins, and yachting cap, and consequently he aroused tremendous excitement, plainly being nothing more or less than a "toff" of the first water.

As he strode along the cattle-wharf at Deptford, he looked as much out of place as would a royal highness if suddenly dropped among the habitués of Sally Tucker's pub.

Nevertheless, because of the Royal Yacht Club insignia on his cap, and also because his face was very brown and square-chinned and his shoulders rather broader than most, his "sunfish" prodding the long-horns down the gangs kept their comments strictly to themselves.

Harcourt, who was strolling along in a rather aimless fashion, nodded quietly to the astonished S.P.C.A. inspector, replied to the latter's flurried greeting that it certainly was a fine day, and passed on. His dark-blue eyes settled on an ancient and dishonorable well-deck cargo tank of some three thousand tons, from which the last batch of cattle were being driven into the wharf pens.

As he passed down beneath her counter, on the edge of the wharf, his sauntering ceased rather abruptly. From somewhere came a well-directed stream of blue, evil-smelling, pipe smoke, which shot down with the wind squarely athwart his face.

Harcourt looked up to see a man, obviously a "sunfish" or cattle-boat hand, leaning lazily upon the rail above him and grinning amiably at the intruder.

Foul beyond the ordinary foulness of the bullock waiter was the man, his clothes a mere mass of tattered rags, and dirt; but there was a twinkle in his grey eyes, and his face and neck were brown and rough and muscled. His tousel of black hair was crowned by a battered felt hat, whose brim flapped at weird angles about his ears; but from brow to chin his face was aquiline, sharp, while, as he addressed the other, white teeth flashed on his pipe-stem.

"Slumming, pardner?"

Harcourt smiled, his cheeks rosy through their bronze, and something of the cool insolence that had rested in the grey eyes above him died away before his look.

"Perhaps. Come down here, my man. I'd like a word with you, don't you know."

The sunfish did not move, but sent a slow stream of smoke down the wind, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"I'm not your man," came the calm retort. "Also, I'm quite satisfied where I am. If you want a word with me you are at liberty to trot up here; but I'd advise you to take that white coat off first. I'm liable to muss it up if you get me too excited."

The Englishman stared for a moment, evidently surprised at the voice and accent of the sunfish, which held quite as much authority as did his own and which betrayed culture despite the challenging veneer of insolence.

Meanwhile, the scattered sunfish and cowpunchers took note of their visitor's stoppage and, as the last of the cattle were shoved into their pen, a little crowd collected about the gang, scenting trouble with unmingled joy. Seeing that one of their comrades had taken the burden upon his own shoulders, they encouraged him distantly.

"Don't youse take any lip off'n him, pal!"

"Tell the bleedin', bloody toff 'is pants is tore, 'Ammer!"

"Ain't his little feet pretty——"

The murmuring died away with startling abruptness, for one of the cow-punchers shouted over from the pen, with callous indifference to the feelings of the visitor;

"Shut up, you stiffs! That's his lordship what laid out the Brighton Blighter last night. I seen him do it!"

Amid the ensuing silence Harcourt flushed darkly and walked to the gangway, the men drawing back suddenly from his mild look.

Up above watched the sunfish, his grey eyes wide, for all the docks had heard the story—how the famous Brighton Blighter had encountered some toff or other in Oxford Street the previous night, and how, after some passing reference to lords and ladies, the heavy-weight champion had been knocked out cold within a minute.

So this mild-eyed, wide-shouldered yachtsman was the man, then! The sunfish quietly laid aside his pipe and stood waiting; if his invitation had been accepted in the spirit in which it had been

issued, he was like to have his work cut out for him. Harcourt, however, displayed no bellicose intention, but halted a few feet away.

"Well, now that I am here, I presume you'll grant me a few moments?"

The sunfish grinned as the blue eyes twinkled into his.

"I can spare you five minutes, my lord. I thought that perhaps you desired a sparring partner!"

"Oh, I say now!" Harcourt flushed again and was plainly ill at ease. "Just forget all that bally rot, can't you? It's too beastly——"

"Listen!"

The sunfish held up a hand, and from the wharf below a confused murmur drifted up from the gathering crowd.

"That's 'im, a talkin' to 'Ammer!"

"Aw, what youse givin' us? He didn't knock out your blamed white hope!"

"Stow that, ye flatfoot! Billy here seen it, an' that's the guy, all right!"

The sunfish grinned again at the uneasy yachtsman. "Don't be bashful, your lordship—true greatness cannot be hidden under flannels, even at Deptford, you see. Sorry to receive you in these duds, but my valet hasn't come down to the dock as yet."

A flicker of something that was not amusement flared out in the blue eyes, but it passed quickly with a chuckle.

"All right, my friend—you're the man I'm looking for! But, upon my word, I hardly expected such good luck."

"It's all yours so far," came the dry retort. "Only, if you're looking for a thug, you'll find plenty down there in the crowd." His grey eyes rested shrewdly, but laughingly, on the other.

"No, thanks very much." An appraising glance and a nod accompanied the words. "You'll do. Your name is Hammer I take it. American?"

"Stars and stripes, you bet. As to Hammer, that's not my name, but it's handle enough for this craft. 'Ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway, you know—only my cognomen is a title of distinction gained by the honest use of fists. Yours, if you have one, was probably gained through the chance of birth. I will say, though, that you're very decent-looking, for a Britisher."

"Oh, thanks very much!" The visitor seemed anything but angry, to the visible disappointment of the watching gangway; still, he very plainly was bewildered by the cultured tones of the sunfish. "Are you—er—looking for work?"

"Well, that depends on the work," returned Hammer easily, paying no heed to the outraged ship's officers, who were looking on aghast. "No yachting, thanks. Too hard to look pleasant all the time. Besides, I can't keep straight."

The other's eyes met his, unsurprised, questioning, and beneath that level gaze Hammer only kept up his truculent air with an effort. This Englishman was very likeable.

"How so, Mr. Hammer?"

"Oh, general cussedness and particular booze. Better browse along and hunt up another victim, your lordship! I like your looks, but I don't like my own—in comparison."

This rather impulsive admission had no effect on Harcourt beyond sending a stubborn glint into his blue eyes. Deliberately pausing to light a cigarette, he extended his case to the other; Hammer refused, replacing his pipe in his mouth, but this time he carefully sent the smoke downward.

"No, I'm rather keen on you, Hammer. I've been—er—browsing along, as you say, all of the morning without any success, and it's getting tiresome. As matter of fact, I came out to look for a man with a second officer's ticket, a man who could use his fists and who was willing to take a chance with me.

"Now, however, I've changed my mind. I'm not quite sure yet as to what offer I'll make you, but come up to my address in the city when you're through here—to-night, if you can. Here's my card and a tenner to act as retainer."

The astonished Hammer mechanically shoved the Bank of England note into some recess of his ragged shirt, then perused the card. He looked up with hesitation in his eyes.

"Mind, Harcourt, I've warned you that I'm no good——"

"Nonsense! If I was after a sober, respectable seaman, do you think I'd have come here looking for one? When can I expect to see you?"

"Oh, have it your own way, then!" Hammer shrugged his shoulders, resignedly. "I'll meet you say, at Prince's for dinner. Centre table, far end."

"Eh?" Harcourt's eyes opened. "You—er—but Prince's, don't you know——"

"——Doesn't go with these duds, you mean?" Hammer chuckled as he finished the other's hesitating sentence. "Never mind—you should worry, Harcourt! Much obliged for the tenner, just the same; all you have to do is to show up and see what you find. Seven-thirty suit you?"

"Very well, thanks," murmured Harcourt, and so the colloquy ended—in amused and rather interested toleration on the part of the sunfish, and in bewildered doubt on that of the Englishman.

At seven-thirty that evening Harcourt received another shock, and this time a greater one. For after he stepped into the big dining-room at Prince's and beckoned the stately head-waiter, that individual arrived with the calm information that Mr. Hammer was waiting.

"Er—you know Mr. Hammer, Bucks?"

"Quite well, sir," responded Bucks, and Harcourt followed in subdued amazement.

He was led to a table, from which a man in evening dress sprang to meet him, hand extended. For a moment the sorely-doubting Englishman did not recognize the sunfish, until he took in the hard grey eyes, the tanned features, the keen incisive lines of the face.

Then he recovered himself and went through the form of greeting stiffly; but Hammer had no intention of letting him off so easily.

"It was rather a low-down trick, wasn't it?" grinned the American cheerfully. "However, we'll have an explanation all around. Poor chap, your face was a picture this morning when I announced that we'd dine here!"

"I must apologize, of course, my dear chap," returned Harcourt ruefully; then, unable to resist the infectious humour of the other, he broke into a laugh and the incident was closed.

In truth, Cyrus Hammer was well calculated to draw a second glance, for not only did his evening clothes fit him impeccably, but he wore them with ease and grace which made him to the full as *distingué* as his aristocratic companion.

His mouth was hard, and there were lines in his face which has no place in the face of a man of twenty-eight who had lived his life well; but these were in great part redeemed by an abundance of unfailing good humour, which hid, mask-like, the hard-fisted quality of the man underneath.

Harcourt wasted no time, and no sooner was the dinner fairly begun than he plunged headlong into the subject under discussion.

"Hammer, I have a little surprise for you myself, perhaps. I told you this morning that I had changed my plans pending your acceptance of my offer to you, so there is no use in beating about the bush.

"Until a month ago I had considered myself fairly well fixed for life; then came that flurry in Wall Street which wrecked two of your big institutions.

"I woke up one morning to find myself almost a beggar, as all my funds were invested in American securities and they had

slipped down and out with a crash. My word, it was a blow! I had a few hundreds left; no more."

Hammer displayed none of the surprise he felt at this astounding revelation, but merely nodded; and after a moment, the other continued:

"Practically all that I saved out of the crash was my yacht, the *Daphne*. All my family have been sailors, don't you know, and if I hadn't been, sent down from the 'Mill'—Woolwich—years ago, I'd have been in the navy to-day. In fact, one of my proudest possessions is a Board of Trade certificate as Master.

"Well, I'd about made up my mind to sell the craft and try my luck in your bally country, when along comes an offer to charter the yacht. That gave me the idea. I say, Hammer, why couldn't I take this party out to East Africa, where they wish to go, then—er—browse around the ocean, acting as my own captain? Couldn't a chap make a decent living at that, eh?"

"Ought to," chuckled Hammer, making no secret of his interest by this time. "If you're willing to take a bit of risk once in a while, I fancy you could pick up some easy coin, and have a good time as well. But why should this party want to charter a yacht to reach East Africa with?"

"Oh, it's that big Dresden archaeological chap, Dr. Sigurd Krausz—he's sending out an expedition to dig up some beastly thing or other, and wants the *Daphne* for his own use, the field force going separately. I've not the slightest idea what he's after, but he's willing to pay well, and seems to be doing the thing on his own hook instead of working for any museum.

"But let's get down to business, Hammer. I've been thinking this over, and since I am frankly down and out, as you Americans would say, I've no notion of depending on myself alone. I'm a pretty good character-reader, Hammer, and I liked you at first sight or I wouldn't make this offer. Other things being equal, how would you like to take a junior partnership in the *Daphne*?"

Hammer looked at him silently, wondering if the man meant what he said. But the other was plainly in earnest, and, moreover, Hammer thought that he had seldom met a man to whom he was so attracted. That the liking was mutual there seemed to be no doubt; but would it last?

"I don't know," he returned slowly. "I'm no sailor, for one thing—I'm a cattle-boat hand, and nothing else. I can't see where I'd be any good."

"No matter," declared Harcourt impatiently. "You could soon pick up navigation; for that matter, there are plenty of men in command of craft without proper license. However, I'm not figuring on you as a sailor. I can do that, but I don't know a bally thing about business. You could handle the business end of everything and gradually work into handling the ship; she'd be my property, of course, but we'd share even on what we made."

"Go slow now," and Hammer laughed quietly while the waiter hovered about them. Then, when they were once more alone, he went on: "Better let me spin you my yarn first, then see how far you'd be willing to trust me."

Hammer's real name was Cyrus Murray, and until three years before this time he had been engaged in a profitable brokerage business in New York City. Alone in the world, he had made his

own way, and in the course of its making he had contracted a hasty and ill-advised marriage with a girl who was in no way fitted to be his wife.

It was a sordid little tragedy, by no means uncommon in American life of to-day; but, unfortunately for Murray, his wife had been the first to discover that it was a tragedy.

He glossed over this portion of the tale in its telling, merely stating that he had allowed her to obtain a divorce, and had turned over to her the greater part of his worldly goods; but he had been hard hit by the entire affair.

Impulsively, he had thrown his business overboard, and one night, in reckless desperation, he sought shelter from his thoughts by shipping aboard a cattle-boat. Curiously enough, before he reached Liverpool he had found that in spite of the terribly rough life, in spite of the almost daily battles for existence into which his very appearance and manner flung him, the hard physical labour and the tortured weariness of his body was a relief to his mind. Then the liquor.

So for three years he had been traversing the Atlantic, working hard, fighting hard, drinking hard; his ambition was destroying; he took savage zest in bullying the thugs and degenerates who were his companions in misfortune, and he had thought himself fairly content at the level to which he had sunk.

Upon each arrival in England he made a practise of going to London and living like a gentleman for a week or two—for he had still some money left—until the life became unbearable to him, and back he would go to his cattle-boats and human cattle.

"There's the whole thing," he concluded with a bitter smile. "A fool paying for his folly, that's all. Still want me?"

"Yes," came the quiet answer. "I think we're well mated, Hammer; but, to make sure, suppose we make this a trial cruise together. You'll never find any ambition aboard a bally cattle-boat, that's sure, and you might better go to hell decently, if you're bound to go.

"However, you're a real man, and I like you. My offer stands; only, don't you know, I want your word that you won't drink while you're with me. I mean—er—well, drinking in a beastly fashion—"

"I get you, old man," chuckled Hammer quickly. "Suppose we put it that I can drink as much as you do, but no more, eh? All right, then—but I've really no great inclination for drink in itself. You have my word of honour, such as it is—and here's a toast in coffee to the *Daphne* and the daffy Dutchman!"

"Done!" cried Harcourt in undisguised delight, but as he raised his cup Bucks approached with a whispered word and a card. Harcourt frowned, glancing at the latter.

"John Solomon'—who the devil is John Solomon? Who is he, Bucks?"

"A rather queer *person*, sir," replied the head-waiter sagely. "I might let him wait in a private room, sir!"

"All right, do so. We'll be out in a moment—confounded nuisance! How did the fellow come to look me up here? By Jove, Hammer, the unmitigated insolence of some——"

"Cool off," laughed the American. "Here, have another cigarette before we go, and we can investigate your friend after we finish. Funny name, John Solomon!"

CHAPTER II

JOHN SOLOMON

Since Hammer had an inveterate dislike of fat men in general, and blue-eyed fat men in particular—born out of his experience with a fat and demented Swede cook on his first cattle-boat trip—it was not to be wondered at that he eyed John Solomon with no great favour in his heart. For John Solomon was fat and blue-eyed.

"Pudgy" would be a better word than the flat and misleading "fat". Pudgy embraces the face that a man is not merely fat, but that he is filled to a comfortable completeness, as it were; that he is not too fat to move about, but just enough so to be dignified on occasion; and that his expression is cheerful above all else.

Save for this last item, the description fitted John Solomon to a dot, for while his face was cheerful enough, it was as totally devoid of expression as a face can be—and still remain a face.

He was a short, little man, not more than five feet six, very decently dressed in blue serge, and he sat quite contentedly filling a short clay pipe from a whittled plug as Hammer and Harcourt entered the private room.

When he glanced up and rose to meet them, the first thing Hammer noticed was that healthy-looking yet expressionless face, from which gazed out two eyes of pale blue and of great size.

As he came to learn later, Nature had endowed John Solomon with absolutely stolid features, but in compensation had given him eyes which could be rendered unusually intelligent at times.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

