

The Sea Scourge

CHAPTER XX.—(Continued.)

It was late on the following morning when the stranger awoke. He found that he had slept long and soundly; but that was no wonder, for he had been very much fatigued when he went to bed. He did not feel so much refreshed as one might have expected from such a deep sleep; he felt a sort of lassitude—a dull, leaden feeling. Yet many people feel so after a very hard sleep induced by excessive exercise. When James Fox reached the hall he found that breakfast was not ready, for Laroon himself was not yet up.

The morning was bright and beautiful, and the atmosphere, purified by the late storm, now dwelt upon the scene loaded with the grateful incense of a thousand sweet shrubs and flowers. The guest saw the garden from one of the back windows of the hall, and he resolved to walk out there and sniff up the fresh air, feeling sure that it would start up his blood and quicken his senses. So to the garden he went, and he was not disappointed in the effects. He had walked some dozen times up and down the main path when he heard light footsteps near him, and on turning he saw the same bright-eyed girl whom he had seen so attentive to Mary, and whom he had heard her call Oteheva. The girl came close to him, and then having cast a quick glance about her, she said, in a low whisper:

"You are going to Lopez Garonne's to-day?"

"I had thought of it," returned Fox, with some surprise.

"Go—go. Go this forenoon," said Oteheva, "for Marl Laroon seeks your life. He entered your room last night, and laid your bosom bare. He gazed upon it, and then all his doubts were removed."

"But I locked every door."

"There were some doors you could not lock. You were put in that chamber on purpose for the use of its secret doors, and the woman who gave you drink last night put a sleeping potion in it."

"Ah, then Laroon knows me—and well he might if he saw that mark, for he put it there himself. But how do you know he means to take my life?"

The girl smiled faintly, and then related all the conversation she had heard between the captain and Warda, only leaving out what related to herself.

"And now," continued the girl, "you see you must go to the other estate, and you must take the guide, too, for if you do not, they will contrive some other means for your death, of which you may have no warning; and hence you would be likely to fall without the power of defending yourself."

The man understood it all, and after a few moments' thought, he said:

"I shall certainly do as you advise, but tell me why you have taken such an interest in my behalf. You never saw me before."

"Paul and Mary have been my friends, sir; and at this moment I would lay down my poor life for them."

"But what have I to do with them?" asked the stranger, somewhat moved, and eying the young girl sharply.

"You do not need instruction on that point from me, sir. I am not blind!"

James Fox knew very well that his secret had been penetrated by the dark-skinned girl. He watched her calm countenance for a few moments, and then he asked:

"Does Mary or Paul know what you know of me?"

"No, sir. You can see that they both feel drawn toward you, but wonder and curiosity take precedence of all other ideas with them," she replied. "Hark! They are calling to breakfast. Go you in and I will follow afterward. Do not speak to me again. Do not even look at me. Look to your pistols in secret, and mind that Warda rides not behind you on the way. You will know the ravine when you come to it, and there your guide will do the deed if you let him."

Thus speaking, the girl glided away; and Fox, as soon as he was sure his face was calm, returned to the house. He found the morning's meal prepared and his host was up to receive him. Never was Marl Laroon more kind and cordial in his manner. He embraced his guest cordially and expatiated upon the beauty of the morning.

Paul and Mary were also there, and the young man still manifested the same anxious curiosity that had marked his manner on the previous evening. He gazed into the stranger's face and he wondered if Laroon had told him the truth when he said this could only be a man who had once lived near him. But he had no opportunity to question the stranger, for Laroon did not once leave him after breakfast.

The pirate captain meant that no conversation should be held that he did not hear, and for the present he succeeded. Mr. Fox manifested a desire several times to speak a few words in private with the youth and maiden, but he did not find an opportunity. Once he had a single moment whilst he stood by the side of Mary, and he whispered:

"Can you trust that young, beautiful girl, Oteheva?"

"With my very life and soul!" quickly responded Mary.

"Then I shall not only accept your offer, but your man shall be amply rewarded," replied Fox, as he prepared to go.

CHAPTER XXI.

It was nearly 11 o'clock when the stranger set out on his way to the upper estate. He had carefully loaded his pistols. His guide was a finely built, muscular fellow, not more than 25 years of age, and showing in his countenance a goodly share of intelligence and cunning. Marl Laroon wished his guest a prosperous journey. For some distance Mr. Fox and his guide rode side by side, and though Fox tried to engage the fellow in conversation, he found it extremely difficult to get much out of him. He was not surly nor clownish, but he appeared to be diffident, and at times he manifested a desire to be wholly silent, even when the most simple questions were asked.

"The path seems perfectly plain," said the gentleman, after they had ridden some three miles along a wide cart road. "It is different after we pass the ravine," returned Warda, unintentionally laying a peculiar stress upon the last word.

It was a beautiful ride, for the path ran along upon the river's bank, and the foliage was lovely in the extreme. Yet the traveler did not find much time to enjoy it, for his mind was busy in another quarter. Sometimes the road took a curve away from the river to avoid the high bluffs which overtopped the bank; and at length Fox saw, at some distance ahead, a bluff higher than the others, and from the nature of the place he concluded that it must be the spot where he was to be put out of the way. If he had any doubts on this point they were soon removed, for the guide began to show signs of anxiety, though they were so well guarded that a person might never have detected them without some prepossessed clue to them.

"You see that high bluff?" he said, pointing to the place in question. "The ravine of which I spoke lies just beyond. The path after that is very blind."

"Ah! Then I am glad you have come with me, for it is not very pleasant to lose one's way in such woods."

Finally the place was approached, and Fox could see most of its peculiarities. Toward the river the rocks were piled up as by some mighty convulsion, while to the left was a deep gorge, over which ran a sort of natural bridge of rock. Just as they reached this point the guide uttered an exclamation of dissatisfaction.

"Bah! My saddle girth has broken," he said. "You ride on, sir, and I will follow you as soon as I have fixed it."

Fox was now behind his guide, and as he saw the fellow slip from the saddle he drew up his own horse. His first impulse was to cast his eyes over the strange, wild scene ahead. The ravine was very deep, with rough, jagged sides, and with a bottom of huge rocks, over which the torrent was evidently wont to dash during the season of heavy rains and freshets. But the most peculiar feature of all was a wide, naturally arched tunnel which extended through the bottom of the bluff to the river. The path was very narrow, not wide enough for a cart, all articles which needed transportation being generally carried by pack mules, though the most common mode of transportation was by the river.

The path upon the shelf or bridge of rock was not over four feet wide in any place, and certainly a hundred yards in length, while the gorge extended away to the left until it became lost in the distant forest.

"Come," uttered the guide, somewhat impatiently, "ride on and I will soon overtake you."

"It is not proper for the guided party to ride ahead of the guide," replied Fox, carelessly, having first seen that his pistols were at hand.

"But you had better ride on now," urged the guide, "for you have no time to lose."

"I am in no hurry."

"Then we will ride faster when we get started again."

Warda was not only perplexed, but much agitated. He found that the stranger's eyes were steadily upon him, and his every movement was watched. But soon he seemed to gain confidence, and with a steadier hand he patched the girth with a thong where he had himself cut it, and in a few moments more he was in his saddle.

"Now you may ride on," he said, "for my horse is not safe with another behind him. He will not go over with the sounds of hoofs in his ear."

"Then," replied Fox, who could not help smiling at the fellow's quaint ingenuity, "I will not start until you are across. Now if you are in a hurry, move."

This last sentence was spoken sharply, and the fellow started on. Fox waited until he had gained the opposite side, and then he followed him. When the traveler reached the spot where his guide stood, the latter rode on ahead at a brisk trot, and Fox followed at a respectful distance. Soon the gentleman saw Warda place his hand in his bosom, and when he withdrew it he had a pistol in it. Warda supposed he had accomplished this without being noticed. On the next instant Fox heard a sharp click, click, and from the way in which the fellow's right elbow was bent he knew that the weapon was ready for firing. Fox drew his own pistol, and held it beneath the skirt of his frock, by bringing the skirt up over the saddle bow.

Suddenly Warda drew in his horse by a powerful movement, and quickly changing his pistol into his left hand, he cried out, in a wild, strange voice, at the same time pointing off over the river:

"See here! See there!"

James Fox had seen the whole process, and he knew full well that if he did not act promptly he would have a bullet through his head before he could prevent it. He waited until he saw the guide reach back with his right hand for the pistol, and then he knew the crisis had come. It was hard to take the life of a fellow, but now he had his choice—to fall by the hands of an assassin, and thus leave the villain to do more murder, while at the same time a still darker villain would be left behind with a defenseless maiden in his grasp—or to save his own life, and thus live to accomplish a work which justice and mercy and love demanded at his hands. These thoughts flashed through his mind like lightning, and on the next instant his course was clear.

"Look! Look!" cried the guide. Fox saw the villain's finger now upon the trigger of his pistol. With a firm hand he drew in his rein, and as his horse settled back he quickly brought his own pistol to within a yard of the assassin's head and fired. The guide's horse bounded forward at the sound of the report, and Warda was thrown upon the ground. He had uttered no cry, for the ball had passed through his brain, and the force of the concussion, even without the ball, would have stunned him for a while.

James Fox hastily dismounted and stooped over the prostrate guide, but life was extinct, and after dragging the body out from the path, so that his horse could pass freely along, he remounted and rode along, taking no notice of the guide's horse, which had now stopped as though waiting for its rider.

Toward the middle of the forenoon, Marl Laroon began to look for his slave who had been sent to guide James Fox; but the hours passed away until night-fall, and he did not come. The buccaneer now became uneasy, and sent off two of his most trusty men to hunt Warda up if possible. These two took their horses, and they were directed to follow the path to Lopez Garonne's, and look carefully for the missing man.

"Be sure and examine well about the great bluff and ravine," said Marl, in conclusion, "for there is a dangerous place. Hasten, now."

Half an hour after the negroes had gone, the buccaneer was in the great hall pacing up and down the paved floor. The sun was near setting, and the shadows were now lengthened out till they became lost in the distance. Suddenly Marl heard an alarm at the gate, and soon afterward he was informed that one of the men from the brig would see him. Of course, he gave orders for the man to be admitted, and he waited in the hall for him. Ere long he heard a heavy step on the veranda, and he started with a quick emotion as the sound fell upon his ear, for there was but one man who walked with that unequal thump, and that man he had supposed to be in prison. But his queries were soon stopped, for the hall door was thrown open, and the maimed form of Buffo Burnington appeared upon the threshold.

"What! Buffo!" cried Marl, starting forward and grasping the newcomer by the hand. "Are you at liberty?"

"I am."

"And the rest?"

"Where I left 'em, I suppose—in prison. I have escaped. But I have set a ball in motion in Nagasaki, and they will be out ere long."

"Good, Buffo! You shall be rewarded for this. We'll have supper in a short time, and then you shall eat with the rest of us. Have you been on board the brig?"

"No. I struck the path which I thought would bring me there; but I was mistaken, for it brought me out here."

"All right. Sit down now and rest." Accordingly Buffo sat down upon one of the long stone benches which were stationary fixtures in the hall, while Marl went away to hurry on the supper. In fifteen minutes after this the lame sailor was informed that the meal was ready, and he followed Laroon into the supper room. Paul was there, and he started back in surprise as he saw the dark, strange man.

Mary's first impulse, as she gazed into those repulsive features, was one of fear and disgust; but that feeling quickly passed away, and as she next met his gaze there was a soft, strange light in that single eye that completely disarmed her of her fear. She remembered how she had been once fascinated by that gaze when she had reposed in those stout arms, and she remembered how he had spoken to her. She could even now feel the thrill that went leaping through her soul as those incoherent words fell upon her ear. And the longer she gazed the more did she become used to his deformities, and the less repulsive did they appear.

And Paul, too, was strangely worked upon. Surely Buffo Burnington had betrayed him; but might he not have had some powerful reason for it? One thing was sure; argue with himself as he would, there was a strange spirit in his soul which yearned toward that dark man.

(To be continued.)

Not to Be Wasted.

Mr. Bascomb was as firm about politics as about everything else; he made a boast that nobody could change his views when once they were formed, and it was true.

"But, father, suppose they don't even suggest having 'Liph Godding for representative?" pleaded Mr. Bascomb's son, after a painful half-hour of argument. "I don't believe anybody but you has thought of him."

"If they don't have 'Liph Godding for representative," said Mr. Bascomb, calmly, "I shall winter my vote, that's all."

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All fixtures and property of the house should be treated with the greatest care; the first scratch paves the way for carelessness.

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Know the value of a good personal appearance; do not think that any detail of your attire will escape notice.

Spend wisely your spare time; count every hour golden, every moment an opportunity; don't waste a minute at any time.

Avoid being influenced for the wrong by other persons; have a purpose of your own; weigh counsel, but act from your own best thought.

Cultivate a happy expression and a happy manner; feel it; mean it; the advantage is wonderful in every way.

Learn to ask such questions as will draw out the most profitable information.

Let every effort be toward the idea of permanence; do things to last; make the casual customer a permanent one through satisfaction.

Salesmanship may be made a profession, and receive the same degree of respect accorded to an artist of any class. Be emphatically unwilling to ask or receive favors from any person who expects a return in business favors.

The great majority of errors are made through carelessness. Learn to care; be exact; strive to have it absolutely right—making a mistake in business is like falling down in a foot race; it is a set back.

Cultivate a good, clear, legible handwriting; many people judge quickly on this point; a good hand is always appreciated.

However attached to your business, do not allow the commercial to deaden, but rather to quicken, the moral, artistic and all wholesome sentiments.

In giving orders give reasons, but teaching subordinates to think for themselves.

Learn to show a thorough interest in a customer or any person approaching you; try to look at the matter from his standpoint as well as your own.

Make memoranda of little points while you think them; run over the various subdivisions of your work to recall any points you may have forgotten.

A good deed is never lost; he who sows courtesy reaps friendship and he who plants kindness gathers love.—Basil.

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