

A SET OF ROGUES.

BY FRANK BARRETT AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT HESPER" "RECOLLECTING VENGEANCE" "OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH" ETC. ETC.

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(Continued from last week.)

And now, being in the month of June, and our year of exile (as it liked us to call it) nigh at an end, Dawson one night put the question to Don Sanchez, which had kept us fluttering in painful suspense these past three months, whether he had saved sufficient by his labors to enable us to return to England ere long.

"Yes," says he gravely, at which we did all leave one long sigh of relief. "I learn that a convoy of English ships is about to sail from Alicante in the beginning of July, and if we are happy enough to find a favorable opportunity we will certainly embark in one of them."

"Pray, senior," says I, "what may that opportunity be, for 'tis but three days' march hence to Alicante, and we may do it with a light foot in two?"

"The opportunity I speak of," answers he, "is the arrival, from Algeria, of a company of pirates, whose good service I hope to engage in putting us aboard an English ship under a flag of truce as redeemed slaves from Barbary."

"Pirates!" cry we in a low breath. "What, senior?" adds Dawson. "Are we to trust ourselves to the mercy and honesty of Barbary pirates on the open sea?"

"I would rather trust to their honesty," answers the don, dropping his voice that he might not be heard by Moll, who was leading home the goats, "than to the mercy of an English judge, if we should be brought to trial with insufficient evidence to support our story."

Jack and I stared at each other aghast at this talk of trial, which had never once entered into our reckoning of probabilities.

"If I know aught of my fellow men," continues the don surely and slowly, "that grasping steward will not yield up his trust before he has made searching inquiry into Moll's claim, and she her part never so well. We cannot refuse to give him the name of the ship that brought us home, and, learning that we embarked at Alicante, jealous suspicion may lead him to seek further information there, with what result?"

"Why, we may be blown with a vengeance, if he come ferreting so nigh as that," says Dawson, "and we are like to rot in jail for our pains."

"You may choose to run that risk; I will not," says the don.

"Nor I either," says Dawson, "and God forgive me for overlooking such a peril to my Moll. But do tell me plainly, senior, granting these pirates be the most honest thieves in the world, is there no other risk to fear?"

The don hunched his shoulders.

"Life itself is a game," says he, "in which the meanest stroke may not be won without some risk; but, played as I direct, the odds are in our favor. Picked up at sea from an Algerine boat, who shall deny our story when the evidence against us lies there," laying his hand out toward the south, "where no man in England dare venture to seek it?"

"Why, to be sure," says Dawson; "that way all hazards together to a nicety. For only a wizard could dream of coming hither for our undoing."

"For the rest," continues the don thoughtfully, "there is little to fear. Judith Godwin has eyes the color of Moll's, and in all else Simon must expect to find a change since he last saw his master's daughter. They were in Italy three years. That would make Judith a lisping child when she left England. He must look to find her altered. Why," adds he in a more gentle voice, as if moved by some inner feeling of affection and admiration, nodding toward Moll, "see how she has changed in this little while. I should not know her for the raw, half starved spindle of a thing she was when I saw her first praying in the barn at Tottenham Cross."

Looking at her now (browsing the goats among my most cherished herbs), I was struck also by this fact, which, living with her day by day, had slipped my observation somewhat. She was no longer a gaunt, ungainly child, but a young woman, well proportioned, with a rounded cheek and chin, brown tinted by the sun, and, to my mind, more beautiful than any of their vaunted Moorish women. But, indeed, in this country all things do mature quickly, and 'twas less surprising in her case because her growth had been checked before by privation and hardship, and since our coming hither it had been aided by easy circumstances and good living.

CHAPTER XIV.

On the third day of July, all things falling in pat with the don's design, we bade farewell to Elche, Dawson and I with no sort of regret, but Moll in tears at parting from those friends she had grown to love very heartily. And these friends would each have her take away something for a keepsake, such as rings to wear on her arms and on her ankles (as is the Moorish fashion), silk shawls, etc., so that she had quite a large present of finery to carry away, but we had nothing whatever but the clothes we stood in, and they of the scantiest, being simply long shirts and "burnouses" such as common Moors wear. For the wise don would let us take naught that might betray our sojourn in Spain, making us even change our boots for wooden sandals, he himself being arrayed no

better than we. Not was this the only charge insisted on by our governor, for on Dawson bidding Moll in a surly tone to give over a shedding of tears, Don Sanchez turns upon him, and says he:

"It is time to rehearse the parts we are to play. From this day forth your daughter is Mistress Judith Godwin, you are Captain Robert Evans, and you" (to me), "Mr. Hopkins, the merchant. Let us each play our part with care, that we do not betray ourselves by a slip in a moment of unforeseen danger."

"You are in the right, senior," answers Jack, "for I doubt it must be a hard task to forget that Mistress Judith is my daughter as it is for a loving father to hold from chiding of his own flesh and blood. So I pray you, madam" (to Moll), "bear that in mind and vex me no more."

We lay this lesson seriously to heart, Dawson and I, for the don's hint that we might end our career in jail did still rankle wondrously in our minds. And so, very soberly, we went out of the forest of Elche on mules lent us by Sidi ben Ahmed, with a long cavalcade of mules charged with merchandise for embarking on board the pirates' vessel and an escort of some half dozen fierce looking corsairs armed with long firelocks and a great store of awesome crooked knives stuck in their waistcloths.

After journeying across the plain we came about midday to the seaboard, and there we spied lying in a sheltered bay a long galley with three masts, each dressed with a single cross spar for carrying a leg of mutton sail, and on the shore a couple of ship's boats with a company of men waiting to transport our goods and us aboard. And here our hearts quaked a bit at the thought of trusting ourselves in the hands of these same murderous looking pirates. Nevertheless, when our time came we got us into their boat, recommending ourselves very heartily to God's mercy, and so were rowed out to the galley, where we were very civilly received by an old Moor with a white beard, who seemed well acquainted with Don Sanchez. Then the merchandise being all aboard and the anchor up the men went to their oars, a dozen of each side, and rowed us out of the bay until, catching a little wind of air, the sails were run up, and we put out to sea very bravely.

"Senior," says Dawson, "I know not how I am to play this part of a sea captain when we are sent on board an English ship, for if they ask me any questions on this business of navigating I am done for a certainty."

"Rest easy on that score, Evans," replies the don. "I will answer for you, for I see very clearly by your complexion that you will soon be past answering them yourself."

And this forecast was quickly verified, for ere the galley had dipped a dozen times to the waves poor Dawson was laid low with a most horrid sickness like any dying man.

By sundown we sighted the island of Maggioro, and in the roads there we out anchor for the night, setting sail again at daybreak, and in this latitude we beat up and down a day and a night without seeing any sail, but on the morning of the third day a fleet of five big ships appeared to the eastward, and shifting our course we bore down upon them with amazing swiftness. Then when we were near enough to the foremost to see her English flag and the men aboard standing to their deck guns for a defense, our old Moor fires a gun in the air, takes in his sails and runs up a great white flag for a sign of peace.

And now with shrewd haste a boat was lowered, and we were set in it with a pair of oars, and the old pirate, bidding us farewell in his tongue, clapped on all sail and stood out before the wind, leaving us there to shift for ourselves. Don Sanchez took one oar and I t'other—Dawson lying in the bottom and not able to move a hand to save his life—

and Moll held the tiller, and so we pulled with all our force, crying out now and then for fear we should not be seen, till by God's providence we came alongside the Talbot of London and were presently hoisted aboard without mishap.

Then the captain of the Talbot and his officers, gathering about us, were mighty curious to know our story, and Don Sanchez very briefly told how we had gone in the Red Rose of Bristol to redeem two ladies from slavery; how we had found but one of these ladies living (at this Moll buries her face in her hands as if stricken with grief); how, on the eve of our departure, some of our crew in a drunken frolic had drowned a Turk of Algier, for which we were condemned by their court to pay an indemnity far and away beyond our means; how they then made this a pretext to seize our things, though we were properly furnished with the duke's pass, and hold our men in bond, and how, having plundered us of all we had, and seeing there was no more to be got, they did offer us our freedom for a written quitance of all they had taken for their justification if ever they should be brought to court, and finally how, accepting of these conditions, we were shipped aboard their galley with nothing in the world but a few trifles, begged by Mistress Judith in remembrance of her mother.

This story was accepted without any demur; nay, Captain Balcock, being one of those men who must ever appear

to know all things, suggested many doubtful particulars, saying that he remembered the Rose of Bristol quite well; that he himself had seen a whole ship's crew sold into slavery for no greater offense than breaking a mosque window; that the duke's pass counted for nothing with these Turks; that he knew the galley we were brought in as well as he knew Paul's church, having chased it a dozen times, yet never got within gunshot for her swift sailing, etc., which did much content us to hear. But the officers were mighty curious to know what ailed Captain Robert Evans (meaning Dawson), fearing he might be ill of the plague. However, on the don's vowing that he was only sick of a surfeit, Captain Balcock declared he had guessed it the moment he clapped eyes on him, as he himself had been taken of the same complaint with only eating a dish of pease pudding.

Nevertheless he ordered the sick man to be laid in a part of the ship farthest from his quarters, and so great was the dread of pestilence aboard that (as his sickness continued) not a soul would venture near him during the whole voyage except ourselves, which also fell in very well with our wishes. And so after a fairly prosperous voyage we came up the Thames to Chatham the third day of August.

We had been provided with some rough seamen's clothes for our better covering on the voyage, but now, being landed and lodged in the Crown inn at Chatham, Don Sanchez would have the captain take them all back.

"But," says he, "if you will do us yet another favor, captain, will you suffer one of your men to carry a letter to Mistress Godwin's steward at Chiselhurst, that he may come hither to relieve us from our present straits?"

"Aye," answers he, "I will take the letter gladly myself, for nothing pleases me better than a ramble in the country where I was born and bred."

So Moll writes a letter at once to Simon, bidding him come at once to her relief, and Captain Balcock, after carefully inquiring his way to this place he knew so well (as he would have us believe), starts off with it, accompanied by his boatswain, a good natured kind of lickspittle, who never failed to back up his captain's assertions, which again was to our great advantage, for Simon would thus learn our story from his lips, and be given no room to doubt its veracity.

As soon as these two were out of the house Dawson, who had been carried from the ship and laid in bed, though as hale since we passed the Goodwins as ever he was in his life, sprang up, and declared he would go to bed no more for all the fortunes in the world till he had supped on roast pork and onions—this being a dish he greatly loved, but not to be had at Elche, because the Moors by their religion forbid the use of swine's flesh—and seeing him very determined on this head, Don Sanchez ordered a leg of pork to be served in our chamber, whereof Dawson did eat such a prodigious quantity, and drank therewith such a vast quantity of strong ale (which he protested was the only liquor an Englishman could drink with any satisfaction), that in the night he was seized with most severe cramp in his stomach.

This gave us the occasion to send for a doctor in the morning, who, learning that Jack had been ill ever since we left Barbary, and not understanding his present complaint, pulled a very long face, and, declaring his case was very critical, bled him copiously, forbade him to leave his bed for another fortnight and sent him in half a dozen bottles of physic. About midday he returns, and, finding his patient no better, administers a bolus, and while we are all standing about the bed, and Dawson the color of death, and groaning betwixt the nausea of the drug he had swallowed and the cramp in his inwards, in comes our Captain Balcock and the little steward.

"There!" cries he, turning on Simon, "did not I tell you that my old friend Evans lay at death's door with the treatment he hath received of these Barbary pirates? Now will you be putting us off with your doubts and your questionings? Shall I have up my ship's company to testify to the truth of my history? Look you, madam" (to Moll), "we had all the trouble in the world to make this steward of yours do your bidding, but he should have come though we had to bring him by the neck and heels, and a pox to him—saving your presence."

"But this is not Simon," says Moll, with a pretty air of innocence. "I seem to remember Simon a bigger man than he."

"You must consider, madam," says Don Sanchez, "that then you were very small, scarce higher than his waist maybe, and so you would have to look up into his face."

"I did not think of that. And are you really Simon who used to scold me for plucking fruit?"

"Yea, verily," answers he. "Doubt it not, for thou also hast changed beyond conception. And so it hath come to pass," he adds, staring round at us in our Moorish garb like one bewildered. "And thou art my mistress now," turning again to Moll.

"Alas!" says she, bowing her head and covering her eyes with her hand. "Hast I told you so, unbelieving Jew Quaker!" growls Captain Balcock in exasperation. "Why will you plague the unhappy lady with her loss?"

"We will have Evans to reprove," says Moll, brushing her eyes and turning to the door. "You will save his life, doctor, for he has given me mine."

The doctor vowed he would, if bleeding and boluses could make him whole, and so, leaving him with poor groaning Dawson, we went into the next chamber. And there Captain Balcock was for taking his leave, but Moll, detaining him, says:

"We owe you something more than gratitude—we have put you to much expense."

"Nay," cries he. "I will take naught for doing a common act of mercy"

"You shall not be denied the puz generosity," says she, with a sweet grace. "But you must suffer me to give your ship's company some token of my gratitude." Then, turning to Simon with an air of authority, she says, "Simon, I have no money."

The poor man fumbled in his pocket, and bringing out a purse laid it open, showing some four or five pieces of silver and one of gold, which he hastily covered with his hand.

"I see you have not enough," says Moll, and taking up a pen she quickly wrote some words on a piece of paper, signing it "Judith Godwin." Then, showing it to Simon, she says, "You will pay this when it is presented to you," and therewith she folds it and places it in the captain's hand, bidding him farewell in a pretty speech.

"A hundred pounds! a hundred pounds!" gasps Simon under his breath, in an agony, and clutching up his purse to his breast.

"I am astonished," says Moll, returning from the door and addressing Simon, with a frown upon her brow, "that you are not better furnished to supply my wants, knowing by my letter how I stand."

"Mistress," replies he humbly, "here is all I could raise upon such sudden notice," laying his purse before her.

"What is this?" cries she, emptying the contents upon the table. "This nothing. Here is barely sufficient to pay for our accommodation in this inn. Where is the money to discharge my debt to these friends who have lost all in saving me? You were given timely notice of their purpose."

"Pray then be patient with me, gentle mistress. This true, I knew of their intent, but they were to have returned in six months, and when they came not at the end of the year I did truly give up all for lost, and so I made a fresh investment of your fortune, laying it out all in life bonds and houses, to great worldly advantage, as you shall see in good time. Ere long I may get in some rents."

"And in the meanwhile are we to stay in this plight—to beg for charity?" asks Moll indignantly.

"Nay, mistress. Doubtless for your present wants this kind merchant friend"

"We have lost all," says I, "Evans his ship and I the lading in which all my capital was embarked."

"And I every maravedi I possessed," adds the don.

"And had they not," cries Moll, "were they possessed now of all they had, think you that I with an estate, as I am told, of £60,000 would add to the debt I owe them by one single penny?"

"If I may speak in your steward's defense, madam," says I, "I would point out that the richest estate is not always readily converted into money. 'Tis like a rich jewel which the owner, though he be starving, must hold till he find a market."

"Thee hearest him, mistress," cries Simon in delight. "A man of business—a merchant who knows these things. Explain it further, friend, for thine are words of precious wisdom."

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"But this is not Simon," says Moll. — their manures be sold over their

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heads. And possibly all your capital is invested in land."

"Every farthing that could be scraped together," says Simon, "and not a rood of it but is leased to substantial men. Oh, what excellent discourse! Proceed further, friend."

"Nevertheless," says I, "there are means of raising money upon credit. If he live there still, there is a worthy Jew in St. Mary Axe, who upon certain considerations of interest"

"Hold, friend!" cries Simon. "What art thee thinking of? Wouldst deliver my simple mistress into the hands of Jew usurers?"

"Not without proper covenants made out by lawyers and attorneys."

"Lawyers, attorneys and usurers! Heaven have mercy upon us! Verily, thee wouldst infest us with a pest, and bleed us to death for our cure."

"I will have such relief as I may," says Moll, "so pray, sir, do send for these lawyers and Jews at once, and the quicker, since my servant seems more disposed to hinder than to help me."

"Forbear, mistress; for the love of God, forbear!" cries Simon, in an agony, clasping his hands. "Be not misguided by this foolish merchant, who hath all to gain and naught to lose by this proceeding. Give me but a little space, and their claims shall be met, thy desires shall be satisfied and yet half of thy estate be saved, which else must be all devoured betwixt these ruthless money lenders and lawyers. I can make a covenant more binding than any attorney, as I have proved again and again, and" (with a gulp) "if money must be raised at once I know an honest, a fairly honest, goldsmith in Lombard street who will at the market rate."

"These gentlemen," answers Moll, turning to us, "may not choose to wait, and I will not incommode them for my own convenience."

"Something for our present need we must have, madam," says the don, with a magnificent glance at his outlandish dress, "but, those wants supplied, I am content to wait."

"And you, sir?" says Moll to me. "With a hundred or two," says I, taking Don Sanchez's hint, "we may do very well till Michaelmas."

"Be reasonable, gentlemen," implores Simon, mopping his eyes, which ran afresh at this demand. "'Tis but some five or six weeks to Michaelmas; surely £50!"

"Silence!" cries Moll, with an angry tap of her foot. "Will £300 content you, gentlemen? Consider, the wants of our good friend, Captain Evans, may be more pressing than yours."

"He is a good, honest, simple man, and I think we may answer for his accepting the conditions we make for ourselves. Then, with some reasonable guarantee for our future payment"

"That may be contrived to our common satisfaction, I hope," says Moll, with a gracious smile. "I owe you half my estate; share my house at Chiselhurst with me till the rest is forthcoming. That will give me yet a little longer the pleasure of your company. And there, sir," turning to me, "you can examine my steward's accounts for your own satisfaction, and counsel me mayhap upon the conduct of my affairs, knowing so much upon matters of business that are incomprehensible to a simple, inexperienced girl. Then, should you find aught amiss in my steward's books, anything to shake your confidence in his management, you will, in justice to your friends, in kindness to me, speak your mind openly, that instant reformation may be made."

Don Sanchez and I expressed our agreement to this proposal, and Moll, turning to the poor, unhappy steward, says in her high tone of authority: "You hear this matter is ordered, Simon. Take up that purse for your own uses. Go into the town and send such tradesmen hither as may supply us with proper clothing. Then to your goldsmith in London and bring me back £600."

"Six-hundred—pounds!" cries he, hardly above his breath, and with a pause between each word as if to gain strength to speak 'em.

"Six hundred, three for these gentlemen and three for my own needs. When that is done, hasten to Chiselhurst and prepare my house, and, as you value my favor, see that nothing is wanting when I come."

And here, lest it should be thought that Moll could not possibly play her part so admirably in this business, I do protest that I have set down no more than I recollect, and that without exaggeration. Further, it must be observed that in our common experience many things happen which would seem incredible but for the evidence of our senses and which no poet would have the hardihood to represent. 'Tis true that in this, as in other more surprising particulars to follow, Moll did surpass all common women, but 'tis only such extraordinary persons that furnish material for any history. And I will add that anything is possible to one who hath the element of greatness in her composition, and that it depends merely or the accident of circumstances whether a Moll Dawson becomes a great saint or a great sinner—a curse to humanity.

(To be Continued.)

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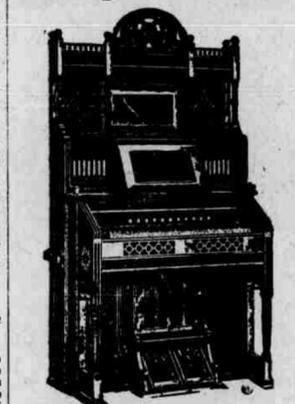
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