

JOHN TOPP, PIRATE

By Weatherby Chesney and Alick Munro.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

While allowed the two Spaniards to get half way up the hillside unmolested, and then he broke out. With a shrill laugh which echoed to and fro in the gullet of the serpent and out through the fanged jaws in a very extract of discordant sound, he raised a din which startled even me, though I now knew the secret of it.

The Spaniards stopped, gazed at one another with scared faces and looked as though the movement of a leaf would make them turn tail and fly. Their ears told them that the din came from the stone serpent; but, then, who ever heard of a serpent laughing? Not since the days of Mother Eve had such a thing been, and so, plucking up their courage again, they continued on their way. But as the first step the serpent spoke afresh.

In the best Spanish which Willie Trehallon could muster it called them scurrile knaves and cowards and a variety of other choice names, in which the boatswain had a true sailor's duncy, and when they were thoroughly scared—as who would not have been in a like case?—it bade them 'bout ship and run if they wished to live another hour.

And that these two doughty Spaniards promptly did, thereby making Willie rub his hook gleefully and I my two hands, for we thought we had effectually frightened them and all their comrades to whom they would tell the tale into leaving the hill alone for the future.

But there is a saying, "Never put value on a ship until you have broken into her treasure room." We had reckoned without Don Miguel, for scarcely had another two hours passed when a band of 20 armed men emerged from the bush below. The serpent had routed two. Would it rout 20, with the alchemist captain to lead them?

At the head came Don Miguel, and with him the bandy legged little chap with the bright steel bassinet whom we had seen the day before from Shelter island, and a couple of paces behind these two were the rest of the band, among whom we recognized the two doughty champions whose flying backs had given us a little while before so much satisfaction.

As the party drew up in the open Willie Trehallon saluted them with a shrill mocking laugh, which had the effect of making the rank and file turn round as if preparing to bolt. But the two officers dealt such hearty buffets right and left with the flat of their swords that the fellows had evidently thought that the danger of being run through by the fiery Don Miguel was a more pressing one than that of being devoured by a mere stone serpent. They stood their ground, therefore; the five arquebusers unsling their crutches and blew their matches, the two bowmen fitted an arrow apiece, and the rest crammed their bonnets well down over their foreheads and waited for they knew not what.

"Come up, good senores all," croaked the serpent's grating voice, when Don Miguel gave the word for advance. "Come up and defile this holy court and commit any indignity that pleases you. Come and build your signal fires on my wall and make my stones ring with your impious cursing. Ha, ha, ha! Pluck up your faint hearts, caballeros, I will not hinder while you work your wicked wills. Batter down these stones and hurl them into the sea if you wish. I will not harass you in the work, but afterward—then—ha, ha, ha!"

The serpent said no more, but the pause and the wild yell of laughter were sufficiently suggestive. The Spaniards stood for a moment against. He of the bassinet was apparently the most scared of the lot, for his bandy legs shook visibly under him and his sword clattered to the ground as he clasped his hands and began to call upon the saints to shield him. Had he been in command every man would have used his heels as soon as his quivering muscles gave him strength to do so. But Don Miguel was different. He stormed, he cursed, he ground his yellow teeth, he all but foamed at the mouth in his frenzy of rage, and yielding to the greater terror of the two each man stood his ground.

"Miserable coward!" yelled Don Miguel at his lieutenant. "What do you fear?"

"The Devil," said the bandy legged man, taking off his bassinet and wiping the perspiration from his brow with the sleeve of his doublet.

"The devil, you poor fool! Where's your wit? Is not the devil clever beyond all human learning?"

"Aye, surely. We believe so," replied the other, crossing himself devoutly.

"Good! Then how do you account for his speaking such villainous Spanish as came from up yonder? Full half of the words were not understandable, and in those which did bear some faint resemblance to Castilian there was, or my ears deceive me, a strong flavor of the barbarous English tongue. Bah! Don Sancho, you're little short of a poltroon."

"Hard words, Don Miguel, and I may call upon you to prove them," said the other sullenly.

"Do it then. My sword is ever ready to back up my tongue. But first follow me up this steep, and if I see you behave as a man against the English

devil whom I will unearth for you perhaps I will take back part of what has been said. Forward!"

And up they came with all their following. The serpent sent down a perfect rain of warnings and curses, but they were not to be stopped again.

"Well," said I, when from sheer lack of breath Willie Trehallon had ceased his outcry, "they've got the better of us now, I fancy. Don Miguel will soon find the entrance to our snail's home. What are we to do, Willie?"

"There's two ways o' getting at a snail's body, Master Topp," replied Willie sullenly. "One is by boiling it. Don Miguel can do neither."

"A pinch of salt or a whiff of smoke will make him show his horns."

"Don Miguel bain't able to get nigh us to plant the salt—leastways I pith the man as tries to come up them stairs, an as for the reek they may build as big a fire as they like below, but we shall always be able to get fresh wind at the chimney top here."

"And with our store of bananas we can stand a considerable siege on short rations? Exactly so. But I was not thinking of our own skins. I was figuring out how we might manage to trap Don Miguel, and now I think I see a way. You noted a small dark cell just at the foot of the stair leading up here? Well, my plan is this: You stay where you are, and I'll go below and hide in that cell. Don Miguel will enter—if he doesn't come of his own ac-

tion, I'll venture to send him a hail of invitation—he will pass me and go up the stair. Then I shall step out and deal with all who try to follow, and as two men cannot advance abreast it will be an easy enough task. As for the senior commandant, we have him between two swords and ought to be able to take him alive."

"Master Topp," said the boatswain, saluting with hook and forehead, "your brain's sharpening right wonderful. The first jacket o' honest ale that wets my lips shall be drained to your health. But," he added eagerly, "let me fill the cell an hold the lower alley."

"No. It is my plan and so my choice. You have the post of honor, for it will be yours to tackle Don Miguel, and a tough customer you'll find him. But do not kill him, Willie, if you can avoid it."

"H'm! I'm thinking I shall thrust guard plate deep, Master Topp. You would yourself if you'd suffered one-half o' what I have."

"Still, spare him. He's of more worth to us alive than dead at present. Afterward"—I stopped. Great heavens, it was of Inez's father that I was speaking thus!

"Aye, afterward!" growled Willie. "Afterward, Master Topp! There'll be a bitter reckoning when Captain Ireland comes. You may lay your last tester on that. But in the meanwhile I'll thrust as daintily as the don will let me."

I picked my way down the windings of the passage in the serpent's body with the intention of finding out what the Spaniards were doing up above and if possible of enticing them to come down from the wall and attack me in the narrow path. But when I reached the entrance I heard the voices of Don Sancho and a couple of others just above me, so I crept into the cell to listen.

He first of all suggested to the soldiers that they should go first, but they hung back and seemed inclined to argue the question. Now, the chasm was far too uncanny for the bandy legged don to enter himself, so he settled matters by sending off one of the men for the superior officer, while he himself pluckily remained on guard with the other.

Presently Don Miguel came and, snapping out a few caustic words about poltroonery, cowardice and the like, dropped, sword in hand, through the opening and strode along the alley. It would have been easy to run him through as he passed had I been so minded; but, hoping that Willie Trehallon would take him at his leisure and with a reasonably whole skin, I lay quiet and let him pass.

His followers trailed on leisurely enough, and their leader must have climbed the greater way up the stair before I stabbed the first of them. The second played me a couple of passes, and by the time he rolled over Don Sancho, who came next, was in full flight down the passage. I sped after him, but he was too quick for me and sprang up among his fellows. The whole crowd then made threatening

demonstrations against me, but not a hero of them would accept a civil invitation to come down and have it out man to man.

It was just like a bear pit. I was the bear at the bottom, who could not get at the yapping hounds above without being slain, while they did not dare to descend and bait me. And so, seeing that one of them had unsling his arquebus and was fixing its crutch and blowing his match for a shot, I left them to amuse one another and went to see how Willie Trehallon had fared with Don Miguel.

Their struggle must have been a short one, for when I came up to the chamber in the snake's head I found the Spaniard lying on the floor with the squat figure of the boatswain perched on his stomach. The victor had a bare brown foot on each of his enemy's arms, while in his only hand he held, with significant intention, Don Miguel's own jewel hilted misericorde.

It was a most refreshing sight. "You be back soon, Master Topp," said Willie without turning his head. "We have just this very minute decided who should sit uppermost."

At this the Spaniard drew back his lips in an evil smile, showing two rows of yellow teeth that protruded outward like a calf's, and I thought his face the most devilish and fearsome my eyes had ever fallen upon. Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he closed his mouth, smiled and lay before us a pale, perfect Apollo. The suddenness of the change sent a cold shudder through me—it smacked so much of magic. The boatswain, too, was plainly not a little disconcerted, for he set to work scratching his bare, shining poll with the hook, a sure sign that he was puzzled, and presently, still without taking his eye from the prisoner, he rapped out:

"Best kill him at once, Master Topp, for fear of accidents."

A flicker of fear passed quickly over the Spaniard's face at the words, but it was only a flicker, and in an instant it was gone.

"You hear, Don Miguel?" said I. "Have you any plea to urge why we should not kill you?"

"No," he said shortly; "no plea that you would consider adequate."

I knew of one which he might have urged with success, but as he evidently did not at present recognize me it was not the time to remind him of Whittby and Vigo.

"Then, senor, you do not shrink from death?"

"When you promise us immunity from hurt if we set you free?"

"No, I will not, for you would mock me if I did. And," he added fiercely, "my word shall not be held up to the scorn of any one."

This reading of my thoughts and intentions took me back somewhat, but after a moment's pause I asked if he would give his word not to attempt to attack us or to escape, supposing that I ordered the boatswain to release him from his present uncomfortable durance.

"Yes, senor. I pledge my honor so far," he answered carelessly, so I bade Willie rise. He did so after some demur and very unwillingly.

The Spaniard gazed at me sullenly and persistently, and as I began to feel eerie and uncomfortable under his stare—for I feared the evil eye, and those black orbs were baneful—I told Willie that I had something for his private ear. With a bow to the prisoner which, considering that I was long unused to movements of courtesy, was passable enough I led the way down stairs, and Willie followed, carrying Don Miguel's sword and dagger tucked underneath his right armpit. Some 20 steps below he halted, but I bade him go farther still, for I wished to be sure that we were out of earshot of our captive.

"Now, Willie," I said when we had nearly reached the bottom, "why this gloom? Our fortune could not have been better."

"No," replied the boatswain slowly, "but we might have made a better use o' it."

"Prove that."

"I had my steel at you rascal's throat, an you made me stay it," was the reply.

"Understand me," I said sternly; "I won't have Don Miguel injured while he is in my hands, if for no other reason because he can be made to serve us."

"Aye," answered Willie scornfully; "that he can. We've left him up there alone, an he can send a hail to Don Sancho to tell him how matters are. Who's to hinder him, since we don't seem to want to? Pho, Master Topp! D'you think our bird won't chirp to his mates when he's got the chance?"

"I hope so! Why, Master Topp, you must be bewitched. That bandy legged little don will have another score o' men up from the cave before you can wink."

"Let him. We can hold our snail's house against them."

"But not against starvation. The bananas is about done already, an I'd liefer tackle a leather scabbard than the skins."

"How is the wind, Willie? Or has your sailor's eye deserted you along with your other faculties? Come, tell me what you read in the sky up aloft there when you were sitting on the don's stomach."

The boatswain shot a look of perplexity at me, and then his eye brightened. He began to see my drift.

"Chopped round gently to the eastward," he answered promptly. "Swell blowing down an big clouds floating high an unbroken. A murky night coming on."

"A murky night coming on! Yes, and what about Captain Alexander Ireland and the lads with him? Will he sleep through that murky night, think you? Or will the boat leave Galley Island on the instant that darkness falls? I tell you, Willie Trehallon, my sworn

shipmate will be at the cave's mouth before the midnight glass has turned, and it seems to me that he'll find his task an easier one if half the foe is sitting round the snail shell. Why, man, I schemed for it!"

"An you were right, Master Topp," said the boatswain, half vexed at finding himself in the wrong. "I vow you be right after all."

And with that we went aloft again, he to resume his interrupted sleep beside Don Miguel, whom we found lying down in the shelter of the snake's teeth, and I to take the watch.

(To be continued next Friday.)

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