

The Captain of the Kansas.

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"The Pillar of Light," Etc.

CHAPTER XVI.

BY the way, what of M. de Poincillit?" said Courtenay. "I saw him come aboard with Malcolm, but he dived into the salon and has not reappeared. Is he ill?"

Gray's mouth set like a steel trap. His eyes had a glint in them. He seemed to be unwilling to speak. When words came they were cold and measured.

"I haven't any use for that fellow," he said. "I suppose the unpleasant story must be told sooner or later, so here goes. In the first place, Poincillit forgot that I understood Spanish, and I heard him whispering to the Chileans in the jolly boat that if we took any more people on board we should be swamped. It was he who put the notion in their heads to cast off while you were lowering Miss Baring's maid into my arms. I tried to forget that, as he was blue white with fear, and some fellows are not responsible for their actions when their liver melts. But I can never forget his action on the island. Yesterday morning I was just in time to stop him and four others from sneaking off in the lifeboat with all our provisions."

Courtenay's face hardened too.

"Necessity may have no laws," said he, "but I fancy I should have found a code to meet his case."

"I have organized a vigilance committee in my time, and its articles kind of fitted in," was the American's quiet reply. "That is why I have a few recent knife cuts distributed about my skin. I began to shoot, and we were two short on the muster roll next day. De Poincillit ran and fell on his knees. So did a skunk of an Italian, and I did not want to waste cartridges. They were tied back to back until we sailed today."

"And the fifth?"

"The fifth was a woman." They talked until daybreak; then Courtenay turned in. He did not appear on deck again until noon. By that time the Kansas had lost all marks of the fight excepting the smashed windows, and a sailor who understood the glazier's art was replacing the broken glass. Making the round of the ship, the captain found Elsie sitting with Isobel and Mrs. Somerville on the promenade deck. She was binding Joey's foot, and he knew then why the dog had scampered off on three legs as soon as the cabin door was opened.

Lifting his cap, with a smile and a general "Good morning," he bent over Elsie.

"Well," he said, "surely you owe me at least one kiss!"

If her cheeks were red before, they became scarlet now. But his kindling glance had warned her that he would adopt no pretense, so she lifted her face to his, though she did not dare to look at her amazed companions. Courtenay explained matters quite coolly.

"If Elsie has not told you already it



"I have organized a vigilance committee in my time," he said, "and its articles kind of fitted in," was the American's quiet reply.

"Indeed, I congratulate you both most heartily," said the missionary's wife. "Events have marched, then, while we were stranded on that wretched island," tittered Isobel. Her voice was rather shrill. She, too, was excited, not quite mistress of herself. She did not know how far Gray's statements might have prejudiced her with the captain. She had already sent De Poincillit a note urging him to deny absolutely all knowledge of the plot to steal the boat and attribute the American's summary action to his mistaken rendering of the Spanish patois used by the Chilean sailors. "You feel sure that we shall see no more of the Indians?" asked Isobel quickly.

"I think so. One never can tell, but if they have the grit to attack us again I shall regard them as first class fighters."

Isobel meant to be on her best behavior. Her tact with the Frenchman

was discreditable, but smooth words might restrain tongues from wagging until she could leave the ship. Moreover, the vicissitudes of life in these later days were not without their effect.

"I shall resume my rounds," said Courtenay to Elsie. "I expect to be received reproachfully by Walker. He made great progress yesterday. Let me whisper a secret. Then you may pass it on in strictest confidence."

He placed his lips close to her ear. "I am dreadfully in love with you this morning," he breathed.

"That is no secret," she retorted. "It is. You and I together must daily find new paths in Eden. But my less poetic news should be welcome also. Walker says he hopes to get steam up tomorrow."

"Well, tell us quickly," cried Isobel, with a show of intense interest when Courtenay had gone. Though his manner betokened that the affair was something which concerned Elsie alone, she was on fire until she learned that his "secret" alluded to the restored vitality of the ship.

For once her expressions of gratitude were heartfelt. Mrs. Somerville even wept for joy. This poor woman, after living twenty-five years in the oasis of a mission house, was a strange subject for storm tossed wandering and fights with cannibals.

"It will be a real manifestation of Providence if we ever reach England again," she cried, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. "I'm sure John and I have said so many a time during the past week. To think of the ship's blowing up in the way she did! It makes me all of a tremble, it does."

"Oh," broke in Elsie, thinking that the information she possessed would help to calm the older woman, "we have made a good many discoveries since—since the boat went away without me, I mean. But do tell me—how did those horrid Chileans manage to cast off the tackle before Mr. Gray or some of the other men were able to stop them? Of course it is matterless now in a sense, but at that moment it looked like leaving those on the ship to certain death."

Mrs. Somerville was stricken dumb. The American's shooting of two men on White Horse Island had naturally called for a complete explanation on his part, and she did not know how to answer Elsie's question. Before she could gather her wits Isobel intervened.

"If you had been in that boat, dear," she said sweetly, "you would realize the topsy turvy condition of our brains. Even Mr. Gray himself, the coolest man on board, imagined we might sink any moment, so what can you expect of those excitable Chileans? What are the discoveries you spoke of?"

"Well, some one placed dynamite among the coal."

"But who would do such a thing?"

"That is hard to say. The captain believes that the culprit will be found out through the insurance policies. You cannot tell how surprised I was to hear him mention Ventana's name in connection with it."

"Ventana's name?"

"The blood ebbed away from Isobel's cheeks, leaving her pallid as a statue. There was a gasp in her voice which startled her own ears. Lest her agitation should be noted too keenly she bent forward and propped her face on her clinched hands, staring fixedly at the distant cliffs in a supreme effort to appear apathetic. Elsie heard that dry sob, but her friend's seeming indifference misled her.

"Yes," she said, wondering a little whether or not Christobal's veiled hint regarding a bygone tenderness between the two might account for Isobel's hysterical outburst on the night of the ship's breakdown. So, pondering unspoken thoughts, while she told the others exactly what Tollemache, Christobal and Courtenay had said and even revealed to them that which Courtenay himself did not yet know.

"You remember the poor fellow who got into trouble soon after we sailed from Valparaiso?" she said. "His name is Frascuelo. He was wounded again in last night's fight, but not seriously, and he and I are quite chums. He assures me that he was drugged by a man named Jose Anacleto, who took his place among the coal trimmers."

"Oh, Miss Maxwell, come quick!" screamed Mrs. Somerville, for Isobel had lurched sideways out of her chair in a fainting fit, and the missionary's wife was barely able to save her head from striking the ship's rails.

Joey was shot out of Elsie's lap with such surprising speed that he trotted away without any exhibition of lameness. He was quite disgusted for at least five minutes, but it is reasonable to suppose that a dog of his intelligence would brighten up when he heard the wholly unlooked for story which Christobal was translating to Courtenay word for word as it was dragged hesitatingly out of Suarez.

The Argentine miner had been badly injured during the struggle for possession of the promenade deck. Owing to loss of consciousness, supplemented by an awkward fall, he might have choked to death had he not been rescued within a few minutes. He was very ill all night, and it was not until midday that he recovered sufficient strength to enable him to question the Indians on board.

Courtenay wished specially to find out what chance, if any, there was of the Alaculof attack being renewed. It was obvious that some of the maimed Indians recognized Suarez, notwithstanding his changed appearance, the instant he spoke to them. At once they broke out into an excited chattering, and Suarez was so disconcerted by the tidings they conveyed that he stammered a good deal and seemed to flounder in giving the Spanish rendering.

"This fellow is telling us just as much as he thinks it is good for us to know," said Courtenay sternly when

the interpreter avoided his accusing gaze. "Bid him out with the whole truth, Christobal, or it shall be his pleasing task to escort his dear friends back to their silly circles."

Being detected, Suarez faltered no longer. A ship's lifeboat had been driven ashore lower down the coast. Fourteen men had landed. They were captured by the Indians after a useless resistance in which three were killed. The dead men supplied a ghoulish feast next day, and the others were bound securely and placed in a cave in order to be killed at intervals, an exact parallel to the fate of Suarez's own companions five years earlier.

But on this occasion a woman intervened. Suarez confessed very reluctantly that there was a girl in the tribe to whom he had taught some words of his own language. He declared that the relations between them were those of master and servant, but the poor creature had fallen in love with him and had become nearly frantic with grief when he disappeared. It was difficult to analyze her motives, but she had undoubtedly freed the eleven sailors and led them over the rocks at low water to a cave on Guanaco hill, believed by the Indians to be haunted. The Indians dared not follow, but they took good care that no canoes were obtainable in which the unhappy fugitives could reach the ship, and they were confident that hunger would soon drive them forth.

Courtenay's brow became black with anger when he understood the significance of this staggering story.

"It comes to this," he said to Christobal. "The men who got away from the Kansas in No. 3 lifeboat fell into the hands of the savages early on the day of the ship's arrival here. Suarez slipped his cable that night, being aware of the time that eleven white captives were still alive. Yet he said no word, not even when he heard that we had seen one of the boat's water casks in a canoe. What sort of mean hound can he be?"

Suarez needed no translation to grasp the purport of Courtenay's words. He besought the senior captain to have patience with him. He had escaped from a living tomb and felt that he would yield up his life rather than return. Therefore when he saw how few in number and badly armed were they on board the ship he thought it best to remain silent as to the fate of the boat's crew. In the first place, he fully expected that they had been killed by the Indians, who would be enraged by his own disappearance; secondly, he alone knew how hopeless any attempt at a rescue must prove; finally, he wished to spare the feelings of those who had befriended him. Of what avail were useless mind torturings regarding the hapless beings in the hands of the savages?

There was a certain plausibility in this reasoning which curbed Courtenay's wrath, though it in no way diminished his disgust.

"Ask him to ascertain if the Indians believe the white men are still living," he said. A fresh series of grunts and clicks elicited the fact that the smoke column seen the previous day on Guanaco hill had not been created by the tribe. Suarez begged the senior captain to remember that he had spoken truly when he declared that its meaning was unknown to him. Probably from what he now learned the girl who threw in her lot with the sailors had built a fire there.

Courtenay turned on his heel and quitted the cabin. Christobal, well knowing how the demons of doubt and despair were afflicting Courtenay, followed him to the upper deck. Boyle was in the chart house, and Tollemache. Each man noted the captain's troubled face.

Courtenay obtained a telescope. With the tact which never failed him, even in such a desperate crisis as this, he handed the doctor his binoculars. Then both men looked at the summit of Guanaco hill. Though it was high noon and the landscape was shimmering in the heat mist created by the unusual power and brilliance of the sun, they distinctly saw a thin pillar of smoke rising above the trees. Courtenay closed his telescope. He made to approach Boyle, evidently for the purpose of giving some order, when Christobal said quietly:

"Wait! I have something to say to you. You ought to remain on the ship. Let me go!"

"You?"

"Yes, I. After all, it is only a matter of taking command. One man cannot go alone. He could not even pull the lifeboat so far; hence what you can do I can do, and I have no objection to dying in that way."

"Why should either of us die?"

"You know better than I how little chance there is of saving those men. You may deem me callous if I suggest that the reasonable thing would be to forget the miserable statement you have just heard. Oh, please hear me to the end. I am not talking for your sole benefit, believe me. Greatly as I and all on board are beholden to you, I do not propose giving my life in your stead because of my abounding admiration for your many virtues. Well, then, since you are so impatient as to be almost rude, I come straight to the point. If you take command of a boat's crew and endeavor to save the men imprisoned over there, you will almost certainly throw away your life and the lives of those who help you. In that event a lady in whom we are both interested will suffer grievously. On the other hand, if I were killed she would weep a little, because she has a large heart, but you would console her. And the odd thing is that you and I are fully aware that either you or I must go off on this fool's errand. There is none other to take the vacant place. Now, have I made myself clear?"

"While I command the Kansas I am responsible for the well being of the ship, her crew and her passengers. I could never forgive myself if I left

those men to the mercy of the Indians. I cannot permit either you or Tollemache to take a risk which I shirk. Boyle and Walker must remain on board—lest I fail. Now, Christobal, don't make my duty harder. Shake hands! I am proud to claim you as a friend."

"Huh," said Boyle, strolling toward them. "What is it—a bet?"

"Yes," laughed Courtenay, from whose face all doubt had vanished, "a bet indeed, and you hold the stakes. Have you seen the smoke signal yonder?" And he pointed across the bay.

"Yes, Tollemache found it again twenty minutes since."

"It means that eleven of our men are there, expecting us to save them. Hoist the ship's answering pennant from the main yard swung out to starboard. Build a small fire on the poop and throw some oil and lampblack on it. If they don't recognize the pennant they will understand the smoke. Get some food and water stowed in the lifeboat and offer £5 a head to six men who will volunteer for a trip ashore."

"I go in charge, of course, sir?" said Boyle.

"You remain here and take command during my absence. I want two revolvers for a couple of the crew, and I shall take my own gun. Please make all arrangements promptly. I am going to my cabin for five minutes and shall start immediately afterward."

This was the captain speaking. His tone admitted of no contention. Boyle hurried off, and Courtenay went into his quarters.

"What do you think of it?" Christobal asked Tollemache as the latter appeared to be sauntering after the chief officer.

"Courtenay is a hard man to stop," said Tollemache, vanishing down the companion. The Spaniard was left alone on the bridge. He paced to and fro deep in thought. He scarce dared probe his own commings. So complex were they, such a queer amalgam of noble feat and base expectation,

that he could have cried aloud in his anguish. Big drops of perspiration stood on his forehead when Courtenay came to him.

"For God's sake, don't go," said he hoarsely. "Do you know you are placing me on the rack?"

"Your sufferings are of your own contriving, then. Why, man, there's no reason for all this agony. I have written to Elsie, briefly explaining matters. Here is the letter. Give it to her if I don't return. And now pull yourself together. I want you to cheer her. Above all things, don't let her



The Spaniard was left alone on the bridge.

know I am leaving the ship. I'll just swing myself overboard at the last moment. I can't say goodbye. I don't think I could stand that."

(To Be Continued.)

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