

CHAPTER IV. PIRACY

BY DUSK the trim little brigantine was scudding away toward the west before a wind that could not have suited her better had it been made to order at the special behest of the devil himself to speed his minions upon their devil's work.

All hands were in the best of humor. The crew had forgotten their recent rancor at not having been permitted shore leave at Honolulu in the expectancy of adventure in the near future, for there was that in the atmosphere of the Halfmoon which proclaimed louder than words the proximity of excitement, and the goal toward which they had been sailing since they left San Francisco.

Skipper Simms and Divine were elated at the luck which had brought them to Honolulu in the nick of time, and at the success of Theriere's mission at that port. They had figured upon a week at least there before the second officer of the Halfmoon could ingratiate himself sufficiently into the goodwill of the Hardings to learn their plans, and now they were congratulating themselves upon their acumen in selecting so fit an agent as the Frenchman for the work he had handled so expeditiously and so well.

Ward was pleased that he had not been forced to prolong the galling masquerade of valet to his inferior officer. He was hopeful, too, that coming events would bring to the fore an opportunity to satisfy the vengeance he had inwardly sworn against the sailor who had so roughly manhandled him a few weeks past--Theriere had not been in error in his estimate of his fellow-officer.

Billy Byrne, the arduous labor of making sail over for the time, was devoting his energies to the task of piecing out from what Theriere had told him and what he had overheard outside the skipper's cabin some sort of explanation of the work ahead.

As he pondered Theriere's proposition he saw the wisdom of it. It would give those interested a larger amount of the booty for their share. Another feature of it was that it was underhanded and that appealed strongly to the mucker. Now, if he could but devise some scheme for double-crossing Theriere the pleasure and profit of the adventure would be tripled.

It was this proposition that was occupying his attention when he caught sight of "Bony" Sawyer and "Red" Sanders emerging from the forecastle. Billy Byrne hailed them.

When the mucker had explained the possibilities of profit that were to be had by entering the conspiracy aimed at Simms and Ward the two seamen were enthusiastically forit.

"Bony" Sawyer suggested that the black cook, Blanco, was about the only other member of the crew upon whom they could depend, and at Byrne's request "Bony" promised to enlist the cooperation of the giant Ethiopian.

From early morning of the second day out of Honolulu keen eyes scanned the eastern horizon through powerful glasses, until about two bells of the afternoon watch a slight smudge became visible about two points north of east. Immediately the course of the Halfmoon was altered so that she bore almost directly north by west in an effort to come safely into the course of the steamer which was seen rising rapidly above the horizon.

The new course of the brigantine was held as long as it seemed reasonably safe without danger of being sighted under full sail by the oncoming vessel, then her head was brought into the wind, and one by one her sails were lowered and furled, as the keen eyes of Second Officer Theriere announced that there was no question but that the white hull in the distance was that of the steam pleasure yacht Lotus.

Upon the deck of the unsuspecting vessel a merry party laughed and chatted in happy ignorance of the plotters in their path. It was nearly half an hour after the Halfmoon had come to rest, drifting idly under bare poles, that the lookout upon the Lotus sighted her.

"Sailin' vessel lyin' to, west half south," he shouted, "flyin' distress signals."

In an instant guests and crew had hurried to points of vantage where they might obtain unobstructed view of the stranger, and take advantage of this break in the monotony of a long sea voyage.

Anthony Harding was on the bridge with the captain, and both men had leveled their glasses upon the distant ship.

"Can you make her out?" asked the owner.

"She's a brigantine," replied the officer, "and all that I can make out from here would indicate that everything was shipshape about her. Her canvas is neatly furled, and she is evidently well manned, for I can see a number of figures above deck apparently engaged in watching us. I'll alter our course and speak to her--we'll see what's wrong, and give her a hand if we can."

"That's right," replied Harding; "do anything you can for them."

A moment later he joined his daughter and their guests to report the meager information he had.

"How exciting," exclaimed Barbara Harding. "Of course it's not a real shipwreck, but maybe it's the next thing to it. The poor souls may have been drifting about here in the center of the Pacific without food or water for goodness knows how many weeks, and now just think how they must be lifting their voices in thanks to God for his infinite mercy in guiding us to them."

"If they've been drifting for any considerable number of weeks without food or water," hazarded Billy Mallory, "about the only things they'll need'll be what we didn't have the foresight to bring along--an undertaker and a preacher."

"Don't be horrid, Billy," returned Miss Harding. "You know perfectly well that I didn't mean weeks--I meant days; and anyway they'll be grateful to us for what we can do for them. I can scarcely wait to hear their story."

Billy Mallory was inspecting the stranger through Mr. Harding's glass. Suddenly he gave an exclamation of dismay.

"By George!" he cried. "It is serious after all. That ship's afire. Look, Mr. Harding," and he passed the glass over to his host.

And sure enough, as the owner of the Lotus found the brigantine again in the center of his lens he saw a thin column of black smoke rising amidships; but what he did not see was Mr. Ward upon the opposite side of the Halfmoon's cabin superintending the burning by the black cook of a bundle of oily rags in an iron boiler.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Harding. "This is terrible. The poor devils are panic-stricken. Look at 'em making for the boats!" and with that he dashed back to the bridge to confer with his captain.

"Yes," said that officer, "I noticed the smoke about the same time you did--funny it wasn't apparent before. I've already signaled full speed ahead, and I've instructed Mr. Foster to have the boats in readiness to lower away if we find that they're short of boats on the brigantine."

"What I can't understand," he added after a moment's silence, "is why they didn't show any signs of excitement about that fire until we came within easy sight of them--it looks funny."

"Well, we'll know in a few minutes more," returned Mr. Harding. "The chances are that the fire is just a recent addition to their predicament, whatever it may be, and that they have only just discovered it themselves."

"Then it can't have gained enough headway," insisted the captain, "to cause them any such immediate terror as would be indicated by the haste with which the whole ship's crew is tumbling into those boats; but as you say, sir, we'll have their story out of them in a few minutes now, so it's idle speculating beforehand."

The officers and men of the Halfmoon, in so far as those on board the Lotus could guess, had all entered the boats at last, and were pulling frantically away from their own ship toward the rapidly nearing yacht; but what they did not guess and could not know was that Mr. Divine paced nervously to and fro in his cabin, while Second Officer Theriere tended the smoking rags that Ward and Blanco had resigned to him that they might take their places in the boats.

Theriere had been greatly disgusted with the turn events had taken for he had determined upon a line of action that he felt sure would prove highly remunerative to himself. It had been nothing less than a bold resolve to call Blanco, Byrne, "Bony," and "Red" to his side the moment Simms and Ward revealed the true purpose of their ruse to those on board the Lotus, and with his henchmen take sides with the men of the yacht against his former companions.

As he had explained it to Billy Byrne the idea was to permit Mr. Harding to believe that Theriere and his companions had been duped by Skipper Simms-- that they had had no idea of the work that they were to be called upon to perform until the last moment and that then they had done the only thing they could to protect the passengers and crew of the Lotus.

"And then," Theriere had concluded, "when they think we are a band of heroes, and the best friends they have on earth we'll just naturally be in a position to grab the whole lot of them, and collect ransoms on ten or fifteen instead of just one."

"Bully!" exclaimed the mucker. "You sure got some bean, mate."

As a matter of fact Theriere had had no intention of carrying the matter as far as he had intimated to Billy except as a last resort. He had been mightily smitten by the face and fortune of Barbara Harding and had seen in the trend of events a possible opportunity of so deeply obligating her father and herself that when he paid court to her she might fall a willing victim to his wiles. In this case he would be obliged to risk nothing, and could make away with his accomplices by explaining to Mr. Harding that he had been compelled to concoct this other scheme to obtain their assistance against Simms and Ward; then they could throw the three into irons and all would be lovely; but now that fool Ward had upset the whole thing by hitting upon this asinine fire hoax as an excuse for boarding the Lotus in force, and had further dampened Theriere's pet scheme by

suggesting to Skipper Simms the danger of Theriere being recognized as they were boarding the Lotus and bringing suspicion upon them all immediately.

They all knew that a pleasure yacht like the Lotus was well supplied with small arms, and that at the first intimation of danger there would be plenty of men aboard to repel assault, and, in all probability, with entire success.

That there were excellent grounds for Theriere's belief that he could win Barbara Harding's hand with such a flying start as his daring plan would have assured him may not be questioned, for the man was cultivated, polished and, in a sinister way, good-looking. The title that he had borne upon the occasion of his visit to the yacht, was, all unknown to his accomplices, his by right of birth, so that there was nothing other than a long-dead scandal in the French Navy that might have proved a bar to an affiance such as he dreamed of. And now to be thwarted at the last moment! It was unendurable. That pig of a Ward had sealed his own death warrant, of that Theriere was convinced.

The boats were now quite close to the yacht, which had slowed down almost to a dead stop. In answer to the query of the Lotus' captain Skipper Simms was explaining their trouble.

"I'm Captain Jones," he shouted, "of the brigantine Clarinda, Frisco to Yokohama with dynamite. We disabled our rudder yesterday, an' this afternoon fire started in the hold. It's makin' headway fast now, an' ll reach the dynamite most any time. You'd better take us aboard, an' get away from here as quick as you can. 'Tain't safe nowhere within five hun'erd fathom of her."

"You'd better make haste, Captain, hadn't you?" suggested Mr. Harding.

"I don't like the looks of things, sir," replied that officer. "She ain't flyin' any dynamite flag, an' if she was an' had a hold full there wouldn't be any particular danger to us, an' anyone that has ever shipped dynamite would know it, or ought to. It's not fire that detonates dynamite, it's concussion. No sir, Mr. Harding, there's something queer here--I don't like the looks of it. Why just take a good look at the faces of those men. Did you ever see such an ugly-looking pack of unhung murderers in your life, sir?"

"I must admit that they're not an overly prepossessing crowd, Norris," replied Mr. Harding. "But it's not always either fair or safe to judge strangers entirely by appearances. I'm afraid that there's nothing else for it in the name of common humanity than to take them aboard, Norris. I'm sure your fears are entirely groundless."

"Then it's your orders, sir, to take them aboard?" asked Captain Norris.

"Yes, Captain, I think you'd better," said Mr. Harding.

"Very good, sir," replied the officer, turning to give the necessary commands.

The officers and men of the Halfmoon swarmed up the sides of the Lotus, dark-visaged, fierce, and forbidding.

"Reminds me of a boarding party of pirates," remarked Billy Mallory, as he watched Blanco, the last to throw a leg over the rail, reach the deck.

"They're not very pretty, are they?" murmured Barbara Harding, instinctively shrinking closer to her companion.

"'Pretty' scarcely describes them, Barbara," said Billy; "and do you know that somehow I am having difficulty in imagining them on their knees giving up thanks to the Lord for their rescue--that was your recent idea of 'em, you will recall."

"If you have purposely set yourself the task of being more than ordinarily disagreeable today, Billy," said Barbara sweetly, "I'm sure it will please you to know that you are succeeding."

"I'm glad I'm successful at something then," laughed the man. "I've certainly been unsuccessful enough in another matter."

"What, for example?" asked Barbara, innocently.

"Why in trying to make myself so agreeable heretofore that you'd finally consent to say 'yes' for a change."

"Now you are going to make it all the worse by being stupid," cried the girl petulantly. "Why can't you be nice, as you used to be before you got this silly notion into your head?"

"I don't think it's a silly notion to be head over heels in love with the sweetest girl on earth," cried Billy.

"Hush! Someone will hear you."

"I don't care if they do. I'd like to advertise it to the whole world. I'm proud of the fact that I love you; and you don't care enough about it to realize how really hard I'm hit--why I'd die for you, Barbara, and welcome the chance; why--My God! What's that?"

"O Billy! What are those men doing?" cried the girl. "They're shooting. They're shooting at papa! Quick, Billy! Do something. For heaven's sake do something."

On the deck below them the "rescued" crew of the "Clarinda" had surrounded Mr. Harding, Captain Norris, and most of the crew of the Lotus, flashing quick-drawn revolvers from beneath shirts and coats, and firing at two of the yacht's men who showed fight.

"Keep quiet," commanded Skipper Simms, "an' there won't none of you get hurted."

"What do you want of us?" cried Mr. Harding. "If it's money, take what you can find aboard us, and go on your way. No one will hinder you."

Skipper Simms paid no attention to him. His eyes swept aloft to the upper deck. There he saw a wide-eyed girl and a man looking down upon them. He wondered if she was the one they sought. There were other women aboard. He could see them, huddled frightened behind Harding and Norris. Some of them were young and beautiful; but there was something about the girl above him that assured him she could be none other than Barbara Harding. To discover the truth Simms resorted to a ruse, for he knew that were he to ask Harding outright if the girl were his daughter the chances were more than even that the old man would suspect something of the nature of their visit and deny her identity.

"Who is that woman you have on board here?" he cried in an accusing tone of voice. "That's what we're a-here to find out."

"Why she's my daughter, man!" blurted Harding. "Who did you--"

"Thanks," said Skipper Simms, with a self-satisfied grin. "That's what I wanted to be sure of. Hey, you, Byrne! You're nearest the companionway--fetch the girl."

At the command the mucker turned and leaped up the stairway to the upper deck. Billy Mallory had overheard the conversation below and Simms' command to Byrne. Disengaging himself from Barbara Harding who in her terror had clutched his arm, he ran forward to the head of the stairway.

The men of the Lotus looked on in mute and helpless rage. All were covered by the guns of the boarding party--the still forms of two of their companions bearing eloquent witness to the slenderness of provocation necessary to tighten the trigger fingers of the beasts standing guard over them.

Billy Byrne never hesitated in his rush for the upper deck. The sight of the man awaiting him above but whetted his appetite for battle. The trim flannels, the white shoes, the natty cap, were to the mucker as sufficient cause for justifiable homicide as is an orange ribbon in certain portions of the West Side of Chicago on St. Patrick's Day. As were "Remember the Alamo," and "Remember the Maine"

to the fighting men of the days that they were live things so were the habiliments of gentility to Billy Byrne at all times.

Billy Mallory was an older man than the mucker--twenty-four perhaps--and fully as large. For four years he had played right guard on a great eastern team, and for three he had pulled stroke upon the crew. During the two years since his graduation he had prided himself upon the maintenance of the physical supremacy that had made the name of Mallory famous in collegiate athletics; but in one vital essential he was hopelessly handicapped in combat with such as Billy Byrne, for Mallory was a gentleman.

As the mucker rushed upward toward him Mallory had all the advantage of position and preparedness, and had he done what Billy Byrne would have done under like circumstances he would have planted a kick in the midst of the mucker's facial beauties with all the power and weight and energy at his command; but Billy Mallory could no more have perpetrated a cowardly trick such as this than he could have struck a woman.

Instead, he waited, and as the mucker came on an even footing with him Mallory swung a vicious right for the man's jaw. Byrne ducked beneath the blow, came up inside Mallory's guard, and struck him three times with trip-hammer velocity and pile-driver effectiveness--once upon the jaw and twice--below the belt!

The girl, clinging to the rail, riveted by the paralysis of fright, saw her champion stagger back and half crumple to the deck. Then she saw him make a brave and desperate rally, as, though torn with agony, he lurched forward in an endeavor to clinch with the brute before him. Again the mucker struck his victim--quick choppy hooks that rocked Mallory's head from side to side, and again the brutal blow below the belt; but with the tenacity of a bulldog the man fought for a hold upon his foe, and at last, notwithstanding Byrne's best efforts, he succeeded in closing with the mucker and dragging him to the deck.

Here the two men rolled and tumbled, Byrne biting, gouging, and kicking while Mallory devoted all of his fast-waning strength to an effort to close his fingers upon the throat of his antagonist. But the terrible punishment which the mucker had inflicted upon him overcame him at last, and as Byrne felt the man's efforts weakening he partially disengaged himself and raising himself upon one arm dealt his now almost unconscious enemy a half-dozen frightful blows upon the face.

With a shriek Barbara Harding turned from the awful sight as Billy Mallory's bloody and swollen eyes rolled up and set, while the mucker threw the inert form roughly from him. Quick to the girl's memory sprang Mallory's recent declaration,

which she had thought at the time but the empty, and vainglorious boasting of the man in love--"Why I'd die for you, Barbara, and welcome the chance!"

"Poor boy! How soon, and how terribly has the chance come!" moaned the girl.

Then a rough hand fell upon her arm.

"Here, youse," a coarse voice yelled in her ear. "Come out o' de trance," and at the same time she was jerked roughly toward the companionway.

Instinctively the girl held back, and then the mucker, true to his training, true to himself, gave her arm a sudden twist that wrenched a scream of agony from her white lips.

"Den come along," growled Billy Byrne, "an' quit dis monkey business, or I'll sure twist yer flipper clean off'n yeh."

With an oath, Anthony Harding sprang forward to protect his daughter; but the butt of Ward's pistol brought him unconscious to the deck.

"Go easy there, Byrne," shouted Skipper Simms; "there ain't no call to injure the hussy--a corpse won't be worth nothing to us."

In mute terror the girl now permitted herself to be led to the deck below. Quickly she was lowered into a waiting boat. Then Skipper Simms ordered Ward to search the yacht and remove all firearms, after which he was to engage himself to navigate the vessel with her own crew under armed guard of half a dozen of the Halfmoon's cutthroats.

These things attended to, Skipper Simms with the balance of his own crew and six of the crew of the Lotus to take the places upon the brigantine of those left as a prize crew aboard the yacht returned with the girl to the Halfmoon.

The sailing vessel's sails were soon hoisted and trimmed, and in half an hour, followed by the Lotus, she was scudding briskly southward. For forty-eight hours this course was held until Simms felt assured that they were well out of the lane of regular trans-Pacific traffic.

During this time Barbara Harding had been kept below, locked in a small, untidy cabin. She had seen no one other than a great Negro who brought her meals to her three times daily--meals that she returned scarcely touched.

Now the Halfmoon was brought up into the wind where she lay with flapping canvas while Skipper Simms returned to the Lotus with the six men of the yacht's crew that he had brought aboard the brigantine with him two days before, and as many more of his own men.

Once aboard the Lotus the men were put to work with those already on the yacht. The boat's rudder was unshipped and dropped into the ocean; her fires were put out; her engines were attacked with sledges until they were little better than so much junk, and to make the slender chances of pursuit that remained to her entirely nil every ounce of coal upon her was shoveled into the Pacific. Her extra masts and spare sails followed the way of the coal and the rudder, so that when Skipper Simms and First Officer Ward left her with their own men that had been aboard her she was little better than a drifting derelict.

From her cabin window Barbara Harding had witnessed the wanton wrecking of her father's yacht, and when it was over and the crew of the brigantine had returned to their own ship she presently felt the movement of the vessel as it got under way, and soon the Lotus dropped to the stern and beyond the range of her tiny port. With a moan of hopelessness and terror the girl sank prostrate across the hard berth that spanned one end of her prison cell.

How long she lay there she did not know, but finally she was aroused by the opening of her cabin door. As she sprang to her feet ready to defend herself against what she felt might easily be some new form of danger her eyes went wide in astonishment as they rested on the face of the man who stood framed in the doorway of her cabin.

"You?" she cried.