

CHAPTER V. LARRY DIVINE UNMASKED

"YES, Barbara, it is I," said Mr. Divine; "and thank God that I am here to do what little any man may do against this band of murdering pirates."

"But, Larry," cried the girl, in evident bewilderment, "how did you come to be aboard this ship? How did you get here? What are you doing amongst such as these?"

"I am a prisoner," replied the man, "just as are you. I think they intend holding us for ransom. They got me in San Francisco. Slugged me and hustled me aboard the night before they sailed."

"Where are they going to take us?" she asked.

"I do not know," he replied, "although from something I have overheard of their conversations I imagine that they have in mind some distant island far from the beaten track of commerce. There are thousands such in the Pacific that are visited by vessels scarce once in a century. There they will hold us until they can proceed with the ship to some point where they can get into communication with their agents in the States. When the ransom is paid over to these agents they will return for us and land us upon some other island where our friends can find us, or leaving us where we can divulge the location of our whereabouts to those who pay the ransom."

The girl had been looking intently at Mr. Divine during their conversation.

"They cannot have treated you very badly, Larry," she said. "You are as well groomed and well fed, apparently, as ever."

A slight flush mounting to the man's face made the girl wonder a bit though it aroused no suspicion in her mind.

"Oh, no," he hastened to assure her, "they have not treated me at all badly--why should they? If I die they can collect no ransom on me. It is the same with you, Barbara, so I think you need apprehend no harsh treatment."

"I hope you are right, Larry," she said, but the hopelessness of her air rather belied any belief that aught but harm could come from captivity with such as those who officered and manned the Halfmoon.

"It seems so remarkable," she went on, "that you should be a prisoner upon the same boat. I cannot understand it. Why only a few days ago we received and

entertained a friend of yours who brought a letter from you to papa--the Count de Cadenet."

Again that telltale flush mantled the man's cheek. He cursed himself inwardly for his lack of self-control. The girl would have his whole secret out of him in another half-hour if he were not more careful.

"They made me do that," he said, jerking his thumb in the general direction of Skipper Simms' cabin. "Maybe that accounts for their bringing me along. The 'Count de Cadenet' is a fellow named Theriere, second mate of this ship. They sent him to learn your plans; when you expected sailing from Honolulu and your course. They are all crooks and villains. If I hadn't done as they bid they would have killed me."

The girl made no comment, but Divine saw the contempt in her face.

"I didn't know that they were going to do this. If I had I'd have died before I'd have written that note," he added rather lamely.

The girl was suddenly looking very sad. She was thinking of Billy Mallory who had died in an effort to save her. The mental comparison she was making between him and Mr. Divine was not overly flattering to the latter gentleman.

"They killed poor Billy," she said at last. "He tried to protect me."

Then Mr. Divine understood the trend of her thoughts. He tried to find some excuse for his cowardly act; but with the realization of the true cowardliness and treachery of it that the girl didn't even guess he understood the futility of seeking to extenuate it. He saw that the chances were excellent that after all he would be compelled to resort to force or threats to win her hand at the last.

"Billy would have done better to have bowed to the inevitable as I did," he said. "Living I am able to help you now. Dead I could not have prevented them carrying out their intentions any more than Billy has, nor could I have been here to aid you now any more than he is. I cannot see that his action helped you to any great extent, brave as it was."

"The memory of it and him will always help me," she answered quietly. "They will help me to bear whatever is before me bravely, and, when the time comes, to die bravely; for I shall always feel that upon the other side a true, brave heart is awaiting me."

The man was silent. After a moment the girl spoke again. "I think I would rather be alone, Larry," she said. "I am very unhappy and nervous. Possibly I could sleep now."

With a bow he turned and left the cabin.

For weeks the Halfmoon kept steadily on her course, a little south of west. There was no material change in the relations of those aboard her. Barbara Harding, finding herself unmolested, finally acceded to the repeated pleas of Mr. Divine, to whose society she had been driven by loneliness and fear, and appeared on deck frequently during the daylight watches. Here, one afternoon, she came face to face with Theriere for the first time since her abduction. The officer lifted his cap deferentially; but the girl met his look of expectant recognition with a cold, blank stare that passed through and beyond him as though he had been empty air.

A tinge of color rose to the man's face, and he continued on his way for a moment as though content to accept her rebuff; but after a step or two he turned suddenly and confronted her.

"Miss Harding," he said, respectfully, "I cannot blame you for the feeling of loathing and distrust you must harbor toward me; but in common justice I think you should hear me before finally condemning."

"I cannot imagine," she returned coldly, "what defense there can be for the cowardly act you perpetrated."

"I have been utterly deceived by my employers," said Theriere, hastening to take advantage of the tacit permission to explain which her reply contained. "I was given to understand that the whole thing was to be but a hoax--that I was taking part in a great practical joke that Mr. Divine was to play upon his old friends, the Hardings and their guests. Until they wrecked and deserted the Lotus in mid-ocean I had no idea that anything else was contemplated, although I felt that the matter, even before that event, had been carried quite far enough for a joke.

"They explained," he continued, "that before sailing you had expressed the hope that something really exciting and adventurous would befall the party--that you were tired of the monotonous humdrum of twentieth-century existence--that you regretted the decadence of piracy, and the expunging of romance from the seas.

"Mr. Divine, they told me, was a very wealthy young man, to whom you were engaged to be married, and that he could easily afford the great expense of the rather remarkable hoax we were supposed to be perpetrating. I saw no harm in taking part in it, especially as I knew nothing of the supposititious purpose of the cruise until just before we reached Honolulu. Before that I had been led to believe that it was but a pleasure trip to the South Pacific that Mr. Divine intended.

"You see, Miss Harding, that I have been as badly deceived as you. Won't you let me help to atone for my error by being your friend? I can assure you that you will need one whom you can trust amongst this shipload of scoundrels."

"Who am I to believe?" cried the girl. "Mr. Divine assures me that he, too, has been forced into this affair, but by threats of death rather than deception."

The expression on Mr. Theriere's face was eloquent of sarcastic incredulity.

"How about the note of introduction that I carried to your father from Mr. Divine?" asked Theriere.

"He says that he was compelled to write it at the point of a revolver," replied the girl.

"Come with me, Miss Harding," said the officer. "I think that I may be able to convince you that Mr. Divine is not on any such bad terms with Skipper Simms as would be the case were his story to you true."

As he spoke he started toward the companionway leading to the officers' cabins. Barbara Harding hesitated at the top of the stairway.

"Have no fear, Miss Harding," Theriere reassured her. "Remember that I am your friend and that I am merely attempting to prove it to your entire satisfaction. You owe it to yourself to discover as soon as possible who your friends are aboard this ship, and who your enemies."

"Very well," said the girl. "I can be in no more danger one place aboard her than another."

Theriere led her directly to his own cabin, cautioning her to silence with upraised forefinger. Softly, like skulking criminals, they entered the little compartment. Then Theriere turned and closed the door, slipping the bolt noiselessly as he did so. Barbara watched him, her heart beating rapidly with fear and suspicion.

"Here," whispered Theriere, motioning her toward his berth. "I have found it advantageous to know what goes on beyond this partition. You will find a small round hole near the head of the berth, about a foot above the bedding. Put your ear to it and listen--I think Divine is in there now."

The girl, still frightened and fearful of the man's intentions, did, nevertheless, as he bid. At first she could make out nothing beyond the partition but a confused murmur of voices, and the clink of glass, as of the touch of the neck of a bottle against a goblet. For a moment she remained in tense silence, her ear pressed to the tiny aperture. Then, distinctly, she heard the voice of Skipper Simms.

"I'm a-tellin' you, man," he was saying, "that there wan't nothin' else to be done, an' I'm a-gettin' damn sick o' hearin' you finding fault all the time with the way I been a-runnin' o' this little job."

"I'm not finding fault, Simms," returned another voice which the girl recognized immediately as Divine's; "although I do think that it was a mistake to so totally disable the Lotus as you did. Why, how on earth are we ever to return to civilization if that boat is lost? Had she been simply damaged a little, in a way that they could themselves have fixed up, the delay would have been sufficient to permit us to escape, and then, when Miss Harding was returned in safety to her father, after our marriage, they would have been so glad to be reunited that he easily could have been persuaded to drop the matter. Then another thing; you intended to demand a ransom for both Miss Harding and myself, to carry out the fiction of my having been stolen also--how can you do that if Mr. Harding be dead? And do you suppose for a moment that Miss Harding will leave a single stone unturned to bring the guilty to justice if any harm has befallen her father or his guests? If so you do not know her as well as I."

The girl turned away from the partition, her face white and drawn, her eyes inexpressibly sad. She rose to her feet, facing Theriere.

"I have heard quite enough, thank you, Mr. Theriere," she said.

"You are convinced then that I am your friend?" he asked.

"I am convinced that Mr. Divine is not," she replied non-committally.

She took a step toward the door. Theriere stood looking at her. She was unquestionably very good to look at. He could not remember ever having seen a more beautiful girl. A great desire to seize her in his arms swept over the man. Theriere had not often made any effort to harness his desires. What he wanted it had been his custom to take--by force if necessary. He took a step toward Barbara Harding. There was a sudden light in his eyes that the girl had not before seen there, and she reached quickly toward the knob of the door.

Theriere was upon her, and then, quickly, he mastered himself, for he recalled his coolly thought-out plan based on what Divine had told him of that clause in the will of the girl's departed grandparent which stipulated that the man who shared the bequest with her must be the choice of both herself and her father. He could afford to bide his time, and play the chivalrous protector before he essayed the role of lover.

Barbara had turned a half-frightened look toward him as he advanced--in doubt as to his intentions.

"Pardon me, Miss Harding," he said; "the door is bolted--let me unlatch it for you," and very gallantly he did so, swinging the portal wide that she might pass out. "I feared interruption," he said, in explanation of the bolt.

In silence they returned to the upper deck. The intoxication of sudden passion now under control, Theriere was again master of himself and ready to play the cold, calculating, waiting game that he had determined upon. Part of his plan was to see just enough of Miss Harding to insure a place in her mind at all times; but not enough to suggest that he was forcing himself upon her. Rightly, he assumed that she would appreciate thoughtful deference to her comfort and safety under the harrowing conditions of her present existence more than a forced companionship that might entail too open devotion on his part. And so he raised his cap and left her, only urging her to call upon him at any time that he might be of service to her.

Left alone the girl became lost in unhappy reflections, and in the harrowing ordeal of attempting to readjust herself to the knowledge that Larry Divine, her lifelong friend, was the instigator of the atrocious villainy that had been perpetrated against her and her father. She found it almost equally difficult to believe that Mr. Theriere was so much more sinned against than sinning as he would have had her believe. And yet, did his story not sound even more plausible than that of Divine which she had accepted before Theriere had made it possible for her to know the truth? Why, then, was it so difficult for her to believe the Frenchman? She could not say, but in the inmost recesses of her heart she knew that she mistrusted and feared the man.

As she stood leaning against the rail, buried deep in thought, Billy Byrne passed close behind her. At sight of her a sneer curled his lip. How he hated her! Not that she ever had done aught to harm him, but rather because she represented to him in concrete form all that he had learned to hate and loathe since early childhood.

Her soft, white skin; her shapely hands and well-cared-for nails; her trim figure and perfectly fitting suit all taunted him with their superiority over him and his kind. He knew that she looked down upon him as an inferior being. She was of the class that addressed those in his walk of life as "my man." Lord, how he hated that appellation!

The intentness of his gaze upon her back had the effect so often noted by the observant, and suddenly aroused from the lethargy of her misery the girl swung around to meet the man's eyes squarely upon her. Instantly she recognized him as the brute who had killed Billy Mallory. If there had been hate in the mucker's eyes as he looked at the girl, it was as nothing by comparison with the loathing and disgust which sprang to hers as they rested upon his sullen face.

So deep was her feeling of contempt for this man, that the sudden appearance of him before her startled a single exclamation from her.

"Coward!" came the one word, involuntarily, from her lips.

The man's scowl deepened menacingly. He took a threatening step toward her.

"Wot's dat?" he growled. "Don't get gay wit me, or I'll black dem lamps fer yeh," and he raised a heavy fist as though to strike her.

The mucker had looked to see the girl cower before his threatened blow--that would have been ample atonement for her insult, and would have appealed greatly to his Kelly-gang sense of humor. Many a time had he threatened women thus, for the keen enjoyment of hearing their screams of fright and seeing them turn and flee in terror. When they had held their ground and opposed him, as some upon the West Side had felt sufficiently muscular to do, the mucker had not hesitated to "hand them one." Thus only might a man uphold his reputation for bravery in the vicinage of Grand Avenue.

He had looked to see this girl of the effete and effeminate upper class swoon with terror before him; but to his intense astonishment she but stood erect and brave before him, her head high held, her eyes cold and level and unafraid. And then she spoke again.

"Coward!" she said.

Billy almost struck her; but something held his hand. What, he could not understand. Could it be that he feared this slender girl? And at this juncture, when the threat of his attitude was the most apparent, Second Officer Theriere came upon the scene. At a glance he took in the situation, and with a bound had sprung between Billy Byrne and Barbara Harding.