

## CHAPTER VI. THE MUCKER AT BAY

"WHAT has this man said to you, Miss Harding?" cried Theriere. "Has he offered you harm?"

"I do not think that he would have dared strike me," replied the girl, "though he threatened to do so. He is the coward who murdered poor Mr. Mallory upon the Lotus. He might stoop to anything after that."

Theriere turned angrily upon Byrne.

"Go below!" he shouted. "I'll attend to you later. If Miss Harding were not here I'd thrash you within an inch of your life now. And if I ever hear of your speaking to her again, or offering her the slightest indignity I'll put a bullet through you so quick you won't know what has struck you."

"T'ell yeh will!" sneered Billy Byrne. "I got your number, yeh big stiff; an' yeh better not get gay wit me. Dey ain't no guy on board dis man's ship dat can hand Billy Byrne dat kin' o' guff an' get away with it--see?" and before Theriere knew what had happened a heavy fist had caught him upon the point of the chin and lifted him clear off the deck to drop him unconscious at Miss Harding's feet.

"Yeh see wot happens to guys dat get gay wit me?" said the mucker to the girl, and then stooping over the prostrate form of the mate Billy Byrne withdrew a huge revolver from Theriere's hip pocket.

"I guess I'll need dis gat in my business purty soon," he remarked.

Then he planted a vicious kick in the face of the unconscious man and went his way to the forecastle.

"Now maybe she'll tink Billy Byrne's a coward," he thought, as he disappeared below.

Barbara Harding stood speechless with shock at the brutality and ferocity of the unexpected attack upon Theriere. Never in all her life had she dreamed that there could exist upon the face of the earth a thing in human form so devoid of honor, and chivalry, and fair play as the creature that she had just witnessed threatening a defenseless woman, and kicking an unconscious man in the face; but then Barbara Harding had never lived between Grand Avenue and Lake Street, and Halsted and Robey, where standards of masculine bravery are strange and fearful.

When she had recovered her equanimity she hastened to the head of the cabin companionway and called aloud for help. Instantly Skipper Simms and First Officer Ward rushed on deck, each carrying a revolver in readiness for the conflict with their crew that these two worthies were always expecting.

Barbara pointed out the still form of Theriere, quickly explaining what had occurred.

"It was the fellow Byrne who did it," she said. "He has gone into the forecandle now, and he has a revolver that he took from Mr. Theriere after he had fallen."

Several of the crew had now congregated about the prostrate officer.

"Here you," cried Skipper Simms to a couple of them; "you take Mr. Theriere below to his cabin, an' throw cold water in his face. Mr. Ward, get some brandy from my locker, an' try an' bring him to. The rest of you arm yourselves with crowbars and axes, an' see that that son of a sea cook don't get out on deck again alive. Hold him there 'til I get a couple of guns. Then we'll get him, damn him!"

Skipper Simms hastened below while two of the men were carrying Theriere to his cabin and Mr. Ward was fetching the brandy. A moment later Barbara Harding saw the skipper return to the upper deck with a rifle and two revolvers. The sailors whom he had detailed to keep Byrne below were gathered about the hatchway leading to the forecandle. Some of them were exchanging profane and pleasant badinage with the prisoner.

"Yeh better come up an' get killed easy-like;" one called down to the mucker. "We're apt to muss yeh all up down there in the dark with these here axes and crowbars, an' then wen we send yeh home yer pore maw won't know her little boy at all."

"Yeh come on down here, an' try mussin' me up," yelled back Billy Byrne. "I can lick de whole gang wit one han' tied behin' me--see?"

"De skipper's gorn to get his barkers, Billy," cried Bony Sawyer. "Yeh better come up an' stan' trial if he gives yeh the chanct."

"Stan' nothin'," sneered Billy. "Swell chanct I'd have wit him an' Squint Eye holdin' court over me. Not on yer life, Bony. I'm here, an' here I stays till I croaks, but yeh better believe me, I'm goin' to croak a few before I goes, so if any of you ginks are me frien's yeh better keep outen here so's yeh won't get hurted. An' anudder ting I'm goin' to do afore I cashes in--I'm goin' to put a few of dem ginks in de cabin wise to where dey stands wit one anudder. If I don't start something before I goes out me name's not Billy Byrne."

At this juncture Skipper Simms appeared with the three weapons he had gone to his cabin to fetch. He handed one to Bony Sawyer, another to Red Sanders and a third to a man by the name of Wison.

"Now, my men," said Skipper Simms, "we will go below and bring Byrne up. Bring him alive if you can--but bring him."

No one made a move to enter the forecabin.

"Go on now, move quickly," commanded Skipper Simms sharply.

"Thought he said 'we'," remarked one of the sailors.

Skipper Simms, livid with rage, turned to search out the offender from the several men behind him.

"Who was that?" he roared. "Show me the blitherin' swab. Jes' show him to me, I tell you, an' I'll learn him. Now you," he yelled at the top of his voice, turning again to the men he had ordered into the forecabin after Billy Byrne, "you cowardly landlubbers you, get below there quick afore I kick you below."

Still no one moved to obey him. From white he went to red, and then back to white again. He fairly frothed at the mouth as he jumped up and down, cursing the men, and threatening. But all to no avail. They would not go.

"Why, Skipper," spoke up Bony Sawyer, "it's sure death for any man as goes below there. It's easier, an' safer, to starve him out."

"Starve nothin'," shrieked Skipper Simms. "Do you reckon I'm a-goin' to sit quiet here for a week an' let any blanked wharf rat own that there fo'c's'le just because I got a lot o' white-livered cowards aboard? No sir! You're a-goin' down after that would-be bad man an' fetch him up dead or alive," and with that he started menacingly toward the three who stood near the hatch, holding their firearms safely out of range of Billy Byrne below.

What would have happened had Skipper Simms completed the threatening maneuver he had undertaken can never be known, for at this moment Theriere pushed his way through the circle of men who were interested spectators of the impending tragedy.

"What's up, sir?" he asked of Simms. "Anything that I can help you with?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the skipper; "so you ain't dead after all, eh? Well that don't change the looks of things a mite. We gotta get that man outa there an' these flea-bitten imitations of men ain't got the guts to go in after him."

"He's got your gun, sir," spoke up Wison, "an' Gawd knows he be the one as'ud on'y be too glad for the chanct to use it."

"Let me see if I can't handle him, sir," said Theriere to Skipper Simms. "We don't want to lose any men if we can help it."

The skipper was only too glad to welcome this unexpected rescue from the predicament in which he had placed himself. How Theriere was to accomplish the subjugation of the mutinous sailor he could not guess, nor did he care so long as it was done without risk to his own skin.

"Now if you'll go away, sir," said Theriere, "and order the men away I'll see what I can do."

Skipper Simms did as Theriere had requested, so that presently the officer stood alone beside the hatch. Across the deck, amidships, the men had congregated to watch Theriere's operations, while beyond them stood Barbara Harding held fascinated by the grim tragedy that was unfolding before her upon this accursed vessel.

Theriere leaned over the open hatch, in full view of the waiting Byrne, ready below. There was the instant report of a firearm and a bullet whizzed close past Theriere's head.

"Avast there, Byrne!" he shouted. "It's I, Theriere. Don't shoot again, I want to speak to you."

"No monkey business now," growled the mucker in reply. "I won't miss again."

"I want to talk with you, Byrne," said Theriere in a low tone. "I'm coming down there."

"No you ain't, cul," returned Byrne; "leastways yeh ain't a-comin' down here alive."

"Yes I am, Byrne," replied Theriere, "and you don't want to be foolish about it. I'm unarmed. You can cover me with your gun until you have satisfied yourself as to that. I'm the only man on the ship that can save your life--the only man that has any reason to want to; but we've got to talk it over and we can't talk this way where there's a chance of being overheard. I'll be on the square with you if you will with me, and if we can't come to terms I'll come above again and you won't be any worse off than you are now. Here I come," and without waiting for an acceptance of his proposition the second officer of the Halfmoon slipped over the edge of the hatchway and disappeared from the sight of the watchers above.

That he was a brave man even Billy Byrne had to admit, and those above who knew nothing of the relations existing between the second mate and the sailor, who had so recently felled him, thought that his courage was little short of marvelous. Theriere's stock went up by leaps and bounds in the estimation of the sailors of the Halfmoon, for degraded though they were they could understand and appreciate physical courage of this sort, while to Barbara Harding the man's act seemed unparalleled in its utter disregard of the consequences of life and death to himself that it entailed. She suddenly was sorry that she had entertained any suspicions against Theriere--so brave a man could not be other than the soul of honor, she argued.

Once below Theriere found himself covered by his own revolver in the hands of a very desperate and a very unprincipled man. He smiled at Byrne as the latter eyed him suspiciously.

"See here, Byrne," said Theriere. "It would be foolish for me to say that I am doing this for love of you. The fact is that I need you. We cannot succeed, either one of us, alone. I think you made a fool play when you hit me today. You know that our understanding was that I was to be even a little rougher with you than usual, in order to avoid suspicion being attached to any seeming familiarity between us, should we be caught conferring together. I had the chance to bawl you out today, and I thought that you would understand that I was but taking advantage of the opportunity which it afforded to make it plain to Miss Harding that there could be nothing other than hatred between us--it might have come in pretty handy later to have her believe that.

"If I'd had any idea that you really intended hitting me you'd have been a dead man before your fist reached me, Byrne. You took me entirely by surprise; but that's all in the past--I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, and help you out of the pretty pickle you've got yourself into. Then we can go ahead with our work as though nothing had happened. What do you say?"

"I didn't know yeh was kiddin'," replied the mucker, "or I wouldn't have hit yeh. Yeh acted like yeh meant it."

"Very well, that part's understood," said Theriere. "Now will you come out if I can square the thing with the skipper so's you won't get more than a day or so in irons--he'll have to give you something to save his own face; but I promise that you'll get your food regularly and that you won't be beaten up the way you were before when he had you below. If he won't agree to what I propose I give you my word to tell you so."

"Go ahead," said Billy Byrne; "I don't trust nobody wen I don't have to; but I'll be dinged if I see any other way out of it."

Theriere returned to the deck and seeking out the skipper drew him to one side.

"I can get him up peaceably if I can assure him that he'll only get a day or so in the cooler, with full rations and no beatings. I think, sir, that that will be the easiest way out of it. We cannot spare a man now--if we want to get the fellow later we can always find some pretext."

"Very well, Mr. Theriere," replied the skipper, "I'll leave the matter entirely in your hands--you can do what you want with the fellow; it's you as had your face punched."

Theriere returned immediately to the forecastle, from which he presently emerged with the erstwhile recalcitrant Byrne, and for two days the latter languished in durance vile, and that was the end of the episode, though its effects were manifold. For one thing it implanted in the heart of Theriere a personal hatred for the mucker, so that while heretofore his intention of ridding himself of the man when he no longer needed him was due purely to a matter of policy, it was now reinforced by a keen desire for personal revenge. The occurrence had also had its influence upon Barbara Harding, in that it had shown her Mr. Theriere in a new light--one that reflected credit upon him. She had thought his magnanimous treatment of the sailor little short of heroic; and it had deepened the girl's horror of Billy Byrne until it now amounted to little short of an obsession. So vivid an impression had his brutality made upon her that she would start from deep slumber, dreaming that she was menaced by him.

After Billy was released for duty following his imprisonment, he several times passed the girl upon deck. He noticed that she shrank from him in disgust and terror; but what surprised him was that instead of the thrill of pride which he formerly would have felt at this acknowledgment of his toughness, for Billy prided himself on being a tough, he now felt a singular resentment against the girl for her attitude, so that he came to hate her even more than he had before hated. Formerly he had hated her for the things she stood for, now he hated her for herself.

Theriere was often with her now, and, less frequently, Divine; for at the second officer's suggestion Barbara had not acquainted that gentleman with the fact that she was aware of his duplicity.

"It is just as well not to let him know," said Theriere. "It gives you an advantage that would be wanting should he suspect the truth, so that now you are always in a position to be warned in plenty of time against any ulterior suggestion he may

make. Keep me posted as to all he tells you of his plans, and in this way we can defeat him much more easily than as though you followed your natural inclinations and refused to hold communication of any sort with him. It might be well, Miss Harding, even to encourage him in the hope that you will wed him voluntarily. I think that that would throw him entirely off his guard, and pave the way for your early release."

"Oh, I doubt if I could do that, Mr. Theriere," exclaimed the girl. "You cannot imagine how I loathe the man now that I know him in his true colors. For years he has importuned me to marry him, and though I never cared for him in that way at all, and never could, I felt that he was a very good friend and that his constancy demanded some return on my part--my friendship and sympathy at least; but now I shiver whenever he is near me, just as I would were I to find a snake coiled close beside me. I cannot abide treachery."

"Nor I, Miss Harding," agreed Theriere glibly. "The man deserves nothing but your contempt, though for policy's sake I hope that you will find it possible to lead him on until his very treachery proves the means of your salvation, for believe me, if he has been false to you how much more quickly will he be false to Simms and Ward! He would ditch them in a minute if the opportunity presented itself for him to win you without their aid. I had thought it might be feasible to lead him into attempting to take the ship by force, and return you to San Francisco, or, better still possibly, to the nearest civilized port."

"You might, with propriety suggest this to him, telling him that you believe that I would stand ready to assist in the undertaking. I can promise you the support of several of the men--quite a sufficient number with Divine and myself, easily to take the Halfmoon away from her present officers."

"I will think over your suggestion, Mr. Theriere," replied Barbara, "and I thank you for the generous impulse that has prompted you to befriend me--heaven knows how badly I need a friend now among so many enemies. What is it, Mr. Theriere? What is the matter?"

The officer had turned his eyes casually toward the southeast as the girl spoke, and just now he had given a sudden exclamation of surprise and alarm.

"That cloud, Miss Harding," he answered. "We're in for a bad blow, and it'll be on us in a minute," and with that he started forward on a run, calling back over his shoulder, "you'd better go below at once."