

CHAPTER VII. THE TYPHOON

THE storm that struck the Halfmoon took her entirely unaware. It had sprung, apparently, out of a perfectly clear sky. Both the lookout and the man at the wheel were ready to take oath that they had scanned the horizon not a half-minute before Second Mate Theriere had come racing forward bellowing for all hands on deck and ordering a sailor below to report the menacing conditions to Captain Simms.

Before that officer reached the deck Theriere had the entire crew aloft taking in sail; but though they worked with the desperation of doomed men they were only partially successful in their efforts.

The sky and sea had assumed a sickly yellowish color, except for the mighty black cloud that raced toward them, low over the water. The low moaning sound that had followed the first appearance of the storm, gave place to a sullen roar, and then, of a sudden, the thing struck the Halfmoon, ripping her remaining canvas from her as if it had been wrought from tissue paper, and with the flying canvas, spars, and cordage went the mainmast, snapping ten feet above the deck, and crashing over the starboard bow with a noise and jar that rose above the bellowing of the typhoon.

Fully half the crew of the Halfmoon either went down with the falling rigging or were crushed by the crashing weight of the mast as it hurtled against the deck. Skipper Simms rushed back and forth screaming out curses that no one heeded, and orders that there was none to fill.

Theriere, on his own responsibility, looked to the hatches. Ward with a handful of men armed with axes attempted to chop away the wreckage, for the jagged butt of the fallen mast was dashing against the ship's side with such vicious blows that it seemed but a matter of seconds ere it would stave a hole in her.

With the utmost difficulty a sea anchor was rigged and tumbled over the Halfmoon's pitching bow into the angry sea, that was rising to more gigantic proportions with each succeeding minute. This frail makeshift which at best could but keep the vessel's bow into the wind, saving her from instant engulfment in the sea's trough, seemed to Theriere but a sorry means of prolonging the agony of suspense preceding the inevitable end. That nothing could save them was the second officer's firm belief, nor was he alone in his conviction. Not only Simms and Ward, but every experienced sailor on the ship felt that the life of the Halfmoon was now but a matter of hours, possibly minutes, while those of lesser

experience were equally positive that each succeeding wave must mark the termination of the lives of the vessel and her company.

The deck, washed now almost continuously by hurtling tons of storm-mad water, as one mountainous wave followed another the length of the ship, had become entirely impossible. With difficulty the men were attempting to get below between waves. All semblance of discipline had vanished. For the most part they were a pack of howling, cursing, terror-ridden beasts, fighting at the hatches with those who would have held them closed against the danger of each new assault of the sea.

Ward and Skipper Simms had been among the first to seek the precarious safety below deck. Theriere alone of the officers had remained on duty until the last, and now he was exerting his every faculty in the effort to save as many of the men as possible without losing the ship in the doing of it. Only between waves was the entrance to the main cabins negotiable, while the forecabin hatch had been abandoned entirely after it had with difficulty been replaced following the retreat of three of the crew to that part of the ship.

The mucker stood beside Theriere as the latter beat back the men when the seas threatened. It was the man's first experience of the kind. Never had he faced death in the courage-blighting form which the grim harvester assumes when he calls unbridled Nature to do his ghastly bidding. The mucker saw the rough, brawling bullies of the forecabin reduced to white-faced, gibbering cowards, clawing and fighting to climb over one another toward the lesser danger of the cabins, while the mate fought them off, except as he found it expedient to let them pass him; he alone cool and fearless.

Byrne stood as one apart from the dangers and hysteric strivings of his fellows. Once when Theriere happened to glance in his direction the Frenchman mentally ascribed the mucker's seeming lethargy to the paralysis of abject cowardice. "The fellow is in a blue funk," thought the second mate; "I did not misjudge him--like all his kind he is a coward at heart."

Then a great wave came, following unexpectedly close upon the heels of a lesser one. It took Theriere off his guard, threw him down and hurtled him roughly across the deck, landing him in the scuppers, bleeding and stunned. The next wave would carry him overboard.

Released from surveillance the balance of the crew pushed and fought their way into the cabin--only the mucker remained without, staring first at the prostrate form of the mate and then at the open cabin hatch. Had one been watching him he might reasonably have thought that the man's mind was in a muddle of

confused thoughts and fears; but such was far from the case. Billy was waiting to see if the mate would revive sufficiently to return across the deck before the next wave swept the ship. It was very interesting--he wondered what odds O'Leary would have laid against the man.

In another moment the wave would come. Billy glanced at the open cabin hatch. That would never do--the cabin would be flooded with tons of water should the next wave find the hatch still open. Billy closed it. Then he looked again toward Theriere. The man was just recovering consciousness--and the wave was coming.

Something stirred within Billy Byrne. It gripped him and made him act quickly as though by instinct to do something that no one, Billy himself least of all, would have suspected that the Grand Avenue mucker would have been capable of.

Across the deck Theriere was dragging himself painfully to his hands and knees, as though to attempt the impossible feat of crawling back to the cabin hatch. The wave was almost upon Billy. In a moment it would engulf him, and then rush on across him to tear Theriere from the deck and hurl him beyond the ship into the tumbling, watery, chaos of the sea.

The mucker saw all this, and in the instant he launched himself toward the man for whom he had no use, whose kind he hated, reaching him as the great wave broke over them, crushing them to the deck, choking and blinding them.

For a moment they were buried in the swirling maelstrom, and then as the Halfmoon rose again, shaking the watery enemy from her back, the two men were disclosed--Theriere half over the ship's side--the mucker clinging to him with one hand, the other clutching desperately at a huge cleat upon the gunwale.

Byrne dragged the mate to the deck, and then slowly and with infinite difficulty across it to the cabin hatch. Through it he pushed the man, tumbling after him and closing the aperture just as another wave swept the Halfmoon.

Theriere was conscious and but little the worse for his experience, though badly bruised. He looked at the mucker in astonishment as the two faced each other in the cabin.

"I don't know why you did it," said Theriere.

"Neither do I," replied Billy Byrne.

"I shall not forget it, Byrne," said the officer.

"Yeh'd better," answered Billy, turning away.

The mucker was extremely puzzled to account for his act. He did not look upon it at all as a piece of heroism; but rather as a "fool play" which he should be ashamed of. The very idea! Saving the life of a gink who, despite his brutal ways, belonged to the much-despised "highbrow" class. Billy was peeved with himself.

Theriere, for his part, was surprised at the unexpected heroism of the man he had long since rated as a cowardly bully. He was fully determined to repay Byrne in so far as he could the great debt he owed him. All thoughts of revenge for the mucker's former assault upon him were dropped, and he now looked upon the man as a true friend and ally.

For three days the Halfmoon plunged helplessly upon the storm-wracked surface of the mad sea. No soul aboard her entertained more than the faintest glimmer of a hope that the ship would ride out the storm; but during the third night the wind died down, and by morning the sea had fallen sufficiently to make it safe for the men of the Halfmoon to venture upon deck.

There they found the brigantine clean-swept from stem to stern. To the north of them was land at a league or two, perhaps. Had the storm continued during the night they would have been dashed upon the coast. God-fearing men would have given thanks for their miraculous rescue; but not so these. Instead, the fear of death removed, they assumed their former bravado.

Skipper Simms boasted of the seamanship that had saved the Halfmoon--his own seamanship of course. Ward was cursing the luck that had disabled the ship at so crucial a period of her adventure, and revolving in his evil mind various possible schemes for turning the misfortune to his own advantage. Billy Byrne, sitting upon the corner of the galley table, hobnobbed with Blanco. These choice representatives of the ship's company were planning a raid on the skipper's brandy chest during the disembarkation which the sight of land had rendered not improbable.

The Halfmoon, with the wind down, wallowed heavily in the trough of the sea, but even so Barbara Harding, wearied with days of confinement in her stuffy cabin below, ventured above deck for a breath of sweet, clean air.

Scarce had she emerged from below than Theriere espied her, and hastened to her side.

"Well, Miss Harding," he exclaimed, "it seems good to see you on deck again. I can't tell you how sorry I have felt for you cooped up alone in your cabin without a single woman for companionship, and all those frightful days of danger, for there was scarce one of us that thought the old hooker would weather so long and hard a blow. We were mighty fortunate to come through it so handily."

"Handily?" queried Barbara Harding, with a wry smile, glancing about the deck of the Halfmoon. "I cannot see that we are either through it handily or through it at all. We have no masts, no canvas, no boats; and though I am not much of a sailor, I can see that there is little likelihood of our effecting a landing on the shore ahead either with or without boats---it looks most forbidding. Then the wind has gone down, and when it comes up again it is possible that it will carry us away from the land, or if it takes us toward it, dash us to pieces at the foot of those frightful cliffs."

"I see you are too good a sailor by far to be cheered by any questionable hopes," laughed Theriere; "but you must take the will into consideration--I only wished to give you a ray of hope that might lighten your burden of apprehension. However, honestly, I do think that we may find a way to make a safe landing if the sea continues to go down as it has in the past two hours. We are not more than a league from shore, and with the jury mast and sail that the men are setting under Mr. Ward now we can work in comparative safety with a light breeze, which we should have during the afternoon. There are few coasts, however rugged they may appear at a distance, that do not offer some foothold for the wrecked mariner, and I doubt not but that we shall find this no exception to the rule."

"I hope you are right, Mr. Theriere," said the girl, "and yet I cannot but feel that my position will be less safe on land than it has been upon the Halfmoon. Once free from the restraints of discipline which tradition, custom, and law enforce upon the high seas there is no telling what atrocities these men will commit. To be quite candid, Mr. Theriere, I dread a landing worse than I dreaded the dangers of the storm through which we have just passed."

"I think you have little to fear on that score, Miss Harding," said the Frenchman. "I intend making it quite plain that I consider myself your protector once we have left the Halfmoon, and I can count on several of the men to support me. Even Mr. Divine will not dare do otherwise. Then we can set up a camp of our own apart from Skipper Simms and his faction where you will be constantly guarded until succor may be obtained."

Barbara Harding had been watching the man's face as he spoke. The memory of his consideration and respectful treatment of her during the trying weeks of her captivity had done much to erase the intuitive feeling of distrust that had tinged her thoughts of him earlier in their acquaintance, while his heroic act in descending into the forecabin in the face of the armed and desperate Byrne had thrown a glamour of romance about him that could not help but tend to fascinate a girl of Barbara Harding's type. Then there was the look she had seen in his eyes for a brief instant when she had found herself locked in his cabin on the occasion that he had revealed to her Larry Divine's duplicity. That expression no red-

blooded girl could mistake, and the fact that he had subdued his passion spoke eloquently to the girl of the fineness and chivalry of his nature, so now it was with a feeling of utter trustfulness that she gladly gave herself into the keeping of Henri Theriere, Count de Cadenet, Second Officer of the Halfmoon.

"O Mr. Theriere," she cried, "if you only can but arrange it so, how relieved and almost happy I shall be. How can I ever repay you for all that you have done for me?"

Again she saw the light leap to the man's eyes--the light of a love that would not be denied much longer other than through the agency of a mighty will. Love she thought it; but the eye-light of love and lust are twin lights between which it takes much worldly wisdom to differentiate, and Barbara Harding was not worldly-wise in the ways of sin.

"Miss Harding," said Theriere, in a voice that he evidently found it difficult to control, "do not ask me now how you may repay me; I--;" but what he would have said he checked, and with an effort of will that was almost appreciable to the eye he took a fresh grip upon himself, and continued: "I am amply repaid by being able to serve you, and thus to retrieve myself in your estimation--I know that you have doubted me; that you have questioned the integrity of my acts that helped to lead up to the unfortunate affair of the Lotus. When you tell me that you no longer doubt--that you accept me as the friend I would wish to be, I shall be more than amply repaid for anything which it may have been my good fortune to have been able to accomplish for your comfort and safety."

"Then I may partially repay you at once," exclaimed the girl with a smile, "for I can assure you that you possess my friendship to the fullest, and with it, of course, my entire confidence. It is true that I doubted you at first--I doubted everyone connected with the Halfmoon. Why shouldn't I? But now I think that I am able to draw a very clear line between my friends and my enemies. There is but one upon the right side of that line--you, my friend," and with an impulsive little gesture Barbara Harding extended her hand to Theriere.

It was with almost a sheepish expression that the Frenchman took the proffered fingers, for there had been that in the frank avowal of confidence and friendship which smote upon a chord of honor in the man's soul that had not vibrated in response to a chivalrous impulse for so many long years that it had near atrophied from disuse.

Then, of a sudden, the second officer of the Halfmoon straightened to his full height. His head went high, and he took the small hand of the girl in his own strong, brown one.

"Miss Harding," he said, "I have led a hard, bitter life. I have not always done those things of which I might be most proud: but there have been times when I have remembered that I am the grandson of one of Napoleon's greatest field marshals, and that I bear a name that has been honored by a mighty nation. What you have just said to me recalls these facts most vividly to my mind--I hope, Miss Harding, that you will never regret having spoken them," and to the bottom of his heart the man meant what he said, at the moment; for inherent chivalry is as difficult to suppress or uproot as is inherent viciousness.

The girl let her hand rest in his for a moment, and as their eyes met she saw in his a truth and honesty and cleanness which revealed what Theriere might have been had Fate ordained his young manhood to different channels. And in that moment a question sprang, all unbidden and unforeseen to her mind; a question which caused her to withdraw her hand quickly from his, and which sent a slow crimson to her cheek.

Billy Byrne, slouching by, cast a bitter look of hatred upon the two. The fact that he had saved Theriere's life had not increased his love for that gentleman. He was still much puzzled to account for the strange idiocy that had prompted him to that act; and two of his fellows had felt the weight of his mighty fist when they had spoken words of rough praise for his heroism--Billy had thought that they were kidding him.

To Billy the knocking out of Theriere, and the subsequent kick which he had planted in the unconscious man's face, were true indications of manliness. He gauged such matters by standards purely Grand Avenuesque and now it enraged him to see that the girl before whose very eyes he had demonstrated his superiority over Theriere should so look with favor upon the officer.

It did not occur to Billy that he would care to have the girl look with favor upon him. Such a thought would have sent him into a berserker rage; but the fact remained that Billy felt a strong desire to cut out Theriere's heart when he saw him now in close converse with Barbara Harding--just why he felt so Billy could not have said. The truth of the matter is that Billy was far from introspective; in fact he did very little thinking. His mind had never been trained to it, as his muscles had been trained to fighting. Billy reacted more quickly to instinct than to the processes of reasoning, and on this account it was difficult for him to explain any great number of his acts or moods--it is to be doubted, however, that Billy Byrne had ever attempted to get at the bottom of his soul, if he possessed one.

Be that as it may, had Theriere known it he was very near death that moment when a summons from Skipper Simms called him aft and saved his life. Then the

mucker, unseen by the officer, approached the girl. In his heart were rage and hatred, and as the girl turned at the sound of his step behind her she saw them mirrored in his dark, scowling face.