

CHAPTER VIII. THE WRECK OF THE "HALFMOON"

INSTANTLY Barbara Harding looked into the face of the mucker she read her danger. Why the man should hate her so she could not guess; but that he did was evidenced by the malevolent expression of his surly countenance. For a moment he stood glaring at her, and then he spoke.

"I'm wise to wot youse an' dat guy was chinnin' about," he growled, "an' I'm right here to tell youse dat you don't wanta try an' put nothin' over on me, see? Youse ain't a-goin' to double-cross Billy Byrne. I gotta good notion to han' youse wot's comin' to you. If it hadn't been fer youse I wouldn't have been here now on dis Gawd-forsaken wreck. Youse is de cause of all de trouble. Wot youse ought to get is croaked an' den dere wouldn't be nothin' to bother any of us. You an' yer bunch of kale, dey give me a swift pain. Fer half a cent I'd soak youse a wallop to de solar plexus dat would put youse to sleep fer de long count, you--you--" but here words failed Billy.

To his surprise the girl showed not the slightest indication of fear. Her head was high, and her level gaze never wavered from his own eyes. Presently a sneer of contempt curled her lip.

"You coward!" she said quietly. "To insult and threaten a woman! You are nothing but an insufferable bully, and a cowardly murderer. You murdered a man on the Lotus whose little finger held more true manhood, bravery, and worth than the whole of your great, hulking carcass. You are only fit to strike from behind, or when your victim is unsuspecting, as you did Mr. Theriere that other day. Do you think I fear a THING such as you--a beast without honor that kicks an unconscious man in the face? I know that you can kill me. I know that you are coward enough to do it because I am a defenseless woman; and though you may kill me, you never can make me show fear for you. That is what you wish to do--that is your idea of manliness. I had never imagined that such a thing as you lived in the guise of man; but I have read you, Mr. Byrne, since I have had occasion to notice you, and I know now that you are what is known in the great cities as a mucker. The term never meant much to me before, but I see now that it fits your kind perfectly, for in it is all the loathing and contempt that a real man--a gentleman--must feel for such as you."

As she spoke Billy Byrne's eyes narrowed; but not with the cunning of premeditated attack. He was thinking. For the first time in his life he was thinking of how he appeared in the eyes of another. Never had any human being told Billy Byrne thus coolly and succinctly what sort of person he seemed to them. In the heat of anger men of his own stamp had applied vile epithets to him,

describing him luridly as such that by the simplest laws of nature he could not possibly be; but this girl had spoken coolly, and her descriptions had been explicit--backed by illustrations. She had given real reasons for her contempt, and somehow it had made that contempt seem very tangible.

One who had known Billy would have expected him to fly into a rage and attack the girl brutally after her scathing diatribe. Billy did nothing of the sort. Barbara Harding's words seemed to have taken all the fight out of him. He stood looking at her for a moment--it was one of the strange contradictions of Billy Byrne's personality that he could hold his eyes quite steady and level, meeting the gaze of another unwaveringly--and in that moment something happened to Billy Byrne's perceptive faculties. It was as though scales which had dimmed his mental vision had partially dropped away, for suddenly he saw what he had not before seen--a very beautiful girl, brave and unflinching before the brutal menace of his attitude, and though the mucker thought that he still hated her, the realization came to him that he must not raise a hand against her--that for the life of him he could not, nor ever again against any other woman. Why this change, Billy did not know, he simply knew that it was so, and with an ugly grunt he turned his back upon her and walked away.

A slight breeze had risen from the southwest since Theriere had left Barbara Harding and now all hands were busily engaged in completing the jury rigging that the Halfmoon might take advantage of the wind and make the shore that rose abruptly from the bosom of the ocean but a league away.

Before the work was completed the wind increased rapidly, so that when the tiny bit of canvas was hoisted into position it bellied bravely, and the Halfmoon moved heavily forward toward the land.

"We gotta make a mighty quick run of it," said Skipper Simms to Ward, "or we'll go to pieces on them rocks afore ever we find a landing."

"That we will if this wind rises much more," replied Ward; "and's far as I can see there ain't no more chance to make a landing there than there would be on the side of a house."

And indeed as the Halfmoon neared the towering cliffs it seemed utterly hopeless that aught else than a fly could find a foothold upon that sheer and rocky face that rose abruptly from the ocean's surface.

Some two hundred yards from the shore it became evident that there was no landing to be made directly before them, and so the course of the ship was altered to carry them along parallel to the shore in an effort to locate a cove, or beach where a landing might safely be effected.

The wind, increasing steadily, was now whipping the sea into angry breakers that dashed resoundingly against the rocky barrier of the island. To drift within reach of those frightful destroyers would mean the instant annihilation of the Halfmoon and all her company, yet this was precisely what the almost unmanageable hulk was doing at the wheel under the profane direction of Skipper Simms, while Ward and Theriere with a handful of men altered the meager sail from time to time in an effort to keep the ship off the rocks for a few moments longer.

The Halfmoon was almost upon the cliff's base when a narrow opening showed some hundred fathoms before her nose, an opening through which the sea ran in long, surging sweeps, rolling back upon itself in angry breakers that filled the aperture with swirling water and high-flung spume. To have attempted to drive the ship into such a place would have been the height of madness under ordinary circumstances. No man knew what lay beyond, nor whether the opening carried sufficient water to float the Halfmoon, though the long, powerful sweep of the sea as it entered the opening denoted considerable depth.

Skipper Simms, seeing the grim rocks rising close beside his vessel, realized that naught could keep her from them now. He saw death peering close to his face. He felt the icy breath of the Grim Reaper upon his brow. A coward at heart, he lost every vestige of his nerve at this crucial moment of his life. Leaping from the wheelhouse to the deck he ran backward and forward shrieking at the top of his lungs begging and entreating someone to save him, and offering fabulous rewards to the man who carried him safely to the shore.

The sight of their captain in a blue funk had its effect upon the majority of the crew, so that in a moment a pack of screaming, terror-ridden men had supplanted the bravos and bullies of the Halfmoon.

From the cabin companionway Barbara Harding looked upon the disgusting scene. Her lip curled in scorn at the sight of these men weeping and moaning in their fright. She saw Ward busy about one of the hatches. It was evident that he intended making a futile attempt to utilize it as a means of escape after the Halfmoon struck, for he was attaching ropes to it and dragging it toward the port side of the ship, away from the shore. Larry Divine crouched beside the cabin and wept.

When Simms gave up the ship Barbara Harding saw the wheelmen, there had been two of them, desert their post, and almost instantly the nose of the Halfmoon turned toward the rocks; but scarcely had the men reached the deck than Theriere leaped to their place at the wheel.

Unassisted he could do little with the heavy helm. Barbara saw that he alone of all the officers and men of the brigantine was making an attempt to save the vessel. However futile the effort might be, it at least bespoke the coolness and courage of the man. With the sight of him there wrestling with death in a hopeless struggle a little wave of pride surged through the girl. Here indeed was a man! And he loved her--that she knew. Whether or no she returned his love her place was beside him now, to give what encouragement and physical aid lay in her power.

Quickly she ran to the wheelhouse. Theriere saw her and smiled.

"There's no hope, I'm afraid," he said; "but, by George, I intend to go down fighting, and not like those miserable yellow curs."

Barbara did not reply, but she grasped the spokes of the heavy wheel and tugged as he tugged. Theriere made no effort to dissuade her from the strenuous labor--every ounce of weight would help so much, and the man had a wild, mad idea that he was attempting to put into effect.

"What do you hope to do?" asked the girl. "Make that opening in the cliffs?"

Theriere nodded.

"Do you think me crazy?" he asked.

"It is such a chance as only a brave man would dare to take," she replied. "Do you think that we can get her to take it?"

"I doubt it," he answered. "With another man at the wheel we might, though."

Below them the crew of the Halfmoon ran hither and thither along the deck on the side away from the breakers. They fought with one another for useless bits of planking and cordage. The giant figure of the black cook, Blanco, rose above the others. In his hand was a huge butcher knife. When he saw a piece of wood he coveted in the hands of another he rushed upon his helpless victim with wild, bestial howls, menacing him with his gleaming weapon. Thus he was rapidly accumulating the material for a life raft.

But there was a single figure upon the deck that did not seem mad with terror. A huge fellow he was who stood leaning against the capstan watching the wild antics of his fellows with a certain wondering expression of incredulity, the while a contemptuous smile curled his lips. As Barbara Harding chanced to look in his direction he also chanced to turn his eyes toward the wheelhouse. It was the mucker.

The girl was surprised that he, the greatest coward of them all, should be showing no signs of cowardice now--probably he was paralyzed with fright. The moment that the man saw the two who were in the wheelhouse and the work that they were doing he sprang quickly toward them. At his approach the girl shrank closer to Theriere.

What new outrage did the fellow contemplate? Now he was beside her. The habitual dark scowl blackened his expression. He laid a heavy hand on Barbara Harding's arm.

"Come out o' dat," he bellowed. "Dat's no kind o' job fer a broiler."

And before either she or Theriere could guess his intention the mucker had pushed Barbara aside and taken her place at the wheel.

"Good for you, Byrne!" cried Theriere. "I needed you badly."

"Why didn't yeh say so den?" growled the man.

With the aid of Byrne's Herculean muscles and great weight the bow of the Halfmoon commenced to come slowly around so that presently she almost paralleled the cliffs again, but now she was much closer in than when Skipper Simms had deserted her to her fate--so close that Theriere had little hope of being able to carry out his plan of taking her opposite the opening and then turning and running her before the wind straight into the swirling waters of the inlet.

Now they were almost opposite the aperture and between the giant cliffs that rose on either side of the narrow entrance a sight was revealed that filled their hearts with renewed hope and rejoicing, for a tiny cove was seen to lie beyond the fissure--a cove with a long, wide, sandy beach up which the waves, broken at the entrance to the little haven, rolled with much diminished violence.

"Can you hold her alone for a second, Byrne?" asked Theriere. "We must make the turn in another moment and I've got to let out sail. The instant that you see me cut her loose put your helm hard to starboard. She'll come around easy enough I imagine, and then hold her nose straight for that opening. It's one chance in a thousand; but it's the only one. Are you game?"

"You know it, cul--go to 't," was Billy Byrne's laconic rejoinder.

As Theriere left the wheel Barbara Harding stepped to the mucker's side.

"Let me help you," she said. "We need every hand that we can get for the next few moments."

"Beat it," growled the man. "I don't want no skirts in my way."

With a flush, the girl drew back, and then turning watched Theriere where he stood ready to cut loose the sail at the proper instant. The vessel was now opposite the cleft in the cliffs. Theriere had lashed a new sheet in position. Now he cut the old one. The sail swung around until caught in position by the stout line. The mucker threw the helm hard to starboard. The nose of the brigantine swung quickly toward the rocks. The sail filled, and an instant later the ship was dashing to what seemed her inevitable doom.

Skipper Simms, seeing what Theriere had done after it was too late to prevent it, dashed madly across the deck toward his junior.

"You fool!" he shrieked. "You fool! What are you doing? Driving us straight for the rocks--murdering the whole lot of us!" and with that he sprang upon the Frenchman with maniacal fury, bearing him to the deck beneath him.

Barbara Harding saw the attack of the fear-demented man, but she was powerless to prevent it. The mucker saw it too, and grinned--he hoped that it would be a good fight; there was nothing that he enjoyed more. He was sorry that he could not take a hand in it, but the wheel demanded all his attention now, so that he was even forced to take his eyes from the combatants that he might rivet them upon the narrow entrance to the cove toward which the Halfmoon was now plowing her way at constantly increasing speed.

The other members of the ship's company, all unmindful of the battle that at another time would have commanded their undivided attention, stood with eyes glued upon the wild channel toward which the brigantine's nose was pointed. They saw now what Skipper Simms had failed to see--the little cove beyond, and the chance for safety that the bold stroke offered if it proved successful.

With steady muscles and giant sinews the mucker stood by the wheel--nursing the erratic wreck as no one might have supposed it was in him to do. Behind him Barbara Harding watched first Theriere and Simms, and then Byrne and the swirling waters toward which he was heading the ship.

Even the strain of the moment did not prevent her from wondering at the strange contradictions of the burly young ruffian who could at one moment show such traits of cowardliness and the next rise so coolly to the highest pinnacles of courage. As she watched him occasionally now she noted for the first time the leonine contour of his head, and she was surprised to note that his features were regular and fine, and then she recalled Billy Mallory and the cowardly kick that she had seen delivered in the face of the unconscious Theriere--with a little shudder of disgust she turned away from the man at the wheel.

Theriere by this time had managed to get on top of Skipper Simms, but that worthy still clung to him with the desperation of a drowning man. The Halfmoon was rising on a great wave that would bear her well into the maelstrom of the cove's entrance. The wind had increased to the proportions of a gale, so that the brigantine was fairly racing either to her doom or her salvation--who could tell which?

Halfway through the entrance the wave dropped the ship, and with a mighty crash that threw Barbara Harding to her feet the vessel struck full amidships upon a sunken reef. Like a thing of glass she broke in two with the terrific impact, and in another instant the waters about her were filled with screaming men.

Barbara Harding felt herself hurtled from the deck as though shot from a catapult. The swirling waters engulfed her. She knew that her end had come, only the most powerful of swimmers might hope to win through that lashing hell of waters to the beach beyond. For a girl to do it was too hopeless even to contemplate; but she recalled Theriere's words of so short a time ago: "There's no hope, I'm afraid; but, by George, I intend to go down fighting," and with the recollection came a like resolve on her part--to go down fighting, and so she struck out against the powerful waters that swirled her hither and thither, now perilously close to the rocky sides of the entrance, and now into the mad chaos of the channel's center. Would to heaven that Theriere were near her, she thought, for if any could save her it would be he.

Since she had come to believe in the man's friendship and sincerity Barbara Harding had felt renewed hope of eventual salvation, and with the hope had come a desire to live which had almost been lacking for the greater part of her detention upon the Halfmoon.

Bravely she battled now against the awful odds of the mighty Pacific, but soon she felt her strength waning. More and more ineffective became her puny efforts, and at last she ceased almost entirely the futile struggle.

And then she felt a strong hand grasp her arm, and with a sudden surge she was swung over a broad shoulder. Quickly she grasped the rough shirt that covered the back of her would-be rescuer, and then commenced a battle with the waves that for many minutes, that seemed hours to the frightened girl, hung in the balance; but at last the swimmer beneath her forged steadily and persistently toward the sandy beach to flounder out at last with an unconscious burden in his mighty arms.

As the man staggered up out of reach of the water Barbara Harding opened her eyes to look in astonishment into the face of the mucker.