

CHAPTER IX. ODA YORIMOTO

ONLY four men of the Halfmoon's crew were lost in the wreck of the vessel. All had been crowded in the bow when the ship broke in two, and being far-flung by the forward part of the brigantine as it lunged toward the cove on the wave following the one which had dropped the craft upon the reef, with the exception of the four who had perished beneath the wreckage they had been able to swim safely to the beach.

Larry Divine, who had sat weeping upon the deck of the doomed ship during the time that hope had been at its lowest, had recovered his poise. Skipper Simms, subdued for the moment, soon commenced to regain his bluster. He took Theriere to task for the loss of the Halfmoon.

"An' ever we make a civilized port," he shouted, "I'll prefer charges ag'in' you, you swab you; a-losin' of the finest bark as ever weathered a storm. Ef it hadn't o' been fer you a-mutinyin' agin' me I'd a-brought her through in safety an' never losta bloomin' soul."

"Stow it!" admonished Theriere at last; "your foolish bluster can't hide the bald fact that you deserted your post in time of danger. We're ashore now, remember, and there is no more ship for you to command, so were I you I'd be mighty careful how I talked to my betters."

"What's that!" screamed the skipper. "My betters! You frog-eatin' greaser you, I'll teach you. Here, some of you, clap this swab into irons. I'll learn him that I'm still captain of this here bunch."

Theriere laughed in the man's face; but Ward and a couple of hands who had been shown favoritism by the skipper and first mate closed menacingly toward the second officer.

The Frenchman took in the situation at a glance. They were ashore now, where they didn't think that they needed him further and the process of elimination had commenced. Well, it might as well come to a showdown now as later.

"Just a moment," said Theriere, raising his hand. "You're not going to take me alive, and I have no idea that you want to anyhow, and if you start anything in the killing line some of you are going to Davy Jones' locker along with me. The best thing for all concerned is to divide up this party now once and for all."

As he finished speaking he turned toward Billy Byrne.

"Are you and the others with me, or against me?" he asked.

"I'm ag'in' Simms," replied the mucker non-committally.

Bony Sawyer, Red Sanders, Blanco, Wison, and two others drew in behind Billy Byrne.

"We all's wid Billy," announced Blanco.

Divine and Barbara Harding stood a little apart. Both were alarmed at the sudden, hostile turn events had taken. Simms, Ward, and Theriere were the only members of the party armed. Each wore a revolver strapped about his hips. All were still dripping from their recent plunge in the ocean.

Five men stood behind Skipper Simms and Ward, but there were two revolvers upon that side of the argument. Suddenly Ward turned toward Divine.

"Are you armed, Mr. Divine?" he asked.

Divine nodded affirmatively.

"Then you'd better come over with us--it looks like we might need you to help put down this mutiny," said Ward.

Divine hesitated. He did not know which side was more likely to be victorious, and he wanted to be sure to be on the winning side. Suddenly an inspiration came to him.

"This is purely a matter to be settled by the ship's officers," he said. "I am only a prisoner, call me a passenger if you like--I have no interest whatever in the matter, and shall not take sides."

"Yes you will," said Mr. Ward, in a low, but menacing tone. "You're in too deep to try to ditch us now. If you don't stand by us we'll treat you as one of the mutineers when we're through with them, and you can come pretty near a-guessin' what they'll get."

Divine was about to reply, and the nature of his answer was suggested by the fact that he had already taken a few steps in the direction of Simms' faction, when he was stopped by the low voice of the girl behind him.

"Larry," she said, "I know all--your entire connection with this plot. If you have a spark of honor or manhood left you will do what little you can to retrieve the terrible wrong you have done me, and my father. You can never marry me. I give you my word of honor that I shall take my own life if that is the only way to thwart your plans in that direction, and so as the fortune can never be yours it seems to me that the next best thing would be to try and save me from the terrible predicament in which your cupidity has placed me. You can make the

start now, Larry, by walking over and placing yourself at Mr. Theriere's disposal. He has promised to help and protect me."

A deep flush mounted to the man's neck and face. He did not turn about to face the girl he had so grievously wronged--for the life of him he could not have met her eyes. Slowly he turned, and with gaze bent upon the ground walked quickly toward Theriere.

Ward was quick to recognize the turn events had taken, and to see that it gave Theriere the balance of power, with two guns and nine men in his party against their two guns and seven men. It also was evident to him that to the other party the girl would naturally gravitate since Divine, an old acquaintance, had cast his lot with it; nor had the growing intimacy between Miss Harding and Theriere been lost upon him.

Ward knew that Simms was an arrant coward, nor was he himself overly keen for an upstanding, man-to-man encounter such as must quickly follow any attempt upon his part to uphold the authority of Simms, or their claim upon the custody of the girl.

Intrigue and trickery were more to Mr. Ward's liking, and so he was quick to alter his plan of campaign the instant that it became evident that Divine had elected to join forces with the opposing faction.

"I reckon," he said, directing his remarks toward no one in particular, "that we've all been rather hasty in this matter, being het up as we were with the strain of what we been through an' so it seems to me, takin' into consideration that Mr. Theriere really done his best to save the ship, an' that as a matter of fact we was all mighty lucky to come out of it alive, that we'd better let bygones be bygones, for the time bein' at least, an' all of us pitch in to save what we can from the wreckage, hunt water, rig up a camp, an' get things sort o' shipshape here instid o' squabblin' amongst ourselves."

"Suit yourself," said Theriere, "it's all the same to us," and his use of the objective pronoun seemed definitely to establish the existence of his faction as a separate and distinct party.

Simms, from years of experience with his astute mate, was wont to acquiesce in anything that Ward proposed, though he had not the brains always to appreciate the purposes that prompted Ward's suggestions. Now, therefore, he nodded his approval of Squint Eye's proposal, feeling that whatever was in Ward's mind would be more likely to work out to Skipper Simms' interests than some unadvised act of Skipper Simms himself.

"Supposin'," continued Ward, "that we let two o' your men an' two o' ourn under Mr. Divine, shin up them cliffs back o' the cove an' search fer water an' a site fer camp--the rest o' us'll have our hands full with the salvage."

"Good," agreed Theriere. "Miller, you and Swenson will accompany Mr. Divine."

Ward detailed two of his men, and the party of five began the difficult ascent of the cliffs, while far above them a little brown man with beady, black eyes set in narrow fleshy slits watched them from behind a clump of bushes. Strange, medieval armor and two wicked-looking swords gave him a most warlike appearance. His temples were shaved, and a broad strip on the top of his head to just beyond the crown. His remaining hair was drawn into an unbraided queue, tied tightly at the back, and the queue then brought forward to the top of the forehead. His helmet lay in the grass at his feet. At the nearer approach of the party to the cliff top the watcher turned and melted into the forest at his back. He was Oda Yorimoto, descendant of a powerful daimio of the Ashikaga Dynasty of shoguns who had fled Japan with his faithful samurai nearly three hundred and fifty years before upon the overthrow of the Ashikaga Dynasty.

Upon this unfrequented and distant Japanese isle the exiles had retained all of their medieval military savagery, to which had been added the aboriginal ferocity of the head-hunting natives they had found there and with whom they had intermarried. The little colony, far from making any advances in arts or letters had, on the contrary, relapsed into primeval ignorance as deep as that of the natives with whom they had cast their lot--only in their arms and armor, their military training and discipline did they show any of the influence of their civilized progenitors. They were cruel, crafty, resourceful wild men trapped in the habiliments of a dead past, and armed with the keen weapons of their forbears. They had not even the crude religion of the Malaysians they had absorbed unless a highly exaggerated propensity for head-hunting might be dignified by the name of religion. To the tender mercies of such as these were the castaways of the Halfmoon likely to be consigned, for what might sixteen men with but four revolvers among them accomplish against near a thousand savage samurai?

Theriere, Ward, Simms, and the remaining sailors at the beach busied themselves with the task of retrieving such of the wreckage and the salvage of the Halfmoon as the waves had deposited in the shallows of the beach. There were casks of fresh water, kegs of biscuit, clothing, tinned meats, and a similar heterogeneous mass of flotsam. This arduous labor consumed the best part of the afternoon, and it was not until it had been completed that Divine and his party returned to the beach.

They reported that they had discovered a spring of fresh water some three miles east of the cove and about half a mile inland, but it was decided that no attempt be made to transport the salvage of the party to the new camp site until the following morning.

Theriere and Divine erected a rude shelter for Barbara Harding close under the foot of the cliff, as far from the water as possible, while above them Oda Yorimoto watched their proceedings with beady, glittering eyes. This time a half-dozen of his fierce samurai crouched at his side. Besides their two swords these latter bore the primitive spears of their mothers' savage tribe.

Oda Yorimoto watched the white men upon the beach. Also, he watched the white girl--even more, possibly, than he watched the men. He saw the shelter that was being built, and when it was complete he saw the girl enter it, and he knew that it was for her alone. Oda Yorimoto sucked in his lips and his eyes narrowed even more than nature had intended that they should.

A fire burned before the rude domicile that Barbara Harding was to occupy, and another, larger fire roared a hundred yards to the west where the men were congregated about Blanco, who was attempting to evolve a meal from the miscellany of his larder that had been cast up by the sea. There seemed now but little to indicate that the party was divided into two bitter factions, but when the meal was over Theriere called his men to a point midway between Barbara's shelter and the main camp fire. Here he directed them to dispose themselves for the night as best they could, building a fire of their own if they chose, for with the coming of darkness the chill of the tropical night would render a fire more than acceptable.

All were thoroughly tired and exhausted, so that darkness had scarce fallen ere the entire camp seemed wrapped in slumber. And still Oda Yorimoto sat with his samurai upon the cliff's summit, beady eyes fixed upon his intended prey.

For an hour he sat thus in silence, until, assured that all were asleep before him, he arose and with a few whispered instructions commenced the descent of the cliff toward the cove below. Scarce had he started, however, with his men stringing in single file behind him, than he came to a sudden halt, for below him in the camp that lay between the girl's shelter and the westerly camp a figure had arisen stealthily from among his fellows.

It was Theriere. Cautiously he moved to a sleeper nearby whom he shook gently until he had awakened him.

"Hush, Byrne," cautioned the Frenchman. "It is I, Theriere. Help me awaken the others--see that there is no noise."

"Wot's doin'?" queried the mucker.

"We are going to break camp, and occupy the new location before that bunch of pirates can beat us to it," whispered Theriere in reply; "and," he added, "we're going to take the salvage and the girl with us."

The mucker grinned.

"Gee!" he said. "Won't dey be a sore bunch in de mornin'?"

The work of awakening the balance of the party required but a few minutes and when the plan was explained to them, all seemed delighted with the prospect of discomfiting Skipper Simms and Squint Eye. It was decided that only the eatables be carried away on the first trip, and that if a second trip was possible before dawn the clothing, canvas, and cordage that had been taken from the water might then be purloined.

Miller and Swenson were detailed to bring up the rear with Miss Harding, assisting her up the steep side of the cliff. Divine was to act as guide to the new camp, lending a hand wherever necessary in the scaling of the heights with the loot.

Cautiously the party, with the exception of Divine, Miller, and Swenson, crept toward the little pile of supplies that were heaped fifty or sixty feet from the sleeping members of Simms' faction. The three left behind walked in silence to Barbara Harding's shelter. Here Divine scratched at the piece of sail cloth which served as a door until he had succeeded in awakening the sleeper within. And from above Oda Yorimoto watched the activity in the little cove with intent and unwavering eyes.

The girl, roused from a fitful slumber, came to the doorway of her primitive abode, alarmed by this nocturnal summons.

"It is I, Larry," whispered the man. "Are you dressed?"

"Yes," replied the girl, stepping out into the moonlight. "What do you want? What has happened?"

"We are going to take you away from Simms--Theriere and I," replied the man, "and establish a safe camp of our own where they cannot molest you. Theriere and the others have gone for the supplies now and as soon as they return we shall commence the ascent of the cliffs. If you have any further preparations to make, Barbara, please make haste, as we must get away from here as quickly as possible. Should any of Simms' people awaken there is sure to be a fight."

The girl turned back into the shelter to gather together a handful of wraps that had been saved from the wreck.

Down by the salvage Theriere, Byrne, Bony Sawyer, Red Sanders, Blanco, and Wison were selecting the goods that they wished to carry with them. It was found that two trips would be necessary to carry off the bulk of the rations, so Theriere sent the mucker to summon Miller and Swenson.

"We'll carry all that eight of us can to the top of the cliffs," he said "hide it there and then come back for the balance. We may be able to get it later if we are unable to make two trips to the camp tonight."

While they were waiting for Byrne to return with the two recruits one of the sleepers in Simms' camp stirred. Instantly the five marauders dropped stealthily to the ground behind the boxes and casks. Only Theriere kept his eyes above the level of the top of their shelter that he might watch the movements of the enemy.

The figure sat up and looked about. It was Ward. Slowly he arose and approached the pile of salvage. Theriere drew his revolver, holding it in readiness for an emergency. Should the first mate look in the direction of Barbara Harding's shelter he must certainly see the four figures waiting there in the moonlight. Theriere turned his own head in the direction of the shelter that he might see how plainly the men there were visible. To his delight he saw that no one was in sight. Either they had seen Ward, or for the sake of greater safety from detection had moved to the opposite side of the shelter.

Ward was quite close to the boxes upon the other side of which crouched the night raiders. Theriere's finger found the trigger of his revolver. He was convinced that the mate had been disturbed by the movement in camp and was investigating. The Frenchman knew that the search would not end upon the opposite side of the salvage--in a moment Ward would be upon them. He was sorry--not for Ward, but because he had planned to carry the work out quietly and he hated to have to muss things up with a killing, especially on Barbara's account.

Ward stopped at one of the water casks. He tipped it up, filling a tin cup with water, took a long drink, set the cup back on top of the cask, and, turning, retraced his steps to his blanket. Theriere could have hugged himself. The man had suspected nothing. He merely had been thirsty and come over for a drink--in another moment he would be fast asleep once more. Sure enough, before Byrne returned with Miller and Swenson, Theriere could bear the snores of the first mate.

On the first trip to the cliff top eight men carried heavy burdens, Divine alone remaining to guard Barbara Harding. The second trip was made with equal dispatch and safety. No sound or movement came from the camp of the enemy, other than that of sleeping men. On the second trip Divine and Theriere each carried a burden up the cliffs, Miller and Swenson following with Barbara Harding, and as they came Oda Yorimoto and his samurai slunk back into the shadows that their prey might pass unobserving.

Theriere had the bulk of the loot hidden in a rocky crevice just beyond the cliff's summit. Brush torn from the mass of luxuriant tropical vegetation that covered the ground was strewn over the cache. All had been accomplished in safety and without detection. The camp beneath them still lay wrapped in silence.

The march toward the new camp, under the guidance of Divine, was immediately undertaken. On the return trip after the search for water Divine had discovered a well-marked trail along the edge of the cliffs to a point opposite the spring, and another leading from the main trail directly to the water. In his ignorance he had thought these the runways of animals, whereas they were the age-old highways of the head-hunters.

Now they presented a comparatively quick and easy approach to the destination of the mutineers, but so narrow a one as soon to convince Theriere that it was not feasible for him to move back and forth along the flank of his column. He had tried it once, but it so greatly inconvenienced and retarded the heavily laden men that he abandoned the effort, remaining near the center of the cavalcade until the new camp was reached.

Here he found a fair-sized space about a clear and plentiful spring of cold water. Only a few low bushes dotted the grassy clearing which was almost completely surrounded by dense and impenetrable jungle. The men had deposited their burdens, and still Theriere stood waiting for the balance of his party--Miller and Swenson with Barbara Harding.

But they did not come, and when, in alarm, the entire party started back in search of them they retraced their steps to the very brink of the declivity leading to the cove before they could believe the testimony of their own perceptions--Barbara Harding and the two sailors had disappeared.