

A SAGA OF THE SEAS

It happened one day that some ladies came to call, who were not at all the sort I was used to. They suffered from a grievance, so far as I could gather, and the burden of their plaint was Man--Men in general and Man in particular. (Though the words were but spoken, I could clearly discern the capital M in their acid utterance.)

Of course I was not present officially, so to speak. Down below, in my sub-world of chair-legs and hearthrugs and the undersides of sofas, I was working out my own floor-problems, while they babbled on far above my head, considering me as but a chair-leg, or even something lower in the scale. Yet I was listening hard all the time, with that respectful consideration one gives to all grown-up people's remarks, so long as one knows no better.

It seemed a serious indictment enough, as they rolled it out. In tact, considerateness, and right appreciation, as well as in taste and aesthetic sensibilities--we failed at every point, we breeched and bearded prentice-jobs of Nature; and I began to feel like collapsing on the carpet from sheer spiritual anaemia. But when one of them, with a swing of her skirt, prostrated a whole regiment of my brave tin soldiers, and never apologized nor even offered her aid toward revivifying the battle-line, I could not help feeling that in tactfulness and consideration for others she was still a little to seek.

And I said as much, with some directness of language.

That was the end of me, from a society point of view. Rudeness to visitors was the unpardonable sin, and in two seconds I had my marching orders, and was sullenly wending my way to the St. Helena of the nursery. As I climbed the stair, my thoughts reverted somehow to a game we had been playing that very morning. It was the good old game of Rafts,--a game that will be played till all the oceans are dry and all the trees in the world are felled--and after. And we were all crowded together on the precarious little platform, and Selina occupied every bit as much room as I did, and Charlotte's legs didn't dangle over any more than Harold's. The pitiless sun overhead beat on us all with tropic impartiality, and the hungry sharks, whose fins scored the limitless Pacific stretching out on every side, were impelled by an appetite that made no exceptions as to sex. When we shared the ultimate biscuit and circulated the last water-keg, the girls got an absolute fourth apiece, and neither more nor less; and the only partiality shown was entirely in favour of Charlotte, who was allowed to perceive and to hail the saviour-sail on the horizon. And this was only because it was her turn to do so, not because she happened to be this or that. Surely, the rules of the raft were the rules of life, and in what, then, did these visitor-ladies' grievance consist?

Puzzled and a little sulky, I pushed open the door of the deserted nursery, where the raft that had rocked beneath so many hopes and fears still occupied the ocean-floor. To the dull eye, that merely tarries

upon the outsides of things, it might have appeared unromantic and even unraftlike, consisting only as it did of a round sponge-bath on a bald deal towel-horse placed flat on the floor. Even to myself much of the recent raft-glamour seemed to have departed as I half-mechanically stepped inside and curled myself up in it for a solitary voyage. Once I was in, however, the old magic and mystery returned in full flood, when I discovered that the inequalities of the towel-horse caused the bath to rock, slightly, indeed, but easily and incessantly. A few minutes of this delightful motion, and one was fairly launched. So those women below didn't want us? Well, there were other women, and other places, that did. And this was going to be no scrambling raft-affair, but a full-blooded voyage of the Man, equipped and purposeful, in search of what was his rightful own.

Whither should I shape my course, and what sort of vessel should I charter for the voyage? The shipping of all England was mine to pick from, and the far corners of the globe were my rightful inheritance. A frigate, of course, seemed the natural vehicle for a boy of spirit to set out in. And yet there was something rather "uppish" in commanding a frigate at the very first set-off, and little spread was left for the ambition. Frigates, too, could always be acquired later by sheer adventure; and your real hero generally saved up a square-rigged ship for the final achievement and the rapt return. No, it was a schooner that I was aboard of--a schooner whose masts raked devilishly as the leaping seas hissed along her low black gunwale. Many hairbrained youths started out on a mere cutter; but I was prudent, and besides I had some

inkling of the serious affairs that were ahead.

I have said I was already on board; and, indeed, on this occasion I was too hungry for adventure to linger over what would have been a special delight at a period of more leisure--the dangle about the harbour, the choosing your craft, selecting your shipmates, stowing your cargo, and fitting up your private cabin with everything you might want to put your hand on in any emergency whatever. I could not wait for that. Out beyond soundings the big seas were racing westward and calling me, albatrosses hovered motionless, expectant of a comrade, and a thousand islands held each of them a fresh adventure, stored up, hidden away, awaiting production, expressly saved for me. We were humming, close-hauled, down the Channel, spray in the eyes and the shrouds thrilling musically, in much less time than the average man would have taken to transfer his Gladstone bag and his rugs from the train to a sheltered place on the promenade-deck of the tame daily steamer.

So long as we were in pilotage I stuck manfully to the wheel. The undertaking was mine, and with it all its responsibilities, and there was some tricky steering to be done as we sped by headland and bay, ere we breasted the great seas outside and the land fell away behind us. But as soon as the Atlantic had opened out I began to feel that it would be rather nice to take tea by myself in my own cabin, and it therefore became necessary to invent a comrade or two, to take their turn at the wheel.

This was easy enough. A friend or two of my own age, from among the boys I knew; a friend or two from characters in the books I knew; and a friend or two from No-man's-land, where every fellow's a born sailor; and the crew was complete. I addressed them on the poop, divided them into watches, gave instructions I should be summoned on the first sign of pirates, whales, or Frenchmen, and retired below to a well-earned spell of relaxation.

That was the right sort of cabin that I stepped into, shutting the door behind me with a click. Of course, fire-arms were the first thing I looked for, and there they were, sure enough, in their racks, dozens of 'em--double-barrelled guns, and repeating-rifles, and long pistols, and shiny plated revolvers. I rang up the steward and ordered tea, with scones, and jam in its native pots--none of your finicking shallow glass dishes; and, when properly streaked with jam, and blown out with tea, I went through the armoury, clicked the rifles and revolvers, tested the edges of the cutlasses with my thumb, and filled the cartridge-belts chock-full. Everything was there, and of the best quality, just as if I had spent a whole fortnight knocking about Plymouth and ordering things. Clearly, if this cruise came to grief, it would not be for want of equipment.

Just as I was beginning on the lockers and the drawers, the watch reported icebergs on both bows--and, what was more to the point, coveys of Polar bears on the icebergs. I grasped a rifle or two, and hastened on deck. The spectacle was indeed magnificent--it generally is, with

icebergs on both bows, and these were exceptionally enormous icebergs. But I hadn't come there to paint Academy pictures, so the captain's gig was in the water and manned almost ere the boatswain's whistle had ceased sounding, and we were pulling hard for the Polar bears--myself and the rifles in the stern-sheets.

I have rarely enjoyed better shooting than I got during that afternoon's tramp over the icebergs. Perhaps I was in specially good form; perhaps the bears "rose" well. Anyhow, the bag was a portentous one. In later days, on reading of the growing scarcity of Polar bears, my conscience has pricked me; but that afternoon I experienced no compunction. Nevertheless, when the huge pile of skins had been hoisted on board, and a stiff grog had been served out to the crew of the captain's gig, I ordered the schooner's head to be set due south. For icebergs were played out, for the moment, and it was getting to be time for something more tropical.

Tropical was a mild expression of what was to come, as was shortly proved. It was about three bells in the next day's forenoon watch when the look-out man first sighted the pirate brigantine. I disliked the looks of her from the first, and, after piping all hands to quarters, had the brass carronade on the fore-deck crammed with grape to the muzzle.

This proved a wise precaution. For the flagitious pirate craft, having crept up to us under the colours of the Swiss Republic, a state with

which we were just then on the best possible terms, suddenly shook out the skull-and-cross-bones at her masthead, and let fly with round-shot at close quarters, knocking into pieces several of my crew, who could ill be spared. The sight of their disconnected limbs aroused my ire to its utmost height, and I let them have the contents of the brass carronade, with ghastly effect. Next moment the hulls of the two ships were grinding together, the cold steel flashed from its scabbard, and the death-grapple had begun.

In spite of the deadly work of my grape-gorged carronade, our foe still outnumbered us, I reckoned, by three to one. Honour forbade my fixing it at a lower figure--this was the minimum rate at which one dared to do business with pirates. They were stark veterans, too, every man seamed with ancient sabre-cuts, whereas my crew had many of them hardly attained the maturity which is the gift of ten long summers--and the whole thing was so sudden that I had no time to invent a reinforcement of riper years. It was not surprising, therefore, that my dauntless boarding-party, axe in hand and cutlass between teeth, fought their way to the pirates' deck only to be repulsed again and yet again, and that our planks were soon slippery with our own ungrudged and inexhaustible blood. At this critical point in the conflict, the bo'sun, grasping me by the arm, drew my attention to a magnificent British man-of-war, just hove to in the offing, while the signalman, his glass at his eye, reported that she was inquiring whether we wanted any assistance or preferred to go through with the little job ourselves.

This veiled attempt to share our laurels with us, courteously as it was worded, put me on my mettle. Wiping the blood out of my eyes, I ordered the signalman to reply instantly, with the half-dozen or so of flags that he had at his disposal, that much as we appreciated the valour of the regular service, and the delicacy of spirit that animated its commanders, still this was an orthodox case of young gentleman-adventurer versus the unshaved pirate, and Her Majesty's Marine had nothing to do but to form the usual admiring and applauding background. Then, rallying round me the remnant of my faithful crew, I selected a fresh cutlass (I had worn out three already) and plunged once more into the pleasing carnage.

The result was not long doubtful. Indeed, I could not allow it to be, as I was already getting somewhat bored with the pirate business, and was wanting to get on to something more southern and sensuous. All serious resistance came to an end as soon as I had reached the quarter-deck and cut down the pirate chief--a fine black-bearded fellow in his way, but hardly up to date in his parry-and-thrust business. Those whom our cutlasses had spared were marched out along their own plank, in the approved old fashion; and in tune the scuppers relieved the decks of the blood that made traffic temporarily impossible. And all the time the British-man-of-war admired and applauded in the offing.

As soon as we had got through with the necessary throat-cutting and swabbing-up all hands set to work to discover treasure; and soon the deck shone bravely with ingots and Mexican dollars and church plate.

There were ropes of pearls, too, and big stacks of nougat; and rubies, and gold watches, and Turkish Delight in tubs. But I left these trifles to my crew, and continued the search alone. For by this time I had determined that there should be a Princess on board, carried off to be sold in captivity to the bold bad Moors, and now with beating heart awaiting her rescue by me, the Perseus of her dreams.

I came upon her at last in the big state-cabin in the stern; and she wore a holland pinafore over her Princess-clothes, and she had brown wavy hair, hanging down her back, just like--well, never mind, she had brown wavy hair. When gentle-folk meet, courtesies pass; and I will not weary other people with relating all the compliments and counter-compliments that we exchanged, all in the most approved manner. Occasions like this, when tongues wagged smoothly and speech flowed free, were always especially pleasing to me, who am naturally inclined to be tongue-tied with women. But at last ceremony was over, and we sat on the table and swung our legs and agreed to be fast friends. And I showed her my latest knife--one-bladed, horn-handled, terrific, hung round my neck with string; and she showed me the chiefest treasures the ship contained, hidden away in a most private and particular locker--a musical box with a glass top that let you see the works, and a railway train with real lines and a real tunnel, and a tin iron-clad that followed a magnet, and was ever so much handier in many respects than the real full-sized thing that still lay and applauded in the offing.

There was high feasting that night in my cabin. We invited the captain

of the man-of-war--one could hardly do less, it seemed to me--and the Princess took one end of the table and I took the other, and the captain was very kind and nice, and told us fairy-stories, and asked us both to come and stay with him next Christmas, and promised we should have some hunting, on real ponies. When he left I gave him some ingots and things, and saw him into his boat; and then I went round the ship and addressed the crew in several set speeches, which moved them deeply, and with my own hands loaded up the carronade with grape-shot till it ran over at the mouth. This done, I retired into the cabin with the Princess, and locked the door. And first we started the musical box, taking turns to wind it up; and then we made toffee in the cabin-stove; and then we ran the train round and round the room, and through and through the tunnel; and lastly we swam the tin ironclad in the bath, with the soap-dish for a pirate.

Next morning the air was rich with spices, porpoises rolled and gambolled round the bows, and the South Sea Islands lay full in view (they were the real South Sea Islands, of course--not the badly furnished journeymen-islands that are to be perceived on the map). As for the pirate brigantine and the man-of-war, I don't really know what became of them. They had played their part very well, for the time, but I wasn't going to bother to account for them, so I just let them evaporate quietly. The islands provided plenty of fresh occupation. For here were little bays of silvery sand, dotted with land-crabs; groves of palm-trees wherein monkeys frisked and pelted each other with cocoanuts;

and caves, and sites for stockades, and hidden treasures significantly indicated by skulls, in riotous plenty; while birds and beasts of every colour and all latitudes made pleasing noises which excited the sporting instinct.

The islands lay conveniently close together, which necessitated careful steering as we threaded the devious and intricate channels that separated them. Of course no one else could be trusted at the wheel, so it is not surprising that for some time I quite forgot that there was such a thing as a Princess on board. This is too much the masculine way, whenever there's any real business doing. However, I remembered her as soon as the anchor was dropped, and I went below and consoled her, and we had breakfast together, and she was allowed to "pour out," which quite made up for everything. When breakfast was over we ordered out the captain's gig, and rowed all about the islands, and paddled, and explored, and hunted bisons and beetles and butterflies, and found everything we wanted. And I gave her pink shells and tortoises and great milky pearls and little green lizards; and she gave me guineapigs, and coral to make into, waistcoat-buttons; and tame sea-otters, and a real pirate's powder-horn. It was a prolific day and a long-lasting one, and weary were we with all our hunting and our getting and our gathering, when at last we clambered into the captain's gig and rowed back to a late tea.

The following day my conscience rose up and accused me. This was not what I had come out to do. These triflings with pearls and parrakeets,

these al fresco luncheons off yams and bananas--there was no "making of history" about them. I resolved that without further dallying I would turn to and capture the French frigate, according to the original programme. So we upped anchor with the morning tide, and set all sail for San Salvador.

Of course I had no idea where San Salvador really was. I haven't now, for that matter. But it seemed a right-sounding sort of name for a place that was to have a bay that was to hold a French frigate that was to be cut out; so, as I said, we sailed for San Salvador, and made the bay about eight bells that evening, and saw the top-masts of the frigate over the headland that sheltered her. And forthwith there was summoned a Council of War.

It is a very serious matter, a Council of War. We had not held one hitherto, pirates and truck of that sort not calling for such solemn treatment. But in an affair that might almost be called international, it seemed well to proceed gravely and by regular steps. So we met in my cabin--the Princess, and the bo'sun, and a boy from the real-life lot, and a man from among the book-men, and a fellow from No-man's-land, and myself in the chair. The bo'sun had taken part in so many cuttings-out during his past career that practically he did all the talking, and was the Council of War himself. It was to be an affair of boats, he explained. A boat's-crew would be told off to cut the cables, and two boats'-crews to climb stealthily on board and overpower the sleeping Frenchmen, and two more boats'-crews to haul the doomed vessel out of

the bay. This made rather a demand on my limited resources as to crews; but I was prepared to stretch a point in a case like this, and I speedily brought my numbers up to the requisite efficiency.

The night was both moonless and starless--I had arranged all that--when the boats pushed off from the side of our vessel, and made their way toward the ship that, unfortunately for itself, had been singled out by Fate to carry me home in triumph. I was in excellent spirits, and, indeed, as I stepped over the side, a lawless idea crossed my mind, of discovering another Princess on board the frigate--a French one this time; I had heard that that sort was rather nice. But I abandoned the notion at once, recollecting that the heroes of all history had always been noted for their unswerving constancy. The French captain was snug in bed when I clambered in through his cabin window and held a naked cutlass to his throat. Naturally he was surprised and considerably alarmed, till I discharged one of my set speeches at him, pointing out that my men already had his crew under hatchways, that his vessel was even then being towed out of harbour, and that, on his accepting the situation with a good grace, his person and private property would be treated with all the respect due to the representative of a great nation for which I entertained feelings of the profoundest admiration and regard and all that sort of thing. It was a beautiful speech. The Frenchman at once presented me with his parole, in the usual way, and, in a reply of some power and pathos, only begged that I would retire a moment while he put on his trousers. This I gracefully consented to do, and the incident ended.

Two of my boats were sunk by the fire from the forts on the shore, and several brave fellows were severely wounded in the hand-to-hand struggle with the French crew for the possession of the frigate. But the bo'sun's admirable strategy, and my own reckless gallantry in securing the French captain at the outset, had the fortunate result of keeping down the death-rate. It was all for the sake of the Princess that I had arranged so comparatively tame a victory. For myself, I rather liked a fair amount of blood-letting, red-hot shot, and flying splinters. But when you have girls about the place, they have got to be considered to a certain extent.

There was another supper-party that night, in my cabin, as soon as we had got well out to sea; and the French captain, who was the guest of the evening, was in the greatest possible form. We became sworn friends, and exchanged invitations to come and stay at each other's homes, and really it was quite difficult to induce him to take his leave. But at last he and his crew were bundled into their boats; and after I had pressed some pirate bullion upon them--delicately, of course, but in a pleasant manner that admitted of no denial--the gallant fellows quite broke down, and we parted, our bosoms heaving with a full sense of each other's magnanimity and good fellowship.

The next day, which was nearly all taken up with shifting our quarters into the new frigate, so honourably and easily acquired, was a very pleasant one, as everyone who has gone up in the world and moved into a

larger house will readily understand. At last I had grim, black guns all along each side, instead of a rotten brass carronade: at last I had a square-rigged ship, with real yards, and a proper quarter-deck. In fact, now that I had soared as high as could be hoped in a single voyage, it seemed about time to go home and cut a dash and show off a bit. The worst of this ocean-theatre was, it held no proper audience. It was hard, of course, to relinquish all the adventures that still lay untouched in these Southern seas. Whaling, for instance, had not yet been entered upon; the joys of exploration, and strange inland cities innocent of the white man, still awaited me; and the book of wrecks and rescues was not yet even opened. But I had achieved a frigate and a Princess, and that was not so bad for a beginning, and more than enough to show off with before those dull unadventurous folk who continued on their mill-horse round at home.

The voyage home was a record one, so far as mere speed was concerned, and all adventures were scornfully left behind, as we rattled along, for other adventurers who had still their laurels to win. Hardly later than the noon of next day we dropped anchor in Plymouth Sound, and heard the intoxicating clamour of bells, the roar of artillery, and the hoarse cheers of an excited populace surging down to the quays, that told us we were being appreciated at something like our true merits. The Lord Mayor was waiting there to receive us, and with him several Admirals of the Fleet, as we walked down the lane of pushing, enthusiastic Devonians, the Princess and I, and our war-worn, weather-beaten, spoil-laden crew. Everybody was very nice about the French frigate, and the pirate booty,

and the scars still fresh on our young limbs; yet I think what I liked best of all was, that they all pronounced the Princess to be a duck, and a peerless, brown-haired darling, and a true mate for a hero, and of the right Princess-breed.

The air was thick with invitations and with the smell of civic banquets in a forward stage; but I sternly waved all festivities aside. The coaches-and-four I had ordered immediately on arriving were blocking the whole of the High Street; the champing of bits and the pawing of gravel summoned us to take our seats and be off, to where the real performance awaited us, compared with which all this was but an interlude. I placed the Princess in the most highly gilded coach of the lot, and mounted to my place at her side; and the rest of the crew scrambled on board of the others as best they might. The whips cracked and the crowd scattered and cheered as we broke into a gallop for home. The noisy bells burst into a farewell peal--

Yes, that was undoubtedly the usual bell for school-room tea. And high time too, I thought, as I tumbled out of the bath, which was beginning to feel very hard to the projecting portions of my frame-work. As I trotted downstairs, hungrier even than usual, farewells floated up from the front door, and I heard the departing voices of our angular elderly visitors as they made their way down the walk. Man was still catching it, apparently--Man was getting it hot. And much Man cared! The seas were his, and their islands; he had his frigates for the taking, his pirates and their hoards for an unregarded cutlass-stroke or two; and

there were Princesses in plenty waiting for him somewhere--Princesses of the right sort.