

CHAPTER III

AN UNAPPRECIATED BOUNTY

In the prime of his belligerent career the Pet of 'Frisco had undergone many fierce contests and withstood some terrible punishments, but never had he undertaken a task calling for greater courage and power of endurance than the one he had this night voluntarily assumed. Dashed about by the seas, he yet managed to keep to the surface; minutes seemed to lengthen into eternity; many times he called out loudly. The arms about his neck relaxed, but he held the child to him. Not for an instant did the temptation come to him to release her that he might the more surely save himself. Overwhelmed again and again by the waves, each time he emerged with her tight against his breast; half-strangled, he continued to fight on. But at length even his dogged obstinacy and determination began to flag; he felt his strength going, when raising his eyes he saw one of the small craft from the lost vessel bearing directly down upon him.

The sight inspired new energy and effort; nearer, nearer, she drew; now she was but a few yards away. Then suddenly the sheet of the life-boat went out and the little sail fluttered like a mad thing, while the men bent with might and main over their ash handles in the endeavor to obey the commands of the chief mate in the stern. But despite skill and strength she was not easy to steer; once she nearly capsized; then eager

hands reached over the side. The convict held up the child; a voice--the police agent's--called out that they "had her"; and then the mate broke in with harsh, warning yells.

"Pull port!--quick!--or we're over!" And at once the outreaching arms returned quickly to their task; as the child was drawn in, oars dragged and tugged; the life-boat came slowly about, shipping several barrels of water. At the same time some one made the loosened sheet taut, the canvas caught the gust and the craft gained sufficient headway to enable her to run over, and not be run down by the seas. As she careened and plunged, racing down a frothing dark billow, the convict, relieved of his burden, clung to the lower gunwale. By a desperate effort he drew himself up, when a face vaguely remembered--as part of a bad dream--looked into his, with a dash of surprise.

"Eh?--Gimme a hand--"

The asked-for hand swept suddenly under the one grasping the side of the boat, and shot up sharply. In the darkness and confusion no one saw the act. The convict disappeared, but his half-articulate curses followed.

"The fellow's let go," muttered Lord Ronsdale with a shiver.

At the steering oar the chief mate, hearing the cries of the man, cast a swift glance over his shoulder and hesitated. To bring the boat, half-filled with water, around now, meant inevitable disaster; one

experiment of the sort had well-nigh ended in their all being drowned. He knew he was personally responsible for the lives in his charge; and with but an instant in which to decide, he declined to repeat the risk.

"He's probably gone by this time, anyhow," he told himself, and drove on.

The convict, however, was not yet quite "gone"; as the boat receded rapidly from view, becoming smaller and smaller, he continued mechanically to use his arms. But he had as little heart as little strength to go on with the uneven contest.

"He's done me! done me!" he repeated to himself. "And I ain't never goin' to git a chance to fix him," he thought, and looked despairingly at the sky. The dark rushing clouds looked like black demons; the stars they uncovered were bright gleaming dagger points. "Ain't never!--the slob!" And with a flood of almost sobbing invective he let himself go.

But as the waters closed over him and he sank, his hand, reaching blindly out to grip in imagination the foe, touched something round--like a serpent, or an eel. His fingers closed about it--it proved to be a line; he drew himself along, and to his surprise found himself again on the surface, and near a great fragment of wreckage. This he might have discovered earlier, but for the anger and hatred that had blinded him to all save the realization of his inability to wreak vengeance. Now, though he managed to reach the edge of the swaying mass

from which the line dangled, he was too weak to draw himself up on the floating timbers. But he did pass a loop beneath his arms, and, thus sustained, he waited for his strength to return. Finally, his mind in a daze, the convict clambered, after repeated efforts, upon the wreckage, fastened the line about him again, and, falling into a saucer-like hollow, he sank into unconsciousness.

The night wore on; he did not move. The sea began to subside; still he lay as if dead. Dawn's rosy lips kissed away the black shadows, touched tenderly the waves' tops, and at length the man stirred. He tried to sit up, but at first could not. Finally he raised himself and looked about him.

No other sign of the vessel than that part of it which had served him so well could he see; this fragment seemed rent from the bow; yes, there was the yellow wooden mermaid bobbing to the waves; but not as of old! Poor cast-out trollop,--now the seas made sport of her who once had held her head so high!

The convict continued to gaze out over the ocean. Far away, a dark fringe broke the sea-line--a suggestion of foliage--an island, or a mirage? Tantalizing, it lay like a shadow, illusive, unattainable as the "forgotten isles." The man staggered to his feet; his garments were torn; his hair hung over his brow. He shook his arms at the island;--this phantasy, this vain, empty vision, he regarded it now as some savage creature might a bone just out of its reach; from his lips

vile words fell--to be suddenly hushed. Between him and what he gazed at, along the range of vision, an object on one of the projecting timbers caught his eye. It was very small, but it gleamed like a spark sprung from the embers of the dawn.

"The dicky-bird!" His dried lips tried to laugh. "Ef it ain't the dicky-bird!" The bird looked at him. "Ef that doesn't beat--" but he could not think what it "beat." The bird cocked its head. "Ain't ye afeard o' me?" It gave a feeble chirp. "Well, I'm damned!" said the man, and after this mild expression of his feelings, forgot to curse again. He even began to eye the island with a vague questioning wonder, as if asking himself what means might be thought of that would enable him to reach it; but the problem seemed to be beyond solution. The wreckage, like a great lump, lay supinely on the surface of the water; he could not hope to move it.

The day slowly passed; the sun dried his clothes; once or twice the bird made a sound--a plaintive little tone--and involuntarily the man moved with care, thinking not to frighten it. But caution in that regard seemed unnecessary, for the bird appeared very tame and not at all averse to company.

Toward noon the man began to suffer more acutely from thirst, and drawing out a sailors' oilskin pouch, one of the few possessions he had been allowed by the police to retain, he took from it a piece of tobacco which he began to chew. At the same time he eyed the rest of the

contents--half a ship's biscuit, some matches and a mariner's thimble. The biscuit he broke, and threw a few crumbs, where the timbers were dry, near the bird. For a long time it looked at the tiny white morsels; but finally, conquering shyness, hopped from its perch and tentatively approached the banquet. Hours went by; the man chewed; the bird pecked.

That night it rained in real, tropical earnest, and he made a water vessel of his shoe, drank many times, ate a few mouthfuls of biscuit, and then placed the filled receptacle where he had thrown the crumbs. As he did so he found himself wondering if the dawn would reveal his little feathered shipmate or whether it had been swept away by the violence of the rain. The early shafts of day showed him the bird on its perch; it had apparently found shelter from the heavy down-pour beneath some out-jutting timber and seemed no worse for the experience. The man's second glance was in the direction of the island; what he saw brought a sudden exclamation to his lips. The land certainly seemed much nearer; some current was sweeping them toward it slowly, but irresistibly. The 'Frisco Pet swore joyfully; his eyes shone. "I may do him yet!" he muttered. The bird chirped; he looked at it. "Breakfast, eh?" he said and tossed a few more crumbs near the shoe.

The second day on the floating bow, he brooded a great deal; the sharper pangs of hunger assailed him; he grew desperately impatient, the distance to the island decreased so gradually. A breeze from the coveted shore fanned his cheek; he fancied it held them back, and fulminated against it,--the beneficent current,--the providential timbers! A

feeling of blind helplessness followed; the sun, beating down fiercely, made him light-headed. Hardly knowing what he did, he drew forth the last little bit of the biscuit, ground it between his teeth and greedily swallowed it. The act seemed to sober him; he raised his big hand to his brow and looked at "Dearie"; through the confusion of his thoughts he felt he had done some despicable thing.

"That weren't fair play, were it now?" he said, looking at the bird.

"That ain't like a pal," he repeated. The bird remained silent; he fancied reproach in its bead-like eyes, they seemed to bore into him.

"And you such a small chap, too!" he muttered; then he turned his back on the island, and, with head resting on his elbow, uttered no further complaint.

That second day on the raft seemed much longer than the first; the second night of infinitely greater duration than the preceding one; but dawn revealed the island very near, so near, indeed, the bird made up its mind to try to reach it. It looked at the man for a moment and then flew away. Long he watched it, a little dark spot--now that he could no longer see the ruby on its breast! At length it was lost to sight; swallowed up by the green blur.

The small winged creature gone, the man missed it. "'Peared like 'twas glad to leave such a pal!" he thought regretfully. The floating timbers became well-nigh intolerable; he kept asking himself if he could swim to land, but, knowing his weakness from long fasting, he curbed his

impatience. His eyes grew tired with staring at the longed-for spot; he suffered the torments of Tantalus, and finally could endure them no longer. So making his clothes into a bundle, he tied them around his neck and slipped into the water.

Half an hour later found him, prone and exhausted, on the yellow sands. Near-by, tall and stately trees nodded at him; close at hand a great crab regarded him with reflective interest, hesitating between prudence and carnivorous desire. Gluttonous inclination to sample the goods the gods had provided prevailed over caution; it moved quickly forward, when what it had considered only an unexpected and welcome *_pièce de résistance_* abruptly got up. The tables were turned; that which came to dine was dined upon; a crushing blow demonstrated the law of the survival of the fittest; the weaker adorned the board. The man tore it to bits, ate it like the famished animal he was. More freely his blood coursed; he looked around; saw other creatures and laughed. There seemed little occasion for any one to starve here; the isle, a beautiful emerald on the breast of the sea, became a fair battle-ground; all he needed was a club and he soon found that.

For a week nothing of moment interrupted the even tenor of his existence; he led the life of a savage and found it to his liking, pounced upon turtles and cooked them, kept his fire going because he had but few matches. Lying before the blaze at night, near a little spring, he told himself that this was better than being behind prison bars; true, he lacked company, but he had known worse solitude--the

"solitary." In it, he had lain on the hard stones; here he had soft moss. If only he could reach out and touch those he hated--the unknown enemy whose face had bent over him a fleeting instant ere he had struck his hand from the gunwale; Dandy Joe and the police agent--if only they, too, were here, the place would have been world enough for him. But then, he felt, the time for the reckoning must come,--it lay somewhere in the certain future. Unconscious fatalist, he nourished the conviction as he nourished the coals of his fire.

Other means to enhance his physical comfort chance afforded him; the fleshpots were supplemented with a beverage, stronger and more welcome than that which bubbled and trickled so musically at his feet. One day a box was washed ashore; a message from the civilized centers to the field of primitive man! On its cover were the words, "Via sailing vessel, Lord Nelson" followed by the address. The convict pried the boards apart and gave a shout. Rum!--and plenty of it!--bottle after bottle, in an overcoat of straw, nestling lovingly one upon another. The man licked his lips; knocked off a neck, drank deep, and then, stopping many times, carried his treasure to his bower.

Day after day turned its page, merged into the past; sometimes, perforce, he got up, and, not a pleasant thing to look at, staggered to the beach with his club. There he would slay some crawling thing from the sea, return with his prize to mingle eating with drinking, until satiated with both, he would fall back unconscious among the flowers. But the prolonged indulgence began to have a marked effect on his store;

bottle after bottle was tossed off; the empty shells flung aside to the daisies. At length the day came when only two bottles remained in the case, one full pair, sole survivors of the lot. The man took them out, set them up and regarded them; a sense of impending disaster, of imminent tragedy, shivered through his dulled consciousness. He reached for the bottles and fondled them, started to knock the head from one and put it down. Resisting desire, he told himself he would have a look at the beach; the ocean had generously cast one box of well-primed bottles at his feet; perhaps it would repeat its hospitable action and make him once more the recipient of its bounty. The thought buoyed him to the shore; the sea lapped the sand with Lydian whispers, and there, beyond the edge of the soft singing ripples, he saw something that made him rub his dazed eyes.

A box!--a big box!--a box as tall as he was! No paltry dozen or two this time! Perhaps there was whisky, too; and the bubbling stuff the long-necked lords had sometimes pressed upon him in the past, when he had "ousted" his man and put quids in their pockets; or some of that fiery _vin_--something he had once indulged in with a Johnny Frenchman before he took to the tunnel, when he had been free to swagger through old Leicester Square. Anyhow, he would soon find out, and, rushing through the water, he laid a proprietary hand on the box. But to his disappointment, he could not move it; strong though he was, its great weight defied him. Ingenuity came to his aid, for, after a moment's pondering, he left the box to the sea and made his way back to the forest. When he returned he bore on his shoulder a straight, stout limb

which he had wrenched from a tree, and in his hand he carried a great stone. The former became a lever, the latter, a fulcrum; and, by patient exercise of one of the simple principles of physics, he managed, at length, to transfer the large box from ocean to land.

To break it open was his next problem, and no easy one, for the boards were thick, the nails many and formidable. A long time he battered and battered in vain with his rocks, but, after an hour or so, he succeeded in splintering his way through the tough pine. His exertions did not end here; an inner sheeting of tin caused him to frown; more furiously he attacked this with sharp bits of coral, cutting and bruising his hands. Unmindful of pain, he was enabled at length to pull back a portion of the protecting metal and reveal the contents of the packing-case. In his befuddled, half-crazed condition, he had thought only of bottles; what he found proved a different sort of merchandise.

Maddened, he tossed and scattered the contents of the box on the beach. The ocean had deceived him, laughed at him, cheated him. He turned from the shore unsteadily, walked back to his camp and knocked the neck from one of the two remaining bottles. A few hours later, sodden, sottish, he lay without motion, face to the sky. And as he breathed thickly, one bleeding hand still holding the empty bottle, a bird from an overhanging branch looked down upon him: a tiny bird, little bigger than his thumb, that carried a bright, beautiful spot of red on its breast, cocked its head questioningly.

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