

## CHAPTER XLI

### A Fray

So bent were the strangers upon concealing who they were, and the object of their voyage, that it was some time ere we could obtain the information we desired.

They pointed toward the tent, as if it contained their Eleusinian mysteries. And the old priest gave us to know, that it would be profanation to enter it.

But all this only roused my curiosity to unravel the wonder.

At last I succeeded.

In that mysterious tent was concealed a beautiful maiden. And, in pursuance of a barbarous custom, by Aleema, the priest, she was being borne an offering from the island of Amma to the gods of Tedaidee.

Now, hearing of the maiden, I waited for no more. Need I add, how stirred was my soul toward this invisible victim; and how hotly I swore, that precious blood of hers should never smoke upon an altar.

If we drowned for it, I was bent upon rescuing the captive. But as yet, no gentle signal of distress had been waved to us from the tent.

Thence, no sound could be heard, but an occasional rustle of the

matting. Was it possible, that one about to be immolated could proceed thus tranquilly to her fate?

But desperately as I resolved to accomplish the deliverance of the maiden, it was best to set heedfully about it. I desired no shedding of blood; though the odds were against us.

The old priest seemed determined to prevent us from boarding his craft. But being equally determined the other way, I cautiously laid the bow of the Chamois against the canoe's quarter, so as to present the smallest possible chance for a hostile entrance into our boat. Then, Samoa, knife in ear, and myself with a cutlass, stepped upon the dais, leaving Jarl in the boat's head, equipped with his harpoon; three loaded muskets lying by his side. He was strictly enjoined to resist the slightest demonstration toward our craft.

As we boarded the canoe, the Islanders slowly retreated; meantime earnestly conferring in whispers; all but the old priest, who, still seated, presented an undaunted though troubled front. To our surprise, he motioned us to sit down by him; which we did; taking care, however, not to cut off our communication with Jarl.

With the hope of inspiring good will, I now unfolded a roll of printed cotton, and spreading it before the priest, directed his attention to the pictorial embellishments thereon, representing some hundreds of sailor boys simultaneously ascending some hundreds of

uniform sections of a ship's rigging. Glancing at them a moment, by a significant sign, he gave me to know, that long previous he himself had ascended the shrouds of a ship. Making this allusion, his countenance was overcast with a ferocious expression, as if something terrific was connected with the reminiscence. But it soon passed away, and somewhat abruptly he assumed an air of much merriment.

While we were thus sitting together, and my whole soul full of the thoughts of the captive, and how best to accomplish my purpose, and often gazing toward the tent; I all at once noticed a movement among the strangers. Almost in the same instant, Samoa, right across the face of Aleema, and in his ordinary tones, bade me take heed to myself, for mischief was brewing. Hardly was this warning uttered, when, with carved clubs in their hands, the Islanders completely surrounded us. Then up rose the old priest, and gave us to know, that we were wholly in his power, and if we did not swear to depart in our boat forthwith, and molest him no more, the peril be ours.

"Depart and you live; stay and you die."

Fifteen to three. Madness to gainsay his mandate. Yet a beautiful maiden was at stake.

The knife before dangling in Samoa's ear was now in his hand. Jarl cried out for us to regain the boat, several of the Islanders making a rush for it. No time to think. All passed quicker than it can be

said. They closed in upon us, to push us from the canoe: Rudely the old priest flung me from his side, menacing me with his dagger, the sharp spine of a fish. A thrust and a threat! Ere I knew it, my cutlass made a quick lunge. A curse from the priest's mouth; red blood from his side; he tottered, stared about him, and fell over like a brown hemlock into the sea. A yell of maledictions rose on the air. A wild cry was heard from the tent. Making a dead breach among the crowd, we now dashed side by side for the boat. Springing into it, we found Jarl battling with two Islanders; while the rest were still howling upon the dais. Rage and grief had almost disabled them.

With one stroke of my cutlass, I now parted the line that held us to the canoe, and with Samoa falling upon the two Islanders, by Jarl's help, we quickly mastered them; forcing them down into the bottom of the boat.

The Skyeman and Samoa holding passive the captives, I quickly set our sail, and snatching the sheet at the cavil, we rapidly shot from the canoe. The strangers defying us with their spears; several couching them as if to dart; while others held back their hands, as if to prevent them from jeopardizing the lives of their countrymen in the Chamois.

Seemingly untoward events oftentimes lead to successful results: Far from destroying all chance of rescuing the captive, our temporary flight, indispensable for the safety of Jarl, only made the success

of our enterprise more probable. For having made prisoners two of the strangers, I determined to retain them as hostages, through whom to effect my plans without further bloodshed.

And here it must needs be related, that some of the natives were wounded in the fray: while all three of their assailants had received several bruises.