

CHAPTER XXIV. A HARD BARGAIN.

The ship which thus appeared before the castaways had long "tramped" the ocean, wandering from one port to another as freights offered. She was two years out from London, by the Cape of Good Hope, India, and the Archipelago; and was now bound for San Francisco in the hope of working homeward round the Horn. Her captain was one Jacob Trent. He had retired some five years before to a suburban cottage, a patch of cabbages, a gig, and the conduct of what he called a Bank. The name appears to have been misleading. Borrowers were accustomed to choose works of art and utility in the front shop; loaves of sugar and bolts of broadcloth were deposited in pledge; and it was a part of the manager's duty to dash in his gig on Saturday evenings from one small retailer's to another, and to annex in each the bulk of the week's takings. His was thus an active life, and to a man of the type of a rat, filled with recondite joys.

An unexpected loss, a law suit, and the unintelligent commentary of the judge upon the bench, combined to disgust him of the business. I was so extraordinarily fortunate as to find, in an old newspaper, a report of the proceedings in *Lyall v. The Cardiff Mutual Accommodation Banking Co.* "I confess I fail entirely to understand the nature of the business," the judge had remarked, while Trent was being examined in chief; a little after, on fuller information--"They call it a bank," he had opined, "but it seems to me to be an unlicensed pawnshop"; and he wound up with this appalling allocution: "Mr. Trent, I must put you on your guard; you must be very careful, or we shall see you here again." In the

inside of a week the captain disposed of the bank, the cottage, and the gig and horse; and to sea again in the Flying Scud, where he did well and gave high satisfaction to his owners. But the glory clung to him; he was a plain sailor-man, he said, but he could never long allow you to forget that he had been a banker.

His mate, Elias Goddedaal, was a huge viking of a man, six feet three and of proportionate mass, strong, sober, industrious, musical, and sentimental. He ran continually over into Swedish melodies, chiefly in the minor. He had paid nine dollars to hear Patti; to hear Nilsson, he had deserted a ship and two months' wages; and he was ready at any time to walk ten miles for a good concert, or seven to a reasonable play. On board he had three treasures: a canary bird, a concertina, and a blinding copy of the works of Shakespeare. He had a gift, peculiarly Scandinavian, of making friends at sight: an elemental innocence commended him; he was without fear, without reproach, and without money or the hope of making it.

Holdorsen was second mate, and berthed aft, but messed usually with the hands.

Of one more of the crew, some image lives. This was a foremast hand out of the Clyde, of the name of Brown. A small, dark, thickset creature, with dog's eyes, of a disposition incomparably mild and harmless, he knocked about seas and cities, the uncomplaining whiptop of one vice. "The drink is my trouble, ye see," he said to Carthew shyly; "and it's

the more shame to me because I'm come of very good people at Bowling, down the wa'er." The letter that so much affected Nares, in case the reader should remember it, was addressed to this man Brown.

Such was the ship that now carried joy into the bosoms of the castaways. After the fatigue and the bestial emotions of their night of play, the approach of salvation shook them from all self-control. Their hands trembled, their eyes shone, they laughed and shouted like children as they cleared their camp: and some one beginning to whistle _Marching Through Georgia,_ the remainder of the packing was conducted, amidst a thousand interruptions, to these martial strains. But the strong head of Wicks was only partly turned.

"Boys," he said, "easy all! We're going aboard of a ship of which we don't know nothing; we've got a chest of specie, and seeing the weight, we can't turn to and deny it. Now, suppose she was fishy; suppose it was some kind of a Bully Hayes business! It's my opinion we'd better be on hand with the pistols."

Every man of the party but Hemstead had some kind of a revolver; these were accordingly loaded and disposed about the persons of the castaways, and the packing was resumed and finished in the same rapturous spirit as it was begun. The sun was not yet ten degrees above the eastern sea, but the brig was already close in and hove to, before they had launched the boat and sped, shouting at the oars, towards the passage.

It was blowing fresh outside, with a strong send of sea. The spray flew in the oarsmen's faces. They saw the Union Jack blow abroad from the Flying Scud, the men clustered at the rail, the cook in the galley door, the captain on the quarter-deck with a pith helmet and binoculars. And the whole familiar business, the comfort, company, and safety of a ship, heaving nearer at each stroke, maddened them with joy.

Wicks was the first to catch the line, and swarm on board, helping hands grabbing him as he came and hauling him across the rail.

"Captain, sir, I suppose?" he said, turning to the hard old man in the pith helmet.

"Captain Trent, sir," returned the old gentleman.

"Well, I'm Captain Kirkup, and this is the crew of the Sydney schooner Currency Lass, dismasted at sea January 28th."

"Ay, ay," said Trent. "Well, you're all right now. Lucky for you I saw your signal. I didn't know I was so near this beastly island, there must be a drift to the south'ard here; and when I came on deck this morning at eight bells, I thought it was a ship afire."

It had been agreed that, while Wicks was to board the ship and do the civil, the rest were to remain in the whaleboat and see the treasure

safe. A tackle was passed down to them; to this they made fast the invaluable chest, and gave the word to heave. But the unexpected weight brought the hand at the tackle to a stand; two others ran to tail on and help him, and the thing caught the eye of Trent.

"Vast heaving!" he cried sharply; and then to Wicks: "What's that? I don't ever remember to have seen a chest weigh like that."

"It's money," said Wicks.

"It's what?" cried Trent.

"Specie," said Wicks; "saved from the wreck."

Trent looked at him sharply. "Here, let go that chest again, Mr. Goddedaal," he commanded, "shove the boat off, and stream her with a line astern."

"Ay, ay, sir!" from Goddedaal.

"What the devil's wrong?" asked Wicks.

"Nothing, I daresay," returned Trent. "But you'll allow it's a queer thing when a boat turns up in mid-ocean with half a ton of specie,--and everybody armed," he added, pointing to Wicks's pocket. "Your boat will lay comfortably astern, while you come below and make yourself

satisfactory."

"O, if that's all!" said Wicks. "My log and papers are as right as the mail; nothing fishy about us." And he hailed his friends in the boat, bidding them have patience, and turned to follow Captain Trent.

"This way, Captain Kirkup," said the latter. "And don't blame a man for too much caution; no offence intended; and these China rivers shake a fellow's nerve. All I want is just to see you're what you say you are; it's only my duty, sir, and what you would do yourself in the circumstances. I've not always been a ship-captain: I was a banker once, and I tell you that's the trade to learn caution in. You have to keep your weather-eye lifting Saturday nights." And with a dry, business-like cordiality, he produced a bottle of gin.

The captains pledged each other; the papers were overhauled; the tale of Topelius and the trade was told in appreciative ears and cemented their acquaintance. Trent's suspicions, thus finally disposed of, were succeeded by a fit of profound thought, during which he sat lethargic and stern, looking at and drumming on the table.

"Anything more?" asked Wicks.

"What sort of a place is it inside?" inquired Trent, sudden as though Wicks had touched a spring.

"It's a good enough lagoon--a few horses' heads, but nothing to mention," answered Wicks.

"I've a good mind to go in," said Trent. "I was new rigged in China; it's given very bad, and I'm getting frightened for my sticks. We could set it up as good as new in a day. For I daresay your lot would turn to and give us a hand?"

"You see if we don't!" said Wicks.

"So be it, then," concluded Trent. "A stitch in time saves nine."

They returned on deck; Wicks cried the news to the Currency Lassies; the foretopsail was filled again, and the brig ran into the lagoon lively, the whaleboat dancing in her wake, and came to single anchor off Middle Brooks Island before eight. She was boarded by the castaways, breakfast was served, the baggage slung on board and piled in the waist, and all hands turned to upon the rigging. All day the work continued, the two crews rivalling each other in expense of strength. Dinner was served on deck, the officers messing aft under the slack of the spanker, the men fraternising forward. Trent appeared in excellent spirits, served out grog to all hands, opened a bottle of Cape wine for the after-table, and obliged his guests with many details of the life of a financier in Cardiff. He had been forty years at sea, had five times suffered shipwreck, was once nine months the prisoner of a pepper rajah, and had seen service under fire in Chinese rivers; but the only thing he cared

to talk of, the only thing of which he was vain, or with which he thought it possible to interest a stranger, was his career as a money-lender in the slums of a seaport town.

The afternoon spell told cruelly on the Currency Lasses. Already exhausted as they were with sleeplessness and excitement, they did the last hours of this violent employment on bare nerves; and when Trent was at last satisfied with the condition of his rigging, expected eagerly the word to put to sea. But the captain seemed in no hurry. He went and walked by himself softly, like a man in thought. Presently he hailed Wicks.

"You're a kind of company, ain't you, Captain Kirkup?" he inquired.

"Yes, we're all on board on lays," was the reply.

"Well, then, you won't mind if I ask the lot of you down to tea in the cabin?" asked Trent.

Wicks was amazed, but he naturally ventured no remark; and a little after, the six Currency Lasses sat down with Trent and Goddedaal to a spread of marmalade, butter, toast, sardines, tinned tongue, and steaming tea. The food was not very good, and I have no doubt Nares would have reviled it, but it was manna to the castaways. Goddedaal waited on them with a kindness far before courtesy, a kindness like that of some old, honest countrywoman in her farm. It was remembered

afterwards that Trent took little share in these attentions, but sat much absorbed in thought, and seemed to remember and forget the presence of his guests alternately.

Presently he addressed the Chinaman.

"Clear out!" said he, and watched him till he had disappeared in the stair. "Now, gentlemen," he went on, "I understand you're a joint-stock sort of crew, and that's why I've had you all down; for there's a point I want made clear. You see what sort of a ship this is--a good ship, though I say it, and you see what the rations are--good enough for sailor-men."

There was a hurried murmur of approval, but curiosity for what was coming next prevented an articulate reply.

"Well," continued Trent, making bread pills and looking hard at the middle of the table, "I'm glad of course to be able to give you a passage to 'Frisco; one sailor-man should help another, that's my motto. But when you want a thing in this world, you generally always have to pay for it." He laughed a brief, joyless laugh. "I have no idea of losing by my kindness."

"We have no idea you should, captain," said Wicks.

"We are ready to pay anything in reason," added Carthew.

At the words, Goddedaal, who sat next to him, touched him with his elbow, and the two mates exchanged a significant look. The character of Captain Trent was given and taken in that silent second.

"In reason?" repeated the captain of the brig. "I was waiting for that. Reason's between two people, and there's only one here. I'm the judge; I'm reason. If you want an advance you have to pay for it"--he hastily corrected himself--"If you want a passage in my ship, you have to pay my price," he substituted. "That's business, I believe. I don't want you; you want me."

"Well, sir," said Carthew, "and what IS your price?"

The captain made bread pills. "If I were like you," he said, "when you got hold of that merchant in the Gilberts, I might surprise you. You had your chance then; seems to me it's mine now. Turn about's fair play. What kind of mercy did you have on that Gilbert merchant?" he cried, with a sudden stridency. "Not that I blame you. All's fair in love and business," and he laughed again, a little frosty giggle.

"Well, sir?" said Carthew, gravely.

"Well, this ship's mine, I think?" he asked sharply.

"Well, I'm of that way of thinking meself," observed Mac.

"I say it's mine, sir!" reiterated Trent, like a man trying to be angry.

"And I tell you all, if I was a driver like what you are, I would take the lot. But there's two thousand pounds there that don't belong to you, and I'm an honest man. Give me the two thousand that's yours, and I'll give you a passage to the coast, and land every man-jack of you in 'Frisco with fifteen pounds in his pocket, and the captain here with twenty-five."

Goddedaal laid down his head on the table like a man ashamed.

"You're joking," said Wicks, purple in the face.

"Am I?" said Trent. "Please yourselves. You're under no compulsion. This ship's mine, but there's that Brooks Island don't belong to me, and you can lay there till you die for what I care."

"It's more than your blooming brig's worth!" cried Wicks.

"It's my price anyway," returned Trent.

"And do you mean to say you would land us there to starve?" cried Tommy.

Captain Trent laughed the third time. "Starve? I defy you to," said he. "I'll sell you all the provisions you want at a fair profit."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mac, "but my case is by itself I'm working me passage; I got no share in that two thousand pounds nor nothing in my pockut; and I'll be glad to know what you have to say to me?"

"I ain't a hard man," said Trent. "That shall make no difference. I'll take you with the rest, only of course you get no fifteen pound."

The impudence was so extreme and startling, that all breathed deep, and Goddedaal raised up his face and looked his superior sternly in the eye.

But Mac was more articulate. "And you're what ye call a British sayman, I suppose? the sorrow in your guts!" he cried.

"One more such word, and I clap you in irons!" said Trent, rising gleefully at the face of opposition.

"And where would I be the while you were doin' ut?" asked Mac. "After you and your rigging, too! Ye ould puggy, ye haven't the civility of a bug, and I'll learn ye some."

His voice did not even rise as he uttered the threat; no man present, Trent least of all, expected that which followed. The Irishman's hand

rose suddenly from below the table, an open clasp-knife balanced on the palm; there was a movement swift as conjuring; Trent started half to his feet, turning a little as he rose so as to escape the table, and the movement was his bane. The missile struck him in the jugular; he fell forward, and his blood flowed among the dishes on the cloth.

The suddenness of the attack and the catastrophe, the instant change from peace to war and from life to death, held all men spellbound. Yet a moment they sat about the table staring open-mouthed upon the prostrate captain and the flowing blood. The next, Goddedaal had leaped to his feet, caught up the stool on which he had been sitting, and swung it high in air, a man transfigured, roaring (as he stood) so that men's ears were stunned with it. There was no thought of battle in the Currency Lassess; none drew his weapon; all huddled helplessly from before the face of the baresark Scandinavian. His first blow sent Mac to ground with a broken arm. His second bashed out the brains of Hemstead. He turned from one to another, menacing and trumpeting like a wounded elephant, exulting in his rage. But there was no counsel, no light of reason, in that ecstasy of battle; and he shied from the pursuit of victory to hail fresh blows upon the supine Hemstead, so that the stool was shattered and the cabin rang with their violence. The sight of that post-mortem cruelty recalled Carthew to the life of instinct, and his revolver was in hand and he had aimed and fired before he knew. The ear-bursting sound of the report was accompanied by a yell of pain; the colossus paused, swayed, tottered, and fell headlong on the body of his victim.

In the instant silence that succeeded, the sound of feet pounding on the deck and in the companion leaped into hearing; and a face, that of the sailor Holdorsen, appeared below the bulkheads in the cabin doorway. Carthew shattered it with a second shot, for he was a marksman.

"Pistols!" he cried, and charged at the companion, Wicks at his heels, Tommy and Amalu following. They trod the body of Holdorsen underfoot, and flew up-stairs and forth into the dusky blaze of a sunset red as blood. The numbers were still equal, but the Flying Scuds dreamed not of defence, and fled with one accord for the forecastle scuttle. Brown was first in flight; he disappeared below unscathed; the Chinaman followed head-foremost with a ball in his side; and the others shinned into the rigging.

A fierce composure settled upon Wicks and Carthew, their fighting second wind. They posted Tommy at the fore and Amalu at the main to guard the masts and shrouds, and going themselves into the waist, poured out a box of cartridges on deck and filled the chambers. The poor devils aloft bleated aloud for mercy. But the hour of any mercy was gone by; the cup was brewed and must be drunken to the dregs; since so many had fallen all must fall. The light was bad, the cheap revolvers fouled and carried wild, the screaming wretches were swift to flatten themselves against the masts and yards or find a momentary refuge in the hanging sails. The fell business took long, but it was done at last. Hardy the Londoner was shot on the foreroyal yard, and hung horribly suspended in the brails.

Wallen, the other, had his jaw broken on the maintop-gallant crosstrees, and exposed himself, shrieking, till a second shot dropped him on the deck.

This had been bad enough, but worse remained behind. There was still Brown in the forepeak. Tommy, with a sudden clamour of weeping, begged for his life. "One man can't hurt us," he sobbed. "We can't go on with this. I spoke to him at dinner. He's an awful decent little cad. It can't be done. Nobody can go into that place and murder him. It's too damned wicked."

The sound of his supplications was perhaps audible to the unfortunate below.

"One left, and we all hang," said Wicks. "Brown must go the same road." The big man was deadly white and trembled like an aspen; and he had no sooner finished speaking, than he went to the ship's side and vomited.

"We can never do it if we wait," said Carthew. "Now or never," and he marched towards the scuttle.

"No, no, no!" wailed Tommy, clutching at his jacket.

But Carthew flung him off, and stepped down the ladder, his heart rising with disgust and shame. The Chinaman lay on the floor, still groaning; the place was pitch dark.

"Brown!" cried Carthew, "Brown, where are you?"

His heart smote him for the treacherous apostrophe, but no answer came.

He groped in the bunks: they were all empty. Then he moved towards the forepeak, which was hampered with coils of rope and spare chandlery in general.

"Brown!" he said again.

"Here, sir," answered a shaking voice; and the poor invisible caitiff called on him by name, and poured forth out of the darkness an endless, garrulous appeal for mercy. A sense of danger, of daring, had alone nerved Carthew to enter the forecabin; and here was the enemy crying and pleading like a frightened child. His obsequious "Here, sir," his horrid fluency of obtestation, made the murder tenfold more revolting. Twice Carthew raised the pistol, once he pressed the trigger (or thought he did) with all his might, but no explosion followed; and with that the lees of his courage ran quite out, and he turned and fled from before his victim.

Wicks sat on the fore hatch, raised the face of a man of seventy, and looked a wordless question. Carthew shook his head. With such composure as a man displays marching towards the gallows, Wicks arose, walked to the scuttle, and went down. Brown thought it was Carthew returning,

and discovered himself, half crawling from his shelter, with another incoherent burst of pleading. Wicks emptied his revolver at the voice, which broke into mouse-like whimperings and groans. Silence succeeded, and the murderer ran on deck like one possessed.

The other three were now all gathered on the fore hatch, and Wicks took his place beside them without question asked or answered. They sat close, like children in the dark, and shook each other with their shaking. The dusk continued to fall; and there was no sound but the beating of the surf and the occasional hiccup of a sob from Tommy Hadden.

"God, if there was another ship!" cried Carthew of a sudden.

Wicks started and looked aloft with the trick of all seamen, and shuddered as he saw the hanging figure on the royal yard.

"If I went aloft, I'd fall," he said simply. "I'm done up."

It was Amalu who volunteered, climbed to the very truck, swept the fading horizon, and announced nothing within sight.

"No odds," said Wicks. "We can't sleep ..."

"Sleep!" echoed Carthew; and it seemed as if the whole of Shakespeare's Macbeth thundered at the gallop through his mind.

"Well, then, we can't sit and chitter here," said Wicks, "till we've cleaned ship; and I can't turn to till I've had gin, and the gin's in the cabin, and who's to fetch it?"

"I will," said Carthew, "if any one has matches."

Amalu passed him a box, and he went aft and down the companion and into the cabin, stumbling upon bodies. Then he struck a match, and his looks fell upon two living eyes.

"Well?" asked Mac, for it was he who still survived in that shambles of a cabin.

"It's done; they're all dead," answered Carthew.

"Christ!" said the Irishman, and fainted.

The gin was found in the dead captain's cabin; it was brought on deck, and all hands had a dram, and attacked their farther task. The night was come, the moon would not be up for hours; a lamp was set on the main hatch to light Amalu as he washed down decks; and the galley lantern was taken to guide the others in their graveyard business. Holdorsen, Hemstead, Trent, and Goddedaal were first disposed of, the last still breathing as he went over the side; Wallen followed; and then Wicks,

steadied by the gin, went aloft with a boathook and succeeded in dislodging Hardy. The Chinaman was their last task; he seemed to be light-headed, talked aloud in his unknown language as they brought him up, and it was only with the splash of his sinking body that the gibberish ceased. Brown, by common consent, was left alone. Flesh and blood could go no further.

All this time they had been drinking undiluted gin like water; three bottles stood broached in different quarters; and none passed without a gulp. Tommy collapsed against the mainmast; Wicks fell on his face on the poop ladder and moved no more; Amalu had vanished unobserved. Carthew was the last afoot: he stood swaying at the break of the poop, and the lantern, which he still carried, swung with his movement. His head hummed; it swarmed with broken thoughts; memory of that day's abominations flared up and died down within him like the light of a lamp in a strong draught. And then he had a drunkard's inspiration.

"There must be no more of this," he thought, and stumbled once more below.

The absence of Holdorsen's body brought him to a stand. He stood and stared at the empty floor, and then remembered and smiled. From the captain's room he took the open case with one dozen and three bottles of gin, put the lantern inside, and walked precariously forth. Mac was once more conscious, his eyes haggard, his face drawn with pain and flushed with fever; and Carthew remembered he had never been seen to, had lain

there helpless, and was so to lie all night, injured, perhaps dying. But it was now too late; reason had now fled from that silent ship. If Carthew could get on deck again, it was as much as he could hope; and casting on the unfortunate a glance of pity, the tragic drunkard shouldered his way up the companion, dropped the case overboard, and fell in the scuppers helpless.