JOHN TOPP, PIRATE

By Weatherby Chesney and Alick Munro.

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There before us lay a landlocked harbor, sheltered from outside view on every side, yet capable of giving anchorage to an armada if need be. Not a vessel floated on its smooth waters, and a solitary seal was swimming about near its upper end, now fishing for his breakfast beneath the surface, now erecting his head and staring anxiously about him. We paid but little heed to him, however, for at the harbor entrance we saw that which to any true mariner is the saddest sight in the whole world.

A finger of rock rose, black and ugly, from the soft blue waters and, wedged into a cleft which divided it to the water's edge, lay the corpse of what had once been a stout and stately ship, a snowy plumaged carrack. Now, with her foremast snapped like a carrot above the round top, a great, yawning chasm in her waist and rivers of clear water hissing into the retreating ebb from a score of starting seams in her sides, she was but a battered ruin, a ghastly wave racked wreck.

A hundred different signs—the litter of cordage on her deck, the streamers of fluttering canvas hanging over her shattered bulwarks, the tangled fringe of broken spars and sea torn planks floating like fallen leaves around her—all made it easy for a seaman's eye to judge that she had not lain there long, and the great storm of two days ago gave an exact date.

No sign of life showed upon her littered decks. The sun was high in the morning heavens, but her gunners were not furbishing up her culverins and falconets in the waists. No candle trimmers were in the poop lanterns cleaning the glasses and refilling the sconces; no cooks were busy heating the great ship's kettle to boil the morning meal. The last sentry had left his post without calling relief. The silence of death was over all.

In the open channel which lay between the carrack and the land spit there floated something over which a dozen sea fowl were screaming and fighting. A glance was enough to show what it was for which they fought; it was the ill starred lover of a mermaiden—some stout mariner swept from the decks by a huge green wave and then seized by snowy arms and carried away to a beauteous home among the branching sea shrubs.

I could see in my mind's eye all that happened from the moment when he was loosed from his trance.

He yawns, stretches, shakes himself, awakens. The mermaid is standing beside him, glass in hand, combing her streaming tresses. She turns, meets his gaze and speaks in words which fill him with delight. She puts a conch shell to her ruby lips and blows a call. It sounds afar through the waving bushes, through the rainbow colored weeds, over the open plain, through the tangled forest. The brilliant fishes hear the note and shoot away through the limpid water with its message. A school of dolphins cry holiday to their master and come gamboling up to the tryst to lie in a gleaming circle on the jeweled sand. Then follow troops of mermaidens, some riding on the backs of shaggy sea horses, some racing along in shell chariots drawn by teams of emulous porpoises; and after them come the mermen, bearing posies of fair sea flowers which wither when they meet the air. All stand and marvel at the mortal who has ventured down among the glories of their enchanted kingdom.

Then there bursts out a strain of delicious melody, and the mermaidens' chant, which rises and falls to the throb of the sea bosom, tells the lone stranger how he must comport himself if he wishes to endure in this land of his new birth.

And this did I hear them sing:

THE GREETING.

Welcome, bright welcome, O wave cradled mariner!
Welcome to bask in our beauteous realm.
Pleasure it is for the merfolk to minister
Unto a mortal beneath ocean's whelm.

THE PROFFER.

We are thy servants, lord, slaves to thy beckoning;
Come, let us lead to the great sea king's hall;
Seat thee on Neptune's throne, 'neath azure covering,
There to receive our best riches, our all.
Gold of the galleon groans in thy treasuries;
Jewels the chastest we'll lay at thy knee;
Fruit trees most curious blow on thy terraces,
Flowers, heaven nurtured, to brighten the sea.
Pearls we will bring to thee, corals and cowries,
Perfume thy robe with the gray ambergris.
Men give their hands to thee, maidens their dowries;
Never, great lord, shall our fealty cease.

THE WARNING.

But, oh, lord, beware!
Have a care, have a care.
Keep thy beating heart still in its breast.
Have a care, have a care.
Good my lord, oh, beware!
Love for maidens is not for our guest.

Love for maidens is not for the merfolk's guest. The man knows that it is true and sighs as he looks at the radiant beauty round him—comely forms and soft white skins coyly half hidden beneath the trembling cascades of their silken tresses. He sits in the stately palace they have given him and covers his face with cruel hands to shut out the light of a hundred lustrous eyes. In vain those ravishing glances must prevail. The shielding fingers unclasp, the bowed head erects itself, and the man is lost. His heart swells within him, and half delirious with ecstasy, half mad with terror, he drinks deep down into the cup of pleasure and feels every moment his amoured body becoming lighter, more fatally light.

He clutches the sides of his throne and again closes his eyes for an instant. But only for an instant, for the loadstone is one that none has ever yet withstood. The mermaidens see his strait and stretch out their soft, white arms, bidding him stay. Their eyes flash love unspeakable. Their floating curls caress his burning cheek. The perfume of their breath intoxicates him. With a cry of joy he lets his willing fingers loose their grip of the throne and reaches out a lover's arms to clasp the nearest.

"See, there they go!"

Fatal movement! Like an arrow he shoots up from among them, and their wail mingles with his cry of doom as he rises.

A swollen corpse, he floats alone on the surface of the ocean, and the laughing mermaids take themselves again to their interrupted play.

CHAPTER XV.

"Wake up, Jack," whispered Alec, nudging me. "While you've been sleeping the snails have made up their minds to creep out of their shells. See, there they go!" And he pointed to some half score of men who were making their way down to a boat which lay drawn up on the beach. A jag of rock almost concealed it, and it was only when we saw the point for which the men were making that we caught sight of the boat at all.

"What shall we do?" said I. "Call the other two fellows and have at them at once?"

"No use. We might manage that armful, but no doubt there are plenty more where they came from. We should simply be running into their net."

"Are we to let them wander about at their own sweet will? Look! Those fellows are off toward the carrack!"

"Can't help ourselves that I can see. So you'll just have to let your valor simmer quietly, old hothead!"

"We shall have a score or two of them up here pig hunting for their dinners directly."

"Yes; they won't be content to patrol the shingle down there like so many harmless crabs."

"Then let's get to our raft at once and back to Galley island. There's no plunder to be made out of these fellows, so where's the use of meddling with them?"

"Plunder! Jack, I do believe you're the most thoroughgoing rascal of a sea thief as ever deserved short shrift and a fathom of rusty chain!"

"Hard words, Alec!" I retorted hotly.

"But true words, though none but your sworn shipmate dared have used them. Hark! What's that?"

There arose from below a sound which caused us to prick our ears to their sharpest angle. A body of men had emerged from the cliff leading some prisoners with them, and one of the latter was singing an English sea song. The words came up to us distinctly through the clear morning air:

Sail away,
Hack away,
Plunder! [Clank.]
Gather all the valuables you can.
Come back,
Nothing lack.
Thunder. [Clank.]
Scatter all the money like a man.

His mates joined in the chorus with all the recklessness of men who know that they are in too tight a place for their conduct to matter. The guards, however, seemed to think the merriment untimely and did not spare their buffets, and one of them, catching the principal singer a whack on the head that knocked his cap off, exposed to view a smooth shining scalp that was as hairless as a mirror.

"By all that's surprising, it's Willie Trehalion!" said Alec in a whisper.

"Sure enough, but how did he get here?"

"On the carrack, of course, but not as a willing prisoner, I'll go bail. Just hear how he's cursing! Confound the foolish fellow; why can't he keep his tongue quiet, now that he's in their hands? We shall see him knifed before our eyes in a minute. We must let him know we're here."

And up from among the slender fern fronds arose the "peewhit, peewhit" of a plover.

Willie's solitary eye glanced for a second at the knoll on the low cliff's edge, and then he burst out again into his song as cheerily as if he were seated on an English tavern bench.

Presently the cortege came to a standstill, and three armored Spaniards, seating themselves on bowlders, motioned for the prisoners to be drawn up in line before them.

"A court martial!" I whispered.

One of the Spaniards began to address the prisoners in English, and it seemed to me that his voice was strangely familiar.

"Traitorous curs!" said he, "do you make full confession? Come, you dog, there, you with the crippled eye and the crippled hand, you who worst misused your trust, do you speak for your companions?"

"Meaning me, Don Uglyface?" quoth Willie Trehalion with unruffled composure.

"Measure your words!" said the Spaniard angrily.

"Aye, with a lead line, not with a foot-rule. I bain't going to stint language just because you've promised to hang me in an hour's time. I tell you plain to your yellow teeth that I plumped the carrack on them rocks o' purpose. I could have fetched her in through the fair channel an brought her up to snug anchor within a cable o' this very spot, an that without losing a spar or carrying away a shred o' canvas. But, Senor Spaniard, I didn't choose. An if I'd got her again with a fine reef on the lee I'd up helm an risk 40 drownings in welcome. So, Don Miguel, you can wrap that in your cigarillo an smoke it."

"Don Miguel!" said Alec, with a gasp. "I knew I had heard the voice before."

"Yes, it's Inez's father," said I gloomily.

"Then we'd better not allow ourselves to fall into his hands. There are old scores against us, and Don Miguel is not the man to forget to wipe them off. God help Willie Trehalion!"

"Hush!" said I. "He's speaking again. Listen."

Willie Trehalion appeared to be enjoying himself down there on the beach. He was by nature a talker, and his subject seemed to have inspired him with eloquence. The Spaniards did not interrupt him, but it was little safety that I argued from their silence.

"Seven months agone, Don Miguel," said Willie, "you lured me an those other lads aboard yon craft at La Guayra an gave us fair promises. I was to be pilot, they a crew to show your own lubbers how to furl a sail an splice a rope, an for a reward we was to be given our liberty an set aboard the first English craft that was brought within hail. We labored willingly an like fools trusted to a Spaniard's promise. We overhauled all your running rigging, set up all your standing rigging again, altered your canvas an made your carrack a seaman's ship instead o' a soldier's as she was afore. An then how did you treat us? We had to lie on the deck all through the glass, like so many willocks, with no shelter from the rains an no shade from the sun, an if there was anything o' a sea the spray drenched us through an through at every dip she gave. Like dogs, we was given the dirty dishes to lick after your idolatrous stomachs were satisfied.

"Aye, aye, Don Miguel!" cried the boatswain, his voice rising almost to a shriek as he hurled out his string of accusations. "You can frown an stamp your foot an put your hand to your sword hilt, but you can't deny the gospel truth o' what I say. If we did well, you thanked us with curses; if ill, you blessed us with blows. Then when a small brig hove in sight an, drawing near, flew a Plymouth ensign, we made bold to remind you o' your promise. Ha, ha, ha! We might have saved our breath! A Spanish promise! A Castilian oath! Easy made, both o' 'em, an just as easy forgotten. You sneered at us an said we were doomed to everlasting captivity. Then you bade us bear arms against our countrymen, forgetting maybe that we wasn't born south o' the Pyrenees. We refused. You flogged us with leaded whips, clapped us under hatches, sailed a trifle nearer the brig an then, feeling your courage ooze away, went 'bout ship like a lily livered coward that you are an ran in under the guns o' La Guayra, where she weren't able to get at you."

Don Miguel's sallow face turned livid at the taunt, and I expected to see him run the boatswain through on the spot, for a sharp tongue is a weapon which more often than not turns its point back on him who uses it. With a violent effort, however, he restrained himself and for the present let the squat, square mariner alone, evidently reserving him for a worse fate.

"Have your say out to the full," he said, with an angry gesture. "There will be a bitter repayment when you have done."

"Thank you, Senor Jack Spaniard," replied Willie Trehalion coolly, "but it seems to me there bain't much more to say. When I've called a villain both liar an coward, I don't think I want to add anything else. Other black words would fall white on him after those."

"Do you know what I shall do with you?"

"Hang me," said Willie, with a contemptuous shrug of his broad shoulders.

"You think so?" replied the Spaniard, with a cold smile. "Maybe before long you'll hope so too. But a rope would not pay one tithe of my debt; it will require a far slower death than a mere dance on nothing. I shall have a post let into the sand yonder at low water. You will be lashed to it. The flood begins to make about sundown, and there will be five hours for you to regret the loss of my ship in before you draw your last gurgle. I have often heard you boast that the sea and you were old friends, and that many is the pleasant tussle you've had together in which the sea has been beaten. Well, you shall have one more duel together, and it will be curious to see which of you comes out the master this time.

"And now," he continued, turning to the other ten prisoners, "can any of you tell me how far we are from the main?"

"Happen a hundred league; happen two," replied one fellow gruffly.

"Ah," said Don Miguel, looking keenly at the speaker. "And will you undertake to build a small craft from the wreck of my carrack to take some of us there to seek assistance? I promise you your liberty and a capful of gold pieces each, if you will."

"No, you blasted cur, I won't," growled out the fellow. "May my fingers be withered to the bone if they ever hale rope for you again and may my eyes drop out of their sockets if they ever see to drive a nail for you, except into your coffin! That's my answer, and you won't get a different one from any lad here." And then he spat contemptuously and relapsed into silence.

His mates nudged one another with their bound elbows, and burst into a leather lunged cheer of approbation.

"That's it, lads," sang out Willie Trehalion. "Stick to it; never give way, an these unsailorly lubbers will have to leave their bones on the island, unless the devil, their master, comes to fetch them away in a flaming chariot o' brimstone."

But at this point, at a sign from Don Miguel, the guards led off our poor English lads out of sight—into a cave, we supposed—and as two or three Spaniards showed signs of wanting to scale the cliff we retreated to the covert where we had left our two men. In it we lay close all the rest of the day.

The time was one of plans and plots, of doubts and difficulties; but, though we whispered together long and earnestly, yet so still did we lie that the parrakeets perched boldly in the boughs above us and preened their brilliant plumage in the sun as though their nearest enemy were many miles away. Great velvet winged butterflies as large as linnets fluttered past our eyes, and mosquitoes bit our half naked bodies, but never a thought had we for butterfly or mosquito, for our minds were busy and anxious.

"Willie Trehalion must be rescued somehow," said Alec for the fortieth time, "even though it costs us our lives to do it." And the rest of us eagerly assented, for our old boatswain was a favorite with us all.

The scorching sun above us, arching his brazen course in fiery splendor, began at last to verge toward the distant wavy water line. The dancing air grew cooler and was freshened by a welcome breeze from the sea. Cautiously we drew out from among the plantains and, looking sharply around to make sure that no one spied us, crept all four back to the knoll and once more peeped from beneath the graceful fern screens.

The tide had not yet turned, and a couple of Spaniards were fastening a stout stake in a hole, which they had scooped beneath the outermost of the ripples. They laughed and joked over their work as though it were some holiday diversion and every now and then gave the post a shake to try whether it was secure.

When they had finished, one of them must needs lean his back up against the wood and pretend in pantomime

Down they brought Willie Trehalion and lashed him to the stake.

that the tide was rising around him, and, to judge from the shouts of laughter which proceeded from unseen observers under the cliff, his companions found something intensely humorous in this grewsome clowning.

Presently there was a shout that the flood was beginning to make, and down they brought Willie Trehalion and lashed him to the stake. The other ten Englishmen were made fast to the outlying trees of a thicket that ran down to the edge of the beach, and when they were all secured Don Miguel once more addressed them:

"I asked you just now to build me a ship that would take me away from this island, and you refused. Well, senores, there are consequences to that refusal, and I am going to acquaint you with them. You may think I shall punish you today, but such is not my plan. I am simply going to let you enjoy the sight of a man drowning by slow inches before your eyes in order that you may have the opportunity of observing what a peculiarly unpleasant exit from this world such a death is. Tomorrow I shall again ask one of you to serve me. If in spite of the lesson of today he refuses, the rest of you shall see him slowly choked by the rising waters. The next day I shall try another, and so on. It will be interesting to see how many times I shall have to repeat this pleasing spectacle, but pray do not hurry yourselves to come to a decision. The island, senores, is a pleasant one, and I shall not be distressed if my play should run even for ten nights. It is a thousand pities that the audience will necessarily be diminished by one at each performance. Adios, senores!"

And with that he strode away. Some of the other Spaniards lingered awhile and then followed him, and the rest, to the number of perhaps 40, lit a fire and prepared to see the tragedy to its close.

When the kindly shades of night began to steal over the island, we crept from our eyrie. A bush covered slope led from the cliff down to the beach, some hundred yards or so from where the prisoners stood, and down this we scrambled, avoiding carefully every little twig that might betray us by its snapping and forcing our very breaths to come lightly lest they should stir the leaves and give the alarm.

The breeze had dropped, the air was heavy and still, and the gabble of the Spaniards' voices came to us softly through the silence. A slight mist had blotted out the stars above, and the only light we had was the fitful glare of the bonfire. It burned dully for the most part, giving out dense clouds of smoke that rolled slowly upward till they were lost in the dark night, but every now and then some one would give the logs a stir, and the darting flames would for a moment send a lucid radiance over the whole scene.

There in the creek we could see Willie Trehalion, with the waters already up to his chest and his smooth, bald head shining like a mirror in the flashing firelight. Round the fire were grouped the Spaniards, chatting and smoking and, standing out dark against the uncertain blaze, were the ten forms of the bound Englishmen.

To Be Continued.

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