JOHN TOPP, PIRATE

By Weatherby Chesney and Alick Munro.

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CHAPTER XIX.

The day passed and after it most of the night, but just before dawn the relief which I had prophesied came.

Under cover of the darkness Alec had landed his heavy load of men from Galley island on the west shore of the harbor, near to its entrance, but out of sight of the Spanish sentinels at the cave's mouth. Then he returned to Shelter island and took off Jan Pengony and the others whom we had left there. The two parties joined and, hauling their boat up high and dry, marched with silent haste round the harbor till they came to the flat before the cave. Here, leaving the others ambushed in the thicket, Job Trehalion and Alec crawled through the grass and stalked the sentinels, who, as their fancied security had made them careless, were easily surprised and silenced. Then the rest of the party came up at a run and formed a circle round the mouth of the cave.

The Spaniards, hearing the noise, came out to discover its cause, but after some three or four of them had fallen in the scuffle they drew back again into the darkness. Alec thereupon swore that he would smoke them like so many flitches of bacon if they gave him any more trouble, and at the threat they surrendered at discretion.

After they had been disarmed and placed for security, together with the Galley island prisoners, in a convenient aisle of the cave, a small party was left to guard them, and the rest, arming themselves with the captives' arquebuses, made their way to the Temple hill to relieve us.

Completely shielded by the thick undergrowth and by the darkness, they

Their fancied security had made them careless.

were able to surround our besiegers and cover them with the arquebuses before they made their presence known. The first indication which Don Sancho and his crew had that they were trapped was the call to lay down their arms and surrender or they were all dead men, and the gallant don, seeing the light of his own watch fire glinting on steel barrels all around him, cared neither to parley nor to fight, but did as he was told. And by so doing he probably saved many lives, both Spanish and English.

The long struggle was over, and now the slaves had become masters and the masters slaves. The Spaniards had lost not a few more men in the final skirmish at the cave—for there were bitter and relentless swords against them—but except that the man called Sam had died of his wounds on Shelter island and lay buried there no more English had fallen. There were 32 of us left and each man ready and able to fight like a bulldog if need be. We had many wounds, but as the poorness of our recent entertainments had kept us all spare of body nature's unaided surgery would soon heal them, for it is only when men are full fleshed and hot blooded that wounds bring fever in their train.

Our prisoners were 122 all told, and to arrange for the safest manner of disposing of them a council was held as soon as all hands had rested somewhat.

The old man, whose prophecies had brought him great respect, was fiercely anxious to kill them all forthwith, and most of the men, the older ones especially, were inclined to agree with him. Willie Trehalion, however, would not hear of it. He had recovered his skin cap and now rubbed it fore and aft across his bald pate with fierce energy while he spoke.

"No, no, old man," said he; "it's ill counsel you be giving us this time. I'll kill Spaniards with you in hot blood as long as I can stand an never ask for a finer sport, but to butcher them defenseless an unresisting isn't an English sailor's job at all. It's a common hangman's work, that's what it is, an Willie Trehalion bain't going to sully hook or fist by doing it. On the high seas," he added reflectively, "I grant you it's different. There you can blindfold a prisoner an leave the gangway open, an then if so he chooses to march overboard, why, it bain't your fault, an you've no call to bring the ship to an waste time in picking him up. But this that you be wanting us to do, old man, is murder."

"Oh, ho, ho! Ah, ha!" laughed the old man. "What dainty gentleman have we here? Why, Willie Thehalion, you with a face molded out of a Portugale orange by four strokes of a harline spike, you with a body as delicate and graceful as a side of beef, you that have lost a hand and an eye in bloody warfare with these same gentle Spaniards for whom you plead so prettily, are your feelings become so nice and finnikin that you blench and turn sick like a girl at the thought of a don or two dancing the devil's hornpipe on empty air? Is that you, Willie Trehalion?"

"Aye," replied the boatswain sullenly, "that's me, if you like, a fighter with the best o' you, but never a murderer."

"What!" cried the old man angrily. "Will you never learn? Have not their beatings, jailings, starvings, cursings, made you suffer enough yet? Tender hearted maiden that you are, you will let the wasps regain their nest once more, and then you'll wonder that they come out with fresh venom in their tails to sting you again. Come, Job, tell this dainty uncle of yours how you served the wasp that seamed that purple scar across your forehead."

"Crushed un," said Job, with a grin.

"Ever a fool was Job," muttered his uncle to the rest of us, "an now he turns fool's evidence."

Job chuckled, and the old man broke out into his weird, unearthly laugh.

"Oh, ho, ho! Fools both, do you say, my pretty boatswain? Well, perhaps it is so. Job here, fool by birth; I, fool by Spanish torture, and yet both of us at times wiser by many a long fathom than every man of you. Never scoff at fools, my masters. The emperor of the Indies has a fool for his vizier, and a motley coat rules half the courts of Europe. Ah, ha, ha! Listen to me now. At times I can be the maddest, merriest, cleverest fool of the lot. I can jest for you, rule for you, cast omens for you, prophesy for you and all without sight of star or burning of mystic charm; but now I do none of these." He hauled himself painfully to his feet and looked round upon them with a gesture of frightful menace. "No, I bid you slay. Slay these cursed Spaniards from commandant to cabin lad. And if it be a crime on my head be it. Slay!"

His voice rose to a shriek at these last words, and his listeners shrank back and shuddered when they met his eyes.

"Aye," he went on, "if it be murder, I care not. Look at these legs—like two gnarled and crushed old willows. Every bone in them has been crushed by Spanish tortures. See these distorted arms, knotted like a conjurer's handkerchief. Gaze on this body, seamed with fire, scarred with whips and pinchers. Aye, I am a poor cripple now, but a short score of years ago I could have thrashed big John Topp there as easily as he could trounce me now with his little finger. What could give atonement for these hurts? And yet I do not bid you torture these Spaniards in like kind, but only slay them. Slay them! Slay them! And then—then"—

"An what then, old man?" asked the boatswain.

"Then," exclaimed the old man fiercely, "make me your captain, and I promise you gold beyond your wildest dreams. I will lead you to Manoa."

There arose a torrent of voices as he finished speaking. Some declared that Captain Ireland was our leader, and that the old man's words were treason; others that they hated the very name of the golden city, and, while a few called upon the old man to say more, the rest pressed Alec to speak. I joined my voice to these last and by outshouting the others gained silence.

"My lads," he said, "there is not one of us here who has cause to love the Spaniards, least of all I, who have lost a father at their hands, but let us not sully our souls with their murder. No, no; we can do better than that—we can make them useful. We have a safe prison for them in the cave, and they shall be our slaves. As for Manoa, many of us who sailed to these seas in the Bristol Merchant have spent years in the search for it already, and the prospect of continuing the quest does not tempt us. But Spanish galleons and plate ships litter the main like islands in an archipelago, and every one of them contains treasure. Now, my plain is to make these our quarry, for from them a stout English ship can reap revenge and plunder both."

"So she should," put in one fellow. "But, captain, we haven't got that same stout ship."

"We have hands, sirrah," replied Alec, "and some of us brains besides. The wrecks will afford both material and tools, and we have plenty of captive labor to make the work light. There are artificers among us, and I myself have some knowledge of the shipwright's craft, and so I say let us collect our plankings at once and begin to set up the stocks on which to lay a keel. Has any one of you a better plan to offer?"

The men looked at one another and exchanged their thoughts in half whispers, and Willie Trehalion, after hanging in the wind for a minute or so, rapped his hook against his forehead and came forward as their spokesman.

"We bain't altogether in love wi' galleys, Captain Ireland," said he, "nor with any other ship that's driven wi' slaves' oars. You see, slaves is apt to break out when you're fighting their friends an requires a lot o' victual an attention. An this company, being sailors all an not soldier mariners, likes best to maneuver in battle under cannon, an, in fact, backs one round ship to three long ones any day."

"And I am with you there, Willie. I did not mean that we should put these prisoner dons on a galley's bank and let them taste the bitters of their own prescription. No, no; leave oared craft to nations of land soldiers. The winds are the ministers of the Englishman, and sails are the wand with which he rules them. Give me a handy craft, and I'll warrant to keep the weather gauge of an enemy without cumbering the waist with filthy slaves and telling off good fighting men to guard them. The Spaniards here shall be far luckier than they deserve. They shall work for us as shipwrights' laborers and shore servants; and when our ship is built and we are fitted for the cruise we'll give them a holiday to dispose of their bodies as they like. If we return to refit or for any other purpose and find them here—well, we can enslave them again and make them useful. If we return no more again, well. And if we come and find that they have escaped, still well, for they will then be off our hands."

Here he paused, and at once there arose a strong lunged shout of approbation, in which all joined with the exception of the old man, who remained moodily silent. The men were delighted with the plan and eager to begin the work of shipbuilding. They swore to follow Captain Ireland to the end, and promised death to the first man who should disobey him. Then they rated John Topp as his lieutenant, Willie Trehalion as boatswain and Jan Pengony gunner, after which, remembering the old man and thinking he mig[illegible] work mischief unless he was humor[illegible]y named him captain of guard [illegible] prisoners and promised to haul him a bombard ashore, with which he could belch language into the cave in case of a revolt.

And at this he regained his spirits instantly and with a horrid torrent of "Oh, ho, ho!" and "Ah, ha, ha!" assured us that before the month was a week older he would have occasion to shoot, for that already, like an Andes condor, he could scent the steam of Spanish slaughter from afar.

Meanwhile Alec had the five Spanish officers brought before him armored, but unarmed, and told them what we had decided to do with them. Most of them received the verdict quietly enough. Bandy legged little Don Sancho shrugged his shoulders and, saying that it was the fortune of war, hoped that we would set our tasks lightly in view of a possible turning of the tides some time in the future. The sallow faced commandant, however, refused absolutely to soil his hands for any man's pleasure and set his snarling yellow teeth with the air of a man who intends to keep to his word.

"Why, senor," said I, "John Topp counts himself as big a gentleman as you any day, and yet holds it no shame to haul and heave with those under him or even to dip his sword hand in the tar bucket if need be."

He turned round sharply when he heard my name. "John Topp, is it? I must ask your pardon for not recognizing you in the serpent's mouth last night. You were a little better dressed, I think, last time we had the pleasure of meeting, so my oversight is perhaps excusable. Well, Don John, my feelings on the point differ from yours."

"Take care, Don Miguel. We have a superabundance of work people," said I significantly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Hang me if you have a mind," he said contemptuously.

"Or we may follow your own device and make you fast to a post down on the strand yonder at low tide."

"You may drown me, senor—drown me by inches if you please, for I am to that extent in your power, but I shall not be your obedient servant."

"Oh, ho, ho!" laughed the old man, who had just come up to look after his charge. "Ah, ha! Stubborn and stiff necked, as I was. It does the old man's heart good to see such a lusty fellow. Let me consider, now. What should be the discipline? Something novel and telling and appropriate and humorous, too, if possible. Why isn't the potbellied little racker here? Dear me, at another time such a piece of pleasantry would be on my lips in a moment! Oh, ho! I have it. We will roast you in your metal shell like some great crab, most illustrious Senor Commandant. You're rather lean, so maybe will be a trifle charred in the process, but the devil, who will eat the dish, is not overnice in his feeding and will forgive the cooks for forgetting to baste."

The Spaniard uttered no verbal reply, but shrugged his shoulders and gave a sneering smile which showed no departure from his previous resolve.

Then Alec spoke:

"Jan Pengony and Job Trehalion, slip off Don Miguel's iron shirt and bare his back. Now trice him up to the lower bough of that tree. No, not by the neck. I don't want him hanged. Fasten his wrists."

Don Miguel's face showed its first expression of uneasiness.

"Sir Captain," he said, "flogging to confession's death, and I have [illegible] to deserve that disgrace. He ho[illegible] hold me to ransom, at answer, [illegible] sword, rope or bullet front he we[illegible] soldier and a gentleman, but instead o[illegible] left for the notation of killing army. He paid with a courtly memory of our dep[illegible] and bring Mrs. Romans, and wi[illegible] the cave remarks, he [illegible] not going

The chair[illegible]ng, and [illegible]th, Don gretted that [illegible]s force. [illegible]ness hear from a [illegible]sons, bu[illegible]m. So [illegible] am [illegible]t, appr[illegible]t, and [illegible]core Co[illegible] Ther[illegible]ehous[illegible] and [illegible] blizzard[illegible]s he c[illegible]eding [illegible]tion in[illegible]S. [illegible] may [illegible] be a [illegible]me, [illegible]epara[illegible]ude [illegible] an a[illegible]nda [illegible] and [illegible]ch al[illegible] he s[illegible] in [illegible] or stole[illegible] [illegible]wers to[illegible]

"We will roast you in your metal shell."

death," cried the Spaniard with a venomous oath.

"You are not offered a choice, senor."

"You refuse to kill me?"

"Absolutely."

"Ah, then, I surrender. Your punishment is more degrading than your task. I accept the lesser indignity."

"So? I thought you would," said Alec. "Here, gunner; appoint this man to a gang and give him a task suitable to his strength."

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