

THE STOLEN SINGER

Continued from page 6

low on the face. He had to begin the intolerable exertion of swimming again, but he no longer had a burden to hold safe; there was no burden in sight. Half-unconsciously he felt the earth once more beneath his feet, but he could not stand. He fell face forward into the water again at his first attempt, and again the strong hand pulled him up and half-carried him over some rocky rocks. It was an endless journey before the strong hand would let him sit or lie down, but at last he was allowed to drop. He vaguely felt the warmth of the sun drying his skin while the sea lapped in his ears; he felt distinctly the sharp pain between his eyes, and a parching thirst. He groped around in a delirious search for water, which he did not find; he pressed his head and limbs against the earth in an exquisite relief from pain; and at last his bruised feet, his aching bones and head constrained him to a lethargy that ended in sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

The Camp on the Beach.

Sunset of the day that had dawned strangely and wonderfully for those two wayfarers of earth, James and Agatha, fell on a little camp near the spit of coast-land toward which they had struggled. The point stood itself abruptly into a rocky bank which curved in and out, yielding to the besieging waves. Just here had been formed a little sandy cove partly protected by the beeching bluff. At the top was verdure in abundance. Vines hung down over the face of the wall, coarse grasses and underbrush grew to its very edge, and sharp-pointed fir trees etched themselves against the clear blue of the sky. Below, the white sand formed a sickle-shaped beach, bordered by the rocky wall, with its sharp point slipping far out to sea. High up on the sand a small rowboat was beached.

There was no path visible up from the shingle, but it was evident that the ascent would be easy enough.

Nevertheless, the campers did not attempt it. Instead, they had made a fire of driftwood on the sand out of reach of the highest tide. Near the fire they had spread fir boughs, and on this fragrant couch James was lying. He was all unconscious, apparently, of the primitive nature of his surroundings, the sweetness of his balsam bed, and the watchful care of his two nurses.

Jim was in a bad way, if one could trust the remarks of his male nurse, who spoke to an invisible companion as he gathered chips and other bits of wood from the beach. He was a young, businesslike fellow with a clean, wholesome face, dressed only in a gauze shirt, trousers, and boots without stockings; this lack, of course, was not immediately apparent. The tide had just turned over the ebb, and he went far down over the wet sand, sometimes climbing over the rocks farther along the shore until he was out of sight of the camp.

Returning from one of these excursions, which had been a bit longer than he intended, he looked anxiously toward the fire before depositing his armful of driftwood. The blaze had died down, but a good bed of coals remained; and upon this the young man expertly built up a new fire. It crackled and blazed into life, throwing a ruddy glow over the shingle, the rocks behind, and the figure lying on the balsam couch. James' face was waxen in its paleness, save for two fiery spots on his cheeks; and as he lay he stirred constantly in a feverish unrest. His bare feet were nearest the fire; his blue woollen trousers and shirt were only partly visible, being somewhat covered by a man's tweed coat.

The fire lighted up, also, the figure of Agatha Redmond. She was kneeling at the farther end of Jim's couch, laying a white cloth, which had been wet, over his temples. Her long dark hair was hanging just as it had dried, except that it was tied together low in the back with a string of slippery seaweed. Her neck was bare, her feet also; her loose blouse had lost all semblance of a made-to-order garment, but it still covered her; while a petticoat that had once been black satin hung in stiff, salt-dried tresses over her waist to a little below her knees. She had the well-set head and good shoulders, with deep chest, which makes any garb becoming; her face was bonny, even now, clouded as it was with anxiety and fatigue. She greeted the young man eagerly on his return.

"If you could only find a little more fresh water, I am sure it would help. The milk was good, only he would take so little. I think I shall have to let you go this evening to hunt for the farm-house."

"Yes, Mademoiselle," the young man replied. He had wanted to go earlier in the day, but the man was too ill and the woman too exhausted to be left alone. He went on speaking slowly, after a pause. "I can find the farm-house, I am sure, only it may take a little time. Following the cove would have been the quickest way; but I can find the cowpath soon, even as it is. If you wouldn't be uneasy with me gone, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh, no, we shall be all right now. You can get back!" As she spoke, Agatha's eyes rested questioningly on the youth who, ever since she had revived from her faint of exhaustion, had teased her memory. He had seen them struggling in the sea, and had

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swum out to her aid, she knew; and after leaving her lying on a silmy, seaweed-covered rock, he had gone out again and brought in her companion in a far worse condition than herself. The young man, also, was a survivor of the Jeanne D'Arc, having come from the disabled craft in the tiny rowboat that was now on the beach. More than this she did not know, yet something jogged her memory every now and then—something that would not shape itself definitely. Indeed, she had been too much engrossed in the serious condition of her companion and the work necessary to make a camp, to spend any thought on unimportant speculations.

But now, as she listened to the youth's respectful tones, it suddenly came back to her. She looked at him with awe-struck eyes.

"Oh, now I know! You are the new chauffeur; 'queer name, Hand!' Yes, I remember—I remember."

"What you say is true, Mademoiselle."

He stood before her, a stubbornly submissive look on his face, as a servant might stand before his betrayed master. It was as if he had been waiting for that moment, waiting for her anger to fall on him. But Agatha was speechless at her growing wonder at the trick fate had played them.

Her steady gaze, serious and earnest now, without a hint of the laughter that usually came so easily, dwelt on the young man's eyes for a moment, then she turned away as if she were giving up a puzzling question. She looked at James, whose stably-bearded face was now quiet against its green pillow, as if seeking a solution there; but she had to fall back, at last, on the youth.

"Do you know who this man is?" she asked irrelevantly.

"No, Mademoiselle. He was picked up in New York harbor, the night we weighed anchor. I have not seen him since until today."

"The night we weighed anchor?"

"What night was that?"

"Last Monday, Mademoiselle; at about six bells."

"And what day is today?"

"Saturday, Mademoiselle; and past four bells now."

"Monday—Saturday!" Agatha looked abstractedly down on Jimmy asleep, while upon her mind crowded the memories of that week. This man who had dragged her and her rescuer from the water, who had made fire and a bed for them, who had got milk for sustenance, had been almost the last person her conscious eyes had seen in that half-hour of terror on the hillside. Her next memory, after an untold interval, was the rocking of the ship, an old woman who treated her obsequiously, a man who her servile attendant and yet her jailer—but then, suddenly, as she knelt there, mind and body refused their service. She crumpled down on the soft sand, burying her head in her arms.

Hand came nearer and bent awkwardly over her, as if to coax her confidence.

for a doctor, first, Hand; then, if you can, get some food—bread and meat; and, for pity's sake, a cloak or long coat of some kind. Then find out where we are, what the nearest town is, and if a telegraph station is near. And stay; have you any money?"

"A little, Mademoiselle; between nine and ten dollars."

"That is good; it will serve for a little while. Please spend it for me; I will pay you. As soon as we can get to a telegraph station I can get more. Get the things, as I have said; and then arrange, if you can, for a carriage and another man, besides yourself and the doctor, to come down as near this point as possible. You two can carry him"—she looked wistfully at James—"to the carriage, wherever it is able to meet us. But you will need to spend money to get all these things; especially if you get them tonight, as I hope you may."

"I will try, Mademoiselle." The ex-chauffeur stood hesitating, however. At last, "I hate to leave you here alone, with only a sick man, and night coming on," he said.

"You need not be afraid for me," replied Agatha coldly. Her nerves had given way, now that the need for active exertion was past, and were almost at the breaking point. It came back to her again, moreover, how this man and another had made her a prisoner in a motor-car, and at the moment she felt foolish in trusting to him for further help. It came into her mind that he was only seeking an excuse to run away, in fear of being arrested later. A second time she looked up into his eyes with her serious, questioning gaze.

"I don't know why you were in the plot to do as you did—last Monday afternoon," she said slowly; "but whatever it was, it was unworthy of you. You are not by nature a criminal and a stealer of women, I know. And you have been kind and brave today; I shall never forget that. Do you really mean now to stay by me?"

Hand's gaze was no less earnest than her own; and though he flinched at "criminal," his eyes met hers steadily.

"As long as I can help you, Mademoiselle, I will do so."

At his words, spoken with sincerity, Agatha's spirit, tired and overwrought as it was, rose for an instant to its old-time buoyancy. She smiled at him.

"You mean it?" she asked. "Honest true, cross your heart?"

Hand's businesslike features relaxed a little. "Honest true, cross my heart!" he repeated.

"All right," said Agatha, almost cheerfully. "And now you must go, before it gets any darker. Don't try to return in the night, at the risk of losing your way. But come as soon as you can after daylight; and remember, I trust you! Good-by."

Hand already, earlier in the day, had made a path for himself up the steep bank through the underbrush, and now Agatha went with him to the edge of the thicket. She watched and listened until the faint rustling of his footsteps ceased, then turned back to the camp on the beach. She went to the fire and stirred up its coals once more before returning to James. He was sleeping, but his flushed face and unnatural breathing were signs of ill. Now and then he moved restlessly, or seemed to try to speak, but no coherent words came. She sat down to watch by him.

After Agatha and James had been brought ashore by the capable Mr. Hand, it had needed only time to bring Agatha back to consciousness. Both she and James had practically fainted from exhaustion, and James had been nearly drowned, at the last minute. Agatha had been left on the rocks to come to herself as she would, while Hand had rubbed and pummeled James until the blood flowed again. It had flowed too freely, indeed, at some times during his ordeal;

and tiny trickles of blood showed on his lips. Agatha, dazed and aching, was trying to crawl up to the sand when Hand came back to her, running lightly over the slippery rocks. They had come in on the flowing tide, which had aided them greatly; and now Hand helped her the short distance to the cove and mercifully let her lie, while he went back to his work for James.

Later he had got a little bucket, used for hailing out the rowboat, and dashed hurriedly into the thicket above after some tinkling cowbells. Though she was too tired to question him, Agatha supposed he had tied one of the cows to a tree, since he returned three or four times to fill the pail. What a wonderful life-giver milk was! She had drunk her fill and had tried to feed it to James, who at first tasted eagerly, but had, on the whole, taken very little. He was only partly awake, but he shivered and weakly murmured that he was cold. Agatha quickly grew stronger; and she and Hand set to work to prepare the fire and the bed. Almost while they were at this labor, the sun had gone down.

Sitting by Jim's couch, Agatha grew sleepy and cold, but there were no more coverings. Hand's coat was over Jim, and as Agatha herself felt the cold more keenly she tucked it closer about him. Alone as she was now, in solitude with this man who had saved her from the waters, with darkness and the night again coming on, her spirit shrank; not so much from fear, as from that premonition of the future which now and then assails the human heart.

As she knelt by Jim's side, covering his feet with the coat and heaping the fir boughs over him, she paused to look at his unconscious face. She knew now that he did not belong to the crew of the Jeanne D'Arc; but of his outward circumstances she knew nothing more. Thirty she guessed him to be, thereby coming within four years of the truth. His short mustache concealed his mouth, and his eyes were closed. It was almost like looking at the mask of a face. The rough beard of a week's growth made a deep shadow over the lower part of his face; and yet, behind the mask, she thought she could see some token of a real man, not without his attributes of divinity. In the ordeal of the night before he had shown the highest order of patience, endurance and courage, together with a sweetness of temper that was itself lovable. But beyond this, what sort of man was he? Agatha could not tell. She had seen many men of many types, and perhaps she recognized James as belonging to a type; but if so, it was the type that stands for the best of New England stock. In the centuries back it may have brought forth fanatics and extremists; at times it may have built up its narrow walls of prejudice and pride; but at the core it was sound and manly, and responsive to the call of the spirit.

Something of all this passed through Agatha's mind, as she tried to read Jim's face; then, as he stirred uneasily and tried to throw off the light boughs that she had spread over him, she got up and went to the edge of the water to moisten afresh the bandage for his forehead. Involuntarily she shuddered at sight of the dark water, though the lapping waves, pushing up farther and farther with the incoming tide, were gentle enough to soothe a child.

She hurried back to Jim's couch and laid the cooling compress across his forehead. The balsam boughs about them breathed their fragrance on the night air, and the pleasant gloom rested their tired eyes. Gradually he quieted down again; his restlessness ceased. The long twilight deepened into darkness, or rather into that thin luminous blue shade which is the darkness of starlit summer nights. The sea washed the beach with its murmuring caress; somewhere in the thicket above a night-bird called.

In a cranny of the rocks Agatha hollowed out the sand, still warm beneath the surface here where the sun had lain on it through long summer days, and made for herself a bed and coverlet and pillow all at once. With the sand piled around and over her, she could not really suffer; and she was mortally tired.

She looked up toward the clear stars, Vega and the jeweled cross almost in the zenith, and ruddy Antares in the body of the shining Scorpion. They were watching her, she thought, tonight in her peace as they had watched her last night in her struggle, and as they would watch after all her days and nights were done. And then she thought no more. Sleep, blessed gift, descended upon her.

To be continued

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