

THE LADY AND THE PIRATE

By EMERSON HOUGH

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"Good Lord, Mr. Harry!" cried my skipper, Peterson, when he saw me. "Come here! Take this little devil away! I'm afraid he'll knife me!"

I hurried to him, for he struggled in the dark with Jean Lafitte.

"To the rescue, Black Bart!" called Jean Lafitte. "Catch his other arm! I've got this one, and if he moves, by heavens, I'll run him through!"

"Run me through, you varmint—what do you mean?" roared Peterson. "Ain't it enough you pull a gun on me and try to poke out my eye and twist off my arm without sticking me with that bread slicer you got? Mr. Harry—for heaven's sake!"

"There now, Jean Lafitte," I said "enough. He has begged for quarter." "No, I haint," asserted Peterson venomously. "I'll spank the life outen him if I ever get the chance"—I raised a hand.

"Enough of all this noise," I said. "I am in charge now, Peterson. Go to the wheel. Break out the anchor and get underway. At once, man! I have no time to argue."

Peterson had never in his life heard me speak in this way before, but now, for what reason I do not know—perhaps from force of habit, perhaps because he knew I was owner of the boat, perhaps in awe of the naked crease of Jean Lafitte, still presented menacingly at his abdomen—the old skipper obeyed.

I heard the faint jangle of bells in the engine room below. Obviously Williams, the engineer, was responsive to his sense of duty and routine. The power came pulsing through the veins of the Belle Helene, and I heard her screws revolve. I myself threw in the donkey which she forged ahead and so broke out the anchor. It still swung, clogging her bows as she tumbled in the current. The bells again jangled as she got more speed and as the anchor came home. Our searchlight swept a wide arc along the foot of Natchez hill as our bows circled about and headed down the great river, and now we picked in full view, hardly sixty fathoms distant, the dinghy, pulled furiously toward us. My friend, the varlet Cal Davidson, half stood in the stern of the stubby craft and waved at us an excited hand.

"Ahoj there, Peterson!" he cried. "Stop! Hold on there! Wait! Where are you going there?"

Peterson turned toward me an inquiring gaze, but I only pointed a hand downstream, and he obeyed me. I reached my hand to the cord and gave Peterson, Davidson, Natchez and all the world the salute of a long and vibrant whistle of defiance.

"Full speed ahead, Peterson," said I quietly.

"Where are we going, Mr. Harry?" he demanded anxiously.

"I don't know," said I. "It all depends—maybe around the world. I don't know and I don't care."

"I'm scared about this. It don't look right. What's come into you, Mr. Harry?" asked the man solicitously.

"Nothing, Peterson," said I, "except that the bird of time is on the wing. I am a pirate, Peterson!"

"I never knew you so far gone in drink before, Mr. Harry," said he as he threw over the wheel to pick up the first starboard channel light.

"Yes, I have been drinking, Peterson," said I. "I have been drinking the wine of life. It oozes drop by drop and is all too soon gone if we delay. Full speed ahead, Peterson. I am in command."

"Jean!" I called to my able lieutenant. "Reach over into the longboat and bring Partial on board. He is my friend. And bring also our flag. Run it aloft above our prize."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the reply of Jean Lafitte. And a few moments later our longboat was riding astern more easily. Jean Lafitte on his return busied himself with our burgee. And at that moment Partial, overjoyed at also having a hand in these affairs, barked joyously at his discovery of the neglected end of the cook's cue projecting through the hinges at the door. On this he laid hold cheerfully, worrying it until poor John shrieked anew in terror and until I freed him and ordered tea.

I next went over to the hatches of the engine room and, having opened them, bent over to speak to Williams, the engineer.

"It's all right, Williams," said I. "I am going to take her over now and run her perhaps to the gulf. We hadn't time to tell you at first. There has been a legal difficulty. Peterson is on deck, of course."

"All right, Mr. Harry," said Williams, who recognized me as he leaned out from his levers to look up through the open hatch. "At first I didn't know what was up. It sounded like a mutiny!"

"It was a mutiny, Williams," said I, "and I am the head mutineer. But you're sure of your pay, so let her go."

"He didn't let her go, smoothly and brilliantly, so that before long she was at her top speed, around fifteen knots an hour."

I turned to meet L'Olonnois, my blue eyed pirate. He stood at my side as one glorified.

"I locked the door on 'em, Black Bart," said he, "and bade them cease idle remonstrancing. 'Little do you know,' says I to them, 'that Black Bart the Avenger is now on the trail. Let any oppose him at their peril,' says I to them. She give me candy, the fair captive did, but I spurned her bribe. 'Beware,' says I to her. 'Little do you know what lies before you.'"

Jean Lafitte, who had so well executed the work assigned him in the boarding party's plans, proved himself neither inefficient nor unobservant. He approached me now with a salute which probably he copied from Peterson.

"What about our good ship, the Sea Rover, that we have left behind?" he asked.

"By Jove, Jean Lafitte!" I exclaimed. "That is indeed a true word. What indeed? We left her riding at anchor off the channel edge, and so far as I recall she had not her lights up, in accordance with the law."

"Shall we put about and take her in tow, Black Bart?"

"By no means. That is the very last of my intentions."

"But she cost a lot of money."

"On the contrary, she cost only \$1,200."

"Twelve hundred dollars!" Jean drew a long, deep breath. "I didn't know anybody had that much money in the world. Besides, look what you spent for them pearls. Ain't you poor, then, Black Bart?"

"On the contrary, I have that much more money left very likely. And I do not, to say truth, care a jot, a rap or a stiver what becomes of the derelict Sea Rover now. Have we not taken a better ship for our own?"

"Yes, but suppose you varlet boards the Sea Rover and chases us the way we done him?"

"Again, by Jove, Jean Lafitte, an idea! But suppose he does? Much good it will do him, for look you, good lieutenant, the Belle Helene will not stop to send any man ashore for baseball scores. Such was not the practice of the old buccaneers, nor shall it be ours, whereas, no matter what the haste, you varlet could in nowise refrain from that same folly which hath lost him his ship to us. Each hour will only widen the gap between us. Let him take our tub if he likes and do as he likes, for 'twill be a long day before he picks up our masts over his horizon, Jean Lafitte."

"Aye, aye, sir," rejoined my lieutenant and withdrew.

But these all were lesser things to me, for on my soul was a more insistent concern. As I approached the door of the after cabin suit, occupied by the ladies, I made my presence known, at first discreetly, then more pointedly and at length by a knocking on the door.

"Below there!" I called boldly as I could, for, eager as I was to see Helena Emory, there were certain things about the interview which might be difficult.

No answer came at first; then "Who is it?" in the voice of Aunt Lucinda.

"It is I, Mr. Henry," but I paused. "It is I, Black Bart the Avenger," I concluded. "May I come in?"

Silently the door opened, and I entered the little reception room which lay between the two staterooms of this cabin. Before me stood Helena. And now I was close to her, I could see the little curls at her temples, could see the double curves of her lips, the color in her cheek. Ah, she was the same, the same! I loved her! I loved her not the same, but more and more, more!

She held her peace, and all I could do was to stand and stare and then hold out my hand. She took it formally, though her color heightened. I saluted Aunt Lucinda also, who glared at me. "How do you do?" I said to them both, with much originality and daring.

"Black Bart!" snorted Aunt Lucinda. "Black Bart! It might be, from these goings on. What does it all mean?"

"It means, my dear Mrs. Daniver," said I, "that I have taken charge of the boat myself."

"But how?" demanded Helena. "We did not hear you were coming. And I don't understand. Why, that rascally little nephew of mine in the mask frightened auntie nearly to death. And he said the most extraordinary things. Where is Mr. Davidson?" she added. "He didn't tell us a word of this."

"He didn't know a word of it himself," I answered. "Let me tell you, no self respecting pirate—and, as you see, I am a pirate—is in the habit of telling his plans in advance."

CHAPTER IX. The Captive Maiden.

"PIRATE!" cried Helena. I bowed politely. "At your service, Black Bart—my visiting cards are mislaid, but I intend ordering some new ones. The ship's cook, John, will soon be here with tea. These events may have been wearying. Meantime allow me to present my friend Partial."

Partial certainly understood human speech. He now approached Helena slowly and stood looking up into her face in adoration. Then, without any command, he lay down deliberately and rolled over, sat up, barked, and so, having done all his repertory for her, he now—as had his master before him—loved at first sight, he stood again and worshipped.

"Nice doggie!" said Helena courteously.

"Have a care, Helena!" said I. "Love my dog, love me. And all the world loves Partial."

The color heightened in her cheeks. I had never spoken so boldly to her before, but had rather dealt in argument than in assertion, which I, later, was to learn is no way to make love to any woman.

"When do we get back to Natchez?" she demanded.

"We do not get back to Natchez."

"Oh! Then I suppose Mr. Davidson picks us up at Baton Rouge?"

"You varlet," said I, "does not pick us up at Baton Rouge."

"New Orleans?"

"Or at New Orleans—unless he is luckier than I ever knew even Cal to be."

"Whatever do you mean?" inquired Aunt Lucinda in tones ominously deep.

"That the Belle Helene is much faster than the tug we left behind at Natchez, even did he find it. He will have hard work to catch us."

"To catch us?"

"Yes, Helena, to catch us. Of course he'll follow in some way. I have, all the way from above Dubuque. Why should not he?"

The ladies looked from me to each other, doubting my sanity, perhaps.

"I don't just understand all this," began Helena. "But since we travel only as we like, and only with guests whom we invite or who are invited by the boat's owner, I shall ask you to put us ashore."

"On a sand bar, Helena? Among the alligators?"

"Of course I mean at the nearest town."

"There is none where we are going, my dear Miss Emory. Little do you know what lies before you! Black Bart heads for the open sea. Let you varlet follow at his peril. Believe me, 'twill cost him a very considerable amount of gasoline."

"What right have you on this boat?" she demanded fiercely.

"The right of any pirate."

"Why do you intrude—how dare you—at least, I don't understand?"

"I have taken this ship, Helena," said I, "because it carries treasure—more than you know of, more than I dreamed. My father was a pirate, I am well assured by the public prints. So am I. 'Tis in the blood. But do not anger me. Rather have a cup of tea. John, my cook, was now at the door with the tray."

"Thank you," rejoined Helena icily. "It would hardly be courteous to Mr. Davidson to use his servants and his table in this way in his absence. Besides—"

"Besides, I recalled that your Aunt Lucinda's neuralgia is always benefited by a glass or so of ninety-three at about 10:30 of the evening. John!"

"Lessah!"

"Go to the left hand locker in B and bring me a bottle of the ninety-three. I think you will find that better than this absurd champagne which I see you varlet has been offering you, my dear Mrs. Daniver. But—excuse me!"

Helena looked up innocently.

"A moment before there were six empty bottles on the table there. And I saw you writing. How many have you thrown overboard through the porthole?"

"I didn't know you were so observant," replied Helena demurely. "But only three."

"It is not enough," said I. "Go on and write your other messages for success. Use each bottle, and we shall have more emptied for you if you like. You shall have oil bottles, vinegar bottles, water bottles, wine bottles, all you like. You varlet might run across one floating, it is true. I hope he will. Me thinks 'twould bid him speed. But all in vain would be your appeal, for swift must be the craft that can come up with Black Bart now. And desperate indeed must be the man who would dispute his right to tread these decks."

"I hope you are enjoying yourself," said Helena scornfully. "Don't be silly."

"Will you have tea, Helena?" I asked.

"Poor, dear Mr. Davidson!" sniffed Aunt Lucinda, taking a glance out of the port into the black night. "I wonder where he is and what he will say."

"I can tell you what he will say, my dear Mrs. Daniver," said I, "but I would rather not."

"Well, I'll tell you what I say," snorted Aunt Lucinda. "I think this joke has gone far enough."

"It is no joke, madam. I was never so desperately in earnest in all my life."

"Then put us ashore at Baton Rouge."

"I cannot. I shall not."

"What do you mean? Do you know what this looks like, the way you are acting, running off with Mr. Davidson's yacht, and this?"

"Yes, madam?"

"Why, it's robbery, and it's—it's—why, it's abduction too. You ought to know the law."

"I do know the law. It is piracy. Have we not told you that resistance would be worse than useless? Haven't I told you I've captured this ship? Little do you know the fate that lies before you, madam, at the hands of my ruthless men—if I should prove unable to restrain them! And have a care not to offend Black Bart the Avenger himself! If you do, Aunt Lucinda, he may cut off your evening champagne."

I heard a sudden suppressed sound, wondrous like a giggle, but when I turned Helena was sitting there as sober as Portia, albeit I thought her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Well," said she at length, "we can't sit here all night and talk about it, and I've used up all my note paper and bottles. I'll tell you what I suggest, since you have seen fit to intrude on two women in this way. We will hold a parley tomorrow after breakfast."

"Why not at breakfast?"

"Because we shall eat alone here—unlike and I—in our cabin."

"Very well, then, if it seems you are so bitter against the new commander of the ship that you will not sit at the captain's table—as we did the second time we went to Europe together, we three—don't you remember, Helena?"

"Never—at your table, sir!" said Helena Emory, her voice like a stab. And when I bethought me what that had meant before now, that it would mean all my life, if this woman might never sit at board of mine, for one instant I felt the cold thrust of fate's steel. But the next instant a new manner of feeling took its place, an emotion I never had felt toward her before—anger, rage!

"It is well," said I, pulling together the best I could. "And now, by my halidom, or by George, or by anything, you shall be taken at your word. You breakfast here. Be glad if it is more than bread and water—until you learn a better way of speech with me."

Again I saw that same sudden change on her face, surprise, almost fright, and I swear she shrank from me as though in terror, her hand plucking at Aunt Lucinda's sleeve, whereas all Aunt Lucinda could do was to pluck at her niece's sleeve in turn.

"As to the parley, then," said I, pulling, by mistake, my mask from my pocket instead of my kerchief, "we shall hold it tomorrow, at what time and in what place I please. It ill seems a gentleman to pain one so fair, as we may again remark; but, by heavens, Helena, no resistance!"

"Wait! What do you really mean?" She raised a hand. "I've told you I just can't understand all this. I always thought you were a—gentleman."

"A much misused word," was my answer. "You never understood me at all. I am not a gentleman. I'm a poor, miserable, unhappy, drifting, aimless and useless failure—at least, I was until I resolved upon this way to recoup my fortunes and went in for pirating. What chance has a man who has lost his fortune in the game today—what chance with a woman? You ask me, who am I? I am a pirate. You ask what I intend to do? What pirate can answer that? It all depends."

"On what?"

"Oh, you!" I answered furiously. "What right had you to ruin me, to throw me over?"

She turned a frightened glance to Aunt Lucinda, whom I had entirely forgotten. It was my turn to blush. To hide my confusion I drew on my mask as I bowed.

I met John coming down with the ninety-three. As he returned on deck a moment later I pushed shut the



She Was a Vision of Lovely Sweetness.

doors and sprang the outside latches, so that those within now were prisoners indeed. And then I stood looking up at the stars, slowly beginning to see why God made the world.

Cal Davidson's taste in neckwear was a trifle vivid as compared with my own, yet I rather liked his shirts, and in the morning I found a waistcoat of his which I could classify as possible; besides which I obtained from John, the cook, a suit of flannels I had given him four years ago and which he was saving against the day of his funeral and shipment back to China. So that, on the whole, I did rather well, and I was not ill content with life as I sat, with the "Pirate's Own Book" in my lap and Partial's head on my knee, looking over the passing panorama of the river.

I looked up to see Peterson, who touched his cap.

"Yes, Peterson?"

"We're on our last drum of gasoline, Mr. Harry," said he. "Where'll we put in—Baton Rouge?"

"No, we can't do that, Peterson," I answered. "Can't we make it to New Orleans?"

"Hardly. But they carry gas at most of these landings now—so many power boats and autos nowadays, you see."

"Very well. We'll pass Bayou Sara and Baton Rouge, and then you can run in at any landing you like, say, twenty miles or so below. Can you make it that far?"

"Oh, yes, but you see at Baton Rouge—"

"You may lay to long enough to mail

these letters," said I, frowning. "The custom of getting the basenat scores is now suspended. And send John here."

The old man touched his cap again, a trifle puzzled. I wondered if he recognized Davidson's waistcoat—he asked no more questions.

"John," said I to my Chinaman, "carry this to the ladies," and I handed him a card on which I had inscribed: "Black Bart's compliments, and he desires the attendance of the ladies on deck for a parley. At once."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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As to Jarley.

"That man Jarley is without any exception the most inaccurate man I ever knew," said Dobson. "Tell me, Jones, does he ever get anything right?"

"Oh, yes," replied Jones. "Anything that is left Jarley will always get right."—Judge.

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