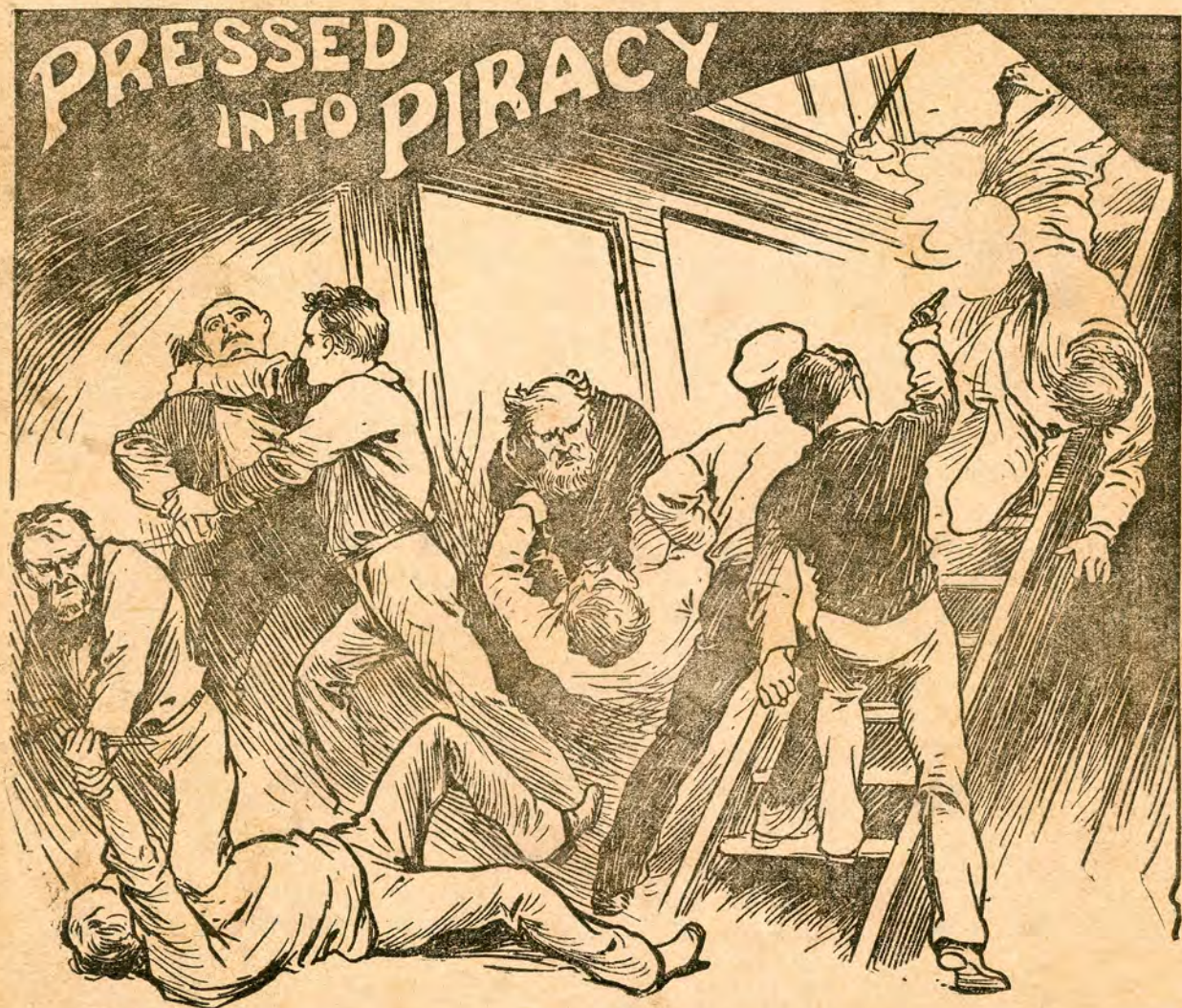


A GRAND NOVEL FOR A HALFPENNY.

THE UNION JACK

A LONG, COMPLETE NOVEL
EVERY FRIDAY.

1½
2



The foemen met at the foot of the stairs, and a terrible struggle between pirate and sailor took place.

No. 322.



"But this—what doz this mean, senor?" asked the Spanish skipper in his broken and only half intelligible English. "It means," replied Gaston Lamant coldly, stepping forward and presenting a pistol, "that I have taken your ship; that you are my prisoner; and that you are a dead man if you resist!"

Pressed Into Piracy.

A Stirring Complete Novel by CHARLES HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

The Ship "Scorpion"—Something in the Wind— What Does it Mean?

"There's something queer about this here v'y'ge, Ned Harris; now just you mark my words!" And Thaddeus Tixon, carpenter of the ship "Scorpion," emphasised his remark with a sounding slap upon his thigh.

Ned Harris, ordinary seaman, looked at him with a smile of amusement.

"You've said that, Thad, exactly twenty-five times since we left New Orleans, and we're only two days out," he said. "You're a regular Jonah, Thad, you are!"

Then a voice behind the two broke in:

"The fate of a Jonah generally is to be thrown overboard."

The carpenter and the seaman turned their heads, to see the second-mate of the "Scorpion," a swarthy Creole named Gaston Lamant. Thad Tixon looked somewhat confused under the eye of the officer.

"So look out, Tixon!" continued the mate sternly. "We want no croakers aboard the 'Scorpion.' There ain't room for 'em. The next time I hear you saying things of that kind again, look out for a berth in Davy Jones's locker."

And the second mate stalked away aft.

Ned Harris looked at Thad, who was red with anger.

"You've stirred up Lamant," he said. "Better keep your weather eye on your jawing-tackle, Thad. How quietly Lamant goes about, hang him! I never knew he was near us till he spoke."

"He's a tiger, that man is," replied the old carpenter, sinking his voice. "And I repeat what I said, Ned Harris—there's something queer about this voyage. We know our papers is fur Charleston, and that the 'Scorpion' is goin' south instead o' north. There's a gum-game afoot aboard this here craft, an' I wouldn't mind a-sayin' of it to Captain Vance himself."

And with that the carpenter turned away, leaving Ned Harris to his work.

Ned, although he had smiled at the old carpenter's fears, was not without a certain uneasiness himself regarding the object and destination of the "Scorpion." The voyage certainly was not made in the usual manner. Leaving New Orleans ostensibly for Charleston, the "Scorpion" had quitted the gulf by the Yucatan Channel, which excited considerable surprise and speculation among the crew. Then there was an indefinable "something" about the officers and certain of the seamen that suggested to a quick and intelligent mind that all was not as it should be. What was wrong no one ventured to state, but it was agreed that something was in the wind.

The crew of the "Scorpion" were not, most of them, the kind of men to trouble themselves much about questions of right and wrong; it was curiosity more than anything else that was aroused. There were thirty-six men forward, which, with two in the cuddy, and four in the cabins, made a total of forty-two in the whole ship's company—a large one, as modern crews go, even for a full-rigged ship.

Ned Harris was the youngest seaman on board, being, in fact, little more than a boy. Left behind by an English merchant-vessel at New Orleans, he had joined the "Scorpion" for the sake of getting employment. He was a fine, manly young fellow, pretty well educated, though only an ordinary seaman, and refined in his habits and manner. He had little in common with the other fo'e'sle hands, whom, in his own mind, he often disparagingly compared with the hearty British crew who had been his shipmates before.

Of the officers, he liked the second mate least. There was to his mind something tigerish and treacherous about Gaston Lamant, with his white teeth and black eyes, his French accent and catlike tread. Ned had often suspected the Creole of stealing about the ship on purpose to spy upon the seamen and learn their views upon the subject of the voyage, and he was not far wrong.

After leaving Thad Tixon, with the warning to say no more about the "queerness" of the voyage, the Creole went down to the captain's cabin. As he went in, the chief mate came

out, and they exchanged glances. The chief was a middle-aged Scotsman, named Rae, a serious man, very unlike the light, sneering French Creole.

"Anything up, Rae?" asked Gaston, noticing that the face of the chief mate was unusually grave, and wearing a worried expression.

Rae shook his head without speaking, and passed up the companion-way. The Creole entered the cabin and closed the door behind him.

Captain Vance—a little, stout, red-faced skipper—sat on the edge of the table, with a smile of enjoyment upon his fat visage.

"What amuses you?" asked Gaston, looking at him. "Has our thick-headed chief mate been asking questions?"

Captain Vance nodded.

"Is he getting suspicious, skipper?"

Another nod. Captain Vance had one peculiarity—he was extremely taciturn, and was as sparing of his words as if they had been articles of great value. He never troubled to open his mouth if a nod or shake of the head would do as well. One reason of this was, perhaps, the pipe which he always had between his teeth, at all times, seasonable or unseasonable.

"We must keep him quiet for a couple of days more," said Gaston, with a smile. "Then you can make him an offer. If he refuses it, we know what to do with him. I don't think he'll accept. I passed him just now looking pretty worried. What did he want to know?"

"Destination—seen arms in cuddy—uneasy," laconically answered Vance.

"Ah! he has seen the arms? Well, that doesn't matter, after all. He is powerless. But there's another name to put on the list of suspects, captain. It's the carpenter, Tixon. He's a Boston man, and much too sharp!"

Captain Vance took a small notebook from his pocket, and entered the Yankee carpenter's name in a list.

"That makes six," observed Gaston Lamant. "No need to put Rae's name down. We can deal with him without that. What answer did you give him just now?"

"Told him—mind own business—I command—no questions," answered the fat skipper, grinning. "Fair flabbergasted—cleared out."

The laconic skipper always shortened his sentences by leaving out all the words of minor importance, which had a rather queer effect.

"No wonder he looked glum!" laughed the Creole. "Serve him right! Whatever he thinks, he can't do us any harm."

If Ned Harris, or old Thad Tixon had heard this little conversation between the captain and the second mate, their uneasiness would certainly have been increased. What was the plot upon which these two men were engaged? Why was a list made of those members of the crew who criticised the air of mystery that hung about the "Scorpion," and the voyage she was making? It was not long before the secret came out, and to Ned, at least, it came like a thunderclap.

CHAPTER 2.

The Secret Out—A Lawless Project—Suicide or Murder?

A few days later the secret came out.

During that time Ned Harris noticed that the curiosity in the fo'c's'le had to a great degree subsided. From the first there had been several men who looked knowing as they listened to the speculations of their shipmates. These had increased in number. Almost every hour saw one cease to make surmises on the fourth and fifth day of the voyage. Ned guessed that the captain was letting them into the secret one at a time.

There were still a number, however, in the dark when Captain Vance at length hoisted his true colours. The "Scorpion" was then in the Caribbean Sea, and heading for the Atlantic by way of Trinidad, so that it was plain to the dullest man on board that Charleston could not be her real destination.

There was a good deal of excitement for'ard when the bos'un piped all hands for a speech from the captain.

"Now we shall see what we shall see," old Thad Tixon said prophetically.

This was a statement which could not possibly be contradicted, so Ned, to whom the carpenter spoke, nodded assent with a smile.

The little fat skipper stood beside the lithe Creole. Mr. Rae, looking more worried than ever, was a little in the background. The expression of the Scotsman's honest face showed that he anticipated some unpleasant revelation. The bos'un, Lemayne, took his place with the seamen.

"My lads," said the fat skipper, taking his pipe out of his mouth—not without an effort—"called you together—explanation—voyage. Know you're curious. Finish it, Lamant."

And he put back his pipe, leaving the rest to be said by his right-hand man, the second mate. The Creole took one step forward.

"Men of the 'Scorpion,'" he said, in his fluent English, just touched by a French accent, "an explanation is due to you, and, besides, it is necessary, because we shall soon be at work."

There was a momentary buzz. Work? What work? Every eye was full of expectancy.

"So please give me your attention," added the Creole.

There was no danger of their missing one word.

"Some of you," Gaston continued, "are aware of the business upon which the 'Scorpion' will be engaged. Some are not. Listen, then. To speak plainly, early next week we shall cross the track of a ship which sails from Cadiz to Rio Janeiro. This ship carries a consignment of specie, the value of which is considerably over half a million dollars."

"By thunder!" ejaculated old Tixon. "Is that the game? Piracy?"

Piracy! Nothing less! The Creole had said enough to make clear the intentions of the officers. The Spanish ship was to be robbed of her specie on the high seas.

Gaston Lamant looked round to ascertain the effect of his words. More than half the crew were already in his confidence. Of the rest, many looked surprised, but assenting; some were dubious; a few felt indignant, and looked it.

"Piracy!" the Creole repeated. "That is what it would be called. But I hope to accomplish the work without the shedding of blood. All who are with me put up their right hands."

Every right hand but five went up, including those of Ned Harris and old Tixon. After an instant's reflection, they had realised what madness it would be to oppose the Creole, with nearly all the crew upon his side, and they gave in their adherence from motives of policy, and without the slightest intention of becoming pirates to please Gaston Lamant.

The hands of the dissentient five quickly followed the rest, the other honest men coming, but more slowly, to the same conclusion. Ned and Thad Tixon had arrived at. But the hawk eye of the Creole had "spotted" the quintette who hesitated, and he did not forget them.

"Very good," said Gaston. "Now, all who are against us step out."

Not a man moved, of course. But the chief mate—an honest and rather bull-headed man—stepped midway between the officers and the crew. Perhaps he hoped to influence the crew to reject the proposition of the Creole.

"Men," he said, "Think before you let that villain lead you into crime. Do you know what you are about to do? To rob the gold-ship will be piracy, pure and simple, and will render you liable to be hung as soon as caught."

There was an uneasy stir among the seamen. The prospect of riches is a pleasant one. But the prospect of hanging—that was decidedly the reverse. The Creole did not fail to see the impression Rae had made. Rae's action had taken him by surprise, or he would not have allowed the chief mate to utter such words. As Rae would have continued, Gaston interrupted him.

"Hold your tongue, sir!" the Creole exclaimed peremptorily.

The Scotsman turned upon him red with anger.

"I will speak!" he cried. "You shall not lead these men into crime, to certain death, if I can prevent it!"

"You can't prevent it!" sneered Gaston. "Say another word, and you shall be placed under arrest!"

"Why, you scoundrel!" And the Scotsman, nearly beside himself, rushed up to the second mate with his fist clenched, and struck him in the face.

The Creole turned deadly pale; not with fear, because he was no coward, but with rage.

"Seize him!" he yelled, pushing Rae back. "Lemayne, Darner, Ricard—seize him, and bind him fast."

The three men named, who had been in the Creole's confidence from the first, and were his chief confederates, threw themselves upon the chief mate. He was thrown heavily to the deck, and secured with a rope. The furious Creole bent over him and hissed in his ear:

"You life shall pay for that blow, Allan Rae."

"Ye villain!" retorted the Scotsman, "I—"

"Gag him, men, gag him!" cried Gaston. And a lump of oakum thrust into his mouth effectually silenced the chief mate.

"Take him below, and lock him in his cabin," said the Creole, with a malignant glare at the prisoner, who was pale but defiant. "We'll give him a trial to-morrow morning, and then decide what to do with him."

"Best thing—hang him—save trouble," interjected the skipper, who had smoked calmly during the scene of violence.

The Creole gave him a warning glance.

"I am opposed to bloodshed," he said. "Take him away."

Ned, looking at the second mate as he spoke, saw a gleam in his eye, and a twitching of his mouth, that made him uneasy.

As soon as the chief mate had been locked in his cabin, and Lemayne, Darner, and Ricard, had returned to the deck,

Gaston went on to fully explain his plans, to which the crew eagerly listened. Ned, saw that the prospect of seizing a hundred thousand pounds had banished every other consideration from the minds of the seamen. The men had, for the most part, been picked with a view to their character, Captain Vance selecting such as best suited him. He would have preferred to have only rascals on board; but that was not possible, for he also needed good seamen. Good seamen are usually honest men; skill and industry are rarely united with rascality. As Captain Vance could not do without skill and industry, he was compelled, in some cases, to dispense with the rascality; and thus Ned Harris and Thad Tixon, and five or six other "true-blue" tars, formed part of the crew. The majority were lawless fellows, however, hailing from the Mississippi and the Texan and Mexican ports. These men were just suited to the purpose for which they were required, and were sufficient in number to overawe, and, if need were, to massacre, the few honest men among the fo'e's'le hands.

When the "audience" was over, the men went back to their work, all discussing the information Gaston Lamant had given them. No one ventured to express an opinion unfavourable to the enterprise. As soon as he could do so without being seen by the keen-eyed mate, Ned spoke to his friend, the carpenter.

"Thad, what do you think of this business?"

"Bad, Ned, bad," replied Tixon, in a low voice. "But we're in for it now, and there's no chance of tacking for us. But it's very hard lines for an honest carpenter to be made a pirate in his latter days."

"What, in your opinion, do they mean to do with Mr. Rae, Thad?"

"Ned, if he ever comes outter that cabin alive, I shall be surprised. I know Lamant won't let him live, after that blow. Sides, he'd be in the way of the piratical villains, if he did. But we can't do nothin'."

Ned had to admit that. Even if Rae could be released from his bonds and from his cabin, he could not escape from the ship. He was at the mercy of the plotters. If they showed no mercy, his fate was sealed. Nothing could be done to save him.

Ned had no particular regard for the chief mate, of whom he knew very little; a foremast hand does not come into association with a second officer of a ship. He looked upon him only as an honest man in the toils of villains—as a helpless prisoner doomed to assassination, whom nothing on earth could save. That was enough to make him horribly anxious. That day was one of intense misery to both Ned and Thad, though they forced themselves to appear as cheerful as the others. When night came on, they expected every moment to hear some commotion aft.

In the second dog-watch the Creole came up and informed the crew briefly that in consequence of Mr. Rae's folly he had become chief mate in the Scotsman's place, and that Lemayne would act as second mate as well as boatswain. He added that Mr. Rae had been unbound, and was now merely confined to his cabin.

In the evening, Gaston took the first watch, and went down at twelve o'clock (eight bells). The middle-watch, following it, was taken by the bo'sun, as the crew continued to call him, though he was now second mate. For some reason, Darnar and Ricard followed the Creole below, and the three went into the captain's cabin. Ned noticed the disappearance of Darnar and Ricard, and he felt a chill creep over him. He was helpless to aid Rae, if harm were meant to him. But the rest of the watch suspected nothing; they chatted about the gold-ship, and no eyes were turned aft but Ned's. The young sailor, with an assumed calmness, made a move towards the companion; but the sharp voice of Lemayne ordered him back.

"You look tired, Harris," said the bo'sun, "you may go to your hammock if you like."

"Thank you, sir," answered Ned. "But—"

"The deuce take your buts. Go to the fo'e's'le this instant, and don't stir out of it again till the morning watch. D'y'e hear?"

There was no help for it. If Ned had heard the sound of a struggle in Rae's cabin, he would probably have rushed below, forgetful of the consequences, to the aid of the Scotsman. But now he had no alternative but to do as Lemayne bade him. If he did not walk, he would be dragged. Saluting the officer, then, he turned away and joined the off-duty watch in the forecabin. He got into his hammock; but it was long ere sleep visited his eyelids. And when at last he did slumber, he was tormented by hideous dreams, caused by the depression and anxiety he had felt all day.

At length the morning came, clear and fresh, with the warm southern sun and a soft breeze from the South American coast.

Ned was on deck with the morning-watch, and he keenly scanned the face of Lemayne to see if he looked the same as usual. The bo'sun was, perhaps, a trifle pale. Darnar and Ricard looked the same as usual; they were both brutal and

swaggering ruffians, unlikely to feel a single pang for any crime they might commit. Captain Vance came on deck with Gaston Lamant. The skipper was as ruddy as ever, with a smile upon his fat face and in his little piggish, cruel eyes.

After the customary work of the morning had been set about, the officers went down to breakfast. It was an hour before the captain reappeared, when he spoke to the crew in his usual abbreviated style.

"Stand by, lads—Mr. Lamant, bring up Rae—see what's to be done—don't know—give attention."

The Creole came out of the companion a minute later, with a very grave look upon his face.

"I have made a terrible discovery, sir," he said.

"Discovery—what is it?—heave away!"

"Mr. Rae has committed suicide, sir, by hanging himself in his cabin!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Creole's Crime—The Gold-Ship in Sight—The Prize of Gaston Lamant.

Suicide!

Various emotions were expressed in the faces of the seamen as the Creole spoke this word with a grave and concerned countenance.

If any believed him, they were few in number.

Two or three of the most hardened ruffians among the crew grinned, as if Gaston had just told them an excellent joke. Others looked serious; some regretful, and a few horror-struck.

Ned did his best to master his emotion, for he knew that the hawk-eyes of the Creole were watching for signs of disaffection. He succeeded in looking indifferent, with a great effort; but in his heart were horror and rage, and a fierce thirst for vengeance against the murderer.

Not for an instant did he believe that Mr. Rae had destroyed himself. It was a cunning lie to cover up a cowardly assassination. For, rough and lawless as the majority of the crew were, most of them would have shrunk from incurring the guilt of a cold-blooded murder. Therefore the Creole had done it without their knowledge or concurrence. Now it was done, any amount of scruple could not undo it; doubtless that was the villain's reasoning.

"This is very sad," said the hypocritical captain. "Poor fellow—mind unhunged—sad case—can't be helped—let's see him."

Captain Vance led the way down to the cabin of the Scotsman. The body had been cut down, and lay on the bunk. The crew crowded round in awed silence to look at it.

The state of the face showed that death had been caused by hanging. But Ned, with a shiver, noted that the chief mate's clothes were rent in places, and his hands bruised and cut. It was evident that the poor fellow had made a terrible struggle before he died. But there were odds against him; his resistance had been unavailing, and so he had been foully done to death.

Noiselessly the men filed out of the cabin after looking at the dead mate.

During the remainder of the day, voices were seldom raised above a whisper, but in subdued tones the men discussed the fearful event.

Ned listened to the words of the men who had been on duty at the time of the suicide or murder. One spoke of having heard Mr. Rae's cabin-door open at about two o'clock in the middle-watch. Another believed he had heard a faint cry, which sounded as if it had been choked back as soon as it was uttered. Others thought they had heard sounds of a struggle.

"Pore fellow," Thad Tixon said to Ned, "I told you how it would be, kiddy; but nothing could save him."

"Thad, that fiendish Creole must know that there are others on board who feel as Mr. Rae felt. Do you think there will be any more pretended suicides?"

The old carpenter was evidently alarmed at the suggestion. His furrowed face was full of uneasiness.

"Maybe, maybe," he replied. "Keep on your guard, Ned, an' I'll keep on mine. I allus has my big hammer about me, and afore I'm strung up, I'll crack one skull at least, I swar that. We must keep tergether ez much ez possible, younker. Blow it, I shall have bad dreams ter-night."

For a couple of days matters were quiet on board the "Scorpion."

Mr. Rae was buried at sea, and the feeling of uneasiness caused by his terrible death gradually wore away.

Once more the former topic of conversation on board the "Scorpion" became the sole one—the plunder of the Spanish ship. The men grew more eager and excited, the nearer they came to the track of the "Oriole."

That Gaston Lamant distrusted the old carpenter Thad and Ned were aware. That he had designs upon Thad's life they were soon assured. He made the move with his usual cunning;

but the Yankee was sharp as a needle, and "spotted" his game at once.

On board a full-rigged ship the boatswain seldom shares the fore-castle with the seamen. It is customary for him to have a little "caboose" somewhere aft. When Lemayne was made second mate he took Gaston's cabin, the Creole taking poor Rae's. The bosun's caboose was offered by the Creole to old Thad Tixon.

The carpenter instantly smelt a rat. His quarters were now for'ard with the crew. If he occupied the bosun's caboose, he would be separated from all the others, and would pass his nights alone—alone, at the mercy of the man who had warned him that Jonahs were usually thrown overboard. When the mate made the offer with the air of a man who is conferring a favour, old Thad gave him a deferential look and saluted.

"Thank you, sir, very much," said the carpenter. "Much obliged, I'm sure. But, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay in the fo'c's'le."

"The dickens, you would? What do you mean?"

"I'm afeerd, sir. The air of your end of the ship, sir, seems to hev a queer effect on people. I'm afeerd I might git infected, sir, an' go an' hang myself, an' commit suicide, sir."

The old carpenter said this with an air of great simplicity, apparently not noticing the flush of rage rising in the mate's swarthy cheek. A deadly gleam came into Gaston Lamant's eyes, but he forced a smile.

"You may do as you like, of course," he said. "I merely thought that the caboose would be more comfortable for a man of your age than a crowded fo'c's'le. But it only concerns yourself. You may go."

And Thad went, leaving the men who had witnessed this little scene tittering. A glance from the Creole's fierce eyes, however, stilled their merriment abruptly.

"Didn't I bluff him a treat, Ned?" said Thad afterwards, to his young friend, gleefully.

"Yes, Thad; but you've shown him that you know his game."

"He was bound to see that when I refused the bo'sun's quarters."

When Gaston Lamant went down to dine with the skipper he said:

"Thad Tixon is up to snuff. He won't take the bo'sun's caboose, captain. What shall we do with him?"

"Leave him alone. One man can't hurt. Let him be. That's sensible."

The Creole gritted his white teeth.

"For the present," he assented, after thinking a moment. "But I fear his influence over a portion of the crew. However there's no danger at present."

So the Yankee carpenter had a respite, and, in spite of his watchfulness, he found nothing further in the Creole's conduct to rouse suspicion.

Some days passed without event, and at length the "Scorpion" crossed the path of the Spanish ship.

Every eye was on the look-out for a sail. Twenty glasses continually swept the sea. Anxiety soon reached fever-heat.

There were a few on board who heartily hoped that the gold-ship had been missed, though they were careful not to say so. But nearly all were intensely eager. The most eager of all was the Creole. His impatience was so great that Ned began to think that he had some deeper motive than mere plundering for waylaying the ship from Cadiz. Some words he heard pass between the captain and the mate confirmed this idea. Gaston was fuming on the quarter-deck when Vance said:

"All's well, Lamant. Fretting no good. Smoke. Keep calm—very. Gold safe enough. 'Oriole' coming. All's well."

The Creole darted a savage glance at him.

"Curse the gold!" he replied. "What do I care for that? It is for my prize that I am anxious, not for the dirty stuff you'd sell your soul for, if you had one, captain!"

"Don't be huffy. 'Oriole' all right, you'll see. Take it easy," jerked out the imperturbable skipper.

And he went on puffing away at his pipe. The Creole stamped away swearing.

Ned heard this, and he wondered greatly. What was the prize Gaston Lamant expected to find on board the Spanish ship? He could not guess.

At length the welcome cry was heard from the man slung up in a cask at the main-truck to watch the sea:

"Sail ho!"

The Creole was in his cabin, eating his lunch; but he heard the hail from the masthead, and three bounds carried him to the deck.

"Where away?" he shouted.

"Just coming up over the line, north-east by east, sir!"

"The 'Oriole,' by heavens!"

At once all was animation and excitement.

"Lemayne, up with the Maxim! Darner, serve out the small-arms! Ricard, take the helm!"

The three men immediately obeyed. It was the Creole who gave the orders. The crew had long ago seen that he was the skipper a good deal more than Captain Vance was. Fat Vance leaned lazily on the taffrail, smoking contentedly, leaving all arrangements to be made by the mate. The mate proved himself to be fully equal to the task. Ned Harris suspected that this was not the first work of the kind that Gaston Lamant had been engaged upon.

The orders given by the Creole were quickly obeyed. Lemayne and his assistants speedily brought the Maxim gun on deck, and in a remarkably short space of time it was mounted upon the fore-castle and ready for use.

Darner brought up the small-arms. A Martini rifle, a revolver, a cutlass, and a long bowie-knife were served out to each man, with eight exceptions.

The exceptions were, of course, the honest men of the ship—Thad Tixon, Ned Harris, and those who had for a moment hesitated to raise their hands when Gaston called upon all who were on his side to do so. These were distrusted, and were not to be allowed to carry arms. But in order to avoid giving them cause for complaint, Lamant gave them various duties to perform, which would prevent their taking part in the possible conflict with the crew of the "Oriole."

"The cunning scallywag!" old Thad Tixon said to Ned, in disgust. "I do believe he is as deep as a well, kiddy!"

"I mean to get hold of a six-shooter, if I can, Thad."

"Don't let him see you do it, then."

Ned was much disappointed at being left unarmed. He was an excellent shot with the revolver, and he had hoped to get hold of one. Armed, he would feel much safer, and would be better able to guard against the mate's treachery.

He kept an eye upon the revolver-chest. Not knowing exactly what the number of his adherents would be when he left New Orleans, Gaston had provided a full supply of weapons for the whole crew. There were consequently eight or nine pistols left in the chest when it was carried back to the cuddy. One of these, at least, Ned Harris meant to get hold of at the earliest opportunity.

By the time the men of the "Scorpion" were equipped for battle the Spanish ship was plainly visible from the deck. Her big topsails, then her courses, came into view, and soon the "Scorpion's" men could see her bulwarks and bowsprit.

Gaston Lamant steered so as to cut across her bows. The men kept their weapons out of sight at his direction, and the Maxim gun was covered over with canvas. Plainly he did not wish to alarm the Spaniards. Ned guessed his plan. It was to approach the "Oriole" as if merely desiring to "speak" her, and suddenly to pour a flood of armed men upon her deck.

The thought occurred to Ned of hailing the ship, and putting the Spaniards upon their guard. It was not the knowledge that, if the gold escaped them, the others would tear him to pieces that restrained him; but he saw that he could only delay, and not prevent, the contemplated act of piracy. The "Scorpion" was a lighter vessel, better built, and a superior sailer—she had the advantage over the "Oriole" in every respect. If the Spaniards ran for it, the "Scorpion" would quickly run them down. Lamant was, however, anxious to avoid delay in robbing the gold-ship. In such a frequented sea as the mid-Atlantic there was constant fear of interruption. A cruiser, heaving in sight, would nip the Creole's game in the bud.

The two great ships drew nearer and nearer to each other. While all the men were excited, Gaston Lamant was more so than any other. He could not keep still, but continually moved from one place to another, and his eyes sparkled and his lips twitched.

"Keep cool. All rot. Girl or gold can't fly. You're an ass, Lamant!" the skipper jerked out between his whiffs.

The Creole turned towards the expectant seamen. Almost all were animated, greedy for plunder, and many a coarse face was full of ferocity. At what would those men stop short, in order to seize the gold consignment? Nothing. A sneering smile came over the Creole's face as he looked at them.

"And these are the men," he muttered, "who nearly all shuddered at the death of Allan Rae. If I had asked them to fling him into the sea, they would have refused. I was compelled to get rid of him quietly, because of their scruples. And now look at them! Eager for plunder, they are ready to wade knee-deep in blood to obtain it. Not one death—no, nor a hundred—would detain them. Strange!"

Aloud he continued, addressing the crew:

"My men, the hour is at hand for us all to become rich. Can I depend upon you all to follow me to the death?"

"Ay! ay!" was the hoarse shout.

"If we have to fight for the gold, you must face it." But, mark you, no wanton destruction. So long as we obtain what we seek, we have no further concern with the 'Oriole.' The ship shall not be injured, nor the crew harmed. Above all, the official in charge of the consignment must not suffer injury, even if he shows fight. This official, Senor Calvados Pomanya, is to be held sacred. His daughter, Donna Carlotta Pomanya,

accompanies him. If a hair of her head is harmed, I will cut the heart out of the man that harms her!"

There was a sudden blaze of ferocity in the eyes of the Creole and a vibrant note in his voice. He was in deep and deadly earnest. The rough crew looked at him in amazement. After a brief pause he went on:

"Donna Carlotta will be brought aboard the 'Scorpion,' as well as the gold. She will be my prisoner. And look out that none of you dare to offer her insult or molestation. My revolver shall avenge it!"

There was a minute's silence of blank surprise, and then young Ned Harris stepped forward with a flush on his handsome face.

"Will you tell us, sir," said he, "if you intend any harm towards the Spanish lady? We shall not insult her, but we are not so sure about you. And the crew of the 'Scorpion' will not allow harm to come to this girl you speak of!"

The many words and ringing tones of the young Briton found an echo in the many hearts there. Ruffians most of the men were, but they were not entirely without a certain sense of humanity and even chivalry. A murmur of many voices, united in approval of the stand he took, followed the bold speech of Ned Harris.

The glance of the Creole, as it dwelt upon the young Englishman, was almost menacing; but he answered calmly enough:

"Donna Carlotta Pomanya will be treated with the utmost respect by the officers as well as by the crew," he said. "So that's ended. Let no more be said upon the matter. Now to our work."

The two ships were near now. The dark faces of the Spanish seamen could be seen, as they looked with curiosity at the "Scorpion."

Gaston Lamant seized the speaking-trumpet of the skipper and hailed:

"Oriole, ahoy!"

Then swiftly he signalled his wish to come aboard.

The Spanish captain was no doubt astonished by the request, for he kept on his course for some minutes without a change. Gaston's heel was tapping the deck impatiently, when at last the "Oriole" rounded to.

"The longboat!" he ordered curtly.

The longboat was lowered and manned, its crew more numerous than was usual; and the arms being placed in it before it left the davits, they were not seen by the Spaniards. With Gaston Lamant in the stern, the boat pulled for the "Oriole." Captain Vance remained in charge of the "Scorpion." In this, as in most other matters, he left all direction to the Creole.

Ned watched the boat reach the "Oriole's" side, and saw all but two of its occupants pass up the ladder let down by the unsuspecting Spanish captain. It was then that the Spaniards, for the first time, discovered that the strangers were armed.

"But this—what doz this mean, senior?" asked the Spanish skipper in his broken and only half intelligible English.

"It means," replied Gaston Lamant coldly, stepping forward and presenting a pistol, "that I have taken your ship; that you are my prisoner; and that you are a dead man if you resist!"

CHAPTER 4.

How the "Oriole" was Robbed.

When the "Scorpion's" boat came alongside the "Oriole," nearly all the crew of the latter vessel were on deck, and so also were two passengers, whose names the reader has already heard. They were Don Calvados Pomanya, the officer sent in charge of the consignment of specie, and his daughter, Donna Carlotta.

Senor Pomanya was a fussy, stout little gentleman of forty-five. Carlotta was a slim, graceful girl, a head taller than her father, with an olive complexion, regular features, lustrous black eyes, and masses of raven hair. Beautiful she was, but she looked more gentle and kind even than beautiful. It was easy to see why Gaston Lamant was eager to carry off his prize. It was hardly possible to know Carlotta without falling a victim to her charms.

The attention of the Pomanyas, father and daughter, was attracted by the boat sent from the "Scorpion." They looked with curiosity at the strangers as they came on board. As Donna Carlotta's eyes rested upon the swarthy face of the Creole, she started, and every vestige of colour fled from her cheeks.

"Father," she whispered, clutching his arm in terror, "do you see that man? Look! He is the assassin of Filippi!"

"Pordios, it is true!" muttered the Spaniard. "What does he here?"

"He comes with some fell purpose, father; I can see it in his wicked face!" Donna Carlotta murmured, with trembling lips.

"Be easy, muchacha; the days of pirates are over. He can do us no harm."

"Ah, I fear him—I fear him!"

That the girl's fears were not unfounded was soon proved. The words of the Creole in reply to the captain of the "Oriole" told that he came as an enemy. And Gaston, catching sight of Carlotta, took off his hat to her with a bow, and an air of mocking politeness that increased her disquietude. For the moment, he made no movement to approach her.

The Spanish captain was absolutely petrified by the reply of the Creole. He could hardly believe his ears. But the motions of the boarders quickly showed him that they were in grim earnest. Twenty loaded rifles were brought up to a level, ready to sweep the deck with fire at a nod from Gaston. Darnier and Ricard hastened aft to take the wheel from the Spanish helmsman.

The Spaniard refused to give it up, and Ricard, without a word, knocked him down with a blow from his rifle-butt. The man fell, stunned, with a sprinkle of blood upon his face. Darnier took the helm. The "Oriole" was then brought as close to the "Scorpion" as was consistent with safety.



Before his fingers could touch her, he received a blow upon the side of his head that sent him sprawling upon the deck.

"You cowardly brute!" cried Ned Harris, standing over him with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

"'Scorpion, ahoy! Show your teeth!" sang out the Creole.

Lemayne tore the canvas covering from the Maxim-gun. Every Spanish eye could see it. It was enough. Resistance might have been offered to the rifles, but never to the Maxim. Such of the "Oriole's" men as had seized upon capstan-bars and belaying pins, dropped them as if they had suddenly become red-hot. Dismay was depicted upon every countenance. The captain was panting with rage, but he had no thought of offering resistance.

"You yield, then, senior?" asked Gaston, speaking in Spanish, as broken as the Spaniard's English.

"Si, I yield!" hissed Captain Pedros. "But you shall pay the penalty for this piratical outrage!"

"Maybe." The Creole shrugged his shoulders. "Meanwhile, I will trouble you for the gold you are conveying to Rio. Don't deny it!" he added, as the captain opened his mouth to speak. "My information is sure. Your life depends upon your handing over the specie without delay!"

Captain Pedros said no more. He had no alternative but to obey. The boxes containing the treasure were brought on deck. Gaston Lamant opened every one to assure himself that the contents had not been tampered with. Satisfied with

the result of his scrutiny, he had the booty lowered into the boat.

"Now will you go, pirate?" said Captain Pedros, with a glance of animosity at the Creole.

"There is another prize I must take, senor."

"We cannot resist your exactions. Do you require us to empty our pockets?" asked the Spaniard, with a sneer.

"No. Senorita Pomanya must go with me."

A chilling silence followed the words.

Donna Carlotta, almost fainting with terror, clung to her father. The face of Don Calvados presented a curious mixture of indignation and alarm.

"Come!" cried the Creole.

The Spanish sailors gave a shout. Spaniards are brave, and especially Spanish seamen. Hopeless as resistance was, the crew of the "Oriole" were fired with the wild idea of defying the pirates. It was doubtless in anticipation of this that Gaston had removed the gold to the boat before making his second demand.

"Take care," cried Gaston, "if a blow is struck, it will be the signal for a massacre! Take care!"

Captain Pedros signed to his men to remain calm.

"What are your intentions respecting Senorita Pomanya?" he asked in a faltering voice.

"The lady shall be treated with the utmost respect. Her maid shall accompany her, if she desires."

"And her father?"

The Creole reflected for a moment.

"No, not her father," he answered.

"You shall not take my daughter," cried Senor Pomanya furiously, "unless over my dead body!"

"I appeal to you, Donna Carlotta," said Gaston, turning a half tender, half fierce glance upon the Spanish girl. "Take you, I will, though the heavens fall. Shall I take you in peace, or make this ship run with blood? Again I declare that I mean you no harm. I swear it!"

"Father, I must go. We are powerless!" the girl murmured.

"Never!" cried the don violently. "Men—Spaniards—will you stand by and see my child torn from me?"

"Madman!" cried Gaston fiercely, "what can they do? Do you see these rifles? Do you see that Maxim? I desire no bloodshed, but I will not wait longer! Ricard, bring that girl hither! Men, shoot dead anyone that raises a finger to stop him!"

Ricard laid his hand upon Carlotta's arm. Don Calvados struck him in the face. The rufian launched out his huge fist, and the don fell prone, deprived of his senses by a stunning blow upon the forehead.

The Spanish sailors gave a shout and rushed at Ricard. The "Scorpions" were about to fire, when a cry from Carlotta stopped them.

"Hold, hold, do not fire; I will come!"

The girl, with a rare fortitude and courage, turned to the men who would have protected her, and waved them back.

"It is useless, my friends," she said, with a great effort speaking composedly. "You cannot save me; you will lose your lives in vain. Do not resist, I entreat you. I say you cannot save me. Heaven will protect me!"

The seamen, convinced, fell back. It was time, for the men on board the "Scorpion" were about to open with the Maxim.

Carlotta bent over her father, who was insensible, and not likely to come to himself for some time, and pressed her lips to his brow. Then, at a word from her, a couple of men carried him below to his state-room. Carlotta walked with a firm step towards the Creole.

"Your maid and your baggage?" he said. "Ricard, see that they are placed in the boat."

He handed Carlotta into the boat himself with an air of politeness. The girl sat in the stern-sheets, pale as ashes, but apparently resigned.

Her belongings, packed by her maid, followed; then the servant herself. The latter, a dark Andalusian girl named Inez, was offered the option of going with her mistress, or remaining in the security of the "Oriole"; she chose the former.

The boat pulled back to the "Scorpion."

The Spanish crew watched it with painful interest. They saw the prisoner and the plunder taken on board, and the boat slung up to the davits. Then the "Scorpion's" sails were braced, and she parted from the "Oriole."

Gloomily the Spaniards turned their prow towards Rio Janeiro, while the ship of the robbers passed out of sight to the northward.

of the crew crowded round to stare at Donna Carlotta when she was brought on board the "Scorpion."

The boxes of gold were laid upon the deck, and Gaston Lamant went with Vance into the latter's cabin to prepare a place for their bestowal, and to see the second cabin prepared for the reception of his captive. Donna Carlotta awaited his return, standing at the head of the gangway with Inez.

The mate being out of sight, three or four ruffians slouched towards Carlotta, who shrank away from them in fear.

"Hyer's a nice bit of caliker, mates!" said a big, brawny Mississippian, called Bill Rogers; and, leering at Carlotta, he made a snatch at the lace rebozo that shaded her pale face.

Before his fingers could touch her, he received a blow upon the side of his head that sent him sprawling upon the deck.

"You cowardly brute!" cried Ned Harris, standing over him with clenched fists and flashing eyes.

"Bully for young Britisher!" exclaimed old Thad Tixon excitedly. "Give the darned scallywag beans, sonny; I'll stand by yer!"

The crash of the burly Mississippian on the deck brought Gaston Lamant out of the cabin in the twinkling of an eye. He took in the situation at a glance. The big rough, jumping up with a look of fury, suddenly weakened and changed colour as he saw a revolver looking him in the face. The finger of Gaston Lamant was on the trigger.

"Hound!" cried the Creole, black with passion, "I warned you that insolence to this lady would be punished by death, and I'll keep my word."

A second more, and a bullet would have pierced the brain of Bill Rogers. But a light hand was laid upon the arm of the Creole.

"Do not kill him," said Donna Carlotta.

The Creole instantly became calm; her voice seemed to have a magical effect upon his stormy mood. But he said:

"He deserves to die. Do you ask for his life?"

"I do."

"It is enough. He shall live. Rascal," added Gaston, looking savagely at Rogers, "remember that you are only spared through this lady's intercession. At the next offence you die. Go!"

The Mississippian slunk away, scowling fiercely.

Ned had stepped back, having no objection to offer to the shooting of the donna's insulter. Gaston turned towards him with a certain reluctance visible in his manner.

"I thank you, Harris," he said; "you have done well."

The young British sailor drew himself up.

"I do not need your thanks, sir!" he replied coldly.

"What I did was not for your sake, but for Miss Pomanya."

The Creole flushed with anger, and ordered him forward. Ned saluted, and went quietly. But a grateful glance from Donna Carlotta consoled him.

Ned had never felt keenly till then his subordinate position. He was proud of being a British sailor, nothing more and nothing less. But to receive orders from Gaston Lamant had all at once become extremely galling to him.

"Permit me to conduct you to your cabin, Donna Carlotta," said Gaston, and he offered his arm. Carlotta, with a gesture, declined it. Somehow her action made Ned Harris glad.

For a single moment the Creole looked like a demon; then he was calm and composed again. He guided the girl to his own cabin, which he had vacated for her use. The steward had made a few little improvements, and it looked a very comfortable apartment.

Before leaving her, Gaston lingered a moment at the door, hoping that she would break her icy silence.

"I thank you, senor," she said, to get rid of him. And the Creole saw it, and went away pale with rage.

"But she shall love me yet—she shall, I swear it!" he murmured. "I will not give up hope. She must love me at last!"

While Gaston was attending to Donna Carlotta, all Captain Vance's attention was given to the boxes of gold. These were packed away in a secret receptacle between the bulkheads of the first and second cabins, the opening being boarded up over them. This proceeding was viewed by the crew with dissatisfaction. They would have preferred to divide the plunder at once. But at present they made no audible objection. When Gaston came on deck, the "Scorpion's" course was changed. She had made north, until the "Oriole" was out of sight, so that Captain Pedros would report that as the direction taken by the robber, when he reached Rio. Lamant now turned her bows directly south. Pursuing cruisers from Rio would be baffled by this doubling.

"What are the men looking black about, captain?" asked the Creole, after he had fixed the vessel's course.

"Dunno—maybe want divide—impatient—lot of fools!"

The mate looked at him with a smile.

"Not so much fools, captain, as we should be if we let them have their way. But I will satisfy them. Tell Lemayne to pipe all hands."

CHAPTER 5.

When Rogues Fall Out.

In spite of the Creole's warning, several of the most brutal

The crew collected eagerly at sound of the bo'sun's whistle, expecting to hear that the treasure was to be divided.

"My lads," said the mate, "no doubt you have felt curious to know why the treasure we have captured is not portioned out. This is the reason. When the 'Oriole' gets to Rio she will send a couple of cruisers upon the hunt for us. I shall try to give them the slip, but it is quite possible that we shall be overhauled and searched before we have disposed of our booty. If we were searched, and a quantity of gold were found in every man's chest, our guilt would be plain. But the secret hiding-place of the specie secures us."

This reasoning was so logical that no fault could be found with it. But there were murmurs as the men went back to their work. Gaston saw that his hold upon these sea-wolves was loosening. They were not satisfied. They would have preferred to share out the gold and run all risks. Besides, was there any real danger of the "Scorpion" being overhauled? Many said "no."

"We may have trouble later on," Lamant said to Captain Vance. "We must get these dogs disarmed as soon as possible."

But here came a difficulty. The men refused to give up their arms when called upon to do so. In this insubordination Bill Rogers was the leader. The men said plainly that they preferred to remain armed, in case of "gun-games." A new idea had taken possession of them, emanating from the cunning Yankee carpenter. It was that Gaston intended to cheat them out of their share of the plunder.

"Look out fur him, mates," old Thad had said in the fo'c's'le. "He's a scallawag from the toes upward, and he'll play injun with you ef he kin. I say that's no danger of our bein' searched, and ther Frenchie only wants to keep the spondules aft so's to get away with 'em at the fust clear chance."

This idea set the crew wild.

"Quite likely the Kreecol diz mean it," Thad said privately to Ned. "Anyway, I've jest put a spoke in his wheel fur him."

"You've flung an apple of discord into their midst," laughed Ned. "All the better; when rogues fall out, you know the rest. You're an artful dodger, Thad."

"Guess I'm up to snuff, just a few," said the old Yank, with considerable satisfaction.

Thad Tixon advised the men to stick to their weapons, and this advice coincided entirely with their own views. Hence their refusal to disarm.

The Creole was perfectly furious. He would have shot the ringleader, Rogers, dead, but, from the expression of the crew, he guessed that they would give him a volley if he did. He tried fair words. He pointed out that work could not possibly be done by men who carried an arsenal about with them. The seamen were prevailed upon to give up their rifles, which were stacked in the cuddy. But neither entreaties nor threats could induce them to go further. Every man kept his revolver and big bowie-knife in his belt. Lamant was forced to yield the point. He could not use force. The only men he could depend upon were Lemayne, Darner, Ricard, and Captain Vance. With the whole crew against five annihilation could be the only result. So he tried to conciliate.

Elated with their victory, the men swaggered about, and there was not much work done after that. By sharing the guilt of a criminal enterprise with their officers, the seamen felt a sort of equality with them, and the discipline of the ship suffered in consequence.

While the rascals on board the "Scorpion" were thus divided into two camps, a third party had been formed by Ned Harris.

Our hero, while the protracted dispute between the mate and the seamen was proceeding upon the maindeck, called together the half-dozen honest men in the fo'c's'le, and spoke to them in a frank, straightforward way. He had a good deal of influence over them, for they looked up to him on account of his superior education, and liked him for his manly, generous nature.

Ned, in brief terms, pointed out that, now the sea-lawyers had obtained the specie, their next move would probably be to attempt to get rid of the honest seamen.

"If a Government vessel pursued us," Ned said, "the mate knows perfectly well that we would tell the whole truth in the case of the 'Scorpion' being overhauled. It is his interest to send us after poor Rae, whom he murdered, as you all know very well. Let us stick together. Union is strength."

"Besides," said Thad Tixon, "if we are not to share the guilt of those villains we must cut ourselves clear of 'em in the plainest way."

"We can do nodings mitout weapons," said one of the true-blue seamen, a burly German named Axel.

"That is true. We must obtain them. Lamant and his bulldogs are now quarrelling. I am in hopes that they will come to blows. While they fight we can get quietly into the cuddy one at a time. All the arms which were not served out are there, and a good many oases of ammunition. Come, there is no time to lose!"

"We must have a leader," said a Scottish seaman, Andrew Macaulay. "I vote for Ned Harris, mates!"

This was agreed to without a dissentient voice.

"But," observed a sailor, "won't this hyer proceeding come under the head of mutiny, Ned Harris?"

"No," replied Ned decisively. "Our officers having turned pirates, we are absolved from our engagements with them. All honest men are called upon to dissociate themselves from the sea-lawyers. That's law!"

The men were satisfied. Leaving the fo'c's'le, they drifted aft in a careless sort of way, and Lamant was too busily engaged with his insubordinate roughs to notice what they did. Singly they slipped down the companion-ladder. In the cuddy were the arm-chests, still open. Each of the men, excepting Thad Tixon, possessed himself of a Martini rifle, six-shooter, and a knife, as well as a cartridge-belt well-filled. Thad knew not how to shoot, and for a weapon he preferred his big hammer to anything else. Inspired with new courage by the possession of arms, the little party returned to the deck and stood near the taffrail awaiting the dispute with Lamant which they knew must come.

The roughs having stacked their rifles in the cuddy, and finally refused to surrender their smaller weapons, the matter ended. Then the angry Creole, as he left his rebellious followers, saw the change that had come over the eight true-blue seamen. With a scowl upon his face he strode towards them.

"What does this mean?" he said harshly. "How dare you appear in arms on deck without permission?"

Ned Harris took a step in advance of his comrades.

"We mean no harm to anyone, Mr. Lamant," he said. "But your own lawless deeds have caused us to arm, to be able to defend ourselves if necessity arises. You know that we were not on your side in the robbery of the 'Oriole,' still less in the abduction of Miss Pomanya. We think you might attempt to rid yourself of us, as you rid yourself of Mr. Rae. For mutual protection we, the only honest members of the ship's company, have banded together and armed ourselves."

The Creole quivered with rage as he listened.

"This is mutiny," he said slowly.

"We owe no obedience to a pirate," Ned answered.

"And what do you intend to do?"

"Remain upon our guard; but we shall not interfere with you or your men."

"By Heaven, Ned Harris, your insolence is too much!" cried Gaston furiously, and he sprang towards the young Englishman.

"Try to strike me, Mr. Lamant, and I will lay you upon your back fast enough. Use your pistol, and I'll use mine," said Ned firmly.

The mate thought better of it. Ned and his comrades looked stubbornly resolute. Assured that their lives depended upon their union and determination, the eight men were ready to die where they stood rather than submit to the dictation of the pirate-officer. Gaston saw that he had here a united and resolute band to deal with, and he quickly abandoned the idea of using violence.

One plan would have suited him well. He wished to call upon the rest of the crew to attack Ned's men and massacre them; but he did not do so, for the simple reason that he knew that his followers would not obey. The massacre of eight brave men with arms in their hands would not be accomplished without terrible bloodshed, and the roughs would need an extremely powerful motive to induce them to engage in such a conflict.

The Creole felt himself baffled. Ned had been too many for him. He controlled his rage with an effort and went below.

Naturally Ned's party were a little elated by the success of their move. It increased their confidence in themselves and in their leader.

Between the insubordination of the crew, Ned's defiance, and Donna Carlotta's coldness, the Creole's state of mind was not an enviable one. He was further exasperated by the indifference of the skipper, whom he consulted in this difficulty with Ned. Captain Vance was always disposed to let things "slide." He was a villain, but a poor-spirited and irresolute villain, and utterly idle and incapable.

"It's all very well for you to smoke, you fat and lazy hog!" the mate cried, in a white heat. "But what's to become of us, with the ship's company divided into three hostile camps?"

"Dunno. Do as you like. Don't worry me," answered Vance. "You led me into it. So you did. Get me out, then. Don't care."

"You'll care when there's a rope round your neck!" hissed the Creole, as he stamped away in a fury.

Captain Vance went on smoking.

Gaston went to the third cabin, which he now occupied, Lemayne being again relegated to the bosun's caboose. Here he called in the three men upon whom he could depend—Lemayne, Darner, and Ricard—and asked their advice.

Each answered according to his view. Ricard, a Mexican-Tejano, proposed to assassinate Ned's party after dark. Darner

suggested a stand-up fight. Lemayne's advice was to scuttle the ship, and carry off the treasure in the longboat.

"We four could do it," he said. "The rest could be left to drown."

The Creole looked thoughtful before he replied:

"We cannot assassinate them as Ricard suggests, because they will be continually on their guard. An open fight would be madness, for the crew would not join us. But your plan, Lemayne, deserves consideration. But I could only decide to sacrifice my ship as the very last resource."

"Your ship, sir?" said Ricard, with a meaning look.

"Yes, mine," said the Creole coolly—"mine, because I induced that fool Vance to spend his money fitting it out for this expedition—mine, because I shall not allow the fat fool to retain possession of it. We are agreed upon that?"

"Quite, sir," said Darner. "But what is to be our plan now? Are not Ned Harris and his friends to be interfered with?"

"When we cannot use force we must use cunning. Divide and conquer. You must use every effort to make Harris's party quarrel with the brutes of whom Bill Rogers is the leader. You, Darner, will pretend to have found out that Harris and Captain Vance are in league to get away with the gold, and, in consequence, you desert me and join Rogers. Do you understand?"

The ruffian nodded, with a grin.

"You, Lemayne, will see that Harris's party are not called upon to work like the rest. This will create a quarrel if anything will. Also, taunt Bill Rogers, Darner, with allowing him to be licked by a mere boy."

After a little further conversation the four confederates separated, each to do his work.

CHAPTER 6.

Ned Plays a Bad Game—The Wolves Break Loose.

The next day the men of the "Scorpion" were set to work by the mate to change the appearance of the ship by fresh painting her. This was a very necessary precaution, in case of pursuit. The crew, who had begun to taste the pleasures of idleness, did not welcome the task.

Lamant, when he gave the orders, saw the men collect in a group and consult. Then Bill Rogers slouched forward.

"We men of the 'Scorpion,'" he said, "hev decided to do no more work than is absolutely necessary to keep the ship goin'. We're all free an' equal here now, sence, ef we're captured, we'll all go to gaol tergether. You ain't to give orders for the fucher, Mister Lamant; you're to ask the crew fur what you want."

"Very good," replied Gaston, controlling his rage with a great effort. "Will it please you to do as I have directed?"

"Yaas," the Mississippian assented, "we'll do it, so long's you don't make the work too hard, Mister Lamant."

The work was done in the most hasty and slovenly manner, the men being slung over the side on little wooden stages. Lemayne took care to leave Ned's party out of the work; but our hero saw his motive, and baffled him. The true-blue seamen set to work of their own accord, and did pretty nearly as much as all the others put together.

The Creole ground his teeth, but he could do nothing.

The work was finished, after a fashion, by sunset. The paint was merely slopped over the timber, and great patches of the underneath colour showed in places. But Lamant was satisfied. Enough had been done to disguise the "Scorpion."

The following day was spent in idleness. The men refused to turn to, except to trim the sails. Ned's comrades did not care to take upon their shoulders the whole work of the ship, so they remained inactive also.

"We'll work when the others do," was Ned's reply to the Creole's angry orders.

So nothing was done.

Idleness is ever the parent of mischief. With nothing to do, in an irritatingly hot climate, men naturally became quarrelsome.

Darner had joined Rogers's party as his master directed, and did his best to promote discord. Evil looks were thrown at the little band by the dominant party. To avoid friction, Ned and his comrades removed from the fo'c's'le, and made their quarters on deck. Here they were safer from surprise-attacks, and it was pleasanter, for the open air was preferable to the stuffy fore-cabin in the hot weather.

On the fourth day after the robbery of the "Oriole," Senorita Pomanya for the first time appeared on deck. With her maid Inez, she came up to take the air. Many curious glances were levelled at her. Ned ventured to take off his cap, a salute she acknowledged with a slight inclination of the head.

Gaston Lamant looked savage. After vainly trying to engage her in conversation, he walked moodily away, leaving her standing by the taffrail. Soon, however, he came back, and again spoke:

"Why are you so cruel to me, senorita?" he said, in a low voice. "You know how devotedly I love you."

She looked at him haughtily.

"Such words from the assassin of my cousin are insults!" she replied.

"It is false. He attacked me, and I was obliged to protect myself!"

"Possibly; but his blood is upon your hand, which, rather than touch, I would die!"

A spasm of uncontrollable rage crossed the Creole's face.

"Recollect that you are my prisoner!" he cried. "As for touching my hand, you shall touch it, whether you wish it or not!"

And he seized her hand with such fierce force that she uttered a cry of pain. Holding it in his, in a grasp that crushed the slim fingers, he glared at her, his swarthy face distorted with rage. Only for a moment, for a grip upon his collar swung him round and forced him to release her.

It was the strong hand of Ned Harris that had seized him. Perfectly calm, but with a sparkle in his eyes, the English sailor looked him in the face as he let go the collar. Gaston was mad with rage.

"I cannot permit such usage of Miss Pomanya," Ned said coldly.

Not permit! This from a foremast hand—a fo'c's'le man! Blind fury gleamed in the Creole's eyes. Without a word he flung himself upon Harris, clutching at him like a tiger.

Ned did not give way an inch. He met the Creole firmly, grappled with him, and hurled him back upon the deck with a crash.

The mate's three henchmen made a simultaneous movement towards Ned. His friends at once closed up behind him, with their weapons to the fore. The trio decided hastily to hold off.

Gaston quickly regained his feet. His back ached—for he had struck the deck with terrible force—and he felt dizzy. He reeled, and generous Ned instinctively put forward a hand to support him. Gaston, with a savage snarl, knocked it rudely aside.

"Curse you!" he said, grinding his teeth. "You dog, your life shall pay for this!"

A revolver glittered in his hand. Donna Carlotta screamed, and turned deathly pale. Ned, reading murder in the look of his enemy, did not give him time to bring the revolver to a level. A swift blow dashed it to the deck. With a passionate yell the Creole again sprang at the Briton. Ned, with superior strength and coolness, forced him down to the deck, and held him there, while he said evenly:

"Thad Tixon, bring me a rope."

In a moment it was brought.

"Now bind this villain so that he cannot move."

"By Jehoshaphat, that's the ticket!" ejaculated Thad.

And with a few turns of the rope he rendered the Creole utterly unable to stir, and with an odd piece he thoughtfully choked back the torrent of blasphemy pouring from Gaston's lips.

"By George, what mean, eh?"

Captain Vance came up just as the old carpenter finished binding Gaston Lamant. The scene struck him with surprise and fear. Ned Harris looked at him calmly.

"Captain Vance, Mr. Lamant has become violent, and I and my friends have decided to hold him prisoner, to guard against further outbreaks. You will not be interfered with, so long as you don't interfere with us. And you"—Harris glanced to the astonished crew, gathered on main-deck and gangway—"you can all do as you like, but I shall not release Gaston Lamant."

The crew were in a state of indecision. Ned's high-handedness was not pleasant to them, but they had not sufficient affection for the mate to cause them to fight his battles. Whatever steps they might have taken were prevented by someone suddenly singing out:

"Now the mate's in limbo, let's hev the treasure out!"

A perfect yell of approval followed. Led by Bill Rogers, the ruffians swarmed aft. It seemed as if a spell had been taken from them. The Creole was the only man they feared. Captain Vance was a nonentity. No one thought of regarding him. He opposed the mutinous men in a feeble way, but was brushed aside, and philosophically retired to the cuddy and smoked.

"What's our game?" asked Thad, looking at Ned.

The young man laughed.

"Don't interfere with them. They seem rather pleased than otherwise that the mate is a prisoner. Better so. We shall be able to hold him the more easily."

The old carpenter stared at Ned with a sort of half incredulous admiration.

"Do ye really mean to hold him, kiddy?" he said.

"Do you doubt it? Isn't it our only safe course?"

"I s'pose so," assented Thad.

"We will occupy the after part of the ship," continued Ned.

"Come. Half-measures are no good; we must go the whole hog or none. If we are not prepared to set Lamant loose and let him pitch us overboard, we must hang on to him, tooth and toenail. We will keep him in his own cabin, which we will occupy ourselves. Two or three of us can manage in the cuddy."

The rush of the crew to seize the gold had been joined by Lemayne, Ricard, and Darner, who were fearful of being left out of the distribution. Ned's party and the prisoner, and the two Spanish girls, only remained on deck. Ned Harris joined Donna Carlotta at the taffrail.

"Pardon me, Miss Pomanya," he said respectfully, "it is necessary for me to make you an explanation, so that you may know exactly how matters stand on board this vessel."

Donna Carlotta inclined her head. Her dark eyes, as they dwelt upon the sailor's frank and manly face, were full of interest and admiration. Women always admire strength in a man, and Carlotta had observed the ease with which Ned crushed and quelled Gaston Lamant, himself no weakling. But more than this, she admired his courage, his resolute decision, and his chivalrous protection of herself.

"Senor," she said softly, "I do not know how to find words to thank you. Twice you have defended me from a ruffian. Believe me, I am grateful."

Ned blushed under her gaze. Somehow, he lost his decisiveness in the presence of this girl. But he replied readily enough.

"It is little, Miss Pomanya, that I have done. It is much

that I would do if it were in my power. I fear that I cannot promise you freedom, though I would give my life to obtain it for you. But I can assure you that you have no more to fear from that blackguard. He shall never address you again."

Then Ned, in a few simple words, told her the history of the "Scorpion"; how he and his friends had been shipped with the belief that they were going to Charleston; how they had found out too late that the ship was fitted out for a piratical expedition. He finished by assuring her that he and his comrades had not shared in the robbery or its proceeds, that they were true-blue seamen, and ready to defend her at the cost of their lives. In the last statement, Ned perhaps represented his men as more chivalrous than they were, judging them by himself; they were not heroes, but only practical fore-castle men. But gladness came into Carlotta's face as she listened. Instinctively she placed faith in the stalwart son of the sea who spoke to her. When Ned concluded, she placed her hand in his.

"I trust to you, senor," she said simply. "It is happiness to find that I have friends aboard this vessel, where I expected none. But I do not yet know the name of my best friend."

Ned thrilled with pleasure as the charming donna called him "her best friend."

"My name is Edward Harris, Miss Pomanya."

"I shall not forget it, Don Eduardo," inclining her head. Then she looked at the Creole, lying helpless on the deck, and foaming at the mouth. "What are your intentions respecting

that man, senor?"

Ned followed her glance. The Creole glared at him like a demon, while he vainly tried to tear loose his bonds.

"He ought to be thrown overboard, Miss Pomanya. He is a dangerous man. But I shall only keep him prisoner. I do not care to have his death upon my hands, assassin though he is!"

At this moment the crew came pouring on deck, shouting and disputing, and carrying in their arms the heavy boxes of gold.

"There will be bloodshed soon," Ned observed. "Let me take you down to your cabin, senorita."

Gaston Lamant turned black with fury as he saw Carlotta accept from Ned Harris the assistance she would never take from him.

When the Spanish girl and her maid were in their cabin, Ned had the Creole carried down, and as an additional security he was fastened with a cord to some iron staples driven into his bunk by Thad. Ned, always considerate, then removed the cords from his ankles, and the gag from his mouth. As soon as he found the use of his tongue, Gaston burst out into a torrent of curses. As Ned did not object to his relieving his feelings that way, he merely retired and left him alone.

Captain Vance had gone into the pantry to get out of the way of the crew, and Ned found him seated upon a cask, looking very disconsolate, but smoking hard. He looked up rather apprehensively at Ned, but was reassured by the sailor's respectful salute.

"I have come to ask, sir, if you would mind allowing my friends and myself the use of your cabin," said Ned.

The captain was the reverse of keen, but he saw very well that Harris had made up his mind to have the cabin, with or without its owner's consent. So he made haste to acquiesce.

"Thank you, sir," Ned answered. "As for yourself, you can perhaps persuade Lemayne to let you have his place."

Crack—crack—crack! clash!

The sounds came from overhead. The crew were dividing the gold robbed from the "Oriole," and, unable to decide the matter by argument, had invoked the assistance of their knives and pistols.

Ned hurried up the companion-ladder.



The boxes had been broken open, and the sight of the rolls of coin made the men mad with cupidity. Revolvers and knives were drawn, and a fearful struggle for the lion's share of the gold commenced.

CHAPTER 7.

The Curse of Gold—Open Strife—Ned Comes Out on Top.

The imprisonment of Gaston Lamant had left the crew of the "Scorpion" leaderless, and with no one to control them. The

natural result followed. Each man obeyed the dictates of his own inclination. All restraint was thrown off; the last vestige of discipline vanished; and the truculent nature of the ruffians showed itself in all its hideousness.

Some, less brutal or more timid than the others, withdrew from the quarrelling gang; but more than a score of furious men remained round the boxes of gold.

The boxes had been broken open, and the sight of the rolls of coin made the men mad with cupidity.

No one wished to make a fair division; each was bent upon getting the lion's share for himself; hence the outbreak of rage.

Accusations, recriminations, oaths and curses, made a babel, and it was not long before revolvers and knives were drawn to back up threats. Words were followed by blows; blows by stabs and shots. When Ned looked out of the companion-hatch, he saw a swaying, struggling, yelling mass of maddened men, fighting like fiends, and the frequent thud of a falling body told how deadly was the strife. Ned saw that it would be useless to interfere, and he returned to his comrades.

"The gold has set them by the ears," he said. "I don't know how it will end. There are five or six killed already."

"All the better," said old Thad Tixon carelessly. "If them sea-lawyers will only wipe each other out, we kin run the ship."

"That has occurred to me, Thad. If, when the fight is over, we could only manage to disarm the survivors, we could take control of the ship, and force Captain Vance to navigate her back to New Orleans."

"You're full of good ideas, kiddy," Thad assented. The fight on deck gradually ended. When the first fury had been expended, the ruffians began to realise the insanity of the conflict.

The survivors slowly drew apart, their pistols empty, their knives red. Many bled from ghastly wounds. Seven still forms lay upon the planks, never to move again of their own accord. The gold, momentarily unregarded, lay strewn upon the deck, splashed and clotted with blood.

Some of the wounded men, groaning heavily, sank down in various places about the deck, calling in vain to their mates for help.

After a long pause, during which they eyed each other suspiciously, the crew again closed round the gold. But not to combat. The reaction had set in, and they were timid enough now. By tacit consent weapons were put back, and voices were no longer threatening.

"No more o' this," said Lemayne. "We're only playin' the game for Ned Harris and his mates."

"But the gold hez ter be divided!" returned Bill Rogers, with an oath.

"Why not leave it in a lump, as Mr. Lamant advised?" suggested the boatswain, who had his own reasons for wishing to keep the gold out of the clutches of the crew.

The words were unlucky for the speaker. Bill Rogers was quite 'cute enough to guess that the Creole and his three henchmen were "playing the game" on their own account. Lemayne's words brought a storm about his ears.

"Mates," cried Rogers, "the bo'sun an' his mates are in the swim with the Kreeole to swindle us. Serpose we don't let none of 'em hev a share of ther spondulies?"

This proposal was met with applause.

"You kin jest c'lar out, Mister Lemayne," added the Mississippian insolently; "you sha'n't tech a cent!"

The bo'sun did not resist this autocratic decree. He retired with Ricard. As for Darner, he was past caring about the gold or anything else, for he lay flat upon his face, with a bowie-knife in his heart.

The division of the specie was made finally by Rogers. Each of the men took the share allotted to him, hungrily watching to see that it was no smaller than anyone else's. Rogers himself took more than double the just amount, and a roar of protest went up. The rough drew his pistol, and glared round at the wolfish faces.

"If anybody thinks I've tuck too much, let him take it away from me, an' he kin keep it all!" he cried, with loud defiance.

But the fatal conflict that had just occurred had taken all the fight out of the roughs, and no one accepted the challenge.

When the division was completed, every man went about with a canvas bag full of gold tied to his belt, afraid to trust it anywhere but on his own person. Then came the question of disposing of the dead. No one cared to touch them. Needless to say, the men who were disabled had been left out of the division. Only such as could look out for themselves had been included; the ties of comradeship were not likely to be much regarded by men who had just been at each other's throats. The groans of the wounded were now mingled with curses upon the avarice of their companions.

Ned Harris came on deck as soon as the question of the gold was settled.

"Have you finished, mates?" he asked calmly.

"Yas!" growled Bill Rogers sneeringly. "Hev you come up fur your share, kid? Ef so, you won't git it!"

"No; but these bodies cannot be kept on board. Tell the sailmaker to sew them 'up, and I will read the service for them."

"Hyer's a good S'maritan, mates!" jeered Rogers. "Kid, ef you're so kinder tender-hearted, thar's four gerloots yander wants repairing!"

"Some of you carry them down to the cuddy, then, and I will attend to their injuries."

This was done. With the help of Captain Vance's medicine-chest, Ned tended the wounds of the four disabled roughs, and fixed them up as comfortably as possible. Meanwhile, the bodies of the seven slain were sewn up in their hammocks, and when Ned was ready to read the prayers, they were buried in the sea.

This terrible consequence of their ferocity made the crew quieter and more orderly, with the exception of Rogers and one or two desperadoes of his kind.

It was Ned's policy to avoid conflict with the other party; but it was the game of Lemayne and Ricard to foment strife, and in this they proved successful. The bo'sun made his peace with the men by bringing a supply of spirits from the cuddy. Ned thought of preventing him, but refrained, for he knew that, as soon as the idea of getting drunk occurred to the crew, they would seize the liquor by force.

The roughs were soon made uproarious by the strong drink. Then Lemayne cunningly twitted the Mississippian with the way Ned had knocked him down when he spoke to Donna Carlotta.

"I'd hev pulverised him if Lamant hadn't chipped in with his popper!" growled Rogers savagely.

"Bah! Lamant's tied up now, and can't interfere, and you don't dare to tech Ned Harris!" sneered the bo'sun.

"Don't I?" cried the rough, in a rage. "I'll show yer, bust my skin!" And, inflamed by rum and temper, he went aft, yelling out for Ned Harris to show himself.

Ned's comrades urged him to stay below; but he pointed out that if Bill Rogers was bent on fighting, fight he must.

"Besides," added the astute Ned, "we can turn this to our own advantage, I believe. While I lick Rogers, all the attention of those wild beasts will be given to the fight, and you ought to be able to make away with their arms, or some of them, and with any store of ammunition they have in the fo'c's'le. I took good care that the dead men's weapons went overboard with them, and those of the wounded I have safe. As a matter of precaution, we had better drop overboard all the arms we do not require for our own use; and you, Thad, had better take your hammer and dislocate that Maxim gun."

Then Ned went up coolly to face his burly enemy. Had Rogers been sober Ned might have had his doubts about tackling so huge an adversary. But, intoxicated, Rogers was not likely to be very formidable.

"If I fight," Ned said, addressing the brutal crew, "no one must interfere. It's to be a fair shake. Is that agreed?"

The crew shouted approval. So the two men faced each other and began. Rogers was strong, but rum had made his legs shaky. Ned saw soon that all was in his own hands. He could do as he liked with the ruffian. But he purposely dealt gently with him, prolonging the fight to enable his friends to get their work done.

Lemayne and Ricard, too, were not idle. They went to the cuddy with the intention of releasing Gaston Lamant. Ned had foreseen it. Axel, the German, and Macaulay were on guard there, and they instantly covered the pair of rascals with their rifles.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the bo'sun hastily. "We don't mean no harm—we don't! We'll jest clear out quietly, mates!"

"No, you don't!" said Thad Tixon, who had followed them down the cabin-stairs. "You'll jest keep still while I tie ye up. Keep 'em kivered, mates, an' let drive if they try ter get erway."

The two rascals expostulated in vain; the old carpenter was inexorable. They dared not resist, with death in the levelled rifles. In a few minutes Thad had them triced up in the most scientific manner.

"Bash thar cokernuts in if they yell, mates!" he said carelessly, as he went back to the deck, and took his way to the fo'c's'le. There he sought out the ammunition of the seamen. There was little, but that little he secured.

At length Ned, tired of the conflict, took the offensive vigorously, and drove his antagonist back with heavy blows. Rogers was astonished by this new development, so much, that in a moment he was laid upon his back in the midst of his mates, who laughed loudly at his discomfiture. When he jumped up there was a drawn knife gleaming in his hand. Ned sprang at him, knocked him down, and disarmed him, flinging all his weapons over the gangway into the sea.

"Now I've drawn your teeth you can get up," he said releasing him; "but don't try any more tricks, my hearty. The

next time you trouble me I shall send a bullet through your heart."

The ruffian was cowed, and he did not reply. The drinking was resumed. Half a dozen of the crew were already dead drunk, and these Thad Tixon had disarmed quietly. It seemed that the rest would soon be in the same condition. Ned fervently hoped so. The fight over the gold had left the roughs under twenty in number, and if they were unarmed it would not be difficult for the true men to keep them in subjection.

As the rum was consumed rapidly, passions began to rise again. Bill Rogers being in no state to defend himself, two of his mates conceived the idea of punishing his cupidity, and at the same time adding to their own stock of booty. They threw themselves suddenly upon him. He was not too drunk to struggle, and he fought fiercely for his treasure. But a knife in his throat stilled him, and from his corpse the spoilers tore the canvas-bag of gold. So died Bill Rogers—a fitting end to a criminal life.

As man by man the crew yielded to intoxication, Ned's hopes rose. Would they be mad enough to render themselves helpless by drink? There could be no doubt of it. At sunset not one was able to move. Senseless as logs, breathing stertorously, they lay about in various postures on the deck.

"Now's our time," said Ned, after leaving the roughs half an hour in which to sink into their drunken sleep. "Come on!"

Quickly, but thoroughly, the work was done. Every weapon on board, save those of Ned's party, was destroyed or flung overboard. The body of Rogers followed them. Five of the most truculent of the gang were taken into the cuddy and heavily ironed. The remaining twelve were required to work. It was the smallest number for safety, or Ned would have manacled every man.

"We are masters of the ship, and without loss," Ned said exultantly. "Now for New Orleans! We shall come off with flying colours, mates!"

"Wot about the gold?" asked one of the seamen, rather wistfully.

"It shall be packed in the boxes again, and we'll give it up to the authorities at New Orleans, to be returned to Spain. But, look you, I am much mistaken if we do not get a substantial reward when we take the 'Scorpion' back to the crescent city."

This was cunningly said to prevent the men letting their thoughts wander upon the specie. So large a sum was a temptation to the most honest.

Captain Vance was requested to make a choice between navigating his own ship back to the port where the prison-doors were open for him, and going overboard, with a lump of lead tied to his ankles.

"All right—guide ship—faithful—very," said the skipper, taking his pipe from his mouth. "All Lamant's fault—hope he'll hang—do, 'pon my word—scamp, that man!"

This being satisfactorily settled, Ned was free at last to acquaint Donna Carlotta with the good news. He tapped at the door of her cabin. She opened it herself.

"You look happy, Don Eduardo."

"I ought to, senorita. I command this ship now, and you are free—free as the air. That makes me happy."

The beautiful Spaniard gave a cry of joy.

CHAPTER 8.

The Final Fight—With Flying Colours.

When the crew came to their senses the next morning they found a change in the ship that astonished them, and threw them into an impotent fury.

Ned addressed them as soon as their fuddled brains were clear enough to comprehend him.

"Men," he said, "I have taken command of the 'Scorpion,' and I am going to run her back to New Orleans. My friends will back me up. You will have to work and obey. You have no option, for you are disarmed, and if you show fight we shall simply massacre you. So be sensible, and make the best of it."

And, after a good deal of swearing and threatening the men of the "Scorpion" took Ned's advice and made the best of it.

The regular watches were resumed, and the roughs soon found that they had to promptly obey the bo'sun's whistle, of which Thad Tixon took charge.

One of them, who refused to turn to, was seized and triced up by Axel and Macaulay, and Thad gave him a dozen with the cat, his comrades not daring to aid him in the presence of the true men's rifles. This lesson was not lost upon the fo'e's le gang.

Ned and his men were under the necessity of keeping ever on the alert. They had eight prisoners in irons to look after. Gaston Lamant's bonds had been changed for manacles, for additional security. The prisoners' meals had to be taken to them regularly. Attempts to escape had to be guarded against. Captain Vance had to be looked after, to see that he did not help the prisoners. The true-blue seamen, there-

fore, had their hands full. There was only one of the party who did not long for the arrival at New Orleans. That one was Ned Harris. His motive for wishing the voyage to be prolonged will be easily guessed.

Every day now Donna Carlotta spent some hours out of her cabin. Sometimes on deck, sometimes in the cuddy; nearly always with "Don Eduardo." And those hours were hours of bliss to the young sailor.

Before many days had passed he was head over ears in love with Donna Carlotta.

And she? Perhaps she did not feel indifferently towards the handsome young sailor. Ned's courtesy and refinement must have appeared doubly conspicuous among his rough surroundings. His daring courage caught the fancy of the romantic Spanish girl. The more she saw of him the more he pleased her.

A week passed by without event, save that the course of the "Scorpion" was again changed. After a long discussion the dominant party decided to make direct for Rio Janeiro. The shortening of the voyage thus would lessen the peril of a revolt on board. Ned's thought was, that Donna Carlotta's father was at Rio, and the girl was so worried about the anxiety Don Calvados must be feeling for her, that Ned would have done anything to hasten the reunion of father and daughter. This was unselfish of him, for, personally, he wished the voyage to be protracted indefinitely, for at Rio he would part with the lovely Donna, probably never to meet her again.

During their hours of conversation Donna Carlotta told Ned what he was very curious to know—the story of her former acquaintance with Gaston Lamant.

The Creole had been a clerk in the Customs House at Cadiz under Don Calvados Pomanya. There he had met Carlotta and paid her his addresses. She repulsed him, but he was not to be beaten. At length Don Calvados forbade him the house. He attributed this to her cousin Filippo, also a suitor. Gaston and Filippo met and quarrelled, and the Creole fled from Cadiz with the blood of Filippo on his hands. Carlotta mourned for her murdered cousin, but she was pleased by the disappearance of her ferocious lover, and hoped never to see him again.

"It is, then, a hanging matter for Gaston Lamant if he is given up to justice," Ned observed. "It is well. If ever a man deserved death, it is he."

Ned was rather puzzled by the way in which the Creole accepted the ill-luck that had shattered all his plans and condemned him to manacles.

After the first outburst of rage Gaston became quiet and submissive. A careful watch kept upon him failed to discover any plan of escape. Yet Ned was perfectly sure that Gaston still hoped.

For what? A rising of the crew was impossible. Unaided release from the manacles still more so. And Captain Vance, a dolt and a coward, and, moreover, well watched, could do nothing for him.

It was here that Ned, acute as he was, made a slight mistake. He allowed himself to be deceived by his contempt for the fat skipper. Vance was a fool, a poltroon, and utterly selfish. But, to some degree conscious of his own failings, these very failings made him all the more desirous of effecting the release of the man who could act for him. Liberty, and an immense sum of money, were at stake. Captain Vance determined to release Lamant, and, through him, to regain command of the ship. Mean-spirited as he was, it galled him to receive orders from Ned on his own quarter-deck. He never suspected that his own confederate, Lamant, had been merely using him as a tool, to be thrown aside when done with.

Roguery endows even a fool with a certain amount of low cunning, and Captain Vance was no exception. And his cunning was all the more dangerous because it was unsuspected. Long he pondered over ways and means of getting the Creole loose. He managed many times to exchange unobserved glances with the prisoner, dumbly assuring Gaston that he was not forgotten. It was mainly this which caused Gaston still to hope.

Vance soon gave up all idea of getting at Lamant directly. He decided to confine his attempt to Lemayne and Ricard, leaving it to them to assist their leader. While waiting for an opportunity he was humble and respectful to his masters, causing the watch kept upon him to gradually relax in vigilance.

Three days more were needed to bring the Brazilian coast into view, when Captain Vance, inwardly quaking, put his scheme into execution. So much was he worried that he actually allowed his pipe to go out, which would certainly have aroused suspicion if it had been remarked.

Night's shadows were upon the Atlantic. Ned was keeping watch, as he usually did at midnight, and on deck with him were Thad Tixon and two more of his men. Of the crew, six were in their hammocks in the fore-castle, and the others in the watch on deck. One of Ned's men was at the wheel.

Below, two were asleep in the first cabin, for the masters of

the ship could not venture to sleep more than a couple at a time. Macaulay and Axel were on guard, the former over Lamant, the latter over the other prisoners, and also attending to the occasional wants of the wounded men.

Captain Vance had retired to the bo'sun's crib. But after sitting there smoking for a time, he left it. His pipe went out in his preoccupation. He came back towards Axel, who looked at him inquiringly, but not suspiciously. The German was a brawny fellow, and would have smiled at the idea of being attacked by the stout and unwieldy skipper.

Suddenly he rushed on Axel, hit him heavily over the head with a lump of iron, and stunned him. Captain Vance caught his falling body, and laid it down noiselessly. Then he pitilessly repeated the blow to make sure of the German's insensibility.

His success rendered him more confident. He went to Lemayne and Ricard, who slept on mattresses in a corner. They had been awake, and watching him ever since he came in.

"Silence!" he whispered, as he proceeded to release them. Their irons were fastened with a spring, which he soon opened. They were free.

"Shall I release them?" whispered Vance, pointing to the pantry, where the other prisoners were sleeping in their fetters.

"No; it's doubtful if they'd join us. One of 'em might try to get into favour with Ned Harris by giving the alarm!" said Lemayne.

"Then—next thing—release Lamant?"

"Yes," replied the bo'sun, as he bent over Axel to deprive him of his weapons.

"Go—do it, then—your work—not mine—good luck!"

Lemayne gave him a glance of contempt. With Ricard, he went to Lamant's cabin. The door was half open. Macaulay, nodding on his watch, had observed nothing of what passed outside the cabin. As the two ruffians pushed the door open, he stood up, expecting to see his relief. Before he could realise that foes were upon him, Lemayne had sprung upon him like a tiger, and stabbed him to the heart with Axel's knife.

"Quick, captain," said Lemayne; "get Lamant loose. Hurry!"

The Creole, started out of his sleep, was speedily released. Poor Macaulay had fallen to the floor dying. But, true to the last, he stretched out his hand to his rifle and contrived to pull the trigger. A sharp report rang out, heard over the whole of the ship.

"Curse on it!" cried the Creole, in a rage. All secrecy was at an end now. The issue must be decided by open war.

The alarm was not given in vain. Ned Harris and his three men on deck were instantly upon the alert. The two men sleeping in the first cabin awoke at once and grasped their weapons.

The rebels looked at each other in dismay. Captain Vance, pale as ashes, stole back to his caboose and pretended to be asleep in bed. But Lamant and his two followers were made of sterner stuff. They had arms in their hands, and were determined to fight.

"To the deck!" cried the Creole. "Liberty and wealth, or death! Follow me!"

They rushed from the cabin.

Meanwhile, Ned and his men were running down the companion-way.

The foemen met at the foot of the stair.

In the dim light of the swinging lamp the shots that were fired flew wild, and, besides, there was no room for rifles in the confined space. With knives and with clubbed pistols, taken from Axel and Macaulay, the three desperadoes met the true men; who, after the first impotent discharge of shots, resorted to the same weapons.

The crew coming down the companion were met by rapid revolver-shots, which wounded the foremost three or four, and sent them flying over the rail. Fordyce and Wilson followed them on deck, and peppered them until they shut themselves up in the fore-castle. Then Wilson went to the wheel, for all this time the "Scorpion" had been uncontrolled, and was lurching dangerously.

Thad Tixon was the first to overcome his enemy. He had got a nasty cut across the arm from Ricard's knife, when he brought his heavy hammer into play. A smashing blow upon the forehead made the Tejano sink back with a moan and lie still. Thad gave him a glance; he was dead!

Lemayne still resisted hardily. He had stabbed one of his adversaries in the throat, killing him instantly. He might have served the other in the same manner had not Thad Tixon interposed. The old carpenter's hammer again rose and fell, and Lemayne expired instantaneously beneath the crushing blow.

At the same moment Gaston Lamant broke loose from Ned, and darted into the cabin which had so long been his prison, and slammed the door violently. Ned dashed in pursuit; but the Creole had bolted the door.

"Break in, if you dare!" yelled the Creole. "I have three shots yet in my pistol, which means three lives that I will take."

But Ned could not afford to waste his men by breaking in the door under the villain's fire. He put two men on guard there, with orders to kill Gaston if he came out, and then set to clearing the debris of the fight. Axel was found, and restored to his senses; fortunately he was not seriously injured. When he told his story, Ned had Captain Vance put in irons, and reduced him to a pitiable state of terror by a threat of hanging him at daybreak.

The sounds of battle had, of course, aroused Carlotta and her maid. Ned tapped at her door. She opened it, fully dressed.

"A revolt of the prisoners," Ned told her. "We have conquered them; two of the three are dead, and Gaston Lamant soon will be."

"But you?" she cried. And he saw that her face was white and drawn with anxiety. "Are you wounded, Don Eduardo?"

"Not a scratch. I have lost two comrades, though, I am sorry to say. Ah, Lamant shall answer for it!"

"Thank Heaven you are safe!" said Carlotta, with unconscious fervour.

Ned looked at her, and then clasped her hand.

"You are glad that I am safe, Miss Pomanya?"

"Ah, Don Eduardo, can you ask?" She blushed vividly. "Can I do aught but rejoice at the safety of my saviour and protector?"

There was something in her glance that encouraged Ned to speak as he had often longed to speak. 'Twas a strange place for an avowal—a strange time; but neither thought of that.

"If you gave me the right to be your protector always, Donna Carlotta, I should be the happiest man upon the earth!"

Her blush deepened, but she did not reply. Ned's heart sank. He had been too bold. What right had he, a fore-castle hand, to speak of love to this beautiful girl, whose family perhaps was no better than his own, but who was in wealth and personal advantages immeasurably his superior. He receded a step, and would have released her hand. But her clasp became firmer. A dazzling smile raised him from despair to glorious hope.

"It is so!" he cried eagerly. "Can it be that you are for me—a common sailor, Carlotta?"

"Could it be that I am not, you should say," she softly murmured.

He pressed her hand to his lips in a transport of love and gratitude. When he went on deck he appeared to be treading on air.

Three days later the "Scorpion" ran into Rio Janeiro, but before she came to anchor one more had been added to her list of tragedies.

Gaston Lamant had refused to surrender, and had remained for three days without food or drink, with his door barricaded. Had he still hope? If so, it died away when the "Scorpion" came in sight of the South American coast. The ship was running into harbour under the direction of the fettered skipper, when the report of a pistol was heard below, succeeded by a heavy fall. Gaston had committed suicide!

The recovered gold was taken possession of by the proper authorities. As they had never expected to see a peso of it after hearing the account brought by the captain of the "Oriole," they were generous to the brave fellows who restored it, who also had a legal claim to a share. A handsome sum was given to each, the shares of the two who had died in fighting being sent to their families.

There was some difficulty about the disposal of the "Scorpion," which, as a pirate-ship, was confiscated. Ned claimed it, as a capture made by his party from its pirate owners. The British consul backed his claim, which the port authorities at Rio, having no shadow of claim to it themselves, finally allowed. The vessel was sold, and the proceeds divided as the bounty for the specie had been.

It was then that Ned again spoke to Senor Pomanya on the subject of his love for Carlotta. He was now possessed of five thousand pounds, which made a difference in his favour. Don Calvados raised few objections, and finally agreed to an engagement.

Then Ned set to work hard to improve his little capital. He spent a considerable time finishing his education, and studying navigation; his next voyage was made as a mate. His rise was rapid, as is always the case with a man of pluck and brain; and at length he received his reward—Carlotta became his wife. And in Ned's success was proved the truth of the saying that "honesty is the best policy"; for, while Gaston Lamant died by his own hand, and Captain Vance went to prison, Ned came off with flying colours.

THE END.

This Grand New Serial Story forms the Second Book of "THE RED RANGERS," and deals with the Further Adventures of Buffalo Bill and his Comrade Scouts.

PIRATES OF THE PRAIRIE;

OR, THE LEAGUE OF THE SILVER STAR.

By PAUL HERRING,

Author of "Silver Spear," "Buffalo Bill and His Chums," &c., &c.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE STORY.

BUFFALO BILL, CALIFORNIA JOE, TEXAS JACK, DICK SHERLOCK (Britisher Dick)—the Comrade Scouts, known as the Fearless Four.

DOLLY DENE, an English girl, Dick Sherlock's sweetheart.

MAJOR ARNOLD DENE, her father; afterwards Judge Dene.

BLACK EAGLE, a Sioux chief of the Sierra Nevada.

FREDA FRANKLIN, a beautiful Southern girl.

HUDSON FRANKLIN, her young brother.

JASPER DAGO, Major Dene's bitter foe.

LORENCE DAGO, his son. He makes love to Dolly Dene; but finds her disdainful, and Dick's knuckles hard as hickory. The two Dagos are men of no honour, whose villainous actions are scorned even by the redskins of the great plains.

A NOTE TO BE READ FIRST.

The Dagos, father and son, after slavery is abolished in the United States, join the roving desperadoes of the plains (sometimes called "Jay-hawkers"), and form a band known as the League of the Silver Star. Buffalo Bill's "Red Rangers" devote themselves to tracking down these pests of the plains.

The Jay-hawkers plot to stop and rob the Denver mail-coach, but Buffalo Bill checkmates them. After this the chums return to Major Dene's ranch. Young Hudson Franklin, the Ranger Kid, rides home, after a long absence, in an exhausted state, and tells of a raid by the Cheyenne, or "Dog," Indians. The Rangers resolve to wage a war of vengeance on the treacherous Redskins.

A Starlight Stampede—Inside Fort Hayes—At the Bugle-Call—The New Ranger—The Strange Adventures of the Ranger Kid.

"Is that you, chief?" asked the Cheyenne sentry. Black Eagle replied in the redskin tongue that it was; he had come to give new orders. The sentry stole up like a spectre to receive them.

"You are to be relieved from guarding the horses," said Black Eagle, and thrust out his hand. The blade of the hunting-knife went home to the hilt, and the young Sioux caught the Cheyenne as he fell, and laid him down in the grass. His relief had come suddenly, swiftly, silently; truly it was a chill, merciless, spectral business.

The Sioux plucked the knife out of the Cheyenne's heart.

"It is dripping red!" muttered Bill Cody.

"Ay, and are these not scarlet, too?" replied Black Eagle, holding up three scalps he had taken from the dead man's belt. "Behold, the second sentry approaches!"

"Give me your tomahawk," said the Ranger captain.

"Will you use the edge?"

"No; yet I will strike a hard, blunt stroke. Be sure he shall not wake for many hours."

The Sioux handed over his hatchet. Bill Cody strode forward, speaking in Cheyenne; the tomahawk swung out, and the butt-end of it drove the sentry to grass. He fell without a moan, struck down utterly senseless. Black Eagle dealt with the third man, using his coppery hands to choke the life from him, and the last Cheyenne fought tooth and nail with Buffalo Bill's fingers across his windpipe. He could not cry out, but he strove to stab the Ranger with a long scalping-knife. In this he failed, for Cody was fighting for something dearer than life, and ultimately the Cheyenne's feathered head lolled loose on a broken neck.

The shadowy struggle was ended. Bill Cody arose sweltered but victorious, and the night-cry of a whip-poor-will sounded from that valley of peril and of death.

The solitary whip-poor-will had not to call twice. The three scouts entered the mouth of the perilous valley, and saw the shadowy forms of Bill Cody and Black Eagle awaiting them. Under the stars the grey huddle of horses stood out, some of them motionless, but many still grazing.

"How have things shaped?" asked California Joe, of the tall, plumed figure with the deerskin dress that he knew for Buffalo Bill.

"Better'n I expected, thanks to Black Eagle. It's all over without a shot being fired, but it was pretty grim work while it lasted. There's a heap for you three to do, though. Jack, you're no end of a cattleman, and I want you to hang round the tail-end of the procession with stockwhip and lasso."

"I'm there, sonny. This is to be a starlight stampede, in the style of the Apaches of the Mexican border. 'Minds me of my Texas range days, when I was a vaquero (cowboy) on the great llanos."

"Joe'll help you your end."

"First time I've herded with a Texas horse-thief," snuffed the Californian, who delighted in getting the edge off the big Ranger's temper.

But Jack only welled him playfully with his cattle-whip.

"Come along, my little mountain-man, and I'll teach you a whole pile you don't know. I'll make a Hanero of you if you've got grit enough left in you after slouching round silver camps and growing rusty on the played-out old sierra, where things never happen, and a man sprouts into a horseradish. Straddle a broncho, sonny, crack a whip, spin a riata, and leave your ground-out mule-paths for the eternal plains, where you can lose yourself for a week and nobody miss you."

"I guess you might do that any time you blame please, Jack. I don't care a cent for your rolled-out llanos. Give me the humpy old sierra, where a galoot can breathe free and spit deep. But Bill Cody's leading his horse in, and we've got to ride round to the tail-end of the drove."

So the two of them forgot their differences, brought in their mounts, and rode down to the bottomland of the valley, ready to round up any "strays" on the march across the plains.

Bill Cody, Britisher Dick, and Black Eagle kept in front, using their horses to decoy the drove out of the unguarded mouth of the vale. The grey huddle of horseflesh began to move after the three decoys, and soon the whole shadowy mass had filtered out of the channel on to the open prairie. Texas Jack and California Joe were doing yeomen's work in the rear.

As soon as the valley was empty Buffalo Bill led the drove away from the Cheyenne encampment, and gradually worked up the pace. The points of danger on the plains were passed safely, then the starlight stampede began in earnest—a wild, whirling gallop of snorting horses allowing themselves to be led and driven anyhow to any destination.

And while starlight still shot the dusky skies, Cody's Rangers reached Fort Hayes with an overdue drove of United States cavalry horses lately in possession of the Cheyenne Indians, and now ready to be handed over to their rightful owners.

The racket up to the fort was a picturesque piece of Ranger riding, and the reception given by Uncle Sam's overjoyed troopers to the comrade scouts was a rouser, but no more than they deserved.

"Bill Cody, you and your lot are a handful of trumps," cried the grizzled sergeant-major. "Pony-express has just told us the story of how you brought the Denver mail through, and now you've capped that adventure by delivering the lost drove of horses, carriage paid. What'll you take?"

"Guess a few hours' beauty-sleep is most in our line," replied Buffalo Bill. And the Red Rangers turned in for a spell of well-earned repose.

The reveille bugle brought them up ready as rifles. The recovered horses that they had headed-in steaming under the stars were spread out on the cavalry pasture-land, no worse for the midnight stampede.

The echoes of the military bugle were still in the air, and the troopers had turned out bright as their sabres, happy men all, with active service staring them in the face.

A man who is any real good on the great plains sleeps little

and works much, and for all the hours they had spent in the saddle, the comrade scouts were up with the soldiers, fresh, smart, and sparkling as the troop bugle.

"How are your fellows feeling, Cody?" asked the sergeant-major.

"All form—fit as fiddles," replied Bill.

"When I get any slouches under me I'll call round for you, Cody."

"I would. Sweat a slouch in the saddle, salt him in hard work and hard fighting, and he'll either learn to sit tight, stick things out, and shoot straight, or he'll go under. Bad form kills men. But we've never had anything within rifle-shot of a slouch in the Red Rangers. No room for that sort even when we were full strength. There's five of us now, all good chums."

"No more?"

"No, sir; that takes in our Sioux comrade."

"I guess you've missed count of a youngster—bugler, or drummer-boy, may be."

The sergeant-major's grey soldierly eyes twinkled.

"How do you mean?" asked Bill Cody.

"Well, he came in at sun-up, and he's right there under that pump."

"Guess I don't follow you."

The cavalry non-com. stubbed out his finger towards a young fellow who was splashing away under half a yard of pump water, with Britisher Dick working at the handle. Through cascades of water enough of the youngster's face was visible for an old acquaintance to recognise the Ranger Kid.

Bill strolled across.

"How in the name of Uncle Sam has he got here, Dick?"

"Can't say. He asked me to pump on him, and I obliged."

"Gu-gur goo! Je-wosh! That you, Bill Cody?"

"Supposing it is, what then?"

"I'm here."

"I guess so. How have you reached us, sonny?"

"I just came. Woke up, and found you had vanished, finished off Dolly's cakes and coffee, saddled up, and made tracks for Fort Hayes. I guessed you'd strike this district, and I didn't mean to be out of all the fun. Say, you bluffed the Cheyennes mighty smart, didn't you? Oh, it's just scumptions."

The Ranger Kid was towelling himself briskly all the time.

"Look here, Hud., what am I going to do with you?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I'm a recruit. One of the new Red Rangers. Didn't you swear me in the old corps with crossed rifles long since?"

"But you've run away from home at St. Louis."

"Not much. I was kidnapped by Cheyennes."

"I ought to take you back again, anyway."

"Don't, Bill Cody. I really didn't think to hear the same old sing-song from you. The major and Dolly dined that yarn into my ears. It's more than a squirrel's jump to St. Louis, and I'll go with you later, honour bright. But I've got a long score to wipe off with the Cheyennes, and I'm just going along with your Rangers and Uncle Sam's saddle and sabre crowd. I've got a heap to tell you about the Dagos and other things."

"Well, we'll hear that over coffee and damper, and court-martial you afterwards. The Rangers shall have their say as to how your future lies."

The Ranger Kid grinned, as though he knew that was a foregone thing, and finished his towelling. Then he slipped on his cowboy hat, scarlet scarf, and decorated deerskin jacket, looking like a handsome young Mexican vaquero.

The comrade scouts took their rations with the United States cavalry, and, sprawled out on the grass, listened to the adventurous story young Hudson Franklin told them.

The Ranger Kid had never settled down after they left St. Louis. He wanted to rejoin Buffalo Bill and his chums; but before that he intended to straighten matters out between himself and Lorence Dago, the man who had left him for dead among the swamps of Florida.

He knew the Denes had settled on a Kansas ranch, and he had a letter from Dick Sherlock, telling how he had blown the fissure of the old Ranger corps at Denver on the regimental bugle.

"Still, I guessed Bill Cody, Britisher Dick, Joe the Californian, Jack the Texan, and Black Eagle the Sioux would stick together, and find out some new five-saddle track of adventure," said Hudson, "and I knew I'd be able to trail you down from the clue of the Major's ranch in Kansas. It looked a pretty long trail, but I meant to take it soon as I'd settled with Pardner Lorence. I went out every morning with my gun and a dandy sportsman's bag of twisted palmetto, telling Sissie I was shooting for the cooking-pot. I always managed to bring something home, and she never dreamt I was hunting for a man's life."

"I lay in the grass under the blistering sun till I was copper-coloured like an Indian. I mixed up with rustlers, toughs,

and dead-beats, and got in some saloon fights, but I was as far off Lorence Dago as ever. I soon got wind that he was concerned in the Silver Star Confederacy, and I joined the league."

"You did what?" asked Bill Cody.

"Joined the league," repeated the Ranger Kid, "and was present at their meetings. Had Lorence stood up I'd have shot him, for sure, but I never caught sight of him. He was out on special service, which means he'd been told off for some red-handed business on the borders. The Silver Star Confederacy winds like a poisonous snake across America, and the Dagos are at the slimy heart of it."

"You're sure of that, Hudson?"

"As sure as I am that that's my hand, Bill Cody. I've mixed among armed planters and Southern riffraff when old man Dago has been surrounded by his greasy banditti. I've heard him boast of murderous deeds from South Carolina to Nevada, of knife-blades and pistol-shots that have left open places in Uncle Sam's Government, of compacts with the border Indians, and raids on the ranchlands."

The Red Rangers looked over at one another. The year's record throughout America had been a black one. Murder had stalked abroad with masked eyes and red hands, and side by side with her had crept the insidious fire-fiend. Wild marauders had branded the borders with their hoof-marks, and left a charred clearing where prosperous farmsteads had stood. Could it be that the Dagos, father and son, were at the root of the evil that had been so widespread?

Hudson Franklin went on, unaware of the impression he was creating.

"I joined to find Lorence Dago, and when I got a clue to his whereabouts I packed a haversack with damper and jerked beef, and left our ranch at St. Louis on a three days' hunting-trail, astride a little brown mustang that was all wire and go. I guessed I'd bring up with Pardner Lorence at last; but on my second day's ride I found a rifle-barrel covering me out of the grass, and I gave myself up for a gone coon. But the man at the other end didn't fire. He unwound himself and talked, and after a pow-wow I found he was a brother Chip on the same errand as me. He was a crippled mulatto, only a shade under seven feet, but scarred all over with slave-whips and broken with brutality."

"Caleb, the mulatto from Silver Rocks!" cried Dick Sherlock.

"The same man, Dick. The Dagos, whom he had served so devotedly, had had the flesh pretty nearly stripped off him by rawhide thongs, and one of their crowd had lamed him with a bullet in the foot. He was hounding down young Lorence now with a revengeful rifle, so we decided to make a double trail with the same end in view. It was a game at stalking for a man's life, and it ended badly for Caleb. Lorence had all the luck from the start off. We tracked him into the Cheyenne country; then he and his rustlers broke apart. We were camping on the platte one night—Caleb, whose eyes were always hungry, turned from a faithful, devoted slave to a lean, restless bloodhound, always snuffling the ground with the scent of blood in his nostrils. He would scarcely touch a crumb, and sleep he scorned. I turned in for four or five hours of refreshing sleep every night, but I fancy the scarred mulatto prowled about all the time. He had showed the Dagos what devotion could do when he carried Lorence out of the burning house on the Silver Rocks; but since they had whipped and maimed him he had learnt to hate them as only a mulatto knows how."

"I have said he was a bloodhound, and I guess I'll stick to that. The night I saw the last of him our horses were clean done, and we camped on pretty dangerous ground, haunted with redskins and border ruffians. The moon came out and shot a sprinkle of silver light across the plains. Caleb drew his knife and crooned over it like a gipsy with a charm, and talked in sort of spasms about the old plantation days. I saw the glitter of steel under the moon, but I was dog-tired, and didn't hear what he was saying. I drowsed a bit, and when I blinked again he was cleaning his rifle fit to wear the barrel out. I went right off to bye-bye-land then, and woke again with a sort of start. I knew a rifle-shot had chipped up my sleep, but I didn't know if the bullet had been aimed at me or not. I couldn't locate the distance now."

"Where are you, Caleb?" I called out. The mulatto did not answer; but I heard a redskin whoop right across the shadows. I reached for my gun, and crept pretty cautiously through the grass."

"Caleb was all right in the swamp country, but he was nothing of a plainsman, and I had a clean trail to follow. I looked out for Cheyennes behind every stalk of grass, but there were none in sight; still it was work that wanted a scout like Bill Cody to get through properly. I messed it in the end, as you will guess. I stumbled right across Caleb stretched out under the moon in a patch of coarse saw-grass."

"He was damp with blood, and not pretty to look at, for the Cheyennes had taken his scalp with a rush. Still, he had died

fighting; his bright knife was up to the hilt in one redskin's throat, and another lay all in a bundle, his skull split up with Caleb's last bullet."

"You are fresh at the game, Hud," said Texas Jack. "You ought to have scooted when you saw dead Injun."

"They didn't give me a chance, Jack. They had me for a tenderfoot, sure. I should have known the Cheyennes don't leave their dead kicking round more than any other Indian tribe, but the picture Caleb made in the pale light filled up my time. Then a coppery hand came through the saw-grass and snatched my rifle, while another laid the flat of a tomahawk on the back of my head."

"That Cheyenne must have hit me pretty hard, for I remember spinning across the edge of the earth and dropping down, down, down, into the night!"

The Ranger Kid Among the Cheyennes—Face to Face—Scouts and Redskins—The Fight at Yellow Butte—Lorence Dago's Peril.

"I guess the butt-end of that redskin tomahawk kind of stunned me; anyway, I had a sleep, and when I woke I was in the Cheyenne encampment with Lorence Dago gloating over me."

"Does that make you stare, chummies? It did me. I buckled my fist to stick it in his face, but he hopped round me at a safe distance with a six-shooter in his grip. After that we had a slanging match."

"I felt sticky about the head, where the Cheyenne tomahawk had made a mark. The sun was blistering hot, too, and I was pretty thirsty; but I called Pardner Lorence names with a parched mouth, and he made personal remarks about my future being worse than Caleb's past."

"All the while he made rings round me with his revolver, and I half expected him to shoot. Presently a grey-headed old Cheyenne came and looked at me, and smoked his calumet, which had a yard of trailing porcupine-quill braid attached to it."

"Lorence asked him to have me grilled in several different ways, and made suggestions. The old chief simply spat on the ground. He smoked another pipe round me, and then had me led to a painted wigwam. I expected many things here, but none of them happened. My head was plastered up with herbs to start with, and I was told to put on an Indian dress. I did so, and found I was adopted by Red Fox, the Cheyenne chief, into his nation, with a tepee of my own, and a friend in the chief's young son."

"Lorence Dago simply smoked and cursed, and cursed and smoked, and did it all over again from the beginning. Luck was with me that journey, and he had to put off the grilling process, for the Cheyennes were not so much under his thumb as he supposed. I found out his little game. He supplies them with firearms, cartridges, and scalping-knives, and in return the Dago league obtain a share in their loot of the border farms—a hideous but a paying game."

"Well, our cavalry friends are getting ready to saddle-up, and I'll leave out a heap of what happened among the Cheyennes, only it's worth while saying that Lorence had a wigwam marked with a silver star to trade and plot in."

"I listened at the rear of the buffalo-skin tepee, and heard their plans to attack the ranches on Three Corner Flat. I determined to escape and warn the rancheros, but I couldn't manage it in time. The farmsteads went up in smoke, and the Cheyennes saw red. It was a ghastly business, and Lorence Dago took his share in it, dressed as a Cheyenne brave. Many of the rancheros had cleared to Fort Hayes, and the Cheyennes, with bloodstained tomahawks, feared the troop of cavalry stationed there would ride out on their trail, and a redskin council was held. The tribe would have ridden back to the bad lands with their spoil, but one of their scouts hung round Fort Hayes and found that the United States troopers were without horses."

The paths to the fort were watched, and the Government drovers fell into a Cheyenne ambushade that cost most of them their lives. Of course, the horses were headed off, and Lorence Dago talked large about raiding the mining-camps of Nevada. They had the cavalymen badly bottled up, and it almost looked as if the Cheyenne raiders would reach the sierra."

"Then young Dago taunted me on the fact that we were approaching Major Dene's Kansas ranch. He knew the lay of it to a hundred yards, and he promised to let loose the reds on it. He even went so far as to point out the trail to the major's. I considered that real good of him, for in the night-time I stole a mustang, slipped from the Cheyenne camp, and made a bee-line for Major Dene's ranch-house. I guess you know the rest!"

Ta-rau-ta-ra! The cavalry bugle split up the air with an American boot-and-saddle call.

"You've told us a whole heap we didn't know, Hud," remarked Bill Cody, "and we're more'n obliged to you for it."

"Then you'll give me a saddle in the new Red Rangers?"

"I'll do more than that; I'll talk to the cavalry commander and get you appointed guide to the expedition."

The Ranger Kid threw up his slouch hat, and when the United States cavalry troop moved forward, he was riding at the head of it among his old companions the comrade scouts.

The Cheyennes were cornered by good scouting and hard riding. Their movements since the starlight stampede had been erratic. Knowing nothing of the midnight approach of the Red Rangers, they could not understand how this strange blow had fallen upon them. The bodies of the dead sentries, the empty bottomland of the grass valley, and the great horse-trail leading to Fort Hayes were their only clues. The man Buffalo Bill had stunned with Black Eagle's tomahawk was in too muddled a state to supply them with any information; but the patrol of redskin scouts sent out on the horse-trail came back with news that the drove had reached Fort Hayes and the soldiers were astrir.

So the Cheyennes thought no more of the Nevada silver-lands, but decided to return on the back trail.

They travelled with their tepees and mustangs; but the comrade scouts located them, and the tireless cavalry pressed on like a glistening steel wedge.

The redskins decided to make a stand amongst the volcanic rocks of Yellow Buttes. This they were advised to do by Lorence Dago, who thought it would give the sabres and horses of the cavalymen no chance, and would start a long rifle duel, during which he could clear from the Cheyenne encampment. He watched his opportunity like a rat in a trap, and, truth to tell, the paleface outcast of Yellow Buttes was little else.

The Cheyennes spread their buffalo-skin wigwams and patrolled the rocks with redskin riflemen. Presently the Red Rangers came up to look at them, and the Indians began to squander their bullets at a range that was too long for their marksmanship.

The comrade scouts gave in their report, and a rough-and-ready council of war was called. A dozen raided ranchmen had joined the cavalry—they were mostly splendid shots, and all hardy fellows, and they were put under Bill Cody's command.

These sterling plainsmen, with the ranger comrades to lead, began to ascend the rocks of Yellow Buttes by an old bridle-path, and came out on the slopes overlooking the Cheyenne encampment. Then brisk rifle-shooting commenced, and the sure shots on the slopes made havoc with the redskin outlaws.

California Joe took the first shot. He was a mountain-man born, as Texas Jack had said, and the work suited him.

"This ain't the eternal sierra!" he muttered; "but it's rocks and gravel, and they're good enough for me. Here's looking at you!"

His rifle cracked out with the last word.

"Dead Injun!" rapped out Texas Jack, and the coppery thing spoken of slid loosely across a boulder, a scarlet ribbon winding slimly and weirdly down the grey side of the stone.

On the heel of Joe's bullet the Texan fired. This son of the great llanos never missed a shot, and there was another saddle needed in the happy hunting-grounds as the cartridge smoke trailed from the barrel of Jack's gun.

A straggling redskin fusillade followed, but did no harm. Then rangers, ranchers, and redskins settled down to a rifle duel, Britisher Dick and Buffalo Bill getting to work with their deadly repeating-rifles.

The cavalry also fired up the rocks whenever they saw a chance, and the Ranger Kid blazed away a whole heap of Government cartridges, his rifle hunting about for Lorence Dago, and never finding him.

The stretch around the Cheyennes was grey to start with, but it changed its colour presently. The active and accurate rifles on the slopes were writing Uncle Sam's message to redskin rebels in their own blood by merciless bullets on the slaty ground of Yellow Buttes.

Behind a hidden rifle Lorence Dago fired at the scouts on the ridge incessantly, until the gun grew hot in his hand; but without exposing himself to peril he could not get a good shot, and beyond showing his activity to the Cheyennes his shooting was of no account.

But the blaze of bullets from the slopes was wearing him down. He tried to sidle across to see what chance there was of slipping over to his horse and clearing. He crept stealthily round a bluff, and on the opposite ridge the Ranger Kid, who had sighted him for an instant and lost him again, stared at vacancy, with his rifle-barrel, and waited for his old enemy to reappear.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

FOR BRITAIN AND THE RIGHT

Or, The Adventures of John Baxter, Daniel Kelly
and Tom Morris in South Africa.

FOR THE NEW READER.

John Baxter, while on scouting-duty near Laing's Nek, strays away from his companions, Dan Kelly and Tom Morris. Unsuspectingly he canters into a deep "spruit," to find himself immediately ambushed by men whom he takes to be Boers. They are not the enemy, however, but outlaws—pirates of the veldt, who use the war to cover their own nefarious enterprises. Dalgueron, the masked leader of the band, is a noted guerilla chief, whose name is dreaded throughout Northern Natal.

Both Tom Morris and Dan Kelly are wounded in an attack on a Boer Kopje.

Victory!—The Glorious News from Roberts—In Hospital at Ladysmith—Johnny Baxter's Return and Mabel's Disappearance.

The Boers fought on with desperate courage. Being threatened both in front and in rear, their only course was to "face the music." So with grim determination they stood their ground in face of the British onrush. Once, twice, thrice were the British repulsed, only to re-form and return to the charge amid a chorus of ringing cheers.

At last the Boer line was broken. The burghers fell back step by step; confusion set in among them. By twos and threes they turned and fled for dear life down the precipitous hillside.

It was another Majuba; but this time the position of Boer and Briton was exactly reversed.

The sun that shone upon the scene of the battle next morning showed a hill stained red with human blood. Burying parties were now at work laying to their last rest the gallant fellows who had fallen in the fray. The wounded—nearly a hundred of them in all—were already on their way to Glencoe, thence to be taken by rail to the hospital at Ladysmith.

"Eh, ma laddies, it's gra-and news they've brought us from the camp!" cried a gigantic Highlander on outpost duty, as he galloped on to the scene of the previous day's fighting.

"What's the matter, then, Donald? Is Kruger dead, or what?"

"Oots, mon, the auld de'il's as lively as you or me, and just gone off by special excursion train, for the good of his health! Na, na; it's better than that. Pretoria is ours, ma mannie! And this verra day Lord Roberts himself will lead the Guards into the Transvaal capital!"

The news was received at first in absolute silence, for it seemed almost too good to be believed. Then somebody raised a cheer, and in a moment, as if by magic, the whole burying-party had stopped their gruesome work, and were yelling themselves hoarse. It was a strange scene—the wild joy these men exhibited, while the unburied corpses of friends and foes lay all around them; but Pretoria was taken! The power of the Transvaal was broken beyond repair; and the men, being British soldiers, could not have forbore to cheer had their very lives depended upon silence.

Many of those who went down to Ladysmith by the hospital train, after the fighting at Doorn Kop, were considerably "more dead than alive." Careful nursing and incessant attention would be their only chance of life. Poor Tom Morris, wounded in both legs and one arm, to say nothing of a sword-thrust in the shoulder, was mercifully unconscious during the long and trying journey. Dan Kelly, also seriously wounded, suffered excruciating pain at each jolt of the railway train; but he would have endured double the discomfort if he could have known how it fared with his chum John Baxter.

Where was he? Did he live, or was he dead? It was now a full fortnight since the day of his disappearance.

The days dragged wearily by in the hospital at Ladysmith, where a band of devoted British women ministered to the wounded soldiers' needs. Both Morris and Kelly mended rapidly in the quiet, restful atmosphere of the hospital.

"Now, who's that bright little colleen with the yellow hair?" mused Dan Kelly, one day, as his eyes fell on a new face among the hospital nurses. "Bad luck to me! where have I seen that face before? Tom"—to his friend, who occupied

the next bed in the same ward—"d'ye see that girl yonder? Wait, now, till she turns her head. There! Why, am I dreamin', Tom, or is it little Mabel Hinks, the far-r-mer's daughter, from Pomeroy?"

"It's certainly the young lady you brought back with you from the man hunt, Daniel!" said the sergeant maliciously.

At this moment the new nurse—who was indeed no other than Mabel Hinks—looked full at Dan Kelly, recognised him, and came to his bedside with hands outstretched, and a look of gladness shining in her eyes.

"And where is Joh—Mr. Baxter?" she asked, in a low voice, looking from Dan Kelly to Tom Morris with a look of eager expectancy.

"Johnny Baxter's been missing for—" began Tom Morris unthinkingly; and Dan Kelly suddenly became afflicted with a tremendous fit of coughing that drowned the sound of his comrade's voice.

"It's missing you Johnny has been, Miss Mabel, so he has," the Irishman went on quickly, at the same time winking furtively at the sergeant. "Sure, he talks about nothin' else but your own swate self, and it's just longin' to be back in Ladysmith he is, to see you once again."

"But why hasn't he written?" went on Mabel, with her sweet eyes full of wonder. "Mr. Kelly, it's nearly a month now since I heard from him!"

"Och! bless your sowl, then, don't yez know that no one's been allowed to write leathers from the camp for these three weeks, for fear the Boers should get to know all Buller's plans?" went on Dan Kelly, who, when he was put to it, could lie like a Baron Munchausen.

"I see! Then he is quite safe and well?" continued Mabel eagerly.

"As safe as you are, miss, and a good deal better than Tom and I here," continued the Irishman. "An' faith! 'tis coverin' himself wid glory he is, doing deeds of great valour, and scatterin' the Boers, bad cess to them, in all directions—so he is!"

Mabel Hinks at this moment turned from Dan's bed to that of Sergeant Tom Morris, with a look of grave concern upon her face. Certainly Tom's conduct was strange in the extreme. He had covered his head with the bedclothes, and from between the sheets came a sound that would have passed for the groan of a human being in awful agony. It was only an agony of laughter that Tom Morris suffered from; and presently his head emerged from the sheets, and he assured "Nurse Mabel," with perfect gravity, that he felt quite well again.

"'Twas only wan av his spasms, miss," Dan Kelly explained. "He's had a lot av 'em lately, an' they always come when I talk to him. There's something in the sound av my swate voice that reminds him av a dear girl he used to know in England—isn't there, Tom?"

After this Mabel Hinks came daily to cheer the monotony of hospital life for the wounded comrades. She wrote letters for them both—in Dan's case to Mrs. Dan Kelly and the children at Cape Town, and in the case of Sergeant Tom Morris to a girl at Manchester, who some day would become Tom's true comrade for life. And after a time, when the invalids were able to leave their beds, and sit under the trees in the grounds of the temporary hospital, Mabel would come and sit with them, and talk to them about John Baxter, and other matters—but principally about John Baxter. Just facing the hospital grounds was the house where Mabel lodged, and if she were too busy to come to the hospital she would wave her hands to them from her window. Dan Kelly and Sergeant Tom Morris were often to be seen gazing intently at that little curtained casement, as if behind it was the only link that bound them to the outside world.

"An' where's the little girl to-day, at all, at all?" grumbled Dan Kelly on one such morning. "Hallo! what's up now? Is that a visitor for Miss Mabel, I'd like to know?"

Outside the house where Mabel Hinks was staying a mounted man had drawn up, just as Dan spoke. The new-comer leaped from his horse almost before the animal was at a standstill, dashed open the door of the house, and unceremoniously entered.

"Sure, 'tis a nice, polite gentleman he is, at all events!" muttered Dan. "And I hope no har-r-m will come to Miss Mabel, so I do! Why, Tom, Tom, pwhat's this, pwhat's this?"

Trembling with excitement, forgetting his weakness and his bandages, Daniel Kelly had risen to his feet, just as a second horseman—a younger, slighter man, with his right arm carried in a sling—dashed along the street, and halted at the door of Mabel's house.

"Tom Morris, shoot me for a traitor if 'tisn't John Baxter himself!" cried the Irishman. And then, with his eyes still sparkling, but his wounded leg refusing to support him longer, Dan Kelly sank down into his chair again.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK, &c.)

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