Prisoners of Chance eBook

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Contents

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Page 1

CHAPTER

ILLUSTRATIONS

I could merely clasp the hands she gave so unreservedly into my keeping, gaze into the depths of her dark eyes, and murmur a few broken words of confidence and farewell. . . . *Frontispiece*

Had I ventured upon a smile at his predicament he would have popped instantly forth again.

“I am the Daughter of the Sun. These are my children, given unto me by the great Sun-god. . . . None of white blood may set foot in this valley and live.”

The woman stood gazing intently down, her red robe sweeping to her feet; below the flaring torches in the hands of her barbaric followers cast their light full upon her.

FOREWORD

The manuscript of this tale has been in my possession several years. It reached me through natural lines of inheritance, but remained nearly forgotten, until a chance reading revealed a certain historic basis; then, making note of correspondences in minor details, I realized that what I had cast aside as mere fiction might possess a substantial foundation of fact. Impelled by this conviction, I now submit the narrative to public inspection, that others, better fitted than I, may judge as to the worth of this Geoffrey Benteen.

According to the earlier records of Louisiana Province, Geoffrey Benteen was, during his later years, a resident of La Petite Rocher, a man of note and character among his fellows. There he died in old age, leaving no indication of the extent of his knowledge, other than what is to be found in the yellowed pages of his manuscript; and these afford no evidence that this “Gentleman Adventurer” possessed any information derived from books regarding those relics of a prehistoric people, which are widely scattered throughout the Middle and Southern States of the Union and constitute the grounds on which our century has applied to the race the term “Mound Builders.”

Page 2

Apparently in all simplicity and faithfulness he recorded merely what he saw and heard. Later research, antedating his death, has seemingly proven that in the extinct Natchez tribe was to be found the last remnant of that mysterious and unfortunate race.

Who were the Mound Builders? No living man may answer. Their history—strange, weird, mysterious—stretches backward into the dim twilight before tradition, its sole remaining record graven upon the surface of the earth, vaguely guessed at by those who study graves; their pathetic ending has long been pictured in our country's story as occurring amid the shadows of that dreadful midnight upon the banks of the Ocatahoola, when vengeful Frenchmen put them to the sword. Whence they came, whether from fabled Atlantis, or the extinct Aztec empire of the South, no living tongue can tell; whither fled their remnant,—if remnant there was left to flee,—and what proved its ultimate fate, no previous pen has written. Out from the darkness of the unknown, scarcely more than spectral figures, they came, wrote their single line upon the earth's surface, and vanished, kings and people alike sinking into speechless oblivion.

That Geoffrey Benteen witnessed the tragic ending of this strange people I no longer question; for I have compared his narrative with all we moderns have learned regarding them, as recorded in the pages of Parkman, Charlevoix, Du Pratz, and Duponceau, discovering nothing to awaken the slightest suspicion that he dealt with other than what he saw. More, I have traced with exactitude the route these fugitives followed in their flight northward, and, although the features of the country are greatly altered by settlements of nearly two hundred years, one may easily discern evidence of this man's honesty. For me it is enough to feel that I have stood beside the massive tomb of this mysterious people—a people once opulent and powerful, the warriors of forgotten battle-fields, the builders of lost civilizations, the masters of that imperial domain stretching from the Red River of the North to the sea-coast of the Carolinas; a people swept backward as by the wrath of the Infinite, scourged by famine, decimated by pestilence, warred against by flame, stricken by storm, torn asunder by vengeful enemies, until a weakened remnant, harassed by the French sword, fled northward in the night to fulfil the fate ordained of God, and finally perished amid the gloomy shadows of the grim Ozarks, bequeathing to the curious future neither a language nor a name.

But this I leave with Geoffrey Benteen, and turn to my own simpler task, a review of the peculiar circumstances leading up to this narrative, involving a brief chapter from the records of our Southwest.

Page 3

The early history of the Province of Louisiana is so complicated by rapid changes in government as to confuse the student, rendering it extremely difficult to comprehend correctly the varied and conflicting interests—aristocratic, official, and commercial—-actuating her pioneer colonists. The written records, so far as translated and published, afford only a faint reflection of the varied characteristics of her peculiar, changing population. The blue-eyed Arcadian of her western plateaus, yet dreaming upon his more northern freedom; the royalist planter of the Mississippi bottoms, proud of those broad acres granted him by letters-patent of the King; the gay, volatile, passionate Creole of the town, one day a thoughtless lover of pleasure, the next a truculent wielder of the sword; the daring smugglers of Barataria, already rapidly drifting into open defiance of all legal restraint; together with the quiet market gardeners of the *Cote-des-Allemands*, formed a heterogeneous population impossible to please and extremely difficult to control.

Varied as were these types, yet there were others, easy to name, but far more difficult to classify in their political relationships—such as priests of the Capuchin order; scattered representatives of Britain; sailors from ships ever swinging to the current beside the levee; sinewy backwoodsmen from the wilds of the Blue Ridge; naked savages from Indian villages north and east; raftsmen from the distant waters of the Ohio and Illinois, scarcely less barbarian than those with redder skin; Spaniards from the Gulf islands, together with a negro population, part slave, part free, nearly equal in point of numbers to all the rest.

And over all who was the master?

It would have been difficult at times to tell, so swiftly did change follow change—Crozat, Law, Louis the Fifteenth, Charles the Third, each had his turn; flag succeeded flag upon the high staff which, ever since the days of Bienville, had ornamented the Place d'Armes, while great merchants of Europe played the occupants of thrones for the bauble of this far western province, whose heart, nevertheless, remained forever faithful to sunny France.

As late as 1768 New Orleans contained scarcely more than three thousand two hundred persons, a third of these being black slaves. Sixty-three years previously Bienville had founded Louisiana Province, making choice of the city site, but in 1763 it suited the schemes of him, who ruled the destinies of the mother country, to convey the yet struggling colony into the control of the King of Spain. It was fully two years later before word of this unwelcome transfer reached the distant province, while as much more time elapsed ere Don Antonio de Ulloa, the newly appointed Spanish governor, landed at New Orleans, and, under guard of but two companies of infantry, took unto himself the reins. Unrest was already in the air,—petitions and delegations laden with vehement protests crossed the Atlantic. Both were alike returned, disregarded by the French King. Where it is probable that a single word of wise counsel, even of kindly

explanation, might have calmed the rising tumult, silence and contempt merely served to aggravate it.

Page 4

It has been written by conscientious historians that commercial interests, not loyalty to French traditions, were the real cause of this struggle of 1768. Be that as it may, its leaders were found in the Superior Council, a body of governors older even than New Orleans, of which the patriotic Lafreniere was then the presiding officer, and whose membership contained such representative citizens as Foucault, Jean and Joseph Milhet, Caresse, Petit, Poupet, a prominent lawyer. Marquis, a Swiss captain, with Bathasar de Masan, Hardy de Boisblanc, and Joseph Villere, planters of the upper Mississippi, as well as two nephews of the great Bienville, Charles de Noyan, a young ex-captain of cavalry, lately married to the only daughter of Lafreniere, and his younger brother, a lieutenant in the navy.

On the twenty-seventh of October, 1768, every Frenchman in Louisiana Province was marching toward New Orleans. That same night the guns at the Tehoupitoulas Gate—-the upper river corner—were spiked; while yet farther away, along a narrow road bordering the great stream, armed with fowling pieces, muskets, even axes, the Arcadians, and the aroused inhabitants of the German coast, came sweeping down to unite with the impatient Creoles of the town. In the dull gray of early morning they pushed past the spiked and useless cannon, and, with De Noyan and Villere at their head, forced the other gates and noisily paraded the streets under the *fleur de lis*. The people rose *en masse* to greet them, until, utterly unable to resist the rising tide of popular enthusiasm, Ulloa retired on board the Spanish frigate, which slipped her cables, and came to anchor far out in the stream. Two days later, hurried no doubt by demands of the council, the governor set sail for the West Indies, leaving the fair province under control of what was little better than a headless mob.

For now, having achieved success, the strange listlessness of the Southern nature reasserted itself, and from that moment no apparent effort was made to strengthen their position—no government was established, no basis of credit effected, no diplomatic relations were assumed. They had battled for results like men, yet were content to play with them like children. For more than seven months they thus enjoyed a false security, as delightful as their sunny summer-time. Then suddenly, as breaks an ocean storm, that slumbering community was rudely aroused from its siestas and day-dreaming by the report that Spaniards were at the mouth of the river in overwhelming force.

Confusion reigned on every hand; scarcely a hundred men rallied to defend the town; yet no one fled. The Spanish fleet consisted of twenty-four vessels. For more than three weeks they felt their uncertain way around the bends of the Mississippi, and on the eighteenth of August, 1769, furled their canvas before the silent batteries. Firing a single gun from the deck of his flag-ship, the frigate “Santa Maria,” Don Alexandro O’Reilly, accompanied by twenty-six hundred chosen Spanish troops and fifty pieces of artillery, landed, amid all the pomp of Continental war, taking formal possession of the province. That night his soldiers patrolled the streets, and his cannon swept the river front, while not a Frenchman ventured to stray beyond the doorway of his home.

Page 5

Within the narrow space of two days the iron hand of Spain's new Captain-General had closed upon the leaders of the bloodless insurrection, his judgments falling with such severity as to earn for him in the annals of Louisiana the title of "Cruel O'Reilly." Among those of the revolutionists before mentioned, Petit, Masan, Doucet, Boisblanc, Jean Milhet, and Poupet were consigned to Moro Castle, Havana, where they remained a year, and then were stripped of their property and forbidden ever again to enter the province of Louisiana. The younger Bienville escaped with the loss of his fortune. Foucault met his fate resisting the guard on board the "Santa Maria," where he was held prisoner; while Lafreniere, De Noyan, Caresse, Marquis, and Joseph Milhet were condemned to be publicly hanged. The earnest supplication, both of colonists and Spanish officials, shocked by the unjust severity of this sentence, sufficed to save them from the disgrace of the gallows, but fated them to fall before the volley of a file of grenadiers.

With the firing of the sunset gun the evening of their last earthly day, the post-captain visited the condemned men, and spoke with each in turn; they numbered five. All through the dark hours of that night heavily armed sentries stood in the narrow passageway before nail-studded doors, while each hour, as the ship's bell struck, the Commandant of Marine peered within each lighted apartment where rested five plainly outlined forms. With the first gray of the dawn the unfortunate prisoners were mustered upon deck, but they numbered only four. And four only, white faced, yet firm of step and clear of eye, stood an hour later with backs to the rising sun and hearts to the levelled rifles, and when the single volley had echoed and reechoed across the wide river, the white smoke slowly lifting and blown away above the trees, only four lifeless bodies lay closely pressed against the red-brick wall—the fifth condemned man was not there: *Chevalier Charles de Noyan had escaped his fate*. Like a spirit had he vanished during those mysterious hours between midnight and dawn, leaving no trace of his going save a newly severed rope which hung dangling from a foreyard.

But had he escaped?

That morning—as we learn from private letters sent home by officers of the Spanish fleet—there came to the puzzled O'Reilly a report that in the dense blackness of that starless night a single boat sought to slip silently past beneath the deep shadows of the upper battery. Unhalting in response to a hail of the sentry, a volley was hastily fired toward its uncertain outline, and, in the flare of the guns, the officer of the guard noted the black figure of a man leap high into air, and disappear beneath the dark surface of the river. So it was the Captain-General wrote also the name "Charles de Noyan" with those of the other four, endorsing it with the same terse military record, "Shot at sunrise."

Page 6

Nor since that fateful hour has the world known otherwise, for, although strange rumors floated down the great river to be whispered about from lip to lip, and New Orleans wondered many a long month whither had vanished the fair young wife, the daughter of Lafreniere, yet no authentic message found its way out of the vast northern wilderness. For nearly one hundred and fifty years history has accepted without question the testimony of the Spanish records. The man who alone could tell the strange story was in old age impelled to do so by a feeling of sacred duty to the dead; and his papers, disarranged, ill-written, already yellowed by years, have fallen to my keeping. I submit them without comment or change, save only as to the subdivision into chapters, with an occasional substitution for some old-time phrase of its more modern equivalent. He who calls himself “Geoffrey Benteen, Gentleman Adventurer,” shall tell his own tale.

R. P.

Prisoners of Chance

CHAPTER I

THE REQUEST FOR AID

I am Geoffrey Benteen, Gentleman Adventurer, with much experience upon the border, where I have passed my life. My father was that Robert Benteen, merchant in furs, the first of the English race to make permanent settlement in New Orleans. Here he established a highly profitable trade with the Indians, his bateaux voyaging as far northward as the falls of the Ohio, while his influence among the tribesmen extended to the eastern mountains. My mother was of Spanish blood, a native of Saint Augustine, so I grew up fairly proficient in three languages, and to them I later added an odd medley of tribal tongues which often stood me in excellent stead amid the vicissitudes of the frontier. The early death of my mother compelled me to become companion to my father in his wanderings, so that before I was seventeen the dim forest trails, the sombre rivers, and the dark lodges of savages had grown as familiar to me as were the streets and houses of my native town. Hence it happened, that when my father fell the victim of a treacherous blow, although he left to my care considerable property and a widely scattered trade, I could not easily content myself with the sameness of New Orleans; there I felt almost a stranger, ever hungering for the woods and the free life of the mountains.

Yet I held myself to the work in hand until successful in straightening out the tangled threads, and might have remained engaged in peaceful traffic until the end of life, had it not been for a misunderstanding with her who held my heart in captivity to her slightest whim. It matters little now the cause of the quarrel, or where rested the greater blame; enough that its occurrence drove me forth reckless of everything, desirous only to leave

all of my own race, and seek amid savage environment and excitement forgetfulness of the past.

Page 7

It was in September of the year 1769—just forty-eight years ago as I write—that I found myself once again in New Orleans, feeling almost a stranger to the town, except for the few rough flatboat-men in company with whom I had floated down the great river. Five years previously, heartsick and utterly careless of life, I had plunged into the trackless wilderness stretching in almost unbroken virginity to north and east, desiring merely to be left alone, that I might in solitude fight out my first grim battle with despair, saying to myself in all bitterness of soul that never again would I turn face to southward or enter the boundaries of Louisiana Province. During those years, beyond reach of news and the tongue of gossip, I wandered aimlessly from village to village, ever certain of welcome within the lodges of Creeks and Shawnees, or farther away amid those little French border towns dotting the Ohio and the Illinois, constantly feeling how little the world held of value since both my parents were gone, and this last blow had fallen. I loved the free, wild life of the warriors with whom I hunted, and the *voyageurs* beside whom I camped, and had learned to distrust my own race; yet no sooner did I chance to stand again beside the sweeping current of the broad Mississippi, than I was gripped by the old irresistible yearning, and, although uninspired by either hope or purpose, drifted downward to the hated Creole town.

I had left it a typical frontier French city, touched alike by the glamour of reflected civilization and the barbarism of savagery, yet ever alive with the gayety of that lively, changeable people; I returned, after those five years of burial in forest depths, to discover it under the harsh rule of Spain, and outwardly so quiet as to appear fairly deserted of inhabitants. The Spanish ships of war—I counted nineteen—lay anchored in the broad river, their prows up stream, and the gloomy, black muzzles of their guns depressed so as to command the landing, while scarcely a French face greeted me along the streets, whose rough stone pavements echoed to the constant tread of armed soldiers.

Spanish sentries were on guard at nearly every corner. Not a few halted me with rough questioning, and once I was haled before an officer, who, hearing my story, and possibly impressed by my proficiency in his language, was kind enough to provide me with a pass good within the lines. Yet it proved far from pleasant loitering about, as drunken soldiers, dressed in every variety of uniform, staggered along the narrow walks, ready to pick a quarrel with any stranger chancing their way, while groups of officers, gorgeous in white coats and gold lace, lounged in shaded corners, greeting each passer-by with jokes that stung. Every tavern was crowded to the threshold with roistering blades whose drunken curses, directed against both French and English, quickly taught me the discretion of keeping well away from their company, so there was little left but to move on, never halting long enough in one place to become involved in useless controversy.

Page 8

It all appeared so unnatural that I felt strangely saddened by the change, and continued aimlessly drifting about the town as curiosity led, resolved to leave its confines at the earliest opportunity. I stared long at the strange vessels of war, whose like I had never before seen, and finally, as I now remember, paused upon the ragged grass of the Place d'Armes, watching the evolutions of a battery of artillery. This was all new to me, representing as it did a line of service seldom met with in the wilderness; and soon quite a number of curious loiterers gathered likewise along the edge of the parade. Among them I could distinguish a few French faces, with here and there a woman of the lower orders, ill clad and coarse of speech. A party of soldiers, boisterous and quarrelsome from liquor, pressed me so closely that, hopeful of avoiding trouble, I drew farther back toward the curb, and standing thus, well away from others, enjoyed an unobstructed view across the entire field.

The battery had hitched up preparatory to returning to their quarters before I lost interest in the spectacle and reluctantly turned away with the slowly dispersing crowd. Just then I became aware of the close proximity of a well-dressed negro, apparently the favored servant in some family of quality. The fellow was observing me with an intentness which aroused my suspicion. That was a time and place for exercising extreme caution, so that instinctively I turned away, moving directly across the vacated field. Scarcely had I taken ten steps before I saw that he was following, and as I wheeled to front him the fellow made a painful effort to address me in English.

"Mornin', sah," he said, making a deep salutation with his entire body. "Am you dat Englisher Massa Benteen from up de ribber?"

Leaning upon my rifle, I gazed directly at him in astonishment. How, by all that was miraculous, did this strange black know my name and nationality? His was a round face, filled with good humor; nothing in it surely to mistrust, yet totally unknown to me.

"You speak correctly," I made reply, surprise evident in the tones of my voice. "I have no reason to deny my name, which is held an honest one here in New Orleans. How you learned it, however, remains a mystery, for I never looked upon your face before."

"No, sah; I s'pects not, sah, 'cause I nebber yet hab been in dem dere parts, sah. I was sent yere wid a most 'portant message fer Massa Benteen, an' I done reckon as how dat am you, sah."

"An important message for me? Surely, boy, you either mistake, or are crazy. Yet stay! Does it come from Nick Burton, the flatboat-man?"

"No, sah; it am a lady wat sent me yere."

He was excessively polite, exhibiting an earnestness which caused me to suspect his mission a grave one.

“A lady?”

I echoed the unexpected word, scarcely capable of believing the testimony of my own ears. Yet as I did so my heart almost ceased its throbbing, while I felt the hot blood rush to my face. That was an age of social gallantry; yet I was no gay courtier of the town, but a hunter of the woods, attired in rough habiliments, little fitted to attract the attention of womanly eyes amid the military glitter all about.

Page 9

A lady! In the name of all the gods, what lady? Even in the old days I enjoyed but a limited circle of acquaintance among women. Indeed, I recalled only one in all the wide province of Louisiana who might justly be accorded so high an appellation even by a negro slave, and certainly she knew nothing of my presence in New Orleans, nor would she dream of sending for me if she did. Convinced of this, I dismissed the thought upon the instant, with a smile. The black must have made a mistake, or else some old-time acquaintance of our family, a forgotten friend of my mother perhaps, had chanced to hear of my return. Meanwhile the negro stood gazing at me with open mouth, and the sight of him partially restored my presence of mind.

“Is she English, boy?”

“No, sah, she am a French lady, sah, if ebber dar was one in dis hyar province. She libs ober yonder in de Rue Dumaine, an’ she said to me, ’Yah, Alphonse, you follow dat dar young feller wid de long rifle under his arm an’ de coon-skin cap, an’ fotch him hyar to me!’ Dem am de bery words wat she done said, sah, when you went by our house a half-hour ago.”

“Is your mistress young or old?”

The black chuckled, his round face assuming a good-natured grin.

“Fo’ de Lawd, Massa, but dat am jest de way wid all you white folks!” he ejaculated. “If she was ol’, an’ wrinkled, an’ fat, den dat settle de whole ting. Jest don’t want to know no mor’.”

“Well,” I interrupted impatiently, “keep your moralizing to yourself until we become better acquainted, and answer my question—Is the woman young?”

My tone was sufficiently stern to sober him, his black face straightening out as if it had been ironed.

“Now, don’t you go an’ git cross, Massa Benteen, case a laugh don’t nebber do nobody no hurt,” he cried, shrinking back as if expecting a blow. “But dat’s jest wat she am, sah, an’ a heap sweeter dan de vi’lets in de springtime, sah.”

“And she actually told you my name?”

“Yas, sah, she did dat fer suah—’Massa Geoffrey Benteen, an Englisher from up de ribber,’ dem was her bery words; but somehow I done disremember jest persactly de place.”

For another moment I hesitated, scarcely daring to utter the one vital question trembling on my lips.

“But who is the lady? What is her name?” As I put the simple query I felt my voice tremble in spite of every effort to hold it firm.

“Madame de Noyan, sah; one ob de bery first famblies. Massa de Noyan am one ob de Bienvilles, sah.”

“De Noyan? De Noyan?” I repeated the unfamiliar name over slowly, with a feeling of relief. “Most certainly I never before heard other.”

“I dunno nothin’ ’tall ’bout dat, Massa, but suah’s you born dat am her name and Massa’s; an’ you is de bery man she done sent me after, fer I nebber onct took my eyes off you all dis time.”

Page 10

There remained no reasonable doubt as to the fellow's sincerity. His face was a picture of disinterested earnestness as he fronted me; yet I hesitated, eying him closely, half inclined to think him the unsuspecting representative of some rogue. That was a time and place where one of my birth needed to practise caution; racial rivalry ran so high throughout all the sparsely settled province that any misunderstanding between an English stranger and either Frenchman or Spaniard was certain to involve serious results. We of Northern blood were bitterly envied because of commercial supremacy. I had, during my brief residence in New Orleans, witnessed jealous treachery on every hand. This had taught me that enemies of my race were numerous, while, it was probable, not more than a dozen fellow-countrymen were then in New Orleans. They would prove powerless were I to become involved in any quarrel. Extreme caution under such conditions became a paramount duty, and it can scarcely be wondered at that I hesitated to trust the black, continuing to study the real purpose of his mysterious message. Yet the rare good-humor and simple interest of his face tended to reassure me. A lady, he said—well, surely no great harm would result from such an interview; and if, as was probable, it should prove a mere case of mistaken identity, a correction could easily follow, and I should then be free to go my way. On the other hand, if some friend really needed me, a question of duty was involved, which—God helping—I was never one to shun; for who could know in how brief a space I might also be asking assistance of some countryman. This mysterious stranger, this Madame de Noyan of whom I had never heard, knew my name—possibly had learned it from another, some wandering Englishman, perchance, whom she would aid in trouble, some old-time friend in danger, who, afraid to reveal himself, now appealed through her instrumentality for help in a strange land. Deciding to brave the doubt and solve the mystery by action, I flung the long rifle across my shoulder and stood erect.

"All right, boy, lead on," I said shortly. "I intend to learn what is behind this, and who it is that sends for me in New Orleans."

Far from satisfied with the situation, yet determined now to probe the mystery to the bottom, I silently followed the black, attentive to his slightest movement. It was a brief walk down one of the narrow streets leading directly back from the river front, so that within less than five minutes I was being silently shown into the small reception room of a tasty cottage, whose picturesque front was half concealed by a brilliant mass of trailing vines. The heavy shades being closely drawn at the windows, the interior was in such gloom that for the moment after my entrance from the outside glare I was unable to distinguish one object from another. Then slowly my eyes adjusted themselves to the change, and, taking one uncertain step forward, I came suddenly face to face with a Capuchin priest appearing almost ghastly with his long, pale, ascetic countenance, and ghostly gray robe sweeping to the floor.

Page 11

Startled by this unexpected apparition, and experiencing an American borderer's dislike and distrust for his class, I made a hasty move back toward where, with unusual carelessness, I had deposited my rifle against the wall. Yet as I placed hand upon it I had sufficiently recovered to laugh silently at my fears.

"Thou hast responded with much promptitude, my son," the priest said in gentle voice, speaking the purest of French, and apparently not choosing to notice my momentary confusion. "It is indeed an excellent trait—one long inculcated by our Order."

"And one not unknown to mine—free rangers of the woods, sir priest," I replied coldly, resolving not to be outdone in bluntness of speech. "I suppose you are the 'lady' desiring speech with me; I note you come dressed in character. And now I am here, what may the message be?"

There was neither smile nor resentment visible on his pale face, although he slightly uplifted one slender hand as if in silent rebuke of my rude words.

"Nay, nay, my son," he said gravely. "Be not over-hasty in speech. It is indeed a serious matter which doth require thy presence in this house, and the question of life or death for a human being can never be fit subject for jesting. She who despatched the messenger will be here directly to make clear her need."

"In truth it was a woman, then?"

"Yes, a woman, and—ah! she cometh now."

Even as he gave utterance to the words, I turned, attracted by the soft rustle of a silken skirt at my very side, stole one quick, startled glance into a young, sweet face, lightened by dark, dreamy eyes, and within the instant was warmly clasping two outstretched hands, totally oblivious of all else save her.

"Eloise!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "Eloise—Mademoiselle Lafreniere—can this indeed be you? Have you sent for me?"

It seemed for that one moment as if the world held but the two of us, and there was a glad confidence in her brimming eyes quickly dissipating all mists of the past. Yet only for that one weak, thoughtless instant did she yield to what appeared real joy at my presence.

"Yes, dear friend, it is Eloise," she answered, gazing anxiously into my face, and clinging to my strong hands as though fearful lest I might tear them away when she spoke those hard words which must follow. "Yet surely you know, Geoffrey Benteen, that I am Mademoiselle Lafreniere no longer?"

It seemed to me my very heart stopped beating, so intense was the pain which overswept it. Yet I held to the soft hands, for there was such a pitiful look of suffering upon her upturned face as to steady me.

“No, I knew it not,” I answered brokenly. “I—I have been buried in the forest all these years since we parted, where few rumors of the town have reached me. But let that pass; it—it is easy to see you are now in great sorrow. Was it because of this—in search of help, in need, perchance—that you have sent for me?”

Page 12

She bowed her head; a tear fell upon my broad hand and glistened there.

“Yes, Geoffrey.”

The words were scarcely more than a whisper; then the low voice seemed to strengthen with return of confidence, her dark eyes anxiously searching my face.

“I sent for you, Geoffrey, because of deep trouble; because I am left alone, without friends, saving only the *pere*. I know well your faithfulness. In spite of the wrong, the misunderstanding between us—and for it I take all the blame—I have ever trusted in your word, your honor; and now, when I can turn nowhere else for earthly aid, the good God has guided you back to New Orleans. Geoffrey Benteen, do not gaze at me so! It breaks my heart to see that look in your eyes; but, my friend, my dearest friend, do you still recall what you said to me so bravely the night you went away?”

Did I remember! God knew I did; ay! each word of that interview had been burned into my life, had been repeated again and again in the silence of my heart amid the loneliness of the woods; nothing in all those years had for one moment obliterated her face or speech from memory.

“I remember, Eloise,” I answered more calmly. “The words you mean were: ’If ever you have need of one on whom you may rely for any service, however desperate (and in New Orleans such necessity might arise at any moment), one who would gladly yield his very life to serve you, then, wherever he may be, send for Geoffrey Benteen.’ My poor girl, has that moment come?”

The brown head drooped until it rested in unconsciousness against my arm, while I could feel the sobs which shook her form and choked her utterance.

“It has come,” she whispered at last; “I am trusting in your promise.”

“Nor in vain; my life is at your command.”

She stopped my passionate utterance with quick, impulsive gesture.

“No! pledge not yourself again until you hear my words, and ponder them,” she cried, with return to that imperiousness of manner I had loved so well. “This is no ordinary matter. It will try your utmost love; perchance place your life in such deadly peril as you never faced before. For I must ask of you what no one else would ever venture to require—nor can I hold out before you the slightest reward, save my deepest gratitude.”

I gazed fixedly at her flushed face, scarcely comprehending the strange words she spoke.

“What may all this be that you require—this sacrifice so vast that you doubt me? Surely I have never stood a coward, a dastard in your sight?”

She stood erect, facing me, proudly confident in her power, with tears still clinging to her long lashes.

“No! you wrong me uttering such a thought. I doubt you not, although I might well doubt any other walking this earth. But listen, and you can no longer question my words; this which I dare ask of you—because I trust you—is *to save my husband*.”

Page 13

“Your husband?” The very utterance of the word choked me. “Your husband? Save him from what? Where is he?”

“A prisoner to the Spaniards; condemned to die to-morrow at sunrise.”

“His name?”

“Chevalier Charles de Noyan.”

“Where confined?”

“Upon the flag-ship in the river.”

I turned away and stood with my back to them both. I could no longer bear to gaze upon her agonized face uplifted in such eager pleading, such confiding trust; that one sweet face I loved as nothing else on earth.

Save her husband! For the moment it seemed as if a thousand emotions swayed me. What might it not mean if this man should die? His living could only add infinitely to my pain; his death might insure my happiness—at least he alone, as far as I knew, stood in the way. “To die to-morrow!” The very words sounded sweet in my ears, and it would be such an easy thing for me to promise her, to appear to do my very best—and fail. “To die to-morrow!” The perspiration gathered in drops upon my forehead as I wavered an instant to the tempting thought. Then I shook the foul temptation from me. Merciful God! could I dream of being such a dastard? Why not attempt what she asked? After all, what was left for me in life, except to give her happiness?

The sound of a faint sob reached me, and wheeling instantly I stood at her side.

“Madame de Noyan,” I said with forced calmness, surprising myself, “I will redeem my pledge, and either save your husband, or meet my fate at his side.”

Before I could prevent her action she had flung herself at my feet, and was kissing my hand.

“God bless you, Geoffrey Benteen! God bless you!” she sobbed impulsively; and then from out the dense shadows of the farther wall, solemnly as though he stood at altar service, the watchful Capuchin said:

“Amen!”

CHAPTER II

A PERILOUS VENTURE

Any call to action, of either hazard or pleasure, steadies my nerves. To realize necessity for doing renders me a new man, clear of brain, quick of decision. Possibly this comes from that active life I have always led in the open. Be the cause what it may, I was the first to recover speech.

“I hope to show myself worthy your trust, Madame,” I said somewhat stiffly, for it hurt to realize that this emotion arose from her husband’s peril. “At best I am only an adventurer, and rely upon those means with which life upon the border renders me familiar. Such may prove useless where I have soldiers of skill to deal with. However, we have need of these minutes flying past so rapidly; they might be put to better use than tears, or words of gratitude.”

She looked upward at me with wet eyes.

“You are right; I am a child, it seems. Tell me your desire, and I will endeavor to act the woman.”

Page 14

“First, I must comprehend more clearly the nature of the work before me. The Chevalier de Noyan is already under sentence of death; the hour of execution to-morrow at sunrise?”

She bent her head in quiet acquiescence, her anxious eyes never leaving my face.

“It is now already approaching noon, leaving us barely eighteen hours in which to effect his rescue. Faith! ’t is short space for action.”

I glanced uneasily aside at the silently observant priest, now standing, a slender gray figure, close beside the door. He was not of an Order I greatly loved.

“You need have no fear,” she exclaimed, hastily interpreting my thought. “Father Petreni can be fully trusted. He is more than my religious confessor; he has been my friend from childhood.”

“Yes, Monsieur,” he interposed sadly, yet with a grave smile lighting his thin white face. “I shall be able to accomplish little in your aid, for my trade is not that of arms, yet, within my physical limitations, I am freely at your service.”

“That is well,” I responded heartily, words and tone yielding me fresh confidence in the man. “This is likely to prove a night when comrades will need to know each other. Now a few questions, after which I will look over the ground before attempting to outline any plan of action. You say, Madame, that your—Chevalier de Noyan is a prisoner on the fleet in the river. Upon which ship is he confined?”

“The ‘Santa Maria.’”

“The ’Santa Maria’?—if memory serve, the largest of them all?”

“Yes! the flag-ship.”

“She lies, as I remember, for I stood on the levee two hours ago watching the strange spectacle, close in toward the shore, beside the old sugar warehouse of Bomanceaux et fils.”

“You are correct,” returned the Capuchin soberly, the lady hesitating. “The ship swingeth by her cable scarce thirty feet from the bank.”

“That, at least, has sound of good fortune,” I thought, revolving rapidly a sudden inspiration from his answer, “yet it will prove a desperate trick to try.”

Then I spoke aloud once more.

“She appeared a veritable monster of the sea to my backwoods eyes; enough to pluck the heart out of a man. Has either of you stepped aboard her?”

The priest shook his shaven head despondently.

“Nay; never any Frenchman, except as prisoner in shackles, has found foothold upon that deck since O’Reilly came. It is reported no negro boatmen are permitted to approach her side with cargoes of fruit and vegetables, so closely is she guarded against all chances of treachery.”

“Faith! it must be an important crime to bring such extremity of vigilance. With what is De Noyan charged?”

“He, with others, is held for treason against the King of Spain.”

“There are more than one, then?”

“Five.” He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. “Madame de Noyan’s father is among them.”

Page 15

“Lafreniere?” I uttered the name in astonishment. “Then why am I not asked to assist him?”

The thoughtless exclamation cut her deeply with its seeming implication of neglect, yet the words she strove to speak failed to come. The priest rebuked me gravely:

“Thou doest great injustice by such inconsiderate speech, my son. There are hearts loyal to France in this province, who would count living a crime if it were won at the cost of Lafreniere. He hath been already offered liberty, yet deliberately chooseth to remain and meet his fate. Holy Mother! we can do no more.”

I bent, taking her moist hands gently between my own.

“I beg you pardon me, Madame; I am not yet wholly myself, and intended no such offence as my hasty words would seem to imply. One’s manners do not improve with long dwelling among savages.”

She met my stumbling apology with a radiant smile.

“I know your heart too well to misjudge. Yet it hurt me to feel you could deem me thoughtless toward my father.”

“You have seen him since his arrest?”

“Once only—at the Captain-General’s office, before they were condemned and taken aboard the flag-ship.”

“But the prisoners are Catholics; surely they are permitted the offices of the Church at such a time?”

A hard look swept across the Capuchin’s pale, ascetic face.

“Oh, ay! I had quite forgotten,” he explained bitterly. “They enjoy the ministrations of Father Cassati, of our Order, as representative of Holy Church.”

“Pouf!” I muttered gloomily. “It is bad to have the guard-lines drawn so closely. Besides, I know little about the way of ships; how they are arranged within, or even along the open decks. We meet them not in the backwoods, so this is an adventure little to my taste. It would hardly be prudent, even could I obtain safe footing there, to attempt following a trail in the dark when I knew not where it led. I must either see the path I am to travel by good daylight, or else procure a guide. This Father Cassati might answer. Is he one to trust?”

The priest turned his head away with a quick gesture of indignant dissent.

“Nay!” he exclaimed emphatically. “He must never be approached upon such a matter. He can be sweet enough with all men to their faces; the words of his mouth are as honey; yet he would be true to none. It is not according to the canons of our Order for me thus to speak, yet I only give utterance to truth as I know it in the sight of God. Not even the Spaniards themselves have faith in him. He has not been permitted to set foot upon shore since first he went aboard.”

“And you have no plan, no suggestion to offer for my guidance?”

“Mon Dieu, no!” he cried dramatically. “I cannot think the first thing.”

“And you, Madame?”

She was kneeling close beside a large chair, her fine dark eyes eagerly searching my face.

Page 16

“It rests wholly with you,” she said solemnly, “and God.”

Twice, three times, I paced slowly across the floor in anxious reflection; each time, as I turned, I gazed again into her trustful, appealing eyes. It was love calling to me in silent language far more effective than speech; at last, I paused and faced her.

“Madame de Noyan,” I said deliberately, my voice seeming to falter with the intensity of my feelings, “I beg you do not expect too much from me. Your appeal has been made to a simple frontiersman, unskilled in war except with savages, and it is hardly probable I shall be able to outwit the trained guardsmen of Spain. Yet this I will say: I have determined to venture all at your desire. As I possess small skill or knowledge to aid me, I shall put audacity to the front, permitting sheer daring either to succeed or fail. But it would be wrong, Madame, for me to encourage you with false expectation. I deem it best to be perfectly frank, and I do not clearly see how this rescue is to be accomplished. I can form no definite plan of action; all I even hope for is, that the good God will open up a path, showing me how such desperate purpose may be accomplished. If this prove true—and I beg you pray fervently to that end—you may trust me to accept the guidance, let the personal danger be what it may. But I cannot plan, cannot promise—I can only go forward blindly, seeking some opening not now apparent. This alone I know, to remain here in conversation is useless. I must discover means by which I may reach the ‘Santa Maria’ and penetrate below her deck if possible. That is my first object, and it alone presents a problem sufficient to tax my poor wits to the uttermost. So all I dare say now, Madame, is, that I will use my utmost endeavor to save your hus—the Chevalier de Noyan. I request you both remain here—it would be well in prayer—ready to receive, and obey at once, any message I may need to send. If possible I will visit you again in person before nightfall, but in any case, and whatever happens, try to believe that I am doing all I can with such brains as I possess, and that I count my own life nothing in your service.”

However they may sound now, there was no spirit of boasting in these words. Conceit is not of my nature, and, indeed, at that time I had small enough faith in myself. I merely sought to encourage the poor girl with what little hope I possessed, and knew she read the truth behind those utterances which sounded so brave. Even as I finished she arose to her feet, standing erect before me, looking a very queen.

“Never will I doubt that, Geoffrey Benteen,” she declared impulsively. “I have seen you in danger, and never forgotten it. If it is any encouragement to hear it spoken from my lips, know, even as you go forth from here, that never did woman trust man as I trust you.”

The hot blood surged into my face with a madness I retained barely sufficient strength to conquer.

Page 17

“I—I accept your words in the same spirit with which they are offered,” I stammered, hardly aware of what I said. “They are of greatest worth to me.”

I bowed low above the white hand resting so confidingly within mine, anxious to escape from the room before my love gave utterance to some foolish speech. Yet even as I turned hastily toward the door, I paused with a final question.

“The negro who guided me here, Madame; is he one in whom I may repose confidence?”

“In all things,” she answered gravely. “He has been with the De Noyan family from a child, and is devoted to his master.”

“Then I take him with me for use should I chance to require a messenger.”

With a swift backward glance into her earnest dark eyes, an indulgence I could not deny myself, I bowed my way forth from the room, and discovering Alphonse upon the porch, where he evidently felt himself on guard, and bidding him it was the will of his mistress that he follow, I flung my rifle across my shoulder, and strode straight ahead until I came out upon the river bank. Turning to the right I worked my way rapidly up the stream, passing numerous groups of lounging soldiers, who made little effort to bar my passage, beyond some idle chaffing, until I found myself opposite the anchorage of the Spanish fleet.

In the character of an unsophisticated frontiersman, I felt no danger in joining others of my class, lounging listlessly about in small groups discussing the situation, and gazing with awe upon those strange ships of war, swinging by their cables in the broad stream. It was a motley crew among whom I foregathered, one to awaken interest at any other time—French *voyageurs* from the far-off Illinois country, as barbarian in dress and actions as the native denizens of those northern plains, commingling freely with Creole hunters freshly arrived from the bayous of the swamp lands; sunburnt fishermen from the sandy beaches of Barataria, long-haired flatboat-men, their northern skin faintly visible through the tan and dirt acquired in the long voyage from the upper Ohio; here and there some stolid Indian brave, resplendent in paint and feathers, and not a few drunken soldiers temporarily escaped from their commands. Yet I gave these little thought, except to push my way through them to where I could obtain unobstructed view of the great ships.

The largest of these, a grim monster to my eyes, with bulging sides towering high above the water, and masts uplifting heavy spars far into the blue sky, rendered especially formidable by gaping muzzles of numerous black cannon visible through her open ports, floated just beyond the landing. I measured carefully the apparent distance between the flat roof of the sugar warehouse, against the corner of which I leaned in seeming

listlessness, and the lower yards of her forward mast—it was no farther than I had often cast a riata, yet it would be a skilful toss on a black night.

Page 18

However, I received small comfort from the thought, for there was that about this great gloomy war-ship—frigate those about me called her—which awed and depressed my spirits; all appeared so ponderously sullen, so massive with concealed power, so mysteriously silent. My eyes, searching for each visible object, detected scarcely a stir of life aboard, except as some head would arise for an instant above the rail, or my glance fell upon the motionless figure of a sentry, standing at the top of the narrow steps leading downward to the water, a huge burly fellow, whose side-arms glistened ominously in the sun. These were the sole signs of human presence; yet, from snatches of conversation, I learned that hidden away in the heart of that black floating monster of wood and iron, were nearly four hundred men, and the mere knowledge made the sombre silence more impressive than ever.

Except for gossiping spectators lining the shore, nothing living appeared about the entire scene, if I except a dozen or more small boats, propelled by lusty black oarsmen, deeply laden with produce, busily plying back and forth between various vessels, seeking market for their wares. Even these, as the priest told me, had apparently been warned away from the flag-ship, as I observed how carefully they avoided any approach to her boarding-ladder. The longer I remained, the more thoroughly hopeless appeared any prospect of success. Nor could I conjure up a practical—nay! even possible—-method of placing so much as a foot on board the “Santa Maria.” Surely never was prison-ship guarded with more jealous care, and never did man face more hopeless quest than this confronting me. The longer I gazed upon that grim, black, sullen mass of wood and iron—that floating fortress of despotic Spanish power—the more desperate appeared my mission; the darker grew every possibility of plucking a victim from out that monster’s tightly closed jaws. Yet I was not one to forego an enterprise lightly because of difficulty or danger, so with dogged persistency I clung to the water front, knowing nowhere else to go, and blindly trusting that some happening might open to me a door of opportunity.

It frequently seems that when a man once comes, in a just cause, to such mind as this, when he trusts God rather than himself, there is a divinity which aids him. Surely it was well I waited in patience, for suddenly another produce boat, evidently new to the trade, deeply laden with fruit and roots, bore down the river, the two negroes at the oars pointing its blunt nose directly toward the flag-ship, attracted no doubt by its superior size. Instantly noting their course I awaited their reception with interest, an interest intensified by a drawling English voice from amid the crowd about me, saying:

“I reckon thar’ll be some dead niggers in thet thar bumboat if they don’t sheer off almighty soon.”

Page 19

Scarcely were these prophetic words uttered, when the soldier statue at the head of the boarding-stairs swung his musket forward into position, and hailed in emphatic Spanish, a language which, thanks to my mother, I knew fairly well. There followed a moment of angry controversy, during which the startled negroes rested upon their oars, while the enraged guard threatened to fire if they drifted a yard closer. In the midst of this hubbub a head suddenly popped up above the rail. Then a tall, ungainly figure, clad in a faded, ill-fitting uniform, raised itself slowly, leaning far out over the side, a pair of weak eyes, shadowed by colored glasses, gazing down inquiringly into the small boat.

“Vat ees it you say you have zare?” he asked in an attempt at French, which I may only pretend to reproduce in English. “Vat ees ze cargo of ze leetle boat?”

Instantly the two hucksters gave voice, fairly running over each other in their confused jargon, during which I managed to distinguish native names for potatoes, yams, sweet corn, peaches, apples, and I know not what else.

The Spaniard perched high on the rail waved his long arms in unmitigated disgust.

“*Caramba*!” he cried the moment he could make his voice distinguished above the uproar. “I vant none of zos zings; Saint Cristoval, non! non! Ze Capitaine he tole me get him some of ze olif—haf you no olif in ze leetle boat?”

The darkies shook their heads, instantly starting in again to call their wares, but the fellow on the rail waved them back.

“Zen ve don’t vant you here!” he cried shrilly. “Go vay dam quick, or else ze soldier shoot.” As if in obedience to an order the stolid guard brought his weapon menacingly to the shoulder.

How the episode terminated I did not remain to learn. At that moment I only clearly comprehended this—I had a way opened, an exceedingly slight one to be sure, of doubtful utility, yet still a way, which might lead me into the guarded mystery of that ship. The time for action had arrived, and that was like a draught of wine to me. Eagerly I slipped back through the increasing crowd of gaping countrymen, to where the negro had found a spot of comfort in the sun.

“Alphonse!” I called, careful to modulate my voice. “Wake up, you black sleepy-head! Ay! I have you at last in the world again. Now stop blinking, and pay heed to what I say. Do you chance to know where, for love, money, or any consideration, you could lay hands on olives in this town?”

The fellow, scarcely awake, rolled up the whites of his eyes for a moment, and scratched his woolly pate, as if seeking vainly to conjure up some long-neglected memory. Then his naturally good-humored countenance relaxed into a broad grin.

“Fo’ de Lord, yas sah! I’se your man dis time suah ’nough. Dat fat ol’ Dutchman, down by de Tehoupitoulas Gate, suah as you’re born had a whole barrel ob dem yesterday. I done disremember fer de minute, boss, jist whar I done saw dem olibs, but I reckon as how de money ’d fotch ’em all right.”

Page 20

I drew forth a handful of French coins.

“Then run for it, lad!” I exclaimed in some excitement. “Your master’s life hangs upon your speed—hold, wait! do you remember that old tumble-down shed we passed on our way here; the one which had once been a farrier’s shop?”

The negro nodded, his eyes filled with awakened interest.

“Good; then first of all bring me a suit of the worst looking old clothes you can scare up in the negro quarters of this town. Leave them there. Then go directly to this Dutchman’s, buy every olive he has for sale at any price, load them into a boat—a common huckster’s boat, mind you, and remain there with them until I come. Do you understand all that?”

“Yas, Massa; I reckon as how I kin do dat all right ’nough.” The fellow grinned, every white ivory showing between his thick red lips.

“Don’t stop to speak to any one, black or white. Now trot along lively, and may the Lord have mercy on you if you fail me, for I pledge you I shall have none.”

I watched him disappear up the street in a sort of swinging dog-trot, took one more glance backward at the huge war-ship, now swinging by her cable silent and mysterious as ever, and turned away from the river front, my brain teeming with a scheme upon the final issue of which hung life or death.

CHAPTER III

A VISIT TO THE FLAG-SHIP

I had seldom assumed disguise, except when wearing Indian garb upon the war-trail. Yet in boyhood I had occasionally masqueraded as a negro so successfully as to deceive even my own family. With this in mind the resolve was taken that in no other guise than that of a foolish, huckstering darky could I hope to attain the guarded deck of that Spanish frigate. This offered only the barest chance of success, yet such chances had previously served me well, and must be trusted now. Opportunity frequently opens to the push of a venturesome shoulder.

Once determined upon this I set to work, perfecting each detail which might aid in the hazardous undertaking. Much was to be accomplished, and consequently it was late in the afternoon before the two of us, myself as much a negro to outward appearance as my sable companion, floated anxiously down the broad river in a battered old scow heaped high with every variety of country produce obtainable. Drifting with the current, I kept the blunt nose pointed directly toward the bulging side of the “Santa Maria,” yet

without venturing to glance in that direction, until a sharp challenge of the vigilant sentinel warned us to sheer off.

Slowly shipping the heavy steering oar, finding it difficult even in that moment of suspense to suppress a smile at the expression of terror on Alphonse's black face, I stood up, awed by the solemn massiveness of the vast bulk towering above me, now barely thirty feet away. For the first time I realized fully the desperation of my task, and my heart sank. But the gesticulations of the wrathful guard could no longer be ignored, and, smothering an exclamation of disgust at my momentary weakness, I nerved myself for the play.

Page 21

"*Caramba*!" the fellow shouted roughly in his native tongue. "Stop there, you lazy niggers; don't let that boat drift any closer. Come, sheer off, or, by all the saints, I 'll blow a hole clear through the black hide of one of you!"

"Hold her back, boy!" I muttered hurriedly to the willing slave. "That soldier means to shoot."

Then I held up a handful of our choicest fruit into view.

"I have got plenty vegetables, an' lot fruit fer sell," I shouted eagerly in negro French, putting all the volume possible into my voice, hopeful my words might penetrate the hidden deck above. "Plenty 'tatoes, peaches, olibs—eberyting fer de oppercers."

"Don't want them—pull away, and be lively about it."

It was a moment of despair, every hope suspended in the balance; my heart beating like a trip-hammer with suspense. The thoroughly enraged guard lifted his gun to the shoulder; there was threat in his eyes, yet I ventured a desperate chance of one more word.

"I got de only *olibs* on dis ribber."

"*Bastenade*!" yelled the infuriated fellow. "I 'll give you a shot to pay for your insolence."

Even as he spoke, fumbling the lock of his gun, that same head observed before suddenly popped over the high rail like Punch at a pantomime.

"Vat zat you say, nigger?" its owner cried doubtingly. "Vas it ze olif you haf zare in ze leetle boat?"

I eagerly held up into view a choice handful of green fruit, my eyes hopeful.

"Oui, Senor Oppercer—fresh olibs; same as ob your lan'."

The Spaniard was standing upright on the rail by this time, clinging fast to a rope dangling from above, leaning far over, no slight interest depicted upon his pinched, sallow countenance.

"It's all right, sentry," he said sharply to the soldier, who lowered his gun with a scowl indicating his real desire. My newly found friend lifted his squeaking voice again in unfamiliar speech.

"Bring ze leetle boat along ze side of ze sheep, you black fellar, an' come up here wiz ze olif fer ze Capitaine."

“Scull in close against those steps, Alphonse,” I muttered, overjoyed at this rare stroke of good fortune. “Then pull out a few strokes; but stay alongside until I come back. Don’t let any one get aboard, and keep a quiet tongue yourself.”

The whites of his eyes alone answered me, he being too badly frightened for speech. The situation was one to grate upon any nerves unaccustomed to danger, yet, trusting the long training of the slave would hold him obedient, I turned away, and, in another moment, had scrambled up the rope ladder, plunging awkwardly over the high rail on to the hitherto concealed deck. My pulses throbbed with excitement over the desperate game fronting me, yet, with a coolness surprising to myself, I lost at that instant every sensation of personal fear, in determination to act thoroughly my assumed character. More lives than one hung in the balance, and, with tightly clenched teeth, I swore to prove equal to the venture. The very touch of those deck planks to my bare feet put new recklessness into my blood, causing me to marvel at the perfection of my own fool play.

Page 22

The gaunt Spaniard commanding my presence stood waiting, hardly more than five paces from where I landed, yet so intense became my immediate interest in the strange scene—an interest partly real, but largely simulated for the occasion—that he contented himself watching my confused antics with much apparent amusement, and without addressing me. Even to this hour that scene lies distinct before my eyes. Possessed I skill with pencil I could sketch each small detail from the retina of memory—the solitary sentinel beside the rail, his well-worn uniform of blue and white dingy in the sun; another farther forward, where a great opening yawned; with yet a third, standing rigid before a closed door of the after cabin. An officer, his coat richly decorated with gold braid, wearing epaulets, and having a short sword dangling at his side, paced back and forth across the top of a little house near the stern. I heard him utter some command to a sailor near the wheel, but he never so much as glanced toward me. Perhaps thirty or more seamen, bronzed of face, and oddly bedecked as to hair, lounged idly amid the shadows opposite, while, more closely at hand, that gaunt, cadaverous Spaniard, at whose invitation I was present, leaned against a big gun, puffing nonchalantly at a cigarette, held between lean, saffron-colored fingers. The deck was white as the snows of a northern Winter, while the brass work along the railings and about the cannon glittered brilliantly in the sunshine. There was a gaudy yellow-and-white striped canopy stretched above a portion of the deck aft; the huge masts seemed to pierce into the blue of the skies; while on every side were ranged grim guns of brass and iron.

My role was that of an ignorant, green, half-frightened darky, and I presume I both appeared and acted the natural-born idiot, if I might judge from the expression upon the Spaniard's face, and the broad grin lighting up the fierce countenance of the sentry at the gangway. Yet back of this mask there was grim determination and fixed purpose, so that no article of furniture was along that broad deck which I did not mentally photograph, so as to know its whereabouts if ever I chanced that way again. Ay! even to a little cuddy door beside the cookhouse, apparently opening directly into the mysterious regions below, and a great chest lashed hard against the rail, within which I distinguished the bright colors of numerous flags. I noticed also the odd manner in which queer rope ladders led up from either side of the broad deck to the vast spars high above, rising tier on tier until my head grew dazed with gazing at them.

"Vel, Sambo, my black fellow," grinned the officer, whose eyes were still lazily following my erratic movements as I peered innocently into the muzzle of a brass carronade in apparent hope of discovering the ball, "zis vus ze first time you vus ever on ze war-sheep, I sink likely. How you like stop here, hey, an' fight wis dos sings?" And he rested his yellow hand caressingly upon the breech of the gun.

Page 23

I shook my head energetically, rendering as prominent as possible the whites of my eyes, at which he grinned wider than ever.

“No, sah, Mister Oppercer Man; you don’t git dis hyer nigger into no fought, sah,” I protested with vehemence. “I done fought wid de Injuns onct, sah, an’ I done don’t want no mo’.”

“Veil, you not vorry, boy; you voud be no good on ze war-sheep. But now you come wis me to ze Capitaine—bring ze olif.”

Bearing a tempting sample of the Spaniard’s favorite fruit tightly clutched in my black hand, and pulling my battered straw hat lower in concealment of my telltale hair, I made awkward attempt to shuffle along behind him, as he carelessly advanced toward the after part of the vessel. But I loitered along our passage to examine so many objects of curiosity, asking such a multitude of extremely absurd questions, that we consumed considerable time in traversing even the comparatively short distance to where the rigid sentinel fronted us before the cabin door. My queries were simple enough to have birth in the brain of a fool, yet my guide was of rare good humor, and evidently so amused at my ignorant curiosity that his patience withstood the strain. On my part none were blindly asked, but were intended to open a way toward others of the utmost importance. My sole purpose at that moment was to lull suspicion to rest; when that had been accomplished, then I might confidently hope to pump my trustful victim of such information as I imperatively required. The ignorant questions of an imbecile will oftentimes be frankly responded to, where a wise man might ask in vain, and my first play was to establish my character as a fool. That I had succeeded was already evident.

The statuesque guard before the cabin brought his musket up at our approach with so smart a snap as to startle me into a moment’s apparent terror. To the officer’s request that we be admitted to the presence of the Captain, he responded briefly that that officer had gone forward half an hour before. My guide glanced about as if uncertain where he had better turn in search.

“Did he go down the hatch?” he queried shortly.

“I know not, Senor Gonzales,” was the respectful reply. “But I believe he may be with the prisoners’ guard below.”

The officer promptly started forward, and, awaiting no formal invitation, I shambled briskly after, keeping as close as possible to his heels. Could I gain a brief glimpse below the deck it would be worth more to me than any amount of blind questioning, and my heart thumped painfully in remembrance of what hung upon his movements. With a single sharp word to the sentry at the hatch he swung himself carelessly over the edge, mysteriously disappearing into the gloom beneath. That was no time for hesitancy, and

I was already preparing to do likewise, when the guard, a surly-looking brute, promptly inserted the point of his bayonet into my ragged garment, accompanying this kindly act with a stern order to remain where I was.

Page 24

“An’ what fo’ yo’ do dat, Senor Sojer?” I cried, in unaffected anguish, rubbing the injured part tenderly, yet speaking loud so that my words should be distinctly audible below. “Dat oppercer man he done tol’ me to foller him to de Captain. What fo’ yo’ stop me wid dat toastin’ fork?”

“It’s all right, Manuel,” sung out a voice in Spanish from the lower darkness. “Let the fool nigger come down.”

The thoroughly disgusted soldier muttered something about his orders, that his lieutenant had not ever authorized him to pass fools. Overlooking this personal allusion, and fearing more serious opposition from some one higher in authority, I took advantage of his momentary doubt, promptly swung my legs over the edge of the hatch opening, groped blindly about with my bare feet until they struck the rungs of a narrow ladder, and went scrambling down into the semi-darkness of between-decks, managing awkwardly to miss my final footing, thus flopping in a ragged heap at the bottom.

“Holy Mother! you make more noise zan a sheep in action,” grumbled the startled officer, as I landed at his feet. “Vat for you come down ze ladder zat vay?”

Rubbing my numerous bruises energetically, I contented myself with staring up at him as if completely dazed by my fall. Reading in his amused countenance no symptom of awakening suspicion I ventured a quick glance at my new surroundings. We were in what appeared a large unfurnished room, with doors of all sizes opening in every direction, while I could perceive a narrow entry, or passageway, extending toward the after part of the vessel. The roof, formed of the upper deck, was low, upheld by immense timbers, and the apartment, nearly square, was dimly flooded by the sparse light sifting down through the single hatch-opening above, so that, in spite of its large dimensions, it had a cramped and stuffy appearance. The vast butt of the mainmast arose directly in front of me, and, upon a narrow bench surrounding it, a dozen soldiers were lounging, while near the entrance to the passageway, scarcely more than a shadow in that dimness, stood a sentry, stiff and erect, with musket at his shoulder. They were mostly slightly built, dark-featured men, attired in blue and white uniforms, the worse for wear, and were all laughing at my crazy entrance. No doubt my coming afforded some relief to their tiresome, dull routine. While lying there, apparently breathless from my fall, my brains effectively muddled, a young officer advanced hastily from out the gloom to inquire into so unusual an uproar.

“What is all this noise about?” he questioned sharply, striding toward us. “Ah, Gonzales; whom have you here? Another bird to add to our fine collection?”

“If so, it must be a rare blackbird, Senor Francisco,” returned my friend, vainly endeavoring to recover his customary gravity. “By Saint Cristobal! I have not laughed so heartily for a year past as at this poor black fool. Faith, I sought to enlist him in the service of His Most Christian Majesty, yet his method of coming down a companion

ladder convinced me he sadly lacks the necessary qualifications for a sailor. Hast seen aught of the Captain here below?”

Page 25

“Ay, comrade, thou wilt find him aft. He hath just had speech once more with the chief rebel, the graybeard they call Lafreniere, and was in raging temper when last we met. *Caramba*! he even called me an ass, for no more serious fault, forsooth, than that I made the round of my guard unattended. Hath your darky news for him?”

“Nay; the fellow possesseth not sufficient sense to be a messenger, except it may be a message for his stomach to make his humor better,” was the reply. “Come, trot along now, boy, and mind where you put down those big feet in the passage.”

I struggled upright in response to his order, assisted by the sharp tap of a boot accompanying it, tripped over a gun barrel one of the guard facetiously inserted between my legs, and went down once more, uttering such howl of terror as could be only partially drowned beneath the uproarious laughter of my merry tormentors. It developed into a gantlet, yet I ran the line with little damage, and, after much ducking and pleading, managed to regain my position close to the heels of Senor Gonzales before he turned into the passageway, which, as I now perceived, was dimly illumined by means of a single lantern, hung to a blackened upper beam.

“Well, good luck to both of you,” called out the young officer of the guard laughingly as we disappeared. “Yet I ’d hate to have the steering of such a crazy craft as follows in your wake, Gonzales, and I warn you again the Senor Captain will be found in beastly humor.”

“I fear nothing,” returned my guide, his lean yellow face turned backward over his shoulder. “I have what will bring him greater happiness than a decoration from the King.”

Shambling awkwardly forward, simulating all the uncouthness possible, I retained my wits sufficiently to note our surroundings—the long, narrow passage, scarcely exceeding a yard in width, with numerous doors opening on either side. Several of these stood ajar, and I perceived berths within, marking them as sleeping apartments, although one upon the right was evidently being utilized as a linen closet, while yet another, just beyond, and considerably larger, seemed littered with a medley of boxes, barrels, and great bags. This apartment appeared so much lighter than those others, even a stray ray of sunshine pouring directly down into it from above, that I instinctively connected it in my mind with the cook-house on the upper deck, and the open cuddy door I had chanced to notice.

As we approached the farther end this passage suddenly widened into a half circle, sufficiently extended to accommodate the huge butt of the mizzenmast, which was completely surrounded by an arm-rack crowded with short-swords, together with all manner of small arms. A grimly silent guard stood at either side, and I perceived the dark shadow of a third still farther beyond, while the half-dozen cabins close at hand had their doors tightly closed, and fastened with iron bars.

Page 26

Instinctively I felt that here were confined those French prisoners, the knowledge of whose exact whereabouts I sought amid such surroundings of personal peril, and my heart bounded from sudden excitement. In simulated awkwardness, I unfortunately overdid my part. Shuffling forward, more eager than ever to keep at the heels of my protector, yet with eyes wandering in search of any opening, my bare feet struck against a projecting ring-bolt in the deck, and over I went, striving vainly to regain my balance. Before that human statue on guard could even lower his gun to repel boarders, my head struck him soundly in the stomach, sending him crashing back against one of those tightly closed doors. Tangled up with the surprised soldier, who promptly clinched his unexpected antagonist, and, with shocking profanity, strove to throttle me, I yet chanced to take note of the number "18" painted upon the white wood just above us. Then the door itself was hurled hastily open, and with fierce exclamation of rage a gray-hooded Capuchin monk bounded forth like a rubber ball, and instantly began kicking vigorously right and left at our struggling figures. It gives me pleasure to record that the Spaniard, being on top, received by far the worst of it, yet I might also bear testimony to the vigor of the priest's legs, while we shared equally in the volubility of his tongue.

"*Sacre*!" he screamed in French, punctuating each sentence with a fresh blow. "Get away from here, you drunken, quarrelling brutes! Has it come to this, that a respectable priest of Holy Church may not hold private converse with the condemned without a brawl at the very door? Mother of God! what meaneth the fracas? Where is the guard? Why don't some of them jab their steel in the blasphemous ragamuffins who thus make mock of the holy offices of religion? Take that, you black, sprawling beast!"

He aimed a vicious stroke at my head, which I ducked in the nick of time to permit of its landing with full force in my companion's ribs. I heard him grunt in acknowledgment of its receipt.

"Where is the guard, I say! If they come not I will strangle the dogs with my own consecrated hands to the glory of God. By the sainted Benedine! was ever one of our Order so basely treated before? Get away, I tell you! 'Tis a disgrace to the true faith, and just as I was about to bring the Chevalier to his knees in confession of his sins!"

Gonzales was fairly doubled up with laughter at the ludicrous incident, choking so that speech had become an utter impossibility. By this time the aroused guards began hurrying forward on a run down the passageway to rescue their imperilled comrade, yet, before the foremost succeeded in laying hands upon me, a newcomer, resplendent in glittering uniform, with an inflamed, almost purple face, leaped madly forth from the opposite side of the mast and began laying about him vigorously with an iron pin, making use meanwhile of a vocabulary of choice Spanish epithets such as I never heard equalled.

Page 27

“By the shrine of Saint Gracia!” shouted this new arrival hoarsely, glaring about in the dim light as if half awakened from a bad dream. “What meaneth this aboard my ship? *Caramba*! is this a travelling show—a place for mountebanks and gypsies? Shut the door, you shrieking gray-back of a monk, or I ’ll have you cat-o’-nine-tailed by the guard, in spite of your robe. Get up, you drunken brute!”

The crestfallen soldier to whom these last affectionate words were addressed limped painfully away, and then the justly irate commander of His Christian Majesty’s flag-ship “Santa Maria” glowered down on me with an astonishment that for the moment held him dumb.

“Where did this dirty nigger come from?” he roared at last, applying one of his heavy sea-boots to me with vehemence. “Who is the villain who dared bring such cattle on board my ship?”

Gonzales, now thoroughly sobered by the seriousness of the situation, attempted to account for my presence, but before he had fairly begun his story, the Captain, who by this time was beyond all reason, burst roaring forth again:

“Oh, so you brought him! You did, hey? Well, did n’t I tell you to let no lazy, loafing bumboat-man set foot on board? Do you laugh at my orders, you good-for-nothing scum of the sea? And above all things why did you ever drag such a creature as this down between decks to disgrace the whole of His Majesty’s navy? Get up, you bundle of rags!”

I scrambled to my feet, seeking to shuffle to one side out of his immediate sight, but a heavy hand closed instantly on my ragged collar and held me fronting him. For a moment I thought he meant to strike me, but I appeared such a miserable, dejected specimen of humanity that the fierce anger died slowly out of his eyes.

“Francisco,” he called sternly, “heave this thing overboard, and be lively about it! Saints of Mercy! he smells like a butcher-boat in the tropics.”

Hustled, dragged, cuffed, mercilessly kicked, the fellows got me out upon the open deck at last; I caught one fleeting glimpse of the great masts, the white, gleaming planks under foot, the horrified, upturned, face of Alphonse in the little boat beneath, and then, with a heave and a curse, over I went, sprawling down from rail to river, as terrified a darky as ever made hasty departure from a man-of-war.

CHAPTER IV

WE HOLD A COUNCIL OF WAR

The last object I remember seeing was the white face of the Capuchin monk peering at me over the rail, and my earliest thought as I arose to the surface, was that as the water had probably cleansed my skin it would be wise to keep well out of sight from the deck. Fortunately the boat floated close at hand. Laying hasty grasp upon it, but remaining well immersed in the river, I bade the thoroughly frightened black paddle with diligence out of that neighborhood. This was a task he was not slow in accomplishing, fear lending strength to trained muscles, and we soon had the good fortune to discover a safe landing-place beneath the lee of a long molasses shed, where our plight was unobserved by any one.

Page 28

Remaining hidden here myself, feeling reasonably secure from prying eyes, I despatched Alphonse after dry clothing, meanwhile tramping back and forth across the packed earthen floor to keep chilled blood in circulation, seeking eagerly to evolve out of the confused events of the afternoon some programme for future guidance. This task was no light one. The closer I faced the desperate work remaining unaccomplished the less I enjoyed the outlook, the more improbable appeared success. Getting aboard the "Santa Maria" was now, to my mind, the simplest part of the adventure, but beyond the accomplishment of that feat I could perceive little to encourage me. What must necessarily follow my safe gaining of that guarded deck, during the dark hours of the night, depended so largely upon the occurrence of helpful circumstances, any definite plan of action arranged beforehand became simply an impossibility. Still, striving to make allowances for the unexpected, I managed to put together a chain of details, trusting, with the blind faith of a fatalist, that these would somehow fall into line when the hour came. If they failed, as was likely, I determined to shift them about in any way possible as each fresh emergency arose. I realized how small a part any preliminary survey holds in such an enterprise as now fronted me, an enterprise to be worked out amid darkness and grave personal peril, where any bungling act or false move might overturn everything in an instant; yet it is always well—or at least so I have found it—to trace some outline of procedure, rather than trust wholly to the intuitions of the moment. God's aid seems usually granted to those doing most for themselves.

I felt little confidence by the time Alphonse returned, yet my firm determination to make the effort had in no way abated. Indeed, had failure been an absolute certainty I should have gone forward exactly the same, for I was bound to it by my pledge to Eloise de Noyan. I have reason to suppose dogged determination a part of my nature, but then something far more compelling than this inherited tendency drove me irresistibly forward to my fate. This is no story of the rescue of a prisoner of war, but rather of how love impelled an ordinary man to the accomplishment of deeds which seemed impossible.

It was evening, already quite dark, it fortunately proving a night of cloud and threatened storm, when I ventured to steal into the little cottage on the Rue Dumaine, and found there, even as I had left them, Madame de Noyan and the *pere* awaiting me. How anxious a day she had been compelled to pass since the hour of my departure was plainly imprinted upon her beautiful face, gently touched by the softened light from a shaded candle near which she rested; nor was the naturally pale, emaciated countenance of her spiritual adviser entirely free from outward marks of care impressed upon it by his patient vigil.

Page 29

I recall still, a pang tugging at my old heart, with what unspeakable gentleness Eloise came forward, holding forth both white hands in greeting, while unrestrained tears glistened upon the long lashes partly veiling the eager glow of soft eyes searching my face. She uttered never a word of questioning relative to the result of my mission; merely stood there silent, her warm hands in mine, her gaze fastened upon me, as if within my eyes she sought to read everything unasked. Perhaps she did, yet to me it seemed the perfect abandon of trust, and often since have I thought upon it as illustrative of her unswerving confidence in my honor.

“I do so thank you, Geoffrey Benteen,” she said in all simplicity, “for thus coming to us once more.”

“I returned the earliest moment possible, Madame,” I replied quietly, although all my heart must have leaped responsive into my eyes, contradicting such coolness of speech. Be that as it may, my sweet mistress never glanced aside, nor drew back her hands from mine. It was the gravely observant priest, standing behind within the shadows, whose natural impatience caused him to interrupt our greeting, although he spoke not unkindly.

“My son,” he said, deep anxiety evident in the tone of his soft speech, “we have remained in solemn prayer ever since the hour of thy departure, and, while we doubt not our petitions have found favor of both Mother and Child, yet the flesh sorroweth, and we yearn greatly to know all from thine own lips as to the fortunes of this day. Tell us, I beg thee, hast thou discovered aught of comfort or help for the condemned?”

His words brought me back to earth with sudden rush. Releasing the soft hands I had been clasping so tightly in momentary forgetfulness, I led the lady to a seat, even finding another myself before venturing upon reply.

“I thank you heartily for your prayers, Sir Priest. Often have I heard my father say the prayer of the righteous availeth much, and although I be not of Holy Church—for those to whom I looked in earlier years for guidance were of the dissenting breed—yet I yield respect to all true religion; and even in the woods, where men grow rough, giving small thought to the voice of their souls, I have discovered much to tell me of God, and to make me thankful for His mercies. But you ask a difficult question. The day has not been ill spent nor wasted. This much, at least, I may say—I have discovered one weak spot in the Spanish guard-line, and intend to make the best possible use of it. Yet the venture is bound to prove a desperate one, and nothing except the overruling care of Him who guides us all can secure the desired outcome.”

He piously crossed himself, his thin lips moving silently above the silver crucifix resting in his white fingers, but Eloise only leaned more eagerly forward, her dark eyes anxiously scanning my face.

“Have you seen my—the Chevalier de Noyan?” she questioned tremblingly.

Page 30

“No, Madame, yet I have been aboard the ’Santa Maria,’—though in truth ’twas not altogether an enjoyable experience,—and now know precisely where the prisoners are confined, even to the room of the Chevalier. If you will listen patiently I will briefly relate the story; then we can outline together our further plans for the night. Are we alone?”

Both nodded, far too eager to waste time in words, and as rapidly as possible I described those incidents already narrated. At the close Eloise simply thanked me in silence with an appreciative glance, but the priest proved more demonstrative.

“Thou hast, indeed, accomplished much, my son,” he exclaimed impulsively, clasping and unclasping the slender fingers of his white hands nervously. “Surely but for our fervent prayers the good Lord would never have led you amid such imminent and deadly peril. Yet to me the venture appeareth even more hopeless than before. You made mention of plans; shall we not discuss such at once, for the rapidly speeding time must greatly press us. The great Apostle once said, in connection with the work of the Spirit, ‘Brethren, the time is short’; it seemeth a fit text for us even now.”

“It is too early for action,” I replied thoughtfully. “I require food, and it will be best to delay until a late hour before moving in such a scheme as mine. As to plans—faith, the word was ill-chosen if I used it, for excepting the mode already outlined for attaining the deck, I have none. Yet there are certain matters I require to have arranged before I depart. Madame de Noyan, can you furnish me with a strong boat and two stout oarsmen? They must be men to trust, who will care little where they go.”

“It shall be done,” she answered promptly, her eyes brightening. “Alphonse will gladly go, and he can select another from among the slaves.”

“The Chevalier, can he swim if occasion arise?”

“He is perfectly at home in the water.”

“Good; then we need run no extra risk by keeping a boat beside the frigate. Let it await our coming beneath the darkest shadows of the cotton sheds near the North Gate. Have them place within it my rifle and ammunition, together with whatever weapons of war your husband may be accustomed to use; see that the boat be well provisioned for a long voyage, as it will require much travel before we get beyond Spanish reach, and we go not into a region of settlements. Bid the men exhibit no light, nor converse above whispers. My word to them will be ‘Virginia’; they are to pay heed to no other. You understand all this?”

“It is engraven upon my heart,” she responded gravely. “You need have no fear.”

“That I think will be all you can do to aid success—nay, wait! instruct them also, if we have not arrived before the dawn to bide no longer; it will be useless.”

“Oh, say not so, Geoffrey Benteen,” she cried, a sudden sob evidencing the strain upon her. “Surely the good God will aid us now.”

Page 31

“It is upon Him I rely,” I responded, not knowing how best to minister to her deep distress. “We will do all we can, Madame, to win His favor; beyond that nothing remains but to submit to His will.”

She hid her face in her arms upon the table, the light of the candle streaming almost golden in the heavy masses of her hair. Instinctively I rested my hand caressingly upon it.

“Nay, Madame, this is time for strength, not weakness. Afterwards we may have opportunity to weep; to-night there is call for action.”

She glanced up with a quick, impulsive gesture, and I saw her eyes were dry of tears.

“You think me unduly nervous and unstrung,” she said quietly, and I could detect a touch of indignation in the tone. “It is merely my nature, for the impatient blood of the South has place in my veins, yet whatsoever a lady of France may do, you can trust me to accomplish, Monsieur.”

Faith! but she had a way with her which ever left me helpless, and no doubt my face exhibited how abashed I felt at the regal manner in which she fronted me. At least I spoke no word, yet the proud look faded from her eyes, and I felt her hand touch mine.

“Forgive me, Geoffrey,” she whispered softly. “We do not doubt each other, yet I was over hasty of speech with one who has proven so loyal a friend.”

“Nor have I aught to forgive, Madame, or more to say, except that my words meant no injustice,” I responded. Then to avoid longer facing her I turned to where the watchful Capuchin stood.

“And now, Sir Priest, I propose being perfectly frank with you, as I do not believe this a time for mincing of words. I am of Protestant blood; those of my line have ridden at Cromwell’s back, and one of my name stood unrepentant at the stake when Laud turned Scotland into a slaughter-house. So ’t is safe to say I admire neither your robe nor your Order. Yet the events of this day have gone far toward convincing me that at heart you are a man in spite of the woman’s garb you wear. So now, what say you—will you be comrade with me this night?”

At the brutal bluntness of my speech and question—for I fear I took out upon him those feelings I ventured not to exploit with Madame, recalling how this same difference of faith had come between us two with its dread shadow—a red flush sprang into the priest’s thin, wasted cheeks, and I could see how tightly his hands clinched about the crucifix at his girdle.

“As to my Order, it hath little to fear from thy dislike, young man, as that is born from early prejudice, and lack of proper learning,” he returned gravely, meeting I my eyes

fairly with his own. “Yet, speaking as frankly as yourself, I doubt if I would prove of much assistance upon a ship’s deck; such effort as you propose for this night would be wholly foreign to my habit of life.”

Page 32

“Spoken truly; nor would I make choice of one with muscles so inert from disuse were this to be an onset, where men give and take hard blows. I ask you not upon the ship’s deck at all, my friend, nor shall I require your company one step farther than the roof of the great sugar warehouse of Bomanceaux et fils. Still, it will require steady nerve to do even what little I require, and, if you doubt your courage, say so now, and I will seek among the slaves for stouter heart and readier hand.”

That my words touched his pride I could read instantly in his uplifted face.

“Nay, thou needest seek no further,” he announced briefly, his thin lips tightly pressed together. “I will go, Monsieur.” I knew instantly by the bold ring of the words that henceforward I might trust him to the death.

“I thought you would. Now a question more, and then I must have food. Can you prepare for my use one of your robes?”

“Easily, Monsieur; Father Cassati left one behind at the chapter-house when he went aboard ship, and you do not greatly differ in point of size. But is it possible thou proposest to turn priest, and of our Order?”

“In outward vesture merely, and that not for long. It would afford me greater liberty of movement on the ‘Santa Maria’ than my own garb, and may spare me some unpleasant questioning. Yet, perchance, there may be danger of my overdoing the priestly character, as well as of overestimating the privileges granted the clergy on board.”

He shrugged his shoulders, nettled somewhat by my words and manner.

“I have indeed reason for gravely distrusting your naturalness in the wearing of a robe dedicated to religion,” he made answer. “But as for the other matter, there can be little danger of your overstepping the mark. Father Cassati is of a somewhat roistering disposition, over-fond of the bottle, in truth,—although it giveth me pain to speak thus of one of my own Order,—and I have been informed, moveth at his own will about the ship. He is of the sort to be ’hail fellow, well met’ with those roistering Spaniards, who care little for God or man, as he possesseth few scruples of his own.”

“Bear I sufficient resemblance to pass in his stead?”

“You are not unlike as to height and build; as to face, you are far the better featured. With the cowl up it might be reasonably safe in a dim light.”

“My beauty has always been my undoing,” I ventured, in awakened good humor. “Nevertheless I shall be compelled to venture it this time; moreover, I am pleased to learn that things aboard are as you describe, for such a state of affairs may greatly serve our purpose.”

I turned away from him to recross the room and murmur a few words of brighter hope into the ear of Eloise, where she sat in white-faced silence amid the deeper shadows of the portiere.

CHAPTER V

Page 33

ON THE DECK OF THE “SANTA MARIA”

The Spanish sentries on the Place d’Armes were calling the hour of midnight when the priest and I stole silently past amid the shadows of overhanging trees. I find it impossible, even now, after the lapse of years, to dwell upon my parting with her who despatched me on so strange an errand. My reluctant pen halts, while the tears, dimming my old eyes, bid me turn to other scenes. However, under God, the venture of that night might terminate, I firmly believed I was gazing into her dear face for the last time; yet, honor sealed my lips, holding back unspoken those passionate utterances which burned upon my tongue. I could merely clasp for one brief moment those hands she gave so unreservedly into my keeping, gaze into the unfathomed depths of her dark eyes, and murmur a few broken words of confidence and farewell. Then, half blinded from emotion, I tore myself away from her beloved presence, and went forth into night and peril for her dear sake.

However my heart throbbed with hidden anguish as I stepped forth from that fateful house, the nature of the adventure upon which we were now fairly launched was sufficient to cool my brain, so that long before we skirted the guard-lines drawn around the camp of Spanish artillery, I had become once more the cool, resourceful adventurer, as befitted my nature and training.

“Sentries are stationed only along the open side of the square, I think?” I whispered to my companion questioningly, striving vainly to penetrate the intense darkness in our front.

“True,” he responded in so low a voice I could scarcely catch the words, a slight falter betraying that the strange conditions preyed upon his unaccustomed nerves. “It was thus they were posted last night.”

“Then we will assume the risk of finding clear passage. Keep close, and venture no speech, whatever happens.”

It proved slow work at the best, as it would never do to have a Spanish spy dogging our footsteps. I doubt not it tested good Father Petreni to the uttermost, yet I thought the better of him for the determined way in which he clung to my heels through the darkness. As for myself, such dodging, twisting, climbing of walls, and skulking amid shadows, merely sufficed to warm the blood, and yielded greater zest for the more serious work to follow. I claim small credit for courage in such matters; they have ever been so much a portion of life to me that their excitement became scarcely more than a draught of heady wine. He was the truly brave man who, without any such incentive as I possessed, left his books and quiet cell that night to follow me abroad.

At last we ran across the great deserted market-place, and paused, crouching breathlessly in the dense shadows of the huge warehouse standing upon the very brink

of the broad river. As we rested thus we could hear soft lapping of running water along the further wall, while occasionally some vagrant puff of air brought to our strained ears the distant creaking of chains, as the great war-vessels swung by their cables against the swift current. Beyond this the night was intensely still, black, unfathomable, mysterious. It seemed fairly to weigh down upon us with its noiseless burden of gloom.

Page 34

“Are you acquainted with the interior arrangement of this building?” I asked the priest in some anxiety.

“I was within it only once, and observed little of its features. I was called there in haste to speak words of peace to a sorely injured man.”

“Could you guide to the ladder leading up to the second floor in the dark?”

I thought he gave a gesture of dissent, yet so dense was the night I could barely note the movement.

“I am not certain, my son, yet to my remembrance it leadeth up near the centre upon the river side. The building is doubtless empty of all its cotton at this time of year, and we should be able to feel our way across if only once within. How do you purpose gaining entrance?”

“Pah! that is the simplest portion of the whole venture,” I said confidently. “I am not likely to overlook such a point. The third window from here has a loosened shutter; I brought this stick to pry it apart. Then the interior will be ours, unless they keep a watchman stationed within.”

“Thou needst have small fear of that at this late season, and the building empty.”

We crept cautiously forward, myself in the lead, and feeling blindly in the darkness for the loosened shutter previously located. At last my groping hand touched it, and drawing the bottom outward as far as possible by mere grip of the fingers, I inserted the stout oaken bar within the aperture, and, after listening intently to detect any presence close at hand, exerted my strength upon the rude lever. There followed a slight rasping, as if a wire dragged along a nail,—a penetrating shrillness there was to it which sent a tingle to the nerves,—then the heavy shutter swung outward, leaving ample space for the passage of a man’s body. I lifted myself by my hands and peered cautiously within. Everywhere was impenetrable blackness, while the silence was so profound as to give a sudden strange throb to my heart. Waiting no longer, I drew myself up on to the narrow ledge; then hung downward until my groping feet touched the floor. Once safely landed I leaned forth again, and in another moment the priest stood beside me, the shutter tightly drawn behind us. With a feeling of relief I faced that black interior. Now, at least, we were beyond chance of discovery by any prowling Spanish guard, and could advance more freely.

“Lead on,” I commanded shortly, resting my hand upon his shoulder to make sure of his presence. “I will keep hold upon your robe, so we shall not part company in the darkness.”

Very slowly we felt uncertain passage across the uneven floor. It appeared littered with innumerable articles of the box and barrel order, with here and there a pile of loose lumber, altogether making such a jumble of obstruction that keeping our direction became simply impossible in that intense darkness which seemed to fairly swallow us. We did well to proceed at all, and escape creating a racket by stumbling over some of the many unseen obstacles in our path. As to myself, I became so thoroughly confused by constant turning and climbing as to grow completely lost, but fortunately the priest kept a somewhat clearer brain, and, after groping blindly for some time, pausing occasionally as though he would smell his way like a dog, managed to put hand at last upon the object of his patient search.

Page 35

“’T is here,” he whispered. “Shall I go up?”

“Ay!” I returned hopefully, glad I had restrained the impatience of my tongue. “But try each rung before you venture stepping on it; they may prove rotten and give way beneath your weight.”

He swung himself up, after carefully tucking in his robe about the waist, but the ladder creaked so alarmingly beneath his tread I durst not venture my heavier weight upon it until he had safely reached the top. Finally the noise of his climbing ceased, and I could hear a board move high above me.

“Are you up safe?” I questioned in a low voice.

“All safe, praise be to God,” came the cautious response; “but thou wilt do well, friend, to exercise grave care, as the way is bad.”

It required brief exploration to convince us that this second story possessed a strong, firm floor, although there remained some danger of there being traps in it for the hoisting of cotton, while the boards might not extend over the entire surface. By this time, however, our eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the intense blackness enveloping us, so the slightest change in the prevailing gloom became quickly apparent. The air was so fresh and pure, with such a taste of the night in it, I became convinced there must be an opening somewhere close at hand, and whispered the suggestion to my companion. He proved keener of vision than I, for even as we thus spoke he plucked my sleeve and pointed upward.

“Then surely it will be yonder,” he exclaimed, with more eagerness of voice than I had before marked in him. “There is certainly a lightness to the atmosphere overhead, as if it came from a direct opening to the sky.”

It appeared true even to me, now that he had pointed out the spot.

“It must be the roof hatch uplifted. Now if we discover a ladder leading thereto I shall accept it as proof that God guideth us this night, and feel new courage.”

“Our work is of God,” said the *pere* solemnly, “or I should never be here with you, and engaged upon it.”

“Nor have I ever doubted it, father,” I made haste to answer, creeping cautiously forward across the ill-matched flooring. “Yet you have been a luckier man than I if never you found yourself in the wrong when you believed it to be right.”

There was a ladder there spliced with bits of rope, as we discovered, yet proving of sufficient strength to up-bear us one at a time. Thus we were soon out upon the great flat roof, lying prone at the edge, whither we had crept silently, peering cautiously forth

upon the black river. That is, we gazed into the silent mystery where we knew the river must be, yet it was like peering into an impenetrable bank of cloud. There was something awesome about it, for out yonder, within a few yards of us, swung twenty great vessels of war, manned by thousands of fighting men, while not a sound reached us, except the slight creaking of strained cables, or the occasional dash of a wave against some obstruction in the stream; nor could anything be seen, if I except flitting sparks of light glimmering here and there like lost stars, serving to locate the positions of the various ships in their night anchorage.

Page 36

I felt, rather than saw, the devout priest at my side piously cross himself, and there was a mumbling of his lips in prayer, but I contented myself with searching through the gloom for a glimpse of the towering masts of the “Santa Maria,” which must be close at hand. They remained invisible, shrouded behind the mist cloud. For one moment I cursed the intense blackness of the night, losing confidence in our venture. Yet, even as hope failed me, the dull creaking of a nearby cable sounded farther up stream. Guided by this I crept cautiously along the edge of the roof, aware as I proceeded that Father Petreni, imitating my example, pressed closely behind.

Near the northern extremity of the long building we came to a halt, and, leaning well over the roof edge, I peered anxiously into the enveloping fog. A deeper density of shadow showed directly in front, which I felt convinced could be caused only by one of those vast spars around which canvas had been rolled, as noted that afternoon from the ship’s deck. Vainly endeavoring to pierce the thick mist, I distinguished the steady tramping of some one pacing far beneath us. The sound came from farther out in the stream, where I might reasonably suppose the stern of the vessel to lie. I drew back, and placed my lips close to the priest’s ear.

“Can you distinguish any outline yonder?” I queried eagerly, pointing as I spoke, and feeling fearful lest my eyes had been deceived by fleeting night shadows.

Resting upon his breast, one hand shading his eyes, he peered long in the direction indicated before venturing to reply.

“There is a shade of something yonder,” he admitted at last. “It rises a trifle above us, and almost directly out from this edge. ’T is hard to say of what it consists, yet ’tis of a peculiar shape, causing me to think of the foreyard of a big ship.”

“Exactly what I name it,” I replied, set at ease by his prompt decision. “How far would you suppose the thing to lie from where we are?”

He studied the barely visible object long and carefully, shading his eyes again with his hands the better to concentrate his gaze upon that misty blot.

“It is like a jump in the dark, my son, to attempt guessing at so visionary a thing. At times it seemeth to fade away altogether, yet back it cometh once more into the same spot; from where I lie it might be twenty, or it might be forty, feet.”

“Saint Giles! not so bad a guess either. I figured it at thirty this afternoon from the bank below, nor am I apt to prove far wrong in such judgment. Truss up this confounded skirt of mine, while I uncoil the rope for a toss.”

He opened his eyes wide in amazement.

“Do you hope to cast the loop over the end of the spar?”

“Ay, that offers the only opening to get aboard unobserved,” I replied, loosening as I spoke the slender rope coil from about my waist. “Nor would it be any trick if the light were a trifle better. As it is, I may miss a throw or two in getting firm hold. It would prove risky business attempting to pass across a line insecure at one end. Lie down now, *pere*, and keep as quiet as if you were dead.”

Page 37

In instant obedience to my words the priest stretched himself at full length behind the low wooden gutter. Rising cautiously to my feet, I passed the cord with utmost care through my fingers, testing its strands again, making certain it remained perfectly free for the toss. For a moment I stood thus, swaying forward at the very edge of the roof, my eyes measuring again and again the hazy, uncertain distance stretching away toward that slight undulating shadow. It was practically impossible to determine where the extreme end of the spar terminated in air, yet as nearly as possible I made selection for my point of aim, and, with three noiseless circles about my head to give it impetus, shot the rope forth into the dense gloom. I heard the opening noose strike something which rattled sharply in the intense silence. Then the line slipped, hung limp, and finally fell dangling down over the edge of the roof. It had failed to catch, and I crouched low, making no effort to draw the loose end back. With the first sound of the blow against the spar the steady tramping across the deck ceased. A moment, and a gruff voice hailed in vigorous Spanish from out the darkness:

“Aloft there! Who is on the foreyard?”

For a brief space there came no answer, although we were made aware of other movements more directly below us. Then some one answered:

“The watch are all here on the forecastle, Senor. It must have been a loose block that rattled.”

“Two of you jump into the foretop, and make all fast.”

The steady tramping was resumed, while a moment later we became aware of the approach of men climbing through the darkness toward us. We were unable to perceive their shadows, yet their muttered conversation, as they lay out upon the yard, served to fix its actual position more clearly in my mind. I believed I knew where I had so grievously overshot the mark.

“*Boca del Dragon*!” grumbled one of the fellows hoarsely, seemingly in our very ears. “The Captain is as nervous over those cursed frog-eaters down between decks as if we were anchored off Paree.”

“Think you that is the trouble, Jose?” returned the other in the sprightly voice of a younger man. “I tell thee, comrade, ’tis only that bloody demon of an O’Reilly he is fearful of. I have sailed with the ‘old man’ in many seas since first I left Sargon, and never expect to see him affrighted of any Johnny Frenchman. But I heard the Admiral say two days agone, as I hung over his boat in the main chains, that if the Captain lost so much as a single prisoner it should cost him his ship. That, I make it, comrade, is why he has n’t taken so much as a glass of wine since first they were put aboard of us. *Bastante*! but he must have acquired a thirst by this time to make his temper red-hot.”

The other laughed sourly.

“Poh! I know even a better reason for his going dry than that, Juan. He does n’t have chance for a drink alongside of that gray-bellied French priest below. *Caramba*! it takes him to polish off the red liquor.”

Page 38

“How know you that?”

“Saint Christopher! how know I? Did I not just meet him at the main hatch so drunk he fell over the coamings. The sojer on guard set him up against the butt of the foremast to sober off in the night air.”

I experienced difficulty in repressing a laugh at the words, but the two fellows were going down by this time, grumbling in their beards because they had discovered nothing wrong as reward for their trip aloft, so I contented myself by silently pressing my companion’s arm, although doubtless he had comprehended no word of the conversation.

We rested there motionless, with no attempt at speech, for fully twenty minutes before I ventured to haul in the line which dangled downward from my hand. Everything remained quiet below, and, coiling it carefully over my arm, I noiselessly arose to my feet once more, poising myself to essay a second cast. As straight this time as an arrow from the taut string of a bow the noose sped silently away into the darkness. I felt a thrill of delight tingle through me as the end settled softly over the end of the vague, distant spar. I drew the cord taut and firm, not a sound breaking the intense stillness closing us in like a wall. A heavy wooden post, with a pulley attachment, stood behind where we rested, probably fitted there for hauling up heavy bales of cotton. Creeping back, I wound the slack of the rope about its base, drawing it as tight as possible, and then placed the end in the hands of the observant and wondering priest, who continued to creep after me like a shadow.

“Now all I expect of you is to hold hard on this rope until I get across on to the spar,” I whispered. “When I give three distinct jerks on the cord, then let loose of your end; but drop it slowly, mind you, *pere*, so I can draw it in without noise. You had better creep to the edge of the roof with it before you release your hold. Do you understand?”

He nodded silently, his eyes gazing unwaveringly into mine. I held forth my hand to him, moved by the sudden impulse of such a movement. As he gave me his own in response it felt as cold as ice, yet I marked his grip was strong.

“As soon as I coil in the rope you had better creep down and go home,” I explained, speaking slowly, for somehow I felt it strangely hard to part with this last tie between the present and the uncertain future. “You can be no further use to me; Madame will be anxious to hear your report, while it might prove exceedingly awkward for one of your cloth to be trapped here after this night’s work is discovered by the Dons. So now good-bye; you are a man of nerve, even if you are a priest, and I am glad to have been comrade with you.”

Page 39

I heard him answer something as I slowly crept down to the edge, testing again the feel of the rope before venturing to swing off upon it. I was not unaccustomed to those adventures incident to rough life on the frontier; my nerves were not easily jarred by strange experiences, yet I hold it no pleasant sensation to swing out on a thirty-foot line at that height, amid utter darkness, especially when you feel uncertain as to its secure fastening at the farther end. Moreover, the priest's robe hampered my movements sadly, while, being no light-weight, the strands of the small cord cut my hands. I durst not hurry, but took the passage inch by inch, gritting my teeth as I hung suspended above the abyss, lest I might emit a cry. In truth I thought my arms would pull out of the sockets before I finally came alongside the spar. Yet, thanks be to God, the rope held nobly, though it required every pound of remaining strength to haul my dangling body up, that I could rest across the wood before I felt after the standing rope beneath. I clung there weak as a child, trembling like a frightened woman, the cold perspiration standing in drops upon my face.

I have been in far happier situations than that—lying bent nearly double across the yard of an enemy's ship on a black night, but at the moment, so sincerely rejoiced was I to be off that sagging rope, I felt like humming a tune. Yet I contented myself with sliding along the smooth spar until I discovered a firm strand of rope beneath my feet, ventured then to stand upright, and clung for support to the cloth of the sail. At last I gave our signal, and, as the line slackened to my hand, drew it cautiously in, coiling it as it came, until all was once again in my possession. Waiting a moment, to give the *pere* opportunity to begin his retreat, I undid the noose yet wound about the small end of the spar, and, with much care, feeling my uncertain way through the darkness, worked myself slowly along, inward bound toward the mast. Finally, close beside it I again made fast the end of my cord, lowering it, paying out the long coil inch by inch, until I felt convinced from its limpness it must extend to the deck.

I acknowledge it was several minutes before I mustered sufficient courage to slip down into that intense blackness. It was not so much fear of men which deterred me, but the oppressive silence, the mystery of what awaited me below, rested heavily upon the nerves, binding me to the spar, intently gazing and listening for either sight or sound. It was recollection of that last, trustful look within the dark eyes of Eloise which finally aroused me to action. Muttering an imprecation upon my faint-heartedness, I instantly swung off on to the dangling rope, slipping silently downward through the shadows to meet whatsoever fate might lurk below.

Page 40

It was a confused tangle of ropes I was compelled to traverse, yet none greatly interfered with my progress, except to render it slower, and the consequent strain harder upon the arms. The huge foremast, close against which I swung, grew bulkier as I descended. Suddenly my feet touched the solid deck. I discovered myself between the foremast and the rail, so dropping upon hands and knees I crept silently around, hoping thus to gain clearer view forward. As I circled the vast butt of the mast I came suddenly face to face with the friar, sitting upon the deck and blinking at me with drunken gravity.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROLE OF PERE CASSATI

I have no knowledge as to what the surprised priest thought regarding the astounding apparition thus bursting upon him. Perchance he mistook me for the ghost of some ancient Father Superior visiting him in warning of his sins. However, I permitted him small space for any reflection. I have ever been swift in action; was awake then with the excitement of my venture, and little accustomed to hesitancy at such a time. Moreover, I despised the fellow, and was not loath to be the instrument of punishment to him, and I never struck any man a deadlier blow with the bare fist than that I put in just back of his ear. My posture was not the best for such exercise; nevertheless it permitted me to do the work, and he went over without word or groan, even as I have seen a buck fall to the rifle when the ball sang straight to the heart.

Indeed, so limp did he drop upon his side, with not a sigh to relieve the sickening impression, I feared at first I had killed him—for it is a wicked blow, such as has caused death more than once. I was reassured, however, by listening intently at his heart, and, not knowing how soon he might revive in the cool night air, took precautions to keep him dumb before venturing to leave him huddled against the butt of the great mast, and proceed forth on my own mission.

To lower the long gray skirt of my monk's robe until it touched the deck planks, loosening as I did so the hunting knife securely hidden within my waist-belt, and to draw up the coarse, ample hood, thus better to conceal my features, after the same manner I was pleased to note Cassati wore his, were my first duties. The way of procedure had been made clear; fate had seemingly solved that problem. My sole prospect of attaining the guarded space between decks, of reaching the cell of the man I sought, lay in careful impersonation of the drunken French priest, now lying insensible at my feet. Nor in this imposture did I anticipate serious difficulty. Everything thus far had developed so favorably I became hopeful of the outcome—the inspiration of success brought with it renewed courage and confidence. The exciting incidents of the night had awakened me to the humor of the venture, and I smiled grimly at the rare conceit of the contemplated

Page 41

masquerade. Nor did it promise an especially difficult part to play. We were of similar size, broad-shouldered, stocky men, with smoothly shaven faces, the difference therein hardly likely to be observed by careless eyes, beneath dimly burning lights. I knew enough regarding his peculiarities of voice and manner to imitate both fairly well, so only an accident, or some careless slip of the tongue, would be apt to reveal the fraud. In short, I was armed with audacity, doubting little that I should safely pass the guards. Anyway, there was nothing else for it; 'twas a moment when one must cast timidity to the winds.

Yet I found it difficult to essay the first step in so desperate an enterprise. For several moments I waited, hanging back within the shadow of the mast, gathering my wits together for the chances of the play, while endeavoring to pick out details of the situation along those silent, gloomy decks. Owing to the mass of over-hanging cordage and the high wooden bulwarks on either side, the night appeared even darker than when I was above, perched on the dizzy yard. Occasionally some deeper shadow, or the noise of voice or footfall, made apparent to me the life on board. Toward the stern that steady tramping back and forth of the officer on watch continued uninterrupted, as he paced steadily from rail to rail. I could even distinguish the dim outlines of his lower limbs as he passed and repassed before the single gleaming point of light on board. I was also assured as to a group of seamen forward, hard against a steeper rise of the deck; once I heard the officer aft call out some unintelligible order, when one of the group detached himself from among those others and passed along the opposite side of the mast from where I lay, yet so close I could have touched him with extended hand. I felt convinced a sentinel stood beside the hatch, and imagined I could distinguish the faint outlines of another farther back, near the rail. Trusting to avoid interference from this latter soldier,—for I sought no risk of accident which might be escaped,—I crept around upon the opposite side of the deck from where I had been crouching so long. Getting my new bearings as well as possible amid such confusing darkness, I finally set my teeth to it, rose, and bore directly down upon the hatchway, lurching somewhat heavily and unsteadily upon my feet.

Whatever vestige of doubt lingered as to the nature of my reception on board the "Santa Maria" was quickly out to rest. In return there came to me, from that first experience, a measure of confidence in my assumed character that enabled me to impersonate my drunken priestly predecessor with a degree of cool perfection that surprised myself. Faith, 't is always so; life is like the teetering-board of children, ever up or down. Evidently the father in his night migrations had passed that way before, as the sentry—-he appeared a burly fellow in the gloom,—after making certain as to the identity of his unsteady visitor, asked no unpleasant questions, merely contenting himself with gruff, good-natured warning to the *padre* to be more careful this time and not fall down the ladder.

Page 42

“Holy saints!” he added soothingly, “your worship’s head must be ringing yet with the blow it got.”

To this uncharitable remark I maintained dignified silence, and, flinging my somewhat uncertain limbs over the coamings, went scrambling down, leaving him to his solitary meditations.

There was no light burning in the big square room below, merely a faint yellow reflection stealing forth from that passageway leading aft. For this blessing of Providence I was profoundly thankful. A good half-dozen of the night guard, wearing similar uniform with those I had met on duty during the afternoon, were idly lounging about the butt of the mainmast, evidently awaiting turn on sentry post, and ready enough to welcome any diversion chancing their way which would help to break the dull tedium of the night. I observed likewise, as I made a drunken pause at the foot of the ladder in an apparently vain endeavor to steady myself, that these roisterers of the night-watch were a set of jolly dogs, and had been opening numerous bottles of red wine with which to pass lagging hours more pleasantly. They were already in that gay, thoughtless spirit of badinage which comes of fair allowance. Good humor had laid careless hand on duty, until, the stern restraint of discipline noticeably relaxing, good fellowship had become king. Their officer lay outstretched at full length upon three camp stools, a fellow long of limb, with face as dark as a Moor. He made no effort to arise from his undignified position, yet hailed me as though I had been a boon companion of his revel.

“Ha!” he exclaimed gleefully, tapping as he spoke an empty glass against the deck. “Comrades, ’t is as I prophesied; we are not long robbed of the Church. See, the most reverend Father hath already returned unto his own. Truly art thou welcome, *padre*, for I fear thy flock were about to go astray without a shepherd. Ho, Alva! seest thou not the coming of thine own liege lord? or art thou already so blinded by good liquor thou would’st dare neglect the very Pope himself, did he honor us with his company? Alva, I say, you roistering hound, you drunken blade, bring hither a stool for the worthy confessor! Faith! doth he not bear the sins of us all, and must he not be greatly aweary with so vast a load. Saint Theresa! ’t is fortunate there is yet a bottle left uncracked for the good *padre*!” I gathered the heavy hood closer about my face, so as better to muffle voice as well as conceal features; made an apparent effort to stand firm, but with such poor success I noticed the grins expand on the faces watching me.

Page 43

“Peace, my son,” I hiccoughed, with an assumption of drunken gravity, uplifting my disengaged arm as if in priestly benediction of the impious crew. “Tempt me not to turn aside from the solemn path of duty by offerings of that foul fiend which doth so corrupt and despoil men. Know you, I am now on my way to perform the sweet offices of our most holy religion, and need greatly to permit my mind to dwell in peace upon more soulful things than that which lieth in the wine pot. You are mere beasts of the field, sons of Belial, children of wrath, every one of you, doomed to death, even as it is written, ’He that taketh the sword shall perish by the sword.’ Laugh, will you, you drunken scum of the sea!” I shouted, glaring about savagely on the grimacing faces. “’T is truth out of Holy Writ I speak, but I waste the precious word in such company—’t is casting pearls before swine—for there be none here who comprehend the things of the Spirit.”

“The spirit say you, *padre*?” interrupted the officer, evidently in rare good humor. “*Bastinade*! thou doest wrong to all this worshipful company by so grievous a slur. The spirit we know right well, although I confess thou art ever a full bottle in advance of the most of us.”

I cast upon him a withering glance of scorn as rebuke to his unseemly levity, venturing to lurch a step nearer.

“Hush such vain and impious speech, thou man of war,” I commanded thickly, indignation apparent even through my drunkenness. “Thou makest mock of the sacred teachings of Holy Church, and art from henceforth accursed by virtue of my office. I pause here, holding converse no longer with such mocking tongue, nor linger in presence of this blasphemous crew. There resteth upon me the eternal destiny of a human, unshriven soul, and I bid thee permit my passage; ’t is the final night of earth for some upon this ship, and I have until now neglected to perform my priestly duty with one of the condemned. ’T is upon this holy mission I would pass thee now.”

“I truly think, *padre*,” exclaimed one of the group, with a careless laugh, “if you had another drink of red wine beneath your cassock you could never tell a prayer from a song; so for the sake of those poor devils yonder we ought to pass you this time without demanding toll.”

“To whom do you go at such unseemly hour with ghostly consolations?” inquired the Commandant, negligently rolling a cigarette between his long fingers, and resting back his head in supreme content.

“I give absolution unto De Noyan.” In spite of my utmost endeavors my voice trembled mentioning the name. I watched the fellow’s face narrowly, yet read nothing save reckless indifference.

“Ah! the gay Chevalier. Faith, I doubt not he hath grave need of thee and thy paternosters ere he find peace. Yet surely, *padre*, ’twas with him you were this very afternoon, while I was on guard before. I marvel greatly he should care for your company so much. Saints, he seems scarcely of the kidney to take kindly to so many prayers.”

Page 44

I felt a chill sweep across me even at this slight check. Had I dared too much? Had I ventured too far? I knew not, yet spoke my next words boldly, realizing that any retreat now would be impossible.

“Thou knowest little of men at such a moment; even careless hearts learn fear of God as they face the end. Holy Mother! but ’t would even pale your black face, and put a stopper on that ribald tongue, were grim Death stalking at your very heels. You may smile now, making reckless mock of the sacraments, but that hour will come when you will be as a child at the knee of Mother Church. Ay, I was with the Chevalier to-day; ’twas the coming of that negro huckster which took me from his side before, and I seek now to complete the gracious work which then had well begun. Surely thou wilt not stand between a dying man and his last confession!”

“Nay; not I. Let the poor devil have his chance, as may the good Lord grant me mine. But, *padre*, I have only just returned from my last round among the prisoners, and am greatly wearied, nor will I journey that way again with you. In truth, ’tis all I can well do to guide my own footsteps, without helping along a priest of thy weight. So here, *padre*, take the key, and, mind ye, have it safely back in my hands before the ship’s bell soundeth the half hour.”

Hastily snatching the bit of iron he flung rattling on the deck at my feet, I paused merely long enough to favor the company with parting admonition on their probable future. Then, glad enough to be thus easily rid of them, I lurched heavily forward into the narrow passageway. Some coarse joke launched at my expense attracted the attention of those behindhand speeded me onward.

My heart throbbed in anxious anticipation of what unknown trial was at hand. Such rare fortune as had thus far attended my efforts, seemed too remarkable to endure; nor was it impossible that, through some unforeseen mischance, the cup of success might yet be stricken from my very lips. So far at least I had made no mistake; evidently this Pere Cassati was “hail fellow, well met” among these riotous guards aboard the “Santa Maria,” and I had played the part to their complete undoing. But now I was facing a new experience, and stiffened myself to meet it boldly, uncertain still what trick fate might have in store.

The sentinel, whom I discovered facing forward, hardly more than two paces from that door having the figures “18” painted upon it, quickly lowered his gun as I lurched unsteadily into sight. Greatly to my relief, as soon as he obtained distinct view of his unexpected visitor, he returned the piece carelessly to his shoulder, and leaned back, his elbow against the arm-rack. He was a good-natured-looking fellow, with round, boyish face, upon which streamed the full glare of a swinging-lamp suspended from a chain fastened to an upper beam. His unsuspicious appearance served greatly to reassure me.

Page 45

“I give thee peace of Holy Church, my son,” I muttered solemnly, leaning heavily against the jamb of the door, uplifting my hand in benediction. “May the presence of the Mother and Child guard thee in time of battle.”

The face of the young soldier grew sober, and he withdrew one hand from its grasp on the shining musket piously to make the sign of the cross.

“I thank thee, *padre*, for thy blessing,” he returned gratefully. “It will be in accord with the prayers of those I left at home in Spain.”

Whether or not guards on duty in the corridor had orders to pass the father unquestioned, this lad, at least, made no effort to prevent my inserting the great iron key within the lock of the door. Doubtless my possession of it was accepted as evidence of my right to its use; anyway he remained there in that same careless posture, a pleased smile on his face, watching me curiously. The heavy nail-studded door swung noiselessly ajar; with single questioning glance backward at the motionless sentry, I stepped within, closed it behind me, and stood, my heart throbbing fiercely, face to face with her husband—the man to whom had been given the woman I loved,—Chevalier Charles de Noyan, condemned to die at sunrise.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHEVALIER DE NOYAN

It seems strange any man should deliberately venture life for one he had never seen; one whom, moreover, he hated with an intensity of passion seldom experienced between man and man. I have not been of revengeful disposition, nor often indulged in grave personal dislike, yet it would be wrong in this simple narrative for me to attempt concealment of my own impulses. So it is impossible to deny that, from the first moment when she called Charles de Noyan husband, I felt toward him a degree of animosity deeper than I had before supposed it possible for me to entertain relative to any human being. It was bitter memory of the past, a belief that I had once won the heart of this fair girl, only to be balked of reward by spectral hands of religion, which swayed me thus strongly. To my thought this stranger was one who had purchased, from priests at the altar, what was mine by divine decree; what would remain mine forever from the mandate of love unchangeable, eternally sealed by higher power than any priestly ritual.

Yet I had already passed through a day and night of intense excitement, of grave peril, endeavoring to preserve the life of this man whom I would more gladly see die than any one I ever knew. I stood now in the open jaws of my own destruction, where the slightest false movement, or ill-judged word, upon his part or my own, must mean betrayal; where an awakening of suspicion in the simple mind of the sentry without, or of

his captain in the corridor; the return to consciousness, or chance discovery, of the bound priest upon the upper deck, would ruin every hope, sentencing me to a fate no less speedy or certain than that which now awaited him I sought to serve. All this had I risked that I might aid in the escape of the one and only man in all the wide world who stood between me and the woman I loved.

Page 46

It was an odd position, a heartless caprice of fate. I felt the full measure of its strangeness, yet the thought never occurred to me of shrinking back from duty, nor slightest dream of realizing a personal victory through any act of baseness. I was not there for his sake, or my own, but to redeem my pledged word to her whose slightest wish was law, whose pleading face forever rose before me. Nevertheless, as I stood fronting him for the first time, there was little except bitter hatred in my heart—hatred which, no doubt, burned for the instant within my eyes,—but a hatred which never returned, to curse my memory, from that day unto this. I may have found much to test my patience, much to dislike about him in those weary weeks which followed, much of weakness and of fickle spirit, but naught ever gave birth anew to the deep resentment I buried there.

The room in which I found myself was long and narrow, dimly lighted by an oil lamp screwed fast into a blackened beam overhead. Along one side was the bare wall, unrelieved in its plain planking except for a small cracked mirror and a highly colored picture of the Virgin in a rude frame. Opposite, two berths were arranged one above the other, both partially concealed by a dingy red curtain extending from ceiling to floor. The only other furniture I noted in my hasty survey consisted of a rough stool chair, and a huge iron-bound, wooden sea-chest, the last so bulky as almost completely to block the narrow space between the lower berth and the opposite wall. Seated upon the stool, which was tilted back upon two legs, his shoulders resting comfortably on a pillow pressed against the wall, his long limbs extended in posture of supreme contentment and laziness, upon the chest, was the man of my desperate search, the gallant soldier of France, the leader of rebellion, condemned to die before the rifles within four short hours.

I have never greatly feared death, have witnessed it often and in many hideous forms, yet always believed it would test my nerves to the uttermost to face it as a certainty under guard of enemies. Yet here was one, young in years, strong of limb, vigorous of hope, with all the joy of life just opening before him; a man of wealth, of fashion, and of ease, who was seemingly awaiting the inevitable hour of his doom with as calm indifference as if it meant no more than the pleasant summons to a Creole ball. With one glance I made a mental picture of him—a young, high-bred face, marred somewhat by dissipation and late hours, yet beneath that dim light appearing almost boyishly fresh, and bearing upon its every feature the plain impress of reckless humor, and indolent content. It was the face of a youth rather than a man; of one more accustomed to looking upon gay companions at the club than on the horrors of a battlefield; one who could justly be expected to boast of fair conquests, yet who might prove somewhat slow at drawing sword to front a warrior of mettle, unless his blood were heated with wine.

Page 47

Such were my first impressions, until I noted a certain manliness imparted thereto by the heavy moustaches adorning the upper lip, almost yellow in color, curled sharply upward, so heavily waxed at the ends as nearly to reach the ears, or rather to lose themselves amid the luxuriant growth of hair. This latter, of the same unusual tinge, swept low over the shoulders, and was trimmed squarely across the forehead according to a fashion then prevalent among young French cavaliers. His dress was not a uniform, but that of the latest mode in the province, somewhat exaggerated, I thought, as to length of the bronze shoes and glaring color of the waistcoat. All these details I noted, as he turned somewhat indolently in my direction, calmly flipping the ash from off a cigarette, and permitting a spiral of thin blue smoke to curl slowly upward from his lips into the air.

“So it is you, you miserable, drunken reprobate!” he exclaimed, a touch of temper tingling in a voice I felt must naturally be soft and low. “Have you dared come back to pester me with your abominable consolations? Sacre! did I not bid you this afternoon to let me alone? I care nothing for your tipsy paternosters. Faith, man, it will be pleasanter to face that firing squad to-morrow than your drunken prayers to-night. Come, get out of the room before I lay unregenerate hands upon your shaven poll. I am but giving you fair warning, priest, for I am quick of blow when my blood is heated, nor care I greatly for the curses of Mother Church.”

I stepped quickly forward, coming as directly before him as the great sea-chest would permit, fearful lest his loud words might be distinguishable beyond the closed door. Then, with silent gesture of warning, I flung aside the heavy cowl which had concealed my features.

“You, I presume, are Charles de Noyan,” I said gravely. “I am not Father Cassati, nor drunken priest of any Order of Holy Church.”

The prisoner was thoroughly astounded. This I could perceive by the sudden gleam leaping into his eyes, but that he retained marvellous control over every muscle was abundantly proven by the fact that no change of attitude, or of voice, gave slightest evidence of emotion.

“Well, Mother of God preserve me!” he exclaimed, with a short, reckless laugh. “’Tis some small comfort to know even that much. Yet may I politely inquire who the devil you are, to invade thus coolly the bedchamber of a gentleman, without so much as asking leave, at this unholy hour of the morning? *Pardieu*, man, are you aware that this is the last night on earth I have?”

He was staring at me through blue rings of tobacco smoke, very much as one might observe some peculiar animal seen for the first time.

“Had it been otherwise you might rest assured I should never have troubled you,” I replied, some constraint in my voice, his boyish bravado of speech rasping harshly upon my nerves. “But time presses, Chevalier; there remains small space for useless exchange of compliment, nor does indifference appear becoming to those in such grave peril as you and I.”

Page 48

"*Sacre*! are you also one of us? Surely, I have no recollection of your face."

"I am one in so far as I now face the same fate at the hands of the Spaniards, although, it is true, I had no part in your uprising. I am not of your race."

He laughed easily, passing one slender, white hand carelessly through his long hair.

"Pah! you scarcely need tell me that, for the taste of the French tongue seems ill-suited to your lips. Yet I would have you speak out more plainly! I play not easily into the hands of strangers."

"Why not? You could hardly be worse off than you are now."

"*Pardieu*! you are not so far wrong in your philosophy, friend. Still I stick to my text, and if you care to hold further speech with me it will be well to declare yourself. I have ever been a bit careful as to my associates."

"It makes small odds, Chevalier, who I am; nor will it greatly aid you to learn my name, which is plain Geoffrey Benteen, without even a handle of any kind to it, nor repute, save that of an honest hunter along the upper river. I say who I am makes small odds, for I come not with application for membership into your social circle, nor with card of introduction from some mutual friend."

His expressive eyebrows uplifted in surprise.

"Then, Monsieur, pray relieve my natural curiosity, and tell me why I am thus honored by your presence?"

"To aid your escape from this hole, God willing. That is, provided you rouse up from lethargy, and bear your part as becomes a man."

I spoke with heat, for his indifference irritated me; yet I failed to note that my words made the slightest impression on him, for I did merely mark a slight shrugging of the shoulders, while he crossed his legs more comfortably, rolling some fresh tobacco, before he took trouble to reply.

"You are evidently of a choleric temper, friend Benteen. Great Heavens, what names have you English!" he exclaimed. "And you need greatly to practise better control over yourself, as such weakness is apt to lead one into just such scrapes as this of ours. *Sacre*! it hath been my failing also, otherwise would I now be a fat Major of the Line instead of a poor devil condemned to the volley, for no worse crime than an over-hot head. But seriously, Monsieur, and I am truly of a most grave disposition, it is not so easy to accomplish that which you propose with so glib a tongue. Imagine you I have lain here, under tender Spanish care, all these weeks, where, as I do most solemnly affirm, not so much as a glass of decent wine has found way down my throat, nor have I

possessed a bit of pomade for the proper arrangement of my locks—which will account for their present dishevelment—Saint Cecilia! but that moon-faced Moor who commands the guard merely laughed at me when I did request a comb;—think you, I say, I have been through all this without calculating

Page 49

chances for escape? But, *pardieu*! what use? A man of sense will not dream such fool dreams. This I know, there are three sentries yonder in the passageway, a good dozen more under arms in the guard-room beyond, with still others vigilantly pacing the deck above. What use, I say, for did not poor Villere try it, and, before he had covered twenty feet, had three bullets in his brain? Nay, Master Benteen, to endeavor running such a gantlet would only give me my fill of Spanish lead before the hour set, which, they tell me, comes with the sunrise."

He arose languidly to his feet, paused a moment in front of the cracked mirror to recurl his long moustaches, and then, turning about, extended a white hand toward me, smiling pleasantly as he did so.

"Faith, I fear I shall not look my best when it is all over, but if so it will be the fault of the Dons—they seem most careless as to requirements of the toilet. Yet I would not have you deem me ungrateful, and I thank you heartily, Monsieur. But if it be my turn to die, and I doubt it not,—for who ever heard of mercy in the black heart of a Spaniard?—then it is best I front it as becomes a gentleman of France, not with a bullet in my back, as though I fled from fate with the faint heart of a coward. Nay, good friend, if death is to be my portion, I prefer meeting it with a smile, and thus prove, at the ending, worthy of my race."

There was a certain dignified manliness in his speech and manner which for the moment caused me to doubt my earlier reading of his character. There might be steel beneath the velvet glove of this fair courtier.

"Do you mean you deliberately choose to remain here, rather than accept the chance I offer you?"

"Sacre! I have as yet heard of no chance," he replied easily, sinking indolently back into his old seat against the wall. "I shall be fairly comfortable here for the while, though I must say I have used a better grade of tobacco than this furnished me."

For the moment I was in despair as to the outcome of my mission, nor did I accept the proffered hand of the prisoner. Here was a totally different order of man from what had ever come my way before, nor did I know how best to meet him. How much of his vain and reckless speech came from the heart, and how much of it was merely a mask with which to test my purpose, I could not determine, yet I remained resolute regarding my own duty, and accordingly sat coolly down upon the chest, determined to play out his own game with him to the bitter end.

"Quite true, Chevalier," I said, smiling pleasantly, as if I entered fully into his reckless spirit. "Doubtless you are right—needs must when the devil drives. Could you spare

me a morsel of that same tobacco, until I test the quality of which you complain?" I produced a pipe from the recesses of my monk's habit, knocking the ashes out carelessly against the chest.

Page 50

He passed over his pouch in silence.

“When one resteth between His Satanic Majesty and the deep sea it makes small odds at the best which direction he turns. It becomes merely a matter of taste. Death,” I continued musingly as I deliberately rammed home a charge into the bowl, “must be about the same to one man as to another, except for matter of temperament; so if you can afford to sit here and welcome its coming, so can I.”

“Do you mean you are sufficiently crazy to remain deliberately and die with me?”

“Certainly. I pledged your devoted wife I would rescue you, or never return alive myself. As you stubbornly refuse to listen to reason, this seems to be all that is left me. Opinions might differ as to which was crazed, but as to that we will probably neither of us ever know. May I trouble you for a light?”

I leaned forward, coolly helping myself to the burning cigarette he held forth doubtingly between his fingers, and, puffing vigorously, silently resumed my seat.

“My wife, say you?” A fresh interest appeared to sweep over him at the word, overcoming his indifference. “Did Eloise de Noyan send you here seeking to succor me?”

“It was at her request I came; at her wish I stay,” I answered firmly.

“You knew her?”

“Several years since, when she was scarcely more than a girl; yet she retained sufficient faith to call upon me in extremity.”

He sat staring at me as if he would like to question further.

“The Lord love us, you are a cool fish,” he finally exclaimed, bringing his hand down upon his knee, and speaking with fresh animation in his soft voice. “What is more, I rather like you. So Eloise really wishes me to desert the Dons? Queer choice that, for she would make a lovely widow. Oh, well, what’s the odds? ’Tis only the question of a ball in the back to-night, or a ball in the front to-morrow. If you chance to have a tuck ready for my hand, friend, I ’ll try a dash at the deck just for the sport of it.”

I shook my head emphatically.

“We will attempt passage without flashing of weapons, or not at all. I grant a quick stroke might win us the open, yet would only serve to rouse the ship; neither of us would ever lift head above the river surface without a bullet in the brain.”

“It is the only way fit for a gentleman.”

“Confound your gentlemen!” I cried, now thoroughly aroused at this ill-chosen trifling with time. “Either you do as I bid you, or else we settle down without any more ado, to wait the file to-morrow. How often does the Commandant look in?”

“On the stroke of the ship’s bell.”

“Then, Monsieur, the sooner you arrive at some decision the better. If indifference is your game, I play it out with you to the end.” As I spoke I leaned carelessly back against the lower bunk, puffing away at my pipe to get it fairly alight once more.

Page 51

I could note from the corner of my eye he was watching me closely, and with no slight degree of aroused interest, but I would have rested there without further speech until the guard came, had he not first broken silence.

“And she sent you?”

“So I said.”

“To me, not Lafreniere, her father?”

“There was a possible chance to save one, not two.”

“*Sacre*! yes, I understand that; yet it doth puzzle me why she should have chosen as she did. Know you just why it was De Noyan instead of Lafreniere?”

“Madame selected me for action, not advice,” I answered shortly, now thoroughly tired of his questioning. “Lafreniere, I understood, positively refused opportunity to escape, from scruples of conscience. Besides, the father must be near the end of his days, while you were yet young, with long life before you. No doubt this also had weight with her decision. As for myself I sincerely wish it might have been some other, so I could have brought my aid to a man of sense.”

He rose up, shrugging his shoulders.

“You are not especially choice in speech, yet your purpose harmonizes somewhat with my present humor. I will risk the effort; so now tell me your plan?”

I permitted no sign of pleasure at his decision to appear in my face.

“I did intend dressing you in this cassock so you might play priest, and slip safely past the guard beneath its gray cover,” I said quietly. “I purposed remaining behind, arranging for myself as best I might; but now that we have met, to be perfectly frank about it, I retain no confidence in your discretion which will warrant the risk. I therefore decide we had better abide together until this venture be done.”

He smiled, apparently in rare good humor at my words.

“No doubt it will prove best, my friend. Your wider knowledge should supplement my boyish enthusiasm,” he responded with mocking bow. “I rather suspect, from outward appearance, you may be some years my junior, yet in life experience I readily yield you the palm. So lead on, most noble Captain; from henceforth command me as your devoted follower. And now, your excellency, I trust you will pardon if I venture the inquiry, what would you have your humble servant do?”

I permitted him to ramble along as he pleased. Now I had won his pledge I cared little for the nature of his raillery. While he talked I flung open the great chest upon which I had been sitting, and discovering it packed with clothing, hastily dragged the various articles forth, flinging them into the lower berth, covering the pile with blankets in such a manner that they resembled the sleeping figure of a man. Then I turned toward him.

“My first order, Monsieur, is that you get in here.”

“*Sacre*! not I—”

There came a quick, firm footstep sounding along the passageway without; then a hand fell heavily upon the latch of the door.

Page 52

CHAPTER VIII

FAVORED OF THE GODS

It seemed as if my heart must choke me at sound of those steady footsteps approaching down the passageway. I heard the sharp click of a gun-barrel in the sentry's hand as he presented arms, then the noise of the uplifting latch, yet remained so paralyzed by the suddenness of it as to be fairly helpless, unable to move from my position. De Noyan merely smiled lazily, as though this new act formed part of the play, beginning calmly to roll another cigarette.

"The devil came likewise," he murmured lightly, sinking back upon his stool. "Begin your paternosters, friend Benteen, or he will fly away with both of us."

Fortunately these mocking words brought me to my senses quickly enough to permit dropping upon my knees with back to the door before it swung wide open. Nor did I trust myself to do aught save mumble inarticulate and mongrel Latin, until it had been safely closed again. Had I sought to exercise my wits on this occasion, my companion permitted small opportunity for words.

"Ah! so it is you, you black-faced Arab?" he exclaimed sneeringly, as the Commandant of the guard peered curiously in. "Not content to wait the striking of the ship's bell, you must even interrupt my prayers. Nice treatment of a gentleman his last night on earth, to push yourself in between him and the consolations of the holy father. *Sacre*! had I only a small sword at my side I would write a message across your black Spanish heart which would teach your master how to guard a French cavalier safely, and still be decent about it."

It is doubtful whether the officer comprehended this tirade. It was voiced in French, yet tone and manner must have conveyed much of its import, for I distinguished a muttered word or so regarding the unpleasant duty of a soldier, and the length of time the priest had retained the key, ere the intruder finally backed out closing the door behind him. I clung to my knees, however, until his retreating footsteps had died entirely away in the distance; even until De Noyan addressed me again in his exasperating drawl.

"So, Father, you must now realize, if never before, how highly I value your ministrations. Faith! never until this hour have I truly enjoyed the prayers of any *padre*; I knew not what I missed. Still there is limit even to such pleasure, and it is time now to conclude; I have heard better Latin in my day, while your provincial accent rasps painfully upon the ears."

"You made your play quite well, Monsieur," I said shortly, somewhat mortified he should thus take the leadership out of my hands at the first symptom of danger. "But there

must be something besides play-acting for us to-night if we get free of this ship. So come now; do you get into the box?”

He looked down at it doubtfully, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Page 53

"*Pardieu*! I would ask certain questions first," he said with greater show of seriousness. "For how long a time? for what sort of a passage? It will prove somewhat cramped, I take it, for a man of my length of limb."

"I hope both may prove short," I returned, continuing to hold up the lid for him to enter. "Yet I know of no other possible means whereby you can leave this room without being halted by the guard at the door. There is no certainty in this, yet there is a chance, Chevalier, and that ought always to be invitation to a brave man. Beyond this it is God's affair."

The soldier twisted his long moustaches reflectively, a new light gleaming in the eyes that fronted me.

"*Sacre*, man!" he said at last stepping forward in sudden resolution. "As you say it may be worth trying, but it's not unlike climbing into a coffin three sizes too small for the deceased. Still I 'll bide therein for a while, only, I warn you, you better be easy when you put me down, or the corpse may furnish a sudden resurrection."

It proved truly no easy task to stow him safely in that contracted space. At any other time I should have laughed outright, marking the final result of our combined efforts, especially at the expression, half ludicrous, half pathetic, upon his face as he gazed up at me just before the lid was closed.

"Now mind, Chevalier," I said gravely, for had I ventured upon a smile at his predicament he would have popped instantly forth again, "you are to make no movement of any kind until left alone. When certain of that you may venture out of the chest, but remain quiet until you hear from me again."

[Illustration: Had I ventured upon a smile at his predicament he would have popped instantly forth again.]

"You believe you know a way?"

"Under God's guidance yes, if you will only bear your part."

Without pausing for his answer I dropped the heavy cover over him, and gave vent to a sigh of relief.

So far, at least I had won; thus far the gods had favored me. In spite of the obstacle of temperament I had found means to attain my end, to work my will, yet I realized well De Noyan would never bear such uncomfortable posture long; whatever was to be accomplished must be done quickly. Fortunately my plan, dim and doubtful as it was, had already taken outline. I had determined what to endeavor; it must be attempted at once, with bold heart, or the opportunity would be gone forever. Pulling the hood across

my face, I partially opened the door, glancing out upon the curious sentry. To my relief he was alone.

“I suppose the Commandant told you to give me a lift out with this box?” I asked in Spanish.

“No, senor *padre*.”

The man was exceedingly good-natured, evidently one who had profound respect for the cloth.

“*Caramba*!” I growled angrily, using the Spanish tongue so he might not miss my meaning. “He promised it only a moment ago, when he looked in. He must have forgotten. There is no sense in having such a great chest lumbering up the entire room. Know you how it ever came there?”

Page 54

“It was the senor Lieutenant’s state-room, *padre*, before the prisoners were brought aboard. I think it might be his sea-chest.”

“Well, the Commandant said it could be removed, so out it goes. It leaves no space for us to kneel in prayer.”

I bent down as I spoke, exerting all my strength, and succeeded in dragging the heavy, iron-bound chest forward, across the threshold. My heart beat fiercely in misgiving lest the guard might feel moved to interfere, but he never stirred; merely gazed at my movements in stolid wonder. Concealing from him all the interior possible with my body, I spoke a brief word of farewell to the prisoner, supposed to be safely within, then closed and locked the door.

“Here,” I said authoratively, my cheeks flushed with delight at so successful an issue, “lay hold on one end of this, and give me a lift.”

Obligingly, and apparently without a moment’s reflection as to his duty, the soldier, young in years and doubtless a new recruit, leaned his gun against the mast, bending down with hand upon the rope handle.

“Where to, senor *padre*?”

“The Commandant said it might be placed in the store-room. ’Twill stow away safely enough there, and bother nobody. Know you where that is?”

“Ay; only a step this way.”

“Lead on then, yet Saint Cecilia! it makes no light load. The Lieutenant must have kept his stock of wine within.”

I durst not venture bearing the thing farther, fearful lest we might run afoul of others of the guard who would prove more suspicious than this honest fellow, besides, all my hasty plan of escape hung now upon the faith retained, that the half-open cuddy door had direct communication with the provisions stored below. Surely they could never be loaded and unloaded by means of the distant hatch-ladder. So dull and unintelligent in the dim light appeared the face of the fellow opposite, as we strained forward beneath the weight of the chest, I ventured upon a question.

“How does the cook get out all that provender from here?”

“I know not, senor *padre*; but I think there will be opening from the store-room to the upper deck. They were at work there yesterday while I was on guard.”

By good fortune the room sought was only three doors down the passageway. As it was, my forehead was wet with perspiration for fear De Noyan would lose what little

stock of patience he possessed before we reached there, or that the Spaniard would begin to wonder at the surprising weight. Dropping the chest with good will amid the raffle littering up the floor space, we came forth together, the soldier to pick up his gun, while, mopping my face vigorously, I proceeded forth into the guard-room for the purpose of delivering up the key.

Page 55

This was a task I approached with dread. Even now some slight slip of tongue, or action, could easily ruin everything accomplished, yet I durst not omit the precaution, lest the missing key awaken suspicion and lead to immediate pursuit. Here, again, fortune played strangely into my hands, as I discovered the officer dozing in his chair, and, stepping softly, so as not to arouse him, I gladly handed that important bit of iron over to the care of one of the guard, himself too drowsy from potations to trouble me with questioning. Relieved of this duty, my heart filled with gratitude for all the mercies of the night, I betook myself up the ladder unmolested, and a moment later stood in comparative freedom upon the open deck.

I could scent the coming dawn in the fresh morning air the moment I arose through the hatch opening, yet there was no sign of it in the sky; indeed I felt there must be fog in the atmosphere, it rendered it so thick, although not sufficiently heavy to drip in moisture. It required only a moment to locate all life present along the forward deck, and I became convinced few wakeful eyes remained among them at this sleepiest of all hours of the night. Trusting to this, as well as the garb I wore for concealment, I walked boldly back as far as the mainmast, meeting no one. Then, fearful of observation from the officer still pacing the poop, I skulked stealthily along in the black shadow of the cook's galley, until I reached the cuddy door, quaking with fear lest it fail me. It opened instantly to the touch of the hand, and with heart throbbing wildly, for now all that had been accomplished hung in the balance of this last experiment, I groped about within seeking to solve the mystery of that gloomy interior. The place had the feel of a big, square box; by stretching out across the edge I could barely reach the farther side, but could touch no bottom, nor did I feel the rungs of any ladder leading down. It resembled a well, and the thought immediately took possession of me that the crew hauled up their provisions by use of ropes, yet I could discover no hoisting apparatus of any kind. With head projected far below the deck level I ventured a soft whisper into the darkness:

"Are you there, Chevalier?"

There was a slight movement beneath, as if he drew closer to where I was.

"Yes, it is all right," he returned, his voice so modulated as to be barely audible. "But I discover nothing in this darkness to aid in reaching the deck. Know you where a rope can be secured?"

"Ay; lie quiet until I return."

It was a bit ticklish, yet required doing. A trip to the foremast put in my possession quite a section of line sliced from off the rope's end previously left dangling from the upper yard. Incidentally as I passed back and forth I revisited Father Cassati, still resting easily in his bonds, but now peacefully sleeping off his earlier potations undiscovered upon the hard deck. Returning with my treasure, I payed it out into the intense blackness of the cuddy hole, and anxiously awaited developments below.

Page 56

Nor had I long to wait—there came a touch on the line followed by a firmer pull, as if the party below tested its strength. For a moment the cord wiggled about as if the man was working with his end to some purpose, then there followed three sharp jerks which I interpreted to mean to hoist away. I promptly put my full strength to it, bracing both feet firmly against a heavy cross-piece of timber, evidently nailed there for that very purpose. The rope ran over a small roller set close against the coaming, which I had failed to observe in my hasty search, so I found the strain less than expected, although a heavy weight was evidently attached to the other end. But I uplifted this, for I was vain of my strength in those days, and the distance was not so great but that shortly his hands managed to grip hold upon the deck planks, and a moment later he stood beside me, complacent and debonair as ever, in the dense shadows of the galley.

"*Sacre*! 'tis a most scurvy trick we are playing on the Dons, friend Benteen," he murmured smiling easily, while peering about him in the darkness. "And now, what is the next act in this midnight melodrama, most cautious youth?"

"The keeping of a still tongue until we are both overboard," I replied somewhat roughly. "Follow me closely, and keep quiet about it, if you retain the slightest care for your life."

It was not much of a trick, the rest of it, and within five minutes we were silently floating down the great river, through the darkness, seeking after some quiet landing-place below the fleet.

CHAPTER IX

THE BIRTH OF THE DEATH-DAWN

We durst not swim to the nearest landing, just beyond the bow of the big flag-ship we had so unceremoniously quitted, fearing our efforts to stem the current might attract the attention of some watcher on board. So permitting myself to drift silently beneath the vessel's stern, without the stir of a limb to disturb the water, I was soon well away from the great black shadow. Without a word De Noyan followed. Yet time was far too precious to permit long drifting, and at the earliest moment I dared the venture we turned aside, striking out boldly for the shore.

"We must move rapidly, Chevalier, to make up lost time," I cautioned briefly, wading out, dripping, upon the bank.

"Are the streets patrolled by the Dons?"

"Ay! although not as thoroughly as when the Spaniards first landed. We shall require to exercise caution."

"Where do you take me? There can be no safe hiding spot in New Orleans?"

“I know none. We go to the rear of a long row of tobacco sheds near the North Gate. A boat thoroughly stocked, with two oar men, awaits us.”

“I mind the place,” he said eagerly, “I outfitted there for hunting more than once. It is best for me to lead, as I know well every inch of the path, and have grown interested in the play.”

Page 57

He certainly proved his familiarity with that labyrinth of sombre streets and alleys. Selecting a devious course, stooping low beneath the black shadows of walls and fences, he yet set so swift a gait with his confounded long legs it kept me puffing to follow. But we found clear passage, seeing no one close enough to interfere with our rapid progress, while no challenge sounded, until we crept, silently as possible, around the dilapidated end of the old tobacco shed, and a black figure, scarcely distinguishable in the gloom, suddenly arose, uttering no word, yet with threatening gesture, barring further passage toward the river.

“Virginia,” I gasped, breathless from the hard run.

“Bless de Lawd, Massa Benteen,” returned a darky voice. “An’ Massa Charlie, as I ’m a sinner. I tell you, sah, we done ’bout gib you both up fo’ suah.”

“Stop talking just now, Alphonse, and lead along lively,” said De Noyan, with returning authority. “We can converse later, in surroundings more congenial.”

Another moment and we were in the boat, the Chevalier pushing it clear of the bank, then lightly clambering in over the stern.

“Benteen,” he exclaimed, panting heavily, “I confess I’m about useless from lack of wind. *Sacre*! I ’ve been housed so long I am weak as an invalid, yet I can steer the craft if you inform me where ’tis best to go.”

“Up country is our only chance,” I gasped, grasping an oar, vaguely noting a second figure huddled within the bow. “All the lower water is patrolled by the fleet, but above there are plenty of hiding places. Lay down to it hard, you black rascals; you are pulling for your lives.”

De Noyan extended his hand toward the east.

“It will be dawn in about an hour,” he said, a tone of earnestness creeping into his soft voice. “We can never pull against this stiff current so as to get any distance in that time. This east shore is flat as a board for leagues. I ’m for heading straight across. If we gain the west bank within an hour, or even two, the Devil himself would have a hard job to find us.”

“Go on,” I muttered, bending grimly to my task. “You know this country better than I. When we reach upper waters it will be my turn to guide.”

As I uttered these words, a bit impatiently, there sounded a quick step on the low bank at our right. A sharp voice cleaved the darkness.

“Halt there! Halt that boat, or I put a ball through you.”

“Sheer off lively, lads,” I whispered. “Swing her head out, Chevalier.”

There was a rush of feet down the steep embankment. Then a second voice questioned eagerly:

“What was it you saw, Sanchez?”

“Nothing, Senor; I heard voices out yonder. Listen! As the saints watch, ’t is the dip of oars.”

“Halt that boat, or we shoot!”

There followed a moment’s painful pause. An oar in our bow slipped, making an awkward splash in the water. “*Caramba*! you will not? Take aim, men—fire.”

Page 58

A jagged flash of flame cleaved the night. It lit the steep bank, flinging a bright glare across the dark waters. In that instant I saw, my face set shoreward, a dozen black figures clustered in a bunch. One ball crashed into the planking close beside my hand, hurling a splinter of wood against my face. The boat gave a sudden tremor, and, with a quick, sharp cry of pain, the negro next me leaped into the air, and went plunging overboard. I flung forth a hand in vain effort to grapple his body, yet never touched it, and everything about became black once more.

“The poor devil’s gone,” muttered De Noyan. “The rest of you lay down to your oars, before they have time to load again.”

So quickly did this occur I do not believe we lost more than a stroke or two, and were already well out into the stream, nothing except our narrow stern pointing toward the bank, where some of the soldiers—we judged from their voices—were reloading for a second volley, the others searching the shore after some boat in which to begin the pursuit. It was a hard pull, especially upon my part, as I chanced to sit on the lower side, having full sweep of the current tugging against my oar, while De Noyan headed the boat as directly as possible for the western shore. The soldiers, completely swallowed in the gloom, made no further attempt to fire; possibly, having seen the fall of the black, they believed their work done. Nor did other sounds reach us evidencing pursuit; for that moment at least we were free. It was then I watched the coming of the dawn.

There was a slight, scarcely perceptible, shading into a lighter tinge of the clinging black shadows that veiled the eastern sky, dimly revealing misty outlines of white, fleecy clouds extending above the faint horizon line, until they assumed a spectral brightness, causing me to dream of the fairies’ dwellings which my mother pictured to me in childhood. Gently the delicate awakening spread along the wider expanse of sky, which became bluish gray, gradually expanding and reflecting its glow along the water, until this also became a portion of the vast arch, while the darker borderland, now far astern, formed merely a distant shade, a background to the majestic picture. The east became gradually a lighter, more pronounced gray; rosy streaks shot upward through the cloud masses, driving them higher into an ever-deepening upper blue like a flock of frightened birds, until at last the whole eastern horizon blushed like a red rose, while above the black line of distant, shadowy trees, the blazing rim of the sun itself uplifted, casting a wide bar of dazzling gold along our wake. Gazing thus, every thought of our surroundings, our dangers, and fatigue passed from memory. Bending to the oar, my soul was far away upon a voyage of its own.

Some unusual movement served to attract attention from this day-dreaming, my eyes falling suddenly upon De Noyan. His face, turned partially away from the rising sun, was gray with anxiety, and I noted he shivered in his wet clothes. Yet his smile and speech seemed jauntily unconcerned as ever.

Page 59

“Yonder was to have been my last sunrise,” he remarked grimly, nodding backward across his shoulder. “’Tis about the hour now for those in the hands of the Dons to have their backs against the wall.”

I caught a sound as of a partially suppressed sob behind me, but before I could turn sufficiently to ascertain the cause, the Chevalier sprang past, rocking the little boat furiously, and my ears overheard that which caused me to keep my face set the other way.

“Eloise!” he exclaimed exultantly. “Are you here, little wife? Mon Dieu! I dreamed it not; yet should have known you would never leave such duty to the slaves.”

“I was simply compelled to come,” she answered, and I could mark her voice falter. “Do not be angry with me. What have I now left except you? The rising of the sun sealed my father’s fate.”

“True,” he admitted soberly, lifting his hat in grave gesture. “I feel like a condemned coward, my name a byword for the rabble, being here in such comparative safety, when, in honor, I should be lying beside my comrades.”

“Nay; say not that! You are young; much of life, of usefulness, lies before you. I knew that at the best only one destined victim might be plucked from the Spaniard’s vengeance. It was at his approval I made choice of you. My father is robbed of but few years, while you are too young to die. Somewhere—God guiding—we shall find a home again, and days of peace.”

“Ay! you were ever of brave heart, Eloise. But let us not forget we yet remain in reach of Spanish claws, and they are merciless. Go back to the tiller a while, and let me lay hold upon this oar; ’tis heavy work for such soft hands as yours. Point the course direct for the cane island—you must remember it; you were there once with me.”

I fail to recall even glancing into her face as she sat fronting me, her hands upon the tiller bar. I durst not, fearing some telltale expression within my eyes might bring her added pain. So I sat with glance downcast upon the planks, while tugging doggedly at the oar with all my strength, feeling that same sunrise had brought with it my own death warrant. So dull and heavy grew my heart with lonely weariness, I cannot guess how long we pulled before the boat’s nose ran up upon the shore, and De Noyan, springing overboard, dragged it well beyond view among the thick cane.

“We shall be safe enough here,” he exclaimed lightly, gazing about with approval. “Come, Eloise, step on this dry sand, for you must be greatly cramped from so tedious a passage.”

As I arose, the more easily to permit her passing me in the narrow space, she suddenly grasped both my hands within her own; then my eyes glanced up once more to meet hers, dark with unshed tears.

“Do not think, Geoffrey Benteen,” she said brokenly, her voice vibrating with emotion, “that I fail to realize what this means to you. Your troubled face has been a silent accuser of me this hour past. But I thank you; you have proven yourself a man, such a man as I have ever believed you to be. May the good God bless you and bring you peace.”

Page 60

“Ay!” chimed in her husband, apparently in good humor. “He’s the nerviest fellow ever I met, Eloise. *Sacre*! had you hunted this province over you could never have found one to perform better work this night. I wonder how it was you chanced upon him?”

Without venturing a word in reply to either of them, I helped her gravely over the boat’s side, within grasp of his outstretched hand, all about us the warm sunshine piercing the thick canes with golden light.

CHAPTER X

A COVERT IN THE CANE

Our boat was securely hidden amid a thick growth of reeds, which extended their domain far down the shore, even out into the river shallows. These reeds sprang quickly back into position as we pressed through, leaving no trail for pursuers to follow. Nevertheless, making all secure on board, and removing from the locker a quantity of biscuit and some smoked meat, we took the further precaution of covering the boat with rushes so as thoroughly to disguise its presence from prying eyes. Satisfied with the result of these efforts, we clambered up the slight ridge to where we found a small open space, carpeted with soft grass, and sufficiently elevated to permit our looking about above the level of the cane, while remaining concealed ourselves.

Our lodgment was upon a small island, a stream of languidly flowing water extending between us and the main west shore. This, so far as my eyes could distinguish, did not differ in appearance from our present abiding place, being composed of low, swampy land, thickly covered with a heavy growth of cane, and exhibiting no sign of human habitation. The sole break to this dull monotony of outline was a narrow fringe of trees situated farther back, where doubtless firmer soil gave spread to their roots.

Northward the eye might trace the slight curve of the bank for miles. It appeared irregular and low, slightly diversified by small, marshy islands, similar to this we occupied, possibly cloven from the mainland by some eccentricity of current. Occasionally I distinguished openings into lagoons, such passages into the low-lying mainland being evidenced by the deeper green of the vegetation bordering them, as well as by wind-twisted trees clinging despairingly to the crooked banks. East and south swept the river, so broad our eyes could barely trace the dim presence of a distant shore. Below, that majestic yellow flood poured downward unbroken, although De Noyan imagined he perceived distant spars of the Spanish fleet outlined against the blue background of the southern sky. This may have been possible, yet to my eyes all was blank, although I could mark pretty accurately where they should have been.

Page 61

We indulged in little conversation, reclining on the short grass, partaking of our cold meal. The Chevalier attempted a sorry jest or two, yet soon subsided, discovering so unresponsive an audience. It was plain to my mind the reflections of Madame were altogether with her father—lying dead before this hour—and this sad memory darkened even the delight of her husband's safety. His affected gayety of manner, and reckless speech, jarred more harshly upon her in this hour than perhaps ever before in her life. Yet she made a pathetically brave effort to appear of good cheer, managing to eat with us, although it was easy to perceive the food choked her, while her eyes were blurred with tears resolutely held in restraint. It was plain, I say, yet this is but my thought, for I question whether De Noyan, in his careless mood, observed her depression. He was of a nature reflecting slightly on any save himself; past sorrow being quickly forgotten in any present gleam of sun. As we thus ended this silent meal it occurred to me they might require slumber more than I, and I expressed my willingness to stand guard while they sought rest. Perhaps my face told a tale of weariness easily read, for this proposal met immediate resistance.

"No, no, Geoffrey Benteen," exclaimed Madame impulsively, "what have I done except sit quietly in a boat, waiting the passing of the hours? You have been through strain and labor which wears out life. It is you who will lie here upon my wrap, trusting me to call should need arise."

"Hush, both of you," impatiently burst in De Noyan, rising to his feet, and gazing across the sparkling water. "A watch would have small value. There is no safer spot on all the lower river than this; if the Dons discover it, no way of escape exists even were we all awake and ready. To remain quiet is all we can do, and how can we accomplish that better than by going to sleep? *Sacre*! I am a soldier, and not apt to make light of a guard, yet," and he stifled a yawn, "I see no necessity here, nor could I be more completely played after a night of dancing at a Creole ball."

Thus the matter was agreed upon, not altogether to my liking, but I yielded owing to too great weariness to argue. At first Madame protested she could not sleep, yet finally consented to lie down. As to myself my head had scarcely pressed the soft pillow of grass before I was lost in slumber.

A blessing of youth lies in the fact that sleep then truly gives rest. The tired body responds so thoroughly to the gentle touch of slumber that the latter becomes a magician capable of restoring every faculty to complete power. It was thus I rested motionless, and it was nearly evening before I stirred, although the sun must have been streaming directly across my upturned face for hours. I awoke to perfect consciousness of our situation, as naturally as ever in a bed at home. Dimly impressed that some unusual noise had aroused me, I immediately sat

Page 62

upright. This change of posture brought my eyes on a level with the tops of the cane on either side, and, my face being turned southward, there was outspread before me the full, broad sweep of the Mississippi, glinting under the westering sun, so that for a moment it dazzled eyes yet clogged with the heaviness of sleep. Then I perceived what afforded me so severe a shock that I ducked hastily down into my covert, every faculty instantly alert. Close in against the reeds, as though skirting the low line of the shore, loomed the black outline of a large boat.

Coming bow on toward the place of our concealment, every eye in her would naturally be scanning the spot where we lay hidden, and I durst not raise my head again until assured they had passed by. I rolled partially over to gain view of the others of our own party. Both were slumbering heavily, Eloise near the western edge of the little grass plot, wrapped within a great shawl so as to leave not even her head visible, while De Noyan rested within easy reach of my outstretched arm, breathing so heavily I felt it safer to arouse him, before that strange boat should come abreast. It required severe shaking, his sleep being that of sheer exhaustion, yet he proved sufficiently a trained soldier to obey instantly my signal for silence. Nor were words needed to explain the reason, as by this time the sound of oars was clearly audible. Suddenly some one spoke, apparently at our very side. Lying as I was I noticed the shawl pushed hastily down from Madame's face, her brown eyes gazing questioningly across into my own; yet, with rare self-control, not so much as a limb quivered.

"I tell you, *padre*, there's nothing along this cursed cane-marsh," growled a deep rumbling voice in Spanish. "It is a mere bog, in which a man would sink to his armpits, were he to venture outside the boat."

"Bog it may be," retorted a sharper, petulant voice, the sound of which was oddly familiar, "but I tell you this, Senor, 'tis on this very shore French gallants come hunting from New Orleans. There is dry land in plenty beyond the fringe of reeds."

"*Saprista*! there may be, as there may be water in Hell, but I 'll never tangle my boat amid that mass of cane to make its discovery. Let the frog-eaters have it, say I; the saints bless them. Come, pull away sharply, lads, and we'll see what the shore-line looks like above."

The sound of dipping oars instantly increased in rapidity.

"You are one pig-headed fool of an officer, Senor," snarled the sharp voice contemptuously.

"Mother of God!" roared the other, enraged. "Speak so again, you dog of a French priest, and even your gray robe will not save you from tasting the mud at the bottom.

Do you want to know what I think of you? Well, I ’ll tell you, you snivelling, drunken singer of paternosters—you did more to help that fellow escape than you ’d care to have known. Now you ’re trying to hold us back until he has time to get safely away up the river. That’s my opinion of you, you snarling gray-back, and if you dare breathe another word, I ’ll give orders to chuck you overboard.”

Page 63

“Where do you purpose going?” ventured the cowed priest, in a subdued tone.

“Straight up the stream. That’s where your cursed Frenchman has disappeared so swiftly, unless the guard at the North Gate shot him, as they swear to O’Reilly. So sit there quiet, and hold your tongue—you may command the Devil, for all I care, but I ’m in charge of this boat.”

The sound of angry controversy died away in the distance. Cautiously I lifted my eyes to the level of the cane, and peered over. The Spanish boat, a large one propelled by the vigorous sweep of twelve oars, was already a hundred yards above, swiftly stemming the current. From their gestures I judged the debate yet raged between the gray-robe crouched in the stern, and the big, burly fellow, resplendent in gold lace, standing up and urging his oarsmen to greater exertion. Within ten minutes they rounded the upper point, and when they again appeared within vision, the boat was a mere dot floating in the midst of the golden sunshine, where the setting sun gave a good-night kiss to the vast, sombre river.

De Noyan’s boyish face was aglow with unconcealed amusement as I turned toward him.

“Well, Benteen,” he asked, twirling his moustache, and staring after them, “what was it the Dons said? *Peste*! I could not make out a word of their lingo, except when the fellows swore.”

I repeated to him the conversation, and he burst into a hearty laugh.

“Indeed, a sweet-scented Frenchman, that Capuchin priest,” he said carelessly. “I wonder what has so set the drunken fool against me?”

“It is not you, Chevalier,” I acknowledged, feeling a touch of his spirit; “it is rather that lad who landed so heavily behind his ear last night, and who ran such a merry masquerade in monk’s robe as never Spanish war-ship saw before. I warrant it is I the holy father seeks so savagely. Faith, it would be pleasant to know how he got out of the pickle in which I left him. ’T is odd the Dons did not use him in your place.”

“Ay, that will be the cause, for I did nothing to anger the fellow, except it was to laugh at his prayers, with a joke at the quality of his Latin. But Dieu protect you, Monsieur, if ever he gets whip-hand. A revengeful priest is more to be feared than a rabid dog. I stirred one of his breed once at the Cathedral by some wild prank, and carry the scar of it still. But come, it becomes dusk. Let’s break our fast, and while eating consider the best plan for the night. Eloise, do you awaken refreshed?”

She came quickly forward, a smile for us both, looking dainty and sweet, although the heavy mass of brown hair appeared somewhat dishevelled from her unaccustomed pillow.

Page 64

“I must have been exceedingly tired,” she confessed pleasantly, “for I slept with never a dream, and this is my first experience of lying without the covering of a roof. It was all strange and solemn at first, with never a sound except the dismal whispering of wind through the cane, and the dull murmur of the river. The very, stillness, no doubt, lulled me to slumber. Nay!” and she sprang hastily forward, taking from my hands the few provisions I was bearing. “That is to be my part of the work, Geoffrey Benteen, not yours. You will find hard enough task before morning, while there remains so little for me that I refuse to be robbed of any rights.”

I realized, watching her prepare our scant meal, that she was bravely endeavoring to appear gay, while her heart remained heavy from memory of her father. Whether this assumed levity deceived De Noyan I cannot say—he was of a volatile nature, easily swayed by either smile or tear, and instantly joined responsive to her seeming mood. I left them thus, engaged in pleasant badinage, while seeking some spot where I might bathe my heated face. It was no small hardship to watch them thus together.

Seated upon the grass, lingering over the rude repast, we discussed our situation, seeking to outline vaguely our future plans. De Noyan was for keeping close against the western bank as we progressed northward. He had hunted amid the marshes, and remembered sufficiently the formation of the shore-line to be aware that for several leagues it remained thickly skirted by small islands, while numerous bayous offered secure hiding-places. In this choice I acquiesced, urging also that the downward flow of the current would sweep with greater force along the opposite shore; besides which the search-boat, just passing us on the way up-stream, would be more likely to return along the eastern bank.

“There is no reason,” I continued, “why we should delay departure longer. We can keep the boat beneath the shadows of the bank, and even if the Dons stop to make camp, they would hardly do so without building a fire, which would afford ample warning to sheer out into the stream. If they return along this shore—as is unlikely—we should hear the heavy strokes of their oars before they caught the sound of our lighter ones. I am for embarking at once.”

This agreed upon, within a half-hour we were pushing slow passage through the thick cane, soon finding ourselves once again afloat upon the broad water, the prow of our boat turned up-stream, while here and there a dim star winked down upon us between scurrying clouds.

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT IN THE BOAT

Page 65

This was one of many nights we passed in the narrow confines of the boat during our flight northward. Yet its incidents remain in memory with peculiar distinctness of detail. I do not recall exactly how it occurred, but my duty during that first night chanced to place me at the after oar. In consequence I sat directly facing Madame de Noyan, operating the rudder bar. It was so warm, merely a delicate, fragrant breeze blowing from the south, she had felt no necessity for drawing up her hood, and the soft light of distant stars, glimmering along the bosom of the river, reflected back into her face, illumining it until I could almost note the changing expression within her dark eyes.

It was a sadder, graver face than the one I associated with her girlhood. Yet I could scarce forbear an impression that it was now a sweeter one, more womanly, faint lines beginning to mark its satin smoothness with impress of sorrow. To my thought a new, higher womanhood had found birth within, during weary days and nights of suspense and suffering. It was yet torture to me constantly beholding these two together, but, as I observed her then, I thanked the good God who had permitted me to be near her in time of trial. In patience I would serve, even though I must suffer. Tears were clinging to her long lashes, and occasionally one would glitter an instant upon her white cheek, as she leaned her face upon one hand, from which the loose sleeve fell away, revealing an arm like chiselled marble. She made no effort at concealing these evidences of emotion, doubtless believing them sufficiently hidden by the gloomy shadows. Nor did she appear to glance at me, keeping her own gaze directly ahead, where the dark, swirling waters merged into the mystery of the North.

We were none of us in talkative mood—although I heard De Noyan, behind me, humming a light French air, as though perfectly free from trouble—and I have no recollection of exchanging a word for more than an hour. We merely continued to pull sturdily against the downward rush of the stream, the deep silence of the night broken only by the dripping of uplifted blades, or the occasional far-off hooting of an owl upon the bank to our left. The pressure of the river's current was scarcely perceptible close against the shore, so we made fair progress. Yet it was hard work, neither of us being accustomed to such exercise, the heavy oars feeling awkward to the hand. The grim uncertainty of the future, coupled with our solitary surroundings, exercised a depressing influence upon the spirits of each, although differing widely in degree, according to our several natures. Undoubtedly this same sense of dreariness led De Noyan to sing, caused me such painful restlessness under that same singing, and left Eloise saddened in her lonely thoughts.

Page 66

Every occurrence impressed me that night as unusual. Perchance this was because both heart and head were sadly out of tune. Yet, at best, it was a lonesome journey, and remains a grewsome memory, haunting with many a spectre, as weird as the shadows of delirium. The few stars, peeping shyly forth between scurrying black cloud masses, were so far away they merely silvered the cloud edges, leaving them as though carven from granite. The low shore, often within reach of our oar blades, appeared gloomy and inhospitable, the spectral rushes creeping far out upon the water like living things, seeming to grasp after us as the wind swept them, and we glided past in phantom silence. Beyond, like a great black wall, arose higher ground, occasionally jutting into bare bluffs outlined against the lighter sky; again diversified by gaunt dead trees, their fleshless limbs extended upward toward ghostly pillars of vapor ever floating from off the river's surface. Occasionally, jaggedly uneven, close-set trunks of forest growth would appear, spectral in solemn ugliness, a veritable hedge, impenetrable and grim.

If, with a shudder of disgust, I turned away from that lorn, dead line of shore, my eyes swept a waste of waters slipping solemnly past, while farther out, where sky and stream met and mingled in wild riot, the surging river swirled and leaped, its white-capped waves evidencing resistless volume. It was a sight to awe one, that immense mass pouring forth from the upper darkness, flashing an instant beneath the star-gleam, only to disappear, a restless, relentless flood, black, unpitying, impenetrable, mysterious, a savage monster, beyond whose outstretched claws we crept, yet who at any moment might clutch us helpless in a horrible embrace. It was a sight to stun, that brutal flood, gliding ever downward, while, far as eye could see, stretched the same drear expanse of cruel waters.

From out that mystery would suddenly emerge, rolling toward us, as if born of the shadows, some grim apparition, a wildly tossing figure, with gaunt, uplifted arms beating the air, to startle for an instant, then fade from our ken into the dimness below. Well I knew it was only driftwood, the gnarled trunk of uprooted tree made sport with by mad waves, yet more than once I shrank backward, my unstrung nerves tingling, as such shapeless, uncanny thing was hurled past like an arrow. Nor were the noises that broke the silence less fearsome. Bred to the wilderness, I little minded loneliness when in the depths of the backwoods, but this was different. I cared nothing for the honk of wild fowl overhead, nor those sounds of varied animal life borne to us from off the black land; but that strange, dull roar, caused by great logs grinding together in the swirl of the current, and the groaning of bits of undermined shore as they gave way and dropped heavily into the water, racked my nerves.

Page 67

The peace I found lay in that sweet face, turned partially away, yet appearing fairer than ever beneath the protecting hood, drawn up as the night air grew chill. Whether similar sense of strangeness and timidity rested upon her, I could not determine, yet I believed her thoughts so far away that our present surroundings were no more to her than the vaguest dream. She scarcely stirred during all the hours I watched her; only once did she glance up, to smile as she met my eyes before I could withdraw them from her face. Had she read aright their message, perchance this story might never have been written; yet purer, truer love no man ever gave to woman. We must have continued thus, pulling silently, for hours before De Noyan broke the oppressive silence with impatient speech. Indeed, not the least impressive feature of the grewsome night was his continued stillness.

"*Le Diable*!" he exclaimed uneasily, shifting in his seat. "If the Styx be more gloomy than this accursed stream, then Jesu pity its voyagers. Never have I put in so miserable a night, to say nothing of a strained back, and a pair of sore hands. What are those black, crawling things yonder? *Mon Dieu*! I have seen a thousand hideous demons since we left the cane."

I glanced across my shoulder in the direction he pointed, glad enough to hear once again the sound of a voice.

"Only the fire-seared branch of a tree tossed on the current—the night rests heavily upon your nerves."

"Heavily? *Parbleu*! it has unmanned me with hideous silence, with creeping, ghostly mystery, until I am half mad, scarcely daring to whisper, in fear of my own voice. Eloise, are you there? or have the spectres of this haunted journey flown away with you?"

"Angels or demons, they would have naught of me," she replied in seeming unconsciousness of his mood. "My thoughts, I fear, have been sufficiently sad to accord well with the gloom, only my shadows are within, not without."

"*Sacre*! mine are all yonder," he exclaimed, indicating with a gesture the vast extent of angry water. "Why should I bear heavy heart, except for brooding phantoms of the night? Life is still mine in all its sweetness. Not that I greatly valued it, to be sure, yet 'tis somewhat better than I once thought, and there is always pleasure left in the world for the young. From whence springs your mood of sadness, Eloise?"

"My thought was with my father."

"'Tis not strange it should be. Yet, it might be better if you dwelt upon the brighter view of our own future. He is at rest; no tears can be of aid. But we can look forward to dreams of happiness. 'Tis my plan to cross the great ocean, seeking better fortune on the Continent. France, they say, has ever a vacant place for a good sword, nor is the

king likely to refuse service to a nephew of Bienville. You and I, Eloise, shall yet tread the Paris streets, nor shall we go as beggars."

Page 68

I marked her quick smile, but thought it not wholly untouched by sadness, as she attempted answer.

“We will hope for the best; yet, Monsieur, we are still deeply buried in the wilderness. Ay! worse—in the country of our enemies. You may not comprehend the full truth of this, but Spain lays claim now to all this great river, with the country bordering it. O’Reilly has already despatched soldiers as high as the mouth of the Ohio, to guard its passage; so there is peril lurking before us, as well as behind.”

“O’Reilly has sent soldiers northward? How know you this, Eloise?”

“It was common talk in the town. I saw with my own eyes the departure of one expedition. It was composed of a captain, with twelve soldiers, destined for the Ohio. I have heard that twice since others have been despatched northward, although to what points was unknown.”

“The saints defend us! ’tis indeed serious. I supposed the boat which passed contained all the Dons on the upper river, but if this be true we may have to desert the stream, and take to the eastern trail on foot. *Sacre*! I like it not! What say you, you sphinx of an English borderman? Knew you this all along?”

“It is news to me,” I answered soberly. “But if three expeditions have already been despatched north, there is little hope the land routes have been forgotten. Beyond doubt every trail, white or Indian, leading toward French or English settlements, is by now patrolled by the Dons. Nor can we hope to gain passage by surprise. That man-of-war boat will spread far the rumor of your escape, so every Spaniard between here and the Ohio will be on the lookout for our coming.”

I imagine the same thought stole into the mind of both, how easily we two, travelling light, might press our way through that scattered line of guard, and attain the upper Ohio; how easily, only for the danger and distress to which so desperate an attempt would expose her. She alone ventured to give the idea utterance.

“Messieurs,” she said earnestly, her calm brown eyes uplifted to our faces, “I have been considering this for an hour past. I know you would experience small trouble eluding the Spaniards, or even cutting your way through them, were I not with you. Yet this is not beyond remedy. I had sincerely hoped to prove of service when I usurped the slave’s place in the boat; instead, I am an encumbrance, a weakling whom you must protect at the risk of your own lives. Fortunately it is not yet too late to leave you free; it cannot be many miles back to New Orleans, and the current would bear me swiftly downward. I have loyal friends in the town to hide the daughter of Lafreniere, should the Spaniards wage war against a woman, and surely some means would open whereby I might make the shores of France. Perhaps I should be there in advance of you. What say you, Messieurs, to such proposal? Would it not be best?”

Page 69

The indignant feeling which swept me as I listened to this speech hardly needs dwelling upon. Yet I held my tongue. It was the privilege of De Noyan to make answer.

"*Parbleu*!" he cried, seemingly forgetful of caution in instant enthusiasm. "You have as good a head as heart, Eloise. *Sacre*! never before did I realize the treasure in my keeping. You gauge well the wishes of a soldier; 't is not pleasant to one of my blood and training to lurk thus in the shadows like a skulking spy. *Bish*! nor do I love this toll at the oars—'tis the work of slaves. I would prefer trusting all to the rapier, writing with its point a Frenchman's message of defiance. Holy saints! I am already half inclined to say yes to your proposal; yet Benteen, what word have you to speak regarding this plan?"

"That if she goes back to New Orleans, I make the town in the same boat," I answered shortly, angered by his flippant words and tone. "'Tis a plan not to be seriously considered a moment, Chevalier. If carried out it would merely place Madame de Noyan in the power of Cruel O'Reilly. I doubt if the sacrifice would preserve our worthless lives. She can only return by means of the boat; with that gone, we should be compelled to plunge, unprovisioned, into a trackless wilderness, feeling our way blindly for hundreds of leagues through unknown, savage tribes. If we survived their cruelty we should be crazed with hunger and fatigue long before our eyes were gladdened at sight of the upper Ohio. I do not say such a journey could not be made, but I retain vivid memory of one such trip, nor will I lightly seek another. I imagine, Captain, you have small conception of the horrors of the black forests, when you choose recklessly to plunge into their depths."

"I served against the Creeks," he announced somewhat sullenly.

"So I heard, yet that was mostly boys' play; armored men pitted against naked savages. You would discover different foemen among the mountain tribes to the north and east. Do not suppose I question your courage, but I realize the dangers, as you cannot from your town life, while as to Madame de Noyan, she will be safer here with us than with those black brutes in New Orleans."

"You refuse to be comrade with me then?"

"Ay, if such comradeship involve the desertion of your wife."

"Desertion!" The term stung him. "*Sacre*! 'tis not a word to be lightly flung in the face of a French cavalier. Did I not already owe you the debt of life, Monsieur, I might endeavor to teach you a lesson in etiquette."

"I permit your overlooking all obligations, if you desire to indulge in such an experiment," I retorted, no wise unwilling. "I am no brawling roisterer, but have never been above giving and receiving blows."

I judged from the glint of his eyes, and the manner in which he juggled his sword hilt, he had grave purpose of backing up his pretty words. I should rather have enjoyed giving the doughty gentleman a sudden bath alongside, had not Madame hastily calmed our hot blood with sober speech other own.

Page 70

“Hush, Messieurs,” she commanded quietly, her eyes upon my face, instantly shaming me. “It is not meet you should quarrel. There are better ways in which to strike blows for me than that. As to my going on with you, or returning alone, that may all be discussed when we make camp again at daylight. Then we will settle the matter coolly, not in the heat of anger. You are both my friends, nor would I awaken between you any cause for controversy.”

De Noyan laughed.

“*Sacre*! ’tis the accursed night got into our blood,” he exclaimed. “The very air seems poisoned with horror, while my back aches so with pulling this oar, I would esteem it relief to fight with my best friend. It was hard fortune that the boy Alphonse happened in track of that Spaniard’s bullet. With three in the boat there would be some rest from the toll.”

“I see solid ground yonder,” I said, pointing as I spoke to the shadowy bank ahead. “We might run the boat’s nose in, and stretch our cramped limbs on shore. There is little to be gained endeavoring to work with wearied muscles.”

“*San Juan*!” he returned, brightening instantly to the suggestion. “’Tis the first word of good sense reaching my ears this cursed night of folly. Head her in under the shade of yonder bush, Eloise, until I see if I can stand upright once more.”

CHAPTER XII

WE LAND AN ODD FISH

After brief respite Madame steered as closely beside the bank as possible, thus avoiding the swift current, yet it was no small task to win our way upward through the lagging hours. More and more frequently tired muscles drove us to the shore for intervals of relaxation. Still, in spite of much time thus lost, we made steady progress, so before morning dawned I was confident many a mile had been placed behind, although the low shore we skirted remained so similar in outline as to afford few landmarks with which to gauge our passage.

De Noyan grew more cheerful toward the end, his sullen mood changing to a gay semblance of reckless abandon. To me, however, he appeared scarcely more engaging in snatches of ribald song, and careless speech, freely interspersed with French oaths and much complaint at unwonted toll, than in his former moody silence; yet his cheerfulness had effect upon Madame, who contrived to rally from her mental depression, becoming in turn a veritable sunburst in the gloom. I experienced a glow of pleasure listening to her merry banter, and, once or twice, to a low-voiced French song, sounding sweetly enough as it echoed back from off the black water.

Page 71

In spite of such efforts to appear light-hearted, the nature of our work, coupled with the sombre surroundings of the night, rested heavily upon the spirits, and long before morning broke, we had all subsided into disheartening silence, holding grimly to our onward course through sheer force of will. With wearied eyes I marked the slow coming of dawn above that desolation; the faint gray light creeping like some living thing across the swirling waters, leaving more ghastly than before the immense flood sweeping past. It was a sombre sight, yet became more heartsome as crimson light streaked the sky, flashing forth over the wide river, reddening the heaving surface, until the waters blazed like burnished metal, and our blinded eyes could hardly gaze upon it.

We were at this time approaching a vast curve in the shore-line, appearing to the eye as if it might prove the mouth of some important tributary stream. Beyond, perhaps a hundred feet out in the main river, appeared a low island, a mere rock as it fronted us, yet thickly covered by small trees and bushes, growing close to the water's edge. No sign of life was apparent anywhere. The mainland, so far as the sweep of vision extended, bore the same marshy and inhospitable look, and I immediately determined upon the island as the more suitable camping spot.

"Turn the prow of the canoe toward the upper end of that rock, Madame," I said, resuming my place at the oar. "It appears the most promising halting place hereabout, and should afford us excellent vantage of view both up and down the river."

"It will prove vantage of sleep for me," grumbled the Chevalier gruffly. "I take it I should have been resting better had I remained with the Dons."

I noticed the sudden uplifting of his wife's face, and seeing a pained expression upon it, I replied:

"Such words bespeak little appreciation, Monsieur, of our efforts to pluck you from a fate which has befallen your companions. Surely your work is no harder than that of others, while you have more at issue."

He glanced from her face to mine in apparent surprise, but replied readily:

"Those knowing me best, friend Benteen, pay least heed to my words. When I bark I seldom bite, and when I intend biting I waste small time on the bark. But, *parbleu*! how can I feel life worth living, if it is all toil? There may be those who enjoy such existence, but I discover no pleasure in it. *Sacre*! I love not hard hands and poor fare, nor will I make pretence of what I do not feel."

We were then two-thirds of the distance between the mainland and the island, in the full sweep of the raging current. It struck us sidelong, with such force as to require all our combined strength to afford the laboring boat headway. Suddenly Eloise startled us with an outcry.

“What is that yonder?” she questioned excitedly, pointing directly up-stream. “It looks the strangest red thing ever I saw on water. I believed it moved but now, as if alive.”

Page 72

Keeping my oar in motion, lest we should drift backward, I made shift to glance across my shoulder in the direction indicated. The river had us completely in its grasp, tossing the light boat in a majestic flood of angry water, whitened by foam, and beaten into waves, where it rounded the rocky edge of the island. Across this tumbling surge streamed the glorious sunlight, gilding each billow into beauty, while in the midst of it, bearing swiftly down toward us, came that strange thing that had so startled Madame. What in the name of nature it might prove to be, I could not hazard—it had the appearance of some queer, shaggy animal, rolled tight into the form of a ball, having fur so radiantly red as to flash and burn in the sunshine. It bobbed crazily about, barely above the surface of the river, like some living creature, while now and then I marked a glimmer of light behind, as if the water was being vigorously churned by some species of swimming apparatus in the monster's tail.

"Stand by with your small sword, De Noyan," I commanded uneasily, "for, hang me if I ever before set eyes on such a creature! Move, quick, and pass me over your oar so you may have both hands free for the onset."

The beast was being swept along rapidly, now appearing to my eyes somewhat whiter on top, although the surrounding red was so glaringly prominent as to obscure everything else. Suddenly the creature gave a kick and whirled over, turning the white expanse directly toward us. At the same moment De Noyan dropped the point of his rapier against the side of the boat, with a loud guffaw.

"May the saints absolve me," he grinned, choking from merriment, "if it's not the red-headedest man ever my eyes looked upon."

Forcing back his laughter, he hailed the swimmer, who, perceiving us for the first time, began sheering off, as if frightened by our presence, and intent upon escape.

"Hold there a moment, Master Red-Cap! If in truth you are not a fish, come on board."

The fellow heard him plainly enough, for I distinguished a muttered English exclamation, but he made no pause in urging a peculiar sidestroke of the arms which threatened to bear him past us like a wild thing.

"Hold your hands!" I roared in English, thinking, perhaps, he had not comprehended the other tongue. "Come in here, sirrah, or, the Lord help you, we 'll turn and run you down."

At sound of these words he ceased his efforts, and turned a peculiar wrinkled face, creased like long-folded parchment, and as yellow, directly toward us. Even at that distance I imagined I could detect a twinkle of delight in the shrewd gray eyes.

“Thy words of greeting are as manna fallen from heaven,” boomed a deep, resonant voice, surprising in its volume. “I take heart anew, young man, for surely thou art not the spawn of the scarlet woman, but, verily, one of the chosen people of our own God.”

Page 73

“I fail to grasp your meaning, friend,” I retorted, nettled to be held at the oars so long in that current. “We are honest voyagers, glad to be of aid to any one in such distress as you seem to be.”

“Nay; I am not especially uncomfortable, unless my tobacco is soaked, and if such disaster hath overtaken me, it shall yet go hard with those blaspheming idolaters who cast me overboard. But thy language is that of modern Israel, so I will join you in the boat. ’Tis the more readily done as I have not tasted food since yesternoon, and possess a hollowness within my physical temple which demandeth attention. The spirit yieldeth to the craving of the flesh.”

“Catch hold upon the side,” I ordered, as he drew near. “We will have you ashore in a dozen strokes.”

The stranger did as I bade him, and it was truly a wondrous sight to observe how his head glowed in the sun as the drops of moisture dried, and brought out the full, ornate color of it. His face had a pinched look, with thousands of little wrinkles leading away from the corners of the wide mouth, and about the narrow, glinting gray eyes. But there was a sly gleam of humor about the expression of it, which, taken in connection with that fiery headpiece, nearly caused me a fit of laughter. I noticed, however, that Madame drew slightly away from his side of the boat, as if close proximity to the fellow were repugnant to her.

“Well, friend,” said I, as we drew up in shoal water under lee of the rock, and I noted his short legs and stocky chest, “no doubt you are well water-logged, and a little healthful exercise will help to warm your blood, especially as we dare not light a fire for such purpose. So bend that broad back of yours, and aid us in lifting the boat to cover.”

He performed his portion of the work well, bearing with apparent ease fully one-half the burden, while De Noyan and I staggered beneath the remainder, until together we sank the boat well out of sight behind the thick brush.

“And why not a fire?” the stranger questioned abruptly, noticing Eloise spreading forth our stock of provisions on the grass. “It was in hope of thus warming the inner man that I consented to come ashore and companion with you. Are you refugees, fleeing from danger?”

I glanced aside at De Noyan and muttered hastily in French, “It will be best to tell him our story—’tis not likely he will prove an emissary of Spain.”

“As you please; he is more of your class than mine,” he returned indifferently, and, with a shrug of the shoulders, strolled away.

“You have made fairly correct guess,” I said to our new acquaintance; “so we may as well understand each other first as last. We have escaped with our lives from New Orleans, and are now seeking refuge on the Ohio.”

He nodded, his shrewd gray eyes fastened intently on my face, his own countenance expressionless.

“Who holdeth New Orleans?” he asked in a tone of interest.

Page 74

“The Spanish, under O’Reilly.”

“’Tis what they told me above, yet I believed they lied. Those with you are French?”

“Ay.”

“And you?”

“Of Louisiana birth and English blood; five years I have been a hunter in the Illinois country.”

He groaned as though the mention of the word awoke unpleasant memories.

“’Tis an unholy land, no fit abiding place for the elect, as I learned, having passed through its settlements seeking prayerfully to bear an evangel unto that stiff-necked people. Friend, thou hast an honest face, and I will say in confidence I have been ofttimes blessed of the Spirit in the conversion of souls; yet this people laughed at my unctuous speech, making merry regarding that head-covering with which the Almighty chose to adorn his servant. Dost thou know the French settlement on the Kaskaskia?”

“I have been there often.”

“Ah! ’tis verily a stronghold of popish superstition. Recall you the humble cabin of Gabriel La Motte, the Huguenot, close by the ravine? It was there I abode in much spiritual and temporal comfort with that godly man, until certain mad roisterers took offence at plain gospel speech, driving me forth into the wilderness, even as Jehovah’s prophets of old. Since that hour I have been a wanderer on the face of the earth, finding small comfort in this life; yet Ezekiel Cairnes is merely the poor servant of the Lord, the chief of sinners, and must abide in travail until He cometh.”

He cast up his eyes in pious affectation, his lips moving as though he meditated in prayer.

“Then your name is Cairnes?”

“Ezekiel Cairnes, late of the Connecticut colony, and am permitted by the Lord’s mercy to write Reverend before my unworthy appellation.”

“A Puritan preacher!” I exclaimed in some disgust. “I have heard of your sort before, yet have been spared a meeting until now. Where do you propose going?”

“The Lord leadeth His anointed, young man. Even as Jonah abode in the belly of the whale, so doth the water bear me onward as the Almighty willeth.”

His wandering eyes rested thoughtfully upon my companion, now returning toward us, sauntering listlessly along the sandy shore.

“I know not, friend, who you may be, save as you have seen fit to reveal,” he said shrewdly. “Yet I would venture a guess as to yonder gayly attired cavalier.”

“A guess?” I echoed, taken completely by surprise. “It is small chance you would hit right—what might your guess be?”

“Chevalier Charles de Noyan.”

“How know you that?”

He chuckled grimly, evidently well pleased at my astonishment.

“’Tis no work of the evil one, friend. I am but just escaped also from the hands of the Philistines,” he explained, becoming angry at the thought, and ducking his red head vehemently. “While in their unhallowed company, a gray-bellied son of Belial questioned me much regarding yonder fine gentleman, ere he waxed exceedingly wroth at my plain speech in matters of the spirit, bidding his jabbering crew of papists to heave me overboard.”

Page 75

“How far away did this occur?” I asked, looking anxiously up the river.

“Oh, mayhap some such matter as twenty leagues,” he returned indifferently, his gaze idly following mine. “Let me reflect; it was at the hour for sunset prayer I fell in with their party. I have heard it said this stream hereabout hath a sweep of seven or more miles the hour, and I kept well in the current of it.”

“Do you mean you have been swimming since sunset yesterday?”

“Nay, friend; I beg be not over-hasty in conclusions. I merely reposed easily upon my back, with only enough straightening out of the legs to keep my nose fairly up-tilted above the stream. ’T was thus I made the passage with much comfort of body, and relaxation of mind. ’T is no serious trick for one unafraid of the water although it might bring on cramps were I to keep on as far as New Orleans.”

I stared at him with an astonishment which for the moment precluded speech. Before I found voice with which to express doubt of his story, Madame called, bidding us join her upon the grass, where our rude meal waited.

CHAPTER XIII

WE GAIN A NEW RECRUIT

There could be no doubt regarding the complete emptiness of the Reverend Ezekiel Cairnes, if the breakfast he devoured from our stock of cold provisions was evidence. I have been commonly blessed with robust appetite, yet where that man found space within his ribs to store away all he ate in that hour remains a mystery. Nothing, except total inability to address him in intelligible language, held De Noyan quiet as our limited supply steadily diminished before the Puritan’s onslaught, and long before the latter heaved a sigh of profound satisfaction the gallant soldier had fallen fast asleep. But Madame remained in her place opposite, apparently fascinated by that vivid red crop of hair, now thoroughly dried in the sun, and standing erect above his odd, pear-shaped head. I had whispered in her ear what the fellow claimed for himself, and being a most devout Catholic, and he the first specimen of his class she had ever met, she studied him with no small amount of curiosity and abhorrence.

I can clearly recall the picture, as these two, so widely different, sat facing each other in silence, the golden sunshine checkered over them through an arch of limbs, the broad river shining away to the southward, and De Noyan resting upon his back, with face turned up toward the clear blue sky. The woman, with her soft silken hair smoothed back from the wide, white brow, her intelligent face lighted by eyes of deepest brown, looking, what in truth she was, the aristocratic daughter of a gentleman of France, one whose home had ever been amid refinements of civilization, and whose surroundings

those of love and courtesy. Even there, in the heart of that wilderness, the social training of years remained paramount, and she

Page 76

sat silent, toying with untasted food, out of respect to this stranger guest. And he, with shoulders so abnormally broad as to appear deformed, clad in sober Puritan garb, ate serenely on, unconscious of her glances, making use of both his huge hands in the operation, his little gimlet eyes twinkling greedily, his head, oddly resembling a cone, blazing like a fire whenever a ray of sun chanced to fall across it. I noticed he occasionally stole shy glances at her, nor could I wonder, for, in spite of fatigue and exposure, Madame remained a winsome sight, to do the heart of any man good to look upon.

“The Lord God of Hosts be praised; ay! with harps, cymbals, and instruments of many strings, will I give praise unto His holy name,” he exclaimed fervently, wiping his wide mouth upon his sleeve, while casting a look of regret over the debris in his front. “Once again hath He abundantly supplied His elect with that which upbuildeth and giveth strength to the flesh. Now my bodily requirements have been duly attended to, it behooves me to minister likewise unto the spiritual, and then seek repose. Friends, will you not both join with me at the throne of grace? It hath been said that I possess much unction in prayer.”

“No,” I answered, not unwilling to be left alone with Eloise; “you are welcome to put up petitions in our behalf, but this lady is not of your faith, while as for myself, I have known little about such matters since childhood. One thing, however,—if you propose making use of that bull voice of yours, I advise that you select the farther extremity of the island for the scene of your devotions, lest you arouse the Chevalier.”

He cast upon me a glance not altogether pleasant, but tramped off through the bushes without reply, and for several moments we heard the sturdy rise and fall of his earnest supplications, frequently interspersed with hearty groans, as of one in all the agony of deep remorse.

“’Tis an odd fish we’ve hooked out of the stream,” I said, turning my head toward the dismal sounds. “Yet he has strong arms, and may be of considerable use, if he will consent to voyage with us.”

“I scarcely know what to make of the man,” Madame admitted candidly. “He is unlike any I have ever met. Yet I think he may prove honest and of good heart, although his exterior is far from attractive.”

“And his appetite hardly suggestive of economy,” I added.

The bright look I always loved to see leaped into her clear eyes.

“Have you faith his labor will offset his eating?” she replied, laughing.

“Possibly not; yet it is not labor alone I would select him for. We may have to fight before we attain a place of safety. For that purpose I would rank this fellow highly. Never yet have I met a red-headed man averse to a quarrel. Faith! by that token, this one should be worth a company if we ever come to blows.”

“But he is a priest, you told me, a preacher of the Protestants.”

Page 77

“Ay! and the better for it. I have heard my father say the Puritan breed makes the stoutest men-at-arms; that nothing has been found to stiffen a battle-line equal to a good text. Give this fellow a pike, pit him against a boatload of Spanish papists, and, I ’ll warrant, he ’ll crack more heads than any two of us. Besides, he controls a perfect tornado of a voice, fit to frighten the crew of a frigate on a dark night.”

She was sitting, her back pressed against a small tree, her hands clasped lightly about one knee, with dark eves gazing afar where the broad river danced away into the golden sheen.

“Geoffrey Benteen,” she asked soberly, never glancing toward me, “is it true you do not desire my return to New Orleans?”

“It is true.”

“Would you honestly tell me why?” and she turned her eyes, looking searchingly into mine.

“I have mentioned sufficient reasons,” I ventured, resolutely facing her, determined to speak frankly and abide the result. “All I need add is, to my judgment it will prove better for you to remain with your husband.”

She glanced aside at him where he lay, the quick blood flushing her clear cheek.

“You do not like him?” the question fell faltering from her lips.

“That I am not prepared to declare. He is changeable, somewhat overbearing in speech, not as sober of mind as I am accustomed to find men, yet it is not true I dislike him. I merely believe that he will do better, be truer to his manhood, with you near him, than with you absent.”

“He is French,” she explained gently, “by nature of birth different from your race. Besides, he has led a life filled with the dissipation of the town.”

“True! for that reason I forbear judging his words and actions by any standard of my own people. Yet this I cannot be blind to, Madame; he is of quick temper, hasty in action, easily influenced by others, and might become careless at times, and under strong temptation, unless some moral firmness hold him in check. You alone possess the power to become his good angel.”

She bowed her head, her gaze again far off upon the river, the deepening surge of color rising upon either cheek.

“You cannot be angry,” I continued gravely, after pausing vainly for a reply. “Surely I have said no more than you already knew, and I spoke merely in answer to your questioning.”

“No, I am not angry. But it is not a pleasant reflection underlying the things mentioned, and I cannot assert your judgment of the Chevalier false. Still I would press you further. Is this your only reason for desiring me to remain?”

“You wish me to answer frankly?”

“Otherwise I should not ask.”

I felt the quick flush mount even to my hair, yet gripped my breath, making effort to respond boldly.

Page 78

“I had other reason. To deny it would be merely uttering a lie to no purpose. Madame de Noyan, we are not strangers—we could never be after that night when we parted beneath the olives of Monsieur Beaujen’s garden. You are wife to a chevalier of France; I, a homeless adventurer. Yet I have no higher ambition than to prove of service to you. Whatever I have accomplished has been entirely for your sake, not for his. Now we are together, the daily opportunity to serve you is mine; here I can work for you, perchance die for you, should such sacrifice promise you happiness. But if you decide to go back yonder, directly into danger as desperate as any confronting us to the northward, then I must determine for myself where I can serve you best. Knowing my heart as you must, you can easily judge whether I would plunge deeper into the wilderness with your husband, or return to New Orleans with you. There is a sentence in the Bible about the impossibility of serving two masters, hence I trust I may not be compelled to choose between, until the hour when you are both safe.”

She listened silently, and I almost feared I had ventured upon too plain speaking. Yet now, as she turned again toward me, her eyes were moist with tears.

“You are a strange man, Geoffrey Benteen,” she said gently, and, I know not how, yet both her hands found way to mine. “I scarcely comprehend your nature, or gauge your purposes—you are so unlike all others I have known. Yet this I am assured; you are of honest heart, and I trust you wholly.”

“You will not return to the town?”

“I abide with you, and with my husband.” Her voice faltered to that last word, yet she spoke it bravely.

“It will be better so,” I assented. “Better for us all.”

We slept late, undisturbed, in secure retreat among the trees, the vast river chanting its endless song on either side of us. During the evening meal, partaken of amid the gathering shadows of twilight, our newly discovered friend again evidenced his power as a trencherman.

“*Sacre*!” ejaculated De Noyan in dismay. “I supposed his breakfast was intended to last the week. We shall need a fleet of boats to provision the fellow if he keep us company long. How is it, friend Benteen, are we to enjoy the pleasure of associating with this human alligator, or do we now part company?”

“That is not yet determined,” I replied, smiling at the look of consternation with which he regarded him. “I will sound the man on the subject, while he appears in good humor.”

I crossed the narrow plat of grass to where our guest sat facing the remains of his late feast, a look of satisfaction visible upon his withered countenance.

“My good friend,” he exclaimed, observing my approach, “there seems an over-preponderance of spices in this cured meat; otherwise it meets my cordial approbation, although your Southern cookery has a peculiarly greasy flavor to one of my taste in food.”

Page 79

“I failed to observe your refraining from any on account of that objection,” I retorted, deeply amused by his words. “But if you are completely satisfied, you may be willing to turn a moment to matters of business, and inform us what you propose doing. In brief, will you resume your voyage, or is it your desire to cast your lot with us?”

He meditatively stroked the thin red stubble adorning his chin, contemplating me steadily.

“Doth that which assisteth to nourish and sustain the inner man bid fair to hold out?” he finally questioned in a tone of anxiety. “I have need of sufficient food, both temporal and spiritual, and would not lightly assume any burden of suffering, unless it appear clearly as the will of God.”

“I know not how long we can withstand such onslaughts as those you have already made,” I returned honestly. “We are fairly well provisioned for present needs, and when farther up the river will feel free to seek fresh game.”

“Ah! you have guns in the party? You will shoot deer—deer!” He smacked his thin lips greedily. “A nice, fat, juicy steak would not go bad even now. ’Tis strange how the mind runneth upon such carnal matters—it remindeth us the flesh is weak. Deer—’tis best turned upon a spit, with live coats not quite touching it. I would one might wander before your gun this very night. Young man, did I not hear you name the destination of your party as the Ohio?”

“I so stated.”

“Then let me warn you, friend,” he crossed his legs more comfortably, resting back at ease, “that what you propose may not prove so easy as you dream. The Amalekites and heathen, together with the worshippers of Baal, are everywhere along the upper waters. By the memory of Old Noll, I have seen more black-faced papists in the past two weeks than I ever before laid eyes on.”

“You do not enjoy the prospect of a fight?”

“Nay; it is not that, friend. I am, indeed, a preacher of righteousness, a man of peace, yet I might, upon occasion, strike right lustily for the Lord and Gideon. I am not altogether unaccustomed to feeling carnal weapons of strife, but with yonder fair specimen of womanhood in our care, I should not deem it best to force a struggle, provided passage might be secured through other means.”

“Have you some plan?”

“Nay; it has not been revealed unto me, although I besought it of the Lord with great earnestness after the morning meal. I will again wrestle in prayer before the throne, and no doubt it shall all be made plain in due season, if we faint not.”

“I take it, then, you propose forming one of our company?”

“Such seemeth the will of the Lord,” he responded soberly, “and I ever hearken unto His voice. Thou didst state there would be plenty of food, so I abide with you.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOUTH OF THE ARKANSAS

Page 80

I do not recall how many leagues we pushed our way up the stream, nor could I name the length of time required for our journey, before we arrived where a large river, bearing a muddier current, led toward the north and west. Those were neither days nor miles that imprinted themselves on memory; they left only vague impressions, as one sometimes beholds objects through the dense haze of early morning. I remember merely the low, flat line of shore, stretching away to a darker green of the heavy forest behind, and the ever-moving flood of changeless water, no sign of life appearing along its surface.

Nor was there any happening within our boat to reflect upon, excepting that our new comrade proved himself a stanch man at the oars, thus commending himself to me, in spite of a choleric temper apt to burst forth over trifles. He and De Noyan would have quarrelled many times a day, only neither comprehended the language of the other. The greatest cause I found for criticism was his interminable prayers, and the bull voice in which he offered them. I have never made mock of religion, coming of a line of godly ancestors, yet I felt there could be no necessity for making such noise over it morning, noon, and night. Yet neither entreaty nor threat moved him to desist, so I came to the conclusion that he either considered the Almighty deaf, or else was totally unconscious of his own lung power. As to his appetite—but there are things of which one may not justly write, so I content myself by saying that, all in all, he was not so bad a comrade.

De Noyan kept to his nature, and I liked him none the worse for it, although it is not pleasant to have at your side a gay cavalier one moment and a peevish woman the next. You never know which may be uppermost. Yet he performed his full share of toil like a man, and, when not curling his long moustachios, or swearing in provincial French, was mostly what he should be, a careless soldier of fortune, to whom life appealed more as a play than a stern duty. He was of that spirit most severely tried by such drudgery, and, looking back upon it, I can only wonder he bore the burden as cheerfully as he did. Beneath his reckless, grumbling exterior, the metal of the man was not of such poor quality.

However continual labor and enforced companionship told upon the rest, Madame retained her sweetness through it all, hushing our lips from many a sharp retort that had threatened to disrupt our party long before this time. She had merely to glance toward us to silence any rising strife, for no man having a true heart beneath his doublet could find spirit to quarrel before the disapproving glance of her dark eyes. It was thus we toiled forward, until one frosty morning our boat arrived where this great stream poured forth from the west, forcing its reddish, muddy current far out into the wide river against which we had struggled so long. Slowly rounding the low, marshy promontory, and beginning to feel the fierce tug of down-pouring waters against our bow, I observed the old Puritan suddenly cock up his ears, like some suspicious watch-dog, twisting his little glittering eyes from side to side, as though the spot looked familiar.

Page 81

“Do you suspect anything wrong, my pious friend,” I questioned curiously, “that you indulge in such sniffing of the air?”

“’Tis a spot I know well, now it looms fairly into view,” he answered solemnly, continuing to peer about like one suddenly aroused from sleep. “It was near here the Philistines made camp as I passed down the river, but I perceive no signs now of human presence in the neighborhood.”

His words startled me, and I began looking anxiously about us. The low shores consisted of the merest bog, overgrown heavily with stunted bushes and brown cane, but some distance beyond rose the crest of a pine forest, evidencing firmer soil. The opposite side of the stream was no whit more inviting, except that the marsh appeared less in extent, with a few outcropping rocks visible, one rising sheer from the water’s edge, so crowded with bushes as scarcely to expose the rock surface to the eye.

“I discover no evidences of life,” I answered at last, reassured by my careful survey. “Nor, for the matter of that, Master Cairnes, can I see any spot dry enough to camp upon.”

“Up the stream a few strokes the Spaniards had camp; not so bad a place, either, when once reached, although the current will prove difficult to overcome as we turn.”

Following his guidance we deflected the boat’s head, and, by hard toil at the oars, slowly effected a passage up the swift stream, keeping as close as possible along the southern shore, until, having compassed something like five hundred yards, we found before us a low-lying bank, protected by rushes, dry and thickly carpeted with grass.

“What is the stream?” I questioned, marvelling at the red tinge of the water.

“The Spaniards named it the Arkansas.”

“Oh, ay! I remember, although I passed this way along the other shore. It was here some of La Salle’s men made settlement near a hundred years ago, I ’m told. The stream has trend northward.”

“So the Spaniards claimed to my questioning; they knew little of its upper waters, yet possessed a map placing its source a few leagues from where the Ohio joins the great river. It was yonder they were encamped when I was here before.”

He pointed toward a ridge of higher ground, where two trees hung like sentinels above the bank. Madame immediately turned the prow that way, and, bending our heads low, we shot beneath their trailing branches, grounding softly on the red clay of the bank. A brief search disclosed remains of camp-fires, testimony to the Puritan’s remembrance of the spot. Evidently the place had been frequently occupied, and by sizable parties, yet the marks were all ancient; we discovered no signs that any one had been there lately.

Page 82

It was barely daylight, although the sun was above the horizon. A vast bank of cloud hung so dense across the eastern sky as to leave the whole scene in shadow, making the hour appear much earlier. I felt, as we searched the camp-fires, a strange uneasiness, for which I could not account—it was a premonition of approaching peril. This sense is the gift of many accustomed to border life, and compelled to rely for safety upon minute signs scarcely observable to the eyes of others. I had noticed a broken reed near where we turned into this new stream, so freshly severed as to show green from sap yet flowing, while the soft mud about the base of the big rock bore evidence of having been tramped, although the distance was so great the nature of the marks was not discernible. To be sure, native denizens of the forest might account for this, yet the sight aroused suspicion and a determination to examine more closely, while the fear of prowling enemies made me strenuous in objecting to the building of any fire with which to cook our morning meal.

The eating came to a conclusion at last, although not without grumbling, in both French and English, at being obliged to subsist on cold fare. By use of threats I succeeded in inducing the Rev. Mr. Cairnes to retire without indulging in his usual devotional exercise. Discovering De Noyan comfortably settled against a tree-trunk, pipe in mouth, already beginning to look sleepy about the eyes, I muttered in his hearing a word or two regarding a fishing trip into deeper water along the opposite shore, and, quietly leaving him to unsuspicious repose, slipped down to where our boat was tied beneath the tree shadows. As I bent, loosening the rope, I felt rather than perceived the presence of Madame upon the bank above. Turning as she addressed me, I glanced up, holding the untied rope in my hand.

“You fear Spaniards may be near,” she said quickly, as if she had deciphered my hidden thought.

“No, Madame,” I replied, scarcely able to conceal astonishment at her penetration, yet eager to quiet alarm, particularly as I had no occasion for uneasiness. “I merely feel a curiosity to examine that odd rock beside the entrance—the one we passed on the right.”

“Geoffrey Benteen,” she said firmly, stepping down the sloping bank until she stood beside me, “there is no occasion for your attempting deceit with me. Besides, you are too open-hearted a man to deceive any one. I have noticed your glances, and interpreted your thoughts, ever since we turned into this stream. I am certain you fear at this moment we have been beguiled into a trap. Tell me, is this not true?”

Her clear, questioning eyes gazed so directly into my own, and were so honestly courageous, I up and told her what I had observed, and where I was then bound.

“It is better to trust me,” she commented simply, as I ended my recital. “My eyes have not been altogether idle, although I am no borderer to observe such faint signs. There

were several reeds bent low in the water a hundred yards back; their sides scraped as if a large boat had been dragged through them. I thought nothing of it, until I observed how intently you were studying each mark left by man. While you are gone yonder, what would you wish me to do?”

Page 83

I looked at her attentively, noting how heavy her eyes were from weariness.

“You are too tired to remain on guard, Eloise,” I said, forgetting I should not use that name, “or I might bid you watch here, and, if any misfortune befall me, call the others. Besides, if there are enemies at hand there is no knowing from what direction they may chance upon us. However, all we have observed were probably old marks, or made by roving beasts, and I shall soon return to fling myself on the ground, seeking sleep also. So go and rest those weary eyes, while I scout to satisfy myself. It is only the doubt of a suspicious man.”

“I shall not sleep until your safe return,” she replied firmly. “You shall not go forth thus without one to pray for your safe return. I beg you, exercise care.”

“Have no fear, Madame, I am no reckless hot-head at such work, and shall continue to guard my life while it remains of value to you and yours. Try to rest at ease, for I will soon return, with a laugh at my foolish suspicions.”

I forced the boat into the swollen stream, and, using one oar as a paddle, silently and swiftly propelled it directly across. Discovering a spot seemingly fit for travel, I pushed the prow through the long marsh grass, and stepped ashore. She still stood in the tree shadow of the opposite bank, and waving a hand in reassurance, I drew forth my long rifle from beneath the seat. Advancing silently, I pressed forward into the thick bed of cane, thinking more of Eloise de Noyan than of the task before me. It proved a hard passage, so extremely difficult as to call back my mind from foolish day-dreams to save myself an ugly fall, for the grass under-foot was matted and tangled, interspersed with marshy pools of brackish water, amid which innumerable projecting roots spread snares for the feet. The sun, now well advanced, gave me the points of the compass, and, holding the rifle-stock before my face, I cleared a path through the dense growth, and emerged from the low marsh land upon smooth turf, where some brush found foothold, yet not so thickly as to impede the walking.

I discovered myself near the bottom of a steep bank, which, curving with the line of the shore, extended forward for probably fifty feet, crowned along its ridge with numerous stunted trees. Trusting thus to obtain a firmer foothold and more extended view, I breasted the steep ascent and found the summit a narrow plateau, only a few yards in width, with a still more extensive morass upon the opposite side, which stretched away some distance in a desolate sea of cane and drooping grass. Fortunately it proved easy travelling along the ridge, which appeared of stone formation, probably having a terminus at the big rock, toward which I proposed extending my investigation.

I moved forward slowly and with caution, not because I expected to meet enemies in this lonely spot, but rather from an instinct of long frontier training. I had advanced possibly a hundred yards, when I approached a small clump of stunted evergreens, so closely woven together I could not wedge a passage between. Rounding their outer

edge, my footsteps noiseless on ground thickly strewn with their soft needles, I came to a sudden halt within five paces of a man.

Page 84

CHAPTER XV

A PASSAGE AT ARMS

He stood motionless, one hand grasping the limb of a tree, leaning far out so as to gaze up the river, totally unconscious of my approach. The fellow was tall, yet heavily built, wearing a great leather helmet with brass facings, his body encased in a slashed doublet, the strap fastenings of a steel breastplate showing at waist and shoulders, while high boots of yellow cordovan leather extended above his knees. I noticed also the upward curve of a huge gray moustache against the stern profile of his face, while a long straight sword dangled at his side. Evidently the stranger was a soldier, and one not to be despised in feats at arms, although in what service I might merely conjecture, as his dress was not distinctive. Yet it was small likelihood any other nation than Spain had armed men in those parts.

That he had discovered and was watching our camp, I entertained no doubt, yet for the moment the surprise of seeing him was so great I was unable to choose my safer course,—should I withdraw silently as I came, or make quick attack? If the first, he would certainly see me recross the river, and suspect my mission. Nor was the other alternative more promising. If I sprang upon him (and he looked a burly antagonist), such combat could not be noiseless, and surely the fellow was not alone in this wilderness. How close at hand lurked his companions was beyond guessing, yet, if the sound of struggle aroused that band of wolves, my life would not be worth the snapping of a finger. I felt cold chills creep up my spine as I stood hesitating, one foot uplifted, my eyes staring at that motionless figure.

I waited too long, until every vantage left me. Suddenly the soldier swung back from his lookout on to firmer ground, wheeled, and faced me. I marked his start of surprise, noting his right hand drop, with soldierly instinct, upon the sword hilt, half drawing the blade before recovering from that first impulse. Then curiosity usurped the place of fear. He took one step backward, still upon guard, surveying me carefully with one glinting gray eye, for the other had been closed by a slashing cut, which left an ugly white scar extending half-way down his cheek. Except for this deformity, he was a man of fair appearance, having a stern, clearly chiselled face, with a certain arrogant manner, telling of long authority in scenes of war. A half smile of contempt played across his features as he ran me down from head to foot, evidently with the thought I was little worthy of his steel. It was then I recognized him. There had been familiarity about his great bulk from the first, yet now, as I faced him fairly, marking the haughty sneer curl his lips, I knew him instantly as that officer who passed us in the boat with the priest.

“By the true cross!” he exclaimed at last, as if his breath had barely returned, “you gave me a start such as I have not often had in all my soldiering. Yet you are no ghost; your

aspect is altogether too healthful for one condemned to exist upon air. *Saprista*! you must have a light foot to steal thus on me unheard. Who are you, fellow? What do you here upon this soil of Spain?"

Page 85

I leaned lightly on my rifle, so that I might swing it easily if occasion warranted, determined now not to fire unless it proved necessary to save my life, and made careless answer, using the same tongue in which I had been addressed.

“Nor are you more surprised, Senor, at my presence, than was I a moment back to stumble upon you when I supposed our party alone here in this wilderness. Who did you say held dominion over this country?”

“His most gracious Christian Majesty, Charles the Third, of Spain,” he replied shortly. “As his officer, I require that you give proper heed and direct answer to my questioning. Who are you, and where are you going?”

The man’s domineering manner amused me, yet I replied civilly to his words.

“A wandering hunter, Senor, from the Illinois country, homeward bound. I was not aware this territory had fallen into Spanish hands, supposing it still to be under French control. You are then a soldier of Spain?”

“Ay,” he returned ungraciously, eying me in his irritating way, “of the battalion of Grenada.”

He was evidently in doubt whether to believe my word, and I rejoiced to mark such indecision, accepting it as proof he had not gained a glimpse of De Noyan, for whom he was in eager search.

“It may be, fellow,” he consented to say at last, “you speak truth, and it may be your tongue is false as hell. These are times of grave suspicion, yet there are means of discovery open to men of action. I just noted the position of your camp yonder, and have sufficient men within easy reach of my voice to make it mine if need arise. So I warn you to deal fairly, or accept the consequences. The Marquis de Serrato is not one given to speaking twice in such quest. I have a soft tongue in ladies’ bowers, but my hand is hard enough in camp and field.”

He uttered these words in fierce threat, his one evil eye glaring full at me as though to terrify. Before I could answer, he shot forth a question, direct as a bullet from a gun.

“I beheld the flap of a dress yonder amid those trees; what means it? Women are not common in these parts—have you one in your company?”

“We have, my lord,” I replied, holding myself to calmness, striving to speak with apparent respect for his rank. “We are four, altogether; one has his wife along to cook for us.”

“You are voyaging from New Orleans?”

“Nay; from the savannahs of Red River, where we enjoyed a good season of sport.”

“You are French?”

“A natural guess, yet a wrong one, Senor. I am of English blood.”

“*Saprista*! ’t is a beast of a nation! I like not that such as you should be here. I will call some of my men and visit your camp.” He spoke sternly, taking a step backward as if about to seek his companions. “The tale you tell may be true enough, yet these are troublous days along the river, and my orders are strict against permitting any to pass unsearched.”

Page 86

My hands clinched hard around the gun-barrel for a swing, while I braced my body for a leap forward, yet held back from such desperate action, making hazard of one more effort to draw him out.

“I have met soldiers of Spain before, my lord,” I said, speaking the words with deference, yet managing to inject sufficient tinge of sarcasm to the tone, “yet never previously found them so fearful of a stray hunter’s camp as not to dare approach it without a guard of armed men. My companions yonder are asleep, excepting the woman; we are only three, and of peaceful life. You would discover nothing except warm welcome at our fire.”

I caught the quick responsive smile lighting his hard, thin face, observing how suddenly awakened pride and contempt combined to curl his upturned moustache.

“Ah!” he exclaimed gayly, with a derisive wave of the hand, “so you suppose it is from fear I proposed calling others to accompany me! *Caramba*! ’tis well you put your suspicion in no stronger words. But stay; I trust not altogether the truth of your tale. Saints’ love! a soldier can place faith only in what he sees—yet your face is frank and simple enough, and, as you say, there are but three of you, besides the woman. I did mark that much from yonder tree. It will be small risk to one of my experience in arms, and my men sleep in weariness. Lead on, fellow, yet do not forget I wear this sword for use, not show.”

With muttered thanksgiving at my possessing so honest a countenance, and a blessing on the Spaniard’s pride, I turned back, beginning to retrace my steps along the narrow ridge, never deigning to glance across my shoulder, yet confident he was close behind. Every additional step I inveigled him from his camp was to my advantage, nor would I permit him to feel suspicion on my part, as fearlessness was certain to beget confidence, and my final plan of action was already made. We thus passed the spot where I had climbed the steep bank, and were, to the best of my memory, some twenty yards beyond the hiding-place of my boat, when the ridge widened, a thick fringe of low-growing trees completely shutting out all view of the water. It was a likely spot enough, having firm ground under-foot, with sufficient room for a royal struggle, and here I determined to try a passage-at-arms with my burly antagonist. It was useless to hope for surprise. He was an old soldier dogging my steps, doubtless eying my every motion, his own hand hard gripping his sword hilt, ready to cut me down did slightest need arise. No; it must be foot to foot, eye to eye, a club of steel against the dancing blade; yet I felt the strange contest would not prove unfair, for he was a man not as agile as in years agone, while his armor of proof, valuable as it might be in the turning of a sword thrust, would be more burden than protection against my rifle-stock.

“Senor,” I said, in studied courtesy, stopping suddenly and confronting him, “I have hunted across this wilderness more than one season, and dislike greatly being

estopped now by Spanish decree. Nor do I comprehend your right in this matter. Have you warrant for opposing our peaceful passage to the Ohio?”

Page 87

He stared at me in undisguised amazement at my boldness, a grim smile on his hard, set face.

“Ay! I have, fellow,” he finally retorted angrily, tapping his hilt. “’Tis in this scabbard at my side.”

“Then draw it, Senor,” I exclaimed, throwing forward my long rifle menacingly. “And may God stand with the better man.”

I have a conception that at the moment he believed he was being fronted by a crazed man, yet there was in my face an expression quickly teaching him otherwise, and, with a swift twist, he flashed his sword forth into the sunlight, standing on guard.

“*Por Baco*!” he growled savagely, “you must be little better than a fool to hoist that club. It will give me pleasure to teach you better manners toward a grandee of Spain.”

“Grandee, or not,” I retorted, angered at his implied contempt, “I may teach you a trick, Senor, with that same club, never learned in your Spanish fencing-schools.”

It was swift, intense fighting from the word, he proving past-master of his weapon, yet my stiff rifle-barrel was no mean defence against his lighter blade, with a reach preventing his point touching my body, and sufficient weight to bear down the thin, murderous steel whenever the two came into contact. It had been long practice with me, having picked up the pretty trick from a French zouave when I was a boy, so I swung the iron as if it were a single-stick; and, in truth, I know of no better fence against the stroke of a straight sword, although fencing-masters, I have heard, make light of it. Nevertheless it was new experience to this Spaniard, and it did me good to note how it angered the fellow to be held back by such a weapon. He made such stress to press in behind my guard that he began to pant like a man running a hard race. Nor did I venture to strike a blow in return, for, in simple truth, this soldier kept me busier with parry and feint than any swordsman before, while he tried every trick of his trade, not a few of them strange to me. So I bided my time, confident he must make an opening for fit return if he kept up such furious attack, and thus, with retreat and advance, hack and guard, thrust and parry, we tramped up a wide bit of ground, while there was no sound of the struggle, except our hard breathing, with now and then a fierce curse from him as his flashing steel nicked on my gun-barrel, or flew off into thin air just as he thought to send its deadly point home.

Such fighting is wearing even to seasoned nerves, and the dazzle of the sun bothered my eyes, yet he had pressed me back scarcely more than a couple of yards when his dancing blade slipped stealthily up my brown barrel, suddenly nipping the loose sleeve of my doublet. As it pricked into the cloth, scraping the skin of my forearm, I let the fellow have the end of the muzzle full in the side. It was not the best spot for such a thrust, nor could I give it proper force, yet I think it cracked a rib, from

Page 88

the way the Spaniard drew back, and the sudden pallor of his face; indeed, so ghastly white he got, I thought him done for, and lowered my barrel carelessly. He was more of a man than I had reckoned on, or else his pride made him averse to accepting defeat, for with one quick spring, like a wounded tiger, he was inside my guard, his ugly point rasping into me just beneath the shoulder. Saint Andrew! It was an awkward touch, especially as the tough steel held, the punctured flesh burning like fire; but fortunately the fellow was in too great pain himself to press his advantage, and, as we clinched and went down together, I chanced to be on top, throttling him with right good-will.

That which followed was but a small matter, yet I left him there, waiting the discovery of his comrades, in as comfortable a posture as possible, confident he could give no alarm. That Spaniard was a brave man, and I have ever had respect for such.

CHAPTER XVI

WE CHANGE OUR COURSE

My attempt to recross the river proved difficult. I had lost no small amount of blood from my wound, which, besides weakening me, had so stiffened my right shoulder as to render any strain upon the oars a constant pain. Yet the excitement nerved me to the effort, and, crushing down weakness by sheer force of will, I drove the heavy boat straight through the low, overhanging bushes on to the soft mud of the bank. Before I could arise to my feet Madame was standing beside the dripping prow, her great eyes staring at the blood stains discoloring my doublet.

“You are hurt!” she exclaimed, her lips white with apprehension. “I beg you tell me, is it a serious wound?”

“Nay, the merest scratch, Madame,” I answered hastily, for it added to my pain to mark such anxiety in her face. “Not worthy your thought, but I will ask you to call the others at once, and have them load everything into the boat without delay. I will await you here, as I find myself weak from loss of blood.”

She stood gazing intently at me, as if she read my most secret thoughts; and no doubt my face was sufficiently white to alarm her, yet I smiled back into her eyes, and she turned away, running lightly up the bank. Nor was she long away, or noisy in her mission, scarcely a minute having elapsed before the three came trooping down to the water-side, their hands laden with camp utensils, De Noyan wide awake enough, and filled with intense interest in my adventures, but the Puritan yet cock-eyed from sleep, stumbling as he walked like a man in a dream.

“Take the oars, both of you,” I said quietly, totally ignoring the question in the eyes of the Chevalier. “I have tasted a sword point, and am weakened from loss of blood. Pull up the stream, and be swift and quiet about it.”

“Hast thou been smitten of the Philistine, friend Benteen?” loudly questioned Cairnes, stumbling noisily across the seats.

Page 89

“Time enough to tell my story when we are beyond danger,” I returned tartly, annoyed by his awkwardness. “If you utter another word before we are around yonder headland, I will have De Noyan hoist you overboard.”

I saw him glance askance at the unconscious Chevalier as if mentally calculating his ability to perform the feat. Then his glinting gray eyes swept the sodden shore as though vaguely wondering what it was we fled from in such unseemly haste. Nor did I long withdraw my own anxious gaze from that north bank, until we rounded the bend in the stream, and were safely removed from view of any one below. I was able to mark no sign of life along the ridge, my faith reviving that the Spanish sailors yet slept soundly, while as to their irate commander, I had trussed him with a thoroughness which left me confident. Feeling reassured I finally yielded to Eloise’s entreaties, laying bare my breast and permitting Madame to wash away the clotted blood and apply such bandages as might easily be procured. She was extremely gentle about it; but I marvelled somewhat at the trembling of her white fingers and the pallor of her face, for it was not a bad wound, De Noyan hesitating not to make light of it, although he acknowledged it was a strong wrist which drove the tuck in. Anyway, what with the reaction and the loss of blood, I lay back quite spent, telling over briefly those incidents that had occurred to me while they slept.

“And now,” I said, addressing the Puritan, who was seated at the bow-oar, where I could see nothing of him except the bobbing of his red crop, “how do you know this stream makes a circuit and approaches the mouth of the Ohio? It beareth a little to the west of north here.”

“It was the Spanish captain camping here as I passed down,” he answered, speaking abominably through his nose. “They called him Castellane, a little fellow, with pop-eyes, who pretended to light his pipe from my hair. He pointed it out upon a map some black-frocked papist had drawn. It was plain enough to the eye, but ’tis likely they lied, for they were all spawns of Satan.”

“True or false,” I commented coolly, “we seem likely to find out. I have also heard somewhere—no doubt in the Illinois country—about a northern trend to this stream, and one thing is certain, there is no hope for us otherwise; there can be no running those guard-lines back yonder.”

“Do you mean we push on up this river?” broke in De Noyan, who had managed to make something out of our conversation, especially as the Puritan illustrated his knowledge by rudely tracing with a stumped forefinger a map on the board where he sat. “*Sacre*! ’tis the dirtiest red slough ever I navigated. Why not try the other thing? A brush with those gentlemen below would be more to my taste.”

“Ay, Master Benteen,” boomed Cairnes with pious emphasis, reading the meaning of the other through his French gestures. “Methinks the Lord of Hosts would assuredly

strengthen the hearts of His servants for such a fray. How many, friend, do you suppose they number, those unwashed sons of Belial?”

Page 90

“I can only guess. There were twelve oars in the boat passing us on the lower river, while four others sat with guns in their hands; besides these are the Marquis de Serrato and the Capuchin priest, making a total of eighteen, all of whom we must reckon upon as being fighting men at a pinch.”

“Faith, merely enough to make the affair of interest,” muttered De Noyan, as I explained my words to him. “Hardly enough even by your count, as the officer nurses a cracked rib, while the priest would prove of small moment when it came to blows. I am for bearing down upon the knaves in sudden onset; it will require but a crack or two ere the villains let us by.”

“May the God of Battles place me within fair stroke of that accursed gray-backed emissary of Rome,” snorted the Puritan, his red hair erect. “I promise, Master Benteen, to smite as did David at Goliath.”

I gazed uneasily about from where I lay at the feet of Madame, only to perceive her eyes resting upon me as if she waited anxiously my decision.

“Do not suppose,” she said quickly as our glances met, “that I shall shrink from the peril of encounter. If it is best, you may trust me to do whatsoever may become a daughter of France.”

“Nor do we question it, Madame,” I returned warmly, noting the unrestrained flash of pride leaping into the careless eyes of her husband at these brave words. “But to invite such conflict in our present condition would be sheer madness. There are only two men among us, for I am but half a man, the rapier thrust has robbed me of so large an amount of blood; nor do we possess fit weapons to wage battle against so well-armed a company as blocks our passage. De Noyan sports his straight sword, which would be well wielded at close quarters; I possess my rifle, with small store of powder and ball, all of which are likely to be needed to save us from starving in this wilderness; while Cairnes here might indeed prove a strong arm with the tuck I brought back with me, yet probably knows nothing of the secrets of thrust and parry. Pish! ’tis not worth thinking about. Pit such an outfit as this against eighteen well-armed men,—for the Marquis can shoot for all his cracked rib, nor do I doubt the fighting qualities of the priest,—and the venture becomes too difficult for parley. Nay,” warming up as I noted the hot-headed gallant preparing for speech, “nor is this all we should have to contend with. Above, along the upper river, there are at least three other expeditions of Spanish soldiery. They are warned of De Noyan’s escape, already guarding every junction. Suppose we succeeded—which in itself would be a miracle—in cutting our way out from here, could we hope to distance a twelve-oared boat racing against the current, or escape a clash with those others? I know the difference between a bold dash and the utter foolhardiness such a hopeless venture as this would be.”

"*Sacre*! you appear strangely over-cautious all at once," and I detected a covert sneer in the Chevalier's low, drawling tone. "The Spaniard's blade must have let out the best of your blood. Were you a soldier, now, instead of a mere forest rover, the odds you mention would only serve to stir you into action."

Page 91

“Pardon, Monsieur,” I said quietly, holding my temper, “it may be I have seen harder service than some who boast loudly their soldiership. It requires more than a gay dress, with some skill in the fencing-schools, to make a soldier in my country, nor do I believe you will ever find me lagging when a proper time comes to strike blows.”

“So I supposed until now; yet ’tis evident you would have us continue toiling for weeks against this foul current rather than strike one quick blow, and be free from the mess.”

“Nay, Monsieur,” my voice coming stern in rebuke of his rashness, “you are wrong. You know perfectly well, De Noyan, I risk my life readily as any man in a good cause. I have ranged the woods since boyhood, long accustomed to border broil and battle—there is scarcely an Indian trail between the Great Lakes and the country of the Creeks I have not followed either in peace or war. I have faced savage foemen in battle, and crossed steel with those of your own school, and although I may wear no glittering gold lace, nor sport a title with which to dazzle the imagination of a girl, yet the man venturing to sneer at my courage, either amid the wilderness, or in the town, makes answer for the speech, whenever I come to my strength again.”

“Always at your service, Monsieur,” he murmured gently, “with the greatest pleasure.”

“Very well then,” I went on, barely noting his words, yet marking the look of distress on the face of his young wife, and despising him for it. “Understand this, Monsieur—we make no battle here, whether it suit your hot-brained desires or not. I dragged you from the jaws of death at the request of her who sits in silence yonder. I will never consent that your rashness now draw her into the peril of such a *melee* as the attempt to run that gantlet. Cairnes,”—I turned to face the Puritan, sitting all this time with open mouth listening to our quarrel, yet scarcely comprehending a word that passed,—“this gay French cockerel would throw us against those eighteen men below, to fight our way from here to the Ohio, as if the Spaniards between were so many buzzing mosquitoes, and you are not greatly averse to trying that same experiment.”

“It would be a godly and pious service to smite so black and Papist a crew.”

“No doubt of that; yet, Master Cairnes, you are scarcely the sort who would involve a lady in such broil, when, if we escaped at first, the chances are we should have wounded to care for, or, perchance, be prisoners borne southward under Spanish guard—a contingency not over-pleasant, I imagine, to a preacher of your faith.”

I saw him twist his little eyes as if in petition for guidance, while he ran his hand nervously through his red hair before venturing a reply.

Page 92

“It must ever be as the Lord wills, friend Benteen,” he returned soberly, De Noyan surveying the fellow as he might some strange animal whose ways he did not understand. “I am not one to draw back my hand once upon the plough. Yet I have found you of a level and cool head in matters of judgment, and it is meet we exercise due care over this rare flower of womanhood who shares our dangers. I like not the hard pull up this swift current,” he cast anxious eyes at the swirling stream. “It is not clear into what additional peril it may lead, nor do I feel gifted at the oars, now the provisions bid fair to become somewhat scant.”

I waited for no more.

“The Puritan sufficiently agrees with me,” I announced to De Noyan firmly. “We will pull on up this stream until we learn its true trend, and are beyond Spanish overhauling. It will be best to lose no time in placing a good stretch of water behind us.”

During this controversy our boat had drifted against the southern bank, its side softly scraping the mud, its bow entangled amid the roots of an overhanging bush. To my surprise the Chevalier, instead of picking up his oar, grasped a bit of the projecting root, and, sword dangling after him, coolly stepped forth upon dry land.

“You and your cursed canting preacher can do as you please,” he announced carelessly, staring down at us, “but if you desire to retain me as one of this interesting party, you will wait until I return.”

“Surely, man, you do not propose attacking the Spaniards single-handed? This is sheer madness.”

He laughed lightly at the look of consternation on my face, twisting his moustache between his white fingers, his good humor instantly restored.

“Nay, most valiant hunter of game,” he returned gayly. “*Le diable*! you appear as horrified as your hellfire friend yonder at sight of a crucifix. *Sacre*! I am not such a fool. I know when the odds are too great, even although I wear a uniform. Still, should I chance to meet obstruction during my ramble, it is not likely I shall run from it without a pass or two. I merely return to our camp, and will be back presently, if naught unpleasant occur.”

“Our camp? You deliberately venture your life, and ours as well, from mere bravado?”

“*Bravado*! *Sacre*! you do wrong to use such term. ’T is of far greater moment than that —I seek the curling iron I have just missed from out my toilet-bag. I mind me now I laid it beside the tree while I slept.”

Before I could recover speech to stay him, he vanished into the thick cane. It was a difficult task to make the practical-headed old Puritan comprehend the nature of his

quest, and when it slowly dawned upon him for what trivial matter the Frenchman undertook so desperate a journey, there came across his seamed and withered face so odd a look of complete disgust, I laughed outright in my nervousness, discovering some slight response in the amused eyes or Madame. It proved a good hour before the Chevalier returned, somewhat bedraggled of attire, yet with his prize dangling at the belt, and dropped wearily upon a seat within the boat.

Page 93

"'Tis time to move," he answered, responding to my look of inquiry. "They were at the camp when I left; and appeared in ill humor, from what little I could understand of their Spanish mouthings. They had just released the noble Marquis from where you trussed him upon the rock, and his language has given me a headache."

CHAPTER XVII

WE MEET WITH AN ACCIDENT

I find it poor work transcribing so much regarding myself in recounting these small adventures, yet how else may I tell the story rightly? This all occurred so long ago the young man of whom I write seems hardly the same old man who puts pen to paper. The impression grows upon me that I merely narrate incidents which befell a friend I once knew, but who has long since passed from my vision.

It was wearying work, toiling up the muddy Arkansas, and in the end disastrous. Occasionally, for miles at a stretch, our hearts were gladdened by a curve toward the northward, yet we drew westerly so much we became fearful lest the Jesuit had made false report on the main course of the stream. Every league plunged us deeper into strange, desolate country, until we penetrated regions perhaps never before looked upon by men of our race. The land became more attractive, the sickly marsh giving place to wide, undulating plains richly decorated with wild grasses, abloom with flowers, bordered by a thick fringe of wood. Toward the end of our journeying by boat, after we had passed two cliffs upreared above the water, the higher rising sheer for two hundred feet, we perceived to the northward vast chains of hills rising in dull brown ridges against the sky-line, seemingly crowned with rare forest growth to their very summits. During all these days and nights in only two things could we deem ourselves fortunate —we discovered no signs of roving savages, while wild animals were sufficiently numerous to supply all our needs.

Three days' journey beyond the great cliff—for we voyaged now during the daylight, making camp at nightfall—I became convinced of the utter futility of further effort. By this time I had recovered sufficiently from my wound to assume a share of labor at the oars, and was pulling that afternoon, so my eyes could glance past the fiery red crop of the Puritan, who held the after-oar, to where the Captain and Madame rested in the stern. I remarked De Noyan's dissatisfied stare along the featureless shore we skirted, and the lines of care and trouble becoming daily more manifest upon Madame's face. Thus studying the two, I cast about in my own mind for some possible plan of escape.

Page 94

They had been conversing together in low tones, so low, indeed, no words reached me, while the preacher knew nothing of the language employed. Nevertheless I could guess its purport. It was sufficiently clear to all of us that we merely wasted strength longer breasting the swift current of this river, and were constantly drawing farther from our goal. Yet I was of proud spirit in those days, finding it not easy to swallow my hastily spoken words, so I continued to pull steadily at the heavy oars, not seeing clearly how best to conquer myself, confess my former mistake, and advise retreat. Fortunately a stronger influence than false pride urged me to action. Marking again how sadly Eloise drooped her sobered face above the water, it put the heart of a man in me to acknowledge my error, offering such amends as were still possible.

It seems simple enough, yet it was not so small a struggle, nor did I fully win the battle over stubbornness until the gray of evening began wrapping about us hazy folds of cloud, the time coming when we must seek suitable night camp. It was then I found tongue, even while glancing across my shoulder, through the shadows, searching for a landing-place. As if all this were yesterday, I recall the scene. Everything swam in the gray haze, which, settling across the water, shut off from view much of the land. We were nearly abreast of where a smaller stream came leaping down from the right to hurl its clear current far out into the muddy river. So rapid was this discharge, the waters about us were thrown into turmoil, tossing our boat like a cork, causing Madame to grasp the rail nervously. Its narrow mouth was partially concealed by overhanging shrubbery, so we were well within the sweep of its invading waters before I could conjecture the force with which it came. Through the dim light, confusing to the eyes, I sought to peer ahead. The hills, huddled much closer to the shore, appeared rough in their rocky outlines, while the heavy underbrush, clinging tightly to the water-side, offered nothing in the way of a suitable camping-spot. Beyond the tumultuous sweep of this northern tributary, however, I discovered a considerable patch of grass, overshadowed by giant trees, and there I made selection of the spot which should complete our upward voyage.

“Steer us in toward yonder green bank, Madame,” I called to Eloise, “where you see that group of trees through the fog. God willing, it shall prove our last camp before we turn east and south once more.”

It did my heart good to observe the sudden brightening of her face at these words of promise, as if they came in direct answer to prayer. I understood then how weary she was with our toll, how cruel I had been to hold her so long at it. She had given utterance to no complaint; even now, it was not her voice which welcomed my decision. It was the Chevalier, seldom failing in ready speech, whose careless tongue rasped me with quick retort.

Page 95

“Ah, so you have really come to your senses, Benteen,” he cried eagerly. “I thought it would not be much longer after you were able to get grip upon an oar. Our red-headed friend has slow tongue of late, yet I warrant he has little love for such man-killing work; so a turn-about will be the vote of us all. Saint Anne! ’tis the happiest word to ring in my ears since this cursed trip began.”

Nothing tests the innate quality of a man like the wilderness. However bold of heart, if every utterance is a complaint he will prove a constant hardship. I doubted not both De Noyan and the Puritan would show themselves true men if emergency confronted us; but in the daily plodding routine of travel the Chevalier gave way to little worries, jerking along in the harness of necessity like an ill-broken colt; while Cairnes, who pulled steadily in sullen discontent, was much the better comrade of the two.

“Call it what you please,” I answered shortly, never removing my gaze from the pleased face of Madame, thus keeping better control over my tongue. “I have become convinced the map of the Jesuit priest lied, and this stream runs not northward. It is useless pushing any farther.”

“Where, then?”

“Back, of course. To drift down-stream will be easy now we know something of the current. We return to the junction of the rivers, where we left the Spaniards—’tis hardly probable they are still there; but if they are, then we must trust to our stout arms, and have faith in the right.------ By heavens! Cairnes, what mean you? Damme, man, would you overturn the boat?”

This hasty word of expostulation had hardly left my lips before the Puritan scuttled clumsily overboard, his red hair cropping out of the seething water like a rare growth of fungus. Another instant, and the full shock of that racing current struck our bow, hurling it about as if the trembling boat were an eggshell. Over him we went, his pudgy fingers digging vainly for some holding-place along the slippery planks, his eyes staring up in terror.

“For God’s sake, cling tight, Eloise!”

I heard this shout of warning from De Noyan as he fell backward into the water, which, luckily, was scarcely above his waist. Helpless to prevent the plunge, I joined company at the bow, going down well over my head without finding footing, and coming to the surface face to face with the Puritan, who was spluttering out river water and scraps of Calvinistic speech, striving madly to lay hold on some portion of the boat, now spinning away on the swift flood. It was no time to seek explanation from any man wrathful as Cairnes appeared to be, so I devoted my attention to doing the one thing left us,—-keeping the crazy craft upright to save Madame and the cargo. Nor was this an easy task. Seldom have I breasted such angry, boiling surge as beat against us—there was

no fronting it for those of us beyond our depths, while even De Noyan, making a manful struggle, was

Page 96

forced slowly back into deeper water, where he floundered helpless as the rest. It spun us about like so many tops, until I heard a great crunching of timbers, accompanied by a peculiar rasping which caused my heart to stop its pulsation. All at once the heavy bow swung around. Caught by it, I was hurled flat against the face of a black rock, and squeezed so tightly between stone and planking I thought my ribs must crack.

It was then I noted Cairnes, struggling just beyond me, reaching backward with his foot until he found purchase against the stone, then lifting his great crop to gaze about, sweeping the moisture from his eyes. He braced one mighty shoulder against the boat's side, with such a heave as I never supposed lay in the muscles of any man; swung that whole dead weight free of the rock, and ere the dancing craft, we clinging desperately to it, had made two circles in the mad boiling, I felt my feet strike bottom, and stood upright, ready to do my share again.

"Are you safe, Madame?" I questioned anxiously, for I could see no signs of her presence from where I stood, and she uttered no sound.

"I am uninjured," she returned, "but the boat takes water freely. I fear a plank has given way."

"*Parbleu*!" sputtered De Noyan, with a great sound of coughing. "So have I taken water freely. *Sacre*! I have gulped down enough of the stuff to last me the remainder of life."

"Hold your wit until we are safe ashore, Monsieur," I commented shortly, for as I stood the strain was heavy on my arms. "Push toward the right, both of you, or the boat will sink before we can beach her; she takes water like a sieve."

We slowly won our way backward, the effort requiring every pound of our combined strength, De Noyan and I tugging breathlessly at the stern, the sectary doing yeoman service at the bow. Yet the effort told, bringing us into quieter water, although we upbore the entire weight of the boat on our shoulders after we made firm footing. The water poured in so rapidly Madame was for going overboard also, but we persuaded her to remain. Anyway, we drove the prow against the bank at last, and, as I rested, panting from exertion, I observed the others dragging themselves wearily ashore, Cairnes was a sight, with his great mat of red hair soaked with black mud, which had oozed down over his face, so as to leave it almost unrecognizable. He shook himself like a shaggy water-dog after a bath, flinging himself down full length with a growl. De Noyan fared somewhat better, coming ashore with a smile, even trolling the snatch of a song as he climbed the bank, but his gay military cap, without which, jauntily perched upon one side of his head, I had scarcely before seen him, had gone floating down-stream, and the fierce upward curl of his long moustachios had vanished. They hung now limp, leaving so little *a la militaire* in his appearance that I had to smile, noting the look of surprise in

Madame's eyes as he gallantly assisted her to the dry grass, before flinging himself flat for a breathing spell.

Page 97

“God guide us!” I exclaimed, so soon as I could trust myself to speak. “This is a hard ending to all our toil, nor do I understand how it came about.”

“*Sacre*!” commented De Noyan, glancing across at the fellow. “It looked to me as if yonder canting preacher either was taken with a fit, or sought to make ending here of two papists.”

I turned to face the grim-faced sectary, still too thoroughly winded by his late exertions to try the lift of a Psalm.

“See here, sirrah,” I began angrily in English, “perhaps you will explain what sort of a Connecticut trick you attempted to play there in the current?”

He twisted his narrow eyes in my direction, apparently studying the full meaning of my words before venturing an answer.

“I know not what you mean, friend,” he returned at last, in that deep booming voice of his. “Did I not perform my work with the best of ye?”

“Ay, you were man enough after we went overboard, but why, in the name of all the fiends, did you make so foul a leap, bringing us into such imminent peril?” The gleam of his eyes was no longer visible, but I marked the rise of his great shoulders, his voice rumbling angrily, like distant thunder, as he made reply.

“Why did I make the leap, you unregenerated infidel, you thick-headed heretic? Why did I? Better were I to ask why you ran the boat’s nose into that bubbling hell. Why did I? What else saved us losing every pound we carried, together with the woman, you cock-eyed spawn of the devil, only that Ezekiel Cairnes possessed sufficient sense to throw himself in the way, upbearing the bulk of the strain? The water was somewhat deeper than I supposed, and my feet found no bottom, yet ’t was the best thing to do, and the only hope of steadying the boat. Better for you and that grinning papist yonder to be on your knees thanking the Almighty He sent you a man this day, than lie there like so many hooked cods, gasping for breath with which to abuse one of the Lord’s anointed. Yet ’tis but righteous judgment visited upon me for consorting with papists and unbelievers.”

Feeling the possible justice of his claim I hastened to make amends to the wrathful and worthy man.

“You may be right,” I admitted slowly. “Certainly we will return thanks for deliverance each in his own way. As for me, I greatly regret having mistrusted your act. Perhaps it was best, yet I think we have small chance ever to use this boat again. It appears badly injured. However, we must await daylight to note the damage. In the meantime, let us

make shift to camp; a hot fire will dry our limbs and clothing, and put us in better humor for the morrow."

CHAPTER XVIII

A HARD DAY'S MARCH

Page 98

The dawn came with rosy promise of a fair day, a frost lying white over the grass-land, sufficient nip in the air to stir the blood. Before the others were aroused I examined the boat, which rested high in the mud where we had heaved it the evening previous. The cruel rent in the solid planking was such as to afford little hope of our ever being able to repair it. How the accident occurred I did not rightly comprehend, but we had been cast ashore on the western bank of that swift maelstrom. In the light of dawn, I gazed forth upon the whirlpool extending between the rock against which we had struck and the bank where I stood, in speechless wonder at the miracle of our rescue. Standing there in silence broken only by the wild tumult of the waters, I thought of Eloise tossed helpless in their merciless grip, and bowed my head humbly above the shattered boat, offering up a heartfelt petition. I was not in those days a man of prayer, yet the germ of my father's robust faith was ever in my blood, and love teaches many a good lesson. Certainly I felt better within my own heart for that instant of communion under the paling stars.

My head was yet bowed over the gunwale when the heavy footsteps of the Puritan sounded close at hand. I could not fail to remark a softness in his deep voice as he spoke, resting one hand upon my shoulder.

"Thou knowest not, friend Benteen, how it gladdens my old heart to find thee before the throne of grace. I fear thou art not greatly accustomed to look up unto God in time of trouble, yet doing so can never weaken thy arm for the moment of trial. Acknowledge the Lord of Hosts, nor dream thou wilt ever prove less of a man because thy heart responds to His many mercies."

"You speak truly," I returned soberly, feeling a new respect for him in that hour. "There is no better way in which to start the day; and, unless my eyes deceive me, this bids fair to prove a day of sore trial. Have you looked to the damage done the boat?"

"Nay," he returned earnestly, bending low to examine the rent. "I slept like a man in drink, and even now am scarcely well awakened. 'T is, indeed, a serious break, friend; one, I fear, which will prove beyond our remedying."

"Have you skill with tools?"

"It is one of my gifts; yet of what use in the wilderness where tools are not to be found? However, I will see what may be done, after we break our fast—there is little accomplished working on an empty stomach."

It was a morning of sorrowful labor; from the beginning a perfectly hopeless one. The planking had been so badly crushed that a portion was actually ground into powder, leaving a great gaping hole. To patch this we possessed no tool to shape the wood properly, or, indeed, any wood to shape, except the seats of the oarsmen. Nor did we possess nails. More than one expedient was resorted to with bits of canvas, wooden

pegs, or whatsoever else we could lay hands upon, but our efforts resulted each time in sickening failure. At last, long before the sun had attained the zenith, the old preacher looked up, disappointment written on every line of his rough face, to say grimly:

Page 99

“We waste toil, friends; the boat floats no more for all our labors. Nor do I deem it the will of the Lord we longer continue to wear ourselves out in vain effort to undo His work.”

He wiped the beads of perspiration from his low forehead, pushing his hand through his matted hair.

“Were it not for the woman,” he added more cheerfully, “the accident would not be so bad either. I am cramped by long boat service, and would welcome a stiff tramp to loosen out the joints of my legs.”

I glanced across uneasily at Madame, for we were all seated on the grass in the sunshine, but could perceive nothing except encouragement in the clear depths of her brave eyes.

“Fear nothing on my account,” she said quietly, instantly reading my thoughts as if my face were an open book. “I am strong, and shall not greatly mind the walking.”

“At least you are strong of heart,” I returned gravely. “But such a trip as now lies before us will test your power of endurance greatly. Yet what must be done is best done quickly, and there are unpleasant memories clustering about this spot, making me anxious to leave it before another night. Let each one speak frankly his thought as to our future course, so we may choose the route aright. De Noyan, you are a soldier, accustomed to places of difficulty and peril. What would you suggest?”

He was lying flat upon his back, hands clasped beneath his head, puffs of white smoke from his pipe curling lazily up into the blue sky; nor did he remove the stem from between his lips as he made easy answer.

“Faith, man, my service on campaign has ever been with the horse; nor am I fond of using my own limbs for travelling. It would be far easier, I think, to knock up the old boat here; then, with whatsoever else we might find in this God-forsaken wilderness, construct some sort of raft to upbear our company, and so drift down with the stream. *Parbleu*! it would be a relief from those cursed oars. If the load be too heavy, the preacher can be left behind; ’t would be small loss.”

“Your plan sounds bravely in words, Chevalier, but were we to attempt it, we should soon find ourselves in more serious stress than now,—ay! before we had covered the first day’s journey. My Calvinistic friend, what advice have you for our guidance?”

The sectary’s eyes were fastened upon the ragged line of hills at our back, and for the moment he made no response, his seamed face grave with thought.

“How far, Master Benteen,” he queried finally, “do you make it from here to the mouth of this river?”

“Not much short of sixty leagues,” I answered, after a bit of thinking. “The stream bends and twists so it is difficult to judge the true distance.”

“It was a grievous journey,” he admitted with a groan, “one I care not to travel again, unless it be revealed plainly to me as the will of the Lord. I name the distance full seventy leagues. What has been the main direction of our course?”

Page 100

“To north of west.”

“Ay! Are we, think you, thirty leagues to northward of where we left the Spaniards?”

“I should say yes, maybe ten leagues more.”

“I doubt the extra ten, but even at thirty it would be foolishness to retrace all that hard-won distance merely for the sake of keeping in sight of this muddy stream, the very water of which is unfit for Christian stomach, and of no value otherwise. ’Tis my vote we strike directly east and north, following as straight a trail as possible until we find the great river. It should be as easy travelling as along this bank, and will bring us out above the Spanish lines of guard.”

I know not how long I sat there gazing silently into his impassive leathern face, turning over within my own mind the argument of his words. He was neither woodsman nor mountaineer, yet possessed some judgment. Thus considering, I saw but one possible objection to his plan—lack of water or of game along the unknown route to be traversed. But serious scarcity of either was hardly to be expected at this season among the mountains, while the weary leagues of southing thus saved would make no small difference in the length and time of our journey.

“It appears to me our best hope,” I admitted candidly. “It will involve clambering over rocks, yet yonder range does not appear high, nor of a width to keep us long in its shadow; besides, the lower reaches of this river are marshy leagues upon leagues, and to my mind walking will be easier if we take higher ground. It is all guesswork at the best. We know how impassable the trail will be below, and, even if we retrace our steps down the river, we shall have to make a wide detour to cross this mad stream. But wait; we have heard no word from Madame de Noyan.”

She also was looking upon those cool, blue hills, apparently close at hand, but turned instantly at my addressing her, making quick and confident answer.

“My word is only this, Geoffrey Benteen: you are a woodsman, better capable of such decision than any woman whose life has been lived within the town. I go cheerfully wheresoever your choice lies.”

It has ever been a source of strength to me to be thoroughly trusted by some other, and I instantly arose to my feet, feeling a new man under the inspiration of these heartsome words.

“Then that matter is decided,” I announced, a ring of confidence in my voice. “We will break bread once more, and then commence our journey.”

“*Sacre*!” ejaculated the Captain, yet lolling upon his back, “if it be like that same biscuit I had an hour since, breaking it will prove no small matter.”

The blazing sun stood an hour low in the west when we divided our small stock of necessaries so as to transport them, and, with merely a last regretful glance at the damaged boat which had been our home so long, turned our faces hopefully toward those northern hills, commencing a journey destined to prove for more than one a trip unto death. God's way is best, and there is a noble purpose in it all; for had we that day been enabled to view the future, not a single step would we have taken, nor should I have had in my memory a tale worthy of being written down.

Page 101

I led the little company, bearing rifle in hand, keeping vigilant outlook for game; De Noyan followed, where he might easily afford aid to his wife if she required the strength of his arm along the rough path; while the old Puritan, grumbling ever to himself, lumbered along well in the rear, although we were careful to keep within speaking distance of each other. We traversed a gently rising slope of grass land, with numerous rocks scattered over its surface, keeping as close as possible along the bank of the brawling stream, that we might make use of its narrow valley through the rocky bluffs, which threatened to bar our passage. These were no great distance away, so a steady gait—I set the pace slow not to distress Madame, who was cramped from long sitting within the boat—brought us in an hour to where our narrowing path was overhung and darkened by the closing in of gloomy mountain heights upon either side. It had an awesome look, like the yawning mouth of a cave, opening to intense darkness and mysterious danger. I saw a look almost of terror in Madame's eyes as she gazed, yet her lips uttered no protest, and I flung aside a desire to shrink back, with a muttered curse at my own folly. Saint Andrew! it is odd how superstition grips the best of us. Those rock walls, binding us within their scant confines as in a prison, were not particularly precipitous or high, yet our way was sufficiently perilous, leading along a contracted defile, the merest chasm, indeed, steep cliffs rising sheer on either side, merely the raging stream and a ribbonlike path between. The slight expanse of sky above was blue and clear, but it was sombre and gloomy enough down in that black hollow, where we made difficult progress amid loose bowlders.

Where this snake-like ravine widened out slightly we made choice for our first camp. We reached there near the sunset hour, although the sun itself had utterly vanished from our view long before, and we moved forward amid a semi-darkness most depressing. On the spot selected the towering wall of rock on our side of the little river overhung sufficiently to form a comfortable shelter at its base. I had a goodly supply of fresh pine boughs strewn so as to form a soft bed, while the Puritan busied himself gathering together ample materials for a fire, the reflected light of which caused the deep chasm where we rested to appear more gloomy than before, while scurrying night clouds closed us in as if imprisoned within a grave.

That evening was not devoted to much conversation. We were alike wearied from our long tramp, heavy-hearted, and strangely depressed by the desolate gloom of the rock cavern in which we lay. Even De Noyan yielded to this spirit of brooding and, after a faint effort at forced gayety, crept silently to his sleeping-place. The other two were not long in following him. I was thus left alone to keep the first watch of the night. Four lonelier, more miserable hours

Page 102

I do not remember serving at the call of duty. The round moon crept slowly through the black sky, until its soft, silvery beams rested, brighter than daylight had been in that gorge, in glowing radiance along the surface of the smooth, gleaming wall opposite, yet merely succeeded in rendering more weird and uncanny the sombre desolation. The night wind arose, causing the shadows of clinging pines to sway back and forth like spectral figures, while a solemn silence, awesome in its intensity, brooded over all, broken only by the noise of tumbling water, with occasional rasping of boughs against the face of the cliff. The fire died away into a few red embers, occasionally fanned into uncertain flame by breaths of air sucked up the gorge. By the time my guard ended I was so thoroughly unstrung that each flitting glimpse of deeper shadow tempted me to fire.

It was at midnight, or as close to that hour as I was capable of judging, when I aroused De Noyan and crawled into his place on the bed of boughs. I lay there watching him a brief space, as he walked over to the stream and plunged his face into the cool water. The last I recall previous to dropping off into deep slumber was how large his shadow loomed, silhouetted in the bright moonshine against a huge black bowlder directly in my front.

I know not the hour, yet I noted, even in awakening, that the moon had already passed from out the narrow ribbon of sky above, although still fringing in silver beauty the sharp summit of the crest, when a quick, nervous pressure upon my arm awoke me with a start of alarm. Lying at full length, his head uplifted, was De Noyan.

“Keep still, Benteen,” he whispered, his voice vibrant with excitement, “and look yonder. In the name of all the fiends, what is that?”

CHAPTER XIX

DEMON, OR WHAT?

I have been free from superstitious terror as most men, yet there were few in those days who did not yield to the sway of the supernatural. Occasionally, among those of higher education, there may have been leaders of thought who had shaken off these ghostly chains of the dark ages, seeking amid the laws of nature a solution for all the seeming mysteries in human life. Yet it could scarcely be expected a plain wood-ranger should rise altogether above the popular spell which still made of the Devil a very potent personality.

Consequently, as my anxious eyes uplifted toward the spot where De Noyan pointed, it need be no occasion for wonder that my blood turned to ice in my veins, and I felt

convinced I looked upon His Satanic Majesty. The vast wall of rock, arising a sheer hundred feet directly opposite to where we lay, appeared densely black now in the shadow, but as my glance swept higher along its irregularity, the upper edge, jagged from outcropping stones, stood clearly revealed in the full silver sheen of the moon, each exposed line, carven as from marble, standing distinctly forth in delicate tracery against the background of the night sky.

Page 103

Appearing to my affrighted eyes the gigantic form of two men strangely merged into one, there uprose on that summit a figure so odd, weird, and grimly fantastic, it was small wonder I gazed, never thinking it could be other than the Evil One. It was unclothed from head to heel, and, gleaming ghastly white beneath the moonbeams, it brought no Indian suggestion to mind. High above the head, causing the latter to appear hideously deformed, arose something the nature of which I could not rightly judge. It reminded me of a vast mat of hair sticking directly upward, ever waving back and forth to the breath of the night wind. Nor did this horrid figure remain one moment still. There upon the very edge of the precipice, it would leap high into the air, flinging aloft long gaunt arms, even appearing to float bodily forth into the space above us, to disappear instantly, like some phantom of imagination, amid the shrouding gloom of those rock shadows—flitting swiftly, and as upon wings, along the crest; now showing directly in our front, looming like a threatening giant, mocking with wild, furious gestures; then dancing far to right or left, a vague shade in the sheen, a mere nothing in the shadow, yet ever returning, the same weird, unnatural, spectral figure, wildly gyrating upon the air, leering down upon our speechless misery.

My eyes, wide-opened by terror, followed these movements, marking this ghastly shape. I listened vainly for the slightest sound to connect it with aught human. The mantle of the night's solemn silence, the dread stillness of wilderness solitudes, rested everywhere. I heard the mournful sighing of the wind amid jagged rocks and among the swaying branches of the cedars; the dull roar of the little river, even the stentorian breathing of the Puritan lying asleep behind us, but that was all. That hideous apparition dancing so madly along the cliff summit emitted no sound of foot or voice—-yet there it hung, foreboding evil, gesticulating in mockery; a being too hideous for earth, ever playing the mad antics of a fiend.

My gaze rested questioningly upon De Noyan's upturned face, and saw it ghost-like in lack of color, drawn and haggard. Mine no doubt was the same, for never have I felt such uncontrollable horror as that which, for the moment, fairly paralyzed me in brain and limb. It is the mysterious that appals brave men, for who of earth might hope to struggle against the very fiends of the air?

"*Mon Dieu*!" whispered my comrade, his voice shaking as if from an ague fit. "Is it not Old Nick himself?"

"If not," I answered, my words scarce steadier, "then some one must tell me what; never before did I gaze on such a sight. Has it been there long?"

"I know not whence it came, or how. I was not watching the crest. After I bathed at the stream to open my eyes better, I began overhauling the commissary for a bite with which to refresh the inner man. I was sitting yonder, my back against the big stone, munching away contentedly, humming the words of a song to keep me awake, when I chanced to glance up to mark the position of the moon, and there that hell's imp danced

in the sheen as he has been dancing ever since. *Sacre*! it was the bravest deed of my life to crawl here and awaken you; the devilish thing did charm me as a snake does a bird."

Page 104

The mere sound of human speech put new heart into me, yet I found it difficult to avert my eyes from that fantastic figure.

“If that is the Devil,” I said more composedly, still enthralled by the baleful presence, “surely we have neither of us done so much evil as to make us especially his victims.”

As I concluded these words, my courage creeping back, a sudden rustling among the pines at our back startled us to glance around. Out of the gloom of the rock shelter a figure uplifted itself on all fours, and the faint light of a star glimmered directly down upon an upraised, terror-stricken face. Before either De Noyan or myself could mutter a hasty warning, the half-awakened preacher sent his great, gruff voice booming out into the air:

“O Lord God of Israel deliver Thy servant from destruction and the clutch of the Evil One. O Lord God of——”

I flung myself on him, clutching his brawny throat, throttling his speech into a vain gurgle. The fellow made so fierce a struggle, mistaking me for an assistant of the fiend, my fierce hold was jerked loose, and I was hurled heavily backward at full length upon the stones, striking with no pleasant force upon my shoulder.

“Verily have I overcome the Devil by Thy strength, O Lord!” he began fervently.

“Be still, you red-headed Connecticut fool,” I commanded sharply, now thoroughly aroused. “Stop, or I ’ll drive into you a leaden slug to silence that blundering tongue of yours for good and all. Get up from your knees there, and play the man. If needs be you must pray, keep grip on that bull voice of yours.”

“It makes small odds now,” chimed in De Noyan with easier tone. “The Devil, or what, has disappeared from the rock.”

I glanced up at his words, to find them true. The sky was assuming a faint grayish tinge, as if the dawn were near. The vanishing of that spectral figure relieved us greatly, while the steady coming of daylight revived those spirits upon which the haunted night had rested grimly. Nevertheless I felt it incumbent to speak somewhat harshly to the yet sulking sectary for such untimely uproar.

“Did you mistake this for a conventicle, Master Cairnes,” I asked grimly, “an assembly of crop-eared worshippers, that you venture to lift your voice in such a howl when you wake? It will be better if you learn to keep still at such a time, if you hope to companion long with me.”

“You!” he scarcely deigned to lift his eyes to regard me. “You are but an unbelieving and damned heretic. Had it not been in all the earnestness of a contrite spirit I besought the Lord in prayer, wrestling even as did David of old, ’tis not likely the foul

fiend I beheld on yonder crest would have departed so easily. I tell you, you unregenerated son of iniquity, it is naught save the faith of the elect, the prayer of the redeemed, which overcomes the wiles of the Devil, and relieves the children of God from his snares."

Page 105

It was useless arguing with the fanatic; yet much of my previous superstitious terror at our unwelcome visitant had already vanished, there growing upon my mind a firm conviction that the apparition was not a denizen of the sulphurous regions of the damned, but was composed of flesh and blood, even as ourselves. I think Madame had been awake through the greater part of the commotion, as I noted her stir slightly even when De Noyan first informed me of the strange presence. Yet she spoke not a word. Realizing her judgment was ever clearer than that of either of my male companions, I turned to awaken her to some expression.

“And do you also, Madame, believe that we have been honored by a visit from His Satanic Majesty in person?” I asked, wondering as I spoke that she should appear so undisturbed in midst of our turmoil.

“It would be less terrifying to me could I so believe,” she replied gravely, her eyes questioning my face, as if to read therein what answer I desired. “I have that about my person,” and I marked that her fingers toyed with the beads of a rosary at her throat, “which would protect me from his touch.”

“What then did you make of that fantastic figure? I was so gravely startled myself by the apparition I saw double, scarcely retaining sufficient strength for the uplifting of a hand. So speak, Madame, and plainly, for our comforting,—was that flesh and blood, or was it some ghastly visitant from the unknown?”

“I believe,” she answered firmly, “it was human. To my eyes a wild man, partially arrayed in white skins, decorated with a multitude of great feathers, appearing ghastly tall, and weirdly distorted in the moonlight—a fiend, indeed, yet not of the upper air.”

“An Indian?”

“I know not what other name to choose. A savage surely, yet possessing a skin strangely fair in the sheen for one of the red race.”

My roving, unsatisfied eyes met those of De Noyan.

“Blessed Mother!” he ejaculated with a short, uneasy laugh. “I never would have thought it in the night. Holy Saints preserve me, if I was ever more a child! Yet now the dawn brings me new heart of courage, and I would not swear but Eloise may be right.”

“And you, friend Cairnes?” In a few, brief English sentences I retold to the sectary this opinion expressed by Madame. “Does your mind agree with ours?”

He stared at me gloomily, his hands knotting into each other, and his lips moving oddly ere he found speech.

“Nay,” he muttered at last, “you know little about such matters. I tell you again that it was the Devil my eyes saw. Twice have I looked upon him, and each time, in response to prayer, has the good Lord delivered His servant from the bondage of sin, the snares of the fowler. Not by carnal weapons of the flesh are we bidden to overcome, but by spiritual wrestling; even as did he of old wrestle with the angel, are we to master the adversary of souls.”

Page 106

“Madame possesses that also,” and I pointed to the rosary at her white throat, “by which she is able to resist the contamination of evil.”

He sniffed disdainfully, his coarse red hair appearing to bristle all over his bullet head.

“’T is a foul device designed to rob men of the true power of prayer,” he declared angrily. “I say to you, it was the voice of prayer which caused that foul fiend to fly away to his own. The prayer of the righteous availeth much.”

“True, friend,” I admitted as he paused for breath, amused to behold a man thus played upon. “If it is a comfort to you, we all confess it was your voice which put an end to the dancing. Yet if there is a time for prayer, so there is time also for action, and the latter must be here now. Whatever adventure awaits us before nightfall, we shall meet it no less bravely if we first have food. So let us break our fast, and depart from this accursed spot.”

It was not a cheerful meal, our nerves being still at high tension, and we partook more from duty than any feeling of enjoyment. I must except the old Puritan, however, who would have eaten, I believe, had that same figure been dancing at his elbow. Many anxious looks were cast upward at the rock crest, every unwonted sound causing us to start and glance about in nervous terror. It seems to me now Eloise remained the most self-controlled among us, and I have felt sincerely ashamed at yielding to my weaker nature in thus betraying nervousness before that company. Yet had she been in safety I would have proven more of a man, as by this time no haunting superstition remained to burden my heart. I realized we were leaguered by flesh and blood, not by demons of the air, and had never counted my life specially valuable in Indian campaign. But to be compelled to look into her fair face, to feel constantly the trustful gaze of her brown eyes, knowing well what would be her certain fate should she fall into savage hands, operated in breaking down all the manliness within me, leaving me like a helpless child, ready to start at the slightest sound. De Noyan barely touched the food placed in front of him, and, long before Cairnes had completed his meal, the Chevalier was restlessly pacing the rocks beside the stream, casting impatient glances in our direction.

“*Mon Dieu*!” he ejaculated at last, “it is not the nature of a Frenchman to remain longer cooped in such a hole. I beg you, Benteen, bid that gluttonous English animal cease stuffing himself like an anaconda, and let us get away; each moment I am compelled to bide here is torture.”

Page 107

Experiencing the same tension, I persuaded the Puritan to suspend his onslaught, and, undisturbed by sight or sound, we began a slow advance, clambering across the bowlders strewing the narrow way, discovering as we moved forward that those towering cliffs on either side were becoming lower, although no possibility of scaling them became apparent. We travelled thus upwards of a quarter of a mile, our progress being necessarily slow, when a dull roar stole gradually upon our hearing. A moment later, rounding a sharp edge of projecting rock, and picking our way cautiously along a narrow slab of stone extending out above the swirling water, we came forth in full view of a vast cliff, with unbroken front extending from wall to wall across the gorge, while over it plunged the stream in a magnificent leap of fully one hundred and fifty feet. It was a scene of rare, romantic beauty, the boiling stream surging and dancing madly away from its foot, and the multicolored mists rising up like a gauzy veil between us and the column of greenish-blue water. Yet it pleased us little then, for it barred our progress northward as completely as would a hostile army.

Our depth of disappointment at facing this barrier was beyond expression. We could but stand in silence, gazing upon the broad, impassable sheet of water, blocking further advance. De Noyan was earliest to recover power of speech.

"*Le Diable*!" he swore, half unconsciously. "This cursed place is surely damned! Yet it has some consolation to my mind, for that will drive us backward into the lowlands, out of this demon-haunted defile."

"Your judgment is right," I returned gravely enough, not unrelieved myself by the thought. "There is no other course open to us. We shall be compelled to retrace our steps, and if we desire to reach the open before another night, we need be at it. May the good God grant us free passage, with no skulking enemies in ambuscade, for never saw I poorer spot for defence than along this narrow shelf."

Fortunately, the way proved easier travelling as we proceeded downward, and we were not long in passing beyond our haunted camp of the previous night. Below this spot—-which was passed in painful anxiety—we entered into that narrower, gloomy gorge leading directly toward the plain beyond. The little river foamed and leaped in deep black waves upon our left, the rocks encroaching so near that we were compelled to pass in single file, picking a way with extreme caution lest we slip upon the wet stones, and having neither time nor breath for speech. The Puritan led, bearing the Spaniard's naked rapier in his hand. Suddenly, from where I brought up the rear, his voice sounded so noisily I made haste forward fearing he had been attacked.

Page 108

He stood halted, staring like a demented man at a massive rock, a huge monster with sheer, precipitous front, filling every foot of space from the cliff wall to the river, completely closing, as by a wall of masonry, the narrow foot-path along which we had advanced unhindered the day before. It was easy to see from whence that rock mass came; the great fresh scar on the overhanging cliff summit high above told the fatal story of its detachment. Yet how had it fallen so suddenly and with such deadly accuracy across the path? Was it a strange accident, a caprice of fate, or was it rather the hellish work of design?

None knew at that moment; yet we stood there stupefied, staring into each others' despairing faces, feeling we were hopeless prisoners doomed to perish miserably within the gloom confines of that ghastly, haunted hell.

CHAPTER XX

BACKS TO THE WALL

"This is Indian treachery," I said decisively, my eyes searching the cliffs, "nor will they remain long inactive now they have fairly caught us in their trap. Let us get back out of this narrow way; there may be other loosened rocks where this one came from."

"Back where?"

"To some spot where we can defend ourselves in case of attack. These will prove different from any savages I have ever known if we fail to hear from them as soon as we are ready."

"But," protested De Noyan, as we scrambled retreating up the slope, "if there is no way leading from this pit of death, how are those devils going to get in? Will it not be more likely they will be content to starve us?"

"'Tis not Indian nature to hide in patience after having trapped their victims. Although there is no apparent way out to our eyes, nor time to search for one, yet we may put confidence in this: they never bottled us here without knowing some means whereby they might complete their work."

"It is likely to be a fight, then?"

"Either that or a massacre; God knoweth."

"If, friend Benteen," boomed Cairnes, now well in our front, and prodigal of voice as ever, "you expect a stand-up battle with the devils, 'tis my judgment you will find few spots better adapted for defence than yonder—there where the rock juts out so far; 'tis like a sloping roof to protect us from above."

It was as he described, a place fitted by nature for such a contest, the upper stratum of rock projecting so far forward as almost to form a cave beneath, while, partially blocking the centre of this darkened opening, uprose a great square slab of stone, forming of itself no small protection to a party crouching in its shadow. Moreover the ground fell away sharply, the higher point being twenty feet above the water level; and this at the widest part of the gorge, the entire slope thickly strewn with bowlders of varying size.

“You have made soldierly choice,” I acknowledged heartily, after a hasty survey. “It would be difficult to discover a more proper spot for purposes of defence. St. Andrew! but three of us ought to hold that mound against quite a party.”

Page 109

De Noyan broke in, perfectly at his ease with actual fighting in prospect. “Somewhat open as yet, but that can be remedied by use of those scattered stones. Upbuild the circle here, leaving in front of the great bowlder room enough for the three of us to battle at ease, with ample space in which to swing our sword-arms, the solid rock at our backs. Saint Anne! but it is beautiful! Bring the stones here so I may place them to the best purpose for such defence.” And he drew a rapid half-circle about the mouth of the shallow cave, his eyes brightening with interest.

“Pah! your doughty Frenchman appears overly anxious to be killed,” began Cairnes, casting an eager glance toward the provisions dropped upon the ground. “To my mind we had better break our fast before commencing such labor. It may happen we shall have no other chance to eat, and it would go hard against my nature to waste that pickled meat on naked savages. Ecod! it would try Job himself to stand by helpless, watching a clouted heathen gorge himself on what should be lying comfortable in our own stomachs. What say ye, Master Benteen?”

“That our first effort be with the stones,” I returned with decision. “After that, we can partake of food. The latter can be made ready while we work, if Madame will spread it here at the mouth of the cave—a bit farther back would prove better, under the protection of that slab of rock.”

Rejoicing at thus inducing our fair companion to seek safety under shelter, the three of us fell to work with energy. Under the direction of De Noyan, the scattered bowlders were rolled up the steep and piled in a solid wall, reaching nearly waist high, completely circling the open front of the cave, its centre somewhat advanced from the stone slab, with either flank resting solidly against the face of the cliff. It did me good to listen while De Noyan issued energetic orders, swearing at us ardently in army French as if we were of his own squadron of chasseurs.

It required the greater part of an hour to get our rude rock rampart in such condition as to satisfy the military taste of the Chevalier even measurably, and during that time we toiled as men must when their lives are soon to depend upon the result of their labor.

“*Saprista*!” he commented at last, wiping his streaming brow, and gazing about him critically. “It will answer fairly well, I think, although another row might strengthen the curves. Still, ’tis not likely we shall be called upon to battle against gun or pike, and if too high the stones might interfere with proper thrust of the sword. So let us lunch. Egad! the sight of that hungry preacher haunts me every time I turn around; besides, whatever resting-spell we get ere the ball opens will serve to steady our nerves for the onset. Have you spread forth a rare feast for our comrades, Eloise?”

She stood within the shadow, leaning lightly against the great stone, smiling at us.

Page 110

“All I have awaits your pleasure, gentlemen,” she returned bravely, “and I trust you may consider it a pleasant duty to do full justice to my skill.”

It has lingered a unique memory of those days, the outward carelessness with which we chattered away during that strange meal. Surely no company of wanderers was ever in more desperate stress than we at that moment. It was the merest chance of fate if one among us all lived to see the peaceful setting of the sun, now blazing high overhead. Yet that simple noonday repast, partaken of beneath the shadow of the overhanging rock, remains in memory as more redundant with merriment of tongue and face than any since we made departure from New Orleans. Were I not writing truthful narrative, I might hesitate at setting this down, yet there are doubtless others living to bear witness with me that there is often experienced an odd relief in discovering the presence of actual danger; that uncertainty and mystery try most severely the temper of men.

It certainly proved so with us that day, and De Noyan’s high spirits found echo even in the grim Puritan, who, being at last convinced that he was not called upon to wrestle with demons from the pit, was as full of manly fight as the best of us. Eloise added her gentle speech, while even I relaxed my anxiety, though I was careful enough to select a seat from which I could keep watch both up and down the ravine, convinced that our time of trial was not far away. In consequence of this chosen vantage of position I was the first to note those stealthy nude figures silently stealing from rock to rock, like so many flitting shadows, making their way down toward our position from the north. How they attained entrance to the gorge I could not conjecture; my eyes first detected their movement when their leaders stole noiselessly as phantoms about the great shelf of rock higher up the gorge. More than this fleeting glimpse I was unable to perceive from where I sat, our rude rampart somewhat obstructing the view, nor did I call the attention of the others to their approach. Nothing could be gained by exposing ourselves before need arose. Indeed, De Noyan chanced to observe their presence before I ventured upon speech at all.

“Ha, my masters!” he exclaimed suddenly, rising to peer above the low breastworks. “What have we here? By my soul, the ball is about to open, gentlemen; the enemy creeps forward as though uncertain of our whereabouts, yet hardly as if greatly fearing our numbers. What do you make of the fellows, Master Benteen?”

“Beyond doubt savages, but not of any tribe within my knowledge.”

Page 111

“Saint Denis! nor mine,” he acknowledged gravely, staring at them. “At this distance they seem to be of strangely whitish skin, and I am not over pleased with their mode of advance; it has the steadiness of a drilled column, such as I never before witnessed in Indian campaign. *Sacre*! note yonder how that tall fellow on the right guides them with his gestures. They take intervals as firmly as French grenadiers. Eloise,” he turned hastily toward his wife, more tenderness in his manner than I had ever before remarked, “it is going to be a hard battle, or I mistake greatly the temper of yonder warriors. Take this pistol; it is all I have of the kind. I will trust my fortune on the blade. You know how best to use it should things go wrong with us at the front.”

“I know,” she answered calmly, “I have lived all my life within hearing of Indian tales; yet could I not prove some aid beside you?”

“Nay, little woman; there is scarcely room for three of us to stand at the wall; we shall fight with freer hand knowing you are safe from savage blow behind the rock. Come, my lady, it is full time you were there now.”

She shook hands with us in turn, giving to each man a lightsome, hopeful word ere she drew back out of sight, and never before did I have such incentive to battle as I read within the depths of her dark eyes as she came to me the last of all. For a moment after she regretfully withdrew her hands from my clasp I remained motionless, absolutely forgetful of all else, until De Noyan’s voice, harsh now with excitement of approaching combat, recalled me to myself and my post of duty.

“It is time we took our positions, Messieurs,” he said, bowing with the rare French courtesy of battle. “Let Monsieur Cairnes find place upon my right, while Master Benteen, do you keep the left. It will be better to crouch low until I speak the word, and then God give you both strong arms and hearts.”

From behind the roughly piled bowlders in my front I had a fair view up the valley, and was enabled to mark clearly the attacking party as it advanced cautiously toward our position. It was composed of some thirty members, well-appearing fellows for savages, naked from the waist up, their exposed bodies quite light in color, and unpainted as is the usual Indian custom for war. Their leader was a tall fellow, having a head of matted coarse hair, which stood almost erect, thus yielding him a peculiarly ferocious aspect. The entire band moved forward, as if in response to prearranged signals, which must have been conveyed by motion, as I could distinguish not the slightest sound of speech. However, it was a relief to note they bore no weapons in their hands excepting the spear and the war-club, clear evidence that they had limited, if any, trade intercourse with Europeans. Yet they came on with such steadiness of purpose, amid such impressive silence, I instinctively felt we stood opposed to no tribe of cowards, whatever their name.

Page 112

As they crept, rather than walked, forward into the open space in our front, their restless, searching eyes were not long in perceiving the irregular outlines of our rude barricade, nor were they dilatory in deciding that behind that pile of rock were to be discovered those they sought. No attacking party operating upon the eastern continent, guided by all the strategy of civilized war, could have acted more promptly, or to better purpose. The old chief made a quick, peculiar gesture from left to right, and in instant response his clustered bunch of warriors spread out in regulated intervals, assuming positions not unlike the sticks of a fan such as the Creoles use, until they formed a complete semicircle, their flanks close in against the cliff, and their centre well back upon the bank of the stream. It was a pretty movement, executed with the precision of long discipline, and De Noyan brought his hand down applauding upon his knee.

"*Parbleu*!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "'Twas as well done as by troops of the line. I look for a warm time presently, when we cross arms with those fellows."

Even as he spoke, I observed the old chief passing rapidly from man to man, speaking briefly to each in turn and pointing toward us, as though giving special directions for the coming assault.

"Chevalier," I whispered, "would it not be well to try a shot at that tall-haired fellow?"

"It appears too great a distance to my eye."

"I have dropped a buck through forest limbs fifty feet farther."

"Then try your fortune," he said eagerly. "It may be those fellows have never heard the crack of a gun. The sound and sudden death might terrorize them."

I took careful aim above the wall, resting my long rifle-barrel in a groove between the stones, and fired. Ever since, it has seemed to me that God, for some mysterious purpose of His own, deflected the speeding ball, for never before or since did I miss such aim. Yet miss I did, for while the old chief leaped wildly backward, his cheek fanned by the bullet, it was the savage he conversed with who sprang high into air, coming down dead. Nor did a single warrior make a movement to flee. Instead of frightening, it enraged, driving them into savage fury as they stared at the stiffening body of their comrade. Scarcely had the smoke of the discharge drifted upward when, all their former impressive silence broken, and yelling like fiends incarnate, they made an impetuous rush for the hill.

"*Francais*! *Francais*!"

I was certain they used the word, fairly hissing it forth as if in bitter hatred, yet I had short enough time in which to listen as I hastily rammed home a second charge with which to greet them as they came.

“It will be best to draw, Messieurs,” spoke De Noyan in a cool, drawling voice. “Ah, that was better, Master Benteen!” as two of the advancing mob went stumbling to the bullet. “It leaves but twenty-seven to the three of us; not such bad odds! Now, friends, yield no step backward, and strike as you never struck before.”

Page 113

I enjoyed little space in which to glance behind where I knew Eloise crouched beneath the protecting shadow of the great stone, yet I am certain I felt the full magic of her eyes upon me. As I wheeled, newly armed for strife, my hands clutched hard about the rifle-barrel, our fierce assailants came surging up against the stone wall. It was no time to note what others did; one realizes little at such a supreme moment except the flashing in his eyes where menacing weapons play across his front; the swift blows continually threatening to crush his guard; the fierce, cruel faces glaring at him eye to eye, and his own desperate efforts to drive and kill. It all abides in fevered memory not unlike those pictures of horror coming of a dark night when lightning leaps from the black void. I mind the first man to reach me, a burly ruffian, whose shining spear-point missed my throat by so narrow a margin it tasted blood ere my rifle-stock crushed the side of his head and sent him backward, a reeling corpse into the mass at his heels. Then all was confusion, a riot of leaping figures, frantic shouting, and clanging weapons, and I know not what was done, except that I struck out like a crazed man, heedless of what might be aimed at me, but letting drive at every savage head within range, until, at last, there seemed no others in my front. Then, as I paused, breathless and uncertain, passing my hand across my eyes to clear them from the blood and hair which half blinded me, I heard De Noyan's drawling tone.

"Most beautifully done, Master Benteen, and as for our red-headed preacher, by the memory of Jeanne d'Arc, the like of him as fighting man I have never seen."

I leaned back heavily against the stones, now the strain of battle had relaxed, feeling strangely weakened by my exertions as well as the loss of blood, and glanced about me. The discomfited savages had fallen sullenly back to the bank of the stream, where they bunched together as if in council, and I noted more than one wounded man among them. De Noyan sat recklessly upon the stone wall, dangling his long legs, and, back turned contemptuously upon our foe, was carefully examining the edge of his sword.

"I was fool enough to attempt a down cut," he explained, observing my eyes upon him. "I tried it on that savage who lies yonder, and it was rather a neat stroke, yet has sorely nicked the blade."

"Where is the Puritan?" I asked, not seeing him.

"Stretched yonder at rest; he did needlessly exhaust himself, not knowing how best to wield his weapon. *Sacre*! he struck hard blows, and will have two savages for whom to make answer in the Day of Judgment."

"What loss did the fellows sustain?" I questioned, the cut at the edge of my hair half blinding me with dripping blood.

"We dropped seven between us, counting those who fell to your fire, and there are others who hardly appear in condition for further fighting. As to the garrison, you seem

to possess a flesh wound or two, the head of the Puritan rings merrily yet from the tap of a war-club, while I boast a boot full of blood; 'tis none of it serious."

Page 114

“They will attack again?”

“Ay! those lads are not of the breed to let up with one bite; and mark you, man, it is going to be the next turn that will test our mettle.”

He deliberately changed his posture, glancing carelessly across his shoulder.

“Do you know aught regarding those devils, Master Benteen?”

“They are strange to me; no kin, I think, to any tribe east of the great river.”

He sat in silent contemplation a long moment, his eyes fastened upon the savage group.

“Did you chance to notice,” he asked at last, speaking more thoughtfully, “how they hissed that word ‘Francais,’ when they first rushed up the hill upon us? It somehow recalled to memory an odd tale told me long ago by old Major Duponceau, who was out with the troops in 1729, about a strange people they warred against down on the Ocatahoola. These must be either the same savages—although he swore they were put to the sword—or else of the same stock, and have felt the taste of French steel.”

“What did he call them?”

“Natchez; although I remember now he referred to them once as ’White Apples,’ saying they were of fair skin. He told me, but I recall little of it, many a strange story of their habits and appearance, to illustrate how greatly they differed from other tribes of savages with whom he had met. They worshipped the sun.”

“’T is true of the Creeks.”

“Ay! they play at it, but with the Natchez ’t is a real religion; they had a priesthood and altars of sacrifice, on which the fires were never quenched. Their victims died with all the ardor of fanaticism, and in peace and war the sun was their god, ever demanding offering of blood. But see, the moment comes when we must front those fiends again.”

The afternoon sun had lowered so that its glaring rays no longer brightened the depths of the canyon, all upon our side of the stream lying quiet in the shadow. The Indians began their advance toward us in much the same formation as before, but more cautiously, with less noisy demonstration, permitting me to note they had slung their weapons to their backs, bearing in their hands ugly fragments of rock. The old matted-hair savage, who had received a severe slash upon his shoulder during our last *melee*, hung well to the rear, contenting himself with giving encouragement to the others.

“Stand stoutly to the work, friend Cairnes,” I called across to him, feeling the heartsome sound of English speech might prove welcome. “If we drive them this time, they will hardly seek more at our hands.”

“It will be even according to the will of the Lord of Hosts,” he returned piously. “Yet I greatly fear lest my sword-blade be not sound within its hilt.”

“Stoop low for the volley of rocks,” commanded De Noyan, hastily, “then stand up to it with all the strength you have.”

Page 115

Halfway up the little hill they let fly a vicious volley, the hard missiles crashing against the face of the rock, and showering down on backs and heads, some of them with painful force. As we sprang to our posts of defence once more, the savages were already nearly within spear-length of us, and, to our disastrous surprise, delivered a second volley of stones directly into our faces. One jagged rock glanced from off my rifle-barrel, striking me on the side of the head with sufficient force to send me staggering back against the stone slab. Before I could regain place the Indians swarmed over the low wall, two of them, in spite of fierce struggles, bearing me backward to the ground. Through a half-blinding mist of blood I beheld a carven war-club uplifted in the air, noted the face, distorted by passion, of the naked giant wielding it; yet, before I could close my eyes to the swift blow, there came a sudden flash of fire mingled with a sharp report. As if stricken by a lightning-bolt the huge fellow plunged forward, his body across my feet. Involuntarily I gave vent to a groan of despair, realizing that Madame, in an effort to preserve my life, had thrown away her sole chance to escape torture, or an existence worse than death.

The knowledge nerved me to renewed struggle, but ere I could rid myself of that body pinning me fast, others hurled themselves upon us, striking and snarling like a pack of hounds who had overtaken their quarry. It would have been over in another minute; I already felt the grind of a stone knife-point at my throat, able to gain only a poor grip on the fellow's wrist, when suddenly, sounding clear as a bell above that hellish uproar, a single voice uttered an imperative command.

Instantly each Indian's face was upturned toward where such unexpected summons came, and, lying as I did flat upon my back, my eyes gazed across the narrow valley, to the summit of the cliff on the farther side. There, solitary, a carven statue full in the glow of the westering sun, turning her garments golden, and lightening her rich profusion of hair into radiant beauty, stood a young woman of white face and slender, stately figure. It was no time to note dress, yet I could not fail to observe the flowing white robe, draped from shoulders to feet, gracefully falling away from an extended arm, as she stood thus in regal poise looking down upon us. There was a suggestion of despotic power in both face and posture, and the ring of stern authority spoke in the sound of her voice.

Twice she addressed our savage captors in brief sentences strange to my ears, once pointing directly at us, once with sweeping gesture up the valley. A moment longer she remained motionless, bending slightly forward, permitting the rich, reddish gold of her hair to flash and shimmer in the sunshine; then she stepped swiftly back from the dizzy summit, vanishing instantly, as if dissolved in the haze.

CHAPTER XXI

Page 116

THE STRONGHOLD OF THE NATCHEZ

We were hopelessly prisoners. On my part further struggle had become impossible, nor elsewhere did any effort last long, although Cairnes had to be knocked insensible before the heathen finally mastered him. I believed the obstinate fellow dead, so ghastly white appeared his usually florid face as the victorious savages dragged him roughly past where I lay, flinging his heavy body down like carrion upon the rocks. De Noyan appeared badly cut, his gallant clothing clinging to him in fluttering rags, silent witnesses to the manliness of his struggle. Yet the Chevalier was far from done.

“Let me sit up, you villains!” he cried, vigorously kicking at a passing shin. “’T is not my custom to lie with head so low. Ah, Benteen,” he smiled pleasantly across at me, his eyes kindling at the recollection, “that was the noblest fighting that ever came my way, yet ’tis likely we shall pay well for our fun. *Sacre*! ’t is no pleasant face, that of their grim war-chief, nor one to inspire a man with hope as he makes plea for mercy.”

“Marry, no,” I replied, determined on exhibiting no greater outward concern than he. “Nor will the ugly clip on his shoulder leave his humor happier.”

The Chevalier’s eyes danced at the recollection.

“’T was our preacher friend who sheared him. I hold it a master-stroke; but for a spear-butt on the way it would have cleft the fellow into two equal parts. Have you seen aught of Eloise since the fight?”

“She lies yonder against the wall at my left, and remains unhurt, I think. I will make effort to turn over, and have speech with her.”

So securely had I been bound with coarse grass rope, I found it no small task to change the position of my body sufficiently to peer about the corner of intervening rock, and clearly perceive my lady. She was reclining in a half sitting posture well within the darker shadow, bound as were the rest of us.

“You remain uninjured, I trust, Madame?” I asked gently, and it heartened me to observe the smile with which she instantly glanced up at sound of my voice.

“No blow has touched me,” was her immediate response, “yet I suffer noticing the stains of blood disfiguring both you and my husband. Are the wounds serious ones?”

“Nay, mere scratches of the flesh, to heal in a week. Why did you waste your last shot on that savage who would have struck me? It was not the will of De Noyan that it be expended thus.”

“You must have formed a poor conception of me, Geoffrey Benteen,” she answered, as if my words pained her, “if you suppose I value my life more highly than your own. But

for my solicitation you would never have been in such stress, and, whatever else may be true, Eloise de Noyan is not one accustomed to deserting her friends."

"Yet there are fates possible to a woman more to be dreaded than death."

Page 117

“Ay, and frontier bred, I know it well, yet none so bad as would have been the knowledge that I was guilty of ingratitude. My life, my honor, are in the care of God, Geoffrey, and if I remain grateful for aught this day, it is that my shot proved timely, saving you from that blow. Tell me, was it not a woman at whose command the combat ceased?”

“It was; a white woman at that, unless my eyes deceived me. She stood on yonder point of rock, appearing a veritable queen in the sunshine.”

“So I thought, a fair face enough, yet not devoid of savage cruelty. Her presence brings me some rays of hope, making me feel I may have less to fear in the future than you. If a woman, however debased and barbarous, rules these savages, she will not be altogether without heart to the supplications of a woman.”

I felt less assured of this, yet it was better she be buoyed up by all possible hope, so ventured upon no answer. There was that in the Queen’s face as she gazed down upon us that made me doubt her womanliness; doubt if behind that countenance of wild beauty there did not lurk a soul as savage and untamed as any among her barbarous followers. What but a spirit of insatiate cruelty could animate and control such fierce warriors in their battle rage? Thinking of this, my eyes on Madame, a movement occurred among our captors quickly challenging my attention. Fresh shouts and cries evidenced new arrivals. These came swarming down the ravine, and in another moment began crawling noisily about us, chattering with our surly captors, or scowling into our faces with savage eyes boding no good. It would be unjust were I to write that these fellows were a brutal lot, as such words would be void of that truth I seek to convey. I lived to learn that many among them had the stuff of which true men are made; yet, nevertheless, they were savages, scarcely touched by the virtues or vices of civilization, a people nursing within their memory a great wrong, and inflamed by the fierce passions of battle. Gazing about on the stiffening forms of their stricken warriors, all alike exhibited in eyes and gestures how eagerly they longed for the hour of vengeance, when implacable hate might have full vent in the unutterable agony of their victims. I gazed up into their scowling, distorted faces, imagining a final moment of reckoning was at hand; yet some authority, either of chief or tribal custom, restrained their pitiless hatred, reserving us for longer, more intense suffering.

But the wild thirst for blood was mirrored in those fierce eyes glaring down into mine, and echoed in the shrill cries with which they marked us yet alive for their barbaric ingenuity to practise upon at leisure. Even as I observed this, realizing from my knowledge of Indian nature that our ultimate fate would be infinitely worse than merciful death in battle, I could not remain blind to the wide difference between these naked warriors

Page 118

and those other savages with whom my wandering border life had made me familiar. My awakened memory dwelt upon the peculiar tribal characteristics of the Mingoes north of the Ohio, the Kaskaskias in the Illinois country, the Shawnees, the Cherokees, even the Creeks, in whose villages I had dwelt as a friend, and beside whose young men I had hunted as a brother. Yet here was surely a distinct race, one less clearly marked with those features peculiarly Indian,—the cheek-bones not prominent, the form of nose more varied, the skin decidedly lighter, the heads better shapen, and the figures more thoroughly developed. More, their language had little of the guttural so universal among Eastern tribes, but had a peculiar, sharp, hissing sound; so, although the faces peering into mine were wild and ferocious enough to leave no doubt as to their barbarous nature, or our probable fate, yet these peculiarities, with the total absence of paint, such as disfigures and renders grotesquely hideous other Indians upon the war-path, were sufficient to stamp these savages as members of a distinct race.

"Natchez?" I ventured to inquire of the burly brute who stood over me grasping spear and war-club.

"*Sa*," he grinned savagely. "*Francais, Francais*."

I shook my head and tried him again, but soon desisted on discovering that these two words marked the full extent of our common language, and so was obliged to be content with silently contemplating the crowds of curious, naked heathen swarming on the hill.

Fortunately, it was not long we were doomed to wait, uncomfortably trussed with our ropes of plaited grass. The old chief who had led the assault gave his order, and, in immediate obedience, we were roughly dragged forth, the bonds about our lower limbs severed, and, under zealous guards, despatched up the canyon, the entire party promptly falling in at the rear, bearing with them their wounded and dead. De Noyan and I, thus released from our cramped, painful position on the rocks, were jerked rudely upon our feet, and, in obedience to threatening gestures, driven rapidly forward like dumb beasts; but Madame and the Puritan, the latter not yet having regained consciousness, were swung aloft in hammocks of coarsely woven cloth, and thus borne upon the shoulders of four stout carriers. In this way we advanced northward, not moving as slowly as I desired, for I was sore and aching from head to foot, besides being weakened by loss of blood. Yet there was no hope of escape, no evidence of mercy. If we ventured to lag, the vigilant guard promptly quickened our movements by the vigorous application of spear-points, so we soon learned the necessity of keeping fully abreast of our assigned position in the column.

Page 119

Coming nearer to that great cataract which had effectually dammed our progress up the valley, the leaders swerved toward the left, passing so closely beside the leaping, foaming flood as to be enveloped in the spray as if in a cloud of mist. Almost beneath the fall, the water crashing on the rocks within reach of an outstretched hand, we commenced a toilsome climb, along a deep, rocky gully completely shrouded by overhanging bushes, as if we traversed a tunnel dug by the hands of men. Indeed, I have little doubt that this peculiar passageway had been constructed by artificial means. Every now and then, when a faint light from without straggled through the interlaced boughs overhead, I caught a glimpse of the evidences of human labor. This odd passage, crooked and intricate, at times so steep as to require the chiselling of steps in the solid rock, wound in and out along the side of the cliff, then ran back into the very face of the precipice, for more than a hundred and fifty yards. Suddenly we emerged, fifty yards back from the crest, in the heart of a great circular hole resembling the crater of a burned-out volcano, having great ragged points of rock, blackened as if incased with lava, jutting up upon every side, and forming as desolate and barren a picture as ever eyes looked upon.

I was completely fagged by this time, the climb being a heavy one, and I noticed De Noyan was ghastly of face, his body trembling like that of a palsied man. But our relentless drivers permitted no halting to recruit strength. The Chevalier was evidently in greater distress than I, so from pity I bade him lean on my shoulder; but as he sought to draw near, the merciless brute on guard struck him savagely, and there was such shaking of spears and fierce uproar on the part of our escort, we could do naught else than set our teeth to it, and go staggering on. The slight path, if it might be named a path, led in and out among the black lava cones in such labyrinthine fashion that no man could hope to retain memory of its course, while the floor being of irregular stone, the passing feet left no trail for future guidance. We travelled blindly, and reckless through suffering and exhaustion, some distance, until, perhaps a mile above the spot where we had surmounted the cliff, a sudden twist was made to the right, our company creeping on all fours through a narrow opening, having a great tree-trunk on one side and a huge black bowlder on the other. We came forth high in air above the swift, deep water, footing the insecure bark of a rude tree-bridge spanning the current. Once safe on the other bank, our path merely a narrow shelf of stone, we wormed around a sharp projection of the cliff, rising to even greater height than in the gorge below. A dense mass of interlaced and overshadowing cedars was partially pressed aside, partially crawled under, and from this we finally emerged into an open space, containing, I imagine, not far from five hundred acres of land, having vast towering precipices of black frowning rock on every side, with no outlet apparent, save to one blessed with wings. Saint Andrew! ’twas an awesome place, yet oddly beautiful, so soft and green below, with those massive walls completely shutting out all the rest of the world, and shadowing the little valley with impregnable grandeur.

Page 120

I had but a moment in which to view the impressive scene. Scarcely had the head of our column entered this natural prison when it was greeted with wild shouts of triumph, immediately succeeded by shrieks of distress, while there streamed forward to meet us a tumultuous band of savages, a large proportion of whom were women and children. The children were absolutely nude and peculiarly white of skin, while the former wore rude skirts of coarsely woven cloth fastened about the waist, their long hair in many instances trailing upon the ground, yielding them a wildness of aspect beyond description; yet withal they were not uncomely of features. These newcomers thronged about us with scowling faces, and, when sternly forced back by the lowered weapons of the guard, either joined the procession, or else trooped alongside, yelling and jeering.

Pressed forward, although by now so utterly spent I could barely stagger rapidly enough to escape those pitiless thrusts, I mechanically noted enough of our surroundings to understand that we traversed ground which had been cultivated; that low fences, here and there encountered, divided the land into small sections, even as in more civilized regions farmers protect their fields. What their crops may have been I could not determine, the season of harvest being already past, yet I distinguished what I supposed must be evidences of garden culture, observing also a considerable ditch, certainly four feet in width, filled with clear running water, which seemed to encircle the entire basin, the deeper green of vegetation marking its course close up against the farther rock wall.

The view directly in advance was at first obscured by the leaping figures of the exultant savages leading the way, whooping with excitement, and wildly brandishing their war-clubs. These at length fell back along either side, our guards hurrying us across the ditch, spanned by the great trunk of a tree, and thus on into the village. This town resembled no other encampment of savages on which my eyes had ever looked. I saw a wide open space, a blackened stake set in the middle of it, the ground bare of vegetation, and tramped hard as if by countless feet. Beyond, circling this plaza upon two sides, were several rows of houses, all facing the same direction. It reminded me of pictures I had seen of Hebrew camps in my father's great Bible, only the houses were built of sun-dried clay, such as peons use in the far Southwest on the Brazos, square in shape, of but a single story, having dome-shaped roofs, heavily thatched with cane. They were windowless, with one narrow opening for a door, protected by a heavy matting of grass. Behind these, perhaps a hundred yards or more, and within a short distance of the steep cliffs bounding the upper extremity of the valley, there arose from the surface of the plain two immense rounded mounds of earth, each fully a hundred paces wide at its base, sloping sharply upward. Considerable

Page 121

vacant space lay between the two, while on the apex of each stood buildings of sun-baked clay, resembling in form those below, yet much larger, and, because of their elevation, appearing spacious and imposing. Above one were posed three rudely carven figures bearing a slight resemblance to giant eagles, their wings outspread as if for flight. The other was surmounted by a hideous, grotesque figure, blackened as by fire, with distorted face daubed a glaring yellow, and long hair glittering from red pigment. Here the grass curtain had been drawn aside, while before the entrance, their faces striped with disfiguring black lines, their dull vestments trailing to the ground and gaudily trimmed with fanciful trappings, their coarse hair so trained as to stand almost erect, were two aged men, who, with wild gesticulations, and solemn chanting, were apparently paying adoration to the setting sun, the last beams streaming over them through a rift in the western wall.

Directly past these priests we were driven like cattle, finding ourselves plunged into a vast square gloomy apartment, having an earthen floor, but utterly devoid of either furnishings or ornament. There was another mat-draped opening at the farther side, and in the centre a huge log smouldered, resting upon what bore the appearance of a rudely chipped altar of rock. About this were ranged numerous fancifully painted statues of wood, grotesque and hideous, while a third figure, attired as were the aged priests without, lay prone upon the earth moaning as if in agony. The walls were hung thickly with undressed skins of wild animals, and at the back stood a slightly upraised platform of logs, cut in halves by a narrow passageway leading toward the second curtained door. It was in the midst of this we halted, still under strict surveillance of our brutal guards. These, however, permitted us to sink down exhausted on the hard floor.

CHAPTER XXII

PRISONERS IN THE TEMPLE

A fear of impending danger will not always prove sufficiently strong to prevent yielding to the demands of fatigue. I realized the desperation of our position, feeling no doubt regarding our ultimate fate. I read it plainly in our surroundings, as well as within those vengeful, scowling faces, yet so dulled was every physical sense from excessive weariness that I had passed through much already described like a man in a dream. The brief repose of the previous night, broken by nervous, superstitious terrors, the anxious effort to escape from the haunted canyon, the hurried labor on our rude defences, the two fierce combats with the savages, my numerous wounds, none dangerous yet weakening me by loss of blood, together with the rapid marching and the difficult climb up the cliff, combined to exhaust my vitality so completely that, the moment we halted within the sacred precincts of this temple, I flung myself full length upon the floor. I remember the sun had already disappeared behind the western

heights. I retain some slight memory of a tender hand resting softly on my forehead, of a familiar voice questioning me, yet if I made response, it must have been in the unconsciousness of sleep, as these faint remembrances were my last.

Page 122

I had no means of telling how long I lay thus, close against the north wall of the building in that very posture in which I had first fallen. It must have been after hours of unconsciousness I was at last partially aroused by the reviving touch of cool water with which my face was being bathed. As I slowly unclosed my heavy eyes the huge smouldering log in the centre of the room burst into sudden flame, lighting the interior, casting weird, dancing shadows along the black walls, its red radiance falling upon the face bending above me, and permitting me to look into the dark, troubled eyes of Eloise de Noyan.

“There is no necessity for moving,” she explained softly. “Nothing of moment has occurred since you fell asleep, except that the savages brought us food.”

“Have you been watching over me all this time without rest?”

“Nay; at least no more over you than the others,” she answered with a smile, “yet you appeared in greatest stress. The others have been some time awake and have partaken of food while you remained in stupor. Do not look at me like that! I am not tired; I was borne all the way upon a litter, never once placing foot upon the ground.”

“Have you knowledge as to the hour?”

“Only that it must be well into the night.”

I lifted my body into a more erect posture, finding myself stiff and sore from head to foot, and glanced curiously around our prison-house. In the centre was the blazing log, the sole bit of color my eyes could perceive. Kneeling upon either side were the motionless figures of four priests, robed from head to foot in black, their faces, darkened by some pigment, appearing ghastly and repulsive under the flickering flame. Their lips muttered in monotonous chant a weird incantation which sent to my heart a chill of superstitious dread. High above the altar, blackened by the constantly ascending cloud of smoke, swayed uneasily a peculiar graven image of wood, hideous in disfigurement of form and diabolical of visage, appearing to float upon outspread wings, and gloating down upon us through eyes glittering ominously in the fire sheen. At either extremity of the apartment, where I supposed were the entrance and exit previously noted, stood those savages remaining on guard, grim, naked fellows, whose restless eyes, gleaming in the glow, followed our slightest movements, and whose weapons were constantly uplifted as though they longed for some excuse to strike. It composed a grewsome scene, savage, cruel, devilish, exhibiting within its gloomy outlines small promise for the morrow.

The old Puritan was leaning heavily against a small stake driven into the earth, resting his aching head upon one hand as he peered at me from beneath thatched brows.

“You have a white face, Master Benteen,” he ventured, wondrously soft spoken for him, “yet if the heart remain strong and at peace with God, the body will mend itself.”

Page 123

“The heart has never yet failed me,” I returned, striving to speak cheerfully, feeling that he would like to hear hearty English words again. “I am glad to behold you safely recovered, friend; that was a hard crack they landed on your skull.”

“’T is not the will of the Almighty that I ignominiously perish at the hands of the heathen,” he responded in his old manner, and as his voice roared out, not unlike a clap of thunder in that silence, I observed how the savages about us started. “Again, and yet again hath He miraculously delivered his servant from the mouth of the lion. Surely He must yet have labor for me in His vineyard; perchance the bearing unto these children of Amalek the message of peace.”

“Do you propose preaching unto them?”

“Ay, why not? Inspired thereunto by the Spirit, I have already sought serious converse with yonder priest of Baal, kneeling at this side of that accursed shrine of idolatry. Yet so wedded is he to idols of wood and stone, he merely chattered back at me in unintelligible speech, and when I laid hand upon him to compel him to listen, the brown savage beyond grievously thrust me with a spear. But I retain faith that the Lord, in His own time, will open up a way unto their rebellious and sinful hearts.”

“Such way may be opened, yet I fear these savages will only take unkindly your efforts at ministry, even if they permit opportunity for the carrying on of such work.”

“I should be overjoyed to minister unto them with the sharp edge of a steel blade,” interposed De Noyan decidedly, and I noticed him for the first time, lying beyond his wife. “What do you expect, Master Benteen, these villains will do to us?”

“I read no sign of mercy in any face yet seen,” I answered cautiously. “It would be against all savage nature to forgive the loss of those warriors sent home this day.”

“You look for death?”

“I expect nothing less, and by torture; still they may permit us the slight chance of the gantlet, although I know not the war customs of the tribe.”

He subsided into silence, as though my words merely echoed his own gloomy thought, and for a few moments no sound arose except the dismal droning of the priests about the altar. Then Cairnes silently pushed over toward me what remained of their evening meal, and I forgot gloomy forebodings in a new realization of hunger. It was while thus busily engaged Madame spoke to me, whispering her words softly, so that they could not reach the ears of the others.

“If the end prove according to our fears, could you outline my probable fate?”

No lack of courage prompted the question, I could perceive that in her eyes as they looked into my own, and some way their expression yielded me boldness to answer truthfully.

“I am afraid, Madame, you may be spared,” I said gravely.

Her hands closed down tightly about each other.

Page 124

“That is what renders my heart so heavy in this peril, Geoffrey Benteen. I could die easily, without tremor, beside you; nor would I shrink back from torture, did it of necessity come to me, for I possess a faith in Christ which would sustain me in such an ordeal. But this—O God!—it is too much! The thought that I may be reserved for a worse fate than death, may be compelled to live for months, perhaps years, as the humiliated companion of these murderous savages—I, a lady of France! It is more than I can bear.”

I saw tears shining in her eyes, and my hand, seeking her own, closed over it with sympathetic pressure.

“God grant there be some escape,” I said earnestly; it was all that came to my lips.

“But I feel there is none. I have not lived upon the border of this vast wilderness all my life without learning something regarding the customs of savages. If they spare a woman from stake or knife it is that they may doom her to a fate more horrible, making of her their degraded slave. I know this, and have read the truth anew in those faces glaring upon me to-day. There remains but one faint hope—that woman who seems to exercise control over them may incline the savages to mercy.”

“I cannot encourage you to place much trust in such tenderness,” I confessed sadly. “’T is not likely, despite her white face, and certain graces bespeaking knowledge of civilization, she will prove any less a savage than those she governs. She would not be here, able to control so wild a brood of wolves, if she were not of their breed in heart; nor do women chiefs have much choice against the vote of the tribe. I do not trust her, Madame; I studied her face—a fair one, I grant—as she stood in the sun upon the rock summit. It was hard set, and savage with the scent of blood and battle. No mercy led her to protect us then; like a great cat she prefers playing with her mice before killing. Has she been here while I slept?”

“No one has visited us excepting the old chief who led the assault; he did nothing but strike the Puritan, who sought speech with him.”

She paused a moment, her head bent low; then she lifted her face to mine again, and I read within it the quick determination of her soul.

“Geoffrey Benteen, listen. What would you do to save her who was Eloise Lafreniere from such a fate of horror as now overhangs her?”

“Anything within the power of a man,” I answered instantly, a painful throbbing at the heart. “I would even drive the saving steel into your heart to keep you unsoiled from the clutch of such foul hands. Ay! hard as the task must prove, yet I could do it, believing I performed the will of God as I struck the blow. But even for that I am helpless, as I possess no weapon.”

I felt her hands touch mine, something cold being pressed against my flesh.

“I thank thee, Father, there is one whom I may trust even unto death,” she sobbed prayerfully. “Take this knife, Geoffrey Benteen. The Indians did not think to search a woman for such weapons of war. If the moment comes when all hope is gone, when naught else is left, I pray you, as a helpless woman utterly dependent upon your aid, let that sharp point save me endless shame and agony. Have I your promise?”

Page 125

“But—but why not ask this of your husband?” I questioned, shrinking, in spite of my belief in its righteousness, from the committal of so dreadful a deed.

“Surely he would better make answer for the necessity of so desperate a sacrifice.”

Her dark eyes never wavered from my face, nor did her hands relax their confident grasp of mine.

“Not because I believe he would refuse, but he is of a temper changeable as the winds of Spring. I must rest in peace, not in perpetual doubting. You I trust implicitly; your word, once gravely given, will be kept to the death; nay, surely this is no time in which to practise deceit with each other, or act parts like mummers upon the stage. I know you love me even as of old. I know this, Geoffrey Benteen, and will abide in my extremity with no other promise than your own.”

“Eloise,” I answered, strangely calmed and strengthened by her faith, “it shall be as you wish. I thank you for the words, and am better for them. When the last faint hope flees, and dishonor or death alone is left, I will strike that blow which sets free your soul.”

I felt her kisses and tears commingled on my roughened hands, but before further words might be uttered, the heavy mat concealing the western entrance was suddenly lifted, and in from the dark night there stalked in solemn silence and dignity a long line of stalwart savages.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE VOTE OF DEATH

I have already written that I was never easily affected by supernatural fears, yet something about that grim entrance chilled the very blood. There was no cessation of the monotonous, dismal chanting of the priests, as these newcomers,—whose sinister purpose no one could doubt,—moving with the silence of spectres, their bodies draped in shapeless robes of skin, appearing ghostlike beneath the uncertain flickering of flame, moved forward like a great writhing snake, passed along the southern wall beneath the face of the flying dragon overhead, until they found seats on the hard floor between altar and platform; two or three, evidently superior chiefs, by their richer trappings, ascended the raised logs and solemnly squatted thereon, so as to face us. How many composed this uncanny company I cannot say, having failed to count as they filed past, yet they completely filled the great room with scowling, upturned faces, and were probably all the available warriors of the tribe.

This was accomplished in stealthy silence, as wild animals creep upon their prey, nor did any among them take seats until the old war-chief—he who had led the assault in the gulch—made signal to that end. Responding to a second gesture, we were driven

roughly forward by our guard, until permitted to sink down once more, directly in their front, within full focus of their cruel eyes.

Page 126

It was a fearful spot to be in. That dark interior, dimly lighted by fitful bursts of flame, seemed more the abode of the damned than a place of human habitation, nor was there anything to remind us of mercy in that savage company gloating over our desperate plight. No one of us doubted what fate dwelt in the decision of that grewsome gathering, and in those faces we saw nothing except eagerness for revenge. It was their speechless silence, their stolid imperturbability, which rested heaviest upon me. It told plainly that we were helpless victims of their cruel pleasure. Deliberately, as if desirous of prolonging the agony of our uncertainty, for more than an hour—to us it seemed an age—they sat thus, unmoved as so many statues, except for their restless eyes, while the four ministering priests, robed in black from throat to sandals, slaughtered animals beneath the frowning shadow of the huge winged dragon, pouring warm blood over the stones of the altar, or smearing it upon their faces. Then, appearing fiendishly hideous, ghastlier than words can fitly picture, these revolting figures began with wild chanting to make offerings to their gods, dancing and capering before the flame to an accompaniment of dismal music, burning some incense which polluted the air.

It was a hellish scene, arousing every sleeping devil within those savage hearts; it preyed upon our strained nerves, and the Puritan lost all control, roaring out objurgations on the foul, idolatrous crowd until he was silenced by the sharp tap of a guard's club on his bushy pate. Nor was it easy for De Noyan to remain quiet, while Madame hid her shocked white face in her hands, venturing not to glance up while the sound of these rites continued. Whatever this religious ceremony—for such I supposed it to be—may have symbolized, it was finally concluded by the entire party uniting in a fierce chant. As grim silence settled once more throughout the black interior, the old war-chief, appearing taller than ever in the weird light, and rendered peculiarly repulsive by the bandages wrapping his wounds, rose to his feet, commencing an impassioned address.

No word spoken was intelligible to us, yet I knew so well the nature and customs of savages as to experience little difficulty in deciding the purpose of this harangue. Without doubt the fellow demanded an immediate sacrifice in payment for the loss inflicted on their tribe. With this conception as guide I noted his continually pointing toward us, one after another, as if singling us out as special subjects for denunciation, perhaps for torture, as with each he seemed to associate a peculiar term, repeating it again and again with changing cadence, as if thus to force its dread significance more firmly home into the minds of his listeners. The word I distinguished most frequently had the sound "*ca-tah*," which became associated in my thought as some special form of torture to which he desired us sentenced. Nor did I fail to remark in this connection, my every faculty alert and strained to grasp the slightest revealment, that, whenever the orator's baleful glance rested upon the shrinking woman, his lips uttered another word, his silent audience nodding as though in assent to each demand.

Page 127

One followed another, no doubt in accordance with rank. Those chiefs upon the platform spoke first, each in turn seeming to pronounce against us in favor of that same unknown fate, making use of those two words, gesticulating toward us as they gave judgment. Nowhere amid all that vengeful black circle did I discern a single face not set in savage hatred, while slowly at first, but gathering force as it proceeded, there passed from lip to lip the sullen murmur of that dread word "*ca-tah*." As it was pronounced each voter pointed at us, three times making repetition of the word, until the last warrior had spoken, and we knew that our doom had been formally pronounced by a tribunal knowing no mercy, from whose decision there was no appeal.

No hapless prisoner confined, as I have read they were in olden times, within a dungeon whose walls slowly closed to crush him into pulp, could have seen the coming of death, resistless and horrible, with clearer vision than was ours as that group of savages pronounced our doom. It was by exercising the greatest effort of will that I conquered the dread sense of utter hopelessness which seemed to numb my every faculty; for, although I was to be tortured to the end, and perish at last in utmost physical agony, yet before that moment came there still remained a duty to be performed for one I loved. For that I must retain mind and strength to act like a man.

Slowly, cautiously, moving inch by inch across the small space intervening, so as not to attract the attention of our guard, I crept forward, pausing at last close beside Madame. Even as I reached her the final warrior cast his useless vote with the others, the excited concourse voicing appreciation in noisy acclaim. I bent low, trembling from weakness, until my lips were close to her ear.

"Eloise," I whispered softly, forgetting at the awful moment that she possessed another name, "it has been voted that three of us perish by torture, but you are not in the list; you are named for a different fate. Is it still your wish that I fulfil the pledge?"

As she glanced up, the old war-chief pointed directly toward her. I could perceive the baleful gleam of his eyes, and noted with what quick aversion she shrank back until her shoulder pressed my own.

"Yes, Geoffrey Benteen," she made immediate, resolute answer. "It will be mercy. I beg you strike."

"You forgive the blow?"

"Forgive!" An instant her clear eyes, unfrightened, looked directly into mine, a message in their depths I had never seen there before. "More, I love the heart and hand which speed it."

Page 128

My hands were bound tightly together, but my arms remained free, the hilt of the knife resting firmly between the palms. Although I drew my body somewhat back in readiness for the stroke, I delayed the terrible deed until the last possible moment, the perspiration standing in great beads upon my face. Oh, how I loved her then! how my half-blinded eyes feasted upon her sweet, sad face, the flames casting a ruddy glow upon it, and playing fitfully amid the masses of her dark, tangled hair! There swept across my mind every memory of our past, and she was again with me in her girlhood, before sorrow had stamped her with its seal, and she had turned me away tenderly as ever a woman could. And now she was doomed to death by my hand; with one blow I was to blot out the life I loved a thousand times better than my own. Merciful God! what a trick had fate played me! Nor durst I speak to her again, for her fingers toyed with the rosary at her throat, the beads glowing dully in the flame, and I knew she was in prayer, expecting with each instant the coming of that stroke which should send her trusting soul to God. I, who have seen much of conflict and peril, much of suffering and atrocity, look back on no moment in all my life so fraught with agony as this, when, grasping that deadly knife in both hands, I watched every threatening movement of the savage arbiters of her fate, praying unto God for strength with which to perform my duty.

At last the chiefs stood erect. In response to their gestures of command, the massed warriors below sprang to their feet, flocking eagerly toward us, giving utterance to one deep vengeful cry. Already their clutches were upon the struggling Puritan, when I swung high the gleaming knife in both my hands. For one terrible second I met her unflinching gaze, a glance which will abide with me until my dying day—then the keen steel fell, barely deflected from the heart, slashing open the bosom of her dress, yet—-thanks be to a kind God!—finding harmless sheath, not within her quivering flesh but in the hard-packed earth. It was scarcely less than a miracle that I was thus able to turn the blow, but, even as I aimed it, putting to the hilt my full strength that I might send it surely home, there came into my vision a sudden flash of bright color against the dark, skin-draped wall, and I knew the Queen had come.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DAUGHTER OF THE SUN

At first my dimmed eyes beheld her through a mist, my hands shaking as if stricken by palsy, nor did I retain sufficient strength of body to uplift myself from the spot where I had fallen with the force of my blow. Nevertheless I shall forever retain the vivid picture imprinted on memory. Before us stood a tall, fair-skinned woman, having dignity of command in every movement, her face thin, strong, dominant, with large, dark, passionate eyes, flashing in scornful beauty over the excited warriors at her

Page 129

feet. Pride, power, imperious will, a scarcely hidden tigerish cruelty, were in every line of her features; yet she remained strikingly handsome, with that rare beauty which drives men mad and laughs mockingly at its victims. She was robed completely in red, the brilliant color harmonizing strangely with her countenance, the single outer garment extending, devoid of ornament, from throat to heel, loosely gathered at the waist, and resembling in form and drapery those pictures I have seen of Roman togas, while her magnificent wealth of hair, of richest reddish gold, appeared to shimmer and glow in the sparkle of leaping flames as if she wore a tiara of rubies.

With quick, passionate speech she poured forth her purpose, and I saw the savage throng shrink before her, as if they knew and dreaded the outburst of her anger. Yet, as she paused breathless, the old war-chief ventured to face her, returning a stern reply. This disregard of her temper so imparted courage to the others that they rallied about their leader as one man, numerous hoarse voices supplementing his protest, until it was plain to be seen that the woman remained alone and unsupported against the savage crew. Yet the lines of determination but deepened in her face, her lips curled in scorn, and she turned from them to look down where we were huddled in despair. A moment her flashing eyes swept across our upturned faces, the howls of her opponents growing fiercer on every side. With one imperious gesture she commanded silence, and, as the gruff voices died away in muttered discontent, the woman addressed us, speaking a clear, pure Spanish, making use now and then of words unknown to me.

“Prisoners, can any among you interpret my speech?”

I caught my breath in glad surprise, struggling to my feet, and making haste to answer.

“If you speak slowly,” I said, “I shall be able to understand.”

“’Tis well, as it is a tongue unknown to these Indians,” her eyes lighting up with cunning. “Then, Senor, mark with care what I say, and, if the meaning of any escape your ears, bid me speak again, so no mistake be made.”

“It will give me great pleasure, O Queen.”

“I am the Daughter of the Sun,” she interposed proudly, as if correcting my mode of address. “These are my children, given unto me by the great Sun-god. For what purpose have you of white skin dared invade the land of the Sun?”

“We knew nothing of your presence here, merely seeking a passage through these mountains northward.”

“But you killed the warriors of our nation; you have stricken the people of the Sun.”

“True, Daughter of the Sun; yet it was done only in self-defence. When attacked we struck hard blows.”

Her eyes glowed angrily, her face becoming cruelly hard.

“None of white blood may set foot in this valley and live. It is the land of the Sun,” she said haughtily. “None have ever before ventured to do so, and found safe way back to their own. Are you French?”

Page 130

[Illustration: “I am the Daughter of the Sun. These are my children, given unto me by the great Sun-god. . . . None of white blood may set foot in this valley and live.”]

“Not all,—the lady and yonder cavalier are of French blood, I am a hunter of the Ohio country, while he who crouches beyond also calls himself American.”

“I know nothing of your Ohio, nor what may be an American,” she replied with an impatient stamp of the foot, “but it is bad any among you should prove French. What does the woman do here?”

In a few brief sentences I told our story, marking as I spoke that she followed my words with care. As I concluded she merely gazed more closely into Madame’s upturned face, speaking as though communing with herself.

“She has the appearance of a fair woman; we need no such here.” She raised her voice slightly, addressing me in cold reserve.

“Your story sounds well. True or false, it makes small odds. We attacked your party, believing you French, whom the children of the Sun have good reason to hate. You have cost us the lives of many warriors, and the Sun calls for vengeance. Already has the tribe solemnly voted your death by fire. Now mark me closely. ’Tis not often I interfere in such affairs as this, nor do I now for any higher object than my own gratification. The Daughter of the Sun is no angel, nor ambitious to become one. I have looked on unmoved at the torture of the stake more than once, so ’tis no weak sentimentality that leads me to try to avert your fate. Nor am I sure I can, whatever my motive be. I possess no power to overturn the united vote of these warriors—they are all children of the Sun. I can think of but one method by which I can even hope to encompass your escape from immediate torture. If by some subterfuge I can delay action until day-dawn, I may be able to control these savages. The children of the Sun do not light their fires in the presence of their Father. There is but one possible way to that end,—does yonder red-headed man comprehend the Spanish tongue?”

“He does not.”

“That is bad,” her brows contracting. “Still he must be used, as no other among you will answer my purpose. Bid him advance to my side on the platform; bid him pretend to hold converse with me, and, above all else, have him attend my every gesture and obey. Will he do your bidding?”

“I know not,” I replied honestly. “He is of a bull-headed breed, yet I may be able to drive into him a moment of sense.”

“Do your part thoroughly, nor be too long about it. The chiefs grow restless at our talk, and may yet take affairs into their own hands.”

I turned doubtfully toward the Puritan, who was glaring up at the woman from beneath his shaggy brows, much as he might have looked upon some wild animal seen for the first time. I presume the fiery red drapery caused him to deem her that veritable scarlet woman about whom he prated so much. He appeared far from being a promising subject for my overtures, especially as his great head must have ached still from contact with the club, which had alone beaten him into sullen silence. Yet she commanding the attempt was so desperately in earnest that I determined to do my part.

Page 131

“Watch carefully my words,” I said sternly in English, “and bear in mind the preservation of all our lives depends on the part you play. The woman chief has made choice of you to help in winning mercy from these savages. I know not why you are the one thus chosen, yet I suspect that fiery crop of hair may have something to do with the honor. The main point is, are you in a humor to do her bidding?”

“Nay!” he replied, gazing at me stubbornly.

“You refuse to assist in saving your own life, and the lives of your comrades?”

“I touch not the accursed abominations of this place,” he answered, hoarse with anger, “nor will I have aught to do with yonder shameless creature.”

“Sirrah!” I cried, thoroughly aroused by his mulishness, “do you deliberately choose to sacrifice the life of this lady to your bull-headed fanaticism? Do you refuse to unbend your miserable Connecticut sectarianism, your Puritan cant, although by so doing you might keep your comrades from the horrors of the stake? If this is what you mean, I denounce you as unworthy to be called a man, and I name your loud protestations of religion no more than a hissing and a byword before the ungodly you profess to despise. You are no better than a Pharisee, full of loud-mouthed prayers and vain conceit of righteousness, a false prophet, haggling over formalism when the slightest sacrifice of what you hold the letter of the law would result in the salvation of human life. You call yourself a Christian, a follower of that Nazarene who died for sinners on the cross, deeming yourself better than those who cling to other creed. You sneer at that rosary in Madame’s fingers, yet do you suppose it possible she would not endeavor to pluck your life from the jaws of death if it lay in her power? Ay! and never waste speech about abominations in the path.”

“The spirit is of greater value than the body,” he persisted doggedly. “Yea, ’tis better the flesh perish miserably in the flame than surrender up the soul unto the devil.”

“That is no issue here; you seek to deceive yourself by false words. I denounce you openly as a false follower, for if I read rightly the language of Holy Writ, it was He whom you so delight to term Master who gave his life freely for His friends. But you—you are all words, a charnel-house of dead men’s bones.”

Had he been free I might have rued my hasty words, for his eyes were hot with anger, and he strained fiercely at his bonds in effort to break free. Yet I felt safe enough beyond the sweep of his great arm, rejoicing that my tongue was sharp enough to penetrate so thick a hide, and make the man squirm beneath his outer vestment of piety.

“You speak falsely,” he bellowed, nearly beside himself. “Satan puts those foul words upon your lips tempting me to do evil.”

Page 132

“Nay; the words are true,” I went on, determined to drive him by taunts. “They are neither foul nor false, and right glad I am to discover your real character even at this eleventh hour. I make no loud boasting of my religion, dinning it into the ears of all I meet as if I were the only righteous man on earth, but I do thank God from the depths of my heart I have never yet basely deserted a friend in time of trouble. I did consider you a good comrade, but I know now you are nothing but a whited sepulchre, a miserable hypocrite, a Judas betraying his master with a kiss. Pah! go your way, you are unclean; nor ever hope again for word of fellowship from lips of honest men. I shall die having performed my duty to the extent of my knowledge, but you as a dog, a traitor to your comrades, the betrayer of a woman in time of peril.”

“’Tis false, I say; I would yield life gladly to aid her.”

“Zounds! that sounds good from such lips. Why, you have just refused much less.”

“Yonder is an emissary of the Evil One.”

“Keep your cowardly excuses to yourself. Whatever the woman may be, she offers us a chance for our lives, provided only you will perform her will in sundry matters.”

He hesitated, his uncertain eyes shifting from her face to mine.

“What does this scarlet priestess of Baal require that I do?” he questioned sullenly.

“Good lack, ’tis little enough even to satisfy your conscience. Merely that you stand beside her on the platform, pretending converse, marking carefully her every signal, and obeying it.”

“I play no idolatrous mummery with her.”

“Then may the devil fly away with you,” I retorted, so enraged by this time I could scarcely refrain from grappling him with my hands. “I go to tell Madame of the fool you are.”

He gave vent to a deep groan, rolling his eyes as was his habit in time of trial, yet never removing his gaze from that red figure, standing motionless as a statue, impatiently awaiting his decision.

“In the name of the holy prophets of Israel!” he snorted desperately at last. “’T is, indeed, a grievous trial like unto that which befell Daniel in the den of the lions. If I go upon yonder sinful platform before these hosts of Satan, it will be only as led by the Almighty, and that I may wrestle mightily in prayer for the redemption of the heathen.”

“I care not, man, so you go. Pray loud as you please, yet give heed to the signals of the woman if you value your own life or ours.”

Odds! it was a picture to see the fellow start on his unwelcome mission, slouching through the ranks of the surprised savages with as hangdog a look on his mournful countenance as though he mounted the gallows. It was with faint hope as to the result that I watched him lumber onto the platform, doubting not he would perform some crazy trick to offset any good he might endeavor. I could scarce restrain

Page 133

a smile as the two actors faced each other, marking the look of undisguised horror on his leathern face, and how he shrank back as her hand extended to touch him. The wild, discordant cries of the grouped savages ceased in wonderment at this unanticipated scene; even the perpetual incantations of the priests died away, every eye gazing curiously on the strange spectacle. The Puritan had appropriated one of De Noyan's hats, broad of brim, and so ample of crown the high peaked head of the worthy sectary was almost lost within its capacious interior. No sooner, however, did he attain her side than the woman grasped it in her white fingers, flinging it disdainfully upon the floor, and, like a flash of unexpected color in the dancing light of the fire, there blazed forth before us his flaming covering with a brilliancy which startled even me. Saint Andrew! it was a glow to make the eyes blink.

The sudden effect of this disclosure upon the thronging warriors was beyond words of mine. There followed a hush so painful in intensity I could distinguish the quick throbbing of my own heart. I saw the woman point at the fellow, giving eager utterance to a single word, her eyes sweeping the faces below. Then came an irregular rush forward, inarticulate cries pierced the air, war weapons were dashed clanging upon the earthen floor, while numerous torches, grasped from off the sacred altar, were waved aloft by excited hands, all serving to form as demoniacal a scene as was ever witnessed this side of hell.

The full truth flashed across my mind—our comrade had in that moment been changed from a helpless, beaten prisoner into an object of superstitious worship. By the magic of a word, the alchemy of a thought, he had become to these superstitious savages a mysterious visitant from the Sun, and for once, at least, he might fervently bless Nature, who had bestowed upon him so rich a coloring of hair. Whether or not the fellow comprehended the meaning of that uproar, of those wildly dancing figures in his front, I could never determine; but, before the woman could in any way interfere, the sectary plumped down upon his knees, and, with head bent so low that every separate hair caught the reflection of the ruddy flames, began pouring forth a petition in sturdy English, and with a volume of voice that shook the whole interior. It was not such a bad play, I take it, although he was desperately in earnest. Very plainly he compared his worshipping auditory to certain scriptural characters, in a way that would not have proven flattering to them could they have interpreted his language.

Page 134

“Oh, Lord God!” he roared, rolling his eyes upward and interjecting many a deep groan after each sentence. “Infinite Jehovah, for some just reason of Thy own, Thou hast seen fit to lead Thy most humble servant into this den of iniquity. Thou hast placed me in the fiery furnace of tribulation, it may be in the test of that faith which was delivered unto the saints, yet will I not bow down in the tents of the idolaters, nor profane Thy Holy Name by the worship of their false gods. Here in the midst of the ravening lions I uplift my eyes unto Jerusalem, and my lips unto the throne of grace, beseeching Thee to give unto me the salvation of these heathen, even as brands plucked from the burning. Quench the fire on this altar of Baal, O Lord, by the outpouring of Thy Spirit, and give unto this people a manifestation of Thy mighty power, redeeming them from their manifold sins. Yea, Lord, give ear unto the words of my petition, and as of old times thou didst send a message of fire unto Thy prophet Elijah, so come down even now to visit these unbelieving and mocking hearts with the terror of Thy just wrath. Make bare Thy arm of infinite power that this abomination of heathendom may be purged of its vain idolatry, and that Thy Israel may triumph over the hosts of the sinful. Even as Thou didst scatter the forces of the Egyptians in the waters of the Red Sea, even so, O Lord, visit now Thy wrath upon those who mock Thee and degrade Thy image. Save us from the snare of this scarlet woman, this proud harlot of Babylon, and forgive Thy servant for thus seeming to obey her will. Thou knowest, O Lord, that it is only that I may the better serve Thee, and thus overcome the wiles of the Wicked One. Give unto me in this hour the strength of Samson that I may overturn the pillars of this temple of abominations, even though we all perish in its destruction. Yea, visit us with power and righteousness, and scatter Thy enemies over the face of the earth. O Lord! I am as nothing, a mere worm of the dust: smite me if Thou wilt, yet I but wrestle with Thee in prayer that through me the heathen may be brought low, and led to see the error of their way.”

There was no halting him, yet even as he continued to pour forth fervent supplication, the warriors drew back from the dense circle pressing against the platform, taking solemn counsel together. Then the old war-chief advanced to the centre, pointing maliciously toward De Noyan and myself. I observed the Queen wave her hand in a gesture of apparent carelessness, and before I could clearly conjecture the full meaning of it, strong hands clutched us, and, in spite of struggles, we were dragged roughly back toward the shrouded entrance of the lodge. There was no shouting, no din of any kind to disturb the devotions of the Puritan, who prayed on with closed eyes and a vigor of utterance making mock of all other sound. Silently as they moved, it was nevertheless plain to be read in the grim, savage faces closing about

Page 135

us, that we were being driven forth to no scene of pleasure. Harshly did their gripping hands hustle us forward. The heavy mat shading the entrance was flung aside, and like the unexpected flight of an arrow, into the black gloom of the lodge, weirdly lighting up the wild faces, streamed the clear, white light of the dawn. Far off upon the highest summit of the yellow cliff there already rested the first rosy reflection of the rising sun. One shout rang discordant from the surprised throats of our captors; the brutal hands released their grasp, and De Noyan and myself sank back helpless upon the ground.

CHAPTER XXV

A VISITANT FROM THE SUN

As by magic the uproar of the infuriated savages died away. Gazing up from where I lay, my eyes beheld every face turned outward, every eye fastened upon that distant wall of rock. Suddenly a strange cry arose, each throat giving utterance to the same sound as if in trained obedience to some recognized signal, and immediately every Indian lay prostrate, his face in the dust. Gazing toward the spot they had watched so intently, I could perceive how the rose tints of the early sun flecked the upper extremity of the precipitous rock with spots of color, checkers of red and gold, while just below its lofty crest, seemingly touching the deep blue of the morning sky, hardly more than dim specks against the dull background of gray rock, appeared several moving black figures, and I could distinguish a series of flashes as if they waved blazing torches in welcome to the King of Day.

"*Sacre*! 'tis an uncanny sight," muttered my companion uneasily. "Have yonder foul priests been given wings whereby they mount the very rock in their devil worship?"

"Hardly that," I returned tersely. "There will be a footpath leading to the spot either from above or below."

"True, perchance; yet 'tis not from above. Of that I am certain, as the crest of the rock overhangs; you may perceive the deep shadow of it even from here."

Before I could distinguish clearly the peculiarity pointed out, the woman chief came forth through the open entrance, appearing more fair and white of skin than ever in the clear light of the dawn. Scarcely glancing toward either the prostrate tribesmen or those distant signalling priests, she advanced directly toward where we lay helpless in our bonds. There was a flush upon her cheeks, a light of animation in her eyes, yet she stood looking down upon me much as she might have viewed an insensate stone.

“Senor,” she said coldly, still speaking the Spanish tongue, “it did please my humor but now to play a small trick upon these innocent children of nature, knowing their faith and tribal customs. For the time being I won, and it is you who benefit. You, and these others, are for the present delivered from that torture to which you were condemned: the rising of yonder Sun

Page 136

has saved you; 'tis the law of the Natchez. Nay, thank me not," as I sought to express my words of gratitude. "I told you before it was not from any desire to show mercy, but for a purpose of my own. Yet if you would continue to profit through my strange whim—and surely I have seldom been thus swayed to action—then it will be well to give heed unto my words. I bid you proceed at once to that second hut yonder, nor dare venture forth again until I send. The children of the Sun bow now to the commands of their ancient faith, yet are of temper hard to control."

"You fear they may yet demand us in sacrifice?"

"Not to-day, unless you do that which shall arouse their passions beyond my power of restraint. While the sun dominates the sky your lives are preserved from violence, but if you would live longer it must be through careful guarding of speech and action. I promise nothing beyond the present day. But now," she bent over, severing my bonds with a flint blade, "go; do exactly as I bade you, and no longer bandy words with me."

"But the lady within the lodge?" I ventured anxiously, as I struggled to my feet, standing erect before her.

"She bides elsewhere."

"It will be hard for her alone—"

"What is all that to you, sirrah?" she interrupted haughtily. "According to the tale told, you are not her husband. He who might have right to question separation has made no complaint."

"He does not comprehend your speech. For that reason he remains dumb."

"Mean you it is he who inspires your objection?" she asked scornfully.

"No; yet I doubt not 'tis in his heart even as upon my lips."

She turned aside, an incredulous smile curling her lips, looking curiously down upon him, and their eyes met. She stooped swiftly, severing the thongs of grass binding his arms, and with her own hands assisted him to rise.

"A fair and noble gallant," she said softly, reluctantly turning back from him to me. "Not of hard, stern visage like yours, but with the bearing of a gentleman, the smile of a courtier. Pish! he will not miss her over-much, or else I read not rightly the challenge of his eyes. But come, hunter, I bade you go in haste, nor is it well for any one to wait my bidding twice."

“’T is no more than just we should be told the destiny of our companions,” I persisted, determined not to desert them thus. “May not both the Puritan and the woman abide with us?”

Her eyes flashed in uncontrolled anger, her lips giving vent to a low, cruel laugh.

“I tell you no, and understand once for all my word is law. You are not standing before a French court to haggle over trifles, and dispute about your rights. Bah! you have no rights; you live from day to day merely by my whim. The red-headed man tarries where he is as long as it remains my pleasure; while as to yon dainty creature, she shall meet no harm. Forsooth, it will not greatly hurt her to be beyond your sight for a space.”

Page 137

“Does she bide with you?”

“If I so will it, yes; if not, no. Who are you, hunter, to dare question Naladi after she bids you cease?” she exclaimed, her cheeks crimsoning. “Now go; go ere I am tempted to show you I possess power to enforce my will. Another word, and you will long regret it.”

She was a tigress now, her eyes burning into mine with the fierceness of a wild animal scenting blood. It would have been sheer madness to attempt more, with those scowling, savage faces lowering at us from every side, their possessors only too eager to spring forward in cruel obedience to a gesture of their Queen. A single word from her red lips would, in spite of all superstition, cause them to rend us limb from limb, so I bade De Noyan follow me, feeling relief when once beyond her sight in the cool depths of the sheltering hut.

“Well, Master Benteen,” remarked my comrade easily, finding a soft bearskin upon which to rest his aching limbs, “this is an odd company among whom you have piloted us; one not altogether appealing to my taste in its masculine elements. Yet, damme, but you possess rare advantage over the rest of us in holding converse with these people, while I must remain dumb as an oyster, save for a glance of the eye. Perhaps, now that we have time for it, you will kindly explain the meaning of all this mummery with which we passed the night, for, by all the gods of Rome, it was weird enough to turn my hair gray, yet I understood neither word nor deed. How came that grim preacher to attain such honor, taking position beside their peerless Queen?”

His idiotic lightness of speech and manner jarred unpleasantly upon my humor. I was heavy-hearted from what had passed, retaining little confidence in the future, yet I told him the story as best I could, trusting the recital might serve to sober him, so we could counsel together regarding our plans.

“*Pardieu*! ’twas rather a pretty trick of the lady,” he exclaimed laughingly, as I ended the tale. “She would do honor to a more pretentious court with her wit as well as beauty. What did you call the title she bore?”

“‘Daughter of the Sun’ was the name given in the altar-house yonder; later she made use of the word Naladi.”

“Ay! that was it. ’T is a name fitting her well to my taste, and I boast of some experience with the sex. *Sacre*! I trust not to have seen the last of so fair a vision as this Queen Naladi.”

He was twirling his moustache, such a look of complacency upon his features I could only stare at him in bewildered surprise.

“You appear reconciled to our situation with marvellous good grace,” I managed to say at last, in a tone which made no attempt to conceal my disgust at his coxcombry. “For myself I can see very little to hope for.”

Page 138

“Tut, tut, man,” stretching himself negligently into a posture of greater ease, “an old soldier learns to take things as they come, without complaint; to extract sweets from every flower. Surely here is a rare rose we have uncovered blooming in the wilderness; nor am I blind to its beauty, or unmindful of my privileges. Besides, lad, what is there greatly to worry about? We are preserved, you tell me, from torture; food will undoubtedly be supplied in plenty, while the lady is surely fair enough to promise pleasant companionship in exile—provided I ever learn to have private speech with her. What was the tongue?”

“We conversed in Spanish.”

“I thought as much; there were certain familiar words. But, as I said, why complain of fate, with all these blessings showered upon us. *Pardieu*! it would prove us ungrateful wretches. Surely ’tis better than the tender mercy of O’Reilly, ay, or the hardship and starvation of the trail.”

“You have forgotten your wife.”

“Forgotten? *Sacre*! I should say not, Master Benteen; nor is that likely to occur. Yet what cause have I to worry regarding her present comfort. Did you not say that the Queen pledged her safety and good care? What more could I accomplish for her than that, even were we back in New Orleans, beneath French protection? Saint Denis! you are of a complaining breed, inclined to act as conscience for your betters. True, there are some few things I greatly miss, that would minister to comfort. I was ever careful in my toilet, and choice as to my wines in town; still, if these savages have not lost my soaps and brushes, I will strive to exist even here, and be content until a way opens toward that which is better.”

“I greatly admire your patience.”

“Pah! ’tis but the long practice of a soldier. Yet I am somewhat weary from the night, and, if you have talked enough, will seek rest to dream of Naladi, trusting she may send for me ere long. Did you note the beauty of her eyes?”

“I marked their cruelty.”

“*Le Diable*! I ever admired spirit in a woman; ’tis the greater pleasure to watch them take on softer light. In such orbs love shines the clearer, once awakened.”

I sat there some time in silence until he fell asleep. Then, realizing how useless it was for me, wearily as my eyelids drooped, to strive longer in thought, I sought another robe to rest upon, and was soon happily unconscious also.

I presume some unusual noise aroused me, for as I awoke and stared about, unable at the moment to comprehend my situation, I noticed, by evidence of the sun shining

through the entrance of the hut, it was already past the noon hour. Consciousness becoming more acute, I perceived, standing barely within the shadows of the interior, the dusky figure of a warrior, unarmed, and motionless except for a gesture of the hand which seemed to command my following him. Retaining concealed within my doublet the sharp knife intrusted to me by Madame, I felt little trepidation at the fellow's presence, nor was there anything about his countenance to foster alarm, he appearing the least ferocious of aspect of all I had observed among the tribe. A moment I hesitated, then believing him a messenger from the Queen, I followed his retreating figure out into the sunlight.

Page 139

The village reposed in loneliness and silence, nor did I see even child or dog playing before the square huts as we passed them. As we mounted higher along the slope and began climbing the strangely rounded hill on the summit of which perched the altar-house, I glanced back curiously over the plain outspread below. Little clusters of dark figures were scattered here and there throughout the pleasant valley, many of them congregated along the greener banks of the circling water-course, others scattered more widely afield, yet all earnestly engaged in cultivation of the ground. This quiet, pastoral scene was so foreign to all my previous conception of Indian nature that for the moment I paused amazed, gazing upon this picture of peaceful agriculture in the heart of the wilderness. Surely, cruel, revengeful savages though they were, yet here was a people retaining traditions of a higher life than that of the wild chase and desert war. I could perceive no guards stationed anywhere, yet felt no doubt that every entrance leading into this hidden paradise, this rock-barricaded basin amid the hills, would be amply protected by armed and vigilant warriors, confining us as securely within its narrow limits as if a dozen savages followed our every footfall. My silent guide, after one glance across his naked shoulder, to assure himself that I followed, led straight forward up the hill on a dog-trot, soon placing him far in advance. At the entrance of the altar-house he paused, showing disinclination to enter. In obedience to a gesture I passed within, leaving him standing there, as if awaiting my return, a silent statue in light bronze, the glow of the sunshine upon him.

Wondering what my mission might be, I remained a moment motionless slightly within the entrance, my eyes almost totally blinded by the sudden transition from the garish day to that dull interior. Slowly the scene within resolved itself into clearer detail. I began to perceive the crawling red flames licking with hungry tongues along the sides of the huge log resting upon the altar block, and later distinguished the black figure of a priest moving silently from point to point amid the shadows, engaged upon the grewsome functions of his office, his presence ever manifested by the dismal crooning with which he worked his magic spells. Beyond these vague suggestions of life—for they seemed scarcely more—it was like endeavoring to sound the depths of a cavern, so black, still, and void was all within and about. Yet, even as I stood thus, peering uneasily into the gloom, I was thoroughly startled at the sudden booming forth of a voice, apparently issuing from the darkest corner.

“May the Lord God forgive ye, Master Benteen, and be merciful unto ye, for thus placing His minister in such stress. ’T is I, Ezekiel Cairnes, who hath become an abomination unto Israel.”

Page 140

There was a tone of such utter depression in the great roaring voice, I feared some serious mishap had befallen him, and hastened to cross the room, heading toward the corner whence the sound came. As I attained the outer edge of the platform, groping my passage through the dense gloom, I was halted in the midst of a dozen or more savages, lying prone upon the hard floor, evidently in adoration of that grotesque figure perched above, and now clearly revealed by a blazing up of the charred log. Not one among them stirred from his prostrate position at my approach. Forgetting them instantly, my whole attention became riveted upon the marvellous transformation presented by my old Puritan comrade. Odds! what a sight! He sat bolt upright, as though bound in that stiff posture, occupying a low dais, almost at the edge of the platform. This latter had been covered with a glaring crimson cloth, roughly woven, presumably of native manufacture, peculiarly brilliant in its coloring, and hence of rare beauty to Indian eyes. At my approach he began straining at the cords which held him helpless, and I soon saw that his entire body was wrapped about with ropes of grass in such a manner as to render vain any hope of escape. His oddly shapen figure, with the wide, square shoulders and short legs, was likewise-draped in red, above which flared his fiery shock of dishevelled hair, while a face fairly distorted with rage, gray from loss of sleep, and rendered ludicrous by its little snapping eyes, glared down upon me.

“Memory of Beelzebub! It would be no matter of laughter for ye, Master Benteen,” he snorted savagely, straining at his cords, “could I burst these accursed strings, and lay my hands to your throat. Ay! nor would yonder idolatrous swine lie there long if I once got free among them. Imagine not, vain and presumptuous unbeliever that the Lord God Almighty—He who rideth in the chariot of the whirlwind—will long permit the heathen to profane His holy places, or triumph in the misery of one of the elect. There cometh the Day of Judgment, when the wicked shall be scattered as chaff.”

“You are in a most unpleasant condition, friend,” I replied, endeavoring to speak so as to calm his temper. “It is in sorrow, not pleasure, I behold you thus.”

“I am entangled in the snare of the Evil One, Master Benteen. But I continue manfully to war against the adversary even as becomes my high station.”

“Have you been long in so pitiful a state? I dreamed not it would ever come to this.”

“It may be true you were ignorant of the wiles of that emissary of Satan who doth encompass us,” he acknowledged, a trifle mollified by my sympathy. “I would not be guilty of evil thought even toward an unregenerated heretic. Yet I have sat thus, wrapped like a mummy of the Egyptians, since early dawn. Ay, verily have I been sore oppressed both of body and spirit. Nor has there been any surcease, when the heathen have not lain thus at my feet. What means such action?”

Page 141

“They mistake you for a god, and prostrate themselves in worship. You are unto them a mysterious visitant from the Sun—so the Queen named you, inspired by the color of your hair.”

He groaned aloud, his chin dropping dejectedly upon his breast.

“I feared as much, and the thought greatly oppressed me. ’T is as if I were a golden calf set aloft in the wilderness to mock the true God. It resteth heavy on my spirit to abide as a vain idol in the tents of these idolaters. When first they draped me with this foul livery of Satan,” he touched the scarlet robe gingerly with his chin, “I made so vigorous a protest two of the black imps went down before me, but the others overpowered my struggles, binding me fast, as you see. But, verily, I have delivered unto them the whole truth as revealed unto the saints; have struck and spared not—ay! the very language of the scriptures have I poured forth unstinted upon them, and drawn before their eyes that fiery hell over which they dangle in their sins. It must be their understandings are darkened, for they hearken not unto my exhortations, only lie thus, or dance before me by the hour in unholy worship, snapping their fingers and shouting strange words, while twice yonder black emissary of false religion held his smoking torch so closely to my face the flame scorched the skin. Nor have my most fervent prayers availed to drive them hence, or ease the prickings of the spirit. ’T is as if the ear of the Lord had been turned aside from the supplications of His servant; yea, verily, as if the vials of His wrath were being poured forth upon my head, because, in a moment of weakness, I yielded to the machinations of that scarlet woman.”

“Have you again seen her?” I questioned anxiously, as he paused for breath.

“Seen her!—the accursed of God, the moral leper who rules this foul nest? Ay; I have, and may the Lord forgive my ever casting eyes upon such a shameless creature. ’T was she who brought me this disgrace. She stood by with mocking smile, bidding her savage minions bind me fast. She is the chief imp of Satan in spite of her fair face, and shall yet be stricken low by the avenging arm of the Almighty. ’Tis no gleam of mercy cometh to me from her taunts, nor in the harlot blood flowing through her veins. I tell you, Master Benteen, she is the worst devil, for all her softness, in all this heathen crew; and if she spared our lives from the torture, it was done through some dark project born of the demon within her soul. Nothing good can come forth from such as she. Marked you the eyes she cast on De Noyan?”

“I paid no heed,” I answered, wondering he had observed so much. “Have you supposed we may owe our escape unto him?”

“Ay! she has marked him victim to her snare, nor do I doubt the full success of her venture. ’T is small stock of virtue which bedecks itself in such Punchinello dress as that gay gallant wears. Amalekite is written upon his raiment, and he is ever attired as becomes a bridegroom to the shameless harlot ruling this devils’ den. Marry, he may be

good enough wielding a sword, yet will prove the undoing of all who company with him in this adventure."

Page 142

“You are unjustly angry,” I insisted, striving to make light of his words. “I value not the mercy of the woman, yet she used the only means she had for restraining her savage followers. It was stern necessity driving her to reliance on the magic of your red hair with which to save us all. No doubt she intends giving you early release from so painful a situation.”

“You also are bewitched by her vain fleshly beauty,” he bellowed stoutly. “’Tis a carnal generation. I tell you, Master Benteen, I am an old man, uplifted by communion of the Spirit above all fleshly lusts. I have faithfully preached the word of salvation to civilized and savage more than forty years, and am not likely to be led astray by a glimpse of a fair face tempting me hellward. I speak you truth, as delivered of God, so surely as were the tablets of the law delivered unto Moses, when I say that she who, by some wile of the Devil, rules this tribe and holds our lives in her hands, is an incarnate fiend, who will yet mock our agony whenever her own accursed lust shall be satisfied. ’T is not only that she jeered at me with cruel smiles, and affronted a preacher of the Word by so ribald a covering; she did as clearly reveal the hideous sin of her heart unto that sweet lady we have in our keeping.”

“Madame de Noyan?” I cried in awakened interest. “Mean you this woman dared do wrong by her?”

“I report only what my eyes beheld, for I can make nothing out of their heathen gibberish. Yet she who journeyed with us, ever proving herself a modest, high-bred lady in times of sore trial, begged upon her knees, with tears hot upon her cheeks, to be permitted to accompany you and her husband. What result? Why, this good Queen; this charming creature, stood there, like an insensate stone, gazing down upon her; and later, when the poor lady would not walk voluntarily, that painted harlot ordered two lecherous warriors to drag her forth, and laughed like a fiend at the scene.”

“Where did they take her?”

“I know not; beyond the entrance she made no outcry that reached my ears, while that red-draped witch came back smiling to work her will on me.”

This comprised all he knew, and, no matter what depth of sympathy I may have then felt for Master Cairnes in his unfortunate predicament, it was equally clear I could do nothing to aid him. My heart was so heavily laden by the plight of Eloise, I retained no other desire than a longing to return at once to the hut and hold consultation with De Noyan. That same silent spectre accompanied me along the brief journey, leaving me unguarded at the entrance. I entered hastily only to find the room vacant, my comrade gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CHRONICLES OF THE NATCHEZ

These pages have been poorly written if he who reads has not discovered that I am of a nature not easily discouraged by events, or disheartened by misfortune. God had sufficiently armored me with hope; so that in the midst of much darkness I sought for whatever light of guidance there might be, making the most of it. Yet the intense, unanticipated loneliness of that bare hut chilled my blood, and I scarcely recall a more wretched time than while I waited, stung and tortured by fears, for the return of De Noyan.

Page 143

In truth the rough conclusions voiced by the angry sectary merely confirmed my own fear. I had marked within the eyes of Naladi—dreamy as they appeared beneath the shading of long lashes—no promise of tenderness of heart. I believed it was seldom she inclined to mercy, seldom she would step between her warriors and their revenge. I acknowledge freely I felt to some degree the strange spell of her power, the magic influence of her soft, sinuous beauty, which I doubt if any man could utterly resist. Yet I recognized her from the first, even as she stood wrapped in the sun's rays on the rock summit, as one who, by instinct and nature, was scarce less a savage than her most desperate follower, although she possessed the rare gift of masking her cruelty beneath the pleasing smile of a woman not entirely unacquainted with the courtesies of refinement.

I marvelled greatly who she could be, thus sporting the polite graces of a reception-room in the midst of these squalid huts. What was her strange life-story? How ever came such a woman, with charm of face, and grace of manner, to be acknowledged leader over such a people? It was not so odd that a clever, resourceful woman, driven perhaps by necessity, should have made unscrupulous use of their dominant superstitions, and, by naming herself "Daughter of the Sun," have obtained supreme power. The perfect acting of such an assumed character would not prove difficult to her, while their servile worship of the protesting Puritan, whose red hair alone had elevated him to sainthood, proved how easily these savages might be deceived, and led slaves by subtle magic. Yet who was the woman? Whence came she? Why should she ever have chosen such a life?

And Eloise! Through what misfortune had she already attained the undisguised dislike of this Amazon? To what fate would this unmerited disfavor condemn her? It is a terrible thing to remain chained and helpless at such a time, to realize that cruel wrong, possibly torture, is being visited upon another, upon one you know and love, and yet be unable to uplift hand or voice in warning. I am by nature cool in action, yet there are few who fret more grievously when held in leash, compelled to await in uncertainty the coming of the unknown.

All I could do that day was to pace the hard earthen floor, vainly endeavoring to quiet the wild throbbing of my heart with every hope I might conjure up, now and then approaching the unguarded entrance of the lodge to search anxiously for some ground of hope. It was thus the long afternoon wore away, until the deepening shadows of sun-setting rested heavily along the western cliffs, and the workers in the fields began trooping through the village, their shouts of greeting shrill and discordant, while the grim priests found place before the draped entrance to their dread altar-house, with blazing fagots signalling their distant brethren on the dizzy summit. It was then De Noyan finally returned and found me raging from wall to wall like one distracted.

Page 144

It required but a glance to note the subtile change the afternoon had wrought in his personal appearance, yet at the time I did not greatly marvel at it. The stains of battle and exposure, that had so decidedly disfigured him, had disappeared before the magic of new raiment, which had about it the color and cut of French fashion; so it was now a fair and prosperous gallant of the court, powdered of hair, waxen of moustache, who came jauntily forward with his greetings.

"What said I, Master Benteen?" he questioned cheerily to my stare of surprise. "Did I not boldly contend that this would yet prove a pleasant resting-place to relieve the tedium of a journey? Can you gaze upon this gay attire, longer doubting the verity of my dreams? But no happiness finds reflection in your face; 'tis gloomy as a day of rain. Prithie, the afternoon must have been passed by you far less pleasantly than its hours sped with me."

"I have been conversing with good Master Cairnes," I responded gravely. "I found him in no state of mind or body to bring me pleasant thought."

"*Parbleu*! I warrant not from all I hear of that worthy servant," the Chevalier laughed gayly. "'T is told me the grim-faced old hypocrite sits in worshipful state, a veritable god, trussed like a bronze idol or some mummy of the Egyptians. By my faith, I should enjoy gazing on his solemn face, and listening to his words withal."

"'T is an unhappy experience for a Christian."

"Ay! a pity; yet it should do the canting preacher good to play heathen god a while. She pictured to me most vividly his struggles to escape a fit draping with which to match his hair. *Sacre*! I have not laughed so heartily since leaving New Orleans."

"She?" I exclaimed in new interest. "Have you been with your wife?"

He stroked his moustache, gazing at me in apparent surprise.

"Nay, friend Benteen; you must be the very soul of innocence to make such hasty guess. I rested beneath the same roof with her, so I was informed, yet she who spake thus regarding the plight of the Puritan chanced to be the fair Queen, Naladi."

"Naladi? But you speak no Spanish,—how could you hold converse with her?"

"There are always ways, if the lady be fair. The hands, eyes, lips can all be made into messengers of speech. But in this case she brought forth a black boy—a most mischievous imp—who managed to convey her words in my own tongue. Still it was difficult to do justice in such a way to so charming a woman; much came to my lips which I hesitated to utter through the medium of that interpreter."

I looked at him in speechless amazement at this revelation of his supreme conceit, his reckless vanity. Anxiety alone prompted me to smother my resentment, hoping thus to obtain information.

“But your wife, Madame de Noyan? You say she was beneath the same roof, and yet you saw her not? Do you mean you made no effort to obtain speech with her?”

Page 145

He leaned back against the wall of the hut, crossing his long limbs negligently over the soft fur of the robe beneath, drawing from his pocket a small mirror.

“Ay, I mentioned it; but *la reine Naladi* appeared not overly well pleased with the suggestion, so I concluded not to press the matter unduly. One never gains by being ungallant at such a time. Besides, there is no doubt Eloise is well attended; the Queen referred to her most kindly.”

“The preacher told me,” I broke forth indignantly, determined to test him to the full, “that this same sweet Naladi compelled her savage minions to drag Madame harshly forth from the altar-house, despite her pleadings. Perchance this tender-spoken Queen has little of the angel beneath her fairness of skin.”

“*Sacre*! I hope not. I opine an angel would prove wearisome to company with for long. My own taste inclines toward flesh and blood. You say Master Cairnes told you this sad tale?”

“Ay, adding that the pitiful Naladi only laughed at the sobs of Madame.”

“Pish! between the two, her word has most weight with me. No doubt ’twas a vision born of his own temper. The Queen assured me most graciously of the welfare and contentment of Eloise. It would have been boorish to question her further. Besides, she took my thought from other things, repeating to me the strange tale of these savages, although the black made poor enough work with her words.”

It was abundantly evident the man was fairly crazed with conceit, already well entangled in the web of this designing creature. For the hour, at least, all serious consideration of her who should rightfully claim his attention had been completely blotted out. He had become a willing victim to a will infinitely stronger than his own, his conscience deadened by the poison of beauty; so, while my blood rioted in protest to his simpering French vanity, I could perceive no means by which I might arouse him to more manly action. To cross such a man only invites to the surface the worst elements of his nature; besides, were I to stir him by strong protest, it might be doubtful if he comprehended the nature of my scruples in the matter. Any such misunderstanding would result in the exchange of hard words, and in my making an enemy where now I possessed a friend. Not that the Chevalier was a particularly valuable ally, yet he wielded a good sword upon occasion, and would prove more useful in friendship than in enmity. I might despise him, yet he remained the husband of Madame, and I durst pick no quarrel with him. To do so would raise a barrier between us, rendering our situation among the savages darker than ever. As to the moral side of the affair, it would be sheer waste of words to broach it, as De Noyan could form no clearer conception of such an issue than a babe unborn. He swung as the wind blew, and in all his pampered life had probably never dreamed of denying himself a liberty. Saint Andrew! it was a knotty problem for such a head as mine to solve. I believe I chose the better course in assuming the role

of a neutral, as I sat staring at the fellow while he twisted his moustaches into their old-time curl, gazing at himself in the pocket mirror, utterly oblivious of my presence.

Page 146

“So this beauty of a Queen told you the tale of her people,” I remarked at last, determining to humor his mood. “It would interest me to hear the story. Those I have thus far seen differ widely from any other order of savages with whom I have come in contact.”

“Your judgment is right. As she tells the story, they are not of Indian blood, but belong to a far older race. She says they are the remnant of a master people—although regarding their exact lineage she spoke but little—who once, hundreds of years ago no doubt, held undisputed dominion from the banks of a great red river flowing through the prairies far to the northward, down to the salted sea bounding the land upon the east. She said their ancestors mined in the rocks, and cultivated the rich land of the valleys. They were ruled over by five kings; and when one of these died all their wives were burned above the grave, and a hundred slaves sacrificed to the Sun, which they worshipped, and called Elagabalus. These were all buried around the body of the king, whose tomb was of rock, and a huge mound of earth erected over them by the labor of thousands of slaves taken in battle. Yet their chief king, in the day of their great power, she called Palenque, placing his capital to north and east of this place, a land journey of thirty days. Here was built a great city of wood and stone, surrounded by an immense wall of earth, to which all the smaller kings journeyed in state once each year to make account of their kingdoms, and offer up slaves on the altar of the great temple in sacrifice to the Sun. They would gather thus from noon to noon, and thousands of captives would be slaughtered before the altar by the priests. She told me they once possessed vast store of yellow metal and flashing stones, with other treasures. Cities were set apart under guard to have special care over them. Some of these have descended even unto the present, but are kept hidden away by the priests, though she promised later to let me view them secretly. And she related a most strange tale of destiny—of a long, barbarous war, filled with the names of warriors and towns sounding most uncouth to my ears; a war lasting many years, during which the Chichimes—for so she named the wild hordes sweeping down upon them from the northward—drove their fathers backward from city to city, beginning far away in the kingdom named Talapa, and pillaging clear to the banks of the great river where Palenque reigned. Their ancestors erected vast forts of earth, thus managing to hold their own against the invaders, so long as their slaves remained loyal. But at last these also rose in revolt, and, when all supplies had been cut off, the hopeless remnant of defenders fell back down the broad river, bearing with them much of their most valued treasure, never permitting the sacred flame, which was the gift of the Sun, to die out upon their altars. Like flies they died in the preservation of this symbol of their religion; for ’tis their

Page 147

faith, that if it be kept burning undimmed, there will yet come to them a great leader from the Sun to restore their lost glories. She described to me the arts of that past, the many beautiful things the race had made, those wondrous cities protected by high walls, the vast mounds of earth moulded into strange figures of extinct animals, uplifted as altars, and sometimes utilized for the burial of their dead and their treasure. *Sacre*! I can recall a portion of the story, yet it was a weird, fascinating tale as she told it slowly, and with all seriousness, although the black boy stammered so badly in his words I got only dim pictures here and there."

"But how came they here?" I questioned.

"I was coming to that. It was some trouble with the French in Bienville's day. Only a few escaped, and they were driven into these hills; yet 't is said they saved a considerable amount of treasure which had come to them from their fathers, together with some of the mummified bodies of their kings. It is forty years since they discovered this dell, and only the older men have any memory of the discovery."

"What do they call themselves?"

"'Nalmas' was the word the Queen used, but they are that same people whom we knew about in New Orleans as 'Natchez'; their old country was called Tlapalan."

I sat silent, pondering upon his words, but before I thought out further questioning, a warrior, bearing food, entered the hut. Setting this down upon the ground before us, he drew back into the gathering night shadows without uttering a word. That which I had just heard caused me to gaze upon the fellow—a tall, stalwart savage—with newly awakened interest, and I could not help observing again how widely the type differed from those Indian tribes with whom my wandering border life had rendered me familiar. Not only was this man of fairer, clearer complexion, but his cheek-bones were not in the least prominent, his nose was wide at the base and somewhat flattened, while his forehead sloped sharply backward in such peculiar form as to warrant the opinion that the deformity arose from a compression of the frontal bone in infancy. The hair, although worn long and flowing down the back, was decidedly wavy, and not coarse; the color was a ruddy brown. The eyes of these Indians were bold, cruel, crafty, yet in many instances the coloring was so light as to be startling; the average stature was greater than that of those other Indians that I knew. In short, they impressed me as being all that was claimed, a distinct race, with characteristics more nearly allied to the Ethiopian and the Mongolian than to the surrounding red races. As I figured this out somewhat slowly, De Noyan busted himself with the meal, and, thus engrossed, apparently forgot the topic of our conversation.

“And did this Queen Naladi claim to belong to this old race?” I questioned, thinking thus to test his observation.

Page 148

“Why not?” he asked in return, suspending operations, and glancing up at me in surprise. “She referred to herself as the ’Daughter of the Sun,’ once saying that her ancestors ruled over this people for a thousand years.”

“She told you that?”

“At least so the black interpreted her words. Why question it?”

“Doubtless to your thought there exists small cause for questioning the word of so fair a woman,” I acknowledged dryly. “Yet to my vision, not wholly blinded by her charms, she possesses more of the Caucasian in face and manner than any other of the race. If she is not of European birth I am a poor judge, Monsieur, and ’t is my belief, if she told you she was not, the woman lied.”

I was scarcely prepared for the result of my words upon him; his face flushed, a sudden glow of anger sweeping into his eyes.

“You are, indeed, of bold heart,” he exclaimed scornfully, “to malign a woman in her absence.”

“There are women no words can malign,” I retorted sharply, stung by his tone, “I opine this Queen of savages belongs to that class. To my mind it would be better were you to wax indignant over the wrongs of your wife rather than over a just picturing of this harlot.”

Before I could move to draw aside, he was upon his feet, and I felt the stinging blow of his hand across my lips.

“*Sacre*!” he cried, transported by sudden rage, “Charles de Noyan takes such affront from no man. I denounce you as a cowardly vilifier of an absent woman.”

I know not why I failed to strike the fellow down. My hand was hard on the knife hilt within my doublet, yet I drew it not as we stood there eye to eye. There was that between us—the dim, shadowy face of a woman—which held me as by a chain. It seemed to me then as if my knife point would have to pass through her before it touched his heart, and, feeling thus, God gave me power to choke back the hot resentment, and restrain my hand.

“Monsieur,” I said sternly, “never has the hand of man touched me before in anger without my making full return for the blow. Yet now I strike you not. The time may come when I shall wipe out this insult, but here and now you stand safe from my arm.”

“Safe!” he sneered. “*Parbleu*! you are a cowardly hound to talk thus. Safe! think you I have anything to fear at your hands?”

“I bid you restrain your tongue, Chevalier,” I said, my voice unsteady. “God being my witness, never before did you stand so close to death as now. Look,” and I held up the keen blade before his eyes. “This steel thirsts for your blood; only one thought has intervened to save you.”

“What was that?”

“The fact that you are the husband of one who was once Eloise Lafreniere.”

I know not how much of the truth he suspected, but for a moment we stood thus, I half imagining he contemplated a leap at my throat. Then his eyes fell, and he drew back with a short laugh.

Page 149

"*Le Diable*! 'tis easy for some people to discover excuses at such a time. Still, Monsieur, as you refuse to fight I may as well lie down; having been early awake I am somewhat weary."

I watched him silently while he arranged his robes for the night.

"Before you sleep," I ventured, "it would please my curiosity to know where this pure and peerless Queen of yours makes her abode."

"Ah! would you pay her a visit?" he asked suspiciously.

"Far from it; rather that I may avoid her. Yet we are not in specially pleasant surroundings, and such information might not come amiss."

He sulked a moment over his answer, but finally relented.

"In that large hut upon the second mound."

"You spoke as if Madame de Noyan were beneath the same roof, yet you saw her not. Does the hut differ from this in being divided into rooms?"

"A partition runs through it from roof to floor. Naladi holds court in the south room, which is decorated most lavishly with things of beauty."

"Then Madame occupies the northern portion?"

"So I understood," with a sleepy yawn. "I asked little in detail; 'twas enough for me to be assured she was well."

CHAPTER XXVII

A VENTURE IN THE DARK

It is occasion for deep regret that I was so blind to my opportunities for learning much relative to this strange people. During those hours of trial my thoughts were so occupied with our own dangers, it was merely incidentally I considered anything else. No small temptation now assails me to record many things I believe true, things I remember vaguely; but I pass the temptation by, determined to write only what I may vouch for as of my own observation.

I remained silent, leaning against the wall and making vigorous use of my pipe, a long time after De Noyan fell peacefully asleep. While the fast fading daylight clung dimly to the interior, my eyes were fastened upon his upturned face, almost boyish in the unconsciousness of repose, and I began to feel pity for his weakness, my anger against

him fading away. As the darkness became pronounced I remained there still, my sleepless eyes paying small heed to night, the scenes I saw being of the brain, memory awakening to paint with glowing colors across the black screen. The evening was quiet, —within, no more was heard than the regular breathing of my companion; without, an occasional savage outcry, mingled with the low moaning of the night wind.

Page 150

It became a lonely vigil, my thoughts unhappy. I had much to reflect upon. The extreme difficulty of our present situation, encompassed and separated as we were: De Noyan was bewitched by a siren who had already bound him by silken cords to any nefarious scheme her unscrupulous desires might compass; Cairnes was as helplessly entangled in her power, although held to his fate by ropes of a different nature; while Madame was scarcely less a prisoner, powerless to escape the ruthless grasp of a false-hearted woman whose jealousy might at any instant lead to measures of extremity. I alone of all our little company remained somewhat my own master. My hands and heart at least were free from all visible bonds. Yet what hideous mockery was such freedom! I realized that I could venture no step beyond the door of the lodge without becoming the focus of spying eyes; that all about was evidence of the despotic power of this renegade white queen, who deigned to spare me merely because she deemed I was utterly powerless to interfere with her cruel purposes. Saint Andrew! it was an environment of evil to chill the blood of any man, nor amid its gathering gloom could I distinguish any gleam promising dawn. About us watched impatiently a horde of ruthless savages, eager to make us victims of their torture, held back temporarily only by the imperious will of this self-styled “Daughter of the Sun,” who ruled through appeal to their grossest superstitions. She, I believed, in spite of fair face and evidences of culture, was as vindictive, barbarous, and relentless as the wildest in that savage band.

Over and over I turned such unhappy thoughts in my seething brain, until the faintest sound from without had died away. I may have spent hours thus, while De Noyan slept on peacefully as a tired child. At last a wild desire for action overcame my lassitude, conquered all lingering discretion. There arose before me, clearly as a painted picture, the pleading face of her I loved. I knew that to no other was she looking for aid in her despair. There might be little I could accomplish for her succor, yet it would bring her new courage even to exchange a brief word with some faithful friend, as proof that she was not forgotten. Besides, I longed, as no expression can make clear, to gaze again, if only for an instant, into her clear gray eyes, to listen to the gentle murmur of her trustful voice. In brief, I was in the mood for a desperate venture.

I crept to the open door, peering cautiously forth into the darkness. It was a heavy night, the little basin was wrapped in shadow, and not even a star peeped forth from the rifts of low-scudding clouds. In no direction could I distinguish any twinkling of lights except a single fitful flash from off the altar, where black-robed priests guarded the sacred fire or worshipped before the Puritan. Encouraged by the darkness I crept along the outer wall, unchallenged by the skulking guard, and finally attained the upper corner. Here I observed a second glimmer, which I instantly recognized as coming from the other great house upon the summit of the mound—that house in which I understood dwelt Queen Naladi, and where De Noyan said his wife remained prisoner.

Page 151

I scarcely know what I hoped to accomplish by such a move, yet helpful circumstances are apt to develop when one attempts boldly to do his own part the best he may. It was in blind faith I crept forward through the dry grass, drawing ever closer toward that beckoning light. It was a long journey and a slow one, as the tribe would guard vigilantly the dwelling-place of their Queen. At every rustle in the grass, every flap of wing overhead, I paused, listening to the pounding of my heart.

I clasped closely in one hand the knife, my sole weapon of defence, and, as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom and could distinguish some things more clearly, I paused often, with uplifted head, to study some indistinct object in the darkness. Thus advancing inch by inch, avoiding with care the least rustling of dry grass, I wriggled snake-like forward, until I began breasting the steeper incline of the mound, its summit now outlined against the lighter space of overarching sky.

All my rage deserted me when again in the open, actually attempting to achieve a purpose. My brain cleared as by magic, every nerve steadying itself to meet whatsoever peril might be lurking along the path. Half-way up the mound I lay close to the earth, peering steadily through the gloom. There was no cover to crouch behind, the slope being totally bare of vegetation except for the short, dry grass, yet I felt reasonably secure from observation unless I entered that bar of light. Unable to do more than guess, I concluded that the single flame, splitting the night like the shining blade of a sword, came from the northern compartment, while the southern half remained wrapped in silent darkness. Outwardly this Queen's residence was constructed much like the building used by the priests as a temple. In the latter I recalled two entrances opening respectively toward east and west. Were a partition run between, as in this private dwelling, the eastern door would open into the southern apartment. It was the west door through which the light streamed, and, daring approach it no closer, my only recourse lay in trying my fortune on the opposite side.

I began a winding advance along the sloping side of the hill, but sank suddenly to earth as a spectral figure moved forth from the darkness, stood a moment in the bright glare, and then strode past, vanishing within the gloom like a shadow. It was an Indian, spear in hand, one of the body-guard of the Queen. With renewed caution, my imminent danger being manifest, I barely lifted my head from the level of the grass, and began to work onward, reaching out until I got firm grasp on a bunch of grass, then drawing my body forward the full extent of my arms. The progress was slow, involving much labor, and it required a full half-hour to attain the other side of the mound. I could now look above, perceiving nothing except the black shadow of the house. If Eloise was within, and if this door led to her prison, it was

Page 152

scarcely possible that it was unguarded. Naladi had special reasons for looking carefully after the safe keeping of this captive, and was not likely to forget. I discovered no outward signs of life, but was too thoroughly versed in wilderness ways to count upon that, knowing that each dark shadow along the wall might conceal some crouching stealthy figure, ready to pounce forth. With utmost care, anxiously scanning the silent hillside, I drew myself forward, hardly venturing upon a full breath, until I finally rested on my breast barely three paces from where I believed the entrance must be.

I dreaded any attempt to advance into the unknown, yet I had no intention of withdrawing until I had accomplished that end for which I came. To retreat was foreign to my nature; indeed, I was now so close to Eloise, it required an effort of will to restrain a desire to rush blindly forward. But long training overcame this rash impulse. I rested there, silent as a savage, seeking to trace each detail of what was barely beyond my hand. It was little enough I could distinguish, straining my eyes to the utmost; and finally, despairing of learning more, I advanced my hands, silently groping for something to grasp, when I was instantly frozen into a recumbent statue by a slight movement of something directly in front. This was so faint that, had not my every nerve been tense, I should scarcely have noted it at all. Yet there could be no doubt—some one had given a slight shiver, as though from the chill of the night air; whoever it might be, the person was not three paces from my out-stretched hands, and, as near as I could judge, must be sitting on the very threshold of the entrance.

I was in an awkward position. How I had succeeded in arriving there without attracting attention was little short of miraculous. I durst not venture on any retrograde movement; I even pressed my mouth against the hard earth, the better to deaden the sound of breathing. I know not how long I remained thus; it was until my strained muscles appeared to cord themselves, and I could scarcely keep back a moan of pain. Yet no other sound came from that mysterious presence. Intently as I listened, not so much as the faint sound of breathing reached me. Still I could not have been deceived; there assuredly had been movement; I distinctly felt a consciousness of other presence, so that every nerve tingled, and it required the utmost self-control to hold me still. I fairly throbbed with insane impulses to leap forward and solve the mystery.

Who could be lurking there in such silence? It must assuredly be an enemy, a guard stationed to watch over the fair prisoner within; doubtless, he would remain until relieved by some other. What hope for successful advance held me in such agony of mind and body? I felt that I must relieve my cramped limbs or else scream aloud in spite of every effort at control. Slowly I drew back, my outspread

Page 153

hands searching for some hummock of grass against which I might press, to force my body silently downward, but discovered none. Then there sounded, slightly to my left, the soft rustle of a moccasoned foot, and a low, guttural voice muttered some indistinct sentences. The lurking form in my front appeared to rise, and there was a brief grunt as if in response to command. Then a huge warrior stalked past so close that his moccasoned foot planted itself fairly between my outstretched arms. Instantly he faded away within the enveloping gloom, and with hardly the hesitation of a moment I was on hands and knees creeping toward my goal. With groping fingers I touched the riven trunk that formed the threshold, and, reaching upward, noted with a thrill of delight that merely a heavy curtain of woven straw guarded the interior. There was no time for hesitancy; at any instant the savage guard might return to his deserted post. Pushing the slight barrier noiselessly aside, I gained the interior, dropped the mat behind me, and, for the first time, ventured to pause and survey my surroundings.

The single partition did not extend to the roof by a foot or more, so sufficient light found passage through the narrow aperture to render dimly visible the principal features of this apartment into which I had ventured. It was evidently a sleeping-chamber, handsomely furnished in barbaric fashion, the faint light gleaming on numerous burnished ornaments, while a carpet of soft skins concealed the floor. To this I gave brief attention, my anxious glance falling almost instantly upon the draped figure of a woman, vaguely defined in the dimness, lying outstretched on a slightly raised cushioned couch, her face concealed by the denser shadows of the wall, sound asleep.

Cautiously I crept forward, hesitating to touch her lest so sudden an awakening might cause alarm. It seemed safer to trust in speech, as then she would recognize at once who was by her side.

“Madame,” I whispered softly, my lips as close as possible to her tiny ear, “I seek brief word with you to-night.”

She must have slept lightly, for at my faint whisper I perceived that her wide-opened eyes were scrutinizing my face.

“’Tis I, Madame, Geoffrey Benteen. I beg you make no noise.”

“You need have no fear,” returned a soft voice in purest Spanish. “You do me honor by so unexpected a visit; I bid you welcome, Geoffrey Benteen.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

SPEECH WITH NALADI

If you were ever rudely aroused from pleasant dreams by a sudden dash of cold water in your face, you may partially comprehend my emotions upon hearing these words of greeting, and realizing that I was looking into the beautiful, pitiless eyes of the Daughter of the Sun, now sitting upright on the couch, happily smiling at my embarrassment.

Page 154

“Nay, Geoffrey Benteen,” she exclaimed, significantly waving her white hand as she noted my swift glance backward, “retire not thus suddenly. You must be a marvellous woodsman to have attained this place through the watchful cordon of my guards, but ’tis not likely you would so safely run the gantlet of return. You are not so fair of visage as your gay companion the Chevalier, yet now you are here I will enjoy a short time with you. Yet first let us understand each other. For what purpose do you invade my apartment so boldly?”

“I came,” I replied, believing frankness would prove my best play in this crisis, “expecting to find not you, but your prisoner.”

“Ah! you are honest, if not complimentary,” a quick flash of understanding in her bright eyes. “So it was another woman for whose sake you came creeping recklessly through the night! God’s mercy! I even ventured to dream my charms had pierced the dull armor of your cold English heart, yet here you merely stand and laugh at me,—would even flee my presence as though pestilence were upon my breath. Why, I wonder? am I not also fair? Why then flout me thus disdainfully? Naladi has not been accustomed to such harsh treatment at the hands of your sex.”

“You are, indeed, beautiful both in form and face,” I answered, seeking to avoid quarrel, “but it is not for a mere adventurer of the woods to utter words of love to such as you.”

Her lips curled in sarcastic smile.

“Pish! you grow marvellously modest all at once. I bid you note that the passion of love cares nothing for a registry of birth—it looks to flesh and blood, not records. There is more hidden in your secret heart to-night than finds utterance upon the lips. You have the soft speech of a diplomat, full of guile and cunning. Come, I bid you tell me the whole truth. Do you think me an untutored savage, that you deny me in such disdain?”

“I know not how it may prove regarding your heart,” I said boldly, not hesitating to meet her questioning eyes, “but in manner and graces you exhibit the gloss of courts.”

She smiled mockingly, rising to her feet and saluting me with a low curtsy.

“Ah! very prettily said, senor. I perceive your objection then: you think me fairer without than within. I dare not contend you are altogether wrong in such conjecture. Faith, why not, senor? It would be strange otherwise. All lives do not flow gently amid prosaic routine, and my ship has been often enough upon the rocks. I have learned reasons of deceit and cruelty in the hard school of experience. If, in years of trial, I have grown hard of judgment, reckless of action, it is because others have been harsh with me. Power is naturally tyrannical. But then what use for us to dwell upon the past? So you came to-night to meet another? ’T is strange the risks a man will run for so infinitesimal a reward. Yet, Mother of God, it gives me a pleasant tale to pour into the ears of him

you call De Noyan when we meet again to-morrow. If I mistake not, the one you seek in secret bears the name of that gay gallant. At least, she masquerades in this wilderness under the title of Madame de Noyan. But 'tis you, not he, her reputed husband, forsooth, who seeks her chamber in the midnight. Truly 'tis a pretty tale of romance."

Page 155

It flashed upon me, as she thus lightly spoke, what infernal use an unscrupulous woman might easily make of this. The imputation lurking in her words aroused me to defiant anger, yet before I could collect my thought to make reply, she marked my hesitancy and continued with bitter sarcasm.

“Madame possesses so sweetly innocent a face I should never have suspected her of being an immodest wanton, were it not for the evidence of my own eyes. ’T is a strange world, senor. Yet I have often heard this is the way with these *grandes dames* of France.”

“It is only your own foulness of thought which places such construction upon my coming here,” I broke forth, determined I would face her down at every hazard. “You know well my purpose; I came seeking to aid one you held prisoner. It is all because of your sin, not ours. You have robbed this Chevalier de Noyan of all his manhood by your cursed smiles and honeyed speech. You have made him forget his sworn duty unto her who is his wife.”

“How interesting you grow,” she interrupted, her lips curling, her eyes hardening. “Senor, you grow almost handsome when your eyes flash. So you felt called upon to devote yourself to this poor, misused, neglected wife? I trust you have not found it an unpleasant service, or entirely without reward?”

“I felt called upon to aid her in escaping from your grip.”

“Ah, indeed? Would you kindly, senor, tell me how you proposed performing such a miracle? It remains in my memory some such effort at release has been made before,” her eyes hardening like diamonds. “Down yonder stands a blackened post which tells how Naladi deals with those daring to mock her will.”

“You may spare threats,” I retorted, gathering courage from rising anger, “as I care nothing for your good will, nor shall I swerve an inch in the hope of escaping your savage vengeance. Madame de Noyan is so far above you in every attribute of unsullied womanhood that no words of yours can ever besmirch her reputation; while, as to myself, I remain so certain of my own rectitude in the action of this night, I challenge you to do your worst.”

“No doubt the Chevalier will also feel confidence in all you say,” she added maliciously. “I understand it is the way with the French.”

“With whom your previous acquaintance seems to have rendered you most familiar.”

It was a wild, chance shot, for firing which I had no reason excepting that twice she had openly sneered at that people, and once had spoken of ships in a way strange to an

inland savage. It was worth trying, however, and I marked her slight start of surprise at my insinuating tone, and the dark shadow sweeping across her face.

“Think you so, senor? It is passing strange, then, that I should be ignorant of the tongue.”

“Yes, were it true,” I made quick reply, encouraged by her manner, determined now to press this guessing home, and abide results. “But you had small difficulty comprehending the language a moment back. Permit me to remind you that it chanced to be French I spoke when first kneeling at your bedside.”

Page 156

She savagely bit her red lips in rage at my words; yet more, I thought, at her own forgetfulness.

“Pish! perhaps so;” and she stamped her foot angrily on the stone slabs of the floor. “What does that prove to my discredit for you to harp upon?”

Why my accidental words should thus worry her I could not even guess. Yet, clearly enough, there lay hidden some secret here—a hideous secret I had harshly probed. Believing this, I felt that I could enhance my power over her by pressing it relentlessly home with whatsoever directness of speech I dared to venture. With me, at such a crisis, decision meant action, and I advanced a step nearer, looking her directly in the eyes. A single moment she met me with a haughty stare; then defiance faded away into pleading, and her glance wavered. Whatever the cause, she was clearly afraid.

“Who—who are you?” she faltered. “Surely we have never met before?”

“As you know already, I am Geoffrey Benteen. I only regret that your memory is so faulty.”

“What is it you know of me?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing, Madame,” and I threw into the utterance of these words all the irony possible. “It is not altogether strange Madame should forget acquaintances of other days, even her native tongue, living so long in the wilderness.”

It was a reckless shot, but somehow it struck the mark.

“I am a Toltec!” she cried wildly. “You speak to the Daughter of the Sun.”

“No doubt; ’tis a neat superstition with which to overawe savages, yet there was one once across the water greatly resembling you,—a bit younger, perhaps,—yet who was content then with a title not nearly so high-sounding, until—oh, well, what need to tell the rest? Of course, it was not you?”

I would never have believed so sudden a change could come over the countenance of a human being, had I not witnessed it with these eyes. She had sunk back against the couch, her hands pressing her breast as if to still the wild throbbing of the heart, her great eyes staring at me in silent horror. Twice her lips moved as if attempting speech, yet no articulated sound issued from between them.

“Are you a fiend from hell?” she sobbed at last. “Why have you pursued me here?”

“You do me far too great an honor.” I made her a low bow, thoroughly confident I held the whip hand, provided only I did not overplay my part. “It is the merest accident of

fate which has thus thrown me again across your path. Nor have I the slightest desire to cause you trouble, only that through your power may come our safety."

"You—you have not followed me, then?"

"No."

I saw she was diligently studying my face in the dim light, vainly endeavoring to recall where, under what circumstances, we had met before.

"Who are you?"

"Bah! what difference can a name make? Surely you are careless enough about your own to be lenient with another choosing to forget."

Page 157

“You also are a fugitive?” I caught the sudden ring of hope in her voice, saw a new light flash into her eyes.

“I have fled the Spaniards,” I answered carelessly enough. “What odds is that, so long as what I did has been for France? Still, as I say, I have no desire to play you harm provided you deal justly with us all.”

“Harm? You? How could you harm me?” she questioned, evidently more at ease from the change in my tone of speech. “You presume, senor; surely you forget you address the Queen of the Nahuacs; that even in our remnant there remain more than a hundred warriors to do my bidding! I can laugh at threats, senor.”

I stared at her coldly.

“As you please, Madame *la reine* Naladi, Daughter of the Sun, formerly woman of—ah! so you do not care for me to speak that accursed word? Well, I thought you might not, so I spare you the shame. ’T is nothing to me your past, yet I would have you remember there is a people we both know to whom your miserable horde of savages would be but a mouthful. This tribe has already tested the sharpness of the French sword.”

Her troubled eyes fell before mine, the last faint gleam of defiance dying from her face. She glanced about the apartment, evidently meditating retreat from my presence, or the swift summoning of her guards. Whichever it might have been, she as evidently thought better of it, turning toward me once more, no longer a frightened, angry Amazon, but instead a smiling, pleasant-faced woman.

“We have surely jested long enough, senor,” she exclaimed with apparent lightness of demeanor. “It can never be best for us to be other than good friends. I doubt not you are a bold man, loyal to those trusting you, and I honor you for it. Take me, also, into that charmed circle, yet never forget I am a woman capable of doing great harm if I choose, for I have those at my command here who would die gladly at my bidding. The threat of French vengeance moves me little, senor; France is strong, cruel, relentless; but France is not here.”

“Quite true,” I replied, feeling best now to permit her to enjoy her own way. “But France never forgets, never pardons, and France possesses arms which reach across the seas, even into this wilderness. All she needs is a guide, and I could become that. Yet if you grant my request I pledge that no words of mine shall result in your injury.”

“Your half threat does not greatly trouble me, senor. I am no frail reed fearing a puff of air. I merely seek that duty which seems most fair to all concerned. Pray tell me then what it is you would ask at my hands. Nay, wait; before we go into this business be seated here, so we may more easily converse together.”

It was a low stool beside the couch she indicated, and I could do no less than silently accept her courtesy, the soft, mysterious charm of the woman blunting my prejudice.

Page 158

“Now, senor,” an engaging smile rendering more beautiful the face turned toward me. “I pray you trust me fully, and state frankly your demands upon Naladi.”

If slightest sarcasm lurked in these softly spoken words I acknowledge total oblivion to it. Her fair face was the picture of earnestness, her eyes gazed frankly into mine.

“Our release, Madame.”

She lifted her white hands in a sudden gesture of expostulation.

“Why ask that? It is utterly beyond my power, senor—at least, at once,” in a tone of despair, convincing me she spoke truly. “We have our laws, which must be obeyed. It was the tribe who in battle took you prisoners, not I; it would cost me my position did I endeavor to give you immediate release.”

“Could it be accomplished later?”

“Possibly it might.”

“Will you promise me it shall?”

She hesitated, her eyes downcast, her bosom rising and falling to tumultuous breathing.

“Yes,” at last slowly, as if she had weighed the problem with care. “I will pledge you my utmost help to that end.”

“There is one thing more, Queen Naladi,” I contended earnestly. “It is that Madame de Noyan be permitted meanwhile to abide with her husband.”

The fair face darkened ominously. Instead of immediately answering she stepped across the room; returning, she held in her hands a small box in which I perceived papers.

“One moment, senor; move your stool here; yes, a trifle to the left where we may have clearer light shed upon these documents.”

I drew it unsuspectingly to the spot indicated by her gesture, bending forward, wondering what it might be of importance she held in her hands.

“This, senor,” she began calmly, slightly unrolling a written sheet, “is, as you will easily comprehend, the very document causing my unfortunate exile in this wilderness. You will take notice—”

As she spoke, I felt myself falling. She sprang hastily back, barely in time to escape my frenzied clutch upon her draperies; for one instant I clung to the stone slab of the floor

desperately. Then she laughed, her heel crunched on my gripping fingers, and, with one muffled cry of despair, I went plunging down into the blackness.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN AND OUT THE SHADOW

It is strange I remember so little from that instant when my tortured hands released their frantic grasp on the stone slab of the floor. I recall the sharp pain, as that fair-faced fiend stamped upon my clutching fingers; I heard the echo of sneering laughter with which she mocked my last upward look of agony, but, with the plunge downward into that black, unknown abyss, all clear recollection ceased—I even retain no memory of the severe shock which must have occurred as my fall ended. Whether excess of fear paralyzed the brain, or what may have been the cause for such a phenomenon, I know not. I merely state the fact.

Page 159

I awoke—how much later God alone knows—lying upon the rough stone bottom of an awful well, huddled in its blackness. When I finally made attempt at straightening my cramped limbs it seemed as if each separate muscle had been beaten and bruised, and it required no little manipulation before I even recovered sufficient strength to stand upright and endeavor to ascertain the nature of my grewsome prison-house. My stiffness caused me to believe that I must have lain motionless for several hours in the same cramped position into which I fell, before even regaining consciousness. Another evidence of this was the blood which, having flowed copiously from a severe cut upon the back of my head, had so thoroughly hardened as to stanch the ugly wound, thus, perhaps, preserving my life.

Slowly I returned to a clear realization of my position, for my eyes opened upon such intense darkness I could scarcely comprehend in my weakened, dazed condition that it was not all a dream from which I was yet to awaken. Little by little the mind began asserting itself, vaguely feeling here and there, putting scrap with scrap, until returning memory poured in upon me like a flood, and I grasped the terrible truth that I was buried alive. The knowledge was a deathlike blow, with which I struggled desperately, seeking to regain control over my shattered nerves. I recall yet the frenzied laugh bursting from my lips—seemingly the lips of a stranger—ringing wild and hollow, not unlike the laughter of the insane; I remember tearing wide open the front of my doublet, feeling I must surely choke from the suffocating pressure upon my chest; I retain memory of glaring violently into the darkness; how I fondled the sharp edge of the hunting knife, crying and shouting impotent curses, which I trust God has long ago forgiven, at that incarnate devil who had hurled me down to such living death. Terror dominated my brain, pulsed like molten fire through my blood, until, as the desperation of my situation became more clearly defined, I tottered upon the very verge of insanity, feeling I should soon become a helpless, gibbering imbecile.

Yet, as I succeeded in staggering weakly to my feet, the movement and exertion served to quiet my apprehensions, while hope came faintly back, bringing with it, as though newly born, a determination never to yield without one manly struggle. I possessed a knife; perchance there might be discovered some opportunity for using it. With outspread hands, and groping feet, I attempted to advance, but found I had fallen so close to the centre of the well that I had to make several steps before my extended fingers touched the cold wall. This I followed slowly, passing exploring hands with utmost care over each inch, from the floor to as high as I could reach on tiptoe, until confident I had made the complete circuit. It was all the same, vast slabs of flat stone, welded together by some rude yet effective masonry, the mortar between

Page 160

impervious to the sharp probing of the knife. Again and again I made that circuit, testing each crack, sounding every separate stone in the hope of discovering some slight fault in construction by which I might profit. Everywhere I was confronted by the same dull, dead wall of cold, hard rock, against which I exerted strength and skill uselessly. Finally I dropped upon my knees, creeping inch by inch across the floor, but with no better result. It likewise was composed of great slabs of stone, one having an irregular crack running through it from corner to corner, but all alike solid and immovable.

Then the last faint flicker of hope deserted me. Yet the exercise of that fruitless search had restored some measure of manhood; my brain no longer throbbed with dull agony, nor did my veins burn as with liquid fire. I felt convinced this black vault was destined to become my grave; here in after years, perhaps, some straying hunter might uncover my mouldering bones, wondering idly at my unknown story, for here I was surely doomed to face all that was mysterious and terrible in death. Well, that end must come to me some time, as to all men; I had seen many die, and, although fate faced me in far more horrid guise than any of these others, yet after all it was merely death, and I had no more cause to fear it here in the dark than yonder in the sunshine. Besides, I retained the keen knife-blade; if worse came to worse that was available for release. I passed it caressingly through my fingers, wondering would God forgive its use if the moment came when I must choose between insanity and death.

Merciful Heaven! how time dragged! What awful conceptions were formed in my fevered brain! What leering, sardonic faces pictured themselves against the black wall; what demon voices spoke and laughed in the void above! At times I stood in a cave thronged with jeering devils, some with the savage countenance of the heathen, some yet more satanic; yet ever in the midst of their maddest orgies, the cruel mockery of the infamous Naladi appeared more hellish than that of the rest. She leered down upon me from every side until I seemed to stare into a thousand faces, each wearing her hateful, sardonic smile.

I paced the floor with feverish impatience, counting my steps from wall to wall, hoping by this means to retain control of my brain. Experiencing the sharp pangs of hunger, I slashed a bit of leather from my belt, and chewed it savagely as a dog might chew a dry bone. In my despair, I danced, snapping my fingers, and hurling bitter taunts at the unseen upper world. Exhausted by such useless frenzy, I would sink prone to the floor, every nerve unstrung, lying there panting in helplessness until returning strength again sent me back and forth in that awful tramp from wall to wall. I perceived that the strain of that horrible haunted silence was driving me mad. There was no escape, no hope, no peace. Again and again did I break from incoherent ravings to sink upon my knees, beseeching God for mercy. Yet I arose without rest, without peace. At last I sank weakly down against the wall and lay trembling in every limb, staring blindly with wide-open, unseeing eyes.

Page 161

I had come to the very end—to that moment when my limbs refused longer to support my swaying body, when my tortured brain was picturing scenes of hellish ingenuity. Ah! look! see! yonder comes now another to torment my soul. O God! Mark that grim, gray face floating against the wall! Away, you foul fiend! I am not yet your prey! But see! see how the ghastly horror grows! It is as large as a man; and mark those long, gaunt arms reaching up until they meet overhead. Suddenly it seemed to shed a strange, unnatural radiance over the cave. I imagined I saw things about me. What, Mother of Mercies, can it be? Daylight! Oh, good God! do my eyes actually look upon the day once more—the sweet, sweet, blessed day? Surely it is but a dream; yet no! it must truly be light streaming down from above.

I staggered to my feet, trembling so that I was compelled to clutch the wall for support. Swinging and swaying down toward me through the dim light, now in the radiance, anon in the shadow, twisting and turning like a great snake, a grass rope steadily dropped ring by ring until its loosened end coiled on the stone floor. I saw it, never believing the testimony of my own eyes, until my trembling hand had actually closed upon it. Then, with the touch in my fingers, the hot tears gushed from my blinded eyes, the tension on my brain gave way, and I was Geoffrey Benteen once more. A cautious whisper pierced the silence.

“If you remain alive, have you strength to mount the rope quickly?”

So parched and swollen were my lips I could not answer, yet managed to take stronger grasp upon the cord, and, finding it firmly held above, made earnest effort to climb. ’Twas a desperate undertaking for one who had passed through the strain which had befallen me; but now, the trembling having somewhat passed, I found myself not entirely devoid of strength, while an intense desire to escape from that hell made me willing to venture. I was dimly conscious of a face gazing intently down through the small aperture, yet, with the swaying of that loosened rope, the slipperiness of its grassy strands between my fingers, I found little opportunity for glancing upward while slowly winning toilsome way toward the light. It was as hard a struggle for life as I ever made, my heart almost ceasing to hope, when I finally felt a hand close firmly upon the collar of my jacket. With that help, I struggled on, until, panting and exhausted, I sank upon the skin-carpeted floor of the apartment from whence I had been hurled into that living tomb.

Half turning as I fell, I gazed into the face of my rescuer, endeavoring to smile as my glad eyes met those of Eloise de Noyan.

“Oh, hush!” she sobbed. “Do not speak of what you have suffered, for I read it all in your eyes. Oh, my poor, poor boy! I thank the merciful Christ you are still alive. Yet I know not how long that demon in form of woman may be absent; besides, her savage guards are everywhere. The slightest sound might bring one to the door, and it will be better that she believe you her victim, buried forever in that foul grave.”

Page 162

I could but gaze at her, my breath coming in sobs of pain.

“How chanced it, Madame, you knew I was thus entombed?” and my hand, yet bleeding from contact with the rope, ventured to touch her own. She looked into my eyes bravely, a red flush in either cheek.

“I overheard those bold words you spoke to her last night across the partition.”

“Last night? Rather a week since.”

She smiled, her hand-clasp tightening.

“Ah, no, Geoffrey. It has seemed that long even to me waiting opportunity for service, yet ’tis scarcely eight hours since you were hurled into yonder hole. See; the sun in the sky tells the story truly. But every moment we delay only serves to increase our peril of discovery. Assist me, if you have strength, to relay this stone slab. It tested my muscles sorely to drag it aside. No doubt there is a cunning spring somewhere, by use of which it moves easily, yet I sought after it in vain.”

Toiling together we finally succeeded in returning the flat cover to its proper position in the flooring, and spread over it a thick skin. Seeing everything was left exactly as when she entered, Madame, who had become a new woman to my eyes, capable and alert, silently led me through a narrow curtained recess to the second apartment. This had evidently been designed as the Queen’s reception room, being fairly gorgeous in coloring, the low walls covered with shields of beaten copper, while burnished bits of the same metal, mingled with duller tones of gold and iron, were scattered everywhere in strange profusion. Varied tinted stones and sea-shells had been built into a raised platform, on which stood a couch hidden beneath rich robes of skin, and draped about with multicolored cloth of rude design and texture. Altogether it was an interior of rich barbaric splendor, savage in its unusual beauty, yet possessing here and there an odd touch of civilization almost startling by contrast. You must understand that I enjoyed little opportunity to gaze about and note such details, for Madame was impatient of delay, hurrying me forward until we entered together a partially concealed passage behind where the couch stood. Here my fair guide paused, thrusting into my hands a quantity of food hastily appropriated from a long shelf, concealed by a curtain of scarlet cloth.

“Eat heartily,” she commanded quickly, “for you seem very weak. Meanwhile I will stand here, keeping watch lest we be taken by surprise. Should I give a signal, lift yonder red curtain at its farther end, and hide there in silence until I come again.”

I partook of the coarse food eagerly enough, yet my eyes were ever upon her, my lips even finding time for speech.

“Have you some plan, Madame?” I questioned anxiously. “You said but now this house was held under heavy guard.”

“I spoke truly. I may not step forth into the air but some savage is at my side driving me back again. Oftentimes they peer within when the Queen is absent, to assure themselves that I am safely caged.”

Page 163

“And this Naladi—does she treat you well?”

The swift color mounted into her clear cheeks.

“Not ill, so far, at least, as relates to the physical,” she responded gravely. “No hand has been angrily laid upon me since I was dragged forth from the altar-house. Yet there are other forms of torture; and she constantly mocks me with my helplessness, and, I believe, even hates me for no better reason than that I stand between her and the Chevalier.”

“You have seen him?”

“No; but have heard his voice while he held private converse with her, the shameless wanton; have listened to words ill suited to the ears of a wife. She is a witch, and the slumbering devil in her has made snare for his weakness.”

“I greatly fear there may be truth in this,” I returned, scarcely knowing how best to speak at such a time, marking the agitation of her breathing. “Naladi is a fair woman, softly spoken and seductive when it is her purpose to please. There are not many men who could resist her wiles. Yet possibly, Madame, were you to have converse with the Chevalier your plea might break the spell.”

She turned toward me with proud, impetuous gesture, and I was surprised at the sudden indignant light glowing within her dark eyes.

“No, Geoffrey Benteen, that will never be. I am this man’s wife. He has vowed himself to me before the sacred altar of Holy Church. Think you that I, a lady born of France, would abase myself to beseech his loyalty? Not though life or death hung upon the issue! If he can cast me aside for the caresses of this savage harlot, he may forever go his way; never will my hand halt him, or my voice claim his allegiance. I am his wife before God; to the end I will be true unto my solemn pledges to Holy Church; yet I hope never to look again upon the false face of Charles de Noyan.”

“Are you not over-hasty in such decision?” I ventured, conscious of a gladness in my own heart at her impulsive speech. “Possibly this is a mere passing whim, an idle fancy; he may yet emerge from the craze purified by trial.”

She looked hard at me, as if seeking to penetrate the flimsy mask I wore, and I beheld a pride in her uplifted face such as had never been visible there before.

“Such might be the way with some women,” she returned firmly. “I am of a race to whom honor is everything. My father gave his life for no less, and I hold him right in his choice. I may forgive much of wrong—ay! have forgiven—yet the stain of dishonor now rests upon the proud name I bear, and that can never be forgiven. Whether in New Orleans, or the heart of this wilderness, I am still Eloise Lafreniere, the daughter of a

gentleman of France. I would die by the torture of these savages before I would surrender the honor due my race."

There was that in her proud speech silencing my tongue from further expostulation, even had I believed De Noyan deserved a defender. He had deliberately chosen his path, now let him follow it; any man who would thus lightly tread on the heart of such a woman was clearly outside the radius of human sympathy, deserving to be. Certainly I felt no call to stand between him and his fate.

Page 164

“I may not comprehend the claims of family pride, Madame,” I responded finally, for want of something better. “Of that I know little. Yet I cannot contend that your decision is wrong. However, let us talk of other things, permitting this disagreement to adjust itself. You have not stated how I am to escape from this present predicament. It surely looks a problem not easily solved.”

“Nor is it clear even in my mind,” she admitted, evidently relieved by the change of topic, “because I do not know the ending of a certain passage underground. Yet I have a plan. Behind the curtain, yonder, a concealed opening leads downward into an underground gallery. I have ventured to explore it for only a brief distance, but trust it may end under the open sky. At least our only hope is that you may discover some such ending. If not, you can only return to me, and we wilt seek other means for escape, if, indeed, there are any.”

“I am to understand you do not flee with me?”

She shook her head gravely, her cheeks flushed, her dark eyes lowered.

“No; I deem such move not best after those words the Queen spoke to you last night,” she answered simply. “Besides, our best efforts at escape would be futile should she suspect you have not perished where she entombed you. I am safe here, for the present at least, while you can accomplish much more for all of us if she believes you dead and takes no precautions to guard against you.”

I could scarcely bear the thought of her remaining in the power of that half-savage creature, who wielded such despotic power over her wild tribesmen. Inspired by fear of the result I begged reconsideration, urging her to accompany me in flight; but she was firm in refusal.

“No; urge it no longer, good friend. I know you speak from the heart, yet it is not best. You cannot know to what depths of peril, or disappointment, this passage may lead, while, by remaining behind, I can help to hide your trail, and possibly open to you some way of retreat. But hush!” She held up her hand. “It is the Queen returning; neither of us must be discovered here.”

I took a step forward, gaining undisputed possession of the uplifted palm.

“I depart at your wish, Madame,” I said brokenly; “but may the merciful God bring us to each other again.”

For a breathless instant, even while the sounds without drew nearer, her eyes looked confidingly into mine.

“All must be as God wills,” she replied gravely. “Here or hereafter, Geoffrey Benteen, I believe it shall be. Until then, continue to prove the same true man you have ever been, doubting not the trust of her who now bids you speed.”

There were voices lightly conversing at the entrance, and I distinguished clearly the senseless laughter of De Noyan. Lower I bent above the white hand reposing in my rough grasp, until my lips pressed the soft flesh; nor was it withdrawn from the caress.

Page 165

“Good-bye, Eloise,” I whispered, and, sweeping aside the heavy folds of curtain, vanished from her sight.

CHAPTER XXX

UNDERGROUND

A slight radiance found passage through the coarsely woven curtain, proving sufficient, as my eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, to reveal, rude steps excavated from the earth, leading down into lower darkness. Pausing merely to assure myself that the meeting between Naladi and Madame was outwardly courteous, while De Noyan seemed shamed into silence by the presence of his wife, I began the descent, quickly finding myself in an apartment, rounded in outline, not greatly dissimilar to that other from which I had been so lately rescued. This, however, was smaller, the floor littered with various articles, the nature of which I found it difficult to determine in such dim light. Nor did I pause for close inspection, but, so soon as search revealed an opening into a narrow passageway beyond, I pressed forward amid dense gloom, feeling my way, fearful lest I meet some pitfall. It was a low, contracted gallery, so extremely irregular in excavation that I sometimes stood erect, unable to reach the roof with extended fingers, yet a moment later was compelled to creep on hands and knees in order to progress at all. Had it led through solid rock I should have accepted this as evidence of natural origin, but sides, floor, and roof were of earth, while every few feet, rendering progress uncertain and perilous, were huge posts of wood, usually roughly hewn tree trunks, each topped by a flat piece of stone, supporting the sagging roof.

Altogether it was a surprising excavation, exhibiting some degree of engineering skill on the part of these savages. I wondered whether the conception originated within the brain of their alien Queen, or was another of the unique inheritances of their race. Perhaps I may be permitted to add here some information which reached me later, that abundant evidences of the existence of similar passages have been noted elsewhere in the old homes of this people beside the Mississippi. While at Petite Rocher River, I met lately a Jesuit, who had travelled widely and read many books, and he gravely assured me that in the vast cities of the Aztecs, far to the south in Mexico, their temples and palaces were connected by means of such long, secret, covered ways. Hence I incline to the belief that this excavation was largely the labor of slaves; for these Nahuacs had many such, some of negro, others of Indian blood, and that the earth thus removed had been utilized in constructing those mounds above, the entire method of building merely a tradition from the past.

Page 166

Let that be as it may, here the tunnel extended stretching its snake-like course before me. Along it I carefully felt a passage, nervously gripping the knife hilt, and vainly seeking to distinguish definite outlines amid the darkness. My groping feet encountered numerous obstructions along the path—here a pile of loosened earth over which I plunged headlong, or a flat stone dropped by the rotting away of its supporting prop, or some sharp declivity, as though softer earth had yielded to rude implements; yet it became evident from the start that the tunnel level rapidly descended, boring deeper and deeper into the bosom of the earth. Finally, my fingers came into contact with small fragments of rock strewing the side walls, and I comprehended I must already be beneath the base of that rounded mound upon the summit of which the house of Naladi stood. What worried me most was to what end this tunnel was made. Such vast labor had surely never been performed without adequate purpose. Besides, completed, the passage was well cared for. I met frequently in my blind groping with evidences of comparatively recent labor. Yet for what purpose was it designed? Where did it lead? To my bewildered judgment the general trend appeared northward; but that would carry it directly across the broadest portion of the upper basin. To have an unconcealed entrance in the centre of that unprotected, open plain would be foreign to savage nature; while to imagine that such a tunnel as this, from which a vast amount of earth had been borne upon the backs of workmen, could extend below the full extent of that valley, was beyond conception. Besides, the air was light and pure, as sweet to inhale as if it blew directly upon me from the open sky; itself proof positive that some opening could not be far distant.

Thus questioning, I groped slowly forward. To one accustomed to living in the open there is something peculiarly oppressive in being cooped within the confines of such narrow entries, and being compelled to reflect upon the immense mass of rock and earth resting above, and prevented from crushing him down into everlasting silence only by insignificant props of wood, whose melancholy groaning in the darkness bore evidence of the vast weight they upheld. There was nothing for me but to struggle onward, although I do not claim that it was without quaking heart, or many a start at odd noises echoing and re-echoing along that grim gallery. It is comparatively easy to be courageous where the peril is of a nature to which we have long accustomed ourselves, but many a trained nerve gives way before little ventures amid the unknown. I am told that soldiers coming to these colonies—veterans who had faced unflinchingly the flames of battle—will tremble and shrink like frightened girls at the slightest sign of a storm at sea; and there was once a famous war-chief of the Shawnees, who had fought fiercely with tomahawk and knife, yet who fell dead at the

Page 167

first crash of a field gun, although the piece was uncharged with ball. So I conceive that physical courage is not so high a virtue after all, and am not greatly ashamed to acknowledge I went timidly forward down that black slope, and with a wild inclination to fly backward at every sound. Nor do I boast of keeping on, for it was largely because I knew well what reception would await me; the look of scorn with which Madame would discover that a faint heart had made me afraid of the dark. So it was love, or pride, I scarce know which, that kept my reluctant feet moving; and, possibly, both of these are the true sponsors for most of the courage in the world, except that engendered by excitement.

Finally, when, with many a quaking of the heart I thought there must be above me a full hundred feet of earth, I perceived a flickering ray of light stealing along the floor. It grew more pronounced with each advancing step and soon crimsoned the upper walls. I dropped cautiously upon hands and knees, and crept slowly forward, beside the dancing shadows, taking concealment behind every irregularity. Thus approaching, I discovered the flaring beacon to be a huge pine knot stuck into the earth wall, blazing right merrily. Lying at full length, with head outstretched from behind the tree trunk that concealed my body, I gazed forward into a small room, possibly a dozen feet in width, the walls concealed by grotesquely pictured bark, its floor covered with a rude matting, dyed in fanciful colors. Somewhat to the left of where I lay uprose a huge, grim figure, roughly shapen from wood, having two uplifted wings pressing the roof, while directly in front reposed numerous dishes of untasted food. This idol, for such I conceived it to be, was a most hideous, repulsive object, colored lavishly with strange pigments, the face and head decorated in crimson, while the huge right hand, grasping a club, was uplifted as if about to strike down an approaching enemy. The flaring light of the pine knot glittered on great staring eyes which appeared to sparkle as if composed of precious stones; while about neck, zone, and ankles shone the duller gleam of gold, with the shimmer of some brighter metal.

It was a grewsome sight to approach in such a place, especially as the peculiar eyes appeared to follow my slightest movement. Yet only for a breathless moment did I experience doubt as to its nature, then laughed grimly at myself for a superstitious fool. The remaining portion of this dimly revealed underground apartment appeared bare, except for a gayly decorated skin or two, and the figure of a man, garbed in the gloomy attire of a priest, lying fast asleep at the very feet of the statue. Beyond showed a dark opening where the tunnel continued onward into the earth.

It required brief observation to note these outlines, nor did they greatly serve to delay my advance. I paused merely long enough to become thoroughly convinced of the reality of the priest's slumber, and then crept silently past, keeping close as possible within the shadow of the eastern wall, until once again safely swallowed within the blackness of the passage. Oddly enough the mere sight of that fellow lying there

unconscious served to yield me new courage, robbing the cave of its loneliness, and I plunged directly ahead.

Page 168

The passage I now followed rose with a sharp pitch, evidently inclining toward the surface, the opening not far distant. It was like mounting a hill, so marked was the incline, yet I covered a distance fully equalling that of my previous descent before becoming aware of a steadily increasing gray tingeing the side walls. Halting in this faint illumination I was suddenly startled by the sound of vigorous English speech. I advanced cautiously. The words were so confused by the echoes that little could be made of them until I reached a coarsely matted curtain, through which dimly sifted the welcome daylight. Here I paused, listening intently, striving to discover what mystery lay hidden beyond.

For some moments nothing reached me, excepting a low, dull murmur, as if voices chanted in muffled monotone, the sound commingling with a sharp crackling of flames, and an occasional doleful beating upon some surface resembling the taut parchment of a drum. Suddenly a deep voice close at hand roared out hoarsely, and my heart leaped in excitement, although I at once recognized it.

“You black-faced son of Belial,” came a savage snort, “do you give all that food unto a dumb idol, when a Christian man, a ministering servant of the Most High, lies groaning with a stomach which has n’t tasted food for four and twenty hours? Possess you no bowels of compassion for the long sufferings of a fellow-man? Come now, give me just a bite of the white meat, and yonder grinning wooden image will never miss it. You won’t, you spawn of Baal, yet I marked plain enough how you filled your own lean belly with the best there was.”

The straining of cords, together with sound of struggle, bore evidence that the Reverend Mr. Cairnes was making heroic effort to attain unto that food offered before idols. That such strenuous effort was vain was soon proven by the bursting forth of his voice once more.

“Oh, gracious Lord,” he cried, in a tone evidencing more anger than spiritual exaltation, “surely thy ancient servant Job never bowed before greater affliction than this now visited upon me. Verily ’t is even as the experiences of the Apostle Paul, yet without his reward in the flesh. I beseech Thee from the depth of humiliation—even as did Daniel from the lions’ den—loosen my arms that I may smite as with Thy wrath this profaner of Thy most holy name, thus bringing peace unto the smitten heart of Thy faithful servant. O Lord, what have I done to be deserted in this hour of extremity? As Elijah called down fire from Heaven, so I call upon Thee to smite with the terror of Thy might the ranks of these foul idolaters. He who hath boldly proclaimed Thy truth in the wilderness, who hath proven a faithful witness unto these savages, through many years of trial and tribulation, doth now call upon Thee in dire distress. Shall it be in vain, that he thus uplifts his voice supplicating in the wilderness?”

Page 169

His deep rumbling died away until I could distinguish little except those moans with which he punctuated the conclusion of each sentence. Finally, hearing no other sound to restrain me, I ventured to slightly uplift one corner of the heavy curtain, and peer into the room. The entrance opened upon the back of the rude platform, my position being within less than three paces from the famine-stricken Puritan, who, with low-bowed head and hidden face, was still wrestling in fervent prayer. I was unable, from where I hid, to distinguish the form of the crouching priest, yet knew he could not be far distant, and therefore I durst not speak above a whisper lest the sound awaken his suspicion.

“Cairnes,” I said softly, “hush that unseemly racket, man, and give heed to my words.”

Three times I was compelled to repeat this warning before I noticed him lift his head, in evidence that the faint sound had finally reached his ears. Unable to turn, he rolled his eyes inquiringly upward.

“What is it, O Lord?” he questioned, with such unbounded faith in a celestial visitant I found it hard to restrain a laugh.

“Don’t be a fool,” I whispered back hastily. “The Almighty may have guided me here, but ’tis a man in the flesh who speaks.”

The sectary made hard efforts to glance behind, but the cords held too firmly, so I merely gained a glimpse of the side of his face.

“Merciful Jehovah! ’tis the voice of Master Benteen,” he exclaimed joyfully. “I know not how you could come there unless you descended from the sky.”

“From the opposite quarter, my friend,” I replied, awake to the humor. “Pray speak with less noise, and pay heed to what I say. Tell me where the priest stands; you are so confounded broad of shoulder I can see nothing beyond.”

“He kneels to the right of the altar, the crawling spawn of hell, where he has good chance to fill his lean body with food he makes pretence to feed unto that foul figure of wood. He is a full imp of Satan, the black-faced idolater.”

“I care little as to that. Are there others present?”

“None, save the guard, a naked savage. He leans in the doorway, looking without.”

“Then be quiet while I cut your bonds; afterwards move back toward me. But mark well you tread lightly along the floor, with no sound to attract attention.”

He chuckled grimly.

“Fathers of Israel! it will astound those fellows to discover this place empty—’t is likely they will imagine me gone back to the Sun.”

Making no response to this natural conceit, I stretched myself forward the full length of my body, quickly drew the keen knife edge across his bonds, severing them with one stroke, thus setting free his arms. As the sundered cords dropped noiselessly to the floor I drew back into hiding, leaving him to rid himself of whatever might remain. A moment later he joined me, silently as a great shadow, and I cordially extended my hand to him.

Page 170

CHAPTER XXXI

WE MOUNT THE CLIFF

“May the gracious blessing of the Lord rest upon you, Geoffrey Benteen,” exclaimed the old Puritan fervently, as we faced each other in that gloomy passage, and it somehow heartened me to note tears in his gray eyes. There was heart, then, under all his crabbedness. “I have suffered much of late both in spirit and flesh, and the very sight of you is as a gift of mercy unto me. No angel with healing in his wings could prove more welcome, yet I dislike leaving yonder food for the sustenance of that foul idolater.”

“You hunger then?” I questioned, amused at the regret with which he glanced backward.

“Is it hungered you call a man who has had but two dry bones to pick since yesterday-noon?” he groaned, pressing both hands upon his stomach. “I am lean as the Egyptian kine, and fain would welcome even locusts and wild honey.”

“Well, friend,” I insisted firmly, “if you follow, within fifteen minutes you shall partake of a meal equalling that left behind. I myself know well what a long fast means.”

“’T is truly a grievous affliction, difficult to sustain in meekness of spirit,” he admitted, yet ever keeping me close company through the increasing darkness of descent; “yet more am I distressed by the loss of all spiritual nurture amid these wild heathen. Perchance, Master Benteen, you might be led to unite with me in a moment’s fervent supplication before the throne of grace?”

“Ay; when the right time comes I will gladly join, yet I warn you now not to send your bull voice roaring through these passages, or you will have small opportunity for another meal.”

“A time to work and a time to pray has ever been my motto, most worthy youth, but my soul is so filled with gratitude at my providential deliverance from pagan bondage—even as was Daniel from the lions’ den—I long to pour forth my joy in songs of praise. Patience, but were I out of here, verily would I venture to uplift a psalm of Zion.”

He spoke in such ecstasy I feared lest his zeal might conquer his prudence, although in truth this latter virtue was one never apparent in his composition, and I determined once for all to nip in the bud all such inclination. So I halted in the darkness, and, as he lumbered past, laid a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

“Now hark you, Ezekiel Cairnes,” I muttered sternly, “I admire your piety, but this is no conventicle of the elect we are in; rather a place where your life, and those of others, depend on our caution. The echoing of that bull voice along these galleries might cause

the blocking of our passage, caging us in here like rats in a hole. So hold quiet, Master Preacher, and let me hear no more about either prayers or psalms."

The grave determination in my voice served to sober him.

"'T is in my blood," he admitted doggedly, "to fight and work better to the holy songs of Israel. It would bring renewed peace to my soul merely to uplift a paean of victory over the discomfiture of my enemies. But I seek no quarrel here, and hence bide in silence until a proper moment to unseal my lips."

Page 171

“’Twill be well you do. Now follow close at my heels, and I ’ll promise a swift diversion to your thoughts.”

Thus cautiously we crept toward the distant flickering of the torch, the unsteady light from which already began to yellow the packed earth about us, until we finally emerged into its full glare. I had crawled forth, perhaps half my length beyond the concealment of the wooden pillar, and, knife in hand, was stealthily drawing in toward the motionless form of the still slumbering priest, when the roving eyes of Cairnes encountered the idol, with its flashing gems and widely outspread wings, towering above like an avenging demon. I doubt not the sight was startling to the fellow, terrorized by the underground gloom, and he gave utterance to one gruff cry:

“’T is Beelzebub!”

The sleeping priest leaped to his feet, glaring about in bewilderment. Where I lay outstretched it required an instant to gather myself for action, and, before I could place restraining grip upon him, the fellow saw us both, and, with echoing scream of terror, fled frantically up the dark entry to the right. I made desperate effort to halt him, but my swift-flung knife found bloodless sheath within the soft earth of the wall.

“Zounds! are you a screeching woman with no control over your tongue?” I exclaimed angrily, panting for breath. “’T is likely that priest will rouse the tribe, and we shall have a run for it. What caused you to make such an uproar?”

“Saints of Israel!” he said, repentantly enough, his glinting eyes still roving over the silent, leering image, “never before did I behold such monster as that. For the moment, I believed it Satan himself. But, for the love of the prophets, what is this?” He began eagerly sniffing the air with his great nose like a pointer dog. “’T is food I scent; that which will stay a famished stomach. I beg you, friend, pause shortly while I satisfy in some measure the yearnings of the body. Then shall I be better fitted to withstand the temptations of the world.”

“Odds, man, I hope so,” I responded gloomily, watching his eager attack upon the supply outspread before the idol. “So far you have acted like a lunkhead, and I begin to regret making you comrade in this adventure. If a full stomach inspires to a man’s duty, it would be policy always to bear food about with you.”

“Ay, ’tis strange, indeed,” he mumbled, his mouth too full for clear speech, “that one who ever strives to live in spiritual exercise should be so completely the bound slave of mere bodily indulgence. Yet I did inherit all such ungodly tendency from my mother who was of Dutch blood, as round of form as a Holland churn, while my father was spare of build, and throve marvellously upon the water of life.”

Page 172

Leaving the engrossed sectary to refresh himself to the full of his capacity, I anxiously set to work searching after some species of cross-tunnel, shrewdly guessing this underground altar masked a junction point, from whence some such branch passageway would lead toward the open air. With diligent care I passed along the walls, testing each separate section, yet discovering nothing to reward my efforts, until, finally creeping between the spreading feet of the effigy, which appeared to sway unsteadily, I lifted the crimson drapery hanging down its back, thus disclosing an opening, barely sufficient to permit the easy passage of a small man while lying flat.

“Most noble scavenger,” I said, feeling in better humor from this chance discovery of the means of escape, “are the wants of nature finally satisfied? For if so, I have found a path which will lead us from this hole of iniquity.”

“Nay, call it not so while it offers such excellent bodily nurture,” he replied with fervor, cocking one eye up at me, yet keeping both hands busily employed in crowding his pockets full of eatables. “Say rather the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, or a well of water in desert places. I shall be ready to accompany you upon a journey after I lay in these few necessaries. The Lord hath given me manna in the wilderness—even as the ravens fed Elijah so hath He succored me—and ’twould be sin to make mock of His mercy.”

“Very well; only hurry and follow my lead.”

“Will you not carry the torch to help guide?” he questioned, peering doubtfully into the yawning black opening.

“No; the light would serve to betray us to any spying eyes. Perhaps that frightened priest may deem us spirits, and muster courage to come creeping back. If so, it will be best for him to find things here unchanged, although in faith he will scarcely doubt we possess earthly appetites when he notes your onslaught on the sacred food. Come, man, enough of stuffing; your pockets can hold no more, so press on with me.”

“It grieves me sorely to leave behind so much good pabulum,” he explained, eying still the few morsels left. “It would be well, to my judgment, did you pack the rest of this providential supply.”

Never pausing to answer, I crept between the spreading wooden limbs, and, with the expenditure of no small effort, succeeded in wriggling into the narrow hole beyond. It was a cramped passage for a man of my girth, yet, by digging in firmly with both hands and feet, I managed to advance, until I finally emerged, within space of perhaps a yard, into a much larger excavation, resembling the tunnel we had previously traversed.

“Now, Master Cairnes,” I spoke back encouragingly, “it is only a short distance to good footing; so take fresh breath and come on.”

His massive head completely shut out the faint light of the narrow opening, and I heard heavy breathing as the fellow squeezed his broad shoulders through the hole. There followed sounds of violent struggle during his slow and painful advance.

Page 173

“By all the prophets and the patriarchs,” he groaned wearily, “’tis not in me to make it! Had I endeavored this before eating I could have slipped through, scarcely touching either side. But now I am scraped like a pig for the feast. Baste me, friend Benteen, but I can move neither forward nor back in this accursed place; I am full aground in the centre, and can never hope to progress without aid.”

I reached down until I laid firm hold upon his groping fingers.

“Find some projection to push against with your feet,” I advised disgustedly.

“Fervently will I endeavor to dig in, and thus render all assistance in my power, yet I feel little to encourage me here in good works. Would it not be wise to test the potency of prayer? Verily the prayer of the righteous availeth much.”

“I try earthly power first,” I returned testily. “So lay to it, and we will have you out.”

I braced my knees against the firm wall, exerting all the strength I possessed. There followed a series of moans and heated expostulations, then the sound of rending cloth, and the disgruntled Puritan came forth with a suddenness of exit which landed us both in a heap on the floor.

“May all the spawn of hell be your playmates,” he roared in mad anger. “By the bones of Moses! you have scraped every bit of skin off me, and half my coat is ripped loose and left behind. Thou art an ungodly, blaspheming—”

He gasped wildly for breath as I throttled him, but the grip of my hands stilled his speech.

“It was only that you gorged like a bear preparing for Winter, or you would have passed through even as I did,” I muttered, heedless of his effort to release my clutch. “Lie still now, or, by all the devils in the pit, I ’ll shut down harder on your throat. Ah, so you can keep quiet, friend? Then I will let you go, for I would be free to explore this passage.”

I could perceive, by means of the faint light streaming through the narrow opening, that he was busily engaged in rubbing his sorely lacerated sides, and I noted his brown jerkin had been fairly wrenched off his shoulders.

“Where did you leave your coat?”

“Yonder in that accursed hole! It has store of provisions in its pockets. Lord save me, but was there ever such a time!”

He turned, groping anxiously about in the scene of his late adventure until he finally brought forth the missing garment. Carefully testing the pockets to see their contents remained intact, a smile lit up his leathern face, and he flung it across his shoulders, like

a pair of well-filled saddle-bags. I reached in also, lowered the drapery, and then led down the dark tunnel as rapidly as the grim uncertainty of the way would permit.

The passage proved long and tedious; at least so it seemed to us compelled to grope slowly onward through the darkness. However, it ran straight and upon a level, although the numerous supports of the roof gave us occasional foul blows, and proved so confusing we were considerable time in traversing its distance. All I have already pictured as occurring since I departed from the presence of Madame, and first plunged blindly into the underground labyrinths, had required several hours, and it must have been close upon sunset when we emerged from the gloom of the tunnel into the fresh sweet air.

Page 174

The passage traversed so long terminated abruptly, and with a sheer turn to the left, coming forth between two huge rocks. To all appearances, it ended at the high bank of a noisy stream, and was partly hidden by the overhanging cliff. The latter, devoid of path or chasm, now barred our progress, towering aloft until its ragged summit appeared to press the blue sky. At first view I thought the way ended here, but Cairnes pointed silently toward the right, and then I perceived where a path led upward, along the merest narrow, jagged shelf, skirting the boiling water, yet ever rising higher above it, until, as my eyes followed its serpentine windings from terrace to terrace, I grew dizzy contemplating the possibilities of so mad a climb.

“I suppose it must be tried,” I admitted soberly, “for there is apparently no other passage. Doubtless it leads straight to the top of the cliff.”

“Ay,” with more of indifference than I had expected, “and it will be no easy trick in the night.”

“The night?”

“Surely, yes; when else could we expect to compass the path? Is it not plain, friend, that before we rose fifty feet we should be in full view of every eye in the valley with the sun bright upon us? I tell you we must foot yonder rocks amid the night shadows, or else it will be safer to lie hidden here.”

I perceived the truth of his words and I confess to a sinking of the heart, as I contemplated the work before us. I was never an adept in clambering, it addles my head; and, bad as it appeared by day, surely doubly bad would it prove by night. Yet there was little help for it, and I made shift to win back my oozing courage by more cheerful speech. “Odds, but that is no such trip as I would seek after, yet needs must if the devil drives,” I said. “So, now, brother Cairnes, if you wilt consent to divide your store of food, we shall both front our night’s work with stronger bodies.”

“Saints’ rest! and if we go over the edge,” he replied, cheerfully emptying his bulging pockets on the rock, “it will be a comfort to bear loaded stomachs with us. It was ever against my pleasure to die half filled.”

We lingered as long as possible over our meal, conversing in such a way as to encourage each other and indulging in frequent draughts from the clear stream. Nothing occurred to disturb us, and, finally, both yielded to the soothing influence of the drowsy evening, and, resting back upon the rocks, dropped asleep. I know not the hour of my awakening, yet it greatly heartened me to be greeted by the sight of a nearly full moon, and to observe how the clear silvery light flooded the rocks, revealing the winding path leading upward. To arouse Cairnes was no easy task, but at last we advanced on our path. The huge rocks overhead appeared to arch us in, while, with utmost caution, we crept along the narrow, irregular ledge, which at times was level, and anon rose

abruptly like the steps of a stair; occasionally it wound about projecting rocks and over vast, unknown depths, until my brain whirled, while I hugged the smooth rock wall at my right, and felt cautiously forward for solid foothold.

Page 175

I imagine we had progressed thus for upwards of three or four hundred yards, and were elevated so far above the stream that scarcely an echo of its noise assailed our ears even in the silence of the night, when suddenly we came to the end of our path. The rocky shelf was so narrow the very conception of turning about smote me with terror. Directly in front, extending to the very edge, stretched a solid wall of rock. My eyes sank to the shelf on which I stood. Lying close against the sheer cliff was the root of a tree, its trunk, perhaps a foot or more in diameter, stretching over the abyss, whose depth I durst not guess. I stooped cautiously, my heart throbbing, and ran my fingers along the bark.

“Oak,” I announced soberly, “and feels solid and strong. No doubt those Indians must cross here, but it is a bridge to rack the nerves.”

“Will you adventure the passage?” questioned Cairnes, striving to peer across my shoulder. “As for me I would rather attempt the Red Sea.”

“Odds, man, the choice is not given. ’T is either turn and go back, or foot the tree; of the two the attempt at turning would addle me worse.”

I leaned out over the edge as far as I dared, clinging desperately to the root, and gazed down. It was like peering into the mouth of a great well. Then I nerved myself for the ordeal, and the next moment was fairly launched over the abyss, hanging on grimly to the log, my brain reeling as if with drunkenness. Yet I kept moving inch by inch, for there was now no stopping, and soon felt solid rock once more beneath my groping feet. With prayer on lips I crouched, sick and dizzy, close in against the wall, watching Cairnes where he followed along the same perilous path.

CHAPTER XXXII

CHIEF PRIEST OF THE SUN

The rock shelf we followed became gradually somewhat wider, so I moved forward with greater freedom. The path continued to ascend, winding unevenly along the precipitous face of the cliff, until we must have climbed nearly to the summit of the mighty bluff. But the overhanging crest rendered it impossible for us to do more than guess the situation. We were but ants clinging to a wall and unable to see more than a few yards ahead. Finally we attained a point where the cliff bulged outward in a wide curve, not unlike the rounded bow of a ship, and were compelled to move with renewed caution along the narrowed shelf, which was seemingly unsupported. Creeping fearfully forward on hands and knees around the sharp corner I found myself before the yawning entrance to a cavern. I realized that here was the ending of our toilsome climb, for I could see nothing beyond, excepting a precipitous wall of stone. If the path had continuation, it must pass through the cave.

“Yonder yawns a gloomy-looking hole, Master Benteen,” muttered the Puritan, lying at full length beside me, and staring ahead. “Yet my eyes see no sign of life to alarm us.”

Page 176

“The front is unguarded surely,” I admitted gravely, “but do not feel confident that there are no occupants within. If I mistake not, we have stumbled upon the very spot whence the priests signal down to the valley the rising and setting of the sun.”

“I never witnessed such ceremony, yet to my mind it would be far pleasanter going forward than lying here on the hard rock.”

Realizing the truth of his comment, yet muttering over my shoulder a word of caution, I began crawling forward into the interior. No sign of human presence appeared, and I ventured to stand upright. The cavern possessed a wide opening, with a broad platform of rock extending well out beyond the face of the cliff. Along the edge I could observe the rather dim outlines of an immense altar, built of detached stones, rising to a considerable height, and partially blocking the entrance. From below it might serve to conceal the mouth of the cave. This obstruction shut off much of the moon’s light, rendering the interior intensely dark. We were compelled to grope our way forward with hands pressed against the walls. I had not advanced more than thirty feet, my every nerve tingling, when I saw the ruddy reflection of a fire, hitherto completely concealed by a sharp turn in the tunnel. Rounding this abrupt point we found ourselves in a large room capable of containing upwards of three hundred persons. This chamber was partly natural in formation, but, as I discovered later, had been considerably enlarged by artificial means. So high was it that, in the dim light, I could scarcely distinguish its vaulted roof, while its length was hidden in the darkness. In the very centre of this apartment arose a great pile of irregular rock, flattened and hollowed along the top, where was burning a vast log, the smoke ascending straight upward, evidently finding outlet above. The light, red and yellow, flared and flickered upon the surrounding bare gray walls, nothing else arresting the eye except a second wide rock platform close to where we crouched. This was partially concealed by a great mat of coarsely woven scarlet cloth, which brought to me a conjecture that here, perhaps, the Queen was throned.

Wherever there was fire burning there must, of necessity, be attendants to feed the flame, but I could detect no sign of life, no sign of any kind, other than the crackling of the blazing log, and the heavy breathing of my companion. The silence oppressed me.

“Go to the right,” I advised at last, nervous from inaction, “I will try the left, until we meet again. Keep close against the wall, and move with care.”

“’Tis not wholly unlike a visit to hell,” he muttered gloomily, “but I am weary of lying shivering here.”

Page 177

I watched the fellow creep forward on his knees, his brilliant head-covering revealed in the glare like a flame. Then I took up my own part of this work of exploration. I had compassed half my distance amid profound stillness, perceiving nothing strange, and constantly feeling more intensely the solemn loneliness of the place, which by now, to my awakened imagination, appeared peopled with bloodless victims of heathen superstition. I felt no doubt this was a torture chamber; that many a hapless slave, or shrieking captive, had yielded up life in agony upon the summit of the gloomy pile, and the haunting spectres seemed to grin at me with distorted faces from every crevice along the walls. I was weakly yielding to such weird dreams, when a wild, shrill scream rang forth from the darkness in front. The cry contained such note of affright that, for an instant, I connected it with the fantasies which thronged my brain. I stood still, rooted to the spot, the blood curdling in my veins, my eyes straining in vain effort to pierce the darkness. Then there arose a roar not unlike that of an angry lion; the sound of a fierce struggle; the dull thud of a blow, and Cairnes's deep voice boomed forth.

"Ye black-faced villain! 'T is the strength of the righteous you have felt this day. Blessed be the name of the Lord, who hath given me the victory! Lie there in your sins, and no longer affront your Maker."

I sprang eagerly forward, but at my first step came into contact with a fleeing figure, which rounded the end of the altar in such blind terror as nearly to hurl me from my feet. I grasped at the floating robe, but missed, and the next instant was rushing blindly after the fellow down the dark passage toward where the moonlight silvered the outer rocks. Fright gave him wings, but desperate determination lightened my feet, and I was nearly upon him when the fleeing man rounded the great rock. One instant he paused, glancing behind. What he saw, or imagined he saw, I have no means of knowing; perchance some shrieking victim of his foul rites risen from the dead. With one wild, echoing cry, which rang in my ears like the scream of a lost soul, he gave a mad leap out into the air, and went plunging down to the jagged rocks at the base. Sick and pulseless I drew back. Trembling in every limb, even in the silence which followed I could detect no sound of his body as it struck the earth. I crept to the edge, lying prone upon my face, and looked over. The moonlight ended a hundred feet beneath me; beyond its line there was nothing but a black void. There could be no question as to what had occurred—the man was dead. I made my way back into the cave seeking to discover what had befallen the Puritan. I found him at the farther extremity of the great altar, calmly enjoying a quantity of cold meat he had discovered. He was squatting upon the floor, in close proximity to the motionless, extended figure of a savage arrayed in the black garments of the priesthood. They formed a picture so startlingly grotesque I could but stare in amazement.

Page 178

“Jerked venison,” he explained, glowering up at me, as I came into the firelight. “’T is of a peculiar flavor not altogether to my taste, yet not a food to be despised in the wilderness. Did you lay hands upon the heathen who fled?”

“No, he escaped me, but only to leap over the outer rock. He lies dead below. Have you slain this man?”

He turned the huddled up body over contemptuously with his foot, and I perceived the wrinkled countenance of an aged man, the eyes bright, the thick hair on his head long and nearly white. The face, thin and emaciated, was so sinister I involuntarily drew back.

“A snake is not so easily killed,” he answered in indifference. “I struck but once, and not very hard as I rank blows, yet the fellow has not stirred since. ’T is well for him to remain quiet until I finish this repast, for I am of a merciful disposition when my carnal requirements are properly ministered unto. Faith, had my eyes not fallen on the food I might have got both the fellows.”

Paying slight heed to his gossip I bent over the priest, rubbing his limbs until the blood began to circulate. Before the testy sectary had ended his munching, the old savage was sitting up, his back propped against a rock, the firelight playing over his wrinkled face, as he gazed at us, yet dazed and frightened. This was one whom I had never before seen; there was something of distinction about him, both as regards face and costume, which instantly convinced me he held high rank in the tribe—no doubt the chief priest. His sharp, black, malicious eyes wandered unsteadily from the Puritan to myself, as if he sought to regain his scattered senses. Finally he ventured a single word of inquiry:

“*Francais*?”

“No,” I answered shortly, speaking deliberately in French, hopeful he might know something of the tongue. “We are not of that people, yet I speak the language.”

“I glad you not *Francais*,” he said brokenly, yet intelligibly, his tone gruff, his accent guttural; “but I talk you some in that tongue.”

“How come you to speak French?”

His lean face hardened. As he bent forward, his fingers clinched convulsively. At first I thought he would not answer.

“’T was much time since I learn; when I was young man,” he answered slowly, recalling the unfamiliar words. “Then no snow in hair, no lame in leg, and my people dwell beside the great river toward the sun-rising. We were a great nation, with slaves to work our land, warriors to fight our battles, and priests to make sacrifice. Then we had

much of treasure from our fathers." He bowed his head, mumbling indistinctly; then continued, as if talking to himself, after the fashion of the aged: "Long time before that there came to our village men in canoes, floating down the great river out of the north. They were of white face, and wore shining things on their bodies and heads,

Page 179

and bore in their hands that which spouted fire and death. This was before I was born, yet I was told it often of my fathers. My people believed them children of the Sun, because of their white faces and light hair; they were made welcome, taken into the house of the altar, fed, warmed, and loved. I know not who they were, or whence they came, yet they spoke this tongue, did point at themselves and say '*Francais*,' and told of a mighty King away off, and worshipped before a cross-piece of wood. My people knew not what to make of them; yet they were not afraid, and treated the strangers with kindness, and there was no war between them. He who seemed their leader had one hard hand of metal, and they named him 'Tonty.' Know you such a man of your color?"

"No," I answered, already deeply interested in his simple story. "That was all before my time, nor do I even remember hearing the name till now, yet there were Frenchmen upon the great river full a hundred years ago, I have been told. 'Twas most likely they who came to your people. Did they do harm to your fathers?"

"They passed away in peace," he continued, using the language with greater ease as he proceeded, "for we were then strong, and of courage in battle; the fire bright on our altars. Nor did we look again upon any white face for so long a time that this visit became no more than a tradition among the people. More and more did the fathers believe this Tonty was a visitant from the Sun—many there were who worshipped him as a god. When he left he said he would come again, and with every sunrise the eyes of my people were turned in watching up the river. Then, when I was but a child, there came to our village canoes from below, from the way of the salt water. They did land, unmolested of our people, who supposed Tonty had come back; fair-faced men with yellow hair and beards and dressed in shining metal from head to heel. I was at the shore with the others when they came, and heard them speak in this tongue, and call themselves *Francais*. Others of that race followed, and we welcomed and fed them all, even as our fathers had done to Tonty. Some were warriors with swords, and fire-sticks, but with these were also some strange, black-robed men, who sought to tell us of another God, greater than the Sun our fathers worshipped. They had pictures, and crosses of wood, and prayed to these as we to the Sun. But we believed not in their God, and tried to drive them away from our village when they put out our fires, for they made much trouble among our people, so that the priests came to hate them—the black-robes. Some among them went, but one would not go, and so we made offering of him in sacrifice to the Sun. Then we thought we were rid of the black-robes, and could again live as we had been taught of our fathers."

He stopped speaking, his head bent low on his breast, his eyes on the altar name. I waited without a word.

Page 180

“But they were of strong heart,” he went on at last, never looking at me, “and returned again, until finally war arose between my people and these white-faced *Francais*. Many came up the great river from the salt water in big boats, and drove us forth from our village, the home of our fathers, and gave it up to fire, after killing many warriors. We could not fight against their fire-sticks, yet we saved much that we valued, and wandered far toward the sunset, bearing along with us the bodies of our chiefs, and the sacred fire from our altar. The *Francais* lost us in the wilderness. We came to a little river which flowed down to greet us from out the sunset. Here we stopped once more, built our village, erecting about it a great wall of earth such as our fathers did in those days when we were strong and mighty. We dwelt there in peace for three seasons of sun and cold, having little trouble with those tribes that roamed about us, until one day there came into our new village another *Francais*, a black-robe. How he got there I know not, but we laid hands upon him,—remembering the past,—bound him before our altar-house, and made of him a sacrifice unto our god, the Sun. Yet it was not well. Even that very night, while we worshipped before the fire which had consumed him, there came upon us many *Francais* out from the dark woods, with fire-sticks and sharp knives, so that only few of our people escaped, and got away to the north. I was one, bearing ever with me the sacred fire, which I was sworn to guard. We travelled across many rivers, suffering much from want, until those who lived wandered to this place, and here set up once more our fathers’ ancient altars. ’T was thus I learned the words of the tongue, this accursed *Francais*, and learned also to hate those with white faces and black hearts who speak it.”

His voice ceased, and his chin sank wearily upon his breast. My ear caught the heavy breathing of Cairnes, and I turned to mark him lying at full length upon the stone floor sound asleep. Admiring his indifference to surroundings, I was yet so deeply engrossed in this tale of the old priest as to be myself insensible of fatigue.

“You are indeed of an old race,” I said, hoping to make him talk further, “if the traditions of your people extend to those first Frenchmen who came floating south along the great river.”

The old eyes, now scanning my face, gleamed with awakened pride.

“’T is no more than a page out of our history I have related,” he exclaimed hastily, evidently aroused by my interest. “We are the oldest and greatest people of the earth. Ay, more; we are children of the Sun, and, ages ago, when our fathers were true to their faith and their God, there were none who could contend against us. We had our great altars on every hilltop, and our villages were in every valley. Our kings ruled from far above the great fresh water down to where the salt sea kisses the white sand; our slaves toiled in the fields to produce us food, and in the rocks to give us store of metal for the chase and war. It was then the Sun shone warm upon his children, and there were none among men who dared to face our warriors in battle. We were masters of all the land we trod; we feared no people, for we were blessed of the Sun.”

Page 181

“How came the end?”

“It was a curse upon us—curse because we made mock of the Sun. The sacred fire died out on our altars, while recreant priests slept, and so there came upon the nation a breath of pestilence from the sky which swept away the people as if by fire. It has been told to me that our dead lay everywhere; that whole villages were destroyed in a single night; that those who survived wandered in the woods foodless, until only a pitiful remnant of those who were once so powerful lived in that tainted air, poisoned by decaying bodies. Then the surviving slaves banded themselves together, fell upon their wandering masters, driving and killing, until the few who were left drew together on the banks of the great river. Here, by lighting the sacred fire again, they made peace and were saved. It was there I was born.”

I fail utterly to picture the true solemnity of the scene, as the aged priest, white-haired and evil-eyed, slowly mumbled it forth in his broken, halting French, leaning with his back against the rough stones of the great altar, on the summit of which flamed the sacred fire he had passed his life in guarding. ’T was like a voice speaking from a forgotten past, which looked forth from sunken eyes, and became visible in snow-white hair. A grave yawned to give me a glimpse of all which that grave contained—the hopes, the struggles, the death of a once powerful tribe. Yet it all stands forth perfectly clear to my memory as I write—the vast black chamber lying in shadow and flame; the dark figure of the bulky Puritan outstretched upon the stones at our feet; the ghastly, corpse-like face of the savage old priest, whose eyes gleamed so fiercely, as he dreamed once again of the vanished glories of his race.

“But the woman who now rules over you?” I questioned, waiting vainly for him to resume. “Is she not white?”

He did not answer; apparently he did not hear.

“I ask regarding Queen Naladi—is she also of your people?”

“We are alike children of the Sun,” he responded, his tone more sullen. “She is of the Sun and was sent to rule; sent by the Sun to lead us once again unto our own.”

“She told you this?”

“We know it by signs, by the prophecy of our fathers; we were long looking for her coming; she was promised us by the Sun. In the hour of deepest need, a woman fair of face with hair of reddish gold, a goddess in earthly form, was to be sent to guide us. She came out of the mystery, and we wait her will.”

“Then she is not of your race?”

“I have answered—she came to our people from the Sun.”

Page 182

I have not often felt too secure while in any position of danger, but this feeble old savage rested so helplessly back against the base of the altar, I lost all thought of him as an enemy against whom I needed to guard. Sunk in contemplation of his story, I sat carelessly, my head somewhat lowered as I mentally viewed the picture drawn. Cairnes moved uneasily in his sleep, muttering something indistinctly, and I turned partially so that I might look at him. Instantly, with the leap of a tiger, the priest hurled himself upon me. I flung up one arm, barely in time to intercept a jagged stone aimed full at my head. As we clinched and went down, the incarnate fiend buried his yellow teeth in my hand, and, in spite of his weight of years, I found myself hard pressed in a death struggle. A very demon seemed to possess him; his grip was satanic in its hate. In truth it was Cairnes who seized him by the throat, dragging him off me. He struggled insanely against the two of us, until we bound him so securely that nothing except his eyes could move.

CHAPTER XXXIII

PERE ANDRE LAFOSSIER

“You treacherous, white-headed old villain,” I exclaimed angrily, “I am half inclined to kill you for so savage a trick. Odds! but my arm feels as if it were broken.”

The fellow grinned at me, showing his yellow fangs.

“I care not if you kill,” he answered, with true Indian stoicism. “I am old, and have served the Sun long. Kill, but I will not be unavenged of my people; for, whether I live or die, it matters not—there is no escape for you.”

He spoke with such confidence as to stun me.

“No escape? Why?”

His lips curled with undisguised contempt.

“So my words sting. Well, they are true, nor am I unwilling to tell you. You are trapped here. There is no path you can travel, either by night or day, unseen of our people. You have already climbed along the only passage leading here, and you dare not go back. This way you have reached the end. Behind is the village; here the altar of sacrifice—-choose either, and you die like the *Francais* dogs you are.”

“Who is here to touch us?” I asked derisively. “There is food in plenty; we can wait our chance.”

“Ay, you have grace of this day in which to make ready,” his wrinkled face lighting maliciously. “When yonder moon becomes round it will be the night of sacrifice. Know

you what will happen then?" he licked his thin lips greedily. "I may not be here to see, but it will be the same. Up that path of rocks will swarm all of my race, and what then can save you from the altar? How they will welcome the victims waiting their pleasure —white-faced *Francais*."

His old, deeply sunken eyes gleamed so with hatred, I drew involuntarily back, my blood chilled with a conviction that he did not lie.

Page 183

“Here? Do you tell me the tribe comes here?”

“Ay, here, *Francais*,—here to make sacrifice of blood, that they may go forth once more, and conquer the land of their fathers.”

“’T is your custom to kill slaves?”

“When there be none better, but now we have other victims sent us by the Sun, all *Francais*, and you two cooped up here to be added to the others. ’T will be a sweet sacrifice, and I should like to live to hear your cries for mercy, and drink of the warm blood.”

I stared at him, unable to deny our helplessness.

“You would make us believe there is no upper entrance to this accursed hole!”

“Seek as you please—there is none. You are trapped beyond struggle; you cannot escape the vengeance of the Sun.”

I pointed, still incredulous, toward the great burning log.

“Did you grow yonder tree in this cavern? or was it borne here on the back of a slave?”

“It was lowered from above, over the edge of the cliff, by grass ropes.”

“I believe you lie,” I cried, now thoroughly shaken by his surly contempt; but the fellow only leered at me, and I strode across the great room, where I might reflect beyond sight of his eyes. As I passed to the other side of the altar I observed a little gray daylight flooding the mouth of the cave. The sight recalled to mind another possible danger.

“Cairnes,” I called, “it is about the hour of sunrise. Down in the village I have noticed that whenever the sun touches the crest of these rocks the priests up here go forth, waving a flame into the air from yonder platform. I fear if it were missed, the savages below would come swarming up to discover the cause. Take a light from the pile, and wave it yonder.”

The stubborn preacher grimly shook his head.

“Nay,” he replied. “I have borne part enough in their heathen orgies already; it will take a lifetime to purge my soul. I bow down to Baal no more.”

It was useless to argue with such as he, nor had I spirit to do it.

“Then keep close guard over the priest,” I retorted; and, grasping a torch from among the burning mass upon the altar, made haste toward the outer stone.

My eyes have seldom gazed upon a grander view of nature than that which greeted me, as I crept around the great rock, and peered over the edge down into that beautiful basin wherein the remnant of the Natchez had established their home. The early sun had not as yet illumined the lower levels, and all beneath my dizzy perch remained wrapped in the sombre gray of promised dawn; the slightly rolling valley was dotted with numerous square-topped huts of yellow straw, surrounded by ponderous walls of gray stone or dun-colored earth, and the irregular green fields were intersected by a silvery ribbon of running water: the whole composed such a fair picture of restful, peaceful beauty, that for the moment it held me at the edge in silent

Page 184

contemplation. It appeared impossible that so sweet, secluded a spot could be the habitation of savages, vengeful and cruel. Yet those black, moving dots down yonder, clustering in front of the various lodges, I knew were naked heathen, blood-thirsty and vindictive. Now that the earliest rays of sunlight were beginning to tinge with gold the crest above me, every expectant face in the tribe would be upturned toward my perch, wondering at the slightest delay in their morning signal. My eyes becoming accustomed to the distance, could even distinguish those faint sparks of light where the priests below gathered before the great altar-house to wave back response. If we would live for even another day there must be no failure now. Nerving myself for the task, I stepped forth on to the narrow shelf—no more than the merest black dot to the watching eyes beneath—and flung forth the flaming torch in fiery welcome to the Sun. A shrill cry from the throats far below reached my ears in the merest thread of sound, yet before I drew back from the edge, I witnessed a responsive signal of flame from the mound summit, and inferred that no suspicion had been aroused in the minds of the guardians of these heathen rites. Satisfied of our present safety I walked back to the great chamber, and beheld the old priest and Cairnes glaring angrily at each other, while the latter nursed his leg so tenderly as to make me apprehensive of further trouble having arisen between them.

“What now, brother Cairnes?” I questioned in some anxiety, noting as I came nearer stains of fresh blood on his hose.

“Yonder black-faced cannibal buried his teeth in my calf,” he growled gloomily. “Saints of Israel! I did merely lean over seeking another bit of meat, when he fastened on to me in that fashion, and hung there like a bull-dog until I choked him loose. ’Tis my vote we kill the ungodly man-eater, who has already feasted off your hand and my leg.”

The energetic movement of his red head clearly evidenced the sincerity of his feelings, yet it was not in my heart to avenge our wrongs upon a helpless prisoner.

“No, friend; we are white, not red. The pain will pass presently, and it would not be a Christian act to dispose thus of one bound in our hands. I will give him other food to chew upon, then make fast his mouth while we go together and search out the secrets of this hole. It will be best to discover early whether this varlet speaks true or false as to the chances of escape. Hand over here the meat and water.”

I endeavored to question the fellow further while he sullenly partook of the food offered, but he gave back merely short, uncivil answers, and those of little value. Finally, despairing of learning more from such a source, we securely bucked the sullen fool, rolled his body close against the wall out of sight of any chance visitant, and then made preparation to explore our prison-house and discover for ourselves

Page 185

the mystery of this gloomy cave. The dense blackness showing directly ahead seemed to promise an extension of passageway into the rock; so, lighting a pine knot at the altar fire, and bidding Cairnes follow me closely, I led forward down the narrow tunnel. The floor was uneven, while so irregular and rough appeared roof and walls as to convince me this was a natural excavation, probably the run-way for some ancient watercourse. Yet, as I tested the nature of the stone with the point of my hunting knife, it proved easily workable with tools, and apparently revealed softer material the deeper we progressed into the hill. Slightly beyond the entrance leading from the main chamber, several rudely fashioned steps led into a sort of gallery. This was of considerable proportions, elevated perhaps ten or more feet above the main floor, its outer parapet formed of loose stones, through the chinks of which one might command unseen a wide view of the cavern and its altar. But, to our rather hasty inspection, this gallery contained nothing except bare rock, and, after a single curious glance about we drew back and moved on cautiously in exploration of the lower tunnel. This curved gradually toward the left, and held a rather steep pitch downward. It was not above three feet in width until we had traversed fully fifty paces, when it suddenly broadened, and the fitful glare of the torch, which I held over my head, flashed back rays of light from two horribly gleaming green eyes. For an instant I believed we had invaded the lair of some wild animal, and drew back quickly, my hand on the knife hilt.

“Hell’s kitchen!” I exclaimed nervously, “but the den has an occupant already.”

“Ay, and of a kind common enough in these hills, but nothing fit to affright a servant of the true God,” echoed Cairnes, striding past me. “I am not wont to fear heathen idols, Master Benteen, nor will I bear back now before those green eyes.”

As he spoke he laid rough hand on the thing, and I heard a sharp rattle of metal against wood.

“Come hither friend,” he called, with a laugh, “’tis no worse than another painted devil we are called to face. Surely it is you who have the faint heart now.”

“The glow of the torch blinded me to all except the green stones,” I explained, coming forward and throwing the radiance of the flame full upon the hideous object. “Saint George! ’t is of no beauty to my sight even now, and, as you say, of small fear to Christian heart. The saints defend us! What was that? As I live, I heard English speech!”

He was earnestly engaged in an endeavor to detach a bit of dull metal from the throat of the image, and scarcely deigned to glance around.

“Nay, there was no sound other than the chattering of your own tongue. This shining thing is gold, I believe.”

“Let it be; ’t is of small value here. I tell you I heard a strange voice; so hold still and listen.”

Page 186

For a minute or more we waited in almost breathless suspense, no unusual sound greeting our ears. Then the Puritan sniffed disdainfully.

“You grow childish, Master Benteen,” he growled roughly, turning back to his labor. “The dark has overstrained your nerves—”

“I bespeak help of de Englishmen for de sake of God!”

There was no mistaking the truth this time—a strange voice was speaking broken English almost at our very feet. Cairnes clattered to the floor with a rough exclamation of surprise, while I stared vainly at the idol, from which the sound apparently came.

“In Heaven’s name, who are you?” I asked earnestly, “and where are you who make appeal to us?”

“I am Andre Lafossier, native of France, for two months past a prisoner to these savages. If you are Christian men I beseech assistance.”

“Nor do you ask vainly. Are you behind the wooden image?”

“Ay, in a small room hollowed out from the rock.”

“Except for that are you free to aid us in your escape?”

“No, Monsieur; I am lamed in limb, and fastened to the stone by a metal band.”

A hoarse growl of rage burst from the throat of the Puritan. “Prophets of God!” he roared. “Surely we are the selected instruments of the Lord sent hither for the salvation of this worthy man; we are the soldiers of Gideon, the chosen of the Most High.”

Before I could lift hand or voice in interference he had braced his massive shoulder against the towering figure of wood, and, with a mighty heave sent the monster crashing over upon the rock floor, himself sprawling beside it as it fell. As they came down together in a cloud of dust, an opening was revealed behind the stone pedestal on which the idol had stood. Torch in hand I instantly crept forward. I found myself in what was little more than the merest cell, yet dimly illumined by a single beam of light streaming downward as if penetrating through some slight crevice in the rock. The narrow hole, for it was hardly more, was bare of all furnishing; both walls and floor were damp, but there were remnants of coarse food and a pannikin of water.

Its sole occupant sat cross-legged on the hard floor, bound about the waist with a band of metal. One end of this was attached to the wall in such a manner that the prisoner could neither rise to his feet nor lie down. Never have these wandering eyes of mine looked upon a figure more pathetic. For an instant I stood there, swaying upon my feet as though from sickness, staring at him incredulously. His thin, pale, effeminate face

was rendered wonderfully piteous by the depth of suffering so plainly revealed within the great, black, appealing eyes. So peculiarly delicate were the features, so slender the fragile form, about which a frayed and rusty robe clung loosely, that for a moment I actually believed I was looking upon a young girl. So strong was this impression that I drew back, almost abashed. This slight pause enabled Cairnes to regain his feet and press past me. As his eager glance fell upon that slender, crouching figure, I observed how suddenly his eyes hardened, his whole expression changed.

Page 187

“You are a priest of Rome!” he exclaimed harshly, staring down.

The white, girlish face brightened instantly, the two thin hands plucking forth from some fold in the tattered robe a small silver crucifix. At sight of this the stern-mouthed Puritan drew sharply back, as if he feared contamination from the symbol.

“*Oui, Monsieur*,” answered the soft voice, with an odd note of joy in it. “I am of the Society of Jesus.”

“’T is plain to see. What do you here?”

The priest smiled gently, his eyes dimming with tears fixed upon the cross.

“’Tis strange question. Surely Monsieur knoweth little of our Order, or he would not need to ask. We are soldiers of Christ, commissioned for war, even to life or death. We ask nothing but the privilege of service, and the command of our superior. I am named missionary unto the savage tribes of this river. It has been the will of God that I suffer in order that through me some souls born into heathendom may thus be redeemed from the torments of the damned.”

The sectary’s rough, gray face reddened until it was nearly the color of his hair.

“’Tis false!” he growled, smiting one hand hard upon the other in anger. “You only lead the way straight to hell with your false doctrine. Have you made any converts to the Roman harlot in this tribe?”

“Nay, Monsieur, I cannot lay claim to such reward.” His eyes slowly uplifted to the face of his questioner. “Jesu hath not as yet opened before my understanding the way which leadeth to their hearts. I can but work, and pray for guidance. I have only baptised one who was dying of a fever, and sprinkled with holy water an infant, unknown to its mother. It is not much, yet I bless the good Mary for the salvation of those precious souls.”

“Saints of Israel! do you think that mummery saved them?”

“Surely yes, Monsieur; is it not so taught of our Order?”

I shall never forget the look upon Cairnes’s face. At the moment I believed him wrestling with temptation to strike the helpless man, so irritated was he by these confident words of Romish faith. Determined to prevent discussion, I elbowed him aside, and bent down over the fastenings of the Jesuit.

“Enough of this,” I said sternly, barely glancing at Cairnes. “Keep the rest of your Puritanical sermonizing for a conventicle. We have here a fellow-Christian to be rescued from the savages; this is no time to jangle over creeds.”

“A fellow-Christian! I hold no fellowship with such; he is but an emissary of a false religion, a slave to the Evil One.”

“Enough, I say,” and I rose to my feet fronting him. “I care little which is right in doctrine, you or he. Here is a man begging aid of us in extremity. Surely the priest has suffered for the sake of Christ, regarding whom you speak so freely. So have done with dogma, and play the man a while—press here with your strength on this knife-blade until I bend back the metal and set him free.”

Page 188

He yielded, ungraciously enough, to my command, giving so good a turn to the steel with his vice-like fingers that in another moment the Jesuit was released from the wall. Slowly and painfully, clinging fast to my hand for aid, the man arose and stood before us, swaying wearily, his thin lips pressed tightly together as if he would stifle a cry of pain.

“Are you suffering?” I asked, greatly moved by the expression of agony imprinted on his pallid face.

“It will pass, Monsieur,” he answered bravely, trying to smile at me. “’Tis strange the spirit of man is so enslaved to the flesh that one cannot wholly master a bit of physical pain. No doubt I am somewhat cramped from my long imprisonment, and, perchance, my wounds have not rightly healed.”

“Are you wounded? I beg you permit me to attend to that. I possess some small skill in the bandaging and dressing of cuts.”

His eyes rested upon me with all the tenderness of a woman.

“I truly thank you, Monsieur, but it is beyond your skill to aid me, even were you of the school of Paris. They be of a savage nature, which God alone may beautify.”

He slightly lifted his long black robe as he spoke, and may the merciful Father forgive the oath which sprang to my lips as I gazed in horror at the disfiguration—two fleshless limbs, one without even the semblance of a foot, merely a blackened, charred stump rested on the rock floor.

“Mother of God!” I sobbed, “it has been burned off!”

“Ay,” he returned, in all gentleness, covering the awful sight. “Yet were they gladly given for Christ’s sake.”

“I doubt that not,” gazing in wonder at his girlish face. “But tell me, who were guilty of such fiendish cruelty—the savages of this tribe?”

“Two months ago it was done in the valley below, in the village of the Natchez,” his eyes again upon the crucifix. “Yet dwell not upon it, Monsieur, for it is so little I can hope to do for the glory of God. It may be I am not even worthy of martyrdom.”

“So the Natchez did that!” the breath hissing between my teeth. “Where was their gentle-hearted Queen?”

“I know not, Monsieur, if they have a Queen. I saw none exercising authority excepting priests of their strange worship. It was the chief priest who held me in the flame.”

I crushed back the hot, useless words burning on my lips, and turned to look at the Puritan. We had conversed in English, and he must have comprehended every word, yet there was no softening in the glint of his hard, gray eyes.

“Hear you the priest’s story, sirrah?” I asked, feeling strong inclination to vent my spleen on him for such bull-headedness. “Is he not one to honor rather than pick a quarrel with in such place as this?”

“’T is no quarrel I seek, nor am I like to question the fanatical courage of a Jesuit. But I tell you his teaching is false, an outrage on the true religion of the saints, and I am of a strain which can never companion with any of that black-robed breed. Call me what ye please, Master Benteen, but I am too old a man, too long indoctrined in the faith, ever to acknowledge brotherhood with hirelings of the Romish church.”

Page 189

“Companion with whom you please,” I retorted savagely. “But I tell you this, preacher, and once for all,—you ’ll bear yourself like a human being to this poor lad while I ’m with you, or else make answer to me. Is that plain? I care nothing for your dogma, or your hair-splitting, but I know what fair play is between man and man,—ay, and mean to have it here, even if it costs you a split head.”

“I beg you will both be at peace, Messieurs,” broke in the soft, caressing voice at my elbow. “There can be no cause for comrades quarrelling over me. I am not worthy a ruptured friendship. Yet I fail to understand any occasion for your seeming trouble; has the older man some reason to distrust my robe?”

“Reason! Saint George! ’tis precious little that ever bothers him. The fellow is a Puritan preacher—of the same breed as the Huguenots—and possesses a head as hard as an oaken plank.”

I nearly laughed at the unrestrained expression of aversion which swept the girlish face. An instant the black eyes lost their gentleness, the thin fingers clutched the silver cross.

“Mother of God! a heretic! a preacher of that doctrine! Never before have I met his kind, nor do I care now to make close acquaintance. A Puritan! *Sainte Marie*, have mercy! Yet surely in such stress as this we may for the time overlook our differences in faith, and be as men together? Is it not God’s will? But I know little of conditions. Is there some path open for escape from here? Then will I let this Puritan be, save for a prayer to the Virgin.”

“I fear there is none, unless you know of some back opening to this rock hole.”

He shook his head sadly, his gaze still on Cairnes.

“None, Monsieur; the passage endeth here.”

“Then the three of us are safely cooped for those savages to work their will upon. No pleasant thought that, yet little good can arise from losing hope. For one, I fight it out, and let others do the praying. Let us retrace our way to the big room, where we can hold council in more comfort; perchance we may find yet some opening to the upper air. Cairnes, lay hold upon the other side, and help to bear back this lamed man to the altar.”

I doubted greatly his compliance with my order, and determined to settle this affair between us without more delay. But he came forward, unwillingly enough and muttering.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE TALE OF THE PRIEST

With all possible tenderness we bore the slender form of the helpless priest along the dark, crooked passage, until we found a comfortable resting-place for him against the altar.

“I thank you much, Messieurs,” he said simply, the depth of his gratitude apparent in uplifted dark eyes, glistening in the light of the fire. “Members of our Order are more accustomed to blows than kindness, so I have no words with which to express thanks for your care.”

Page 190

“Think nothing of it,” I returned hastily, and then, observing how the Puritan drew back from beside him, added, “Master Cairnes, you might busy yourself hunting more food—-it will be exactly in your line—while I attempt to bathe the limbs of the priest, and see what little may be done toward alleviating his pain.”

The mere thought of eating was sufficient to put the Puritan in good humor, and he was soon diligently scouring nooks and corners with scent for provender as keen as that of a pointer dog. I noticed with curiosity how the motionless Jesuit followed the movements of his hulking figure as he passed back and forth amid the shadows, his dark eyes filled with wonder and aversion.

“’Tis truly a strange thing, Monsieur,” the latter remarked soberly, “to meet with one pretending love for Christ, yet who hateth Mother Church, and dares make open mock of Her most holy offices. Thou didst name thy comrade Puritan?”

“Ay, of the same breed as the Huguenots of your country, rebels against the Pope.”

He made the sign of the Cross.

“The curse of Holy Church is upon them all; they are condemned to hell,” he exclaimed with fervor. “A vile pestilence to be stamped out; yet it would afford me joy beyond words could I save this man’s soul from eternal torture, and lead him back into the true faith. Mother of God! what was it moved yonder?”

I glanced quickly about toward where he pointed, seeing the shadowed figure of our forgotten prisoner.

“’Tis only one of the savages we have captured and bound. He guarded this altar, ministering to the superstition of the tribe; an old man, perchance the very chief priest who held you in the flame.”

I anticipated seeing the light of revenge leap into his eyes, but, instead, a rush of pity softened them, and before I could extend my hand to interfere, he crept across the intervening space, and bent over the fellow.

“A most cruel turn on the rope, Monsieur,” he exclaimed, busying himself at the knot. “Surely the man will rest easier, and no less safely, with back propped against the rock. Nay, have no fear; I will keep him tied fast if that be your wish, yet I seek to relieve his pain so I may profitably converse with him upon the needs of his soul.”

“With him! Saint George! he had small enough mercy on you.”

“That is of the past, and abideth not in memory,” and the white hands held up the crucifix into the light. “He who died on this Cross prayed, ‘Father forgive, they know not what they do,’ and who is Andre Lafossier, to be harsher than his Master?”

Not until after he had prayed long and earnestly, holding the silver cross ever before the wicked eyes of the unrepentant savage, did he permit me to bathe his disfigured limbs, dressing them as best I could with what rude materials I found at hand. Even while I worked he seemingly thought nothing of himself, but, oblivious to pain, his face was ever turned to the prisoner, his lips moving in petition for his soul. I caught but scattered sentences.

Page 191

“Oh, Christ, this one—unworthy, yet I beseech Thee—Be merciful, O Virgin—out of the wilderness ariseth the voice of Thy servant—purge the soul of all past iniquity—yield me this one brand plucked from the burning—Thine be the glory forever—let my life be given for this soul—this one precious reward for my ministry.”

A little later the three of us partook, although largely in silence, of the sustaining food which Cairnes furnished in abundance. Throughout the meal I felt it necessary to be ever watchful to prevent the two zealots, who were now my comrades, from clashing. Again and again the priest sought to lead the sectary to his way of thinking, but the gray face only hardened ominously, his bull voice denouncing bitterly all Romish deeds.

“Come, be at peace, you two,” I commanded at last, thoroughly tired and angry. “Hold your tongues over those questions, at least while I am with you. Odds! I care nothing as to your Catholic or Protestant, your popes or preachers. Be done, and bear yourselves like men. I will no longer have you vexing the air with controversy while our very lives are hanging by a thread. There are other things to talk about just now. So, Cairnes, if you cannot bide quietly in our company, then stay here alone while I take the Jesuit out into the sunlight, where we can hold sensible counsel together.”

Leaving the fellow growling to himself over the remnants of the meal, I bore the priest along the short passage, until we discovered a secure, comfortable resting-place outside, where our eyes could sweep the full extent of the wide valley. It was a quietly beautiful scene at this hour, the glow of the sun over all. We could distinguish gangs of slaves toiling in the fields, and a group of warriors, their spears glistening, clustered together before the gloomy altar-house. Yet my eyes barely rested upon either scene, for there, close beside the open door of the Queen’s dwelling, my glance, sharpened by love, perceived the movements of a woman’s apparel, and from the faint color of it, distinguishable, even at that distance in the sun glare, I knew I looked once more upon Eloise. It would be difficult to express in prosaic English with what intense relief I realized, through the evidence of my own eyes, her continued safety. It seemed years already since our last parting, when she had chosen to remain prisoner in those savage hands. Father of all! how I loved her then; how I yearned to have word with her, to read again the silent message of her pure eyes.

The priest was gazing silently far away up the valley. Busied with my own thoughts, forgetting him utterly, I kept my eyes eagerly, hungrily upon that single, far-off figure, until, finally, I saw her arise and disappear within the open door. I growled forth a bitter curse, observing the cause for retreat—a man and a woman slowly climbing the mound together. There was no doubt in my mind as to the identity of the Queen and De Noyan. Faith! but it would have pleased me then to put hand upon the false coxcomb and choke him back to decency and duty. The look of it was in my face, no doubt, as I stared down upon them in helplessness, for the Jesuit rested his fingers gently upon my arm, as though he would restrain my passion.

Page 192

“There seemeth something below which angers you, my friend,” he said softly. “’Tis a battle-light flaming in your eyes.”

“’Tis the shame of it all which crazes me,” I responded, trembling with passion, yet yielding to the influence of his presence. “You have not yet heard the story, so cannot rightly judge our position here.”

As briefly as possible I reviewed the adventures of our little party since leaving New Orleans, and it was good to observe with what growing interest he followed the simple story, interrupting with but few questions until I reached the end. Then his soft hand closed warmly over mine, his eyes upon my face.

“It is a brave tale,” he said kindly, “one not unworthy the days of knighthood. Yet, good friend, it is scarcely well for you to think thus tenderly regarding the wife of another. ’T is against the laws of Holy Church, and can only lead to harm and suffering. But, Mother of God! who am I to pass judgment?—I, who am also guilty of this sin.”

He had uplifted his crucifix, sitting with bowed head before it, with so sad a face I could not forbear questioning.

“Have you, then, such another tale in your life?”

He did not look at me, yet hesitated not in reply.

“Ay, ’tis true, yet not so pure a one. I like not to dwell upon it even in thought; but you have trusted me, and we are here together as men of a common race in face of death. Perchance our hearts may better comprehend each other through such confidences. Do you care to hear my tale?”

“I listen gladly, for in truth I know of nothing better to do,” I returned uneasily. “Pish! but I feel as if we were locked in a cell awaiting the headsman.”

“Yet God can open the doors even as He did for Peter,” he said solemnly, fastening his eyes on the blue sky. For a moment neither spoke; then the gentle voice took up the story, as if telling it over to himself.

“I was not always of the black robe; only six years since I wore the blue and gold of a soldier of France in the dragoon regiment of Auvergne. I came of good family, and was even known and trusted of the King. But let that pass. We were stationed at Saint-Rienes, in the south country, as fair a spot, Monsieur, as this world holds, yet strangely inhabited by those discontented under the faith of Holy Church. But we rode rough shod over all such in those days, for it was the will of the King to crush out heresy. ’Tis a pleasure to see the shrinking of a heretic before the wrath of God. Yet this tale has little to do with this service, however I love to dwell upon it. As I said, we were quartered in garrison at Saint-Rienes, and it was there I first met Marie Fousard, the girl

wife of a Captain in His Majesty's Guard. She was a creature of beauty, Monsieur, with clear cheeks, lips of the rose, and great trustful eyes. I was but a boy then, she not much older in years, but with that knowledge of the world and of men which

Page 193

enabled her to make poor, blinded fool—her helpless slave for evil. Merciful Mary! how I did worship her! To me she was as an angel; divinity lurked in her smile and found utterance upon her lips. I could have died at her word, happy to know it was her pleasure. Yet, as I know now, all the love-making between us was no more than play to her; she merely sought to amuse herself with my passion through a dull season. No, not quite all, for back of her smiles lurked a purpose so dark, so diabolical, 'twas not strange I failed to fathom it. 'Tis hard to associate crime with such young womanhood, to feel that evil thoughts lurk behind eyes soft with love and lips breathing tenderness. Yet behind the outer angel of Marie Fousard there was a devil incarnate. I was blind, crazed, helpless to resist an evil I failed to perceive. I loved her; in that passion all else was lost. She had confessed love for me; in that was all the heaven I desired. Little by little she fanned within my heart a hatred for the man whose wife she was, my comrade in arms. I cannot relate the details, the stories of wrong, the lies, the upbraidings which turned my blood to flame, picturing him ever to me as a monster. Ah, it means much, Monsieur, when such things are told with tears, when every sob rings in the ears as though crying for vengeance. I listened, believing it all, until deep in my heart hate was born. Once she showed me her shoulder, the white flesh discolored as if by a blow, swearing that he did it. The sight maddened me to action. I left her to seek him at the inn, cursing in my teeth, and caring not what happened, so I killed him. What boots now the insult offered which forced him to the field? I can see his face yet, full of wonder at my words, doubting my very sanity; yet I saw only her and that bruised shoulder. I would kill him, and I did, running my sword through his body, and gazing down remorselessly into his glazing eyes. What cared I for aught but her? It was a duel, fairly fought, and I was safe from censure. God! in that hour it never came to me that it was foul murder; that I had stricken down an innocent man at the word of a harlot."

He stopped, his white face buried in his hands, his slender form trembling. I remained motionless. With an effort he resumed.

"I went back to her at our trysting-place, intoxicated by my deed, confident she would come to my arms in gratitude. Instead she laughed, tore from her face the mask of innocence, called me fool, boasted that she had merely used me for her own vile purposes. I shrank away, horrified by my deed, despising her, my love stricken dead. In that moment my life was changed; I cared for nothing except to get away from my fellows, to expiate my sin in the sight of God. I felt no interest in what became of her; I neither smiled nor wept, when, three days later, she married the prefect of that village. All was over; the fire within me had become ashes."

Page 194

“But the woman? this Marie Fousard?”

“She went her way, the broad road leading to destruction. We met never again, yet I heard, for there were those eager to tell such things. A year, and the prefect was dead of poison, but, before the gendarmes learned the truth, the widow fled by night taking much property. One D’Anse was her paramour, a sub-lieutenant of hussars. ’T is all I know; they took ship together at Marseilles. Mother of Mercy! wherever she lives it will be under the spell of the Evil One. To my heart God hath brought peace, but for such as she there can be no peace; she hath been damned already.”

I know not how long we sat there motionless, our eyes on the sunlit valley, our thoughts on past years. The father ran the beads swiftly through his white fingers, his lips moving noiselessly; but I found no such help, no such consolation in my struggle. His story was forever ended; mine was not, the very scene beneath bringing home to me anew the desperate burden. Oh, Eloise! Eloise! what of fate awaited us in the coming night shadows? What sacrifice of mine could bring to you life and liberty? It is one thing to rush headlong into danger; a vastly different one to sit awaiting disaster which it is impossible to avert. The desire to act, to attempt something, became an imperative passion, and I sprang to my feet.

“Come, *pere*,” I broke forth impatiently, “let us get back inside. Before we are aware it will be night, and we must learn first if there is any chance for escape. We can dream no longer over the past. Saint George! the present holds sufficient work for us to do.”

I bore him back in my arms and left him lying beside the savage priest, testing again on him the efficacy of prayer, while Cairnes and I fared forth to explore. We sought long and painfully, trying the walls for some concealed opening, groping in the corners, and squirming through narrow crevices. The effort was useless, except to convince us that the cavern had but the single entrance. All we discovered was an assortment of odd weapons, war-clubs and stone-tipped spears, collected in one corner of the gallery. Everywhere else were bare walls. Feeling like rats in a trap we dragged tired limbs back to the altar-room, our sole remaining hope a possible escape down the rocks under the early shadows of the night. This might be accomplished if sufficient time were granted us, and if the good Lord guided. It was a hope, a cheer to the spirits of the others, yet in, my own heart I counted little upon it.

CHAPTER XXXV

NIGHT AND THE SAVAGES

Page 195

The hours of waiting dragged terribly. We conversed little, all alike nervous, irritable under the strain of our desperate situation. The Jesuit was much in prayer; but Cairnes fell asleep and twisted about uneasily, his head pillowed on his arm. I could only pace the rock floor, harassed by bitter, useless thoughts. What a memory picture it is!—the great bare cavern, with black interior only partially revealed by the gleam of the altar flame; the old savage huddled in his bonds, his baleful eyes glowing in the firelight as he watched every movement; the slender *pere* close beside him upon his knees, his frayed black gown rendering more conspicuous the rapt, upraised face, his white fingers clasping the crucifix; beyond, Cairnes outstretched on the hard stone, his bulky figure motionless but for nervous twitching, his red hair glaring like a spot of paint. I rejoiced that the fellow slept, for he rasped me with his ceaseless, senseless attacks on the Roman Church. Yet the gentle-voiced priest had tamed his open hatred somewhat; so before he lay down the sectary sat long in moody silence staring at the other with glinting eyes, as though fit speech failed him.

As the sun sank to the horizon I went forth again upon the platform, waving a blazing signal torch to the expectant groups below. The sky overhead was blue, but to the north and east, as far as I could see for overhanging cliff, great masses of black cloud were showing ominously, their ragged edges emitting lightning flashes, although too distant for me to distinguish the thunder. Below, in the valley, the approaching storm would not yet be visible; but from my aerie I prayed for a dark night, the swift approach of a battle of the elements.

Arousing Cairnes, who was already awake but lying glowering at the unconscious priest, I despatched him to the jutting platform, with instructions to keep close watch on all movements in the village. Then I busied myself with final preparations for our desperate sortie. The earliest shades of evening would have to be utilized, for then only could we hope for a clear path. Before those wild fanatics swarmed upward to their monthly sacrifice, we must traverse that narrow cliff path and penetrate the tunnel beyond as far as the underground altar. Nowhere between the cave entrance and that spot could I recall any place of concealment. Inspired by this necessity, so soon as darkness began to blot the mouth of the cave, I bore the priest that way in my arms, although he begged earnestly to be left behind, saying he was a useless burden. The slowly advancing clouds had not yet mounted high enough to obscure the moon, but hung densely massed across half the sky, low thunder echoing among the rocks, and jagged streaks of lightning tearing the gloom asunder. The burly Puritan lay, a black silhouette against the silvered rocks, leaning far over, staring down into the void. As I touched him, he turned his face toward me, pointing below with one hand.

Page 196

“We are securely blocked, Master Benteen,” he asserted gruffly. “A fit reward for associating with papists.”

“Blocked?” failing to comprehend. “How? Are the savages already astir?”

“Look for yourself. See yonder; lights are on the pathway as high as the tree-bridge.”

I dropped upon my knees, clinging to a bowlder, and peered over. He spoke truth, and my heart rose choking into my throat. Resembling innumerable fireflies tiny flames were gleaming along the entire front of the cliff—torches borne by human hands. Breathless the three of us clung there staring down, each realizing the utter futility of our efforts at escape, yet none reckless enough to give the thought utterance. The Puritan first found speech.

“The spawn of hell!” he growled savagely, shaking his great fist, remembering the indignities of the altar-house. “Good Lord, deliver us from this iniquity; lead us through the waters dry-shod, even as Thou didst Thy people of old from the land of Egypt.”

“Come,” I said, “we must seek whatever hiding-place is within, and trust God for it.”

The priest looked at me pleadingly, his eyes like stars.

“I would at such an hour you were of my faith, Monsieur.”

“I might do worse,” I admitted, watching intently the lights on the cliff-path, “but it was not the teaching of my childhood. There is one below whose prayers are as yours.”

“Madame de Noyan?”

I bowed my head in gesture of reverence.

“Yes, Monsieur, and whatever she loves is not far from my heart. But come, we have scant time for preparation; no, do not endeavor to walk; your weight is nothing to my arms.”

There was no spot within where, even for a short period, we might hope to avoid discovery, except the rock gallery. Here, crouching behind the parapet, we could see without being seen, unless some savage chanced to stray that way. At my order the sullen, psalm-quoting preacher dragged the helpless old chief priest after him, and so we went groping forward through the darkness of the short passage, until we attained the stone steps. Stumbling blindly upward, our hearts throbbing in realization of the peril that was closing us in, we flung our bodies flat behind the concealing rocks, peering fearfully forth into the great deserted chamber. Even amid that lonely silence it was a sight to chill the heart; and to us, comprehending something of what it would soon reveal of savage orgy. It was like gazing down into the mouth of the Pit. The single

touch of color in the drear picture came from the crimson drapery hanging over the edge of the raised platform. Seeing all this at one glance my anxious eyes sought the deeper gloom shrouding the tunnel leading toward the entrance. As I stared that way a sudden flash of fierce lightning illumined it. So brilliant it burst forth from the opaque night, I hid my blinded eyes, every nerve of my body quivering.

Page 197

“Great God!” burst forth Cairnes, his voice so close as to startle me. “’T is like the end of the world!”

“Be still,” I commanded hastily, pressing him flat, “there they come.”

A dozen flaming torches rounded the rock projection the lights glistening over the half-naked bodies of the bearers. Saint Andrew! it was a weird sight, one to strike terror to the soul! With gritted teeth, my heart pounding, I looked out upon it. The leader was a priest, black from head to heel, his face showing devilish in the torch flare, his coarse hair matted high in horrid resemblance to some wild beast. Behind surged a mob of warriors, women, and children, half-nude bodies striped with red and yellow, a malignant demoniacal crew, yelling and pushing under the flaming lights, rushing tumultuously forward to fling themselves prostrate before the altar. It seemed they would never cease pouring forth from the narrow tunnel, a struggling, gesticulating stream. Behind them lightning played in jagged streaks across the little patch of sky, and the black smoke of the torches curled upward to the roof. Their appearance was not human, but that of demons incarnate; some ran upon all fours like wolves, gnashing their teeth and howling; many yelped in fiendish chorus; others brandished weapons aloft in the yellow flame, or lay, writhing like glistening snakes on the rock floor. It was a pandemonium, a babel, an unspeakable hell. To count was impossible, but the great room was filled with bodies, and rang with guttural, inarticulate cries. The busily flitting priests stirred up the wood until the blaze leaped nearly to the roof, mumbling as they worked, the incessant moaning of the tribesmen deepening into a weird chant. The frenzied singers leapt into the air, flinging their limbs about in wild contortion, their movements increasing in violence, their grotesquely painted faces becoming hellish from awakening passion. They became brutes, fiends, whose only thought was cruelty. I saw them strike each other with stone knives, slashing the flesh till blood ran. Heartsick and trembling, I glanced aside at my companions. The *pere* lay clasping the stone, his eyes wide with horror, his countenance death-like; Cairnes was upon his knees, his great hands gripped, staring straight down like some animal crouching for a spring.

It was when I turned back, loathing the sight yet unable to resist facing it, that I beheld for the first time those I sought—Eloise, De Noyan, and the Queen Naladi. An instant I blinded my eyes with uplifted arm, half believing that the horror had turned my brain, that all this was vision. Yet, as I ventured to look again, they were there before me in the flesh—Naladi all in red, a wondrous figure amid that spectral glow, tall, straight, with proud, imperious face, crowned by the brilliant hair, radiant and sparkling in the flame. Beside her loitered De Noyan, like one who enjoyed a spectacle

Page 198

arranged for his pleasure, his face darkening somewhat as though the sight were not altogether to his liking, yet debonair and careless, his waxed moustaches standing forth conspicuous, his fingers in his waist-belt. About the two were ranged a fringe of warriors, their flint-headed spears rising an impenetrable wall, while farther behind, separated and alone, the light of the fire barely revealing her presence, stood Eloise, a savage guard on either side of her. I caught the outline of her face, imprinted with horror, the lips moving as if in supplication; then I perceived something else—*her hands were bound*! Smothering an oath, I crept back to the pile of weapons in the corner, gripped a war-club, and, returning as silently, thrust a second into the unconscious hands of Cairnes. Our eyes met, the sectary nodding grimly, his jaws set like a steel trap. If need should arise we would die fighting like cornered rats.

Their yells reverberating to the vaulted roof, the smoking torches gyrating wildly above them, the throng of crazed fanatics were now upon their feet, crowding toward the platform, every tongue clamoring in incessant demand. All was confusion, a medley of noise and motion, tossing arms, and painted faces. Finally, I caught a glimpse of Naladi's red robe scarcely ten feet away, and behind her the countenance of De Noyan, still contemptuously smiling at that shrieking rabble. God! my face burned, my grasp tightened on the club. Yet I lay motionless, knowing well the time of sacrifice was not yet.

The woman stood at the edge of the rock platform, gazing intently down, a silent, motionless statue, her red robe sweeping to her feet, and below her the crimson drapery; the flaring torches in the hands of her barbaric followers cast their light full upon her. I stared at the strange creature, comprehending something of the power of passion such as she could exercise over De Noyan, causing him to forget all honor in her presence. Saint Andrew! she was a witch, a hell-cat, whose smile was death. Ay! and she was smiling then, a smile of cruel, unrelenting triumph, gazing down upon the howling slaves who should do her pleasure. She knew them well, every superstition, every wild impulse, and she played contemptuously on their savagery. Not fear, but command, was stamped upon her features; she ruled by legerdemain, by lie and trick, and she stood, the supreme she-devil, the master spirit in that raging hell. It seemed to me my heart would burst as I waited, seeing nothing then of Eloise amid the crush, and compelled to gaze on that dominant scarlet figure.

[Illustration: The woman gazing intently down, her red robe sweeping to her feet; below the flaring torches in the hands of her barbaric followers cast their light full upon her.]

Page 199

The cries of the multitude ceased, and a black-draped priest shouted unintelligible words. Naladi listened, extending one hand. Then her thin lips spoke a single sentence in the sharp tone of command. Instantly burst forth a fierce roar of disapproval; war-clubs pounded the floor, spears rattled as they were brandished overhead, while above the din I caught, again and again, the shriek, "*Francais*! *Francais*!" The Queen shook her head, her fair face darkening, and glanced aside into the questioning eyes of De Noyan. Below them the tumult increased, the mass surging forward and staring upward, every voice yelping that one term of hate, "*Francais*!" There was no doubting the dread menace—they were demanding French victims for the torture of sacrifice; they clamored for white blood with which to sprinkle the altar. I could dimly perceive now a dozen crouching slaves against the farther wall, the whites of their eyes showing in terror, and—oh, God!—there, to the right of them, alone, except for her burly guards, kneeling on the rock floor, with face hidden in her hands, was Eloise. I half rose to my feet, my whole body pulsating with agony. What was to be the ending? What was that mad woman's purpose? Could she control the fierce blood-lust of those savage fanatics? If she cared to do so, would she dare test her power in so desperate a game? If one must be sacrificed which would she spare, De Noyan or his hapless wife? Looking at her, cold, cynical, lustful, her eyes still turned on his face, I felt no doubt. Let the foul fiend choose! by all the gods, Cairnes should brain her where she stood, and, Heaven helping me to do the deed, the one I loved should never die by torture!

She took her own time for decision, indifferently ignoring the howls of rage, her thin lips curling in contemptuous smile, her glance yet upon the startled Chevalier. Laying her hand upon his sleeve, she said in French:

"You hear the wolves howl, Monsieur? They are mad for French blood."

He shrugged his shoulders, staring into her expressionless face, then down upon the surging mob below.

"Saint Giles! give them sufficient of something else," he replied, striving to pretend indifference, yet with a falter in his voice. "You pledged us safety if we would accompany you here."

"I pledged *you* safety, Monsieur," she corrected haughtily. "I gave no word of promise as to others. Yet circumstances have changed. I supposed then we had enough of victims to appease even such blood-lust as yelps yonder."

"You mean the preacher and Benteen?"

"Ay; they would suffice, with plenty of slaves for good measure. But now, only two remain from which to choose. *Sacre*! there are times when those dogs break away even from my control, and mock me. I know not now whether one alone will glut their desire,

yet I am of a mind to try the experiment before the wolves drag me to hell also. Heard you ever such yelping of wild beasts?”

Page 200

“You would sacrifice me?” his face whitening from horror. “You would give me to the knife and fire? *Mon Dieu*! is this the end of all your vows?”

She smiled, a cold, cruel smile, her eyes burning.

“I did not say you,” tauntingly. “There is another here.”

He drew away from her grasp, lips ashen, eyes unbelieving.

“Eloise! *Mon Dieu*! not Eloise?”

“And if not Eloise, what then, Monsieur?” The low voice hardened, becoming oddly metallic. “The wolves cry for blood—French blood. Is it your wish to die together? *Pardi*! if it be between you two, am I to have no choice which one I deliver? Why should you shrink back like a baby at first sight of blood? I thought you a soldier, a man. Did you not tell me you loved her no longer? did you not swear it with your lips to mine?”

He made no response, staring at her with eyes full of unbelief, the hideous uproar clanging about them in ceaseless volume. Naladi’s face flushed with rising anger.

“Yet you do! *Mon Dieu*, you do!” she panted, the tiger within breaking loose. “Your words were a lie! Here, look at me,” extending her arms, the white flesh of her bosom clearly revealed in the parting of her drapery. “Am I such as she? will I shrink like a coward, mumbling prayer and fingering rosary? Am I afraid to work my will? Am I not worth being loved? Am I the kind you think to play with? God’s mercy! I am minded to throw you both to the beasts. No, no, not that; you dare not front me! I make my own choice of who shall die and who live.” She laughed mockingly. “Bah! I know your sort, Monsieur—’tis as the wind blows; you love to-day, and forget to-morrow. Yet I keep you for a plaything—I have no use for her. I care no longer how the wolves tear her dainty limbs. Before this I have tasted vengeance and found it sweet.”

He shrank before her fury, all conceit and audacity fled, and words failed him. Not even yet could he believe it true, but she permitted no recovery.

“You think I lie. You think I threaten, but dare not act. You think me a soft-hearted fool because I listened to your words of love. By the gods! you shall learn better. I have heard love words before; none ever spoke them to my ears without paying the price of deceit. *Mon Dieu*! and shall you escape? I can hate as well as love; strike as well as caress. So you played with me, Monsieur? used me to pass a dull hour in the wilderness? *Sacre*! ’t is now my chance to sport with you. You forget who I am—I, Naladi, Daughter of the Sun, Queen of the Natchez. Look down! there are hands waiting to rend at my word. I will give them the girl-face for their blood-lust. Seek to stop me if you dare!”

Page 201

Never can I forget the expression on De Noyan's face as he listened. Incredulity changed to loathing, then to despair. As though the woman had snatched a mask from off her features he gazed now upon the demon soul revealed in all its hideousness. Instantly all that was physically beautiful became loathsome from the foulness within. He endeavored to speak, to protest, but all his recklessness had deserted him and he trembled like a leaf. Already the gesticulating priests, thinking themselves cheated of their victims, were half way up the rude steps of stone; behind them surged the mob, screaming "*Francais*," their torches waving madly. Naladi laughed.

"So your nerve fails, Monsieur," she sneered coldly. "'Tis well it does, for you need expect no mercy from me. I also hate the French."

She turned from him, her arms outspread, the crimson drapery extended like wings. The glare of a hundred torches reflected on her face, and her lips spoke one word of stern command. Every voice ceased its howling, every form became motionless, the silence so sudden it was painful. The woman stood above them, dominant; every eye was fastened upon her; the priests were prostrate on the stair. I saw De Noyan leaning forward, his teeth clinched, his face death-like. From wall to wall Naladi's gaze wandered; once she looked into his eyes, then down again upon the mob of savages. Like the sharp hiss of a snake a single sentence leaped from her thin lips. The effect was magical. I scarcely realized the transformation, so rapidly was it accomplished. Confusion filled the chamber, yet out of the tumult I caught sight of Madame being driven toward the altar, her white face full of pleading, her hands, now freed, clasping her rosary. De Noyan must have beheld her at the same instant. With shout of rage he leaped recklessly forward, hurled aside the scarlet figure, and, uttering an oath, sprang on the parapet.

"By God! you foul fiend of hell!" he screamed madly. "I 'll fight for it; fight like a gentleman of France!"

I leaped to my feet, Cairnes beside me. Desperate as the chance was, we would be with him on that floor, with him smiting to the death. Yet even as he poised for the leap downward the woman's scarlet arms struck, and he went over like a stone, crashing into a huddled heap on the rock floor. Naladi laughed, leaning far out to look down, like a gloating devil.

"Fight, you poor fool!" she exclaimed in French. "*Sacre*! who struck hardest?"

Sick, trembling like a frightened child, I dragged the dazed Puritan down again, crouching behind the stones.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE INTERFERENCE OF THE JESUIT

I could look no longer on that hellish scene. It seemed as if all strength, all manhood, had deserted me before the utter helplessness of our position. There was nothing left except useless sacrifice—a moment's hopeless struggle, the sole reward death under the war-club or by torture. God knows it was not myself I considered, but Eloise. It was thought of her which so unnerved me, so paralyzed body and mind. The Puritan dropped his heavy hand on my shoulder.

Page 202

“Great Jehovah,” he muttered, “look there!”

How he ever made it I know not; how he ever crept on tortured stumps down those rude steps, and along the dark, rocky tunnel; how he ever succeeded in penetrating unscathed that howling mob of savages—yet there, in the very midst of them, fully revealed in the torch glare, his pallid, girlish face uplifted, but concealed beneath the shadow of his cowl, the silver cross gleaming in the light, beside Eloise, knelt the black-robed Jesuit. Amid the sudden hush of surprise I overheard his voice, fearless, calm, unfaltering, as he gave the weeping woman sacrament of the Church. A great brute struck at him; the frail figure reeled sideways to the force of the blow, but the words of prayer did not cease, nor his grasp on her hand relax. Rallying from their astonishment, the warriors crowded in upon them, and a fanatical priest hurled the *pere* headlong to the floor. I saw a brandishing of clubs, a glitter of spears, yet the poor fellow came erect once more, his arm resting for support on the woman’s shoulder. It was all in a flash of time, like some swift transformation on the stage we could scarcely comprehend. At the instant a voice spoke, ringing above the babel, which ceased suddenly. I glanced involuntarily toward Naladi. She stood leaning forward, her hands gripping the stone parapet, conflicting emotions playing across her face.

As the torches, uplifted, gleamed brighter upon the motionless Queen, they revealed a look of perplexity, almost fear, in her cold eyes. What held her speechless? Was it remembrance of another life, when the stern word of the Church had been law? or was she merely troubled by so mysterious an appearance, her guilty soul swayed by superstitious terror? She was all too strange a riddle for my reading, but some occult power held her helpless, silent. The vengeful cries of her savage followers died away into threatening murmurs; the *pere* remained motionless, one hand on Eloise’s bowed head, his white face shadowed by the hood, calmly fronting her who had commanded quiet. Slowly he lifted one arm, the loose sleeve lending dignity and power to the simple gesture, his white extended hand seeming to have in it the authority of command. A moment, heedless of the scowling, painted faces all about, the slight figure stood erect and firm, the dark eyes bearing witness to his earnestness, and never wavering from Naladi’s scornful face.

“Woman,” he said calmly, even as I imagine Christ may have spoken of old, “release this prisoner, and make thy peace with God.”

She endeavored to laugh mockingly, yet only a hollow semblance came from between her white lips. “Pah!” she cried nervously, “you speak bravely; pray, who gave you authority to give orders to the Daughter of the Sun?”

“One greater than the Sun, woman,” he answered. “I speak to you in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and by authority of the Holy Catholic Church.”

Page 203

She leaned yet farther forward, as though seeking to penetrate the shadow concealing his face, a perceptible tremor apparent in her voice.

“Who are you? Answer me!”

“I am called Father Ignatius, a priest of the Order of Jesuits.”

“And what do you suppose I care for your Romish orders? They have no power here; a single wave of my hand would condemn you to the place of yonder slaves.” Her color rose in the wave of passion, sweeping fear aside. “I have nothing but hatred for your black robe, and your interference only intensifies my purpose. Mark you now what I say; if it be the will of my people to put this cringing French woman to the torture, I lift not so much as a finger to change her fate. More, because of your insolence I give you also into their hands. We take no orders from the Church of Rome.”

“Your people!” the words rang forth with such clearness as almost to bring me to my feet. “You foul fiend of hell, do you think thus to impose your vile imposture on me? I fear neither your power nor the cruelty of your savage satellites. My life is in the hands of my Master, who will give me strength to mock your torture. Two months ago I was bound to a stake in the valley below. Ask these fiends, who do your bidding, whether I shrank back in terror, or made outcry as the flame ate into my flesh. Gaze on these stumps blackened by fire, and learn how I value your threats. Peace, woman, and no longer mock the faith of your childhood.”

“My childhood? You know nothing of that!”

“Do I not? Look upon my face, and judge.”

He flung back his cowl, and the light fell full upon his countenance. Upon the silence broke a sharp cry, in which fear and surprise were strangely blended:

“Andre Lafossier!”

“Right, woman; you have not forgotten. Sunk as you are in shame and evil deeds, conscience yet lives and haunts you. What do I know of you? Enough to justify calling you joint heir with all the fiends of hell, unless, like the thief on the Cross, repentance make white your black soul. Yet, ’tis in my heart that yours is the sin against the Spirit for which there is no forgiveness. Nothing in your face tells me of an awakening soul. You are a Queen, you say? Ay, of evil, of devils incarnate. I would rather be this poor woman bound to the stake than you upon a throne. Do your worst with us, but know that Andre Lafossier has nothing for you save disgust; still, as priest of Holy Church, I hold open the door of salvation through Jesus Christ.”

Evidences of struggle marked Naladi's face, yet by now she had outwardly conquered the first shock of recognition, and stood a cold, stately statue, with glittering eyes on the slender figure of the priest.

"I care as little for your Romish mummery," she said sneeringly, "as I do for the senseless rites of these savages. But I am glad it is you I have in my power. If I am the queen of devils, they serve me well. You are to die, Andre Lafossier. I might have spared you had you kept your tongue, but after those words you die. I shall stand here and mock you to the last breath. You say I have no soul; to-night you shall know it true while I laugh at your agony."

Page 204

She paused as if seeking to mark the effect of her words, but the *pere* merely stooped slightly, whispering some message of comfort into the ear of Eloise. Then he stood erect again.

“As you will, woman; to die for Christ is gain.”

The face of Naladi, which had been pale and drawn, flushed, her eyes fairly blazing.

“So you dare mock me, you hireling priest!” she hissed. “’T is not for long; I am no snivelling French girl, afraid of blood. And now I give you a taste of my power.”

As the words fell from her thin lips, she flung up one hand, exhibiting with a peculiar gesture a glittering metallic substance shining in the light. It must have been a signal for unrestrained sacrifice, for it was greeted with fierce howls of delight, the savage herd pressing in upon the prisoners, so that I lost sight of them an instant in the crush.

“Wait, woman!” rose the priest’s voice above the uproar. “I admit your power here to take physical life; I expect no mercy from such as you. But, if you be not lost to all shame, grant me one favor, Marie Fousard.”

“What?”

“A moment of time in which I may give absolution to this child of God before we die.”

“Pish! is that all? Go on with your fool mummery. I will hold back the savages till that be done, though the sight of it will but anger them.”

Eloise had sunk down against the altar, with face buried in her hands. The *pere* dropped upon his knees beside her. About them surged the glistening forms of the savages, maddened with blood-lust, but Naladi clapped her hands, with voice and gesture bidding them wait her further word. An instant they swayed passionately back and forth, their fanatical priests clamoring in opposition to this halting of vengeance. Then Naladi shook loose her hair, permitting its wealth to fall in a golden-red shower, until it veiled her from head to foot. The silenced crowd stared as if in worship of the supernatural. I know not what she said, uplifting her white arms from out that red-gold canopy, yet I can guess.

“Natchez, I dare you to disobey the Daughter of the Sun!”

Swept by a superstition stronger than hate, they flung themselves at her feet, prostrating their faces to the rock, grovelling like worms, heedless of all except her presence and her supremacy. She was a goddess, one whose will was destruction. Gazing down upon them, conscious of her power, her thin lips smiled in contempt. ’T was so I saw her last; so I shall always picture her in memory—a motionless, statuesque figure, covered with a veil of red-gold hair, her eyes like diamonds, her bare,

white arms gleaming, her lips curved in proud disdain; a queen of savages, a high priestess of Hell.

The sudden cessation of noise was awesome, uncanny. It rendered manifest the ceaseless roar of thunder without. Directly in front of me yawned the cave entrance, plainly illuminated by vivid lightning. Dreadful as was the spectacle, it yielded me a flash of hope—here opportunity pointed a path of escape. With no pause for thought I whirled to arouse the Puritan, every nerve a-tingle with desperation. His deep-set eyes glowed like two coals, his square jaw projecting like that of a fighting bulldog.

Page 205

“Cairnes,” I muttered, almost heedless of what I said in the necessity for haste. “If we could attain the tree-bridge, we might hold the devils. See! the way is clear! What say you to the trial? Will you bear the priest?”

His grip tightened about the war-club, as he half rose to his feet like a maddened bear.

“Saints of Israel! yes,” he growled, “the Jesuit is a man.”

“Then come!”

With one leap I was upon the floor; almost at the same second he landed beside me. Twice I struck savagely at some obstructing figure, and in five strides was at the side of Eloise. One shrill cry of warning from the lips of Naladi echoed through the chamber, and was answered by the yell of the warriors. I was already clasping Eloise against my breast, and speeding toward the opening. Not a savage stood between, and now, all hope centred upon the desperate race, I dashed forward down the rocky path, rendered hideous by the lightning. All the fires of hell seemed swirling about us, writhing serpents of flame leaping from the sky, while fierce crashes of thunder echoed from rock to rock. I scarcely heard or saw. Below yawned the abyss, black with night; above stretched solid, overhanging stone, painted by green and yellow flames. I realized nothing except that ribbon of a path, the need of haste, the white, upturned face in my arms. God! was ever such a race as that run before? Did ever men dash headlong over such a path of death? No one need ask how it was done; how speeding feet clung to the narrow rock. I know not; I never knew. Twice I stumbled, sobbing in despair, yet ran on like a madman. Under the glare of the lightning I leaped downward where I had crept in climbing; protruding splinters of rock tore my clothes, bruised my body; my forehead dripped with perspiration, my breath came panting, yet I ran still, her form crushed against my breast. I shudder now in the recollection; then I scarcely knew. Ahead loomed black the tree-bridge; but I recall no shrinking fear, only exultation, as I bore down recklessly upon it. It must be crossed, upright, swiftly, with no thought of the yawning depth. If death came we should go down together.

“Eloise, steady me with hand against the cliff,” I panted, and stepped forth boldly upon the trunk. My moccasoned feet gripped the rough bark firmly, yet I swayed horribly under my burden, as I footed the treacherous way. Again and again I felt myself swaying wildly, yet some power held us, until, at last, I stood on solid rock, utterly unable to essay another yard. Panting for breath, my arms yet clasping the motionless figure of Eloise, I glanced backward in apprehension. I could perceive Cairnes footing the log, the head of the priest showing black and distinct above his broad shoulder; beyond, a medley of dark figures appeared to dance dizzily along the cliff face. I staggered to my knees. With a growl of relief the Puritan dropped his burden.

Page 206

The next instant he had one great shoulder under the tree root. Heaving with all his mighty strength he slowly moved the great trunk, and I saw it topple over into the abyss; I saw his burly figure tottering on the very brink—then one awful flash lit up the sky, so blinding me that I sank face downward on the rock. The cliff shook as if riven from crest to valley, a single peal of thunder reverberating like the report of a thousand guns.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD

I may have lost consciousness; I do not know. That awful glare, the thunderous report, the speechless terror of feeling myself a mere pygmy in the midst of such tremendous convulsions of nature, shocked me into momentary insensibility. I lay huddled against the rock like a man dead, one arm yet clasping the motionless form of Eloise. Stunned, unable to move a muscle, I believed death had overtaken us all; that out from the very heavens a bolt had stricken us down. I struggled painfully to arouse myself, every nerve in my body appearing paralyzed. At first I could not even see, but light came back gradually to my blinded eyes, and I staggered to my feet, slowly adjusting my mind to the situation.

I began to understand then what had happened—that deadly bolt had smitten the cliff as by the wrath of God, yet I was spared. I still lived, as by a miracle. I stared across the chasm and up the steep ascent beyond, still clearly revealed in the lightning flashes. It was vacant; not a human form stood where those pursuing savages had been. A cry burst from my lips as I gazed—a vast, irregular gash showed clearly in the cliff face, but where the entrance to the cave had yawned was a solid front of rock. I staggered with the shock, reeling on the very edge of the path, and barely saved myself by dropping to my knees. Again I looked, half believing my brain crazed, that I beheld visions. As God guards me, it was true! Out of the very heavens He had struck, sealing those fiends into a living tomb. Trembling like a frightened child, I bowed my face and sobbed as I prayed for mercy.

I know not how long I lay unable for either thought or action. But at last I was upon my knees again, creeping forward to where a black figure lay at the very edge of the chasm, one arm dangling over the brink. I drew the inert body back to safety, peering down into the white face of the priest. My touch seemed to arouse him into consciousness, his dark eyes staring up into my face. I helped him to sit up and lean back against the wall. An instant he gazed about wildly, like one suddenly awakened from sound sleep, then hid his face in his hands.

“The Puritan—” I questioned—“the man who bore you here—what happened to him?”

He shuddered, and pointed into the black abyss.

“’Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,’” he quoted solemnly.

Page 207

“He went down?”

He bowed his head silently, his fingers searching for his crucifix. I sat staring at him, crushed into helplessness.

In a few moments I felt the pressure of his fingers.

“The Lord hath preserved us as by fire,” he said in low, solemn tone, “He hath ridden upon the flaming skies in his chariot, accompanied by angels and archangels. ’T is ours to bless His holy name.”

I gazed into the rapt, boyish face, and said:

“On my knees have I already acknowledged His mercy. I am not ungrateful.”

The troubled countenance brightened with a quick smile.

“God is most good,” he murmured; “He hath spared us that we may continue to honor Him, and do His work. The woman—does she also live?”

The question brought me instantly to my feet, wondering how I could have neglected her so long. But before I could advance to where she lay, she sat partially up, her face turned toward us.

“Eloise,” I cried, the heart joy apparent in my voice. “Good God! I had forgotten.”

She held forth her hand, her eyes smiling.

“I hold that not strange,” she answered, the soft voice faltering slightly. “I saw you groping like a blind man, yet could neither move nor speak. I lay helpless as if paralyzed. Tell me what has happened.”

I held her hand, falling upon my knees beside her, my eyes searching her sweet face.

“A lightning bolt smote the cliff,” I explained rapidly, “rending the solid rock. Master Cairnes was hurled headlong into the chasm, and our pursuers were swept from the path. The very mouth of the cavern has been forever sealed.”

“The cavern?” as if stifled, her eyes opening wide. “They—they are buried alive?”

“I doubt if any lived to know,” I answered soberly. “’T is likely those within were crushed to death.”

She dropped her face into her hands, sobbing hysterically. Unable to speak, I bowed my head until it touched her shoulder. The crippled priest crept toward us, forgetful of his own pain in the call of duty.

“Daughter,” he said tenderly, stroking her brown hair with his slender fingers, “to live or die is as Christ wills. The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Be of good comfort, remembering these words of promise, ’Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.’”

She looked up through the mist of her tears, first into his face, then into mine.

“I have passed through much,” she confessed simply, “yet ’tis not the spirit but the body which has become weakened. Forgive me, both of you.”

“Brave heart!” I echoed, caring nothing for the presence of the father. “No woman ever upbore grievous burden better. If we rest first, you will regain courage to go on.”

Both her hands were resting trustfully in my own.

“With you,” she acknowledged softly. “In all confidence with you.”

Page 208

We sat there until the coming of dawn, speaking only seldom, our very thoughts holding us silent. Occasionally I could feel Eloise's hand touch mine as if she sought thus to be reassured of my presence, and I could distinguish an inarticulate murmur from the priest's lips, as if he continually counted his beads in prayer. The glare of lightning gradually ceased, the storm passing away to the westward with distant reverberations. Yet clouds overcast the skies, leaving the early morning hours dark and cheerless. With the first faint glow of day lighting the pathway, I stood up, dizzy at viewing the awful abyss below our narrow shelf. We could perceive now more plainly the terrific havoc wrought above, but our eyes turned away from it in horror. We must linger there no longer, but press forward with whatever of courage remained.

"I must ask you to attempt to walk alone, Eloise," I said regretfully, "as I must bear the *pere*, whose limbs are crippled."

Her startled eyes were filled with womanly sympathy.

"Crippled? Was it done last night in the storm?"

"No, a month ago; he was tortured at the stake in the village below. Ever since then he has been held prisoner for sacrifice."

"Do not worry, daughter; my wounds are not worthy your tears," broke in the soft voice; "they are but a small part of my debt to Him who perished upon the cross. Yet I think I might manage to walk, Monsieur, without assistance. Surely, with God's help, I can master the pain."

"Make no attempt," I said; "your slight figure will prove no burden to me. It was of Eloise I thought."

"Then do so in that way no longer," she burst forth eagerly. "I have been trouble enough to you, Geoffrey. I will not consent to remain helpless. See! I can stand alone—ay, and walk; even this great height does not render my head dizzy."

We advanced slowly and cautiously down the path, feeling yet the exhaustion of the night. The way proved less difficult than we expected. The tunnel was by far the hardest portion, as we were compelled to grope the entire distance through intense darkness, guiding ourselves with hands against the wall. Having little fear that any of the tribe remained to dispute our passage, we conversed freely and cheerfully, avoiding all unnecessary reference to the recent tragedy. We emerged from the dark hole somewhat before noon, making use of the entrance leading through the altar-house. The sight of the deserted platform reminded us of the Puritan, and as I glanced aside at Eloise, her gray eyes were filled with tears. A fire smouldered on the altar, waiting replenishment from hands that would labor no more; and we gladly hurried from the gloomy interior to the sunlit slope without.

Page 209

The desolate, deserted village presented a scene of loneliness impossible to describe; not a figure was moving among the huts, no sign of life anywhere. We discovered an abundance of food, and partook of it in the open. Eloise appeared unwilling to accompany me, so I went alone to explore the mystery of Naladi's house, leaving her assiduously ministering to the needs of the priest. My search was rewarded by the discovery of my lost rifle, with what remained of ammunition, together with a variety of feminine garments with which to replace those sadly soiled and tattered ones Madame wore. The desire was in the hearts of us all to get away as soon as possible, to put behind us that desolate spot, those deserted houses, and the haunting cliff. The *pere* had constructed, during my absence, a pair of rude crutches for his use; and, so soon as Eloise had more becomingly clothed herself, we departed, bearing such provisions as we could conveniently carry. With the gun in my possession, I expected no great shortness in the food supply. Madame carried it at first, however, as we made swifter progress by my taking the father on my shoulder. He was no great burden, his weight scarcely more than that of a child.

In this manner we tramped steadily forward through the bright sunshine, along canals filled with clear, cool water, and across fields no longer tilled by slaves, until we discovered the secret path which led forth from this death valley. A moment we paused, glancing back toward the village, and up at the frowning front of rock, the tomb of the Natchez. Then silently, soberly, as befitted those who had witnessed an act of God, we pressed on into the labyrinth, shutting out forever that scene, except as a hideous memory. To me the change was like entering upon a new world; I was a prisoner released, breathing once again the clear air of hope and manhood. Burdened as we were, the passage through the tangled cedars to where the stream flowed down the canyon proved one of severe exertion. When we finally attained the outer rocks, with the sullen roar of the falls just below, I was breathing heavily from exhaustion, and a flush had come back into Eloise's pale cheeks. Very gladly I deposited the priest in a position of comfort, and the three of us rested in silence, gazing about upon the wilderness scene. We had spoken little to each other regarding the future; under the depressing influence of that dread valley we felt incapable of thought, our minds yet dazed by the tragic events we had experienced. Even now I constantly saw before me the faces of Cairnes and De Noyan, scarcely able to banish their memory long enough to face intelligently the requirements of the present. Yet now it must be done. The *pere* sat, with crutches lying across his rusty black robe, his girlish features softened by a look of infinite peace; Eloise leaned against the rock in a posture of weariness, her bosom rising and falling with tumultuous breathing. I recalled to mind the leagues of desolate wilderness yet to be traversed. Possibly I indulged unconsciously in outward expression, for the priest gazed across at me.

Page 210

“The sun is still sufficiently high for considerable travel, my son,” he remarked quietly, “and you will require daylight for the earlier part of your journey.”

“It was upon my mind, but I scarcely knew how best to proceed.”

“Possibly my experience may guide you. The way should not prove unduly fatiguing after you pass the falls,” with a wave of the hand downward, and a slight smile. “I wandered here alone up that valley, seeking the Indian village somewhat blindly, discovering much of interest on the way. Would that my own future path led me through such ease; but ’tis mine to go whithersoever the Lord wills. However, my discoveries will be of value. Slightly below the falls, concealed beneath an outcropping rock, you will find several stanch Indian boats. The lightest one will transport safely the two of you, together with what provisions you require. The current runs swiftly, yet a strong, skilful hand on the steering oar should bring you through without mishap.”

We both stared at him, greatly puzzled by his strange speech. Eloise was first to speak in protest.

“What do you mean by two of us? Do you deem us dastards enough to leave you here alone?”

He smiled into her face with the tender smile of a woman, and held up his shining silver crucifix.

“Daughter,” he said modestly, “my work is not yet done. Upon this symbol I took solemn oath to live and die in faithful service to the heathen tribes of this river. Would you have me retreat in cowardice? Would you have me false to the vows of my Order? to the voice of the Master?”

“But you are crippled, helpless, in continual pain!” She crossed hastily to him, dropping upon her knees at his side. “Oh, *pere*, we cannot leave you; it would mean death.”

His slender fingers stroked her brown hair, his eyes alight with the fire of enthusiasm.

“Whether or not I am worthy of martyrdom, God knows. All I see is my plain duty, and the beckoning hand of the bleeding Christ. Daughter, you are a child of the true Church; your pleading should never retard the labor of the priesthood. My suffering is nothing, my life nothing, if only through such sacrifice souls may be rescued from the consuming flames of hell.”

She could not speak, but sobbed, her face hidden.

“Where do you go seeking other tribes?” I asked hoarsely, scarcely believing his words.

He arose with difficulty to his feet, holding himself erect on the rude crutches. I noticed now, for the first time, a bag of woven grass hanging at his girdle.

“Yonder, Monsieur, to the westward,” a new dignity in his manner as he pointed up the narrow canyon. “There are tribes a few days’ journey away. I have learned of them, without being told their names. To such, under God, I bear my message of salvation.”

“But you will starve on the journey.”

“I carry food here,” touching the bag. “It will suffice; if not, there are berries and roots in abundance. My Master has always fed me in the wilderness.”

Page 211

What more could I say or do to change his purpose? It was a girlish face fronting me, yet the thin lips were pressed tightly together, the dark eyes fearless and resolute. I laid my hand on Eloise's shoulder.

"It must be as he says," I acknowledged regretfully. "We can but depart."

She arose slowly to her feet, her eyes still sadly pleading. The *pere* gazed questioningly into both our faces, the rigid lines of his mouth softening.

"My daughter," he said, in calm dignity, "we of a desert priesthood are ordained unto strange duties, and unusual privileges. Do you love this man?"

A wave of color surged into her cheeks, as she gave one rapid glance aside into my face. Then she answered in all simplicity:

"Yes, *pere*, from childhood."

Resting upon his crutch, he touched her with his hand.

"Yet he who perished yonder was your husband. How came you thus to marry, with your heart elsewhere?"

"It was the desire of my father, and the will of the Church."

He bowed his head, his lips moving in silent prayer for guidance.

"Then the will of the Church hath been done," he said humbly. "Here in the wilderness we perform the will of God, untrammelled by the councils of men. 'T is my dispensation to bury the dead, baptize the living, and join in marriage those of one heart. It is not meet that you two journey together except with the solemn sanction of Holy Church."

My pulses throbbed, yet I could only look at her, as she stood trembling, her eyes downcast, her cheeks burning.

"But—but, *pere*, will it be right?" she faltered faintly.

"Let the dead past bury its dead," he answered gravely. "I hold it right in the name of Christ, from whom I derive authority. Geoffrey Benteen, take within your own the hand of this woman."

'T is but a dream, our standing there together in the sun; a dream, those words of the marriage rite spoken by him in the desolation and silence of the desert. We knelt together upon the stones, hand clasping hand, while above our bowed heads were uplifted the priest's thin, white hands in benediction. Whether or not in that hour Andre

Lafossier exceeded his authority I cannot tell. In heart we were joined of God; our union has never been questioned of man.

We stood there watching, longing to prevent the sacrifice, as he moved away from us slowly upon his crutches. It was a pitiful sight, that slender figure, in frayed, tattered black robe, going forward alone, and in agony, to death or torture. It was in my heart to cry after him, but she understood far better the mighty motive of his sacrifice, and restrained me with uplifted hand. Far up the canyon, he paused a moment and glanced back. The distance already veiled his face, but up into the sunlight he lifted the silver crucifix. Then he disappeared—to endure his fate in Christ's name. Then, hand in hand and heart to heart, our voices silent, Eloise and I went down into the valley to where the boats lay. The dead past was behind us; the future was our own.

Page 212

THE END