

found her a charming companion, he remained in ignorance of her past life.

Eight bells had struck and he was about to turn in, when the Captain invited him to his cabin for a good-night smoke. "I have noticed you about with the little circus rider," he said. "Can you make out how she happens to have shipped with such a crew?"

"It's a puzzle to me," he replied. "She is as much out of her element with that gang as a fish out of water. Have you had any talk with her?"

"Quite a long one this morning, and she struck me as a thoroughbred, and trying to make the best of a bad bargain. I expect I shall have to help her get back to the States."

A quartermaster knocked at the door and reported the Isaacs light in sight, and the captain excused himself to lay the course for the Holo in the Wall. "Sea like a mirror and not a cloud in the sky," he said when he returned. "Moonlight is comfortable about here, for the sponging schooners don't waste any money on oil, and the whole crew, including the look-out, has the habit of going to sleep at the same time."

They finished their cigars, and the Idle Man rose to say good-night, when there was a violent jar which threw him from his feet. It was half stunned by the fall, but conscious of a rasping noise and the trembling of the ship, and by the time he reached the deck the Captain was on the bridge, giving rapid orders, which the officers, most of them but partly dressed, were carrying out. The engines had been stopped and the only sound of machinery was the whirring of the dynamos. The sailors, under perfect control, were already ripping the canvas covers from the lifeboats and preparing to swing them out, and the captain came down from the bridge.

"The passengers will be on deck in a minute; help me to keep them from making fools of themselves," he said to the Idle Man. As he spoke a horde of grimy figures, most of them bare to the waist, poured from the forward companionway, and made a determined rush for the nearest lifeboat, but the captain intercepted them, capstan bar in hand, and, without wasting words, dropped it on the head of the leader, who fell like a pole-axed ox. Three or four of the others tumbled over themselves in their haste, and when one of the officers joined the captain, revolver in hand, the captain ordered a sailor to throw the one he had knocked down into a cabin.

"I'll kill the first man that tries to get into a boat without orders," roared the captain. "If we have to abandon ship, there will be room enough for all." The frightened passengers, in all stages of undress, were coming from their cabins, some of them making frantic efforts to adjust life-belts, and others clinging to hastily gathered bundles of

clothing and valuables. The Idle Man and the ship's officers passed among them, reassuring and quieting them; and a sharp speech from the captain impressed them so that a panic was averted.

"We have struck something, probably a derelict, but the injury is confined to the bow, and there is water in only the forward compartment. There are six compartments in the ship, and any three of them will keep us afloat. I shall have the boats lowered as a matter of precaution, but if you will keep your heads there will be no danger to anyone." The Idle Man had made an unsuccessful search for the high school rider in the crowd, but he finally found her standing near the companionway which led to the 'tween decks. She was dressed in an ulster, which came nearly to her feet, and her face was very pale.

"Are we in great danger?" she asked, anxiously.

"In none at all, I think, but you had better get ready to leave the ship," he replied.

"And Marplot; must I leave him to drown like a rat in a trap?"

"I don't believe that anyone, man or beast, will even get wet, but the captain may order the passengers into the boats as a matter of precaution, and, in spite of Marplot's perfect manners, they would probably object to him as a companion in such close quarters. If the ship is abandoned I will try to have him dropped overboard, and I am sure he can swim to a small quay which lies within half a mile."

She looked up at him gratefully, and, thanking him for his kindness, went below to dress.

The night was one of anxiety for all on board, but a careful examination confirmed the first report, that the ship was in no danger of sinking, but firmly wedged on a coral reef and helpless, in spite of the hundreds of horse power latent in her great boilers. The Idle Man found the captain and the first officer in consultation in the chart room.

"The charts and sailing directions show better than eight fathoms here," said the captain ruefully. "and, many times as I have sailed over this position, I never heard of a reef in this position. If we can get help before bad weather sets in we can lighter the cargo and get the ship off. I could jettison the cargo now, but there is nearly a million dollars' worth of stuff on board. When the Bahama wreckers hear of it they will be down on us like a flock of vultures, and if I can charter one of their schooners I will send to Key West for help. Someone will have to go with it, and, as they will try to prevent outside help from reaching us, he will be lucky if he don't get his throat cut on the way."

"I'll take those chances," said the Idle Man, "if you will let me go."

"You don't understand navigation, and they would take you 'way off the course. Are you willing to run the risk?" he asked, turning to the officer.

"I'll warrant no nigger crew will do me up if I'm awake," was the reply. "If you can get a schooner I'll make Key West safe enough."

"Turn in, then, and get what sleep you can, for you will need to keep both eyes open on the cruise."

When daylight came they sighted a small schooner within a mile of them, and as she came slowly up with the light breeze they could see that she carried a much larger crew than was needed for her navigation and the number of small boats stowed on her deck proved her to be a sponger. The crew was composed of negroes, who were jabbering and gesticulating, and the helmsman seemed the only one on board who was attending to the schooner. He was a magnificent specimen of manhood, black as ebony, and the colour of his skin contrasted sharply with the snow white wool which covered his head.

"That's old Rowley," said the Captain, as the schooner ran alongside, "the worst old pirate in the sponging gang." He turned to an officer standing near him. "Station a half dozen men with capstan bars along here and don't let a nigger on board. Crack their heads, but don't kill any one, if you can help it." A dozen of the negroes tried to clamber on board, but were knocked off into the water and climbed on to the schooner, spluttering and rubbing their woolly pates.

"It's no go, Rowley," shouted the Captain. "There will be no looting of this ship so long as the Stars and Stripes are over her, but if you will come alone I will give you a chance to make a lot of money honestly." The old negro grinned and, giving the tiller to one of the crew, climbed up the

rope ladder which they lowered for him. The Captain proposed to charter the schooner to carry an officer to Key West, but, although he offered a large sum the negro refused.

"I mink plenty money here too soon," he said, grinning. "I wait long time for one big ship strike die rock. Now, she done come I no go 'way."

"You bloody pirate!" shouted the Captain. "Do you mean to say that you knew about this reef and did not report it?" Rowley stepped back from the menacing fist of the Captain and saw that the way to the rail was clear.

"Too many years ago, when I was pickaninny, one big ship wid coal sink here. I dive many times to her, an' every year coral cover her mo'. 'Spouse yo' all tank water glass, you see some must yet."

"And you have been roosting around here like a vulture, waiting for a ship to strike it?" roared the Captain, his face red with passion. "I ought to string you up to the yardarm." Having gotten under full headway his language for the next few minutes would have made his remarks to the harbourmaster like a Christmas carol by comparison, and the negro kept discreetly out of his reach, waiting for his rage to abate. He was interrupted by howls of agony, and the second officer ran a burly negro along the deck, his left hand twisted in the collar of his prisoner's jacket, while his right was jabbing a sharp pronged tool into a part of the negro's anatomy which was covered only with thin dick trousers. The jacket tore in his hand and the negro made a wild dash overboard, and as he climbed over the rail of the schooner they could see that his trousers were streaked with blood.

"That nigger must have dived under the ship and come up by the port boat falls," said the officer. "I found him at the balyards trying to pull down the flag. He had an English flag under his jacket, but I'll bet he wishes it had been in the seat of his pants."

The high pressure of the captain's rage was reduced by the safety valve of explosive language, and he laughed as he turned to Rowley.

"You see what happens to you men when they come aboard, I'll crucify the next one."

Rowley was obdurate in his refusal to charter his schooner, but another one soon appeared whose owner was open to persuasion, and the bargain was made. The Idle Man went in the boat

which took the first officer to her, and when he saw him make a mark on the deck, about six feet in front of the tiller, and inform the crew that he would shoot the first one of them who came aft of it, he returned to the ship, convinced that the schooner would rendezvous Key West if the officer could keep awake.

Life on the stranded vessel went on much as usual, so far as the passengers were concerned. Their meals were served on time, and they spent the day in loafing about the deck, speculating as to when and how relief would reach them. The Idle Man and the high school rider stood watching the brilliant eddies of the water, when they were joined by the captain.

"I am going to make an effort to get her off," he said. "Perhaps when we get the cargo shifted all it will be her bow free at the high tide. You have had a fair sample of what the wreckers are like in that old pirate yonder, and when the entire fleet comes up I shall probably have to impress all the men on board to fight them off."

"Why not let the animals loose on them?" she asked laughing. "If you will have Marplot brought on deck I will lead a cavalry charge against them."

"Good! I appoint you colonel of the horse marines, but, seriously, the danger is a real one. The fact is in sight from the bridge now, and we can count 27 of them. That means more than 200 men, and in their hearts they are most of them pirates. I can stand them off as long as I have steam up, but they would rush the ship without that protection."

There was a succession of splashes alongside, and, walking to the rail, they saw the tailor's dummies being thrown out of the cargo port. The captain explained that they were cumbersome and of little value, so he had ordered them thrown over. They watched them as they sank slowly, their heavy iron standards making them assume an upright position, and the clear water softening their crudeness and giving them a very lifelike appearance.

"It makes me feel as if we were already captured by the pirates and the first of the crew made to walk the plank," she said, turning to the captain.

"There is apt to be considerable of a scrimmage before it comes to that," he replied, smiling grimly. "I have sent the stewards around to ask the male passengers to meet me in the smoking-room. I want to explain the situation

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