

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH I CHANGE MY NAME AND OCCUPATION

"THE sun shining on so much bare steel hurts my eyes," I said. "Put up, gentlemen, put up! Cannot one rover attend the funeral of another without all this crowding and display of cutlery? If you will take the trouble to look around you, you will see that I have brought to the obsequies only myself."

One by one cutlass and sword were lowered, and those who had drawn them, falling somewhat back, spat and swore and laughed. The man in black and silver only smiled gently and sadly. "Did you drop from the blue?" he asked. "Or did you come up from the sea?"

"I came out of it," I said. "My ship went down in the storm yesterday. Your little cockboat yonder was more fortunate." I waved my hand toward that ship of three hundred tons, then twirled my mustaches and stood at gaze.

"Was your ship so large, then?" demanded Paradise, while a murmur of admiration, larded with oaths, ran around the circle.

"She was a very great galleon," I replied, with a sigh for the good ship that was gone.

A moment's silence, during which they all looked at me. "A galleon," then said Paradise softly.

"They that sailed her yesterday are to-day at the bottom of the sea," I continued. "Alackaday! so

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are one hundred thousand pezos of gold, three thousand bars of silver, ten frails of pearls, jewels uncounted, cloth of gold and cloth of silver. She was a very rich prize."

The circle sucked in their breath. "All at the bottom of the sea?" queried Red Gil, with gloating eyes fixed upon the smiling water. "Not one pezo left, not one little, little pearl?"

I shook my head and heaved a prodigious sigh. "The treasure is gone," I said, "and the men with whom I took it are gone. I am a captain with neither ship nor crew. I take you, my friends, for a ship and crew without a captain. The inference is obvious."

The ring gaped with wonder, then strange oaths arose. Red Gil broke into a bellow of angry laughter, while the Spaniard glared like a catamount about to spring. "So you would be our captain?" said Paradise, picking up another shell, and poisoning it upon a hand as fine and small as a woman's.

"Faith, you might go farther and fare worse," I answered, and began to hum a tune. When I had finished it, "I am Kirby," I said, and waited to see if that shot should go wide or through the hull.

For two minutes the dash of the surf and the cries of the wheeling sea fowl made the only sound in that part of the world; then from those half-clad rapscale lions arose a shout of "Kirby!" — a shout in which the three leaders did not join. That one who looked a gentleman rose from the sand and made me a low bow. "Well met, noble captain," he cried in those his honey tones. "You will doubtless remember me who was with you that time at Maracaibo when you sunk the galleasses. Five years have passed since

happy-go-lucky summer breeze. I have seen a little thing convert a crew on the point of mutiny into a set of rollicking, good-natured souls who — until the wind veered again — would not hurt a fly. So with these. They spread themselves into a circle, squatting or kneeling or standing upon the white sand in the bright sunshine, their sinewy hands that should have been ingrained red clasped over their knees, or, arms akimbo, resting upon their hips, on their scoundrel faces a broad smile, and in their eyes that had looked on nameless horrors a pleasurable expectation as of spectators in a playhouse awaiting the entrance of the players.

“There is really no good reason why we should gratify your whim,” said Paradise, still amused. “But it will serve to pass the time. We will fight you, one by one.”

“And if I win?”

He laughed. “Then, on the honor of a gentleman, you are Kirby and our captain. If you lose, we will leave you where you stand for the gulls to bury.”

“A bargain,” I said, and drew my sword.

“I first!” roared Red Gil. “God’s wounds! there will need no second!”

As he spoke he swung his cutlass and made an arc of blue flame. The weapon became in his hands a flail, terrible to look upon, making lightnings and whistling in the air, but in reality not so deadly as it seemed. The fury of his onslaught would have beaten down the guard of any mere swordsman, but that I was not. A man, knowing his weakness and insufficiency in many and many a thing, may yet know his strength in one or two and his modesty take no hurt. I was ever master of my sword, and it did the

thing I would have it do. Moreover, as I fought I saw her as I had last seen her, standing against the bank of sand, her dark hair, half braided, drawn over her bosom and hanging to her knees. Her eyes haunted me, and my lips yet felt the touch of her hand. I fought well, — how well the lapsing of oaths and laughter into breathless silence bore witness.

The ruffian against whom I was pitted began to draw his breath in gasps. He was a scoundrel not fit to die, less fit to live, unworthy of a gentleman’s steel. I presently ran him through with as little compunction and as great a desire to be quit of a dirty job as if he had been a mad dog. He fell, and a little later, while I was engaged with the Spaniard, his soul went to that hell which had long gaped for it. To those his companions his death was as slight a thing as would theirs have been to him. In the eyes of the two remaining would-be leaders he was a stumbling-block removed, and to the squatting, open-mouthed commonalty his taking off weighed not a feather against the solid entertainment I was affording them. I was now a better man than Red Gil, — that was all.

The Spaniard was a more formidable antagonist. The best blade of Lima was by no means to be despised; but Lima is a small place, and its blades can be numbered. The sword that for three years had been counted the best in all the Low Countries was its better. But I fought fasting and for the second time that morning, so maybe the odds were not so great. I wounded him slightly, and presently succeeded in disarming him. “Am I Kirby?” I demanded, with my point at his breast.

“Kirby, of course, señor,” he answered with a sour smile, his eyes upon the gleaming blade.

I lowered my point and we bowed to each other, after which he sat down upon the sand and applied himself to stanching the bleeding from his wound. The pirate ring gave him no attention, but stared at me instead. I was now a better man than the Spaniard.

The man in black and silver rose and removed his doublet, folding it very carefully, inside out, that the sand might not injure the velvet, then drew his rapier, looked at it lovingly, made it bend until point and hilt well-nigh met, and faced me with a bow.

"You have fought twice, and must be weary," he said. "Will you not take breath before we engage, or will your long rest afterward suffice you?"

"I will rest aboard my ship," I made reply. "And as I am in a hurry to be gone we won't delay."

Our blades had no sooner crossed than I knew that in this last encounter I should need every whit of my skill, all my wit, audacity, and strength. I had met my equal, and he came to it fresh and I jaded. I clenched my teeth and prayed with all my heart; I set her face before me, and thought if I should fail her to what ghastly fate she might come, and I fought as I had never fought before. The sound of the surf became a roar in my ears, the sunshine an intolerable blaze of light; the blue above and around seemed suddenly beneath my feet as well. We were fighting high in the air, and had fought thus for ages. I knew that he made no thrust I did not parry, no feint I could not interpret. I knew that my eye was more quick to see, my brain to conceive, and my hand to execute than ever before; but it was as though I held that knowledge of some other, and I myself was far away, at Weyanoke, in the minister's garden, in the

haunted wood, anywhere save on that barren islet. I heard him swear under his breath, and in the face I had set before me the eyes brightened. As if she had loved me I fought for her with all my powers of body and mind. He swore again, and my heart laughed within me. The sea now roared less loudly, and I felt the good earth beneath my feet. Slowly but surely I wore him out. His breath came short, the sweat stood upon his forehead, and still I deferred my attack. He made the thrust of a boy of fifteen, and I smiled as I put it by.

"Why don't you end it?" he breathed. "Finish and be d—d to you!"

For answer I sent his sword flying over the nearest hillock of sand. "Am I Kirby?" I said. He fell back against the heaped-up sand and leaned there, panting, with his hand to his side. "Kirby or devil," he replied. "Have it your own way."

I turned to the now highly excited rabble. "Shove the boats off, half a dozen of you!" I ordered. "Some of you others take up that carrion there and throw it into the sea. The gold upon it is for your pains. You there with the wounded shoulder you have no great hurt. I'll salve it with ten pieces of eight from the captain's own share, the next prize we take."

A shout of acclamation arose that scared the sea fowl. They who so short a time before had been ready to tear me limb from limb now with the greatest apparent delight hailed me as captain. How soon they might revert to their former mood was a question that I found not worth while to propound to myself.

By this the man in black and silver had recovered his breath and his equanimity. "Have you no commission with which to honor me, noble captain?" he

asked in gently reproachful tones. "Have you forgot how often you were wont to employ me in those sweet days when your eyes were black?"

"By no means, Master Paradise," I said courteously. "I desire your company and that of the gentleman from Lima. You will go with me to bring up the rest of my party. The three gentlemen of the broken head, the bushy ruff, which I protest is vastly becoming, and the wounded shoulder will escort us."

"The rest of your party?" said Paradise softly.

"Ay," I answered nonchalantly. "They are down the beach and around the point warming themselves by a fire which this piled-up sand hides from you. Despite the sunshine it is a biting air. Let us be going! This island wearies me, and I am anxious to be on board ship and away."

"So small an escort scarce befits so great a captain," he said. "We will all attend you." One and all started forward.

I called to mind and gave utterance to all the oaths I had heard in the wars. "I entertain you for my subordinate whom I command, and not who commands me!" I cried, when my memory failed me. "As for you, you dogs, who would question your captain and his doings, stay where you are, if you would not be lessoned in earnest!"

Sheer audacity is at times the surest steed a man can bestride. Now at least it did me good service. With oaths and grunts of admiration the pirates stayed where they were, and went about their business of launching the boats and stripping the body of Red Gil, while the man in black and silver, the Spaniard, the two gravediggers, the knave with the wounded shoulder, and myself walked briskly up the beach.

With these five at my heels I strode up to the dying fire and to those who had sprung to their feet at our approach. "Sparrow," I said easily, "luck being with us as usual, I have fallen in with a party of rovers. I have told them who I am, — that Kirby, to wit, whom an injurious world calls the blackest pirate unchanged, — and have recounted to them how the great galleon which I took some months ago went down yesterday with all on board, you and I with these others being the sole survivors. By dint of a little persuasion they have elected me their captain, and we will go on board directly and set sail for the Indies, a hunting ground which we never should have left. You need not look so blank; you shall be my mate and right hand still." I turned to the five who formed my escort. "This, gentlemen, is my mate, Jeremy Sparrow by name, who hath a taste for divinity that in no wise interferes with his taste for a galleon or a guarda costa. This man, Diccon Demon by name, was of my crew. The gentleman without a sword is my prisoner, taken by me from the last ship I sunk. How he, an Englishman, came to be upon a Spanish bark I have not found leisure to inquire. The lady is my prisoner, also."

"Sure by rights she should be gaoler and hold all men's hearts in ward," said Paradise, with a low bow to my unfortunate captive.

While he spoke a most remarkable transformation was going on. The minister's grave, rugged, and deeply lined face smoothed itself and shed ten years at least; in the eyes that I had seen wet with noble tears a laughing devil now lurked, while his strong mouth became a loose-lipped, devil-may-care one. His head with its aureole of bushy, grizzled hair set itself jaunt-

ily upon one side, and from it and from his face and his whole great frame breathed a wicked jollity quite indescribable.

“Odsbodikins, captain!” he cried. “Kirby’s luck! — ’t will pass into a saw! Adzooks! and so you’re captain once more, and I’m mate once more, and we’ve a ship once more, and we’re off once more

To sail the Spanish Main,
And give the Spaniard pain,
Heave ho, bully boy, heave ho!

By ’r lakin! I’m too dry to sing. It will take all the wine of Xeres in the next galleon to unparch my tongue!”

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH WE WRITE UPON THE SAND

DAY after day the wind filled our sails and sang in the rigging, and day after day we sailed through blue seas toward the magic of the south. Day after day a listless and voluptuous world seemed too idle for any dream of wrong, and day after day we whom a strange turn of Fortune’s wheel had placed upon a pirate ship held our lives in our hands, and walked so close with Death that at length that very intimacy did breed contempt. It was not a time to think; it was a time to act, to laugh and make others laugh, to bluster and brag, to estrange sword and scabbard, to play one’s hand with a fine unconcern, but all the time to watch, watch, watch, day in and day out, every minute of every hour. That ship became a stage, and we, the actors, should have been applauded to the echo. How well we played let witness the fact that the ship came to the Indies, with me for captain and the minister for mate, and with the woman that was on board unharmed; nay, revered like a queen. The great cabin was hers, and the poop deck; we made for her a fantastic state with doffing of hats and bowings and backward steps. We were her guard, — *the gentlemen of the Queen*, — I and my Lord Carnal, the minister and Diccon, and we kept between her and the rest of the ship.

We did our best, and our best was very much.

then, and yet I see you ten years younger and three inches taller."

"I touched once at the Lucayas, and found the spring de Leon sought," I said. "Sure the waters have a marvelous effect, and if they give not eternal youth at least renew that which we have lost."

"Truly a potent aqua vitæ," he remarked, still with thoughtful melancholy. "I see that it hath changed your eyes from black to gray."

"It hath that peculiar virtue," I said, "that it can make black seem white."

The man with the woman's mantle drawn about him now thrust himself from the rear to the front rank. "That's not Kirby!" he bawled. "He's no more Kirby than I am Kirby! Did n't I sail with Kirby from the Summer Isles to Cartagena and back again? He's a cheat, and I am agoing to cut his heart out!" He was making at me with a long knife, when I whipped out my rapier.

"Am I not Kirby, you dog?" I cried, and ran him through the shoulder.

He dropped, and his fellows surged forward with a yell. "Yet a little patience, my masters!" said Paradise in a raised voice and with genuine amusement in his eyes. "It is true that that Kirby with whom I and our friend there on the ground sailed was somewhat short and as swart as a raven, besides having a cut across his face that had taken away a part of his lip and the top of his ear, and that this gentleman who announces himself as Kirby hath none of Kirby's marks. But we are fair and generous and open to conviction" —

"He'll have to convince my cutlass!" roared Red Gil.

I turned upon him. "If I do convince it, what then?" I demanded. "If I convince your sword, you of Spain, and yours, Sir Black and Silver?"

The Spaniard stared. "I was the best sword in Lima," he said stiffly. "I and my Toledo will not change our minds."

"Let him try to convince Paradise; he's got no reputation as a swordsman!" cried out the gravedigger with the broken head.

A roar of laughter followed this suggestion, and I gathered from it and from the oaths and allusions to this or that time and place that Paradise was not without reputation.

I turned to him. "If I fight you three, one by one, and win, am I Kirby?"

He regarded the shell with which he was toying with a thoughtful smile, held it up that the light might strike through its rose and pearl, then crushed it to dust between his fingers.

"Ay," he said with an oath. "If you win against the cutlass of Red Gil, the best blade of Lima, and the sword of Paradise, you may call yourself the devil an you please, and we will all subscribe to it."

I lifted my hand. "I am to have fair play?"

As one man that crew of desperate villains swore that the odds should be only three to one. By this the whole matter had presented itself to them as an entertainment more diverting than bullfight or bear-baiting. They that follow the sea, whether honest men or black-hearted knaves, have in their composition a certain childlikeness that makes them easily turned, easily led, and easily pleased. The wind of their passion shifts quickly from point to point, one moment blowing a hurricane, the next sinking to a