

## CHAPTER XXIV

### IN WHICH WE CHOOSE THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

THE luck that had been ours could not hold; when the tide turned, it ebbed fast.

The weather changed. One hurricane followed upon the stride of another, with only a blue day or two between. Ofttimes we thought the ship was lost. All hands toiled like galley slaves; and as the heavens darkened, there darkened also the mood of the pirates.

In sight of the great island of Cuba we gave chase to a bark. The sun was shining and the sea fairly still when first she fled before us; we gained upon her, and there was not a mile between us when a cloud blotted out the sun. The next minute our own sails gave us occupation enough. The storm, not we, was victor over the bark; she sank with a shriek from her decks that rang above the roaring wind. Two days later we fought a large caravel. With a fortunate shot she brought down our foremast, and sailed away from us with small damage of her own. All that day and night the wind blew, driving us out of our course, and by dawn we were as a shuttlecock between it and the sea. We weathered the gale, but when the wind sank there fell on board that black ship a menacing silence.

In the state cabin I held a council of war. Mistress Percy sat beside me, her arm upon the table,

her hand shadowing her eyes; my lord, opposite, never took his gaze from her, though he listened gloomily to Sparrow's rueful assertion that the brazen game we had been playing was well-nigh over. Diccon, standing behind him, bit his nails and stared at the floor.

"For myself I care not overmuch," ended the minister. "I scorn not life, but think it at its worst well worth the living; yet when my God calls me, I will go as to a gala day and triumph. You are a soldier, Captain Percy, you and Diccon here, and know how to die. You too, my Lord Carnal, are a brave man, though a most wicked one. For us four, we can drink the cup, bitter though it be, with little trembling. But there is one among us"— His great voice broke, and he sat staring at the table.

The King's ward uncovered her eyes. "If I be not a man and a soldier, Master Sparrow," she said simply, "yet I am the daughter of many valiant gentlemen. I will die as they died before me. And for me, as for you four, it will be only death,—naught else." She looked at me with a proud smile.

"Naught else," I said.

My lord started from his seat and strode over to the window, where he stood drumming his fingers against the casing. I turned toward him. "My Lord Carnal," I said, "you were overheard last night when you plotted with the Spaniard."

He recoiled with a gasp, and his hand went to his side, where it found no sword. I saw his eyes busy here and there through the cabin, seeking something which he might convert into a weapon.

"I am yet captain of this ship," I continued. "Why I do not, even though it be my last act of authority, have you flung to the sharks, I scarcely know."

He threw back his head, all his bravado returned to him. "It is not I that stand in danger," he began loftily; "and I would have you remember, sir, that you are my enemy, and that I owe you no loyalty."

"I am content to be your enemy," I answered.

"You do not dare to set upon me now," he went on, with his old insolent, boastful smile. "Let me cry out, make a certain signal, and they without will be here in a twinkling, breaking in the door"—

"The signal set?" I said. "The mine laid, the match burning? Then 't is time that we were gone. When I bid the world good-night, my lord, my wife goes with me."

His lips moved and his black eyes narrowed, but he did not speak.

"An my cheek did not burn so," I said, "I would be content to let you live; live, captain in verity of this ship of devils, until, tired of you, the devils cut your throat, or until some victorious Spaniard hung you at his yardarm; live even to crawl back to England, by hook or crook, to wait, hat in hand, in the antechamber of his Grace of Buckingham. As it is, I will kill you here and now. I restore you your sword, my lord, and there lies my challenge."

I flung my glove at his feet, and Sparrow unbuckled the keen blade which he had worn since the day I had asked it of its owner, and pushed it to me across the table. The King's ward leaned back in her chair, very white, but with a proud, still face, and hands loosely folded in her lap. My lord stood irresolute, his lip caught between his teeth, his eyes upon the door.

"Cry out, my lord," I said. "You are in danger. Cry to your friends without, who may come in

time. Cry out loudly, like a soldier and a gentleman!"

With a furious oath he stooped and caught up the glove at his feet; then snatched out of my hand the sword that I offered him.

"Push back the settle, you; it is in the way!" he cried to Diccon; then to me, in a voice thick with passion: "Come on, sir! Here there are no meddling governors; this time let Death throw down the warder!"

"He throws it," said the minister beneath his breath.

From without came a trampling and a sudden burst of excited voices. The next instant the door was burst open, and a most villainous, fiery-red face thrust itself inside. "A ship!" bawled the apparition, and vanished. The clamor increased; voices cried for captain and mate, and more pirates appeared at the door, swearing out the good news, come in search of Kirby, and giving no choice but to go with them at once.

"Until this interruption is over, sir," I said sternly, bowing to him as I spoke. "No longer."

"Be sure, sir, that to my impatience the time will go heavily," he answered as sternly.

We reached the poop to find the fog that had lain about us thick and white suddenly lifted, and the hot sunshine streaming down upon a rough blue sea. To the larboard, a league away, lay a low, endless coast of sand, as dazzling white as the surf that broke upon it, and running back to a matted growth of vivid green.

"That is Florida," said Paradise at my elbow, "and there are reefs and shoals enough between us. It was Kirby's luck that the fog lifted. Yonder tall ship hath a less fortunate star."

She lay between us and the white beach, evidently in shoal and dangerous waters. She too had encountered a hurricane, and had not come forth victorious. Foremast and forecastle were gone, and her bowsprit was broken. She lay heavily, her ports but a few inches above the water. Though we did not know it then, most of her ordnance had been flung overboard to lighten her. Crippled as she was, with what sail she could set, she was beating back to open sea from that dangerous offing.

"Where she went we can follow!" sang out a voice from the throng in our waist. "A d—d easy prize! And we'll give no quarter this time!" There was a grimness in the applause of his fellows that boded little good to some on either ship.

"Lord help all poor souls this day!" ejaculated the minister in undertones; then aloud and more hopefully, "She hath not the look of a don; maybe she's buccaneer."

"She is an English merchantman," said Paradise. "Look at her colors. A Company ship, probably, bound for Virginia, with a cargo of servants, gentlemen out at elbows, felons, children for apprentices, traders, French vigneron, glasswork Italians, returning Councilors and heads of hundreds, with their wives and daughters, men servants and maid servants. I made the Virginia voyage once myself, captain."

I did not answer. I too saw the two crosses, and I did not doubt that the arms upon the flag beneath were those of the Company. The vessel, which was of about two hundred tons, had mightily the look of the *George*, a ship with which we at Jamestown were all familiar. Sparrow spoke for me.

"An English ship!" he cried out of the simplicity

of his heart. "Then she's safe enough for us! Perhaps we might speak her and show her that we are English, too! Perhaps"—He looked at me eagerly.

"Perhaps you might be let to go off to her in one of the boats," finished Paradise dryly. "I think not, Master Sparrow."

"It's other guess messengers that they'll send," muttered Diccon. "They're uncovering the guns, sir."

Every man of those villains, save one, was of English birth; every man knew that the disabled ship was an English merchantman filled with peaceful folk, but the knowledge changed their plans no whit. There was a great hubbub; cries and oaths and brutal laughter, the noise of the gunners with their guns, the clang of cutlass and pike as they were dealt out, but not a voice raised against the murder that was to be done. I looked from the doomed ship, upon which there was now frantic haste and confusion, to the excited throng below me, and knew that I had as well cry for mercy to winter wolves.

The helmsman behind me had not waited for orders, and we were bearing down upon the disabled bark. Ahead of us, upon our larboard bow, was a patch of lighter green, and beyond it a slight hurry and foam of the waters. Half a dozen voices cried warning to the helmsman. It was he of the woman's mantle, whom I had run through the shoulder on the island off Cape Charles, and he had been Kirby's pilot from Maracaibo to Fort Caroline. Now he answered with a burst of vaunting oaths: "We're in deep water, and there's deep water beyond. I've passed this way before, and I'll carry ye safe past that reef were't hell's gate!"

The desperadoes who heard him swore applause, and thought no more of the reef that lay in wait. Long since they had gone through the gates of hell for the sake of the prize beyond. Knowing the appeal to be hopeless, I yet made it.

"She is English, men!" I shouted. "We will fight the Spaniards while they have a flag in the Indies, but our own people we will not touch!"

The clamor of shouts and oaths suddenly fell, and the wind in the rigging, the water at the keel, the surf on the shore, made themselves heard. In the silence, the terror of the fated ship became audible. Confused voices came to us, and the scream of a woman.

On the faces of a very few of the pirates there was a look of momentary doubt and wavering; it passed, and the most had never worn it. They began to press forward toward the poop, cursing and threatening, working themselves up into a rage that would not care for my sword, the minister's cutlass, or Diccon's pike. One who called himself a wit cried out something about Kirby and his methods, and two or three laughed.

"I find that the rôle of Kirby wearies me," I said. "I am an English gentleman, and I will not fire upon an English ship."

As if in answer there came from our fore-castle a flame and thunder of guns. The gunners there, intent upon their business, and now within range of the merchantman, had fired the three fore-castle culverins. The shot cut her rigging and brought down the flag. The pirates' shout of triumph was echoed by a cry from her decks and the defiant roar of her few remaining guns.

I drew my sword. The minister and Diccon moved nearer to me, and the King's ward, still and white and braver than a man, stood beside me. From the pirates that we faced came one deep breath, like the first sigh of the wind before the blast strikes. Suddenly the Spaniard pushed himself to the front; with his gaunt figure and sable dress he had the seeming of a raven come to croak over the dead. He rested his gloomy eyes upon my lord. The latter, very white, returned the look; then, with his head held high, crossed the deck with a measured step and took his place among us. He was followed a moment later by Paradise. "I never thought to die in my bed, captain," said the latter nonchalantly. "Sooner or later, what does it matter? And you must know that before I was a pirate I was a gentleman." Turning, he doffed his hat with a flourish to those he had quitted. "Hell litter!" he cried. "I have run with you long enough. Now I have a mind to die an honest man."

At this defection a dead hush of amazement fell upon that crew. One and all they stared at the man in black and silver, moistening their lips, but saying no word. We were five armed and desperate men; they were fourscore. We might send many to death before us, but at the last we ourselves must die, — we and those aboard the helpless ship.

In the moment's respite I bowed my head and whispered to the King's ward.

"I had rather it were your sword," she answered in a low voice, in which there was neither dread nor sorrow. "You must not let it grieve you; it will be added to your good deeds. And it is I that should ask your forgiveness, not you mine."

Though there was scant time for such dalliance, I

bent my knee and rested my forehead upon her hand. As I rose, the minister's hand touched my shoulder and the minister's voice spoke in my ear. "There is another way," he said. "There is God's death, and not man's. Look and see what I mean."

I followed the pointing of his eyes, and saw how close we were to those white and tumbling waters, the danger signal, the rattle of the hidden snake. The eyes of the pirate at the helm, too, were upon them; his brows were drawn downward, his lips pressed together, the whole man bent upon the ship's safe passage. . . . The low thunder of the surf, the cry of a wheeling sea bird, the gleaming lonely shore, the cloudless sky, the ocean, and the white sand far, far below, where one might sleep well, sleep well, with other valiant dead, long drowned, long changed. "Of their bones are coral made."

The storm broke with fury and outcries, and a blue radiance of drawn steel. A pistol ball sang past my ear.

"Don't shoot!" roared the gravedigger to the man who had fired the shot. "Don't cut them down! Take them and thrust them under hatches until we've time to give them a slow death! And hands off the woman until we've time to draw lots!"

He and the Spaniard led the rush. I turned my head and nodded to Sparrow, then faced them again. "Then may the Lord have mercy upon your souls!" I said.

As I spoke the minister sprang upon the helmsman, and, striking him to the deck with one blow of his huge fist, himself seized the wheel. Before the pirates could draw breath he had jammed the helm to starboard, and the reef lay right across our bows.

A dreadful cry went up from that black ship to a deaf Heaven, — a cry that was echoed by a wild shout of triumph from the merchantman. The mass fronting us broke in terror and rage and confusion. Some ran frantically up and down with shrieks and curses; others sprang overboard. A few made a dash for the poop and for us who stood to meet them. They were led by the Spaniard and the gravedigger. The former I met and sent tumbling back into the waist; the latter whirled past me, and rushing upon Paradise thrust him through with a pike, then dashed on to the wheel, to be met and hewn down by Diccon.

The ship struck. I put my arm around my wife, and my hand before her eyes; and while I looked only at her, in that storm of terrible cries, of flapping canvas, rushing water, and crashing timbers, the Spaniard clambered like a catamount upon the poop, that was now high above the broken forepart of the ship, and fired his pistol at me point-blank.