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By a Hidden Hand.



Complete
Novel

By

CHARLES HAMILTON.

"Do you understand," he said between his teeth, "that this is mutiny?" "Mutiny be hanged!" retorted Winyard. "We don't want to steal the ship, we don't."

No. 253.

By a Hidden Hand

A Mystery of the Ocean.

By CHAS. HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

Accident or Crime?—The Boatwain's Suspicion—
A Sudden Alarm.

"Man overboard!" rang along the deck of the "Ocean" this one dark, rainy night in December.

"Man overboard!" echoed the watch, and then followed a tramping of feet, a rattling of ropes, and a hubbub of voices, as the ship was heave-to.

"It's the captain!" exclaimed the chief mate, who had given the first alarm. "Lower the quarterboat there; look alive!"

Down plumped the boat; into it sprang the mate and several seamen, and the search commenced for the missing man. Well-nigh hopeless it was from the beginning, for in the darkness and the rain the sailors could see only a few yards from the boat by the light of their lanterns. Again and again the mate shouted, but no answering voice came from the darkness; or, if it came, it was drowned by the heavy wash of the waves, running high under the wintry wind.

"It is useless," the mate said at length. "Poor Captain Merton is lost; he must have sunk long before this."

"How do you know it was the captain, sir?" asked one of the seamen. "Did you see him fall?"

"Yes. He and I were talking to Winch at the wheel; and he walked to the rail, I believe, to look at the sea close astern. About a minute afterwards I looked towards him, and he was flying over the rail; he must have been leaning upon it, when the ship lurched and flung him overboard. We must have left him a good way astern before we could lie to."

Thornton, the mate, made this statement in a frank, self-possessed way; but somehow it did not satisfy the seamen. They muttered to themselves that Captain Merton was an experienced seaman, and by no means likely to tumble overboard like a landlubber at a lurch of the ship. No one, however, expressed aloud his doubt of the chief mate's explanation, and, in silence, they returned aboard the "Ocean."

The loss of the captain cast a gloom over the ship. The seamen stood in groups discussing the catastrophe, the watch below, having been roused out of their hammocks by the alarm, not caring to go to sleep again after such an occurrence.

Among those who distrusted Roger Thornton's explanation was Daryl Stanley, the second mate of the "Ocean." Stanley was a young sailor, not more than twenty years of age, who had risen by dint of hard work from the rank of cabin-boy to the responsible position he now held. There had never been very good feeling between the two officers, although they had never had any open quarrel. Daryl distrusted Thornton, feeling an instinctive dislike for him, and the chief mate repaid his aversion with interest, losing no opportunity of making matters unpleasant for his youthful subordinate.

One reason, perhaps, for their mutual repugnance was the fact that they both admired the captain's daughter, Ruth, a girl of nearly eighteen, who had accompanied her father upon this voyage. Daryl, who had been in his hammock at the time of the accident, considered it his duty to acquaint the poor girl with her father's terrible fate, when he learned what had happened.

As he turned to the cabin hatch to go below, Roger Thornton barred his path.

"Where are you going, Mr. Stanley?" demanded the chief mate.

"To Miss Merton's cabin to inform her of what has occurred."

"Stay where you are. That is my task!" said Thornton curtly.

"But, Mr. Thornton—" began Daryl.

"Silence, sir! I command here now, and I forbid you to leave the deck!"

Daryl bit his lip, and turned on his heel. He could not dispute the order of his superior officer, though this exercise of Thornton's new authority mortified him deeply.

Thornton descended to the cabin himself. His sudden elevation to the command of the ship had given him a power he meant to use to its full extent, and he had already resolved that Daryl Stanley should be kept away from Miss Merton.

It was only ten o'clock now—four bells in the first watch, as sailors reckon it—so that Miss Merton had not yet retired.

As the chief mate disappeared below, Daryl Stanley walked moodily aft, and a few minutes later was joined by the boatswain, a broad-shouldered, heavily-bearded seaman, named Winyard.

"Mr. Stanley, sir," the bo's'un said, in a low voice, "I want to speak a few words to you, particler, about what has happened."

"Speak, then!" answered Daryl, rather shortly. "What have you to say?"

"Come here, sir, to the wheel. It's Holt's trick; he's my chum, an' can hear what I have to say."

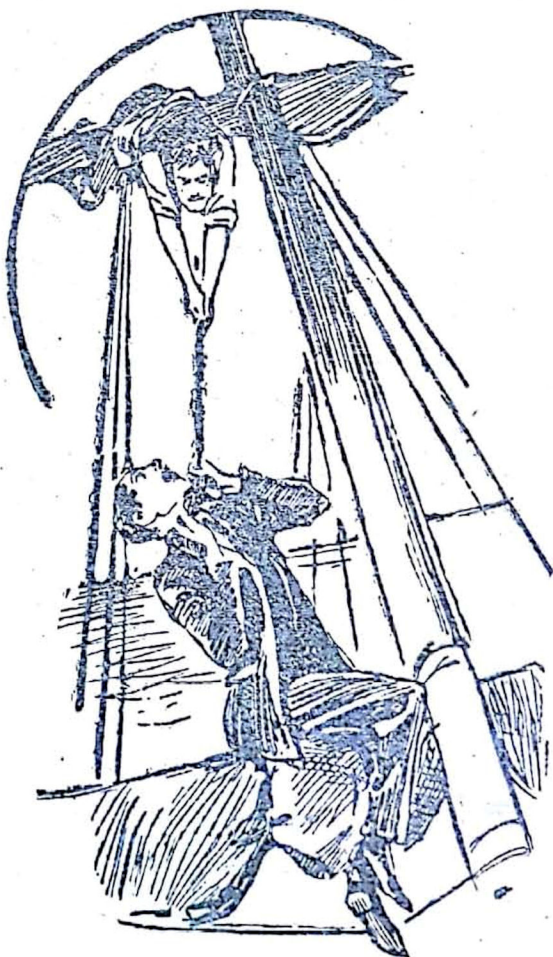
Somewhat surprised by the bluff bo's'un's mysterious manner, Daryl followed him, and, standing close to the binnacle, waited to hear his communication.

"Ain't it struck you, sir, that Cap'n Merton was too good a seaman to fall overboard like a longshoreman?" began Winyard.

"Perhaps it has, Winyard. What of it?" said Daryl guardedly.

"Just this, sir. I believe the skipper was chucked overboard."

Stanley started. That had been his own suspicion; but it startled him to hear it from another's lips.



Daryl suddenly felt a noose flung around his head from above. He clutched at it, and glared upward.

"Be careful what you are saying, Winyard. Whom do you suspect?"

"That's where I ain't quite clear, sir; but I'll swear that it was either the first mate or Winch who was at the wheel!"

"I don't know if I ought to listen to you!" Daryl said gravely. "Whatever you suspect, these words ought not to pass your lips unless you have some kind of proof to support them."

"But there is proof, sir!" exclaimed David Holt, the man at the wheel.

"There is!" continued the bo's'un, in a low but excited tone. "Just after the alarm was given, I saw Jem Winch, and he was as pale as a ghost, and trembling like a baby, so that he could hardly hold the spokes. He's gone below now, though his trick at the wheel ain't up for ten minutes yet; Mr. Thornton ordered Holt to relieve him here. And look you, Mr. Stanley, now Thornton's skipper, he's ordered the course of the brig to be changed."

"The course changed?" ejaculated Daryl, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir; ain't it so, Holt?"

"We ain't making the Gulf of Mexico now, sir," David Holt averred. "Thornton has told me to keep south, sir."

"Heavens! What does he want to keep south for?" Daryl muttered.

"Now, sir," resumed Winyard, "don't you think you hev a right, as an officer of the brig, to remonstrate agin the course being changed? It's my opinion, sir, that Mr. Thornton means nothing less than runnin' orf with this craft."

"Doubtless I have a right to remonstrate," Daryl replied.

"I never suspected that the course was changed. Thornton has no business to take the 'Ocean' anywhere but to the port he is bound for, unless he has the written permission of the late captain, or of the owners. Why, this course will take us to the Cape Verde Isles rather than to New Orleans. I don't think I will refer to the subject yet, however; he may alter his mind. In any case, it will be best to say nothing until the morning."

Just as the second mate finished speaking, a sudden sound rang through the ship—a wild, fearful, blood-curdling scream, that thrilled through the heart of every man that heard it.

"Good heavens! what is that?" exclaimed Daryl.

"It came from the fo'c's'le, sir," the boatswain replied, in a low, hollow voice.

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Discovery—By Whose Hand?—Blumont's Warning—An Altercation—Daryl Gains his Point.

Roger Thornton came upon deck with a bound, his face white and scared.

"Who gave that cry?" he exclaimed violently. "Who was it, I say?"

"No one knows, sir," replied Bill Benton, the carpenter of the "Ocean." "It came from the fo'c's'le, sir."

"Who is in the fore-castle?"

"Only Jem Winch, sir, that's all."

"Robinson! Tremayne! go in and see if anything is wrong with Winch!" ordered Thornton sharply. "The whole star-board watch ought to be there now!" he continued angrily.

"What are you all on deck for?"

"If you please, sir, we couldn't go to sleep arter what has happened, sir!" one of the off-duty watch explained.

"Nonsense! One would think that Captain Merton was the first man who fell overboard since the world began. Well, you lubbers, what is it?"—as Robinson and Tremayne came hurriedly out of the fore-castle, with blanched faces, and shaking from head to foot.

"He's dead, sir!" blurted out both in a breath.

"Dead! Who's dead?" cried Thornton roughly.

"Jem Winch, sir, dead in his hammock, with his skull cracked!"

A shudder of horror ran through the crew.

"Dead? Jem Winch dead?" Thornton repeated, as if unable to believe his ears.

"Yes, sir!" said Tremayne, in trembling tones. "Somebody has hit him over the head with a marlin-spike, or something, and he's stone dead."

"Good heavens! it is impossible!" the chief mate ejaculated.

"You can go and see for yourself, sir!"

This Thornton did, followed by every man on deck, excepting the two discoverers and David Holt at the wheel. There lay Jem Winch, in his hammock, dead as a stone, his skull crushed by a blow from some heavy instrument.

"Who can have done this?" said Thornton, slowly looking round furiously at the seamen, as if seeking someone whom he could accuse.

"Heaven only knows!" Daryl Stanley said. "Who on board can have committed such a fearful deed? Whoever did it must

have been in the fore-castle five minutes ago. Which of you were on deck, my lads?"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Thornton; "that's the way to do, cover the assassin!"

But here a difficulty arose. Every individual claimed to have been on deck at the time of the murder. Stanley, with Winyard and Holt, had been at the wheel; the cook was in the galley; Thornton in Ruth Merton's cabin. These, therefore, could not be suspected. The rest of the crew—eighteen men—had been dispersed about the deck—at least, it was impossible to prove that they had been in the fo'c's'le.

Doubtless it had been easy for the assassin to escape after killing Winch. In the darkness and rain he had slipped from the fo'c's'le unseen, and had been on deck when the discovery was made, and now—horrible thought!—was standing there looking upon his handiwork!

"Look here, men," said Thornton, when the fruitless investigation was ended, "the man who struck this cowardly blow is standing here now amongst us. He has got to be found!"

Distrust and suspicion came into almost every face as the seamen looked at one another. Among the men who stood there was the secret assassin, and no one could tell which of them it was.

Thornton scrutinized every man keenly. All the men looked pale, startled, scared; but all were equally agitated. It was impossible to fix upon one as the assassin. The chief mate bit his lip savagely, and he had to confess himself baffled.

"I will find him out!" he cried, clenching his hand. "The 'Ocean' shall never touch port—I swear it—until I have discovered the murderer, and put a bullet through his heart! I have a way, too, of finding him out, which I shall utilize tomorrow, as you will see!"

The seamen silently returned to the deck. Dark and gloomy were their faces. This second tragedy, following so soon upon the first, depressed them beyond measure. Who could have done the deed? There were no grounds whatever for suspecting anyone; yet there was the certainty that the villain was one of the twenty-three men who formed the ship's company.

Daryl Stanley thought long and hard over the terrible mystery. He ran over in his mind all the men who formed the crew of the "Ocean," to surmise which man was most likely to have killed Jem Winch.

The seamen were mostly British. The starboard watch, in fact, were all of our nationality, excepting one man, a Maltese sailor named Bergo Zenone.

The port watch included David Holt, Winyard, Tremayne, and eight foreigners, seven of the latter being half-castes and one Frenchman. The dead man Winch had belonged to the port watch also. It will be seen that of the twenty-three men now on board, fourteen were Britons.

Daryl Stanley did not believe for an instant that any of his own countrymen had committed the crime. He knew them all personally—Winch, in fact, had been the only black sheep in the flock. There had always, since the beginning of the voyage, been ill-feeling between the British and the foreign seamen, which might point to one of the foreigners being the murderer of Winch. But on the other hand, Winch had always sided with the foreign element, and had been generally disliked by the British seamen. One of the fiery-tempered half-castes might have struck down a Britisher in a fit of revenge, but the man certainly would not have been Winch.

It was a puzzle. No one that Daryl could think of had any motive whatever for the crime—it seemed utterly purposeless; perpetrated by an irresponsible lunatic.

After long and painful cogitation, Daryl was compelled to admit that he was no nearer a solution of the mystery than before.

As may be imagined, the rest of that night was gloomy enough on board the "Ocean." A cloud was upon every face, uneasiness and suspicion in every heart. Voices were hushed and low; eyes peered fearfully into dark corners.

The subject most in the seamen's minds was the chief mate's declaration that he would unearth the assassin on the morrow. In what manner he hoped to do it no one knew, and the murderer was probably trembling in his shoes and awaiting the dawn with deep anxiety.

Roger Thornton remained standing moodily by the taffrail, absorbed in reflections which were certainly not pleasant.

Just before dawn he was accosted by Jacques Blumont, the French sailor, the only seaman of that nationality on board, as we have said. Blumont was a thin, wiry, sallow-faced man, with deep-set eyes and a cunning expression.

"Monsieur the mate," he said, in a low voice, "I have waited for a chance to speak to you alone. The captain is drowned—good!—but our friend Winch? That was not in the plan, eh?"

"You confounded French rascal, do you think that I killed him?" Thornton exclaimed, in a suppressed voice.



The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders indifferently.
 "Pshaw! I know not, nor care. But if you did, I would
 not try it with our other friends, the half-crown
 men. They are savage beings, and if one were missing the others
 would raise a din over it. And don't, my excellent
 friend," Raymond continued, with emphasis, "above all, don't
 try it upon your comrade Jacques, or something may happen
 to you."

The Frenchman tapped his clasp-knife shyly and glided
 away to the chief seats of the "Queen's" room.
 "Come here," muttered Thornton, between his teeth. "He
 suspects me, the low!" Ah! Can that be true? Can it be
 suspecting Bourmont who is the assassin? But not he was too
 evidently in earnest with that warning he gave me."

A few minutes later, Daryl Huxley came up to him.
 "Well, what do you say?" Thornton said gruffly.
 "I wish to know how Miss Merton received the news of her
 father's death?" the young man replied quietly.

"What is that to you, my man?"
 "I am Miss Merton's friend, Mr. Thornton; she has done
 me the honour to tell me so. I wish you to answer my ques-
 tion, and also to give me permission to see her in the morning."
 "As for your question, I don't mind answering it. She
 was shocked by the news, and almost prostrated. She was

weeping when I left her, and I think she won't get over the
 loss for some time."

"How good," murmured Daryl, much moved.

"As for your proposition," continued Thornton, "I
 refuse it. I will not allow Miss Merton's
 father to be buried in a grave which is not his own. It
 is true that Captain Huxley allowed you to receive a familiarity
 towards his daughter, but how I demand this vessel you shall
 be shown your own and kept apart. I will not allow you to
 approach Miss Merton. Is that clear enough?"

"Quite," Daryl replied calmly, but with a glint of fire in his
 dark eyes. "That is quite clear enough, Mr. Thornton, to
 show me that you intend to use your authority in an un-
 fair and tyrannical manner. Thornton, I feel justified in
 telling you plainly that I shall not retreat."

"You will not retreat?" Thornton repeated, surprised by
 this unexpected resistance from an officer who had always
 been a model of prompt obedience, and who had never dis-
 obeyed a command from a superior before.

"I shall run it," Daryl continued. "Any legitimate com-
 mand you may choose to give I will cheerfully obey, but I
 absolutely refuse to bow to tyranny. I am Miss Merton's

(This story is continued on the next page.)

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BY A HIDDEN HAND

(Continued).

friend, and I am bound to offer her any consolation in my power. If I remain away from her she will naturally think me neglectful and unsympathetic, and that, I believe, is what you wish."

"You lie!" said Thornton, annoyed that the keen-witted young mate should have so easily penetrated to his secret motive.

"I do not lie, and I can afford to let your insult pass unpunished, so great is the contempt I feel for you!" Daryl said coldly.

"This is the language you use to your superior officer!" Thornton hissed, longing to strike Daryl, but fearing to provoke him too far.

"You are only my superior officer in matters that concern the ship. When you act as my rival in a private matter, then you are no longer my superior, but only Roger Thornton, whom I can reckon with, and whom," continued Daryl, with a menacing look, "I shall not hesitate to reckon with!"

"By Heaven! Stanley, you go too far. You will see Miss Merton, will you? Approach her cabin, and I'll have you clapped in irons!"

A dangerous gleam shot into Daryl Stanley's eyes. "That is more easily said than done," he answered. "Look you, Roger Thornton, you are only temporarily commander of the 'Ocean,' and the men will not obey you as they would our poor captain. Attack me personally, and I can settle with you! Call upon the men to iron me, and I can call upon them also! I know your friends the foreigners will follow you; but the British portion of the crew will see fair play. I have more influence over them than you have, chief mate as you are!"

Thornton's face became as black as a thundercloud. "You would, then, commence a mutiny?" he said savagely. "No; I would merely curb your tyranny, and I am certain that I could justify my conduct to the owners, if you brought the matter before them."

Thornton felt himself beaten. The men of the "Ocean"—at least, the Britons—almost worshipped Daryl Stanley, whose courage, kindness, and generosity won all hearts. Thornton, a harsh and stern officer, was disliked by all but the foreigners, whose goodwill he had cultivated for reasons best known to himself. He did not doubt that Daryl could wrest the command from him, if he chose to begin a revolt, and well Thornton knew that a mutiny seldom ends without bloodshed—and who so likely to be selected for the first victim as the generally-detested chief mate?

"Your position, then, is this," Thornton said slowly. "If I don't allow you to see Miss Merton you will revolt and seize the ship?"

"Nothing of the kind," replied Daryl, who saw that he was master of the situation. "I merely say that I am determined to see Miss Merton, and that no despotism will be tolerated on board this vessel!"

"Go, then!" grated the chief mate, between his ground teeth—"go; but recollect that you render yourself liable to a charge of insubordination when we reach port. Remember that, Daryl Stanley!"

"And when I am tried," said Daryl, "I may have a story to tell about the loss of the skipper!"

And with this last shot the young sailor left Thornton, who looked after him with both rage and terror in his face.

"Curse him!" the chief mate muttered. "He can play at independence now; but in a few days, when we are out of the regular track across the Atlantic, then let him look out!"

CHAPTER 3.

A Heart Bowed Down—Thornton's Test—Is the Ship Haunted?

Very soon after dawn Daryl Stanley tapped at the door of Ruth Merton's cabin. A soft voice bade him enter.

Daryl found the captain's daughter pale and grief-stricken, and he could easily see that she had hardly closed her eyes during the night. The lids were red with weeping, and though she now wept no longer, her lip trembled as though she could hardly restrain the torrent of her grief.

Her face lighted up as Stanley entered. She read his sympathy in his frank, expressive face. Daryl had long loved Ruth, and the girl knew it; but no avowal had ever passed his lips. But now, in the hour of trial, the bereaved girl turned naturally for comfort to the man whose heart she knew to be hers, and whose love she secretly returned.

"Oh, Mr. Stanley!" she exclaimed. And then the passion of sorrow burst out again in a storm of weeping.

Daryl replied in the tenderest tones, consoling her as best he could, and somehow, before either was quite aware of it, his arm encircled her waist, and her golden head rested upon his shoulder. And, supported thus, she cried quietly until her tears were exhausted.

"My poor Ruth," Daryl said—he had never called her by her Christian name before, and the girl felt a strange thrill as he uttered it—"my poor Ruth, you must bear up through this trial!"

"Yes, yes, I know it!" sobbed Ruth. "But—but I cannot bear up! He was so good, so kind—and to lose him so suddenly!"

"It is, indeed, terrible!" Daryl said, deeply moved by the girl's words. "And my sorrow, Ruth, is as deep as yours. He was almost a father to me."

"Why did you not come to me last night, Daryl?" said Ruth, pronouncing the name hesitatingly. "I could have borne the news better if it had come from you instead of from Mr. Thornton."

"I would have come, Ruth, but I could not leave the deck," replied Daryl. "You may guess how I longed to come to you, and give you what comfort I could."

"Mr. Thornton told me you had gone back to your cabin." Daryl flushed with indignation at this discovery of the chief mate's duplicity.

"He told you a lie, then!" he exclaimed. "I was coming down to you, dearest Ruth, to break the news, when he ordered me to remain on deck, saying that it was his intention to acquaint you with what had happened. Even now I see you against his orders!"

"Against his orders?" Ruth repeated, in wonder. "Yes; you understand that he is, until we reach port, captain of the brig. I have disobeyed his orders in coming to you, he having declared that I should not speak to you again during the whole voyage. I tell you this, Ruth, so that you will know how to value anything he may tell you in future."

"But," said Ruth innocently, "what can be Mr. Thornton's motive for attempting to deceive me?"

"Can you not guess? He desired to place a bar between us. The girl knew then what he meant, as her blush testified. Just then a shout reached the second mate's ears from above.

"All hands on deck!" "I must go, Ruth," Daryl said gently. "But you will come again?" exclaimed Ruth eagerly. "Don't let that wicked man keep you away from me. I am alone in the world, but for you."

The young seaman was deeply touched by this show of confidence in him. He promised to see her again as soon as his duty allowed, whatever his commander thought upon the subject, and reluctantly quitted the cabin. He left the captain's daughter much comforted by his visit.

Daryl, appearing on deck, found all the crew already gathered there, and saw what they had been called together for. The body of Winch lay on a grating, ready for burial in the depths of the Atlantic. The hammock in which it was to be wrapped was there also; but the corpse was as yet unwrapped.

The seamen stood with uncovered heads. No one had liked Winch, but all ill-feeling vanished in the presence of death. They only recollected now that he had been their mate, and that they were now looking their last upon the murdered man.

"Men," Roger Thornton said, in a deep voice, "we are about to commit the body of a comrade, foully murdered by someone aboard the 'Ocean,' to the deep. But before we do this, we shall attempt to discover the assassin. You know that when a murdered man is touched by the hand of his slayer, the blood will flow afresh. Advance, one at a time, and touch him. Thus will we find the assassin!"

Murmurs of approval followed this speech. Sailors firmly believe in this ancient superstition, and all admired Thornton's sagacity in thinking of it at this time. No one doubted the certainty of the test among the British; but many of the foreigners shrugged their shoulders.

Daryl Stanley, who knew that Thornton was too hard-headed to believe in such rubbish, was at no loss to guess the mate's secret idea. Thornton undoubtedly believed that the assassin, put to this trying test, would show signs of fear and confusion, which would lead to his detection.

The British willingly performed their part. If they felt any repugnance to touch the gruesome body, the thought that they were proving their innocence overcame it. Both Thornton and Stanley were quite satisfied that the assassin was numbered among their countrymen. The test proved true, but unfortunately it proved nothing more, for the foreign seamen went through the ceremony just as calmly. Whether they believed in it or not, they did their part quietly and without confusion.

Thornton bit his lip with chagrin when it was over. "Pardon, messieurs," said Jacques Blument suddenly,

One Halfpenny.

Monsieur Stanley has not yet touched the body!" And the fellow leered impudently at Daryl.

"Neither has Signor Thornton," said Berge Zenone, the Maltese sailor.

The two officers, although annoyed at being thus called upon, advanced and touched the body in turn. As no blood had flowed, it was clearly established, according to the seamen's belief, that the murderer was not aboard the vessel.

"We are baffled," Thornton said savagely; "I cannot understand it."

"Signor," said Berge Zenone, "may I offer a suggestion?"

"Certainly. What have you to say, Zenone?"

"Perhaps there is a stowaway, or someone hidden secretly on board the 'Ocean,'" answered the Maltese. "It is proved that none of the crew struck Winch."

The chief mate reflected for a few minutes.



A heavy body fell on him from above, sending him flying down the ladder.

"It is almost impossible," he said at length, "that a man can have hidden himself so thoroughly as not to be unearthed during all the days we have been at sea. However, it will be more satisfactory to search the ship, and make sure that there is no stranger on board."

"One thing, sir, is certain," said Winyard. "If thar ain't a stranger on board the 'Ocean,' the blow wasn't struck by a mortal hand."

"What do you mean, Winyard?" asked Thornton roughly.

"What I says, sir," answered the boatswain quietly. "I mean that it was not a murder, but a judgment."

"A judgment?" repeated Thornton, turning pale.

"Ay, sir, a judgment on Jen Winch, for if he didn't chuck the Cap'n Merton overboard, I'll never trust my eyes agin'!"

A murmur of surprise came from the crew.

"Do you accuse this dead man of murdering the skipper, Winyard?"

"I don't like to say hard things about the dead, sir, but that's my belief."

Thornton did not dare to ask the bo's'un what reason he had for this suspicion.

"You are a fool, Winyard; I myself saw the skipper fall overboard, and may that it was an accident. It is not like a British seaman to slander a man who is dead and cannot defend himself."

"It ain't no slander!" the boatswain replied sturdily, "and I say—"

Silence, Winyard. I will not allow you to repeat your absurd accusations; it is an insult to the poor fellow who lies here dead."

The boatswain said no more; but it was easy to see that he will believed himself to be in the right, and that most of the British sailors coincided with his opinion.

Daryl Stanley read the service for the "Burial of the Dead at Sea" over the remains of the dead sailor, and the corpse was launched into the sea, several pieces of iron being sewed up with it in the hammock to carry it to the bottom of the ocean.

Jen Winch disappeared for ever beneath the waves; and Thornton, anxious to stop the men talking about the idea suggested by Winyard, set them to work searching the brig for the suggested stowaway. No one was found; and the thoroughness of the investigation convinced the crew that no one was aboard whose name was not on the ship's books.

Who, then, had killed Jen Winch?

That remained a mystery; but the suggestion of the boatswain had taken root in the minds of the credulous seamen, and the belief gained ground that Winch had caused the death of the captain, and that his own terrible fate had been a "judgment." When the search ended unsuccessfully, there were few of the crew who did not believe the "Ocean" to be a haunted ship.

CHAPTER 4.

Daryl Asks for an Explanation—Thornton Refuses It—Rough Weather.

During the morning the "Ocean" kept on a southward course, and the whole crew now knew that New Orleans was no longer her destination. This alteration amazed the British seamen, but the half-castes seemed entirely indifferent about the matter. Roger Thornton vouchsafed no explanation, leaving the crew to surmise what they chose about his strange conduct.

Daryl had not yet spoken. But towards the end of the forenoon watch, as Thornton had not referred to the subject, he resolved to demand an explanation of the chief mate.

Thornton probably anticipated what was coming, for when the second mate approached him he assumed his most insulting manner.

"If you have anything to say to me, be brief," he said. "I have no time to waste in idle chatter; there's rough weather coming up from the windward."

Daryl would have enjoyed knocking him down, but he restrained himself.

"I have little to say," he replied. "As an officer of this vessel, I have a right to know why the course is changed. We are no longer making the Gulf of Mexico. Will you tell me the reason?"

Daryl had given Winyard, Holt, and Benton the carpenter a hint to come within hearing of his talk with the chief mate, as he might need honest witnesses of what had passed later on.

"No, I will not tell you the reason!" Thornton said calmly.

"What authority have you for this alteration?"

"I do not choose to satisfy your curiosity upon that point!"

"Hear this, then. I, as second mate, protest against this disregard of our sailing orders. You are taking the 'Ocean' to southern latitudes; I cannot prevent that, but the responsibility is yours alone!"

"Have I asked you to share it?" was the icy rejoinder.

"You are your own master. I have done my duty in remonstrating; the rest is in your hands." And Daryl was about to retire, when Thornton stopped him with a gesture.

"Now you have spoken," he said sneeringly, "it is my turn to speak! Circumstances have given me the command of the 'Ocean,' and for the future you will have the kindness to address me as Captain Thornton. I have decided to make Jacques Blumont my chief mate, and you will, in future, obey his orders!"

Daryl looked at him in unbounded astonishment.

"You make a foremost hand chief mate," he ejaculated.

"Yes; and, as I observed, you will obey his orders!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind! If the loss of our captain has, unfortunately, made you captain, it has also made me chief mate. You can make Blumont second mate in my place, if you choose; but you cannot promote him over my head, as you are well aware."

Daryl's voice and manner were quiet but determined, and Thornton saw clearly enough that he was not inclined to yield.

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the smallest of his rights. Thornton had himself commenced the conflict, and he could hardly expect our hero to give him any advantage now they were declared foes.

But, besides the rights of the case, there was something else to be considered, and it was this "something else" which Thornton did consider. It was this, that the British seamen would all have backed up Stanley in any dispute, with sailor-like recklessness as to consequences. Daryl's influence over the crew was a very important factor, though, legally, it was a factor which did not exist.

Daryl would never have dreamed of using this power for any personal purpose; he would only exercise it in the cause of right. But that was precisely what Roger Thornton feared. Daryl—only Daryl—was the great stumbling-block in the way of the execution of all his secret plans, and it was no wonder that Thornton cursed him from his very soul.

"You refuse, then, to recognise Blumont as first mate, Daryl Stanley?"

"I do, absolutely."

"Very well. For the sake of preserving peace I yield the point." Then he lowered his voice, so that no one but Daryl could hear, and hissed: "But, by Heaven, you shall repent having made an enemy of me before this voyage is out, Daryl Stanley!"

"Your threats do not frighten me," Daryl replied calmly. "Look you, I carry a six-shooter about me, Thornton; and that will save me, I hope, from the fate of Captain Merton!"

"Go!" said Thornton, in a stifled voice, choked by the rage he dared not give vent to. Daryl retired without another word, content with the result of the interview, though he could not imagine why Thornton had changed the course of the brig, for he could hardly credit the boatswain's suggestion that the chief mate meant to actually seize the ship and her cargo. That plan might, perhaps, be laid and executed; and twenty years ago such things were doubtless done; but piracy on the high seas seemed too wild an idea for the present year 1897.

Yet—as Daryl reflected with uneasiness—that idea would account for foul play towards the captain, since it could not be done while Captain Merton lived. If the bo's'un was right—if Thornton really contemplated an act of piracy—he would doubtless attempt to get rid of the members of the ship's company who were likely to oppose his plans in the same way as he had got rid of the skipper. Was Winch the first—but no, he was the friend of Thornton, probably the actual assassin of poor Merton.

"If Winyard was right, Thornton will seize the first opportunity of getting rid of me," Daryl said to himself. "I will take care to be on my guard."

The rough weather Thornton had predicted came on during the afternoon. December is a bad month in the Atlantic Ocean. It was real winter weather—cold, windy, and cheerless. The air was almost always full of sleet, and during the nights frost thickly covered the masts and rigging.

To look at the sea was enough, as one of the sailors said, to give one the "blues." The ocean presented a monotonous prospect, heaving in long, heavy swells, filling the air with spray whenever the bitter wind cut the crests from the billows.

Darkness came on with the first dog-watch, and a gale of wind accompanied it. The wind, which had been moaning all day, began to shriek through the rigging as the afternoon wore away, and the roll of the waves became heavier, thundering seas breaking against the hull of the "Ocean."

The maintop and maintopgallantsail remained spread, and as the wind increased in violence, the "Ocean" was borne along with giddy velocity, cutting her way through the seas instead of riding them buoyantly. Daryl Stanley observed this with disquietude; but he said nothing, for he knew how Roger Thornton would receive advice from him.

At last came the order, long expected by the anxious seamen:

"Hands aloft to take in maintop!"

When the rough weather set in, the sail could have been furled without much difficulty; but it was now a task of danger—dire danger. The seamen, however, never hesitated. Up they went promptly at the word, Daryl Stanley being one of the first up. Stanley, strictly speaking, was not bound to go aloft except in a case of extreme peril, when "all hands" were called; but he was too true a sailor to remain idle when a labour full of danger was being done by his subordinates. It was this alacrity to share in every labour, every peril, that made him the idol of the crew. Thornton, on the other hand, though a thorough seaman, insisted upon all his privileges as an officer, and never let his feet go higher than the poop if he could help it.

Like monkeys the active seamen shinned up the weather rigging, and scattered on the yards, all of them well aware of the importance of getting in the sail without delay.

CHAPTER 5.

A Dastardly Attempt—Daryl has a Narrow Escape—Borgo Zenone's Disclosure.

Daryl, astride of the lee-yardarm, was working like a wind-buffed by the roaring wind and the flapping canvas, when suddenly felt a noose flung around his head from above. Astonished and startled by being thus laid out, as it were, from the sky, he clutched at the noose with both hands and started up-ward.

The darkness was intense, though it was not yet four o'clock (six o'clock). But the lightning had now begun to play, and a momentary flash revealed to Stanley all that he was asked to know.

Astride of the maintopgallantyard, directly over his head, but far above, was one of the half-caste, directly over his head, looking to his perch with his legs, the man—probably an adept in the use of the lasso—had noosed Stanley by the light of a lightning flash.

Astonished as he was, Daryl did not at first realize the murderous intention of the half-caste. Clutching the noose with both hands, he had all his work cut out to keep himself from being strangled. Perez was pulling the rope with all his strength, and Daryl, though he tightened the grip of his legs upon the yard, could hardly keep himself from being drawn into the air.

How this would have ended—for the other seamen were busy, and the darkness was too thick for them to see the impending tragedy—we cannot say; but suddenly the rope slackened, fell loose, and a dark body came whirling downwards past Stanley.

It was Forzio Perez. Daryl caught a glimpse of his white, despairing face as he shot past. If he uttered a cry, it was drowned by the hoarse roar of the wind. Our hero, as he thanked Heaven for his providential escape, could only conclude that the half-caste, tugging too hard at the lasso, had lost his balance and slipped from the topgallantyard.

Daryl was about to drop the lasso into the sea, when he thought better of it, and leaped it round his waist instead. He then finished his work, and was the last to descend to the deck, as he was the first to leave it. His narrow escape had awakened a strong suspicion in his mind.

The loss of Forzio Perez, who had dropped into the raging sea unseen by anyone but Daryl, at once excited attention.

Thornton, looking paler than usual, as Daryl thought, questioned the seamen. Daryl at once related what had occurred to him on the topsail-yard, and produced the lasso as proof. Thornton changed colour several times while Stanley spoke; but he had the presence of mind to join in the exclamation which the indignant sailors heaped upon the possibly half-caste: "And Perez went overboard, then?" he said.

"Yes; he must have overbalanced himself, and that saved my life."

"You have had a lucky escape, Stanley, and I congratulate you. As for that scoundrel, he deserved his fate!"

This, however, did not change Daryl's belief that Thornton had been cognisant of, if he had not instigated, the attempt upon his life. He resolved for the future to be more wary than ever, and to keep his weather-eye open for foul play from the foreigners.

The weather continued so rough that all hands remained on deck throughout the night. The "Ocean" was a well-found craft, and gallantly she rode the storm. Towards morning the gale abated in violence; but the sky continued black and threatening, and there was an almost certain prospect of even worse weather in the near future.

When the worst of the gale was over, Thornton went below to get some sleep, leaving Daryl Stanley in charge of the deck. Daryl, always considerate of his men, sent as many to their hammocks as he could possibly do without; and, muffled himself up, paced the deck to keep his blood circulating. Through the dim and dreary twilight of December dawn, the "Ocean" fled swiftly on her way under her topgallants and a starboard with her bowsprit ever turned to the south, every hour taking her miles out of her proper course.

Stanley, as he strode mechanically up and down, felt a touch upon his arm. Turning, he saw Borgo Zenone, the Maltese. The seaman's dark face was animated now; a contrast to its usual impassiveness.

"Well, Zenone, why are you here? I told you you could go to your hammock."

"I wish to speak to you, sir," said the Maltese, glancing uneasily round the almost deserted deck. Only four men were visible: Winyard and Tremayne at the wheel, R. Linton and David Holt forward.

"Very well, Zenone. Say on."

"You recollect the attack Forzio Perez made upon you last night aloft?"

"I am not likely to forget it!" Daryl replied, with a shiver.

"You thought he fell from the topgallant-yard?"

"Certainly." And the mate looked at Zenone attentively, feeling that some revelation was coming.

"Well, he did not fall, signor. I saw him trying to drag you into the air—no doubt he intended to drop you into the sea when he had forced you to release your hold—and I crawled over the taffrail behind him, and stabbed him, and flung him into the waves. If he had fallen, he would have held the rope, and dragged you to death with him. But when he was made in his ribs he dropped it."

"And you saved my life!" exclaimed Daryl, grasping the hand of the Maltese sailor, and pressing it cordially.

"I did, signor. But you will promise me to say nothing about it—to keep secret what I have told you?"

"Why?" asked our hero, mystified.

"Because the other half-castes would murder me if they knew I had slain their comrade."

"That is true. I promise that I will mention it to no one, signor."

"Especially, signor, say nothing to Roger Thornton."

"Do you anticipate his vengeance, if he knew?" Daryl questioned, looking keenly at the Maltese, wondering if he, too, suspected Thornton's complicity.

"Yes, signor, his more than anyone else!" replied Zenone, with a look of intelligence.

"You suspect, then—"

"More than that. I know that he incited Forzie Perez to attack you. Take care of yourself, signor; there are eight knives on board waiting for a chance to pierce your throat."

"Respect, signor, that if in any disputes I, Bergo Zenone, appear to side with the foreigners, it is only to avoid assassination. I hate them all, and especially do I hate Roger Thornton. Remember, too, that I am doomed if any of them know that I saved your life. Adieu!"

And the strange sailor went away swiftly before Stanley could say another word, leaving our hero in a state of considerable astonishment.

Daryl reflected deeply upon what the Maltese had told him. He well understood Zenone's anxiety that no one should know who had killed Forzie Perez. The revengeful half-castes would scarcely find an opportunity of stabbing the slayer in the back, sooner or later. Daryl was morally certain that Thornton had been the author of the attempt upon his life. But Bergo Zenone, to judge from his words, possessed positive proof of that. Was there, in fact, some secret conspiracy in existence between Thornton and the half-breeds, of which Zenone was cognizant? If so, why did not the Maltese—evidently his friend—put him upon his guard? And if the conspiracy existed, what was its object? The theft of the "Ocean"?

Daryl was puzzled, baffled. He had known, since the death of the captain, that something was brewing on board the "Ocean"—there seemed a sort of undercurrent of disquietude pervading the crew. What was the meaning of it? Daryl felt surrounded, stifled, by an atmosphere of mystery, a secret network of intrigue and dissimulation.

Up till now our hero had looked upon Bergo Zenone as one of the "foreign gang," as the British seamen designated the half-castes. It appeared now that Bergo did not like the foreigners, but dreaded their stilettoes. The young officer found that in Zenone he had a friend in the enemy's camp, as it were.

The reason of Zenone's intense dislike of Roger Thornton was no mystery to Stanley. On the first day out from London the chief mate, in a fit of rage, had felled the Maltese to the deck with a handspike, and would have recreated the blow had not our hero forcibly wrenched the weapon away. The Maltese—a fiery, excitable fellow by nature—seemed to have changed entirely since that incident; he had become sullen and morose, seldom speaking, and answering in monosyllables when addressed. Some of his messmates said that Thornton's brutal blow had injured his brain—and, indeed, on one occasion, when the Maltese lost his temper, he became excited to frenzy, almost to madness. The sailors, regarding him as "uncanny," avoided his society to a great extent; but this did not seem to trouble Bergo Zenone in the least.

Thinking over the words of Bergo Zenone, Daryl paced the wet, slippery deck, silent and pensive. Thornton was in no hurry to release him, and, of course, Daryl could not leave the vessel to take care of itself, although he was very fatigued. As for trusting it to the newly-appointed officer, Jacques Blumont, that was out of the question.

"Captain" Thornton did not condescend to appear until nearly the end of the afternoon watch, when he told Daryl he might go below if he chose.

Glad of the opportunity of getting a little rest, Daryl quitted the sloppy deck; but before he went to his hammock he decided to visit Ruth Merton again.

CHAPTER 6.

A Declaration—The Mystery Deepens.

Ruth received Daryl far more cheerfully than she had done on the previous day when he visited her. Not that her sorrow for her great loss was in any degree abated, but the lapse of time had made her more composed. She had prayed for comfort, and had gained, if not consolation, at least calmness.

Daryl was delighted by the change he saw in her. Now that she had recovered from the first shock, he hoped to see the bloom return to her cheeks, and the brightness to her eyes.

"You are looking much better to-day, Miss Merton," he said, as he took her slim hand in his big brown one. "I am glad to see the change. I hope you did not suffer much from the rough weather last night!"

"Not at all, Mr. Stanley," answered the girl, avoiding his eyes. "Was the vessel in danger?"

"Hardly that; but it was a stiffish gale."

"Mr. Thornton came to see me an hour ago," Ruth said abruptly.

"Did he? And—"

"I don't like that man, Mr. Stanley. I always felt a secret repugnance for him, and it seems to have strengthened lately. He is very considerate; but he looked at me so strangely, and—"

"—and I am afraid of him."

"It is my firm belief that he is a scoundrel," Daryl said gravely. "But you need not fear him; he cannot harm you."

"Ah! I am alone now," murmured Ruth, tears coming into her eyes. "If poor papa were only with me still—"

"If you are an orphan," Daryl said gently, "you are not alone, my dear girl, for I am here. This is, perhaps, hardly the time for a declaration; yet, when I see you in sorrow, my heart yearns to comfort you; and I feel that I cannot keep silent. I do not dare to ask if you love me, Ruth; but I love you, with all my heart, and I have loved you ever since our first meeting. I will lay down my life to save you from harm."

A deep crimson covered the lovely face of Ruth Merton. She did not reply in words, but hid her blushing face upon Daryl's shoulder, and her manner, her looks, told our hero what her tongue refused to say.

He imprinted a kiss upon the glowing face as she shyly turned it up to him from its resting-place upon his broad shoulder.

That hour was to Daryl Stanley the happiest of his life. The recollection of their recent loss, the sense of ever-present danger, seemed to make it doubly sweet—by contrast, as it were, with their usual sadness.

When Daryl left Ruth he would not have exchanged his lot for that of the greatest monarch in the world.

Before he left her, he advised the girl to keep her door fast locked; but he did not tell her of the death of Winch, not wishing to alarm her unnecessarily.

Daryl decided not to occupy his own cabin. There he would be alone, at the mercy of any cowardly assassin who chose to attack him during his slumber. Regardless of etiquette, he tumbled into a hammock in the fore-castle, without taking the trouble to explain to Thornton what he was doing, or why he was doing it. In the fore-castle, full of men, it would be a bold scamp indeed who ventured to assail him.

His slumber passed undisturbed, and he was on deck again at dusk, to relieve Thornton, who was a believer in the wisdom of leaving as much work as possible to other people.

The threatened renewal of the bad weather still held off, but the sky was dull and overcast and the sea rough. The "Ocean" carried nothing but a stay-sail and foretopgallant, to keep her steady in the choppy sea.

When Daryl relieved Thornton they exchanged no words; their mutual dislike was too intense to allow of any politeness of speech between them.

Thornton went below to his cabin—the one which had been Captain Merton's—where he found Jacques Blumont, sitting on the bunk, with his legs dangling down to the floor, smoking one of the late skipper's choicest cigars.

"Hallo!" growled Thornton gruffly. "What are you here for?"

"Firstly, some of old Merton's cigars. They're beautiful. Try one. Secondly, for a chat with you, friend Thornton."

"What have you to say?" snapped the chief mate, as he sat down, threw off his sou'-wester, and put his feet on the stove.

"How long, mon ami, are the lion and the lamb to lie down together so peaceably?" the Frenchman asked significantly.

"Until it's safe for the lion to eat the lamb."

"Mais, friend Thornton, isn't it safe now?"

"You're a fool, Jacques!" Thornton answered coldly.

"Possibly; but, mark you, our bandits are becoming impatient, monsieur."

"Fools all! Before we strike we must get out of the track

of ships across the Atlantic, and we must see the end of this rough weather, which needs every hand to save the ship."

"Anyway, you can commence with Monsieur Stanley at once."

"Haven't I tried?" growled Thornton; "but that fool Perez made a mess of it. Hang these half-bloods! I wish I had half a dozen Britishers, or even Frenchmen, at my back. These cut-throats are useless. Their only qualification is that they are thorough scoundrels."

"Don't you think that some of the British might join us?"

"Catch me asking them! No, Jacques, that wouldn't do. But I'll see that Daryl Stanley pays for his defiance with his life."

"I wonder you like to occupy this cabin, monsieur," the Frenchman said, after a short silence.

"Why? It's better than mine."

"But ain't you afraid of the ghosts? It's Christmas to-morrow; just the time for haunting; and suppose the sea were to give up its dead, eh? and Captain Morton were to revisit his old quarters. How would like it?"

"Pshaw!" said Thornton, though he looked round uneasily. "Don't talk rot."

"The sailors all say this is a haunted ship," continued Blumont. "The death of Sam Winch has convinced them of that. And if we're haunted, why shouldn't the skipper come back, eh?"

"It is a mystery who killed Winch," Thornton said thoughtfully. "I would give a great deal to discover— Great heavens! did you hear that?"

A terrible, heart-piercing scream rang through the vessel, echoing in every corner of the ship from stem to stern.

"Is it another?" muttered Jacques, as the two men rushed on deck.

"What has happened, Mr. Stanley?" exclaimed Thornton hurriedly.

The night had closed in dark and foggy, and only the yellow gleaming of the lanterns illuminated the "Ocean."

"I don't know," replied Daryl, who had been also startled by the fearful cry. "I heard a scream, but I don't know who uttered it."

"Here, sir," cried Winyard, in a voice of horror, from the leeward side. "It's Pedrillo Maquez, sir."

"And what's the matter with him?"

"Dead! His head's been split open, sir!"

"Great heavens! Who can have done it?" gasped Daryl.

All on deck collected round the body. Pedrillo Maquez was a Brazilian half-breed, and had been one of the most truculent of the "foreign gang."

There he lay, stark and still, covered with blood, his head crushed in by a terrible blow. The slayer had evidently taken advantage of the fog to approach him unseen and smite him down.

The seamen looked at each other with pale faces.

"This is awful!" Daryl said, in a low voice. "The second man who has fallen; slain by the mysterious assassin."

"The villain must be still upon deck, sir," said Bergo Zenone, coming forward; "and, no doubt, bears traces of blood."

"Search!" Thornton cried eagerly. "A hundred pounds to the man that finds the infernal scoundrel!"

The men on deck were all examined, but none bore the suggested traces. In the fog no one had seen Maquez fall, and, though the assassin must have been within a dozen feet of several of his shipmates when the blow was struck, he had escaped unseen.

Who was it?

"The ship is haunted!" Winyard cried, with an oath. "I tell you, mates, it ain't safe to be on this craft, it ain't!"

"Silence!" snarled Thornton. "What d'ye mean by such rubbish? Could a spectre crush in a man's skull with a mallet, you fool?"

"It's the skipper's ghost that haunts the ship," Winyard answered, in a tone of sincere conviction. And the looks and nods of the other seamen were proof enough that they agreed with the boatwain.

Thornton turned perfectly livid. Perhaps he was beginning to believe that Winyard's theory might be correct.

"And why should the skipper's ghost haunt the ship?" he said gratingly.



Bergo Zenone darted away in the fog towards the fore-castle. Thornton pursued him, firing at every step.

"Because he was murdered!" the boatswain answered unhesitatingly.

"Doit! Hold your tongue. By Heaven, I'll find out who the assassin is!" exclaimed Thornton, and he went below, followed by Jacques Blumont.

"Do you think, monsieur," said the latter, when they were within the cabin again, "that it can be Daryl Stanley who is thus disposing of our men?"

"No. I hate him, but I know he couldn't be guilty of that."

"But what's to be done? Pardieu! no life aboard the brig is safe."

"Keep a sharp look-out, that's all. You'd better sleep in my cabin; curse me if I want to be left alone after this!"

CHAPTER 7.

The Storm—The Dawn of Christmas—Another Victim—The Revolt of the Crew.

The death of Pedrillo Maquez dispelled whatever doubts remained in the seamen's minds about the presence of a malignant spirit on board the "Ocean." The British seamen, at least, firmly believed that the captain, foully murdered by Sam Winch, had come back in spectral form to take vengeance. Winyard held forth in the fore-castle to this effect.

"The skipper was chucked overboard," he declared, "and he's a-haunting' the ship in consequence. Winch killed him, so Winch was the first to go to Davy Jones' after him. Maquez was Winch's chum, an' Maquez follows. What could he be clearer, mates?"

"But," David Holt put in, "all the foreigners was Winch's mates. Do yer think they'll all go, then?"

"All that was in the game to kill the skipper."

"But you can't tell that Winch killed the skipper," Bergo Zenone remonstrated.

"Bah! I reckon we're allartin' about that."

"Tain't all lavender to sail in this here vessel," Robinson

remarked. "If there's any more killin', mates, 's'pose we sign a round robin, callin' on Mr. Thornton to take the 'Ocean' into port?"

"He won't do that. I tell you, shipmates, there's a gun-into-port!"

"The first thing Daryl did after the discovery of the murder was to station a trustworthy man to keep guard at the door of Miss Morton's cabin. He did not mean to let any danger come to Ruth.

The deepening of the mystery puzzled and depressed Daryl. He could not understand it. Was this kind of thing to come to the whole ship's company to tell, singly, beneath the stars, and the secret slayer? Was it possible, after all, that the blow was really haunted?

Haunted! It was not a pleasant thought, to be sailing in a haunted ship at Christmas time, alone on the black ocean, with a sinister brooding overhead. Daryl was continually watching the sea to catch another death-cry, every moment expecting to hear it.

Haunted? Nonsense, Daryl said to himself, spectres do not handle marlin-pikes: the ghost theory is absurd! It's not a secret assassin who lurks about the ship in the fog, seeking to strike treacherous blows.

Stout-hearted and strong-nerved as he was, Daryl could not help casting uneasy glances about him as he paced the planks in the fog. But there was little time for thinking about the mysterious crime. The storm was coming down upon the "Ocean," and before midnight the ship was in danger, and the cry was "All hands on deck!"

There is no peril on the sea a sailor hates as he hates a fog. Wind, rain, high seas, are nothing compared with the dense vapour which almost blinds him. Daryl could hardly see across the deck. Innumerable lanterns were hung about the rigging, shedding sickly rays, but very slightly dispelling the gloom.

The seamen could not see the ocean by looking over the bulwarks, so thick was the vapour.

"Talk about London fog," Winyard exclaimed, "why, this beats it hollow!"

"We'll be lucky if we ever see London again," one of the sailors said despondently.

The "Ocean," encircled by gloom, flew swiftly on. Not a sail was spread now, excepting the fore-top-staysail, to steady her. Under bare poles she scudded along before the fierce wind.

The brig, a well-built craft, well-handled, met the storm gallantly. The hatches were lashed down, covered with tarpaulin, so that if the seas broke over the deck none of the fluid should find its way below. Fortunately there was plenty of sea-room. But Daryl, great as was his confidence in the brig, looked with uneasiness at the seas which whirled as high as the poop all round her. If one of them carried off her rudder, or struck her amidships, the consequences might be fatal.

Thornton, with all his faults, was a seaman of the first order, and he handled his ship well. After several hours of anxiety, the gale began to abate. It was lucky that the "Ocean" was now in unfrequented waters, for, flying along through the fog, she would have been certain to crash into any vessel that crossed her path. It was a catastrophe of this kind that the men feared most.

Dawn came, and brought a cessation of the elemental strife; but the fog did not lift, it only changed in the daylight from murky black to sickly yellow.

"Happy Christmas, sir!" said Winyard, shivering, to Daryl.

The mate started. Christmas! so it was. He had forgotten that yesterday was Christmas Eve.

"Not a very happy Christmas for us, Winyard," he replied, with a faint smile. "No roast beef, or pie, or pudding, eh?"

"Call over the hands, Stanley," said Thornton abruptly; "let us see if there are any missing."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

All answered the call but one—a half-caste.

"Riquelez! Riquelez!" was shouted up and down the ship.

No voice replied. The crew looked at each other with the same dread in their galling faces. The sexton—spirit of human demon, whichever he was—had claimed another victim during the tempest.

"Look for him!" Thornton said hoarsely.

The search was not a long one. Close to the combings of the main hatch Riquelez was found dead, with a cracked skull. His cry, if he had uttered one, had been drowned by the wind.

The British seamen remained silent and pale as they looked upon this fresh victim of the mysterious slayer. But the foreigners were furious, heaping curses upon the murderer, and brandishing their knives. Only four of the seven half-castes remained, and the other seamen saw in their deadly faces their dread of being added to the terrible list of victims.

"Something must be done!" Thornton said, looking at the corpse with lagged eyes.

"Port! Let us reach port!" cried Winyard and several others.

The chief mate scowled savagely at them.

"How dare you say that?" he exclaimed angrily.

"To New Orleans!" said Winyard. "What do you say, lads? Mr. Thornton had no right to change the course of the 'Ocean,' he hadn't. Mr. Stanley himself said so."

"Do you dare to dictate to me?" exclaimed Thornton.

"To New Orleans! To New Orleans!" shouted the crew.

"Silence!"

"We won't be silent!" Winyard retorted determinedly.

"We're free men, and not black slaves, and we won't be treated as such! The ship's haunted; it ain't safe to remain in her! To New Orleans, lads!"

"But I tell you we will not go to New Orleans!"

"Then curse me if I does another stroke of work on this here v'idge, and, if my shipmates are of my mind, they won't neither!"

"No! No more work! New Orleans or nothing!" shouted the crew. Having found a leader bold enough to voice their discontent, they were resolute now.

Thornton looked at them with a scowl of bitter fury.

"Do you understand," he said, between his teeth, "that this is mutiny?"



The Maltose lay upon the skipper's bunk, the lamp-light showing up the ghastly pallor of his face and the staring wildness of his black eyes.

"Mullin, be hanged!" retorted Winyard; "we don't want to run off with the ship, we don't!"
At this home-thrust, which told him that his secret plot was suspected if not known, Thornton changed colour.

"What do you mean, you hound?" he hissed.
"I mean that you and your five outthroat furriners can't fully a dozen true blue British seamen, that's what I mean! We won't touch a rope, we won't, until the bowsprit p'int to Ameriky; an', what's more, we won't let no one else touch one, either! Though I reckon them five sea-lawyers couldn't handle a fishin' smack by themselves, let alone a ship."

"Do you dare to seize the 'Ocean,' then?"
"Nix! We'll please Mr. Stanley in kermant, an' he shall take us ter New Orleans, an' explain our conduct to the owners, too!"

Thornton turned to Daryl with a face aflame with rage.
"This is your doing!" he hissed; "it is you who have incited these rascals to mutiny!"

"Tain't nothin' of the kind!" interposed Winyard, before Daryl could defend himself from this unexpected accusation.
"We are on our own hook, we are. An' you had better be careful who you're callin' rascals, too, unless you want to be sent where you sent pore Captain Merton!"

"Where I sent Captain Merton?" ejaculated Thornton, with a sort of gasp.

"You or Jem Winch; but, if Winch did it, I reckon it was you who put him up to it!" the boatswain replied steadily.

"You are a scoundrel! Look you, men, I will think over your demand; and if I think fit, I'll head for New Orleans. I'll let you know my decision before eight-bells!"

"We'll wait till midday," Winyard consented.
The unpopular commander went below, signing to Jacques Blumont to follow him to his cabin.

"I reckon he'll give way!" the boatswain said, with a grin.
"He meant to steal the ship, lads, and the cap'n's darter too; but we've nipped that in the bud. There's a curse upon this here craft, and the sooner we all get out of it the better, say I."

But will Mr. Stanley take us to New Orleans if Thornton refuses? said Bill Benton, with a side-glance at Daryl.

"Will you answer that question, sir?" said Winyard respectfully.

"If you depose Mr. Thornton, my regard for the safety of the ship will compel me to do so," Daryl replied gravely.
"But I hope Mr. Thornton will see the wisdom of yielding."

"Don't you think, sir, that he meant to collar the ship?"
"About that I do not care to express an opinion."

"Which means that you do think so, I take it, sir. Well, Thornton will have to give way, or it'll be the worse for him, darn his eyes!"

"You are taking a serious step, Winyard, in thus coercing your commander."

"I reckon the owners won't mind when they find that we've saved the ship for them!" the boatswain replied slyly.

"But you can't prove that Thornton meant to seize the 'Ocean'?"

"How'll he explain changin' the course when he's asked, sir?"

"Doubtless he will have ready some plausible story, true or false."

"Wal, anyway, I, for one, ain't goin' to remain on board a haunted ship, not no longer than it takes to get to New Orleans!" declared Winyard.

The British seamen were unanimous upon this point. The foreign sailors scowled and said nothing; but they were in a hopeless minority, and none of the Britons cared a rap for their opinion. Including Jacques Blumont and Bergo Zenone, the foreigners numbered only six now, and the British were twelve without Daryl Stanley. It was, besides, doubtful if the Maltese, who was supposed to hate Thornton, would side with the foreigners if trouble came, so that the chief mate had only five sure men.

Sailors are naturally keen, and all the Britons on board had observed that there was some secret understanding between the chief mate and the foreigners. Without anything being said upon the subject, the seamen had tacitly agreed that the half-castes and the Frenchman were to be looked upon as adversaries.

"When Thornton and Blumont had been below about ten minutes, one of the half-castes went down into the cabin.

"Gein' to hold a council of war!" Winyard said, with a grin.

CHAPTER 8.

Thornton Plays a Deep Game—The Crew Drugged—Daryl and Winyard Defend Themselves.

Thornton and Jacques Blumont had just come to a decision when the half-caste Lazillo came into the captain's cabin.

"We must delay no longer, Thornton," Jacques was saying. "No; this hour the blow shall be struck. We'll have them smell a rat."

"After that, then, we shall be seven against two."

"Precisely. The mate and the bo'sun are both dangerous; they shall be sent to look for the skipper in Davy Jones's locker."

"And the others?" the Frenchman asked.
"We will maroon them somewhere, Jacques. We may have to keep two or three to assist in managing the ship."

The intrusion of Lazillo made Thornton look up with a scowl.

"What do you come poking in here for?" he snapped.
"I come to speak plainly," the half-caste answered firmly.

"My comrades and I are resolved to wait no longer."
"To wait no longer for what?"

"For revenge!" hissed the half-caste. "First Perez, then Maquez, then Riquelez—not to speak of Winch. Are we to sit quietly to be butchered? No. We will have revenge for our slain comrades!"

"As for Perez, he was killed by his own clumsiness."

"But the others—the others, senior?"

"If you have a clue to the assassin, Lazillo—" began Thornton.

The Spaniard interrupted him with a furious gesture.
"Tis one of the British!" he said fiercely. "None of them have been killed, but only my comrades! That is proof!"

"There's something in that, Thornton," remarked Blumont.
"It is a fact that the three murdered men were all of one party."

"And I say we'll wait no longer!" said Lazillo passionately.
"As it happens, there is no occasion for you to wait longer," replied Thornton.

The half-caste's dusky face lighted up with a ferocious gleam.
"We use our knives to-day!" he ejaculated.

"Ay! But don't be rash; they are thirteen against seven, and one of them is worth two of you. Go on deck, Lazillo, and take care not to let your face betray you. Tell the men to come and hear my decision. Stanley can take the wheel, and Winyard can stay with him. You, Jacques, go and relieve the man who is standing guard at the door of Miss Merton's cabin. All the men must be here, excepting the two who are to die."

The crew received Thornton's message from the scowling half-caste with much satisfaction, doubting not that the chief mate had decided to yield.

"He ain't been werry long makin' up his mind," Winyard remarked. "Go down, messmates, an' see wot he has to say. I'll stay here with Mr. Stanley; we can't leave the brig to take keer of herself."

The British bluejackets soon collected in the skipper's cabin. The half-castes also assembled there, standing apart from the others.

"My lads," said Thornton suavely, assuming a honeyed air.
"I have thought over your demands, and have decided to concede what you ask. Does that satisfy you?"

"It does, sir," replied the sailors respectfully.

"Reflection," continued Roger Thornton, "has convinced me that your belief is correct—the 'Ocean' is haunted. I shall head for New Orleans, and get there as soon as possible. Now that is settled, let us have no more ill-feeling or quarrelling. It is Christmas Day—the time of peace and goodwill. Drink to the success of our voyage, then, and return to your duty!"

Thornton had a couple of bottles of wine on the table before him. He now poured out a glass for each of the seamen in turn, and they drank willingly enough. Then they filed out of the cabin, and returned to the deck.

The half-castes had not drunk with the others, but when the British had gone they came up to the table.

"Drink, if you like," said Thornton; then, as Lazillo seized a bottle, he added: "But I would advise you not. The wine is drugged."

The half-caste set the bottle down hastily.
"In a quarter of an hour," Thornton continued, "all these fellows will be as senseless as logs. Then we can dispose of Winyard and Stanley."

The half-castes grinned with delight, and fingered their knives.

"No stabbing will be allowed, except as regards these two," continued the chief mate sternly. "Anyone who touches the others will get a bullet from my revolver 'through his heart!'"

"But—" began Lazillo disappointedly.

"Stop; I'll hear no objections from you. I'm captain, and I mean to be obeyed, I warn you. I shall answer any disobedience of my orders with my pistol, so look out! Now, all of you, go on deck, and place yourselves ready to assault Stanley and Winyard as soon as I give the word."

The four half-castes and Zenone, who was with them, went on deck. The Maltese was looking very thoughtful. Perhaps he pitied the doomed men. But he had known nothing of the plot to drug the seamen, so he could not possibly have put them on their guard.

The seamen on deck were beginning to feel the effects of the dose they had swallowed. Robinson and Tremayne had the dose gone to sleep, stretched near the bulwarks. Bill slowly went to sleep, stretched against the mainmast, nodding. The rest began to droop. Daryl and Winyard were astonished.

"What the deuce is the matter with the critters?" the boatswain exclaimed. "They hev missed their watch below, I know, but they didn't order be droppin' asleep like this here."

"Hell," called out Daryl; "what's the matter with you, man? Have you been drinking?"

"Only a glass o' wine Mr. Thornton gave us, sir," replied the boatswain.

The mate and the boatswain looked at each other. Both felt the same suspicion at the same moment.

"They're drugged, sir," said Winyard emphatically.

"That's just what occurred to me, Winyard. Yes, it's certain. See, they're all tumbling over aboard. Thornton has drugged them; he means to steal the ship."

"What's to be done, sir? These poor fellows are past helpin' themselves."

"Are you armed, Winyard?"

"Only my clasp-knife, sir."

"Quick! Let us lash the helm, then get ho'd of a marlin-spike. They mean nothing less than throwing us overboard, of that I am assured. I have a six-shooter, though, and I'll drop a few of them first."

"Right you are, sir. We must look out now, and no mistake. What do you say to gettin' inter the fo'c's'le, an' holdin' out? On the deck we're no match for them; seven they are."

"But Miss Merton—"

"She ain't in no danger, sir. It's that Thornton wants to marry her, and he'll take keer she ain't hurt," replied the bosun. "Sides, I noticed that Blument is guardin' her door. If we went down he'd open fire, I reckon, and the others 'ud take us behind. The fo'c's'le's the thing."

"You are right, Winyard. But these poor fellows—they're senseless now—what if these demons drop them into the sea?"

"I can't believe Thornton would allow that, sir. Let's go forward. The best thing we can do is to save our lives now; we can't do nothin' for nobody if we're sticked an' chucked overboard."

Leaving the helm lashed the two men started to go forward. The half-castes, waiting for Thornton's signal, did not bar their way. All the British seamen but one were now lying senseless upon the deck. The exception was a big, rawboned Scotman, of great strength, who struggled with partial success against the influence of the drug.

"Come, MacPherson," said Daryl, seizing his arm. "Come with me."

Winyard took the sailor's other arm, and they hurried him along. This man at least they could save; and he would be a welcome addition to their force when he recovered from Thornton's dose.

The three had nearly reached the fore-castle door when a shrill whistle sounded below. The half-castes drew their knives and rushed towards our friends, and at the same moment Thornton and Blument came running up from below with revolvers in their hands. Bergo Zenone, after a brief, imperceptible hesitation, joined the half-castes with drawn knife.

"Take him in," said Daryl quickly; and, leaving MacPherson to the bosun, he wheeled round to face the half-castes, pistol in hand.

Daryl did not hesitate to shoot. He knew now that his life was at stake, and that mercy would be misplaced.

He fired with fatal effect. The nearest half-caste fell at full length, with a terrible cry—shot through the brain.

That stopped the rush. Daryl darted into the fore-castle with Winyard, and the entrance was soon closed and barricaded with chests. Several bullets from outside crashed into the door, but did no harm.

"Sit—for a time," panted Daryl. "They won't be in a hurry to force their way in while I keep my six-shooter handy."

"Did you kill anybody, sir, with that shot?"

"Yes; Carlo Galva. I let him have it in the forehead, and if he rises from the deck again I shall be astonished."

"There's still be six against us," the boatswain observed solemnly.

"Never mind; when MacPherson is all right again we shall be three, Winyard. Besides, I may tell you now that we have a friend outside."

"A friend among that gang?" said the boatswain, puzzled.

"I am certain of it. There can be no harm in my telling you now. It is Bergo Zenone, the Maltese."

"I allers thought he hated Thornton! But since the skipper went overboard Zenone has allers been the humblest to the first mate."

"That is his policy. He fears assassination. I firmly believe that Zenone will try to aid us. You recollect that, when Thornton knocked him down, the first day out, I stopped the brute from further ill-using him. He is grateful in his way. He has already once saved my life."

"When was that, sir?"

"When Forzio Perez attacked me." And Daryl related what the Maltese had told him, Winyard listening with deep attention.

CHAPTER 9.

A Terrible Time on Board the "Ocean."

The escape of Stanley and Winyard into the fore-castle was a circumstance Roger Thornton had not reckoned upon, though he had expected some trouble with such tough customers as he knew them to be.

He did not care to risk attacking them in their fortress, for he knew Daryl's skill with the revolver; and certainly the probability was that the young sailor would pick them off like pigeons, himself unexposed. Thornton could not afford to lose more men; he was terribly short-handed as it was. In the event of a recurrence of rough weather he knew that he would be compelled to call upon five or six of his prisoners for aid in working the ship.

Rough weather, however, was not likely to occur. The storm had entirely spent itself now, and nothing remained to endanger the ship but the fog, which was as dense and impenetrable as ever. The thickness of the vapour almost shut off the sunlight, but so long as the vessel kept under easy sail, this did not imperil her safety; and now that the wind had fallen, the "Ocean" crawled along at the rate of half a knot.

"There's nothing to eat in the fo'c's'le," Thornton told his men, when they clamoured for vengeance over the body of Carlo Galva. "We shall very quickly starve them out, my lads. All we have to do is to take care that they don't escape from where they are now. I have plenty of pistols; each of you take one, and keep watch."

"Shall we shoot if they show themselves, signor?" asked Bergo Zenone.

"Assuredly, and I'll give twenty pounds to the man that kills either!"

This offer set the scoundrels on a sharp look-out. Had Stanley or Winyard shown so much as a toe it would have received a bullet.

The drugged seamen Thornton put in irons, placing them in the cabin which had been Daryl's. He did not expect them to recover their senses for some hours, the drug he had used being a powerful one.

This done, Thornton descended to Ruth Merton's cabin.

"Come in," the girl called out in answer to his tap, expecting to see Daryl. She was disappointed on seeing the chief mate, but did her best not to show it.

Thornton closed the door and seated himself, facing Ruth.

"Miss Merton," he said, "I have a communication of some importance to make to you."

"Very well, Mr. Thornton; I am willing to hear it."

"I am sure, Miss Merton, that during the time you have spent on board the 'Ocean' you must have seen that I love you. Will you be my wife?"

Thornton's hard voice softened as he uttered these words, and his face showed that he was in deep earnest. That he loved Ruth, in a rough, rugged way, but truly loved her, was too evident for anyone to doubt.

"I am sorry, Mr. Thornton—" Ruth commenced gently.

"That means that you refuse?" the chief mate said, his manner changing.

Ruth nodded, offended by his gruff manner.

"Let me tell you that I expected this, Ruth Merton," said Thornton, his brutal nature, no longer concealed, showing in his voice and looks. "Yes, I expected it, for I guessed that that puppy, Stanley, had supplanted me!"

"I must tell you, Mr. Thornton, that I cannot allow you to address me in that manner," said Miss Merton, with dignity.

Roger Thornton laughed sardonically.

"How are you going to prevent me?" he said sneeringly.

"I request you to leave me," Ruth answered coldly.

"Well, I shall not leave you until I choose," sneered Thornton. "I'll have you know, my girl, that I am master of this ship."

"I will call Mr. Stanley," faltered Ruth, who was alarmed and scared by Thornton's threatening manner.

"Call him! He is at present hiding in the fore-castle, in fear of his life!"

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SEE PAGE THREE.

"What do you mean?" asked Ruth, becoming more frightened, for she felt that something terrible had happened.

"What I mean is this—that I am captain of this ship. Daryl Stanley will be thrown overboard; all the other British seamen are prisoners in irons. The foreigners are all with me. I am going to take the 'Ocean' to the Brazils, where I have an agent ready to dispose of her. By that time you shall be my wife!"

"I will never be your wife!" Ruth answered, firmly—so firmly that Thornton was surprised, for he had expected to see the girl overcome with terror.

"We shall see about that," he growled. "I shall show you, my girl, who is master of this vessel!"

And he went out in a rage, slamming the door, and locking it on the outside, confining Ruth to her cabin. Leaving the girl in tears, suffering the most poignant anxiety for her lover, he ascended the hatchway.

He had nearly reached the deck, coughing, and cursing the fog, when a heavy body fell upon him from above, sending him flying down the ladder. He recovered himself before he reached the bottom, but the strange object that had struck him fell the whole way, with a sickening bump-bump upon the stairs.

"Curse you!" shouted Thornton furiously. "What did you fall on me for, dolt?"

There was no reply. Turning to look at the fallen man, Thornton saw that he was a half-caste, and that he lay motionless. Thinking he had, perhaps, broken his neck, the chief mate went down and looked at him. Then he uttered an exclamation of horror!

"Another!" he cried hoarsely, and rushed up to the deck. The fog prevented him from seeing any of his confederates, but a shout soon brought them about him.

"What's the matter, monsieur?" Jacques Blumont asked, looking at his leader in amazement. "Why are you smothered with blood?"

"As I came up the ladder a man fell upon me," Thornton said, in a shaking voice. "I looked at him, and he was dead! It was Alonzo Zello, and his skull had been crushed in! The blow must have sent him tumbling down the hatchway!"

"Morte de ma vie! this is too much," ejaculated Blumont. "Pardieu! there will be none of us left to reach the Brazils."

"Go and see if any of the prisoners have got loose," directed Thornton.

Blumont went, and returned with the information that the prisoners were still in shackles, and had not yet recovered consciousness.

"Are you sure they are not shamming?" questioned Bergo Zenone.

"Quite. I kicked each man in the ribs to assure myself. Besides, I tell you that they're all manacled, and those irons don't take on and off like bracelets, do they?"

"Then," said the Maltese decidedly, "I believe that the boatswain was right—the ship is haunted!"

"Nonsense," Thornton exclaimed impatiently. "Don't talk childish folly. The assassin is a man, and a strong one, to judge from the effect of his blows."

"Then who can it be?" said Zenone obstinately.

"I thought all along that it was Stanley, or another of the Britons," Lazillo said, with pallid lips. "But that cannot be."

"Were you watching the fore-castle well?"

"Our eyes never left it," asserted the Maltese.

"Well, nothing can be done. Let each keep upon his guard."

Of the half-castes, originally seven, but two survived. Only four followers remained to Thornton, and among these he believed the secret slayer to be. But for the life of him he could not guess which. And at times a frightful doubt crossed his mind. Was his scepticism in the wrong, and the "Ocean" really haunted? He had heard of haunted ships, but had never believed in them. Was it possible?

This was a terrible Christmas, for the five plotters more than for the honest seamen. The quintette of ruffians went about casting anxious glances around them. If the assassin were really one of them, he played his part well, simulating extreme terror, which his companions really felt.

The brig drifted on slowly through the sea of fog—that fog which enabled the secret slayer to deliver his savage blows unseen, unguarded against.

Thornton, a prey to bitter anxiety, paced the deck with irregular strides as the afternoon of Christmas day wore away. At length a new idea came into his mind.

"My lads," he said, "it is this fog which enables the assassin to strike his blows with impunity. Further southward we may get out of it. Aloft with you, and set the foresail. We must risk a collision in the fog; anything is better than this terrible anxiety."

Thornton took the helm, and the four seamen went aloft—

dangerous work in the cold and fog. A few minutes later Thornton heard a thud upon deck; a minute afterwards another. He did not need to be told the cause. Two men had fallen from aloft, or had they been hurled down? Scarcely only a minute to secure the wheel, he hurried forward, and there, at his feet, lay the last of the half-castes, upon his hip-knife wound in the throat, the other stabbed in the back—both dead!

"Blumont and Zenone, come down," called out Thornton, in a strained voice.

CHAPTER 10.

The Secret Slayer Discovered at Last—A Sharp Fight—Death of Thornton—Bergo Zenone Confesses—A Tale of Horror.

The instant the two seamen stood upon the deck, Thornton whipped out a revolver and levelled at them. They recoiled in surprise and fear, grasping their knives.

"Are you mad, Thornton?" said Jacques Blumont, in amazement.

"Look at those bodies," said the chief mate sternly. The two seamen did so, with horrified faces.

"Which of you stabbed them?" Thornton demanded. Both poured out eager denials.

"They were stabbed and thrown to the deck," Thornton continued. "One of you two must be the secret slayer that has been laying us low. By Heaven, I have a mind to shoot you both, and thus make sure!"

"They were stabbed!" repeated Jacques Blumont. "Look at my knife; it is clean; there is no blood upon it."

"And you, Zenone?" said Thornton, after looking at the Frenchman's weapon, and satisfying himself that there was no stains upon it. "Show me your knife."

The Maltese did not reply, but drew back, with a hunted look in his eyes.

"Aha!" cried Thornton; "is it so? I recollect now Blumont was below with me when Maquez was killed. It is Zenone, then, who is the assassin. Villain! viper! your last hour is come!"

And he fired at the Maltese. But Bergo Zenone darted away in the fog towards the fore-castle, crying:

"Help, Signor Stanley, help! I saved your life! Help! help!"

Daryl was not a man to hear such a call in vain. Regardless of the risks, he dragged away the barricade and issued from the fore-castle. Macpherson, who had by now recovered the use of his faculties, followed him, both grasping bludgeons.

But the delay in removing the barricade was fatal to Bergo Zenone. Thornton, howling like a wild beast in his fury, pursued him, firing at each step. The Maltese fell just outside the fore-castle, with one bullet in his leg and another in his back.

"Finish him!" cried Thornton, with a horrid laugh. Jacques Blumont sprang upon the wounded man, and stabbed him twice in the breast. Bergo Zenone gave a terrible groan, and lay still.

Just at this moment Daryl and the two seamen came upon the scene. Daryl, believing he had the whole band to deal with, fired instantly at Thornton, while Winyard and Macpherson threw themselves upon Blumont. The Frenchman struggled like a demon, and the two seamen were hard put to it to gain the upper hand.

Thornton received Daryl's bullet in the chest, and fell at full length on the deck, mortally wounded.

Daryl turned towards the others. Blumont, by a prodigious exertion of strength, threw off Winyard, and flashed aloft his knife to stab Macpherson. Daryl had just time to fire; the Frenchman, shot in the brain, fell dead, and his knife rattled harmlessly upon the deck.

"Where are the others, Zenone?" Daryl asked, looking round, finger on trigger.

"Dead, signor," replied the Maltese, in a feeble voice.

"Dead?"

"I killed them! I was the secret slayer!"

"You?" ejaculated Daryl, kneeling beside the dying man to hear his faint tones more distinctly. "You, Zenone?"

"Yes, it is Thornton dead?"

"Yes."

"Then I am satisfied." And the mysterious Maltese closed his eyes.

"He has fainted," Daryl said. "Lead me a hand, Winyard, to carry him below. He is dying, and, whatever his crimes, he shall die in peace."

The insensible man was carried into the skipper's cabin. There he opened his eyes again, in a brief return of consciousness.

"Your friends are in front, in Mr. Stanley's cabin," he said. "Signor, will you let Miss Merton come to me before I die?"

The request astonished Daryl, but he did not refuse. He found the door of Ruth's cabin locked, but the key was in the lock, and after knocking, he entered. Ruth received him with look and air, and willingly consented to visit the dying Maltese. Daryl had at first intended to tell her nothing of the terrible doings aboard the "Ocean," but now she knew a little, he deemed it best to let her know everything. Accordingly, before entering the cabin where Zenone lay, he briefly recapitulated all that had passed during the last few days, including the suspicion of foul play towards the skipper. Then he led her to Bergo Zenone.

The Maltese lay upon the skipper's bunk, the lamplight showing up the ghastly pallor of his face, and the staring wildness of his black eyes.

He smiled faintly when Ruth entered.

"Thanks, signora," he said, in a clear but failing voice. "It is kind of you to come to me. I wish to ask your forgiveness."

"What have I to forgive?" Ruth asked gently, much surprised.

"The death of your father."

"Good heavens! it was not you?" Daryl ejaculated, while Ruth became pale as death.

"No, no! 'Twas not my hand that struck him. But I might have saved his life, if I had dared. It was I who allowed him to be killed!"

"Explain yourself!" Daryl said, somewhat sternly.

Before the voyage commenced, Thornton and Blumout had planned to steal the ship. The half-castes readily joined in the plot. After that, I was invited to join. What could I do? In asking me, they had betrayed themselves, and if I refused they would instantly assassinate me lest I should tell Captain Merton. I joined them; I was afraid to die. I learned what the plot was—that the captain was to be murdered, Thornton to assume command of the "Ocean," and to take her to the Brazils, where a confederate has already made arrangements for disposing of her and her cargo. He meant to kill Signor Stanley and the boatswain, and maroon the rest upon a desert island.

"I was horror-stricken with the thought of seeing the captain killed; he was always so kind to me, and he saved me from destitution by taking me aboard his ship when I was not worth half-wages. Believe me, signora, I resolved to warn the captain of his danger, though I knew that my assassination would surely follow. But I was a coward—I feared to do so, and I put off warning him day after day. At last I found that Thornton was about to put his project into execution, and then I said to myself, 'I will wait no longer.' I went to Captain Merton's cabin; he had gone on deck to look at the weather. I followed—(too late!) I heard the cry of 'Man overboard!' as I reached the deck, and knew that the deed had been done, that the brave, kind captain had been foully murdered."

The Maltese paused, the perspiration pouring down his ghastly face. The two listeners heard the tale with deep attention, feeling nothing but pity for the unfortunate man, placed by circumstances in so trying a situation. As he spoke of the captain's death, the tears welled from Ruth's eyes, and flowed without ceasing down her pale cheeks.

"The captain was dead," the Maltese resumed, in a weaker voice. "I could not save him. But I could avenge him—

avenge myself. My heart burned with a furious hatred for the villains who had made me an accomplice in the death of the good captain. I determined to kill them, every one, and thus avenge the captain's death, and save Mr. Stanley's life, and see you also, signora, for Thornton meant to carry you off to the Brazils and there force you into a marriage with him. You may guess the rest. Which had struck the blow which knocked Captain Merton into the sea; and which I slew first. The others followed. Deeply I have stained my hands with blood; but I have killed the villains to save honest men. Now I am dying, but I have done my work, and I am satisfied. I shall die happy if you can forgive me the injury I did you in allowing the captain to be killed!"

"My poor friend," Ruth said softly, "I forgive you freely. I have no blame for you."

The Maltese looked at her with a touching expression of gratitude. Her gentle words had eased his tortured conscience. For a few minutes longer he breathed with difficulty; then suddenly his respiration ceased. His soul had fled to meet its judge.

Daryl led the weeping Ruth from the cabin.

Daryl, left in command of the "Ocean" by the death of the villain Thornton, immediately headed her for New Orleans, her original destination. The dead men were buried at sea; and though the British seamen owed a debt of gratitude to

Bergo Zenone, who had saved them from a cruel fate, they could not help feeling relieved to know that the secret slayer was no longer on board—that the "Ocean" was not now haunted by the pitiless avenger.

The "Ocean" made the voyage to the Crescent City without further mishap, and, on arriving there, Daryl went at once to the company's agent to inform him of what had happened during the passage of the Atlantic. The owners, pleased with his conduct, conferred upon him the post Thornton had held, and Daryl was chief mate on the voyage home. Ruth Merton went back to England in the "Ocean," and in London the lovers were united—light, at last, after darkness and sorrow, once more brightened their lives.

Daryl is now a captain, and in his vessel sail most of the brave fellows who were his inmates aboard the haunted ship.

THE END.

[Next Friday's UNION JACK will contain a long, complete novel, entitled "THE THIEF DETECTIVE."]



I am, I must confess, not at all surprised at the number of the entries for the "Unfinished Names" Competition; it is but what I expected, considering the value of the prizes offered.

For a long time past my clerical staff has been kept working at high pressure to get through the thousands of lists sent in, and I am now pleased to be able to give you the names of the successful competitors. I hope you are one of them. If not, do not despair. There will be plenty more competitions in the UNION JACK, and you may be luckier next time.

Those readers whose coupons arrived without a name and address upon them have, of course, been disqualified. I received several letters from readers who had made this mistake, begging me to attach their names and addresses to the lists they had sent. This, however, I was unable to do, as it was impossible to go through the whole of the lists to find the few faulty ones.

UNFINISHED NAMES COMPETITION RESULT.

The Phonograph has been won by Mr. RICHARD TALES, 5, Gibbins Square, Gainsborough, who had one mistake only.

As there were five competitors with two mistakes, instead of giving the football a second prize, I am giving its value in cash. Thus, five readers each receive half-a-crown. Their names are:

Mr. G. Salmon, 24, Millar Terrace, Rutherglen, Glasgow; Mr. J. R. Ralph, Post Office, Helston, Cornwall; Mr. J. Johnson, 244, Holderness Road, Hull; Mr. J. McCormack, 5, Mayfield Cottages, Travis Street, Manchester; Mr. E. Coombs, 18, Kingsgate Road, Birmingham.

To each of the next thirteen competitors a penknife is awarded. They had three mistakes:

Mr. W. C. Lee, 160, Shaw Heath, Stockport; Mr. C. Draper, 32, Sutton Street, Meadow Lane, Nottingham; Mr. W. D. Horshaw 17, Derby Road, Douglas, Isle of Man; Mr. H. Robertson, Ravenstone Lodge, Ashby-de-la-Zouch; Mr. J. H. Richardson, Woodside Cottages, Burton Joyce, Notts; Mr. W. J. Marshall, Barnhill, Perth, N.B.; Mr. E. Hughes, 55, Stanfield Road, Burslem, Staffs; Mr. E. T. Jones, 4, Spring Gardens, Trefechan, Aberystwyth, South Wales; Mr. J. H. Quale, 138, Parkhill Road, Bingle, Liverpool; Mr. G. Spikes, 29, George Street, Somerstown, Clidre ter; Mr. G. Paschart, 74, Allcroft Road, Queen's Crescent, Kentish Town, N.W.; Mr. A. Baber, 266, Marlborough Road, Grandport, Oxford; Mr. E. P. Ashby, 254, Freeman Street, Great Grimsby.

Then come no less than ninety-three readers whose mistakes total up to three. To each of these I am sending a pencil-case with refills.

Mr. E. Hepburn, 6, Trelawa Terrace, Hendon, N.W.; Mr. T. F. King, Ashdale House, Helmsdale, R.S.O., Yorks; Mr. E. Kennedy, 3, Harbour Street, Folkestone; Mr. J. James, 3, Globe Street, Great Dover Street, Borough, S.E.; Mr. H. R. Butterfield, 10, Charles Street, St. Ebbe's, Oxford; Mr. J. C. Lee, 160, Shaw Heath, Stockport; Mr. H. Scott.

(Continued on page 16.)

"THE THIEF-DETECTIVE." See next Friday's "UNION JACK."