

"CONTRABAND"

A Romance of the North Atlantic

by RANDALL PARRISH

AUTHOR of "MY LADY of the NORTH," "MAID of the FOREST," ETC.



CHAPTER XVI.

In the Hands of the Crew.

The afternoon brought me increased faith that the imprisonment of Fergus McCann had practically ended the rebellion of the men forward. No doubt the spirit of mutiny still lingered, but without the leadership this had ceased to be dangerous. Unhappily for the New Yorker's display of wealth, Liverpool Red and Jim White were suddenly shorn of power to control the crew.

Nor did anything occur during the remainder of the day to lead me to revise this conclusion. The weather held fair, and the men worked cheerfully. Now that the liquor was out of them they proved themselves a fairly efficient crew, obeying the orders of the mates smartly. Apparently the crisis had been passed, and the only problem remaining to confront us was that of navigation. With my mind at rest on this point, I passed the hours of the afternoon largely in my own stateroom, sleeping for an hour or more in preparation for the night's watch on deck, and later carefully figuring out in detail the exact course I should attempt to follow during the period of darkness.

Before the call to supper came, I called on Bascom to explain to him the situation, but found the man stupefied by some drug, taken perhaps to alleviate pain, and scarcely capable of comprehending my meaning. Satisfied that I could gain no assistance from him, I left the man lying helplessly in his bunk, and returned to the main cabin. Vera did not appear until after Leayord and I were seated at table, yet she had been on deck during the afternoon, and had much to say relative to the beauty of the ocean scene through which we sailed.

It was a pleasant hour we passed at the table, Leayord relieving Olson, but the girl and I lingering in rather idle conversation before we went on deck. In spite of the pleasant day, and that the sun was still visible in the western sky, the air on deck was chill, and I returned below for a heavier coat, and also brought back with me a cloak belonging to the late commander with which to protect Miss Carrington. But for a faint trail of smoke far to the westward, barely visible as the sun sank below the horizon, no evidence was discernible of any other vessel in the wide circle. I hailed the lookout in the maintop, but the wisp of smoke was too far away for his eyes to determine the course of the distant steamer, although as he swept his glasses a bit farther northward, they became fixed and motionless. As I stared up at him, his voice reported:

"Sail ho!"

"Where away?"

"About three points off the port bow, sir—a schooner's topsail."

"Very well, keep her in sight—a fishing vessel likely."

Both watches were on deck, clustered in a restless bunch before the fore-castle, or overhanging the rail, evidently deeply interested in observing our efforts to get all possible speed out of the Indian Chief. The fading light gave me a glimpse of their faces, and I noticed that both Liverpool and White were circulating freely from group to group. However, the men responded readily enough to Olson's orders, and sang cheerily as they tailed onto the ropes, Liverpool himself leading the way up the ratlines and out upon the mainyard as they sheeted home.

The stars began to pop out in the arch of sky above, silencing the waters, and we could no longer perceive what was taking place forward. The night shades settled about us, and the staunch Indian Chief drove her sharp bows through the black waste of sea in a race to cross the zone of danger before the coming of another dawn. Apparently everything was in our favor, and I stood there, leaning against the rail, chatting with Miss Vera, our conversation drifting idly.

It must have been after nine when the girl left, complaining of being chilled even in the protection of the great cloak. I crossed the deck with her to the head of the stairs, and our hands clasped as we lingered there a moment, the dim light revealing her face uplifted toward mine.

"You are not going below, then, Mr. Hollis?" she questioned. "Surely all goes well?"

"So remarkably well," I admitted, "as to rather puzzle me. No, I shall remain on deck until morning; not that I really anticipate trouble, but the entire responsibility rests with me."

"You do not feel that your officers are efficient?"

"Only within their limits of knowledge. I like the men, and trust them, but at that they are only promoted from before the mast in an emergency. Neither possess any real knowledge of seamanship. You can go to your berth, and go to sleep, Miss Vera, assured that the ship will be in safe hands."

"I know it will, if you remain on deck," she answered earnestly. "I—I have learned to trust you."

The hours of the night gave me some

ple opportunity for thought, and careful consideration. The wind held steady, and while the sea roughened somewhat this slight change was not sufficient to diminish our progress, or cause any swerving from the course set. All remained quiet forward, the watch on deck finding little to do other than their routine duties, and no member of the crew had any occasion to come aft, except those detailed to the wheel. There seemed no reason why I should remain on deck, yet the responsibility rested upon me, and the importance of the night's run prevented my having any wish to retire below. However, I found no occasion to interfere with the operation of the ship, and remained mostly on the main deck, where my watchfulness assured me there was no communication passed between fore-castle and cabin.

The fog grew steadily more dense, until at dawn, we were steaming recklessly through a thick cloud of vapor, barely able to observe the surface of the sea, dull, sodden gray, a few yards in advance of our bow. The dense, watery folds swept along our sides, and the rigging dripped moisture onto the glistening deck planks. It was a gloomy, dreary morning enough and, even as the light of early dawn strengthened, I could scarcely distinguish a thing forward of the main mast. However, there was no slowing up of speed or sounding of siren. Convinced that we were now safely to the north of the usual course of ships, I preferred to take the chance of possible collision.

My eyes were heavy from lack of sleep, and long staring out through the black night; my senses dulled by hours of inaction, during which nothing unusual had occurred to arouse me to realization of impending danger. I no longer even suspected trouble, or any active hostility forward. With the dawn the density of fog enwrapping us seemed to increase, and completely blot out every glimpse of sea and sky. Even Leayord leaned over the rail just above me, could scarcely be distinguished as a man, and evidently his eyes could not make me out at all, for he halted doubtfully:

"Are you still on deck, Mr. Hollis?"

"Yes," I answered, staring up at his shadow. "A bad fog."

"It is, sir. Would we better reduce speed?"

"No, not yet; I am counting on open water, and would rather chance striking a stray than risk being overhauled by a British cruiser. The sun will split this mist before noon, and meanwhile we must make all the northing possible."



"Lie Still, D—You!"

this vicious attack, I made an instant's struggle, but was quickly crushed back, a merciless hand gripping my throat. Almost at the same moment the revolver was removed from my pocket, the cold muzzle thrust against my cheek.

"Lie still, d—you!" muttered a tense voice, and I knew the speaker for Jim White, "or I'll blow the whole top o' yer head off."

I retained sense enough to obey, White's knee pinning me to the deck, but some sound of my fall must have carried aft, for Leayord sang out through the fog:

"Forward there! What's all that racket about?"

White's fingers choked me into helpless silence, his knee crunching hard into my breast. It was Liverpool Red who answered sullenly:

"I knocked over a capstan bar, sir; never saw it in the bloom'n' fog."

Leayord growled something, the words falling to carry to us against the wind, but a moment later, satisfied that no further investigation was to be made, Liverpool thrust White aside and lifted me to my feet, his eyes glaring into mine.

"One whimper from you, an' yer overboard," he muttered hoarsely. "Take it from me we know what we're about. Come on now, an' don't attempt nuthin'. There's nobody forward here to give yer a hand. Take him by the collar, Jim."

With White's hand gripping me, and my own revolver at my head, any attempt to break away would have been simply suicide. The thick fog hid the scene from those on watch aft, and that the two men were reckless and desperate, their plans well laid, was evident. The gray light revealed their faces, and there was no mercy in the scowling eyes.

"Forward yer go, sir!" growled White, his fingers twisted in the jacket collar. "It's little more yer'll hav' ter say aboard this hooker."

"What do you propose doing? This is mutiny, men."

"Then I'll have to be mutiny. It's war, an' we're Englishmen; this ship's loaded with war stuffs, bound for Germany. That sort o' talk means nuthin'—so come on, and stow that guff."

They forced me around the bulk of the windlass to the head of the fore-castle steps, slid back the door in its grooves and thrust me staggering down into the murky depths below. A slush light, swinging to a blackened beam in the deck above, cast a ghastly yellowish glare over the interior, revealing to me at least two-thirds of the crew, clustered about, evidently awaiting some such event. White held to my collar, but Liverpool closed the entrance, shutting out even that faint breath of pure air, before speaking a word.

"Well, we've got the main guy, lads, an' no shindy," he said cheerfully, "an' a gun came with him. Now a few o' us will see if we can persuade the first mate into taking a trip forward."

"Where's Billy Olson?" asked a voice.

"Oh, he's asleep below; there's plenty o' time to attend to him, an' we'll let the engine-room gang alone till we get control o' the deck. Simms, you an' Harris better come along with Jim an' me on this job. Leayord is a husky buck, an' we might not get him foul like we caught Hollis here. We don't want to hurt nobody unless we have to. Where's the nigger Watson?"

"Right hyar, sah."

"Come on, then; it's your trick at the wheel in five minutes; the rest o' you fellows know yer business."

The five men slipped out cautiously, sliding the door shut behind them, and I stared about into the faces of those left with me, still dazed by the rough handling to which I had been subjected, yet fully aroused to the fact that the attack upon me had come from no sudden impulse, but was the first step in a carefully formed plan to gain possession of the ship. My duty was to warn the men aft of the approaching danger. How should I act? In a vague way I knew most of the faces of those grouped about me, but I could recall only a few names. They were a rough lot, typical fore-castle hands, many of pronounced foreign appearance, yet there was nothing especially vicious about them. Ordinarily they would obey orders without a complaint, but now they were evidently under full control of their leaders; yet the expression of their faces bespoke curiosity rather than hatred. Determined to test them I straightened up and placed a foot on the lower step.

"None o' that now," a voice growled as a hand gripped my arm. "You don't want ter git hurt none, do yer?"

I faced the speaker, a big, two-fisted giant with a red face and a slow drawl in his voice.

"You mean to hold me here?"

"Sure; we've gone too far on this job now fer to back down. Thar'd be a row ov a time if we turned you loose."

"You're an Irishman?"

"'Twould be hard for a Dugan to deny that, sor."

"Well, Dugan, look here—you and your mates. You are sailormen, and know the rules of the sea. This is mutiny, and a mighty serious affair to be caught in, lads."

"We're not lookin' at it that way, Mr. Hollis. We shipped for a peaceful voyage, not to run no cargo o' contraband fer the Dutch. This yere Indian Chief is chock-full o' munitions o' war—ain't that the truth, sor?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but shipped before war was declared. The sick man back there in the cabin has his whole fortune in this venture."

"Devil take him an' his fortune. The point is we're not Dutchmen, an' in wartime it's no mutiny fer a crew to capture an enemy's ship."

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind who to'd us; it's the truth, ain't it?"

"Under some circumstances it might be," I said, casting my eyes about the ring of faces. "But the present conditions do not justify any such action. Now look here, Dugan; you fellows are in a mighty bad boat in this matter. You're merchant seamen; you've signed on for a peaceful voyage, and it is no business of yours what's below hatches. That's for the warships to find out. The Indian Chief is under American register. She's a neutral

Don't, and your act is mutiny on the high seas. You know what that will mean to you and your mates, don't you, if you're ever caught?"

"Who says that?"

"I do; and I know more of sea law than any of those fools who are steering you into this trouble. You kill a man on board here, and it is murder, and the whole bunch of you can be made to swing for it. Men have got life for less than you have done now. But I'll give you a chance."

"What chance, sor?"

"To stand by the ship. Set me free now, and back up the officers in maintaining discipline aboard, and not one of your names goes into the log."

"An' sail the bloom'n' hooker to Hamburg?"

"Of course; that's the port you signed for."

There was an uneasy shuffling of feet, and a muttering of voices. The light was too poor to enable me to decipher the expressions on the faces of the men, yet I felt that my words were wasted. Dugan, however, voiced the prevailing sentiment.

"Not a d— one ov us is fer making that voyage," he said grimly. "So stow yer tongue, mate." He winked at me facetiously, then glanced about at the others. "There's bigger wages comin' to us now than ever we signed on for."

(To Be Continued)

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The French advanced more than

miles in three days, a distance which they had planned to cover only after much resistance. Most of the heavy fighting occurred the first day when French artillery cleared out nearly all of the enemy positions. At one point in the attack the French were forced to build a small pontoon bridge under the heavy fire of the Austrian guns. This completed, the Algerian troops stormed ahead and could hardly be stopped, many of them went two and three days without food as it was impossible for the supply trains to keep up with the advance. Casualties were light and there were few wounded soldiers for the ambulance men to transport to the rear.

Many Austrian prisoners taken by the French surrendered without the slightest resistance. When interviewed by their captors, they were invariably strong in their condemnation of the Germans, whom they blame for prolonging the war. They reported that their rations had been restricted to meat, bread and water and welcomed the food, including vegetables and wine, which the French provided them.

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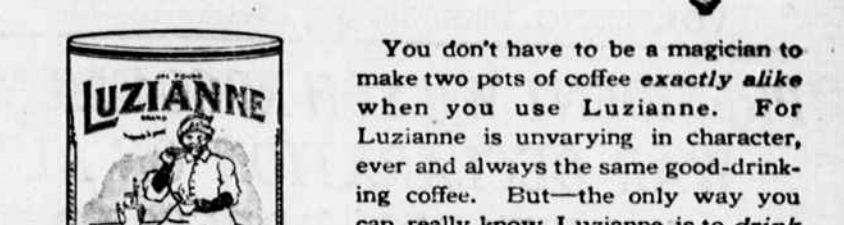
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