

WOLVES of the SEA

& RANDALL PARRISH

CHAPTER XIII.

I Accept a Proposal.

I went on deck with the watch, and mingled with them for a few minutes. A Portuguese boatman sat me at polishing the gun mounted on the fore-castle. I was busy at work on this bit of ordnance, when Estada came on deck for a moment. The fellow seemed to observe me.

"You must be a pretty tough bird, Gates," he said roughly, "for I would have killed you last night—I had the mind to."

Something about his voice and manner led me to feel that, in spite of his roughness, he was not in bad humor.

"That would have been a mistake, sir," I answered, straightening up, rag in hand, "for it would have cost you a good scolding. Three years ago I was skipper on my own vessel, The Bon-bay Castle, London to Hongkong; I wrecked her off Cape Mendocino in a fog. I was drunk below, and it cost me my ticket."

"You know West Indian waters?"

"Slightly; I made two voyages to Panama, and one to Havana."

"And speak Spanish?"

"A little bit, sir, as you see; I learn languages easily."

He stared straight into my face, but without uttering another word, turned on his heel and went below. I had finished my labor on the cannonade, and was fastening down securely the tarpaulin, when a thin, stoop-shouldered fellow, with a hawk-like face, crept up the ladder to the poop, and shuffled over to LeVerre.

"Mister LeVerre, sir."

"Well, what is it, Gumsnakes?"

"Senor Estada, sir; he wishes to see a sailor named Gates in the cabin."

"Who? Gates? Oh, yes, the new man. He swept his eyes about, until he saw me. 'Follow the steward below,' Senor Estada wishes to see you—go just as you are."

"Very good, sir."

The fellow led me away. There was no one in the main cabin. I followed the beckoning steward who rapped with his knuckles on one of the side doors. Estada's voice answered.

I stepped inside, doubtful enough of what all this might mean, yet

quite prepared to accept of any chance it might offer. Estada sat upright in the chair gazing straight at me. His own face clearly revealed in the light from the open port. His face was swarthy, long and thin, with hard, set lips under a long, intensely black mustache, his cheeks strangely emphasized by lines. The nose was large, characteristically Roman, yielding him a hawklike appearance, but it was his eyes which fascinated me. They were dark and deeply set, absolute wells of cruelty. I had never before seen such eyes in the face of a human being; they were beastly, devilish; I could feel my blood chill as I looked into their depths. Yet I held myself erect and waited for the man



I Waited for the Man to Speak.

to speak. Then his lips curled in what was meant to be a smile. He arose, stepped quickly to the door and glanced out, returning apparently satisfied.

"I don't trust that steward," he said, "nor, as a matter of fact, anyone

else would." He paused and stared at me, then added, "I've never had any faith in your Gumsnakes, but you've earned it. Every Englishman I ever knew was a liar and a sneaking peevish fellow. I was brought up to hate the race and every one of them. I can't say that I like you any better than the others. I don't for the matter of that. But just now you can be useful to me if you are of that mind. This is a business proposition, and it makes no odds if we hate each other, so the end is gained. How does that sound?"

"Not altogether bad," I admitted. "I have been in some games of chance before."

"I thought as much," eagerly, "and money has the same clink however it is earned. You could use some?"

"If I had any to use; after a sailor has been drunk there is not apt to be much left in his pockets."

"The fact is," he began doubtfully, "that you just said to me on deck, 'chance' to be of interest. You are a navigator?"

"I was in command of ships for four years, senior; naturally I know navigation."

"I will soon learn if you have lied, and that will be a sorry day for you. I'll tell you, Gates, how matters stand aboard and why I have need of your skill. These men may take your choice—the favorite or the cabin?"

"You invite me not, senior?"

"I give you a chance to move your damage if you will do my work. Listen now. Sanchez has been badly hurt. It may be weeks before he leaves his cabin. If, indeed, he ever does. That leaves me in command with but one officer, the mulatto, LeVerre. This might answer to take us safely to Porto Grande, as we could stand watch and watch, but Francisco is no sailor. It was his part on board to train and lead the fighting men—he cannot navigate. Saint Christopher! I fear to leave him alone in charge of the deck while I snatch an hour's sleep."

"I see," I admitted. "And yourself, senior? You are a seaman?"

"Enough to get along, but not quite sure as to my figures. I have taken no sights except as we came north on this trip. 'Tis for this reason I need you—but you will play me no smart English trick, my man, or I'll have you by the heels at once. I know enough to verify your figures."

"I thought of no trick, Estada," I said coldly, now satisfied as to his purpose and confident of my own power. "You would have me as navigator, very well—at what terms?"

"With rating as first officer and your fair proportion of all spoils."

"You mean then to continue the course? To attack vessels on the high seas?"

"Why not?" sneeringly. "Are you too white-livered for that sort of job? If so, then you are no man for me. It is a long voyage to Porto Grande, and no reason why we should hurry home; the welcome there will be better if we bring chests of gold aboard. Ay, and the thought will put hope into the hearts of the crew; they are restless now from long waiting."

"But Captain Sanchez? You have no surgeon, I am told. Will he not suffer from neglect of his wound?"

"Buffy? No more than under a leech ashore. All that can be done has been. He was a clean knife thrust, which has been washed, treated with lotion and bound up. No leech could do more."

"And my quarters—will they be fit?"

"You will have your choice of those at port. Come now—have you an answer ready?"

"I would be a fool not to have," heartily. "I am your man, Estada."

CHAPTER XIV.

I Warn Dorothy.

The Portuguese, evidently well pleased at my prompt acceptance of his proposal, talked on for some time, explaining to me something of the situation aboard the Namur, and pointing out what he believed to be our position on the chart. I asked a few questions, although I paid but little attention to what he said, my mind being busied with searching out his real purpose. No doubt the situation was very nearly as he described it to be—LeVerre was no navigator, and Estada himself only an indifferent one. Yet at that the course to the West Indies was not a long one, and if the Portuguese had been able to bring the bark from there to the Chesapeake, the return voyage should not terrify him. No, that was not the object; he was planning to keep at sea to waylay and attack merchant ships, and then, after a successful cruise, arrive at Porto Grande laden with spoils and hailed as a great leader. His plan was to dispose of Sanchez—even to permit the Spaniard to die of his wounds, possibly even to hasten and assure that death by some secret resort to violence. No doubt LeVerre was also concerned in the conspiracy and would profit by it, and possibly these two were the chief actors of the cooperation of the more reckless spirits among the crew. I remembered what Watkins had whispered to me forward—his suspicion of them, both. He had been right already, the fate was being laid out, very fortunately, I happened to be chosen to bear such it off. The chance I had almost blindly been being played revealed.

It was evident enough, however, that Estada had in intention of trusting me immediately with his real fate. His confidence was limited, and his instructions related altogether to mere matters of ship routine. I could avoid developments, that I was becoming wary by the time.

"I understand perfectly, senior," I said, in that respectful tone that I had learned to use for a number of years, and which I could enforce as I pleased and was, until your boat to whatever port of the world you desire to sail. At I need only order. This I thought to all you require of me."

"Yes; I plan, you execute."

"Very good; now about myself," and I came to my feet, determined to close the interview. "You say I may choose any stateroom on the port side?"

"They are all unoccupied, except one, used by the steward as a storeroom."

I opened the door and stepped out into the main cabin, the roll of charts under my arm. Estada didn't wait for me to question him.

"Captain Sanchez's stateroom is aft," he said, with a wave of the hand.

"There are two rooms. Jose is with him—a negro with a knack at nursing."

"Who else is quartered aft here?"

He ignored the one thing I most desired to learn, but I did not press it, believing I knew the answer already.

"LeVerre has this middle stateroom, and Mendez the one forward. Mendez is third officer and carpenter. Just at present with LeVerre required on deck he has charge of the men below. Not the working crew—they are quartered in the fore-castle and are largely English and Swede. But we have to carry extra men, who bunk midships—hellhounds to fight—monkeys of course. They are allowed on deck midships when we are at sea, but are not encouraged to mingle with the sailors. We're over a powder magazine all the time, Gates—any spark might set it off."

I opened one of the doors opposite and glanced within. The interior differed but little from that of the stateroom occupied by Estada, except it was minus the table. No doubt they were all practically alike.

"This will do very well," I said quietly. "Now how about clothes? These I wear look rather rough for the new job."

"I'll send you the steward; he'll fix you out from the storeroom."

I was glad to see him go and closed the door on him with a sigh of relief. It had all occurred so quickly, almost without effort on my part, I could do little but wonder what strange occurrence would be next. What, indeed, was there for me to do except to await developments? Only one thing occurred to me—I must discover some means immediately of communicating with Dorothy Fairfax.

The importance of this could not be overestimated. With myself quartered aft and Estada in the cabin we were bound to meet sooner or later, and the girl must previously be warned of my presence aboard, or in her first surprise at the recognition I should be instantly betrayed. If I was to serve the girl there must be, first of all, intelligent co-operation between us. She must not only know of my presence on the Namur but also the purpose actuating me. I had reached this conclusion when a light, hesitating knock sounded at the door.

Gumsnakes entered, garments over his arm, and laid out the pieces carefully one by one, evidently proud of his selection.

"The clothes seem to be all right, steward," I said, "and I judge will fit. Now hunt me up first of all something to shave with, then some tobacco and a pipe, and—yes, wait a second—writing materials. And, by the way, there are two staterooms astern. Who occupies the one to starboard—Senor Estada?"

"No, senior; it is the young lady."

"Oh, the one brought aboard last night. Have you seen her?"

"SI, senior; she is English and good to look at, but she sits and stares out the stern port. She will not speak or eat. I take in her breakfast, but she touch not a morsel. So I tell Senor Estada, and he say, 'then bring her out to dinner with me; I'll make the husky eat if I have to choke it down her dainty throat.'"

"Good; I'll have a look at her myself then. Now hurry up those things, steward; and remember what I sent you after."

He brought the shaving set and writing materials first, explaining that he would have to go down into the lazaret and break open some pickle-axes for the tobacco and pipe. The moment the fellow disappeared I dashed off a note hurriedly—a brief line merely stating my presence on board and begging her not to exhibit surprise at meeting me. I had no time in which to explain or make clear the situation. With this folded and concealed in my hand I silently pushed open the door.

I crept swiftly forward, following the circle of the staterooms, until I came to the closed door of the one sought for. I bent here an instant, listening for some sound from within but heard none. Beyond doubt the girl was within and alone, and I must trust her quick intelligence to respond to my written message. I thrust it through the narrow opening above the sill, and the moment it disappeared within stole swiftly back to my own room. The action had not been seen, and yet I had scarcely a moment to spare. Before I could latch my door the steward returned, bearing in his hands tobacco and pipe.

Estada, however, remained away longer than I had anticipated he would, and I was fully dressed and comfortably smoking before he came down from the deck and crossed the cabin to his port side door.

"The steward's watch has been called," he said, "and you are to take charge of the deck, relieving LeVerre. I waited to explain the situation to you before you appeared. I say, time has been wasted."

"As you say, relieving the steward of his pipe and shaving. He says my clothes disapproved."

"Faster a time, as I said, for a first officer, eh?"

"More so, I think, senior, but the time has been wasted."

"You'll have to make a hand on your own to take up that course, relieving the Namur, so only getting those things done on the way to the port of the world."

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and shook hands at my appearance.

"Rather glad I didn't drown you," he said, intending to be pleasant. "But hope you'll not run a knock in the after-cabin."

"I shall try not to unless I have cause," I answered, looking him square in the eyes and determining



I Followed Him to the Deck.

to make my position clear at once. "Senor Estada tells me I am to relieve you. What is the course?"

"South-west by half south."

"Do you know your position?"

"Only in a general way. We have held an east by south course since leaving the capes, until an hour ago, making about ten knots."

"Very well; I will figure it out as best I can. There is nothing further to report?"

"No, senior; all has been as it is now."

He glanced toward Estada, not greatly pleased, I presume, with my brusqueness, yet finding nothing in either words or manner from which to evoke a quarrel. The latter had overheard our conversation, but he stood now with back toward us looking out on the sea off the port quarter. His silent indifference caused LeVerre to shrug his shoulders and disappear down the ladder on his way below. I turned my face to the man at the wheel—it was the giant negro, Cochose.

(Continued next Sunday.)

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