THE IRON PIRATE

A Plain Tale of Strange Happenings on the Sea

By MAX PEMBERTON

CHAPTER I.

The train moved slowly over the sandy marsh which lies between Calais and Boulogne. Roderick was asleep, and Mary's pretty head had fallen against the cushion. As I reclined at greater length on the cushions of the stuffy compartment, I thought how strange a company we were then being carried over the dull, drear pasture land of France, to the lights, the music and the life of the great capital.

Roderick and I had been at Caius Collegt, Cambridge, together, friends drawn the closer in affection because our conditions in kith and kin, in possession and in purpose, in ambition and in idleness, were so very like. Roderick was an orphan 24 years of age, young, rich, desiring to know life, caring for no man, not vital enough to realize danger, a good fellow, a gentleman. His sister was his only care. He gave to her the strength of an undivided love.

For myself, Iwas 25 when the strange things of which I am about to write happened to me. My father had left me £50,000, which I drew upon when I was of age; but, shame that I should write it, I had spent more than £40,000 in four years, and my schooner, the Celsis, with some few thousand pounds, alone remained to me. Of what was my future to be, I knew not. In the senseless purpose of my life, I said only, "It will come, the tide in my affairs which taken at the flood should lead on to fortune." And in this supreme folly I lived the days, now in the Mediterranean, now cruising round the coast of England, now flying of a sudden to Paris. A journey fraught with folly, the child of folly, to end in folly, so might it have been said; but who can foretell the supreme moments of our lives, when unknowingly we stand on the threshold of action? And who should expect me to foresee that the man who was to touch the spring of my life's action sat before me—mocked of me, dubbed the Perfect Fool—over whose dead body I was to tread the paths of danger and the intricate ways of strange adventure?

But I would not weary you with more of these facts than are absolutely necessary for the understanding of this story, surpassing strange. Mary and Roderick slept, while the Perfect Fool and I faced each other, sick to weariness with reflections upon the probability of being late or arriving before time. At last he spoke, and, speaking, seemed to be the Perfect Fool no longer.

"They're both asleep, aren't they?" he asked suddenly. "Would you mind making sure, for I have a favor to ask."

He was looking at me with a fitful pleading look unlike anything he had shown previously. I assured him at once that he might speak his mind; that, even if Roderick should overhear us, I would pledge my word for his good faith.

"I wanted to speak to you some days ago," he said earnestly and quickly, as his hands continued to play with a paper. "It must seem curious in your eyes that I, who am quite a stranger to you, should have been in your company for some weeks, and should not have told you more than my name, Martin Hall. As the thing stands, you have been kind enough to make no inquiries; if I am an impostor, you do not care to know it; if I am a rascal hunted by the law, you have not been willing to help the law; you do not know if I have money or no money, a home or no home, people or no people, yet you have made me—shall I say, a friend?"

He asked the question with such a gentle inflexion of the voice that I felt a softer chord was touched, and in response I shook hands with him. After that he continued to speak.

"I am very grateful for all your trust, believe me, for I am a man that has known few friends in life. You have given me your friendship unasked, and it is the more prized. What I wanted to say is this, if I should die before three days have passed, will you open this packet of papers I have prepared and sealed for you, and carry out what is written there as well as you are able? As for the dangers, they are big enough, but you are the man to overcome them as I hope to overcome them—if I live!"

The sun fell over the lifeless scene without as Martin Hall ceased to speak. I had thought the man a fool and witless, flighty in purpose and shallow in thought, and yet he seemed to speak of great mysteries—and of death. In one moment the jester's cloak fell from him, and I saw the mail beneath.

"Tell me, are you quite certain that you are not talking nonsense?" I asked. "If you are not playing the fool, Hall, you must be more explicit. In the first place, how did you get this absurd notion that you are going to die into your head? secondly, what is the nature of the obligation you wish to put upon me? Why should you, who are going to Paris, as far as I know, simply as a common sightseer, have any reason to fear some mysterious calamity in a city where you don't know a soul?"

"Why am I going to Paris without aim, do you say? Without aim—I, who have waited years for the work I believe that I shall accomplish to-night! I will tell you. I am going to Paris to meet one who, before another year has gone, will be wanted by every government in Europe; who, if I do not put my hand upon his throat in the midst of his foul work, will make graves as thick as pines in the wood there before you know another month; one who is mad and who is sane, one who, if he knew my purpose, would crush me as I crush this paper; one who has everything that life can give and seeks more, a man who has set his face against humanity, and who will make war on the nations, who has money and men, who can command and be obeyed in ten cities, against whom the police might as well hope to fight as against the white wall of the South Sea; a man of purpose so deadly that the wisest in crime would not think of it—a man, in short, who is the product of culminating vice—him I am going to meet in this Paris where I go without aim—without aim, ha!"

"And you mean to run him down?" I asked. "What interest have you in him?"

"At the moment none; but in a month the interest of money. As sure as you and I talk of it now, there will be fifty thousand pounds offered for knowledge of him before December comes upon us!"

I looked at him as at one who dreams dreams, but he did not flinch.

"To-night I shall be with him; within three days I win all or lose all; for his secret will be mine. If I fail, it is for you to follow up the thread which I have unravelled by three years' hard work. Dare you risk coming with me—I meet him at eight o'clock?"

"Dare I risk!—poor, there can't be much danger."

"There is every danger!—but, so, the girl is waking!"

It was true; Mary looked up suddenly as we thundered past the fortifications of Paris. Roderick shook himself like a great bear; the Perfect Fool began his banter, and roared for a cab as the lights of the station twinkled in the semi-darkness. I could scarce believe, as I watched his antics, that he was the man who had spoken to me of great mysteries ten minutes before. Still less could I convince myself that he had not many days to live. So are the fateful things of life hidden from us.

CHAPTER II,

The lights of Paris were very bright as we drove down the Boulevard des Capucines, and drew up at length at the Hotel Scribe, which is by the opera house. Mary uttered a hundred exclamations of joy as we passed through the city of lights; and Roderick, who loved Paris, condescended to keep awake!

"I'll tell you what," he exclaimed, "the beauty of this place is that no one thinks here, except about cooking. Suppose we plan a nice little dinner for four?"

"For two, my dear fellow, if you please," said Hall, with mock of state—he was quite the Perfect Fool again. "Mr. Mark Strong condescends to dine with me—don't you, Mr. Mark?"

"The fact is, Roderick," I explained, "that I made a promise to meet one of Mr. Hall's friends to-night, so you and Mary must dine alone."

Hall and I mounted the stairs of the cozy little hotel, whose windows overlook the core of the great throbbing heart of Paris, and so until we were alone in my room, whither he had followed me.

"Quick's the word," he said, as he shut the door, and took several articles from his hat box. "One pair of spectacles, one wig, one set of curiosities to sell—do I look like a second-hand dealer in odd lots, Mr. Mark Strong?"

I had never seen such an utter change in any man made with such little show. The Perfect Fool was no longer before me; there was in his place a lounging, shady-looking, greed-haunted Hebrew. The haunching of the shoulders was perfect; the stoop, the walk, were triumphs.

"It's five minutes from here," he said, "and the clocks are going eight—you are right as you are, for you are a cipher in the affair yet."

He passed down the stairs and I followed him. So good was his disguise and make-pretense that the others, who were in the narrow hall drew back to let him go, not recognizing him, and spoke to me, asking what I had done with him. Then I pointed to the new Perfect Fool, and without another word of explanation went on into the street.

We walked in silence for some little distance. Finally he turned, crossing a busy thoroughfare and stopped quite suddenly at last in a narrow street. He had something to say to me.

"This is the place," he said. You carry this box of metal"—he meant the case of curiosities—"and don't open your mouth. Keep a hold on your eyes, whatever you see or whatever you hear. Do I look all right?"

"Perfectly—but just a word; if we are going into some den where we may have a difficulty in getting out again, wouldn't it be as well to go armed?"

"Armed!—pish!"—and he looked unutterable contempt, treading the passage with long strides, and entering a house at the far end of it.

Thither I followed him and found myself at last on the third floor, before a door of thick oak. Our first knocking upon this had no effect. Then I heard a great rolling voice which seemed to echo on the stairway, and so leapt from flight to flight, almost like the rattle of a cannon shot with its many reverberations. For the moment indistinct, I then became aware that the voice was that of a man singing and walking at the same time.

When the noise stopped at last, there was silence, complete and unbroken. Hall stood motionless. After that we heard a great yell from the same voice, with the words, "Ahoy, Splinters, shift along the gear, will you?" A mumbled discussion seemed to tread on the heels of the hullabaloo, when, apparently having arranged the "gear" to satisfaction, the man stalked to the door.

"Hullo—the little Jew and his kickshaws; why, matey, so early in the morning?"

The exclamation came as he saw us, putting his head round the door, and showing one arm swathed all up in dirty red flannel. He was no sort of a man to look at, for his head was a mass of dirty yellow hair, and his face did not seem to have known an ablution for a week. But there was an ugly jocular look about his rabbit-like eyes, and a great mark cut clean into the side of his face, which were a fit decoration for the red-burnt, pitted, and horribly repulsive countenance he betrayed. I looked at him and drew back repelled. This he saw, and with a flush and a display of one great stump of a tooth which protruded on his left lip, he turned on me.

"And who may you be, matey, that you don't go for to shake hands with Roaring John? Dip me in brine, if you was my son I'd dress you down with a two-foot bar. Why don't you teach the little Hebrew manners, old Josfos; but there," and this he said as he opened the door wider, "so long as our skipper will have to do with shiners to sell and land barnacles, what can you look for?—walk right along here."

The man who called himself "Roaring John" entered the apartment before us, bawling at the top of his voice, "Josfos, the Jew, and his pardner come aboard!" and then I found myself in the strangest company and the strangest place I have ever set eyes on. So soon as I could see things clearly through the hanging atmosphere of tobacco smoke and heavy vapor, I made out the forms of six or eight men, not sitting as men usually do in a place where they eat, but squatting on their haunches by a series of low narrow tables, laid round the four sides of the apartment. Each man lolled back on his own pile of dirty pillows and dirtier blankets; each had before him a great metal drinking cup, a coarse knife, long rolls of plug tobacco, and a small red bundle, which I doubt not was his portable property. Each, too, was dressed exactly as his fellow, in a coarse red shirt, seaman's trousers of ample blue serge, a belt, and each had some bauble of a bracelet on his arm, and some strange rings upon his fingers. They were men marked by time as with long service on the sea; men scarred, burnt, some with traces of great cuts and slashes received on the open face; men fierce-looking as painted demons, with teeth, with none, with four fingers to the hand, with three; men whose laugh was a horrid growl, whose threats chilled the heart to hear, whose very words seemed to poison the air, who made the great room like a cage of beasts, ravenous and ill-seeking.

Martin Hall put himself at his ease the moment we entered. He made his way to the top of the room and stood before one who forced from me individual notice, so strange-looking was he, and so deep did the respect which all paid him appear to be. He sat at the head of the rude table, but not as the others sat, for there was a pile of rich-looking skins—bear, tiger, and white wolf—beneath him, and he alone of all the company wore black clothes and a white shirt. He was a short man, black-bearded and smooth-skinned, with a big nose, almost an intellectual forehead, small, white-looking hands, all ablaze with diamonds, about whose fine quality there could not be two opinions; and, what was even more remarkable, there hung as a pendant to his watch chain a great uncut ruby which must have been worth five thousand pounds. One trademark of the sea alone did he possess, in the dark, curly ringlets which fell to his shoulders, matted there as long uncombed, but typical in all of the man. This then was the fellow upon whose every word that company of ruffians appeared to hang, who obeyed him, as I observed presently, when he did so much as lift his hand—the man of whom Martin Hall had painted such a fantastic picture, who was, as I had been told, soon to be wanted by every government in Europe.

Hall was the first to speak, and it was evident to me that he cloaked his own voice, putting on the nasal twang and the manner of an East-end Jew dealer.

"I have come, Mr. Black," he said, "as you was good enough to wish, with a few little things—beautiful things—which cost me moosh money——"

"Ho, ho!" sang out Captain Black, "here is a Jew who paid much money for a few little things! Look at him, boys!—the Jew with much money! Turn out his pockets, boys!—the Jew with much money! Ho, ho!"

His merriment set all the company roaring to his mood. For a moment their play was far from innocent, for one lighted a great sheet of paper and burnt it under the nose of my friend. I remembered Hall's words, and held still, giving banter for banter. In what sort of a company was I, where mere seamen wore diamond rings. Hall gathered up his trinkets and proceeded to lay them out with the well-simulated cuning of the trader.

(To be continued.)

Puzzled.

"I don't know whether to be offended at Miss Smythers or not!" declared Stax, seriously.

"What's the matter?" asked his friend.

"About 11 o'clock last night when I was calling on her," he continued, "she said in the sweetest kind of way, 'Mr. Stax, what in the world does that funny word "skidoo" mean?'"—Detroit Free Press.

INTELLECTUAL NEW YORK.

More Reading Done There Than in Any Other City.

Boston may claim the palm for intellectuality and real blue-blooded "baked in the bean" cleverness, but there are few persons who dwell more upon letters or read more in a lifetime than the average New Yorker, says the New York Press.

The New Yorker never stops reading, from the moment he shuts his flat door behind him in the morning until he comes back and shuts it behind him again at night. The moment he gets downstairs the bellboy hands him his mail or he takes it out of his own letter box as the case may be. It may not contain a personal letter, but there is never a day that he does not receive from one to three or four advertisements, booklets, pamphlets or circulars. He always glances over these at least once, and by the time he has finished he has reached the corner and is buying his morning newspaper.

As there is a newspaper issued about every hour of the day in New York City and many men try to devour them all the New Yorker spends a good many hours over his pink, yellow or burnt orange sheet. If he happens to finish one of these while on a street car or elevated train he cannot glance up without seeing a dozen advertisements along the line above the windows waiting to be read. These glare at him so steadfastly and furiously that he cannot fail to read them sooner or later. But, if one's eyes are tired and he shuts them to the street car ads, or turns them toward the street, the spell is still upon him. Signs, big and little; quick-lunch signs, hotel signs, tailor shop signs; bootblacks, barbers, theaters—all have their signs; millions of them, like microbes.

Then there are the names of the streets on the lamp posts as he flashes by. There is an almost uncontrollable desire to read them as well as the numbers on the automobiles which glare at you and the newsstand signs teeming with vari-colored ads and the billboards and the rubber-neck coaches and the sandwich men. By the time the New Yorker reaches his office and begins to open his mail his eyes and brain are tired; but he goes on all day long, reading, reading, reading about baby powder and fancy preserves and canned soups and health foods and cold cream and hair renewers, etc., and then the Bostonian sneers because we have no time or inclination left for reading mere books.

QUEER WAY OF SMOKING.

West Indians Put Lighted End of Cigar in Mouth.

Visitors to the West Indies and the Spanish main have often noticed the native negro carrying a thin, dark object, like a very long cigarette or slender cigar, in his mouth, and if these visitors look long enough they would see smoke issuing occasionally from between the full, red lips of a buxom matron or a dried-up granny, says the New York Herald. But even the most observant could see no light on the end of the cigar smoked by the natives of the tropics.

That is not to be wondered at, however, for the reason that it is the custom of the natives in that part of the country to smoke with the lighted end inside the mouth. That is curious, of course, but not as remarkable as it sounds. Most of the women, who are all great smokers, work very hard. They coal ships, load bananas and do the kind of work usually done by men.

When on the docks, where they make hundreds of trips a day from the ship to the coal yard or fruit cars, there is generally a strong breeze blowing and it would be almost impossible to keep a cigar lighted in the teeth of a stiff trade wind. Besides, these hard toilers, who earn a few pence or a shilling a day, according to the amount of coal or fruit they carry, could not afford to take the time to keep their tobacco lighted, so they hit upon the scheme of protecting the light by keeping it in the mouth and thus enjoying a smoke without trouble or loss of time. They have been doing this for so many years that the older ones are experts and never burn their tongues or the inside of their mouths and the younger women soon get the hang of it.

The cigars they smoke are usually made of native tobacco and fashioned very rudely. They are about the size of a lead pencil.

The Brass Knocker.

An editor looked up from his dog-eared copy of "Lorna Doone."

"I've read this book about eight times," he said. "What first attracted me to it was a remark of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In England, some years ago, I saw the archbishop distribute some prize books to schoolboys. One of the books was 'Lorna Doone,' and as he handed it out the archbishop said:

"'I went to school with the writer of this book. As he was a little younger than me, when he misbehaved I used to knock him on the head with a brass hammer.'"—Washington Star.

The act of forgiving doesn't always take away the power of memory.

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