

THE TREY O' HEARTS," Part 4, at Gem Thea

CHAPTER XIV.

A Double Escape.

On Nauset Beach, in the shank of a summer night, two men sprawled on the sands, some distance back from the water, and listened to the heavy thumping of their overtaxed hearts, and panted.

Now and again one would lift his head and stare out over the black face of the waters at a little line of red flames about a mile off shore, all that remained to witness to the fact that, an hour since, these two had been in command of as trim a small schooner as ever ventured the coastwise trip from Portland to New York.

As far out again shone the starboard light of a becalmed schooner, whose people had been directly responsible for the disaster which had overtaken the smaller vessel.

In the course of time, beginning to breathe with more ease, one of the two marooned gentlemen said:

"What I can't understand—anyway—is why these damned thugs out there thought we'd be asses enough to stay aboard the Seaventure and get burned up."

The other replied: "Did they?"

"Looks that way—doesn't it? If they didn't, why were we permitted to swim ashore at our elegant leisure?"

"There was nothing to prevent their rowing round to cut us off."

"Maybe they did, at that, and missed us, Mr. Law-and-Order!"

"But—"

"We were a wee mite excited you've got to admit. It's just possible we didn't hear the noise of their oars. And it's black enough for them to have overlooked us. A man's head in the water isn't really a conspicuous object on a dark night."

"Tell me, Barcus, what's the nearest symptom of civilization?"

"Chatham village," said Mr. Barcus, "six miles to the northwards, and cut off by an inlet a mile or so wide at that."

Mr. Law groaned soulfully.

"Then there's the lighthouse on Monomoy point," Mr. Barcus pursued, "three miles to the south."

Mr. Law said nothing whatever to this.

"Of course," his companion reflected morosely, "this had to happen in mid-summer! A month earlier we'd have

had the life-saving patrol to look to for protection. But the service is suspended in June and July."

A silence commenced eloquently on this assertion, broken only when Mr. Law voiced a thought bred of long and malignant observation of the schooner's green eye:

"I'd give a deal to know who's aboard that vessel."

"You don't mean you think your regular young woman—?"

"It's possible, Judith kidnaped Rose in Portland. That's not so far from Gloucester; a motor car could have caught that schooner before she sailed to waylay us, this morning. And what better way to take care of an able-bodied, full-tempered girl you've kidnaped than to ship her somewhere by sea, in the care of trustworthy bellions?"

"Don't ask me—I've done 'ery little kidnaping for one of my years."

"For tuppence," said Mr. Law, "I'd risk a swim off to that boat and see for myself."

"For two million dollars—I would not!" Barcus affirmed with great decision.

A moment or so later the line of little flames went out altogether and unexpectedly; and the owner of the late Seaventure fancied he could hear, even at that distance, the hiss of charred and smoldering timbers sucked under and drowned out.

"Exit," he announced plaintively, "Exit Seaventure," with heroic gesture.

"R. I. P. a good little ship!"

Alan Law sat up, abstractedly scrubbing a crust of sand from his cheeks and commented soulfully: "Oh—damn!"

"That goes double here," his companion rejoined. "And the way I see it, I've got a right to do all the cussing at this juncture of our hero's foolish, but fascinating adventures. I'm the injured party—it was my boat, and now it's gone. I'm broke for fair. Gee!" he pursued vindictively.

"Oh, let up, can't you!" Mr. Law exclaimed peevishly. "I'm sorer than you are—and after all, it's my loss; I've got to buy you another boat. All you've lost is your temper."

"And my susceptibility to the charms

of the well-known sex," Mr. Barcus corrected. "Nothing can ever restore my lost faith in gentle woman's gentleness. When you brought that young woman aboard I thought butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and for a while I actually contemplated doing her the kindness of tipping you over into the drink, so's she could lavish her tender affections on a regular guy, someone able to appreciate her—meaning me, of course. And first thing I know, she ups and points a gun at my head and tips me overboard, and then makes a pretty bonfire out of my sailboat. And all the excuse you can produce is that she's crazy in the head! Well, who said she wasn't? Any woman who would consent to clope with you is a fit subject for a commission de lunatico inquirendo, all right."

"If you inflicted any such monologues as that on Judith," retorted Mr. Law, "I don't blame her for trying to slay you, and I'm sorry I interfered."

"There's gratitude for you!" Mr. Barcus remarked bitterly. "I risk my life for you, and you won't even let me talk about it!"

"It isn't your talking I mind—it's the everlasting noise you make," Mr. Law explained. "Besides—listen!"

For a moment the two maintained attentive silence.

A silken whisper troubled the silence, a little flutter of sound from far across the waters. Gradually it gathered volume, became recognizable as the lisp of cautious oars.

"I'm going away from here," Mr. Barcus announced guardedly, and gathered his legs under him preparatory to rising.

"Half a second," Alan Law insisted, rising in turn and grasping the other by the arm. "They've got to land—haven't they?—and leave the boat while they look for us. Well, then, what's to prevent our hiding in the dunes and—?"

In the next breath, "Look out!" he shrieked.

With no warning whatever, and within fifty feet of them, a ghastly flare broke out in full blaze on the surface of the water, revealing the shape of a dory which had drawn in unseen under cover of the profound darkness, and at the same time discovering to its occupants the two startled figures on the beach.

Before they could stir the weird light glimmered on a polished weapon in the bow of the boat, a spiteful tongue of reddish flame spat out, a bullet sang between Messrs. Law and Barcus, and with a sad thud of disappointment buried itself in the sands of the wave-eaten bluff behind them.

Like twin automatons stirred to action by the report, the two turned and pelted off down the beach, to escape that deadly area of illumination.

Other shots sped after them, but none was so well aimed, and presently, finding a break in the bluff, they swung off into the grateful shelter of the night-wrapped dunes.

Meantime the dory had grounded on the beach, and its several occupants—four or five of them, all men, apparently—jumping out, set off in pursuit of the fugitives, following the tracks in the sand.

The blackness of the night, however, conspired with the savage labyrinth of the dunes to save Alan and his companion.

Within another five minutes—while still the pursuit floundered and blathered at random a round quarter-mile to the south—Mr. Law and Mr. Barcus were noiselessly squirming on their bellies, like two snakes in the beach-grass, up the back of a ten-foot bluff. And presently from its brow they looked down on the spot where the dory lay, only its bow out of water, its stern afloat, under armed guard.

Very slowly and stealthily Alan got to his feet and swung back over his shoulder a heavy club of driftwood.

A match spluttered beside the dory and flamed in the still air, relieving with its reddish glow a bronzed and evil visage.

The guard puffed fast and had the tobacco well aglow when the sky took advantage of his trustfulness and fell upon him like an avalanche.

Simultaneously Alan and Barcus descended the face of the bluff in two miniature landslides, dug themselves out, and by the time the dazed and disarmed guard had sufficiently recovered to cry out for help the dory was a hundred yards off the beach and making excellent time in the direction of that lonely green light.

They wrought with the oars like men possessed, yet with a machine-like precision that drove the boat fast and furiously—without attempt to still the splashing of their blades. Concealment of their purpose from those who remained aboard the schooner was out of the question. The shouts, the shots, the play of flashlights along the beach—as though Bedlam had loosed half a dozen lunatic will o' the wisps upon the holy peace of night—must have betrayed the fact that they had turned the tables long before the dory left the inshore shoals.

The commonest precautions, however, made them pause and rest upon their oars while yet a little way from their goal.

Only an ominous silence rewarded the utmost efforts of their straining senses; no sound was audible other than the gentle whine of an ungreased block; nothing was visible beyond the sinister glare of that almost stationary green lantern.

"What think?" Barcus inquired in a dubious undertone.

"No telling," Alan replied in the same manner. "All a chance."

"You've got that gun handy?"—with reference to the rifle of which they

had despoiled the victim of the sky's ill-faith.

"Here."

"Then—let's go to it! Give way!"

A dozen lusty strokes brought them alongside the schooner, and as the dory scraped the waist of the larger vessel the two young men dropped oars, rose, and seizing the low gun-wales, lifted themselves to the deck.

Nothing opposed them; the deck was ignorant of other footsteps than their own, the schooner as silent as only a becalmed ship can be.

Without further consultation, Alan led quickly aft and down the companionway to the cabin, where a dim light burned—a smoky lamp swinging in gimbals above a cluttered table.

Of the two stateroom doors one disclosed an empty cabin, the other was locked.

Trying the handle roughly, Alan fancied he heard a sound within. Pausing, he called, with a thrill of fearful hope:

"Hello, in there!"

The response was cry of incredulous delight: "Alan!"

By way of answer Alan hurled himself bodily against the door. At the

"Nothing—wind too fresh. Make yourself easy on the soft side of a plank here. I'll land you a kick in the slats when so minded—or when it's your trick at the wheel."

With a chuckle, Alan obediently stretched himself out on the deck.

"I say—Law!"

"Well?"

"You seem pretty easy in your mind about this young woman below. To me, she's the same that tried to send me to Davy Jones' locker. How does she explain her presence aboard?"

"Much as I surmised," Alan replied. "I fancy they chloroformed her while she slept in that hotel in Portland. Whether or no, Rose woke up in a closed motor car—bound and gagged, of course—and was brought aboard at Gloucester about midnight."

"Simple when you know how," Barcus commented. "Of course, I always did say that truth was a stranger to fiction. Cuddle down, now, and I'll talk you insensible."

His accents already merging in with the swish of the longside waves, the bubbling of the wake, and the many-toned composite voice of the ship in being, unconsciousness like a cloud

signals of other shipping sounded a concert of discordance—the maw-power horn of a catboat crying the warning back to the deep-throated whistling of a coastwise steamship and the impertinent drumming of a motor-boat's exhaust with the muffer cut out.

This last boxed the compass, sounding now near, now far, though the complaints of other shipping diminished in volume and died away in the distance, giving place to others still, the plutter-plutter of that motor was never altogether lost; if at times it faded, it seemed certain always to return in even louder volume.

Vainly straining his vision against the blank pallor of the encompassing fog, Alan wondered, worried, dreaded!

At irregular intervals, starting from preoccupation, he would manipulate the brass pull on the wheel-box, provoking the horn's stuttering blasts of protest. But the need for unremitting vigilance and exercise of the fog-signal failed none the less to reconcile Alan to that blatant clamor which so widely and so hideously advertised their whereabouts.

If there were anything still to be feared from Judith and her crew—if, for instance, as Barcus had suggested, they had sought out one of the life-saving stations on Nauset beach, appropriated its power-driven lifeboat and renewed the pursuit, if ever they heard that horn there would beyond question be the devil to pay!

The loneliness of his vigil was eventually relieved by the appearance on deck of the woman Alan loved.

The tableau that greeted her vision as she emerged from the companionway, of the haggard, unshaven wretch at the wheel and the other who lay at his feet, where he had fallen, in a stupor of fatigue, instantly wrung from Rose a little cry of solicitude. And she was quick to do what little she could to alleviate their discomfort. For Barcus she fetched a pillow and blanket from the cabin, and this one suffered her ministrations without once rousing from his slumbers. Then hastening forward, she got the galley fire going and prepared a makeshift breakfast for her half-famished lover.

Warm food and hot coffee—such as they were—lending a little tone to Alan's spirits, he was presently able to discuss their situation with some optimism. Yet nothing could gloss the fact that the problem confronting them was one whose solution baffled their utmost ingenuity—one the simple contemplation of which taxed their courage and intelligence to the extreme.

He summed up: "I can't see anything for it but father and Judith are determined to have my scalp, and I'm hanged if I can see how to protect myself without taking a leaf out of their books. What I'm most afraid of is that some time I may forget it's a woman I'm defending myself against. When a fellow's fighting for his very life he can't always stop to calculate the weight of his blows."

The young man sighed, shook his head, laughed uncertainly, and held her closer to him. "Don't fear; I'll find some way out without injuring either of them. I promise you that!"

He sealed the pledge upon her lips. And in that moment of their oblivion to the world from some point forward a muffled crash sounded simultaneously with the dull shock of a collision with a smaller vessel, and a strange voice cried out with an accent of high exultation.

Before either Alan or the girl could disengage the decks rang loud with a rush of booted feet pounding aft.

The figures of the boarding party were already taking shape through the fog as Alan sprang toward the companionway to fetch the rifle. And in this action his feet slipped on planks greasy with moisture deposited by the surcharged atmosphere. He went down with a stumbling thump, and an instant later two men fell heavily upon him—active, strong fellows in the dress of fishermen. He was suffered to rise only as a prisoner, helpless in the grasp of two pairs of powerful hands.

He saw Barcus, rudely roused and still dumb with sleepy confusion, in no better case—jerked to his feet and held captive by two more fishermen. A fifth had taken charge of Rose, clamping her wrists in the vise of one big hand.

The sixth and sole other member of the boarding party, likewise in the rough-and-ready garb of a fisherman, was Judith Trine.

Down the side a heavy life-boat ground its way astern, the loose end of its painter slipping over the rail even as Alan caught sight of it. (So it seemed Barcus had guessed shrewdly.)

Observing this, one of the men in charge of Alan made as if to leave him to the other, addressing Judith for permission to prevent the loss of the lifeboat. She stopped him with a peremptory gesture.

"No—let it go. We're better off without it. Hold that man fast till I fetch a rope. We'll make sure of them both this time!"

Straining forward in the grasp of her guard, Rose implored her sister: "Judith, in pity's name, think what you are doing!"

"Hold your tongue!" Judith snapped viciously. "Another whimper out of you, and I'll have you gagged!"

The balance of her threat, though accompanied by the exhibition of an automatic pistol, was drowned out by the sudden roar of a steamship fog-signal, so close aboard that it seemed almost to emanate from the forepart of the schooner herself.

As it was answered by shrill and hoarse cries of terror or of warning from a dozen throats, Alan found him-

self released, his captors leaping to their lives to the taffrail.

He caught an instantaneous glimpse of the knife-like bow of a great steamer—towering above the two-master—sweeping toward it at a speed which raised a smart jet of white under the cutwater.

Someone aboard the schooner, with the voice of a stentor, bellowed a terrified appeal:

"Stop your engines! Shut off your propeller! Stop your—"

Then, like the wrath of God, the steamship overwhelmed the lesser ship; its bow seemed to slice through the schooner as a knife through cheese. And the two halves were fairly driven under water by the frightful force of the blow.

Thunders deafening him, Alan was hurled bodily through the air fully twenty feet.

When he came up he struck out at random, blindly tormented by the vision of Rose caught in the suck of



Now and Again One Would Lift His Head.

second impact of shoulders backed by a hundred and eighty pounds of solid flesh and determination, the lock splintered away from its socket, the door flew open with a bang—and Alan into the room with a cry: "Rose!"

His sweetheart met him half-way, her arms uplifted, her countenance transfixed.

And Mr. Barcus turned and slowly ascended the companionway, his nose wrinkled with misgivings.

"Blest if I know how he thinks he can tell 'em apart," he remarked. "Not that I blame him for taking a chance; it wouldn't pain me any to find out I'd kissed the wrong girl by mistake—not, that is, unless she didn't care for my technique."

"In that case," he allowed, "I guess the sequel would be apt to prove tolerable agonizing!"

Some ten minutes later a hail from the deck broke the embrace of the lovers:

"Below there! I say—Law!—wind a-coming!"

"Right-o! Half a minute!"

But that stipulated delay was several times multiplied before Alan showed up on deck to find Barcus bending a laborious back to the capstan.

"Lend a hand, can't you?" Barcus complained, blowing heavily. "I didn't interrupt your amours just to get an audience. The sooner we get this anchor in—"

Alan checked him with a hand on his arm. "What's that?" he demanded in a tone suffused with apprehension.

The muffled running of a heavy-duty marine motor drifted down on the wings of the sluggish wind.

"Don't ask me—I'm afraid to guess!"

"But they couldn't possibly!"

"Since when did you set up to be a judge of possibilities? Nothing probable ever happened to you in all your young life—'s far's I can make out. As for me—I know there are at least two life-saving stations on Nauset, both with modern equipment—motor life-boats and all; and nothing will ever persuade me that pack of wolves would stick at breaking in and confiscating one of the same. It's as likely as not—only more so. Our present business is to get the h—l out of here—and not advertise our exit, either. Take that port light in and douse it, while I do the same by the starboard. Then duck below, warn your Dulcinea, and put out the cabin lamp. That way—if this blackness and our bull-neck only holds—we may manage an evasion!"

There followed an exceedingly busy quarter of an hour for two constrained in pitch darkness to grope their way about the decks and familiarize themselves with the idiotic necessities of a strange two-master. Nevertheless, the end of that period found the schooner with canvas full and sheets taut, a good easterly breeze abeam, swiftly weaving a wake southwards—the light on Monomoy point watching her curiously from over the starboard beam.

"Hear anything more of that power boat?" Alan asked, joining Barcus by the wheel.

descended upon Alan's overwheeled faculties.

He woke mutinously, with a yawn and a shiver in the gray of a tarnished daybreak, to find that fog pressed heavily upon the face of the waters, a mist so thick that from the stern the waist of the vessel was almost invisible, the bows completely so.

Barcus stood over him, at the wheel, fairly reeling with weariness, his eyes blood-shot, swollen, and half-closed in a face like a mask of fatigue.

"Can't keep this up much longer," he apologized thickly; "stood it about as long as I can. Take your trick and give me forty winks."

Grateful solicitude brought Alan instantly to his side, though he himself was sluggish and stiff and sore in all his limbs.

"You're a brick!" he protested. "Why didn't you call me sooner?"

"No good; I knew the way—you didn't. That is, I did until this accursed fog closed down a couple of hours ago. Now—God knows where



The Sixth Member of the Boarding Party Was Judith Trine.

we are—by my reckoning, somewhere in Nantucket sound, west of Monomoy."

Grasping a small brass handle affixed to the wheel box, he jerked it sharply three times, and the automatic horn blared raucously a threefold response up forward.

"Keep that going," he begged, "three blasts in a row and a minute interval—and if the devil takes care of his own we may possibly escape being run down."

With a sigh, relinquishing the wheel, he collapsed upon the deck and was almost instantly asleep.

The wind had fallen until barely enough air stirred to keep way on the vessel; she moved in silence, a spectral ship upon a spectral sea of long, oily swells and the complexion of lead.

Hither and yon in the obscurity, fog-



Accompanied by the Exhibition of an Automatic Pistol.

that gigantic wheel, drawn under, crushed and mangled by the propeller of the vast black bulk whose flank was sliding past, like the face of a cliff, ten yards behind his shoulders.

Aware of several dark objects dotting the surface within a radius of several yards, he swam for the nearest; the head was a woman's, the face turned toward him, the face of Rose.

He gasped wildly: "Keep cool! Don't struggle! Put one hand on my shoulder and—"

What happened then was never quite clear to him; he only knew that he was forced to fight for his very life—that the woman, as soon as he came within reach, flung herself upon him like some maddened animal, clutching his throat, winding her limbs round his, dragging him down and down.

Primitive instinct alone saved him. He remembered later, most vaguely, the culmination of that duel beneath the waters—remembered freeing an arm, drawing it back, delivering a blow from his shoulder, with all his strength, finding himself free, struggling back to the air.

Then a boathook caught the back of his shirt and dragged him for some distance, until two strong hands caught him beneath the armpits and held his head above the water.

He looked up witlessly into the face of Barcus, and, still bewildered, struggled feebly.

The other's voice brought him back to his senses. "Easy, old top! Take it easy! You're all right now—rest a minute, then help me get you aboard."

He obeyed, controlling his panic as best he might; and presently, with considerable assistance from Barcus, contrived to scramble in over the gun-wales of a boat which proved to be the stolen lifeboat.

Aside from Barcus and himself it held one other person only—the woman he loved, crumpled up and unconscious in the bow.

He strove to rise and go to her, to make sure that still she lived. Barcus restrained and quieted him.

"There! Easy, I say! She's all right—fainted—that's all! She and I took the water in practically the same spot, and luck threw this blessed boat my way within half a dozen strokes. No trouble at all—in a manner of speaking!"

"But the steamer—"

"Why fret about her? At the pace she was making she couldn't have stopped within half a mile. We'll be all right now—with power to fetch us to land."

"But the others—Judith!" Alan sat up and leaned over the gunwale, searching an oily, leaden expanse spotted only with a few splinters and bits of wreckage. "I left her out there—unconscious—she'll drown, I tell you!"

"And I'll tell you something!" said Mr. Barcus severely. "You'll lie quiet and shut up or I'll dent your dome with the shaft of an oar. Let her drown—and a good job, I say! Don't you know the meaning of 'enough'? Merciful heavens, man, you're the most insatiable glutton for punishment ever!"

But Alan wasn't listening. His face was as lightless as the waters that swam beneath his lack-luster gaze. There was a horror in his heart that numbed even the sense of relief, of deliverance, that penetrated his being like a shock of mortal pain.

Dead! Judith dead! Back there, in the fog and the cold . . . dead by his hand!

(To be Continued.)



With a Cry: "Rose!"

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