A BEAUTIFUL PIRATE

BY GUY BOOTHBY

Author of "A Bid for Fortune," "The Marriage of Esther," etc., etc.

what purpose they were intended, my guide again laughed and said:

"You must not ask too many questions, my friend, for obvious reasons. In this case, however, and since you have given your word not to tell what you may see, I will explain."

Detaching the catch of one, he lifted it from the deck and threw it over the side, where it hung, just reaching to the top of the copper below water.

"Do you grasp the idea?" he continued. "The next one fits into that, and the next one into that again, and so on

Taking the arm he offered me, we set off

all round the boat. You see, they can be attached in no time, and when they are once fixed, the shape of the masts altered, the funnel differently cased or done away with altogether, the character of her bows and stern changed beyond recognition by another appliance, she can be three different crafts inside of 48 hours."

This, then, accounted for the number of different vessels the Beautiful White Devil was supposed to possess. I began to understand the marvelous escapes more clearly now.

"And who—who was this ingenious [illegible] I ventured to ask.

"[illegible] of our things, her ladyship," he replied, "and wonderfully [illegible]—and it has proved."

[illegible] I [illegible] too much [illegible] I [illegible] to learn [illegible]

[illegible] I [illegible] I can't [illegible] he answered, shaking [illegible] We have strict instructions [illegible] and there is such a man [illegible] this ship who values his life so little [illegible] disobeying. On [illegible] of advice I will give you, but [illegible] for the sake of what we went through together yesterday. Take care how you behave toward her. In spite of her [illegible] frank, artless manner [illegible] takes in and realizes the relative and importance of everything you say or do. If you act fairly toward her, she will act fairly by you, but if you play her false you're a dead man. Remember that. Now you must excuse me if I go to my duties. My absence in [illegible] has delayed my work sadly. And there goes eight bells."

As the silvery voice of a bell chimed out from the forecastle he left me and went below. Hardly knowing what to do with myself, I went back to my chair. A tall man with a gray beard clipped sharp, glittering eyes and a not unhandsome face, marred, however, by what looked like a saber cut extending from the left temple to his chin, resigned the deck to another officer and went below.

While the watch was being changed I had an opportunity of examining the crew. They were nearly all natives, smart, intelligent looking fellows, and excellently disciplined. Whether they were Dyaks or Malays, however, I had not sufficient experience to determine, and for more than one reason I did not like to ask.

But at that moment my reverie was interrupted by the appearance of a neatly clad steward, who in broken English presented me with an invitation from her ladyship to tiffin in the saloon in half an hour. This was an unexpected honor, and one which, you may be sure, I did not hesitate to accept. I wanted, however, to make a suitable toilet first, but where to do it puzzled me, for so far as I knew no cabin had yet been apportioned to me. I placed my difficulty before an officer who was standing near me. He said something in native dialect to the steward, who replied, and then turned again to me.

"Your traps have been placed in a cabin next to Mr. Walworth's, he says, and if you will follow him he will conduct you to it."

I followed the steward down the main companion (I afterward discovered that the one aft was saved to her ladyship) as requested and found myself in a large messroom, in which three officers were seated at lunch. On either side a number of fair sized berths were situated. The one set apart for me was nearest the companion and contained a bunk, a small settee and locker combined, a washstand basin and a place for hanging clothes. The first operation was to shave, a bath followed, to which another steward conducted me, after which I returned to my berth, dressed my wound, and, having selected a clean suit of white ducks, attired myself and repaired on deck.

Punctual to the stroke of two bells (1 o'clock) I was summoned to the after saloon by my first messenger. I followed him, and descending the companion, the scantling of which was prettily picked out in white and gold, found myself in her ladyship's own quarters. There was no one present, and I must own I was glad of that, for I wanted an opportunity to look about me.

In the small space I can allot to it, it would be difficult to do adequate justice to the cabin in which I found myself, but for the better understanding of my story I must endeavor to give you some description of it. In the first place, you must understand that the companion ladder opened directly into the saloon itself. This otherwise commonplace effect was, however, rendered most artistic by a heavy pile of carpet which covered the steps and by the curtains which draped the entrance and the portholes. More of the same noiseless carpet covered the floor, while light was supplied from ports on either side and from a richly decorated skylight in the deck above. The effect of the thick butt of the mainmast was entirely taken away by a number of artfully contrived and molded Japanese mirrors, which, besides fulfilling their original purpose, gave an additional air of light and elegance to the room. The walls, which were exquisitely paneled and molded in ivory and gold, were loaded with bric-a-brac of every description, including much china and many pictures of rare value, while deep chairs and couches, Turkish and Indian divans, piles of soft cushions and furs were scattered about here and there, as if inviting the cabin's occupants to an existence of continual repose. A grand piano stood in one corner, firmly cleated to the deck; on the bulkhead above it were an exquisitely inlaid Spanish guitar and a Hungarian zither, while above them again were several fine specimens of the old Venetian lute. Altogether a more luxurious and beautifully furnished apartment it has never been my good fortune to behold, and I settled myself down in a comfortable chair prepared to spend a really critical and enjoyable time. Then a daintily bound volume, open on a cushion near where I sat, attracted my attention. I took it up to find that it was a volume of Heine's poems in the original.

"So my lady understands German and reads Heine, too, does she?" I said to myself. "I must"—

But I was prevented saying what I would do by the drawing aside of a curtain that covered a door at the farther end of the saloon and the entrance of my hostess herself. If she were capable of such a weakness, my astonishment must have flattered her, for, prepared as I was to see a beautiful woman, I had no idea she would prove as lovely as she looked then. She had discarded the close fitting white dress she had worn earlier in the day and was now attired in some soft clinging fabric of a dark color, which not only brought out all the lines of her superb figure, but rendered her even more attractive than before. There must have been a quantity of jet scattered about the costume, for I was conscious of a shimmering sensation which accompanied her every movement. She carried herself with a truly regal air, and I had a better opportunity permitted me now of seeing what a beautiful face it really was and how exquisitely her head was set upon her shoulders. Her hands and feet were very small, as was her mouth, while her ears were like shells tucked into fragrant nests against her head. But the glory that eclipsed all others was the wealth of golden hair that crowned her. Such hair I have never seen before or since. It seemed to have caught all the sunshine of the world and to be jealous of dispersing it again.

Once more, as if to afford as great a contrast as possible to so much loveliness, the same ferocious bulldog followed at her heels, and when she approached me stood regarding me with calmly scrutinizing eyes.

"Welcome to my cabin, Dr. De Normanville," she said, coming over to me and holding out her tiny hand with a frank gesture. "I am delighted to see that you are looking so much better."

"I'm feeling quite strong again, thank you," I answered, completely carried away by the charm of her manner. "I cannot think what made me break down in that undignified fashion. I'm afraid you will despise me for giving such an exhibition of weakness."

She seated herself in a deep chair beside me and slowly fanned herself with a black ostrich plume, at the same time stroking the dog's ugly head with her little foot.

"I don't really see why I should," she said seriously after a moment's pause. "You must have had a terrible time on that horrible junk. I feel as if I was personally to blame for it. However, I shall have more to say on that subject later. In the meantime let us be thankful that you came out of it as safely as you did. I do not like the Chinese!"

I saw a little shudder sweep over her as she said this, so to turn the conversation into a pleasanter channel I commented on the sailing qualities of her schooner. The subject evidently pleased her, for her eyes sparkled with a new light.

"There is no boat like her in the wide, wide world!" she cried enthusiastically. "I had her built for me on my own lines, and I have tried her on every wind and in every sea, till I have come to know her better than a rider knows his horse. She is the most beautiful and the swiftest craft in the world. And there are times, Dr. De Normanville"—here she sank her voice a little, and it seemed to me it trembled—"when it is of the utmost importance to me that I should move quickly. She has saved my life not once, but a hundred times. Can you wonder, therefore, that I love her? But I'm afraid you are too prejudiced against me to have much sympathy in my escapes."

"I hope you will not think so. I"—

"Forgive my interrupting you, but don't you think it would be better if we sat down to table instead of discussing my unfortunate self?"

She pressed an electric bell in the woodwork by her side and ordered tiffin. When it was served, we went over to the table and the meal commenced.

I am not going to tell you what we ate, for, to confess the honest truth, within half an hour I had forgotten what it was myself. I only know that

"I do not like the Chinese!"

it was admirably cooked and served. As it proceeded we chatted on various minor matters—literature of all nations, music and painting—and it was not until we had finished and the cloth had been removed and we were alone together that my hostess touched upon the reason of my presence on board.

"You know, of course, Dr. De Normanville," she said, ensconcing herself in a big chair when we had left the table, "why I sent for you?"

"It was explained to me by your messenger. But I must confess I do not quite understand it yet. He said something about an island."

"And he was quite right. An outbreak of smallpox has occurred on the island which I make my depot. Where that island is I cannot of course tell you. But you will see it for yourself soon enough. In the meantime I may inform you that the havoc wrought by the disease has been terrible, and it was only when I found that I could make no headway against it myself that I determined to send to Hongkong for assistance. To get hold of you was a piece of good fortune I did not expect."

I bowed my acknowledgment of the compliment she paid me and asked if she herself had been much among the cases.

"Why, of course!" she answered. "My poor people call me their mother and naturally turn to me for assistance in their trouble. It went to my very heart not to be able to help them."

"But were you quite wise, do you think, to run so much risk?"

"I did not think of myself at all. How could I? Do you think of the risk you run when you are called in to an infectious case?"

"I take all proper precaution, at least. When were you vaccinated last, may I ask?"

"In Rome, in June, 1883."

"Then, with your mission, I'll do it again, and at once. You cannot be too careful."

Receiving her assent I went off to my cabin, where I had noticed that a large portion of my medical outfit had been stored, and having obtained what I sought returned with it to the saloon. Alle, for by that name I must henceforward call her, was waiting for me, her arm bared to the shoulder. Never, if I live to be a hundred, shall I forget the impression that snow white arm made upon me. It seemed like an act of basest sacrilege to perform even such a simple operation upon it. Beelzebub, the bulldog, evidently thought so, too, for he watched me attentively enough during the whole of the time it took me. However, it had to be done, and done it accordingly was. Then, when I had put my paraphernalia back into its case, I bade her goodby and turned to go. She stopped me, however, and held out her hand.

"Do you know, Dr. De Normanville, I want to make you like me. I want you to forget, if you can—while you are with us, at any rate—the stories you have heard about me. Some day perhaps I will attempt to show you that I am not altogether as bad as people have painted me."

For the moment I was so completely carried away by her outburst of girlish frankness that I hardly knew what to say.

"'Pon my soul, I really don't believe you are," I blurted out, like a schoolboy.

"Thank you for that, at least," she said, smiling at my earnestness, and then, making me a little courtesy, she turned and disappeared through the door by which she had first entered the saloon.

After dinner, of which I partook in the officer's messroom, I returned to the deck. It was nearly 8 o'clock, and as fine a night as I had seen since I came into the east. Lighting a cigar, I walked aft, and, leaning upon the taffrail, scanned the quiet sea. Situated as I was, it is not to be wondered at that a variety of thoughts thronged my brain. I tried to think what my dear old mother would have said could she have seen the position my overrash acceptance of a tempting offer had placed me in. From my mother, who, with my father, had been dead nearly five years, my thoughts passed on to other relatives—to a girl whom I had once thought I loved, but who had jilted me in favor of a brother student. The old heartache was almost gone now, but it had been a most unfortunate affair. Since then, however, I flattered myself, I had been heart whole, and I deluded myself with the notion that I was likely to remain so.

Since dinner the breeze had freshened, and the schooner, with all sail set, was now slipping swiftly through the water. I turned, and, leaning against the rail, looked aloft at the stretch of canvas which seemed to reach up almost to the stars, then back again at the wake and the wonderful exhibition of phosphorized water below the counter.

Suddenly I became aware of some one standing by my side, and turning my head I discovered it was none other than the Beautiful White Devil herself. She was still dressed in black, with a sort of mantilla of soft lace draped about her head.

"What a supreme fascination there is about the sea at night, isn't there?" she said softly, looking down at the sparkling water. I noticed the beauty of the little white hand upon the rail as I replied in appropriate terms.

"There is somebody," she continued, "who says that 'the sea belongs to eternity, and not time, and of that it sings its monotonous song forever and ever.'"

"That is a very beautiful idea," I answered, "but don't you think there are others that fully equal it? What do you say to 'the sea complains upon a thousand shores?'"

"Or your English poet Wordsworth, 'The sea that bares her bosom to the wind?'"

"Let me meet you with an American, 'The sea tosses and foams to find its way up to the cloud and wind.' Could anything be finer than that? There you have the true picture—the utter restlessness and the striving of the untamed sea."

"'Would'st thou,' so that helmsman answered,
'Learn the secret of the sea?
Only those who brave its dangers
Comprehend its mystery!'"

"Bravo! That caps all."

For some seconds my companion stood silent, gazing across the deep. Then she said very softly:

"And who is better able to speak about its dangers than I, whose home it is? Dr. De Normanville, I think if I were to tell you some of the dangers through which I have passed you would hardly believe me."

"I think I could believe anything you told me."

"I rather doubt it. You see, you have no idea what an extraordinary existence mine is. Why, my life is one long battle with despair. I am like a hunted animal flying before that hellhound, man. Do you know how near I was to being caught once? Let me tell you about it and see if it will convey any idea to you. It was in Singapore, and I was dining at the house of a prominent police official, as the friend of his wife. I had met her some months before under peculiar circumstances, and we had become intimate. During the meal my host spoke of the Beautiful White Devil and commented on her audacity. 'However, we have at last received a clew concerning her,' he said. 'She is not far away from Singapore at the present moment, and I have every reason to believe that in 48 hours she will be in our hands.' I had a full glass of champagne in my hand at the moment, and it is a compliment to the strength of my nerves to say that I raised it to my lips before answering him without spilling one drop."

"And did he never suspect?"

"No, indeed. To tell the truth, I doubt if he knows to this day how close the Beautiful White Devil really was to him. Yet one moment's hesitation might have cost me my life. Another time I attended a viceregal ball in Colombo in the capacity of an heiress from England. In the middle of the evening the partner with whom I was dancing, a young inspector of police, apologized for having to leave me. He said he had received information concerning the Beautiful White Devil, who was known to be in the town. During supper he had been telling me about his prospects and the girl who was coming out from England to marry him when he got his step. 'It will be a good thing for you if you catch this woman, won't it?' I inquired. 'It will get me promotion, and that will mean the greatest happiness of my life—my marriage!' he answered. 'Won't you wish me luck?' I did wish him luck and then went off to dance the lancers with his excellency the governor."

"Do you think it wise to run such awful risks?" I asked, amazed at her audacity.

"Perhaps not, but in that particular case I could not help myself. I stood in need of some important information and could trust nobody to obtain it but myself."

"It must have been a terrible five minutes for you."

"I expect you have been told some very curious stories about me, Dr. De Normanville?" my companion said after a little while. "I wish I could induce you to tell me what you have heard. Believe me, I have very good reason for wanting you to know the truth about me."

"That is easily told," I answered. "I have heard a great many variations of the same story, but knowing how news travels out here I have placed very little credence in any of them."

"You have heard perhaps about the sultan of Surabaya?"

I intimated that I had.

"At first you must have thought that rather a cruel action on my part. And yet if you knew all your blame would probably turn to admiration. You do not know perhaps what a character that man bore in his own state, the life he led, his excesses, his constant crimes, his tyranny over his unfortunate subjects. I tell you, sir, that that man was and is one of the greatest scoundrels upon the face of this earth. I had heard over and over again of him, and when I discovered that his people could obtain no redress for their grievances I determined to meet him on his own ground. I arranged my plans accordingly, abducted him, made him disgorge a large sum of money, half of which I caused to be anonymously distributed among the poor wretches he had robbed, and at the same time told him his character for the first and only time in his heathen existence, promising him as I did so that if he did not mend his ways I'd catch him again and silence him forever. Punishment was surely never more fitly earned. Then there was a merchant in Hongkong named Vesey. I expect you have heard of him and the trick I played him. Well, that man made an assertion about me in a public place to the effect that I was— But never mind what it was. It was so vile that I cannot repeat it to you, but I made a vow I would be revenged on him for it sooner or later. I was revenged, and in the only way he could be made to feel—that is, through his banker. He will never forgive me, of course. Now, what else have you heard?"

"Pardon my alluding to it," I said, "but—the Vectis Queen—the Oodnadatta."

"So you have heard of those affairs? Well, I do not deny them. I must have money. Look at the expenses I have to meet. Look at this boat—think of the settlement I maintain, of the hundreds of pensioners I have all through the east, of the number of people whose services it is necessary for me to retain. And pray do not misunderstand me. To you it may seem that such transactions make me neither more nor less than a thief—a common cheat and swindler. In your eyes I may be that, but I must own I do not look upon it in the same light myself. I am, and have been all my life, at war with what you call society. The reason I may perhaps explain to you some day. I know the risk I run. If society catches me, in all probability my life will pay the forfeit. I know that, and I am naturally resolved not to be caught.

"One thing is certain—I prey only on those who can afford to lose, and, like the freebooters of romance, I make it my boast that I have never knowingly robbed a poor man, while, on the other hand, I have materially assisted many. There are those, of course, who judge me harshly. Heaven forbid that they ever find themselves in the position in which I am placed! Think of it! I am hunted by all men; every man's hand is against me. I am cut off from country and friends. A price is put upon my head, and for that reason I am obliged to distrust every one on principle. Think of having the knowledge continually before you that if you are not constantly on the watch you may be caught! And then"—

"And then?"

I heard her grind her little white teeth viciously.

"There will be no then, Dr. De Normanville, so we need not talk of it. While I live they will never catch me,

"You have heard perhaps about the sultan of Surabaya?"

and when I am dead it cannot matter who has possession of my body. Good night!"

Before I could answer she had left me and vanished down the companion ladder. I turned to the sea and my own thoughts. The ship's bell struck four (10 o'clock), the lookout at the forecastle head cried, "All's well!" and silence reigned—a wonderful quiet broken only by the humming of the breeze in the shrouds and the tinkling of the water alongside. I leaned against the rail and considered the life of the Beautiful White Devil as I had heard it from her own lips.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOME OF THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL.

The sun next morning had scarcely made his appearance when I awoke to a knowledge of the fact that the yacht was stationary. Such a circumstance could have but one meaning—we had arrived at our destination. As soon, therefore, as this idea became properly impressed upon my mind I sprang from my bunk, made for the porthole and, drawing back the little curtain that covered it, gazed out upon the world. And what a picture met my eager eyes! What a scene to paint in words or pigments! But, oh, how difficult! If I were a literary craftsman of more than ordinary ability, I might possibly be able to give you some dim impression of what I saw. But being only an amateur word painter of the sorriest sort I very much fear it is a task beyond my capabilities. However, for the sake of my story, I suppose I must try.

To begin with, you must endeavor to imagine a small harbor, at most half a mile long by three-quarters wide, having upon the side toward which I looked a wide plateau extending almost to the sands that fringe the water's edge. Picture this tableland, or plateau, as I have called it, backed by a tall, forest crowned hill, almost a mountain, which soars up and up a couple of thousand feet or more into the azure sky, while peering out of the jungle that ornaments its base may be seen the white roofs of houses, with here and there the thatch of a native hut of the kind usually met with on the west coast of Borneo and the islands thereabout.

To my surprise the harbor was entirely landlocked, and though I searched for some time I could discern no opening in the amphitheater of hills through which a vessel of even the smallest size could pass in from the sea. But, being more taken up with the beautiful scenery of the bay than its harbor facilities, I did not puzzle over this for very long.

My old acquaintance Walworth joined me at the rail and laid himself out for conversation.

"Doctor," he said, "I want you to tell me candidly if in all your experience of the world you have ever looked upon a fairer scene than that you have before you now?"

"No, I don't think I have," I answered. "It is marvelously beautiful; but, all the same, I must own one or two things about it rather puzzle me."

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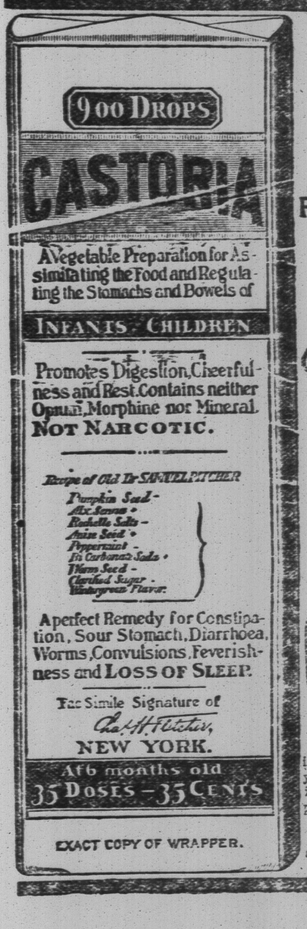

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