

THE MIDNIGHT SWIM.

BY MARLTON DOWNING.

The sunset gun had been fired from the grim old fort which guarded the entrance to the harbor of Matanzas, Cuba, and the yellow and red flag of Spain was lowered indicating to the foreign shipping in the bay that all business must be suspended until the morrow.

A few hours previous the American bark Eagle had come to anchor in the port. She had been visited by the government officers who had examined the crew and her papers, and leaving one of their number behind to look after the interests of the crown, had taken their departure.

The sailors on the recently arrived vessel had despatched their evening meal, and weary from a day of arduous toil had sought their bunks; all, save one, Harry Hartley, a lad some sixteen years of age.

The boy was seated upon the rail, gazing out over the dark waters towards the myriad of lights flashing along the shore. Although he viewed the scene with apparent pleasure still his thoughts were far away in a cosy, New England home, where he knew that a loving mother and sister were anxiously looking for tidings of his welfare in that strange and distant land.

A confusion of sounds from the city were borne to his ears by the gentle land breeze which was stirring, and the fragrant smell of tropical verdure was wafted to his nostrils while he seemed to be living almost in dream-land.

Presently a bell upon a neighboring vessel struck one. This recalled the youth to his sense of duty; he arose and hurried aft, where he glanced down through the skylight at the cabin clock and saw the time to be half-past eight. Returning forward he gave a single tap upon the bell of his own craft.

The sound had scarcely died away when a voice at his elbow inquired,—

"Whose anchor watch is it?"

Recognizing the mate, the boy replied,—

"Mine, sir, till ten o'clock."

"Who relieves you?"

"Bill Sumner."

"All right. Now you go and wake him and my man Tom and bring them both aft, the captain wants to see you."

"Ay, ay, sir." The lad went to obey the order, and the officer returned to the quarter-deck, beneath the awning of which the master was sitting.

"I tell you what, Mr. Johnson," said the skipper in a low voice. "I more than half regret having agreed to execute this commission. The undertaking did not seem nearly so dangerous in New York as it does here in Matanzas."

"It is certainly a risky piece of business, sir. But why do you make the attempt to run the gauntlet at night? It seems to me that a bolder plan would stand more chance of success. Visit Senor Lezola by daylight and give him the packet."

"No, no, it would not do. The utmost secrecy must be maintained. If it was known that a Cuban held intercourse of a private nature with an American sea captain, it would go hard with both parties. No, the work must be done under cover of darkness."

The two sailors, and the boy Harry, now presented themselves, wondering what duty it was that they were to be called upon to perform.

"My men, I have watched you closely throughout the passage," said the master. "I think you are to be trusted, while as for the lad, I look upon him almost as my own son. Are you willing to accompany me upon a dangerous mission? One in which your lives may be the forfeit?"

There was a moment's silence. At length the mate's man, Tom, a perfect type of an American seaman, replied,—

"Cap'n, I speak for myself, but I don't doubt but what my feelin's is the same as Bill's. When I ship with a man I'm willin' to follow where he leads, and ask no questions, knowing that he'll steer as clear of death as possible, and do his duty to the owners and himself. Aren't them your thoughts, mate?" turning to Sumner.

"They be, Tom, and straight from the heart."

"I was sure I should not be disappointed," returned the captain, as he drew a packet, carefully wrapped in oiled silk, from his pocket.

"Of the contents of this package I am as ignorant as you are, save that I know it is of great value to a Cuban gentleman of my acquaintance who lives on the outskirts of the city on the banks of a little river that flows past the custom house. In order to place it safely in his hands it will be necessary for us to make a secret trip up the creek this night. Will you go with me?"

"We will, captain," was the unanimous reply.

"Very well, then. At seven bells, lower away the boat, and be as silent as the deepest cave of ocean. I will be ready to start."

"All right, sir," returned Tom. "We'll have the oars muffled and be at the gangway on time."

Seeing that the master had no further instructions for them, the two sailors and the boy Harry withdrew.

"The custom house officer," said the mate with some apprehension. "Will not the creaking of the boat tackle awaken him?"

"My word for it, no. The Spaniard

likes good wine and has drunk a surfeit of it to-night. Rest assured he will sleep soundly."

"Seven bells" are striking upon the vessels at anchor in the bay. It is half an hour before midnight and the bark's boat with its four occupants drifts slowly away in the darkness. The oars cut the water without a sound, and the little craft creeps gradually into the mouth of the creek.

Soon the outlines of the government buildings can be discerned by the captain, whose keen eyes roam incessantly over the landscape ahead. Then the lumbering sugar-lighters, some empty, others loaded with the saccharine freight to be delivered to the vessels at anchor on the morrow, are seen moored to the bank.

So close are the Americans to the shore, that when the guard about the custom house is relieved at twelve o'clock they can hear the tramp of feet upon the stone pavements.

Yet they do not pause, but run up the tortuous stream which winds its way through the very heart of the city. Now the lights upon the first bridge which crosses the river comes into view.

It is the most dangerous part of the whole journey, for it is well known to the captain that soldiers constantly patrol the thoroughfare. It seemed this night, however, that the Spaniards were rather lax in their vigil for our friends have reached the shadow of the heavy stone arches and received no challenge.

But as they were in thought congratulating themselves, a voice on the bridge above them chilled the blood in their veins!

"Give way! Give way with a will!" whispered the commander. "They speak in Spanish, and we may be supposed not to understand them."

Ere the sailors could pull two strokes, however, a second challenge was issued, and in a language plainly comprehended. It was a rattling discharge of musketry, and leaden bullets pattered in the water about them while some even struck the gunwale of the boat.

"It's all up with us now," groaned the captain. "That firing will alarm the guard on the upper bridge and if we could get out of the range of these guns, it would only be to run against the muzzles of those further on. But they shall not find this damaging evidence in our possession," and the master was in the act of hurling the cause of their present trouble overboard when it was seized by Harry, who in a hoarse whisper exclaimed,—

"Give me the packet, sir. I will see that it reaches Senor Lezola in safety!" and before the latter could remonstrate the lad had left the boat and disappeared from sight beneath the muddy waters of the creek.

The captain for a moment was aghast at the temerity of the youth and the distressing situation in which they were placed; but his natural fortitude and ready wit came to his assistance and with a sweep of the tiller he pointed the boat's head shoreward, calling aloud as he did so: "All right, seniors, all right. Here we are. What's wanted of us?"

As may be supposed there was great excitement upon the bank when the Spanish soldiers laid hands upon the three Americans. In the darkness of the river redoubled by the shade of the bridge the patrol had been unable to count the occupants of the craft, and consequently did not miss the boy, but without further search marched their prisoners to the calaboose where they were detained until morning. After a rigid examination, they were then dismissed with a severe reprimand and a fine of one hundred dollars for the captain in presuming to come ashore after the sundown gun had been fired from the fort.

But the brave boy Harry, whose daring act had made this dismissal possible, where was he?

Once in the water, with the valuable packet in his possession, he allowed himself to drop down under the bridge, where with a few vigorous strokes he succeeded in reaching a large stone which helped to form the base of one of the arches, and here he remained as silent as a statue until the excitement over the capture of his companions had subsided.

Then thrusting the package beneath his belt, he drew the strap a little tighter, and struck out again, keeping close in shore to avoid the down current, and also to take advantage of the shadow offered by the bank. Occasionally when an opportunity offered, he would lay hold of some stationary object and pause a few moments to rest before he resumed his toilsome journey.

The second bridge was successfully passed and then the boy knew that the city was behind him for he had been up this same river on previous voyages. When the wharves ended he found it possible to get near enough to the land to admit of his wading, and there was but little probability of his detention now, his progress was much more rapid, nevertheless the night had considerably waned when he reached the boundary of Senor Lezola's plantation.

The lad knew the surroundings well, for he had visited the place with his captain. When he came in sight of the Cuban's home, he waited a moment to consider how he could gain access to the planter without exciting suspicion.

At length he determined to await the

coming of day, then walk boldly forth and ask to be permitted to see the senator.

Making himself as comfortable as possible he passed the time until a few gray streaks in the east denoted the arrival of morn. Then the lad approached the house. As he was about to put one of his bare feet upon the veranda the door opened, and he was confronted by a youth but little older than himself.

The early riser was apparently meditating a ride on horseback, for he wore top boots and carried a light whip in one hand. The surprise was mutual, but Harry was the first to recover himself.

"I seek Senor Lezola," he said.

"What would you say to my father at this hour?" asked the other in excellent English, and a voice which was exceedingly musical in tone.

"My mission is secret, and one of great importance," replied the American youth without hesitation, for he felt that the fortune which had favored him thus far should not desert him now.

"Ah, say you so?" returned the Cuban quickly. "Then follow me." And he led the way into the house and direct to the apartment of his parent, which he entered without waiting the formality of permission.

The senator had left his couch, and attired in a loose, rich gown girded in at the waist by a silken cord, was seated at a table sipping a cup of coffee.

"Senor Lezola?" asked Harry stepping forward, and not giving his conductor time to speak.

"I am he," answered the elder Cuban in some astonishment. "What do you wish with me?"

For reply the boy proudly placed the packet, for which he had risked his life, upon the table.

When the eyes of the planter rested upon the address, he started, and turning to his son whispered,—

"Mannul, look to the doors and windows. See that no one is near to play the spy upon us."

Hastily tearing off the wrapper the senator examined the contents of the package.

"Arms! Arms for our forces to be landed on the coast within a week. This information will gladden the hearts of the patriots. Boy, boy! You have to-day done that for Cuba which will bring down upon your head the blessings of her oppressed children. Whence came you with this?"

"I have swam and waded with it from the Lower Bridge, where Captain Parker and two of my shipmates have been arrested by the Spanish soldiers."

"Is it possible? I must hasten to his assistance," exclaimed the senator. Then calling to his son who had stepped without the door he instructed him to see that the American youth was supplied with everything he needed for his comfort, and also to order the carriage as they must make a trip to the city at once.

Harry, however, only tarried long enough to dispose of a hasty breakfast, when, after borrowing a sombrero, for his own hat had been lost in the river, he hurried back along the dusty highway that led to the seaport.

Little attention was paid to the bare-footed boy as he wandered through the streets of Matanzas, and not one either Spaniard or Cuban as they passed, saw a hero in the lad.

Harry took his way to the Custom House Landing, from where, out in the harbor, he could see the bark lying quietly at anchor. How he longed to hear from his companions. He was familiar with the fierce disposition of the Castilians and he feared for the safety of his friends.

Just as the boy had made up his mind to accost one of the officers who were strolling idly about and inquire for his captain, he felt a hearty slap upon his shoulder, and a cheery voice said in his his ear,—

"Ahoj there, shipmate. Are you so anxious to get to work again off to that 'hooker,' that you stand gazing at her as if you were afraid she would sink before your eyes?"

It was Tom who had hailed him, and turning the boy saw close behind him the smiling faces of Captain Parker and the man Bill.

The meeting was a joyful one, and as the master grasped Harry by the hand, he whispered,—

"Where is the packet?"

"In the possession of Senor Lezola."

"Thank God! But where is the Cuban?"

"With the authorities, seeking your release."

"Then I must find him ere he compromises himself. You go on board the vessel and remain in the cabin till I come. Say nothing of this night's work to any one, unless it be the mate."

Two hours later a happy party were gathered about Captain Parker's table in the cabin of the bark Eagle. There for the time being, nautical caste was forgotten, for the boy, the able seamen, the captain and the planter sat side by side, but it was the former who occupied the greatest share of attention.

"My boy," said Senor Lezola as he was about to take his leave, "you will be a general or an admiral some day."

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