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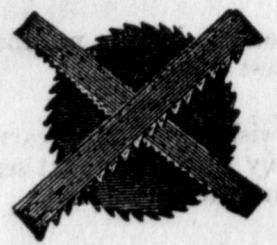
MARTIN FLANAGAN.

Richibucto, Jan. 15, 1890.

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BY

W. CLARKE RUSSELL.

(Condensed for THE REVIEW.)

CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued.

With this kind of talk we killed some time. The light of the mounting moon was so brilliantly clear that I could witness every varying expression in my companion's face as plainly as if a shining diamond had broken; only that the moonlight gave a spirituality to her beauty which her charms were perhaps the richer for not discovering by daylight. When the time arrived for me to press her to seek rest, I found her reluctant. And small wonder! It was not that the hammock was uninviting. Indeed, nothing fitter could have been devised for the languid, dewy warmth of such a tropical night of pale god-like splendor as this, than the air couch that spanned the black pillars of two silent trees. One thought of what was up above!—some scaly beetle, creeping down the dry bark with a clanging of its armored feet like the pattering of a land crab upon an uncarpeted floor, to awaken one by a cold pressure of its body on one's brow—pah! The tropics are a glorious country to read about, to be sure; but give me an English summer evening dying out—with the lowing of a cow or two, the chime of a distant church bell, a drowsy chirp stealing from the shadows of some sweet-blossomed orchard—into the delicious repose of night, unbroken by a note louder than the dim cheep of the grass-hopper, or the faint midnight crow of an uneasy cock.

Finding Miss Grant reluctant to go to her hammock, I proposed a little stroll along the glittering beach, and for over an hour, I think, did we measure to and fro some quarter of a mile of the sparkling shore.

At last she consented to "turn in." I dragged a trunk to her hammock to enable her to step to her swinging bed, and when her head was pillowed I made her snug with a shawl, and then enveloped her in the floating gauze of the mosquito-net, through which I could see her dark eyes watching me. The spreading branches of the tree screened her from the moon, but here and there a ray fell through, and one white beam rested upon the hammock. I doubt if any dream that ever sweetened man's rest was more enchanting than the vision of this girl's face under the moonlit gauze-like transparency. Though no vision, yet it effected me as with the unreality of one. I could see a smile in her eyes as I raised my hat with a little bow and said good-night. One must go to sea for such experiences as this. Name such a conjecture ashore as could produce it. When I stole a peep at her again the moonbeam had slipped off her and the hammock was in gloom.

"I hope nothing will tease you on the sand," I heard her say.

"I hope not," I answered, looking at the branches overhead to make sure that the coast was clear up there.

I had now to make my own bed. The boxstove of unequal height, or I should have stowed them together into a couch. I stretched out a rug to lie upon, brought a carpet-bag to the head of it to serve as a pillow, drew a mosquito curtain over me and lay down, pistols in pocket within ready grasp, and covered myself with such another rug as I rested on. The dry sand yielded with a sort of spring in it, and I found it a very comfortable mattress.

I was nearly asleep when I started, instantly broad awake, to a peculiar, melodious, but almost melancholy whistling of a bird amid the branches of the tree to which the head of Miss Grant's hammock was attached. What sort of bird it was I can not say. May be it was one of the species which induced Columbus to believe that there were nightingales in these islands when he sat hearkening at sunset to the gush of melodies which came floating out of the foliage to mingle with the "Salves" and "Aves" and litanies of his crew.

But the song was brief, and after a little my mind came round to its old bearings, and being now wide awake, after a glance at the hammock, which I observed to hang stiffer in the gloom, I fell to some practical, anxious considerations of our condition; and the current of thought being set a-flowing ran into twenty different channels.

"Tut!" thought I, with a waft of the mosquito-net at a little dance of fire-flies hovering over my knees; "it is about time I went to sleep!"

I had scarcely got my head down on the carpet-bag afresh when I was indescribably astonished by hearing the chimes of a bell rung swiftly. I listened breathlessly for an instant, believing the notes to be an illusion of my sense, but it was impossible to mistake. No church belfry on a Sunday morning ever echoed a clearer summons to the faithful. It continued without cessation. I sat up, then clearing myself of the mosquito-net, I leaped to my feet. I saw Miss Grant sitting erect in her hammock.

"Oh, Mr. Musgrave, what is that?" she cried.

"It may be some vessel," I exclaimed, "close aboard the island; perhaps ashore."

"No; it comes from those trees yonder," pointing to the little forest.

She threw the net like a veil off her head, sprung from the hammock to the box, and thence to the ground. "Oh!" she exclaimed, seizing my arm, "what can it be?"

The bell was no longer ringing rapidly; a sexton might now be tolling it. The slow, punctually recurring chimes came along like a knell; they then ceased and all was still. I paused a little to make sure if possible of the direction whence the sounds proceeded. On a sudden the ringing started off afresh—such a reckless, rushing, clattering of noise that my conviction was there was a madman at large upon the island, and that this was his way of killing the midnight hours! The whole place seemed distracted by the clamor. Queer grunts rose out of the grass, hard snoring noises out of the trees, with a universal groaning of frogs far and near, the hoarse inquiring cries of parrots, while you caught a shriller edge in the shrill minstrelsy of the crickets. The violent ring of a bell in the dark hours of the night, even when one is as secure as a safe lodging and all the contrivances of civilization can make one, is, to say the least, an alarming disturbance. But to hear such a sound in this lonesome island, apparently among the trees yonder where they rose blackest to their topmost foliage against the moon, when it seemed as sure as sure could be that there was no living human being within God knows what distance of us, was such a trial to the nerves that I own to having hung in the wind for a space, amazed to almost a condition of semi-stupefaction.

The tumultuous harum-scarum ringing came to an end, and was succeeded by a melancholy tolling, as though there was a funeral somewhere under way. Bidding Miss Grant stay where she was a minute, I ran swiftly—I was a very nimble runner—to the head of the creek, whence in a few moments I had gained the beach on the north side of the island, a part that would have been hidden to us on the hammock by the forest. The pale golden light of the moon flooded heaven and ocean, and the objects could not have been more visible had the effulgence been of the noontide. There was no sign of a ship hereabouts. The deep ranged with a bare breast steeping and soaking to the indigo of the sky; nothing stirred along the platform of sand that went twisting out of sight in a pear-like haziness round the bend of the island, veering westward. All this time the bell was tolling, and now I could not doubt that it was being rung in some part of the island, for as at the creek, so here, the chimes appeared to float directly from the black shadow of the central grove. I returned to Miss Grant, by which time the sound of the bell had ceased.

"It is no ship," said I, "be it what else it may."

"It is a real bell, though," she exclaimed.

"Ay, real indeed," said I, "too real for superstition to find a footing on it, though it is a chilly sort of thing to happen at this hour, amid this wild loneliness, too. It needed to have been but a little less real to have thickened the blood with fancies of an enchanted island."

We waited expecting to hear it again, but the ringer had evidently exhausted his merry-making fit for the time being, and all remained silent, saving the chirp of the crickets and the wash of the surf, with here and there a sulky creak.

"I had a mind just now to explore for that bell."

"You would be mad to do such a thing," she exclaimed, with energy; "indeed I should not permit it," and she grasped my arm. "There must be a man in that wood," she continued, lowering her voice. "There must be a human agency to set that bell going. Perhaps after all the island is inhabited, and there may be a nest of savages in that forest, who hid themselves on seeing us, and now dream of scaring us away by ringing a bell. Oh, I wish we could be scared away!" she continued, as with a shiver she glanced over her shoulder seaward.

I shook my head. "No," said I, "I'll swear there are no Indians hereabouts. Had they existence we were bound to have met with some signs of them; a canoe, a wigwam, or whatever else their dwelling-place may be called—remains of fires—relics of feasting. I should like to have a good look round from the hammock. Will you stay here. I shan't be gone long."

"Certainly not. I would not be alone for—" she broke off, while she stepped to where her hat lay and put it on, and I saw the glint of her pistol-barrel in her hand. "It is wicked to feel nervous," she exclaimed, "but what could be so unnatural as the sound of a bell here!—and then not to be able to imagine what dreadful creatures may be hidden among those trees."

We walked to the hammock, thinking more of the sound of the bell and of the hidden being that had swung it than of the noisome or venomous objects we might by chance tread upon, and having gained the elevation, sent many a look round the sea and into the heart of the little island; but all this side of the ocean was as bare as the northern quarter, while not the faintest movement of black substance or dark shadow could we see, scrutinizingly as we gazed, on any part of the land. The night breeze had died away; there was scarce motion enough of the air to breathe cool upon the moistened finger. South

and east the ocean stretched, motionless as a surface of polished black wood, and the languid seething of the near surf was so delicate that it stole into the air like the moan of breakers leagues distant. We lingered ten minutes, then returned.

It took me some time to persuade Miss Grant to enter her hammock afresh. I told her that I would keep watch; that there was really no more reason to be afraid now than there had been before we heard the bell; that if the bell were rung with the intention of scaring us, it was plain that, whatever might be our alarm, we also were held in fear; that if there were Indians in hiding, treacherously disposed, they were not very likely to arouse us from the sleep in which they could have stolen upon and murdered or otherwise dealt with us as it pleased them.

"It is a puzzle," said I, "that we must wait for the daylight to resolve. Meanwhile rest is necessary to you, and you must please lie down. Trust to my vigilance, and sleep without misgivings."

Eventually she complied. I made her comfortable as before, carefully enveloped her hammock with a mosquito net, then with a look at my pistols to see that all was right with them, I lighted a cheroot, swigged off a dram of brandy, and fell to pacing the stretch of sand, sentinel-fashion close to the hammock, and keeping a bright lookout on the trees beyond, believe me.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PIRATICAL LAIR.

The time slipped wearily and heavily away. Now and again Miss Grant lifted her head, bride-like with the drapery of the mosquito-curtain; but a time came when she lay still, and on stepping close very softly and peering, I found her sleeping peacefully.

At last, having seated myself to rest after a considerable spell of walking, I fell asleep, and so lay till I was awakened by the rising of the sun, and opened my eyes upon his blinding stream pouring aslant from three or four degrees above the horizon.

I stepped to the hammock; Miss Grant was asleep, and so sweet and fair did she look that I could not break away from watching her. My fixed gaze roused her; she opened her eyes suddenly, and I backed a step, confused, and perhaps feeling a little mean at being detected. However, she awoke with too much wondering at her own situation and the strangeness of surroundings to imagine my inquisitiveness or to note the admiration which I doubt not would have been perceptible in me by her clearer vision. She threw the mosquito-curtain off her, and sat erect, and exclaimed: "Thank God, it is daylight!" looking in a restless way about her, with her hands clasped, her cheek with the hectic of slumber still on it, her beauty rich with the disorder of her hair, and the light in her eyes of transient bewildered thought that fired them like contending passions.

I felt so jaded and stale that every instinct in me clamored for a plunge so I went away past the head of the creek to the north shore, and spent ten delicious minutes amid the surf there.

I returned to Miss Grant feeling years younger, and found her dressing her hair before an ivory hand-glass, which she had hung against the trunk of a tree. Well, thought I, marooning brings about strange intimacies! Perhaps it might be married people only that a scrupulous mutineering crew would think proper to set ashore.

Miss Grant was full of the subject of the bell. She could talk of nothing else, and while we sat at our little repast of preserved meat and sweet biscuit, she was incessantly directing looks towards the wood.

"There may be people there," she said, "watching us all the time. I thought I saw something move when you left me just now. We must find out to-day if this island is inhabited. The approach of the night will be intolerable if we are to expect that bell to ring again without knowing where it is, or what produces the sound."

"I shall explore those trees shortly," said I; "let me have your pistol. With mine it will give three shots without obliging me to reload."

She drew it from her belt where it had lain all night with her.

"I will accompany you," said she; "it is inaction and expectation that keep me frightened."

"Lord preserve you," said I, "look at that growth of grass! You would need to be dressed as I am to penetrate it."

Indeed, it was only too plain that nothing in the shape of petticoats and skirts could be forced, short of one's wake after a plunge or two becoming a raffle of shreds and tatters, through the dense, coarse, bushlike herbage which stood to the height of a man's waist among the trees. Leaving her standing and watching, I walked briskly toward the trees, with the butt end of a pistol projecting from either side-pocket, and Miss Grant's weapon in my hand.

I moved with a vigilant eye, crushing warily through the quickset undergrowth, gazing at every tree-trunk as though another step should open up a figure behind it watching me. I need not deny that I felt very timid.

I had been pushing my way forward for seven or eight minutes without catching

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