

MAROONED.

BY

W. CLARKE RUSSELL.

(Condensed for THE REVIEW.)

CHAPTER XXV.—Continued

This room might be about nine feet square. Beyond it, led to by a door-way that had in its time been screened by a curtain, as I gathered from the sight of a small metal pole bracketed atwart it, was a second room, black as any tomb, as you will suppose. The flame of the candle burned bright, yet it was but a feeble light for the illumination of such an interior as this, and I found it difficult to distinguish objects. On the left-hand side of this first room in which I stood was a low structure of bricks, which, on approaching it, I found had served in its time as a furnace for cooking. Over against it, suspended by nails driven into one of the beams which formed the transverse supporters of the wall, were several quaint, extremely old-fashioned cooking utensils such as sauce-pans, frying-pans, a kettle, and the like. Two or three articles of similar description lay under them upon the ground, whence they had dropped through rottenness of the spikes or timber, like overripe fruit. On the right stood a queer rustic-looking table very rudely made, the legs branching out like open compasses. I had seen such tables with villagers drinking at their outside old rural public-houses in England. On either hand were a couple of high-backed chairs. I approached the opening conducting to the inner room somewhat timorously. I was never a superstitious man, but there was something in the aspect of this dim, moldy underground haunt that, affected as the imagination might also be at such a moment by recurrence to the mystery of the midnight bell-ringing, might well have set the hair of a stouter-spirited man than mine creeping and lifting upon his head. I listened attentively; the silence was unutterably deep, something to make one think of the silence that a man interred alive might hear in his coffin. However, I had talked somewhat big to Miss Grant, and perhaps was in no temper to be dismayed by my own fancies; so breaking from my posture of hearkening, with a look round at the shadows flitting to the movement of the candle in my hand, I advanced to the threshold of the second chamber and peered in, holding the light in advance of me.

There was some furniture here, and consequently objects sufficient to excite a passing emotion of consternation by the dark flickering, so to speak, of several kinds of outlines. I stood staring, and presently made the chamber out to have been a bedroom. A four-post bedstead, the uprights of which, however, had been cut short to admit of their erection in this low-ceiled apartment, stood opposite the entrance. The candle-light seemed to find a dull reflection in the legs of it, and in drawing near I found that they had been gilt. It had been a very magnificent bedstead in olden times, no doubt. The feet were richly carved figures of mermaids, the posts of ebony, with signs lingering of a once gaudy inlaying. There was a mattress upon the bed and a great bolster, along with a huge, coarse, dark rug. Slung by straps to the wall were several fire-locks of the pattern the buccaners of the seventeenth century were wont to level, and the like number of pistols, all nearly of the dimensions of a fowling-piece of our time.

There was also a small array of broad-swords and hangers, some fallen, having rotted from the straps by which they had hung. I spied a small chest in one corner, of black oak, and walked to it, having by this time got over my timidity. I opened it—let me admit, with a pulse accelerated by expectation—and holding the candle close, looked in; but alas! instead of massive treasure the chest contained nothing more than a quantity of fish-hooks of various sizes, a ball or two of rotted linen thread, and three or four parchment-like rolls, which proved to be charts, of which the tracings were rendered indistinguishable by dirt and mildew.

The side of this cavernous chamber where the chest stood was papered as it were, with a sort of loose hangings. I had not noticed this but for their swaying to the little current of air wafted by my moving the lid of the box. This drapery was of yellow silk, covered with strange devices wrought in black, but time or damp had obliterated so much of the figuration while my candle gave forth so uncertain a light, that it was impossible to make a guess at the nature of the designs. Here too were a couple of black wood stools, the legs showing traces of gilding and a circular steel mirror cut in facets, so tarnished that I viewed it for sometime without knowing what it was. While I was gazing around me lost in wonder, but with a tolerably clear conception of the character of this subterranean dwelling-place, my eye was taken with a faint reflection directly amidships of the roof, and on elevating the candle I observed that a large frame of glass had been let into the ceiling, every pane lozenge-shaped. It was indeed like a skylight on a ship's deck. I passed into the first room and observed the same contrivance there. The sight of these windows gave me an idea, and I at once stepped into the shelving corridor and

mounted the steps, blinking like an owl at the brilliant morning blaze.

"Oh, Mr. Musgrave," cried Miss Grant. "I was afraid you would never return! I have been expecting every instant to hear the report of your pistol. What have you seen? Oh, something, I do hope that will explain the bell ringing last night."

"What I have seen you shall presently see," said I. "It is as snug a two-roomed dwelling as one could wish, a bit mouldy, perhaps, but a tidier lodging than a tree anyhow. There will be two windows under the sand here. How will they bear now?"

"Two windows!" she exclaimed; and there was little to wonder at her surprise either, for the sand trended smooth to the dense thickets of herbage, where the trees went huddling into the forest as though it were formed of the quicksilver which the metal dazzle of it, like the fiery points of new tin flashing back the sun, made it resemble; and it needed something more than imagination to enable one to conceive of such a thing as windows having anything to do with this surface of coral, almost powdery, softness.

After pondering a minute I walked to the spot, shell in hand, where I reckoned the windows of the kitchen underneath to be situated, and fell a-scraping; and when I had made a hole about a foot and a half deep the edge of the shell scratched crisply over something polished. This proved to be a frame of glass. Miss Grant stood beside me looking on scarcely understanding what I was at, while I shovelled away with a couple of big shells, tossing the sand aside as a child digs for sport in the seashore, until I laid bare a good space of the skylight. It was easy work, for the admixture of soil was too trifling to give much density and weight to the sand; yet it took me near an hour to lay bare the first skylight. I found it formed, as I had previously conjectured, of the frames of some vessel's skylight, but of a vessel that had been afloat in an age when, as I supposed, shipwrights where here and there to be found willing to embellish the fabrics they launched with lozenge shaped windows in the deck-fittings. The frames lay flat, like the cover of a hatch, solidly overlapping the edge of a timber casement. With the help of the handspike I had manufactured, I pried one of the frames out of its fixings, which had been fastened by wet running sand into a kind of cement, then with my hands tore it bodily up. The sun struck full through the opening; Miss Grant peered down.

"It is a room!" she cried.

"Yes," said I, "and it will furnish us with the sort of asylum we stand in need of until the moment of our deliverance arrives."

"You do not intend to sleep down there?" she exclaimed, flushing to the startling thought, while her eyes brightened with the dread in her.

"You shall judge for yourself, presently," said I, laughing.

"Sleep in such a hole as that!" she cried, with her white forefinger dramatically pointing downward, and a fine imperiousness in the poise of her figure springing as it were out of a sort of passing indignation at my suggestion. "Why, Mr. Musgrave, supposing the man that rung the bell last night should discover that we were underground; he might put the covers on these holes, and then—"

"We should be buried alive," said I; "only there is no man here, so I am not afraid."

"Who rung the bell, then?" she asked.

"No man, I'll swear," I answered, "unless he be endowed with some mystic power of converting himself into a bush or tree at sight. Indeed I hope we may not be able to find out who did ring the bell." I continued, sending a look at the ocean, "for I should like to be taken off at once, at this very minute, indeed. But if we are forced to tarry we shall solve the mystery, depend upon it. There's another window somewhere to be cleaned, Miss Grant." I continued, speaking cheerfully, "and when that's done I'll show you so quaint and surprising curiosity in the shape of a piratical lair, that if I had it within reach of the millions of Great Britain I should make a fortune in a month by exhibiting it at a shilling a head. But how goes the hour?" I looked at my watch; it was after eleven. "It is time," said I, "take a peek at the sea from the hummock. Pray God some gleam of canvas may be showing."

There was nothing in sight. I searched with a shipwrecked eye, but the brim of the ocean ran in an unbroken sweep of blue to the mirroring of the sun.

Miss Grant brought her eyes away from the sea, and looked at me as we stood close together under the shade of the umbrella. "What is to become of us?" she exclaimed, thoughtfully, without expression of alarm or dejection.

"We must trust to God and to our own energy," I replied, "and above all keep our hearts up. Some means of escape, if nothing comes from outside, will suggest itself. Meanwhile we have abundance of fresh sweet water, there is no fear of our lacking food, we have found as decent a lodging as marooned people have a right to expect." She sighed and tried to smile, but you saw she could get no comfort out of the thought of the lodging. "Our health is good, and one wish of yours at least is gratified—we are not separated."

I know not in what sort of tone I may have uttered this last, but I noticed that her eyes fell at the close of my speech, her white teeth shone over her under lip to the just breathless biting of it, and then she said in her purely natural manner: "And we must not be separated, Mr. Musgrave, until—until—I mean you must not undertake anything rash—such as exploring tombs, for instance."

I smiled and said: "A mouthful of something to eat will not hurt us, and I am pining for long draught of yonder cold, bubbling brook. Afterward we will have another look at the tomb, as you call it. Only think of a kitchen ready-made to our hands! We shall be having turtle soup to-morrow and delicate fricasse of iguana. There are some plantains to other side there, past that hummock of green, along with an orange-tree or two, and with patience, Miss Grant, we may even yet see our way to a fruit pie."

"Oh, dear, Mr. Musgrave," she cried, with an almost hysterical laugh, and an eloquent impassioned toss of her hands that could only have come to her with her mother's blood, "if we only could have foreseen all this in London when we were talking over the voyage!"

I fancy she read the thought that was in my mind at that moment, and, to rescue myself, I said, but perhaps too sedately: "It will make a thrilling story for you to entertain Alexander with."

"Ah, poor dear old boy!" she exclaimed taking my arm as before, and we walked to the spot where the luggage lay.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNDERGROUND LODGING.

By two o'clock that afternoon I had cleared the second window of the sand that rested nearly two feet thick upon it. I pried open a casement that the apartment beneath it might obtain purification from the air as well as from the sunshine, and then I asked Miss Grant to step below with me and view the rooms. She had seen enough by peering through the skylight to excite her curiosity, and moreover to reassure her mind; and so she now let me hand her down that black hole from which she had shrunk with her eyes ashine with dismay in the morning.

Miss Grant looked quickly about the place, advancing to the door-way of the inner chamber, and then her manner lost its restlessness.

"Do you know, Mr. Musgrave," she said, "I expected to find that you had missed some secret way of getting out of this place. I felt almost certain that this was the haunt of the person who rung the bell last night."

"You are satisfied, I hope?"

"I see two rooms and only one entrance. Yes, I am satisfied," she said, continuing to look about penetratingly. "Have you lifted that faded silk hanging?" referring to the yellow drapery against the wall in the inner apartment.

"No," I answered, "but I'll do better than lift it," and so saying, I went and pulled it down. It was like dragging at a cobweb. No stagnant flag rotting in the gloom of an abbey's roof over an aged stall would have parted more easily at a pull. The wall the stuff had concealed was like the others, soil and sand, solidified and shored up by a number of stanchions and transverse beams.

"And you think," said Miss Grant, coming to a stand after the narrowest imaginable inspection of everything in true womanly style, and gazing around her with wonder unmixed any longer with apprehension, "that this was many years ago the home of a pirate?"

"Ay, no doubt of it," I responded. "A hundred and fifty years ago I dare say this was a very glittering and sumptuous interior. Look at the legs of that bedstead. Saw any one the like of that carving, I mean on so prosaic a piece of furniture? It was the princely decoration of some rich galleon's stateroom, I dare say, and one need not shut one's eyes to realize the idea of a head like Cervantes—who, by the way, was and exceedingly ugly man—smiling on the pillow there, the figure concealed to the throat by an exquisitely worked counterpane of silk. Here is enough to set the imagination off into a brisk trot. The highest sterner polacca, striking the glory of the westerling sun from her windows into the dark blue beneath, is riding within musket-shot of the beach; her captain, mate, and boon companions of the crew are here caressing. See them in their great flapping hats, their yellow belts, their big jack-boots, their spiked beards, and mustaches curled to their piratical eyes, roaring out some song of old Spain, with goblets before them filled with a vintage of which we, a debased posterity, can never know the generous, the magical qualities. The old villains! they drank all the fine liquors, and left us the gout!"

"Your picture wants a heroine," said Miss Grant, laughing.

"Oh," said I, "I have not forgotten her. She must be yellow-haired; some Saxon sweetheart captured out of an English ship, bound shall we say to Rio, Miss Grant? She has exhausted the language of entreaty, wept her glorious eyes dim, and grief, as she sits yonder, is eating away her trembling little heart as she listens with loathing to the deep-throated chorusing of the black-browed roisterers, as they sit clinking their silver flagons at that very table there, perhaps! The Lord preserve us! what a brush has fancy—to

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