

Literature, &c.

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From Hogg's Instructor.

THE POINT OF HONOR.

One evening in the autumn of the year 1842, seven persons, including myself, were sitting and chatting in a state of hilarious gaiety in front of Senor Arguella's country house, a mile or so out of Santiago de Cuba, in the eastern Intendencia, of the Queen of the Antilles, and once its chief capital, when an incident occurred that as effectually put an extinguisher upon the noisy mirth as if a bomb-shell had suddenly exploded at our feet. But a brief account of those seven persons, and the cause of their being so assembled, will be necessary.

Three were American merchants—Southerners and smart traders, extensively connected with the commerce of the Colombian archipelago, and designing to sail on the morrow—wind and weather permitting—in the bark Neptune, Starkey, master and part owner, for Morant Bay, Jamaica; one was a lieutenant in the Spanish artillery, and nephew of our host; another was a M. Dupont, a young and rich creole, of mingled French and Spanish parentage, and the reputed suitor for the hand of Donna Antonia—the daughter and sole heiress of Senor Arguella and withal a graceful and charming maiden of eighteen—a ripe age in that precocious clime; the sixth guest was Captain Starkey, of the Neptune, a gentlemanly, fine looking English seaman, of about thirty years of age; the seventh and last was myself, at that time a mere youngster, and but just recovered from a severe fit of sickness, which a twelvemonth previously had necessitated my removal from Jamaica to the much more temperate and equable climate of Cuba, albeit the two islands are only distant about five degrees from each other.

I was one of Captain Starkey's passengers, and so was Senor Arguella, who had some business to wind up in Kingston. He was to be accompanied by Senora Arguella, Antonia, the young lieutenant, and M. Dupont. The Neptune had brought a cargo of sundries to Cuba, and was returning about half laden with goods. Among these, belonging to the American merchant, were a number of barrels of gunpowder, that had proved unsaleable in Cuba, and which, it was thought, might find a satisfactory market in Jamaica. There was excellent cabin accommodation on board Captain Starkey's vessel, and as the weather was fine, and the passage promised to be a brief as well as a pleasant one—the wind having shifted to the northwest, with the intention, it seemed, of remaining there for some time—we were all, as I have stated, in exceedingly good humor, and discussing the intended trip, Cuban, American and European politics, the comparative merits of French and Spanish wines, and Havana and Alabama cigars with infinite glee and gusto.

The evening, too, was deliciously bright and clear. The breeze pronounced by Captain Starkey to be rising to a five or six knot one at sea, only sufficiently stirred the rich and odoriferous vegetation of the valleys, stretching far away beneath us, gently to fan the heated faces of the party with its grateful perfume, and slightly rippled the winding river, rivulets rather, which everywhere intersect and irrigate the island, and which were now glittering with the intensely-lustrous stars that diadem a Cuban night.

Nearly all the guests had drunk very freely of wine, too much so, indeed; but the talk in French, which all could speak tolerably, did not profane the calm glory of the scene, till some time after Senora Arguella and her daughter had left us.

The Senor, I should state, was still detained in town by business which it was necessary he should dispose of previous to embarking.

'Do not go away,' said Senora Arguella, addressing Captain Starkey, as she rose from her seat, 'till I see you again. When you are at leisure ring the sonnet on the table and a servant will inform me. I wish to speak further with you relative to the cabin arrangements.'

Captain Starkey bowed. I had never, I thought, seen Antonia smile so sweetly; and the two ladies left us. I do not precisely remember how it came about, or what first led to it, but it was not very long before we were all conscious that the conversation had assumed a disagreeable tone.

It struck me that possibly M. Dupont did not like the expression of Antonia's face as she courted to Captain Starkey. This, however, would, I think, have passed off harmlessly, had it not been that the captain happened to mention very imprudently, that he had once served as a midshipman on board the English slave squadron. This fanned M. Dupont's smouldering ill humor into a flame, and I gathered from his confused maledictions that he had suffered in property from the exertions of that force.

The storm of angry words raged fiercely. The motives of the English for interfering with the slave trade were denounced with contemptuous bitterness on one side, and as angrily defended on the other. Finally—the fact is, they were both flustered with wine and passion, and hardly knew what they said or did—M. Dupont applied an epithet to the Queen of England, which instantly brought a glass of wind full in his

face from the hand of Captain Starkey. They were all in an instant on their feet, and apparently sobered, or nearly so, by this unfortunate issue.

Captain Starkey was the first to speak. His flushed and angry features paled suddenly to an almost deadly white, and he stammered out:

'I beg your pardon, M. Dupont. It was wrong in me to do so, though not inexcusable.'

'Pardon! *Mille tonnerres!*' shouted Dupont, who was capering about in an ecstasy of rage, and wiping his face with his handkerchief. 'Yes, a bullet through your head shall pardon you.'

Indeed, according to the then notions of Cuban society, no other alternative save the duello appeared possible. Lieutenant Arguella hurried at once into the house, and soon returned with a case of pistols.

'Let us proceed,' he said, in a quick whisper, 'to the grove yonder; we shall be free from interruption there.'

He took Dupont's arm, and both turned to move off. As they did so, Mr Desmond, the elder of the American gentlemen, stepped towards Captain Starkey, who, with recovered calmness, and with his arms folded was standing by the table, and said—

'I am not entirely, my dear sir, a stranger to these affairs, and if I can be of service, I shall'—

'Thank you Mr Desmond,' replied the English Captain; 'but I shall not require your assistance. Lieutenant Arguella, you may as well remain. I shall not fight M. Dupont.'

'What does he say?' exclaimed the lieutenant, gazing round with bewilderment. 'Not fight!'

'The Anglo Saxon blood, I saw, flushed as hotly in the faces of the Americans as it did in mine at this exhibition of the white feather by one of our race.'

'Not fight, Captain Starkey!' said Mr Desmond, with grave earnestness, after a painful pause: 'you whose name is in the list of the British royal navy, say this. You must be jesting!'

'I am perfectly serious—I am opposed to duelling upon principle.'

'A coward upon principle,' fairly screamed Dupont, with mocking fury, and at the same time shaking his clenched fist at the Englishman.

The degrading epithet stung like a serpent. A gleam of fierce passion broke out of Captain Starkey's dark eyes, and he made a step toward Dupont, but resolutely checked himself.

'Well, it must be borne. I was wrong to offer you personal violence, although your impertinence certainly deserved a greater rebuke. Still, I repeat I will not fight with you.'

'But you shall give my friend satisfaction,' exclaimed Lieutenant Arguella, who was as much excited as Dupont; 'or by heaven I will post you as a dastard not only through this island but Jamaica.'

Captain Starkey for an answer to this menace coolly rang the sonnet, and desired the slave who answered it to inform Signora Arguella that he was about to leave, and wished to see her.

'The brave Englishman is about to place himself under the protection of your aunt's petticoats, Alphonso!' shouted Dupont, with triumphant mockery.

'I almost doubt whether Mr Starkey is an Englishman,' exclaimed Mr Desmond, who, as well as his friends, were getting pretty much incensed; 'but, at all events, as my father and mother were born and raised in the old country if you presume to insinuate that—'

Senora Arguella at this moment approached, and the irate American with some difficulty restrained himself. The lady appeared surprised at the strange aspect of the company she had so lately left. She, however, at the request of the captain instantly led the way into the house, leaving the rest of her visitors as the French say, *plantes la*.

Ten minutes afterwards we were informed that Captain Starkey had left the house, after impressing upon Senora Arguella that the Neptune would sail the next morning precisely at nine o'clock. A renewed torrent of rage, contempt and scorn broke forth at this announcement, and a duel at one time seemed inevitable between Lieutenant Arguella and Mr Desmond, the last-named gentleman manifesting great anxiety to shoot somebody or other in vindication of his Anglo Saxon lineage. This, however, was with difficulty over-ruled and the party broke up in angry disorder.

We were all on board by the appointed time the following morning. Captain Starkey received us all with civil indifference; and I noticed that the elaborate sneers which sat upon the countenances of Dupont and the lieutenant did not appear in the slightest degree to ruffle or affect him; but the averted eye and scornful air of Donna Antonia, as she passed with Senora Arguella toward the cabin, drawing her mantilla closely around her as she swept by, as if—so I perhaps wrongfully interpreted the action—it would be soiled by contact with a poltroon, visibly touched him—only, however, for a few brief moments. The expression of pain quickly vanished, and his countenance was as cold and stern as before. There was, albeit, it was soon found, a limit to this, it seemed, contemptuous forbearance.

Dupont approached him, gave his thoughts audible expression, exclaiming, loud enough for several of the crew to hear, and looking steadily at the captain:

'Lache!'

He would have turned away, but was arrested by a gripe of steel.

'*Ecoutez, Monsieur,*' said Captain Starkey, 'individually, I hold for nothing whatever you may say; but I am captain and king in this ship, and I will permit no one to beard me before the crew, and thereby lessen my authority over them. Do you presume again to do so, and I will put you in solitary confinement, perhaps in irons till we arrive at Jamaica.'

He then threw off his startled auditor and walked forward. The passengers, colored as well as white, were all on board; and the anchor already apeak, was brought home; the bows of the ship fell slowly off, and we were soon running before the breeze though but a faint one, for Point Morant.

No one could be many hours on board the Neptune without feeling fully satisfied that, however deficient in duelling courage her captain might be, he was a thorough seaman, and that his crew—a dozen of about as fine fellows as I have ever seen—were under the most perfect discipline and command. The service of the vessel was carried on as noiselessly and regularly as on board a ship of war; and a sense of confidence, that, should a tempest or other sea peril overtake us, every reliance might be placed on the professional skill and energy of Captain Starkey, was soon openly or tacitly acknowledged by all on board.

The weather throughout happily continued fine, but the wind was light and variable, so that for several days after we had sighted the blue mountains of Jamaica, we scarcely appeared sensibly to diminish the distance between them and us. At last the breeze again blew steadily from the northwest, and we gradually neared Point Morant. We passed it and opened up the bay at about two o'clock in the morning, when the voyage might be said to be over. This was a great relief to the cabin passengers—far beyond the ordinary pleasure to land folk of escaping from the tedium and confinement on ship-board. There was a constraint in the behaviour of everybody that was exceedingly uncomfortable. The Captain presiding at table with freezing civility, the conversation, if such it could be called, was usually restricted to monosyllables; and we were all very heartily glad when we had eaten our last dinner in the Neptune.

When we doubled Point Morant, all the passengers except myself were in bed, and a quarter of an hour afterward Captain Starkey went below, and was soon busy, I understood, with papers in his cabin. For my part I was too excited to sleep, and I continued to pace the deck with Hawkins, the first mate, whose watch it was, eagerly observing of the lights on the well known shore, that I had left so many months before with but faint hopes of ever seeing again.

As I thus gazed landward, a bright gleam, as of crimson moonlight, shot across the waters, and turning quickly around, I saw that it was caused by a tall jet of flame shooting up from the main hatchway, which two seamen, for some purpose or other, had partially removed.

In my still weak state, the terror of the sight—for the recollection of the barrels of powder on board flashed instantly across my mind—for several moments completely stunned me, and but that I caught instinctively at the railings I should have fallen prostrate on the deck.

A wild cry of 'Fire! fire!'—the most fearful cry that can be heard at sea—mingled with and heightened the dizzy ringing in my brain, and I was barely sufficiently conscious to discern, amid the runnings to and fro, and incoherent exclamations of the crew, the sinewy athletic figure of the captain leap up, as it were, from the companion ladder to the deck, and with his trumpet voice commanded immediate silence, instantly followed by the order again to batten down the blazing hatchway. This, with his own assistance was quickly effected, and then he disappeared down the fore-castle.

The two or three minutes he was gone—it could scarcely have been more than that—seemed interminable; and so completely did it appear to be recognised that our fate must depend on his judgment and vigor, that not a word was spoken, nor a finger, I think moved, till he re-appeared, already scorched and blackened with the fire, and dragging up what seemed a dead body in his arms. He threw his burden on the deck, and passing swiftly to where Hawkins stood, said in a low hurried whisper, but audible to me:

'Run down and rouse the passengers, and bring my pistols from the cabin locker. Quick! Eternity hangs on the loss of a moment.' Then turning to the startled but attentive seamen, he said in a rapid but firm voice: 'You well know, men, that I would not on any occasion, or for any motive deceive you. Listen, then, attentively. You drunken brute—he is lieutenant Arguella's servant—has fired the spirits he was attempting to steal, and the hold is in a mass of fire which it is useless in attempting to extinguish.'

A cry of rage and terror burst from the crew, and they sprang impulsively toward the boats, but the captain's authoritative voice at once arrested their steps. 'Hear me out will you? Hurry and confusion will destroy us all, but with courage and steadiness every soul on board may be saved before the flames can reach the powder. And remember,' he added, as he took his pistols from Hawkins and cocked one of them, 'that I will send a bullet after any man who disobeys me, and I seldom miss my aim. Now, to your work—steadily and with a will.'

It was marvellous to observe the influence his bold, confident, and commanding bearing and words had upon the men. The panic-terror that had seized them gave place to energetic resolution, and in an incredibly short space of time the boats were in the water. 'Well done, my fine fellows! There is plenty of time, I again repeat. Four of you—and he named them—remain with me.—Three others jump into each of the large boats, two into the small one, and bring them round to the landward side of the ship. A rush would swamp the boats, and we shall be able to keep only one gangway clear.'

The passengers were by this time rushing upon deck half clad, and in a state of the wildest terror, for they all knew there was a large quantity of gunpowder on board. The instant the boats touched the starboard side of the bark, the men, white as well as colored, forced their way with frenzied eagerness before the women and children—careless, apparently, whom they sacrificed so that they might themselves leap to the shelter of the boats from the fiery volcano raging beneath their feet. Captain Starkey, aided by the four athletic seamen he had selected for the duty hurled them fiercely back. 'Back, back!' he shouted. 'We must have funeral order here—first the women and children, next the old men. Hand Senora Arguella along; next the young lady her daughter: quick!'

As Donna Antonia, more dead than alive, was about to be lifted into the boat, a gush of flame burst up through the main hatchway with the roar of an explosion; a tumultuous cry burst from the frenzied passengers, and they jostled each other with frightful violence in their efforts to reach the gangway. Dupont forced his way through the lane of seamen with the energy of a madman, and pressed so suddenly upon Antonia that, but for the utmost exertion of the captain's herculean strength, she must have been precipitated into the water.

'Back, unmany dastard! back, dog!' roared Captain Starkey, terribly excited by the lady's danger; and a moment after, seizing Dupont fiercely by the collar, he added: 'or if you will look there but for a moment, and he pointed with his pistol hand to the fins of several sharks plainly visible in the glaring light, at but a few yards' distance from the ship. 'Men,' he added, 'let whoever presses forward out of his turn fall into the water.'

'Ay, ay, sir!' was the prompt mechanical response.

This terrible menace instantly restored order; the colored women and children were next embarked, and the boat appeared full.

'Pull off,' was the order, 'you are deep enough for safety.'

A cry, faint as the wail of a child, arose in the boat. It was heard and understood.

'Stay one moment; pass along Senora Arguella. Now, then, off with you, and be smart!'

The next boat was quickly loaded; the colored lads and men, all but one, and the three Americans went in her.

'You are a noble fellow,' said Mr Desmond pausing an instant, and catching at the captain's hand; 'and I was but a fool to—'

'Pass on,' was the reply; 'there is no time to bandy compliments.'

The order to shove off had passed the captain's lips when his glance chanced to light upon me, as I leaned, dumb with terror, just behind him against the vessel's bulwarks.

'Hold on a moment!' he cried. 'Here is a youngster whose weight will not hurt you, and he fairly lifted me over, and dropped me gently into the boat, whispering as he did so: 'Remember me, Ned, to thy father and mother should I not see them again.'

There was now only the small boat capable of safely containing but eight persons, and how, it was whispered among us—how, in addition to the two seamen already in her, can she take off Lieutenant Arguella, M. Dupont, the remaining colored man, the four seamen, and Captain Starkey? They were, however, all speedily embarked except the captain.

'Can she bear another?' he asked, and although his voice was firm as ever, his countenance, I noticed, was ashy pale, yet full as ever of unwavering resolution.

'We must, and will, sir, since it's you; but we are dangerously overcrowded now, especially with you ugly customers swimming round us.'

'Stay one moment; I cannot quit the ship while there's a living soul on board.' He stepped hastily forward, and presently reappeared at the gangway with the still senseless body of the lieutenant's servant in his arms, and dropped it over the side into the boat. There was a cry of indignation, but it was of no avail. The boat's rope the next instant was cast into the water. 'Now pull for your lives!' The oars, from the instinct of self preservation, instantly fell into the water and the boat sprang off, Captain Starkey, now that all except himself were clear of the burning ship, gazed eagerly with eyes shaded with his hand in the direction of the shore. Presently he hailed the headmost boat. 'We must have been seen from the shore long ago, and pilot boats ought to be coming out, though I don't see any. If you meet one, bid him be smart; there may be a chance yet.'—All this scene, this long agony, which has taken me so many words to depict very imperfectly from my own recollection, and those of others, only lasted, I was afterward assured by Mr Desmond, eight minutes from the embarkation of Senora Arguella till the last boat left the ill-fated Neptune.

Never shall I forget the frightful sublimity of the spectacle presented by that flaming