

John Topp, Pirate.

By Weatherby Chesney
and Chick Munro.

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Chick Munro.

(Continued.)

There in the creek we could see Willie Trehalion, with the waters already up to his chest and his smooth, bald head shining like a mirror in the flashing firelight. Round the fire were grouped the Spaniards, chatting and smoking and, standing out dark against the uncertain blaze, were the ten forms of the bound Englishmen.

To cut the prisoners' bonds without at the same time drawing from them a shout of surprise was work to make the least nervous fingers tremble. Alec crept up to the first and, whispering to him not to move a finger till he was told, cut the cords that bound him to the tree. I went to the second and had just drawn my knife across the first cord when one of the Spaniards, whose ears were sharper than those of his fellows, heard what he thought were suspicious sounds and strolled up to see what was going on. Motionless we stood as tree trunks, and, though he peered curiously into the thicket, he could not see us, for at that moment, fortunately, the fire was burning dim. He was only half satisfied, though, so he sat him down within a fathom of the feet of the man I had been engaged upon and there remained.

Heavens, how slowly the leaden minutes dragged themselves away! Time had never seemed so long before. Every now and again, when the laughing talk of the Spaniards lulled, I could hear the monotonous lap-lap of the rising tide, which told that Willie Trehalion's respite was growing every moment more fatally less. I could see him, too, when the dancing firelight fell upon the waters, and, though his stolid face showed no sign of fear, still his solitary eye roved the shore unceasingly, backward and forward, looking for the help which, it might be, would not come in time. The suspense was awful.

Suddenly a voice from beside the fire called out, "Pepe, you rascal, come and join in a madrigal."

Pepe rose, stretched himself, heaved a pebble playfully at one of the bound men and went.

As the first words of the watchers' madrigal rose round the fire I drew my knife across the second man's thongs. Alec loosened the third man and I the fourth, and then a blaze of summer lightning flashed through the sky and for a moment lit up the smooth, shining head of our boatswain, whose chin was now being lapped by the hungry ripples.

There was a shout. Some prying Spaniard had spied us in the brief glare of the lightning flash. The madrigal ceased in the middle of a bar and then—confusion!

CHAPTER XVI.

That telltale lightning flash came just a moment too soon and put an end to any hope of surprising the Spaniards by a rush from the darkness. The other six Englishmen were released as fast as our swords could cut their lashings, and the band of us made for the interrupted songsters round the fire.

Fortunately for us, few of the Spaniards were armed, and before our fierce

onset they gave way at first like a flock of frightened sheep. The ten prisoners had seized whatever weapons they could lay their hands on—swords, daggers, logs of wood even—and were backing and buffeting right and left like maniacs. But the Spaniards began to rally, and as the alarm spread re-enforcements came flocking from the cave. And those, of course, were fully armed.

We were in a tight place.

"Jack, Jack!" I heard Alec shout. "Loose Willie Trehalion and then run the boat down! The rest of us will keep these mosquitoes back! Quick, though, for the lives of us all!"

Hitting out right and left, I got clear and waded into the water, but it was a full minute before I managed to set our old boatswain adrift. He was sobbing like a hysterical schoolgirl in his excitement, and tears of sheer joy were chasing one another down the furrows of his cheek.

"I can't stand, Master Topp!" he cried as the last thong which held him up was severed. "The water has made my legs as limp as pack thread. Leave me an save your own skin. It's no use my trying. I must just drown in my own depth o' water. But thankee kindly all the same."

"Not yet, Willie. You're heavy, but not too heavy for Jack Topp to carry, so we'll just ride you out of it. Besides, the water will help to keep you up."

With that I hoisted him on my back, holding him with my left hand and keeping my sword arm free.

We did not gain the boat without trouble, and my sword streamed afresh before we reached her. In went Willie plump on to the floor boards like a sack of grain, and desperately I strained every muscle to get her afloat. Inch by inch it was done, while the fight surged nearer and nearer to us. Every man of the English was far too busy to come and help me, but at last I got

her into four feet of water. Rushing back, I joined in the furious battle shouting to our lads to gain the shore as each man could.

One by one they scrambled into the boat, and the Spaniards followed shouder deep into the water. But they could not touch us there. Two hands were lopped off as they clung to the gunwale, and then a few vigorous shoves with the paddles took us into deep water.

"Hasta manana, Senior Don Miguel del Cassamaro, late of Whitby," sung out Willie Trehalion, raising his round head with a great effort above the gunwale, and then we shot into the shadow of the opposite shore out of sight of the Spaniards and lay on our oars to count heads and examine our damages. There were 13 men in the boat. Where were the other two?

"Davy Griffiths is gone," said one of the men. "I seed 'im, with a foot o' smoking steel showing through his back, beat out the brains o' the chap as put it there."

"Joe the Cooper is killed, too," said another. "He an the Spaniards' cargo intendant fell foul o' one another an wrestled on the ground. The don had a dirk, Joe nothing but his bare hands. The don carved Joe's hide into a fishing net, an Joe tore the don's throat out wi' his teeth."

"It was a warmish corner while it lasted."

"Aye, an we've all more or less scratched. You've a rib there peeping at the starlight."

"That's so. An you've a nasty hole in that nether arm."

"Tim there has half an ear shredded away, an Jan Pengony's countenance is opener than ever natur' made it."

"Where's the little cordwainer?"

"Sorely wounded, poor lad. He's lying senseless here by Willie Trehalion in the bilge. This here clip on his head needs a surgeon's needle an pack thread to calk it sound again."

"Aye, an Sam's beside him with a hole in the ribs. Sam's done. I'm thinking."

"Let me bind this rag round your thigh, Master Topp. Got that cut in the last rush, did you? You're bleeding like a pig with a slit weasand."

"Captain Ireland, not scratched? The wonder o't! How did you do it, sir?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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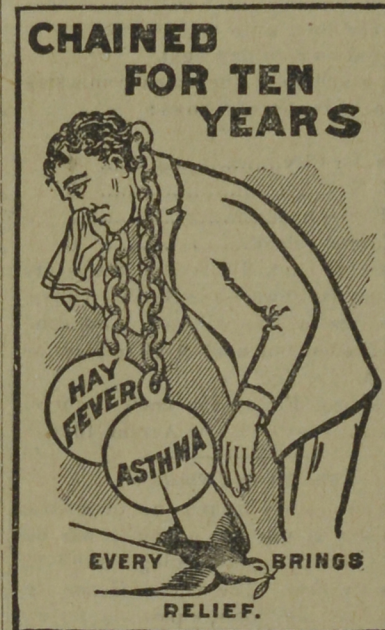
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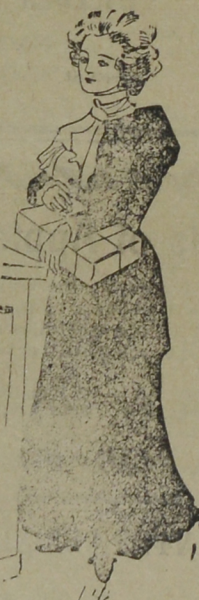
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