

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

Roger the Bold: A Tale of the Conquest of Mexico



Frederick Brereton

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the Conquest of Mexico**

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CHAPTER I

The Image of the Sun

"Hi! Hi! Hi! Your attention, if it please you. Gentles and people, I pray you lend your assistance to one who is in need of help, but who seeks not for alms. But little is asked of you, and that can be done in the space of a minute or more. 'Tis but to decipher a letter attached to this plaque. 'Tis written in some foreign tongue – in Spanish, I should venture. A silver groat is offered to the one who will translate."

The speaker, a short, large-nosed man of middle age, had taken his stand upon an upturned barrel, for otherwise he would have been hidden amongst the people who thronged that part of the city of London, and would have found it impossible to attract their attention. But as it was, his head and shoulders reared themselves above the crowd, and he stood there the observed of all observers. He was dressed in a manner which suggested a calling partly attached to the sea and partly to do with the profession of arms, and if there had been any doubt in the minds of those who watched him, and listened to his harangue, his language, which was plentifully mingled with coarse nautical expressions of that day, and his weather-beaten and rugged features, would have assured them at once that he at least looked to ships and to the sea for his living. Peter Tamworth was indeed a sailor, every inch of him, but he had been schooled to other things, and had learned to use arms at times and in places where failure to protect himself would have led to dire consequences.

He was a merry fellow, too, for he laughed and joked with the crowd, his eyes rolling in a peculiar manner all his own. His nose was large, huge in fact, and of a colour which seemed to betoken a fondness for carousal when opportunity occurred. A stubbly beard grew at his chin, while the upper lip was clean shaven, or had been on the previous Sunday, it being Peter's custom to indulge in a visit to the barber on that day if it happened that he was in port. A pair of massive shoulders, into which the neck seemed to be far sunk, completed an appearance, so far as it could be seen, which seemed to denote a stout fellow, fond of the good things to be found in this world, and not lacking in courage and determination when the time for blows arrived. A little later, when he leaped from the barrel and appeared in the open, it was seen that a ragged pair of hose covered massive legs, which were unusually bowed, and should have belonged to a horseman rather than to one who followed the calling of the sea.

"Come, my masters," he called out again, holding the plaque above his head, and drumming upon it with the handle of his dagger till it rang clearly and sweetly like a silver gong. "Here is the Image of the Sun, and in gold! Yes, gentles and people, I commend this plaque to your careful attention. 'Tis solid gold – the gold of the Indies, the gold with which our Spanish cousins get rich and fatten."

The words were sufficient to call the crowd hovering in that neighbourhood more closely about him. They came running from the entrance to London Bridge, where many had been lolling, enjoying the sunshine, and watching the loading of the ships which lay on the mud below. They came, too, from the city, along old Watling Street, or from Lombard Street, from beneath the shadow of St. Paul's, then a fine building which dominated the city of London. For no fire had then occurred to destroy it, and no monument stood at the opening of the bridge to tell future Londoners of the danger that had once threatened their capital. Indeed, though the streets about were narrow, there were wide

spaces here and there, and trees and green fields were very close at hand. Country people could be seen in the markets not far away, while the pavements supported a mixture of peaceful folk, of men at arms, or friars in their robes, and of seamen from the adjacent river. A negro could occasionally be seen, for Portugal had imported many to her shores years before, and some had drifted to England, or were employed on the ships. Whoever they were, whatever their calling, the tale of gold from the Indies brought them running to the spot where stood Peter Tamworth.

"Gold from the Spanish possessions across the sea," said one city merchant to his friend as they listened. "They say that Ferdinand of Spain rolls in riches, that his chairs are of gold, and that his clothing is heavy with pearls and other jewels. And this fellow, this rascal, tells us that he has some of the spoil. 'Tis not so easily gathered. These Spaniards jealously guard their discovery, for, were it otherwise, there are many who would take ship and try their own fortune at discovery."

"Many in high places, too," responded his friend, a wizened little man, who seemed to take the mention of so much gold as a personal affront. "Riches, indeed, have these Spaniards, and it would be right and proper if they could be divided."

"Between ourselves, friend, no doubt," laughed the other. "That is a course to which I give the warmest approval. And 'tis said that even the king's majesty would stoop to a portion, for his coffers are reported low."

"And he bears but little love for Ferdinand and Spain. 'Tis whispered" – he took his comrade by the sleeve and pulled him closer, so as to speak into his ear – "'tis whispered, and with some truth, by all accounts, that his Majesty would fain divorce his queen from Aragon, and take Anne Boleyn in her place. No doubt, if he would do that, he would also agree to a division of the Indies. But listen to the rascal. He pretends that the plaque is gold. Way there for his worship, the most worthy governor of the honourable company of spectacle-makers."

The pompous little fellow prodded those in front, and urged them to one side, his comrade, a big, genial-looking man, following with a polite bow, and muttered thanks as the people gave way; for the London companies were then at the summit of their power, and a governor was a personage to be reckoned with.

"Gold, I say! Solid gold of more than eighteen carats!" shouted Peter, unabashed by the presence of such a crowd. "An image of the sun, beautifully engraved, as all may see who care to approach, and bearing a plan, as it seems to me, on the reverse. There, gentles and his worship the governor, come closer and look. Here are roads carved upon the face of the plaque, roads and houses, and a space all round, no doubt meant for open country."

"Or the sea, my fine fellow," said the governor, whose prominent position in London had given him easy passage to the very foot of the barrel. "Look for yourself. Here are rocks, and, as I live, these must be boats."

His observation caused his friend to peer even more closely at the image which Peter held. He dragged a pair of spectacles from an inner pocket, and, donning them, stared at the inscription.

"They are boats," he said at length, "and this is the sea – or, rather, an inland lake. Moreover, I believe that the rascal tells the truth. The plaque is of gold."

"Then it must be worth a hundred pounds, more or less. There are some who would give that for it, as a relic from the Indies – if, indeed, it comes from that part."

"While there are others, my masters, who would not part with it for more than ten times that amount. 'Tis gold, of a surety," went on Peter. "Solid gold; and it keeps a golden secret. It tells of a place in the Indies where are gems and riches. This tablet attached may give the locality, and a ship with brave hearts aboard her might even hit upon the spot."

"But you cannot think of that! My friend, the cost of equipping a ship would be greater than the value of this plaque," exclaimed the governor.

"I could not, worshipful sir; and I do not say that there are those who contemplate it. Much will fall upon the translation of the writing. A silver groat is offered to the one who will give us help."

"A silver groat! You are safe in offering the sum," laughed the governor, "for I warrant that there are not two who speak that foreign tongue, unless it be the ambassador from Spain. Go, then, to him, rascal, and learn what he has to say. Mayhap he will give the meaning of the writing on the parchment attached."

"Mayhap he would do even more, your worship, an it please you," answered Peter, with a cunning smile, placing a finger against his enormous nose. "Mayhap he would find a place for Peter Tamworth in the stocks, and hold the plaque for himself, in the name of the King of Spain. Oh yes, worshipful sir, it would be wise to go to the ambassador!"

There was a roar of laughter, in which all within hearing joined; for even in those days, before the advent of Drake and his comrades, a Spanish treasure ship was a fair mark for any British vessel, a proper cargo to prey upon. The wealth of the Indies had indeed been heard of, and the fame of the possessions – Hispaniola and Cuba held by the Crown of Spain – had spread far and wide. What wonder if the news of gold and gems attracted every one! In Spain itself, thousands were eager to venture their all in new voyages of discovery, and very many sailed annually from her shores, hoping to make their fortunes. But to foreigners the new possessions were forbidden; and so far no Englishman had dared to venture to the Spanish main. Perhaps for that very reason they hailed with all the more delight the news of a captured Spaniard, and listened to tales of the wealth aboard with wide-open eyes, while their cupidity was aroused. Here was another tale, and before their faces was dangled a large plaque, full ten inches across, which had come from the Indies. No wonder that they were attracted, and stared at Peter with unwonted interest.

"The stocks would be a friendly place to find yourself in," suddenly said a man, who hitherto had stood silently looking at the plaque. "Perhaps, were the ambassador from the court of Ferdinand to see this gold, and learn from whence it came, a rope would encircle your neck, friend of the big nose."

Peter Tamworth started and changed colour. He looked closely at the stranger, and was on the point of answering flippantly, when something caused him to hold his tongue and doff his ragged cap. For the one who had spoken bore an air of authority, and, moreover, was dressed in the height of the fashion. Indeed, he had only just then alighted from a gilded chair borne between two horses, for he had been passing across the bridge and had been attracted by the gathering. That he was, in fact, a person of no ordinary consequence was plainly evident, for the worshipful governor no sooner set eyes upon him than he dropped on one knee.

"My lord," he said, "the rascal jests only, and no doubt he is well able to account to any one for the possession of the plaque. But see it for yourself, sir. It is of vast interest, and from the little that I know I should judge has indeed come from the Indies. Back there, good people! Do not press closely upon his noble lordship."

There was a stir in the crowd and, obedient to the request, they fell back a little, for the nobleman who had so suddenly appeared was well known to all. Indeed, he held a high place at the court of his Majesty, King Henry the Eighth, the reigning monarch. Very soon he was left in a clear space, so that one could inspect him. He was tall and very fair, and, as has been said, dressed in the finest clothing. But for all that, dandy though he undoubtedly was, he bore a martial air, which was increased by his manner of carrying his sword. He was calm, too, with the coolness of one who is used to being the centre of large throngs.

"A golden plaque from the Indies," he said, as he took the Image of the Sun from Peter and rang it with his knuckle. "And I see on one side a finely graven image which surely represents the sun. On the reverse there is sketched a plan of some buildings."

"Which appear to be built on bridges, with viaducts running from them, and water all round, may it please your lordship," interposed the governor.

"And boats upon the water," added the stranger. "In fact, a city like this London, only built in still water instead of beside a river. And surely there is something stranger still at this point."

He placed his finger almost in the centre of the picture graven on the gold plaque, and held it there while he fumbled in his dress. Then he drew out a glass, set in a fine gold frame, and held it above the engraving.

"Birds and beasts," he said solemnly. "Then the people who dwell in this strange part keep animals for their pleasure, showing that they must be civilized to some degree. Come, rascal, what tale have you to tell in connection with this relic? Have no fear, for though I am the Earl of Essex, and have the king's ear, I am not the one to take spoil from an honest sailor."

He stood holding the plaque and inspecting it with increasing interest while Peter changed from one leg to the other, blowing hot and cold, and wearing a comical look of perplexity not unmingled with fear.

"Your answer?" demanded the earl. "And have no fear. Have I not said that I will harm you in no way? Nor will I allow any one to take this plaque from you."

"'Tis not that, noble sir," answered Peter at last, summoning courage to speak, and doffing his cap again with becoming deference. "But there are ears within hearing, and tongues wag in this city no doubt as fast as they do elsewhere. May it please you to come closer that I may speak?"

The earl at once stepped to the foot of the barrel, motioning the governor and his friend to do the same.

"They shall also listen, if you will permit, my good fellow. For they are interested, and can be trusted to keep the secret. Now, the tale."

"'Tis short, and soon told, your lordship. I have but just returned upon a galleon plying between this port and that of the northern isles. We went by the west coast route, and made our ports in the north without adventure. But on the return, when entering the channel, we fell in with a Frenchman – a galleon which sought to capture us. We endeavoured to sail away, for when you are ready to fight, it is sometimes well to pretend that you desire to escape. So we crowded canvas upon our yards, while the master so manœuvred our craft that we made but little way. Meanwhile we made ready for the encounter. Soon the Frenchman bore down upon us, and sought to take us by the board. But we had the wind, and luffing as she came, we raked her decks with shot from our small cannon. Then we closed with her, and lashed our rails to hers."

"A fine manœuvre. Now, with what result?"

"They thought to take us easily, your lordship. But we were upon their decks and had cut them down while they were still amazed at the turn of affairs. Then we set to work to search her cargo, finding a few fine vessels of gold and some feathered clothing which I have never seen before. It was in the form of cloaks, and all were stitched with pearls and glittering stones. In all there was no great amount, so that when divided there was left this plaque alone to my share."

"But how, then, do you argue that it is from the Indies?" demanded the earl. "I grant that it would appear to have come from some such foreign part. But you took it from a Frenchman – a legitimate act, seeing that the king's Majesty is now at war with France, and that this French ship was the aggressor."

"The tale was told us by one of the prisoners," answered Peter, recovering his jovial spirits, now that he learned that there was no trouble to be feared.

"And he said? Come, hurry, my good fellow; I am in haste to be gone."

"That he, with a comrade, had fallen in with a Spanish ship and had sacked her. She contained little compared with others of which the tales have reached us; but what there was was destined for the King of Spain. He said that it was a token sent by some of the king's lieutenants, to show their Royal master what riches there were in the new countries to which their good fortune had taken them."

"And a right wealthy country it must be where maps are drawn upon gold plaques of such a thickness. What do you value the relic at, my good fellow? If not at too vast a sum I will buy it of you."

The earl turned the plaque over and over in his hands, looking at it with vast interest, while Peter stared at him in perplexity. For the offer of money was an alluring bait to this penurious sailor,

who seldom had more than a few pence to jingle in his pocket. But the tale of the Indies had aroused his cupidity. He had dreamed of gold and gems, and of a huge fortune easily made since he had become the possessor of the plaque, and it was the thought of some greater wealth in the future which caused him to decline the earl's offer.

"I ask pardon for refusing to sell," he said humbly. "But we have not learned the meaning of the words which are written on the parchment. It may mean that a clue will be given to more gold, more of those feathered and jewelled cloaks which we found aboard the Frenchman."

"Then we must search for a Spaniard, though 'twill be hard to find one in this country at this time, save and except the ambassador, who, I fear, bears us no great good will."

The earl took one last look at the golden disk, and was about to turn away, when there was an interruption. Cries were heard from the crowd, who stood staring at Peter and the gentlemen speaking with him, while a crossbow man could be seen pushing his way toward the barrel. He was a huge fellow, standing some six feet four, and his height was increased by the iron cap which was perched upon his head. More than that, as he drew nearer it was seen that he was merely a youth – a youth of unusual size and weight, upon whose jerkin were displayed the familiar arms of the house of Essex. Fresh-complexioned, and with dark-brown hair, this youthful crossbow man was a handsome fellow, and carried his many inches well. But as he neared the earl he halted, took his bow from his shoulder, and knelt on one knee.

"The tale came to me that an interpreter in the language of Spain was required, your grace," he said. "I pushed through the crowd to hear more of what was wanted, and see if I could be of service, for it happens that I was born in Spain, and speak the tongue as well as my own."

"And perhaps the silver groat was an attraction, my lad. Come, now, I see you bear my arms, and are therefore in my service. Your name and age, and how comes it that one born in Spain is of such a height?"

"I am English born, your grace," was the answer, as the young fellow drew himself proudly to his full height. "There is no trace of Spanish blood in me, for my father and mother are both of this country. My name is Roger de Luce, and I have been tall since I was ten years of age. I am now just eighteen, if it please you."

"A fine-grown lad, who has done well with English feeding. And son, I have little doubt, to my tried and trusted Raven de Luce, captain of the crossbow men. How come you to speak this Spanish tongue?"

The earl looked closely at the tall young fellow, noticing his frank and open features, his unconscious air of determination and breeding, and the stalwart frame, which belonged to a man of thirty rather than to a youth of eighteen. Big men were not so often to be met with in those days, when London harboured only some two hundred thousand, and the earl secretly congratulated himself upon having such a champion in his ranks.

"Come," he said, "you are no commoner; that I can see with half an eye. Besides, I know your father to be fit for higher things than captain of one of my bands. How did you acquire the language?"

"I was born in Spain, your grace, when my father went in the suite of your uncle to the court of Ferdinand. My mother accompanied him, and we were there, but for a visit home on two occasions, for eight years in all. There I learned to speak the tongue as well as our own, and I have since kept it up with my father, for he thinks that the time may come when it may be of service to me."

"And to others, thereby winning you reward. Let us hear you translate, and perhaps this worthy fellow here will let us see his silver groat."

"Willingly. Here it is, Roger, and I may as well tell you now something of the reason for asking this service of you. Here is a golden plaque, sent to his Majesty of Spain, so it is said, from his lieutenants, who are bent on discovery in the Indies. 'Twas captured from a Spanish galleon by a Frenchman, whom we in turn despoiled. Here is the parchment attached, and here the silver groat in payment of your services."

All crowded about the tall youth now and listened intently, the earl showing as much enthusiasm and eagerness as any one. Roger took the plaque and spread out the roll of parchment attached.

"It was written a year ago," he said, "and this is the translation: 'To his most Catholic Majesty, King of Spain and of all the Spanish possessions beyond the sea. The plaque forms part of an offering which we, your lieutenants in the Indies, humbly send you, praying for your acceptance. We are about to set out for this city of which report has reached us. It lies on the Terra Firma to the due west of Cuba, and somewhat south after making the northern cape of Yucatan. We have it from the natives that the city is called Mexico, and surpasses anything ever dreamed of in magnificence and wealth. The peoples who inhabit it and the cities lying about the lake engraved on the plaque, have abundance of gold and stones, and their store of treasure is held in the city of Mexico, in that portion beyond the central square where the animals are shown. But the part is not named, for these Indians do not read nor write. They describe all that is seen or that happens by means of pictures and engravings. But the treasure lies within a small radius, and shall be ours. We go to conquer for your sacred Majesty, to colonize, and to bring the holy Catholic faith to these heathen. – Fernando Cortes.'"

"The last?" suddenly exclaimed the earl. "Whose was the signature?"

"Fernando Cortes, governor of the Terra Firma."

"Then there is truth in this plaque," said the earl, showing some trace of excitement. "I have heard of this valiant Fernando Cortes. He finds new lands and new treasures for his king every year, it seems. Good fellow, this plaque would interest his most noble Majesty. Trust it to my charge, and I will give you a sealed receipt for it. Or better, come with the relic to Greenwich to-morrow at noon, and bring the plaque with you. You shall have audience of the king, and this Roger, who has done us this service, shall be there, too, to meet you and translate. Such tales as these, when truth is obviously behind them, must be borne to the king's ears, for it is well that he should hear of these far-off lands, for mayhap he would care to have a finger in the pie which the King of Spain is picking. To-morrow, then, at noon, at the door of the palace at Greenwich."

He beckoned to Roger to follow him, and at once turned to leave, the young crossbow man elbowing a way for him through the crowd to his chair or coach. A minute later the earl had entered, and the horses were in motion, two men being at their heads. Roger fell in behind, his mind full of the Indies and of the visit planned for the morrow.

CHAPTER II

Off to the Terra Firma

A proud day it was for those who, at the order of the earl, attended at the door of Greenwich Palace, and great was the emotion of Peter Tamworth. He appeared in the most brilliant raiment, borrowed, if the truth had but been known, from an accommodating dealer, and looking on this bright morning more weather-beaten than before – his squat figure and his huge nose calling unwonted attention to him. Roger de Luce joined him as the hour for the interview arrived, looking taller than ever, and more substantial. He, too, had donned his best apparel, and still carried his crossbow.

"This way. Follow, an it please you," said an attendant, suddenly opening the gate, to the alarm of Peter, who was more than excited at the thought of the meeting. "Rub your shoes against the broom, and enter quietly. His grace awaits you within, and will take you to the king. Remember to kneel to his Majesty."

He led the way through a long corridor till he came to a large chamber hung with tapestry, and with an arched exit leading into the interior of the palace; and here the Earl of Essex met them.

"You have the plaque?" he demanded shortly. "Then, keep it covered till the king's Majesty makes application for it. Now follow."

He went through the archway, Roger and Peter coming close on his heels, the former cool and unruffled, while Peter grew hot with uneasiness; for he had fears lest this attack upon the Frenchman should lead to trouble, and lest King Henry the Eighth, whose reputation was well known, should take a fancy to the plaque and insist on keeping it. However, they had little cause to be nervous, for King Hal on this fine morning was in the best of humour.

"Show this relic, rascal," he said, as he stood beside the earl in a window niche, "and relate how it came into your hands, leaving nothing of the incidents of the fight to be imagined. By my faith, Essex, 'tis a giant you have here, this crossbow man – or youth, I should have said. How old is the lad?"

He directed his last question at Roger, who fell on his knee, and answered.

"Eighteen! Then England need have little fear while she continues to possess such sons. A fine body-servant, Essex."

"And an interpreter, sire. He and his father were in service with our mission at the Court of Spain some years ago."

For an instant a cloud swept across the brow of the king, for at this time he still remembered the opposition he had met with regard to his cherished wish for a separation from his queen, Catharine of Aragon. Then he stretched out a hand, and took the plaque from Peter.

"A sea dog," he said, in his blunt, loud tones, staring at the sailor, while the latter quaked; "a sea dog who has fought and won, and fought and lost many a time. Is it not so?"

"And who hopes to fight again, as it please your Majesty. There is news here which would give fighting to many a man of yours, and some wealth besides. The Indies are filled with pearls and gold."

"And you would have me take them from my brother of Spain?"

There was a half-smile on the lips of the king as he spoke, and thus encouraged, Peter, who had now lost some little of his nervousness, related all that he knew, and told how the plaque had come to his hands.

"I once fell in with a Spaniard who had served in the Indies," he added. "He had been driven from Spain because of some offence to the Church, and therefore he did not hesitate to tell me what he had seen. There are thousands of undiscovered leagues yet, and it may be that some few might come to the hands of the mighty king of England. There are men on the sea who could do for you what these others have done and are now doing for Ferdinand of Spain, if only the permission were given them, and the money with which to purchase ships and stores at their hand."

"The rascal tempts me to become an adventurer," laughed the king, looking closely at the plaque. "But let us hear about this engraving of the sun. 'Tis marvellously wrought, and like you, Essex, I see buildings, roads, and beasts, and boats upon the water. Let the interpreter tell us of the writing."

With a nod Roger was beckoned forward, and at once translated, his fluency delighting the king.

"Truly a valuable man to send on such an expedition," he whispered to the earl, "for he speaks the Spanish tongue like a native, and he is stalwart and strong. This tale of foreign lands tempts me, for I aspire to extend my dominions. Let this sailor have the plaque and retire with the youth. We will speak quietly together."

What happened at that interview it would be impossible to state. But the result was soon felt by Peter Tamworth, and by Roger de Luce; for hardly had a week passed, and the memory of their interview with the king was still fresh to them, and much in their minds, when a stranger presented himself to each in succession. He was a knight in poor circumstances, by name Sir Thomas Brice, and he came armed with authority to speak.

"There is a large brigantine lying in the river," he said, "and I am in want of men to man her. Her mission is a secret one, at which you can guess. She is bound for the Indies. At this moment all manner of stores are being loaded aboard her, together with guns and weapons. Will you come with me and form part of my crew?"

Sir Thomas, a tall and courageous-looking man, who had already won a reputation in the wars with France, waited to see what effect his message had, and then commenced to speak again.

"There is no need to decide at once," he said quietly. "Meet me to-night at the Swan Tavern, in Cheapside, and there we will discuss the matter. For you, Roger de Luce, I have the Earl of Essex's sanction for your absence, and his wishes for you to form one of the exploration. We go to discover this city which was engraved on the plaque, and also to see whether we cannot oust these Spaniards."

Acknowledging Roger's salutation he strode away again, leaving the latter to think the question over, and discuss it with his father.

"'Tis a chance which may not occur again," said the latter, though Roger needed no encouragement, for he was eager to go. "There is a plan, which should take you to this part, and maybe you will arrive there before this Spaniard who is known as Fernando Cortes. Then there will be riches for all, and you will win back for our family the position which it once held. For we were not always servants, or soldiers in subordinate positions. Time was when the de Luces held their lands and vassals, and jested with the best."

That night Roger kept the appointment at the Swan Tavern, a famous hostelry, where he met Sir Thomas, with whom was Peter Tamworth and some ten others.

"We sail within the week," said the knight, "and your answer must be given now. There is the share of treasure which you will receive should the expedition prove successful, and then there will be the honour which his Majesty will do to each one of us. In all there will be a hundred gentlemen and men-at-arms, whom the brigantine can just accommodate. Now, will you come?"

"Willingly," said Roger. "The share which is promised will be suitable, and I promise to do all that I can to make the expedition successful. Should we fall in with the Spaniards, I shall be able to deal with them, for I speak the language."

"And if the tongue fails, I warrant he will be able to deal with them in other ways," laughed one of the gentlemen present. "We are fortunate in having this young giant. Now, Sir Thomas, we have to find a sailing master, and our crew is completed, for the men-at-arms have already been enrolled."

In fact, those who were leading this expedition had little difficulty. There were too many applicants, for it wanted but a day for the secret to leak out, and it flew swiftly through the city of London. Seafaring men, old sailors, and adventurers came forward in scores, and from amongst them the most suitable were chosen. Then, having filled up with provisions and water, and having taken aboard a plentiful supply of gunpowder and arms, the brigantine slipped from her moorings, and

slid down the River Thames. A thousand eyes followed her as she went. Nor did the knight, who commanded her, and his crew meet with the smallest adventure till they had crossed the Atlantic Ocean, then an almost unknown sea, at least to the English, and come into the neighbourhood of the island of Cuba. A fair wind carried them directly on their course, and during the voyage they met with few matters of great interest. As for Roger, once he had recovered from his sea-sickness, he found the life delightful. In spite of his height and his look of age, he was as much a boy as any young fellow of eighteen years, and skylarked about the vessel with Philip Heasman, son of one of the gentlemen adventurers who had taken shares in the ship.

"I love to look over the side and see the water running past us, Philip," he said, once they were out of the channel, and had come to a part where the sea ran in long low swells. "Then at night I lie in my bunk and listen to the swish of the water alongside, and that sends me to sleep."

"And keeps you so till some one has kicked you to awaken you again," laughed his friend. "I declare that I have a big task every day and night, for when we are off watch you seem to sleep all the time, and I have to look to it that you turn up on deck at the appointed hour. I suppose it's because you are so long, and have overgrown your strength."

"Hardly that. Look here, Philip. That doesn't look like overgrown strength. At any rate, it doesn't seem to be what one could call weakness."

As Roger spoke, he seized one of the small cannon by the muzzle with one hand, and with a heave lifted the gun and its attached carriage till the muzzle stared up at the sky, while the base rested on the deck. Then he set it down again in its old position as gently as though it had been a featherweight.

"A fine performance; but still, not as much as you will be able to do one of these days," said Philip, critically; "and I maintain that you are grown too much, and that the rapid spring-up which you have made has robbed you of strength. That is why you are for ever sleeping, and why you loll and rest at all times. Why, in a matter of a year or so, you will be able to do what you have done without an effort, and with two fingers. You will even be able to lift the portly Peter Tamworth right over your head."

The little sailor happened to be passing along the deck at that moment, and Roger seized upon the opportunity with eagerness.

"Lift Peter!" he cried, with a derisive laugh. "He is but a child. See him soar aloft."

He swung round and seized the sailor by his clothing. Then, with a swing, he tossed him into the air, and held him at arms' length above his head, while Peter shouted angrily.

"What fool's work is this?" he demanded, as Roger set him down again, while the men-at-arms, who had watched the little exhibition of strength, roared with laughter. For Peter was a character, a jolly fellow, apt to cultivate a bosom acquaintance with all with whom he sailed. But, on this occasion, dignity had in some small measure altered his habit, and he stood aloof, as far as his merry nature would allow.

"Would you toss our leader so into the air? Then, why choose me? My faith, were I in command, I would send you to the peak in the bight of a rope, and let you swelter there for a day."

"If you could get him to the rope, well and good, Peter," laughed Philip, patting the angry sailor. "But, think of the strength of this young bull. I warrant, he could hold you with one hand, and lash you with the other. Mayhap, seeing that you do not lead this expedition, he may feel desirous of sending you to the peak to see how the trick looks. But be not angry. Our friend was just trying his strength or weakness, for I maintain that he is weak rather than strong."

"Then let him keep this weakness for the Spaniards," grumbled Peter, "and try not his strength on me. Look over there, comrades. Cuba is in sight – the island where it is said these Spaniards caused the natives to slave so that they died within a few years. 'Tis well for us that we are away in the offing, for there will be ships there, and many men to man them. If they caught sight of us, we should be surrounded, and then where would be this city on the Terra Firma, and the treasure we seek?"

His words brought the men-at-arms, Philip and Roger, to the side of the vessel, leaning against which, they fixed their eyes upon the speck of blue in the distance, which they were told was Cuba.

"Perhaps another week will take us to the north of Yucatan," said Peter. "After that no one can say how long it will be before we run on to the main land. But we shall doubtless halt at Yucatan and take in water and fresh food, if the latter can be found. Does any one see a sail?"

All stared out across the water, but though they watched for many hours, nothing was seen save the land in the distance. And as evening came the latter became larger, and those gifted with the best sight could make out hills and mountain chains. Roger even thought that he caught the white sheen of a sail. But it was getting dusk, and he could not be certain.

"As like as not it was one," said Sir Thomas, when our hero brought the report to him, "for I have information that the Spaniards keep many ships here, and that they are making large preparations to reinforce this Fernando Cortes with men and ships. But we shall be far along the coast by tomorrow, and our course will take us out more. Did you think, Roger de Luce, that we should have accomplished so much in one single month from our sailing from the port of London?"

"I had expected to be many weeks on the voyage, sir, though I am ignorant of the time usually taken. But I remember that while in Spain it was told me that the great Columbus had taken a very long time, and that when in these parts his men had begged of him to turn back, for they thought that they had gone so far that to proceed would make return impossible."

"And yet he persevered against their wishes, and discovered Hispaniola, and afterwards Cuba. And he took many weeks, while we are but four from London. We are fortunate, and in two weeks from this should be on the coast for which we aim. Then we must search for natives, and a captive Spaniard would be of service, for then you could question him."

Roger made his salute, and retired to the lower deck, where he soon turned in. At midnight he and Philip came on the deck again, to take their watch, and strolled up and down. A fine moon was up, and the sea could be observed for miles around them, looking silvery white in the rays.

"Wait," said Roger, after they had trudged up and down for nearly an hour, both busy with their thoughts, "I fancied that I saw another ship. Perhaps it is the light given by the moon, which is rather deceptive, but – look yonder. Is that a sail?"

"I also thought so," was the hesitating answer. "But I could not be certain, and now there seems to be nothing. Listen! Did you hear a call?"

They stood at the rail, staring out at the water and listening. But it must have been their fancy, for though an hour passed and still found them attentive, they neither heard nor saw anything to arouse their suspicions.

"We imagined the whole thing, then," said Roger, "though I fancy still that I actually caught sight of a sail. Suppose these Spanish fellows had heard of our coming, and were lying in wait."

"If they had heard they would certainly be on the look out for us. But you forget, Roger. Our expedition was planned not more than five weeks ago; and it is said that the king commanded secrecy then. Who could have sent the news to Spain? And granted that it reached the court at Madrid, how would a boat have sailed to Cuba in time to bring the information? For we have made a rapid voyage, quicker, we are told, than is usually accomplished by the Spaniards."

The argument seemed conclusive, and Roger sought for some other means of explaining the sail which he thought he had seen. Had he and the others who took part in this expedition but known it, the suspected sail was a ship in actual fact, which for many a week had been cruising off the coast of Cuba. For Spain jealously guarded these new possessions of hers, and the governor of Cuba and of Hispaniola had orders to watch the narrow seas about them. Then, too, it happened that one of the prisoners taken aboard the Spanish treasure ship had contrived to send information of the capture to Ferdinand, and had narrated how the plaque and the other valuables had fallen into the hands of the French, and afterwards into those of the English. It was a serious loss, and steps were at once taken to oppose any who might be tempted to find the land of gold and the city referred to on the plaque.

Early on the following morning, when Roger lay coiled up in his bunk, a shout startled the ship and brought all to the deck.

"A sail! A sail! A Spanish ship!"

It was Peter Tamworth who had made the discovery, and he voiced it at the top of his power.

"A Spaniard, bearing down upon us from under the land."

"Then I was right," whispered Roger in Philip's ear. "There was a ship near us last night. Look now! One can see her fairly well, running from the land. We seem to be nearer in than we had intended to be. She is a large vessel, I should say, and therefore we shall have to fight."

That this was so became clear to all aboard in the next half-hour, for the Spaniard, a big vessel, with prow which stood high out of the water, bore down upon the brigantine, sailing two feet to her one, and to show the feeling aboard her, fired a gun as soon as she was in range.

"A queer sound, and one which makes one feel inclined to dip below the rail," said Philip, with a laugh, as the cumbersome ball skipped along the surface of the water, and sank at the forefoot of the brigantine. "What answer will our leader give?"

"The one you might expect. We have as much right here as any, and are not to be ousted because the Spaniards happened to be here first. But we shall not waste powder. Our guns are far too small. Let them get to close quarters, and then I warrant we shall talk to them. Give me a crossbow before all."

Roger swung his weapon from his shoulder, and looked to the locks.

"One of these days it will happen, perhaps, that the arquebus will be improved, and made easier to carry. It is too heavy by far now, and takes too long to fire. For those reasons it cannot compare with this weapon. At one hundred yards I will guarantee to bring down a man if he does not move."

"You will hardly find one willing to oblige you," was the answer. "Ho! That was a close one. I should think that we shall be badly pounded before we get the range of them."

"Unless we run up towards the enemy, and so get to action sooner," remarked Roger. "That is what I should do, and I think our leader will. Yes. There goes the tiller, and the master is calling to us to shift the braces."

In those days every ship carried her fighting crew, who also saw to the sails; and it happened that aboard the brigantine, amongst the adventurers were many who were sailors as well. And thanks to that fact, those who, like Roger, had been ignorant when they first embarked, had quickly picked up the mysteries of sailing. They obeyed the master's order, therefore, and very soon the brigantine was heading for the Spaniard.

"Let every man lie down behind the rail till I shout," called out Sir Thomas, stationing himself on the lofty stern of the brigantine, "and come hither, Roger de Luce. It may be that they will desire a parley, though it hardly seems so, considering that they have fired upon us so early. Now," he said, when Roger had clambered to his side, "how many men does yonder vessel carry?"

"That I cannot say, sir," answered our hero, "for I spent the greater part of my life in Spain, at Madrid, though once I was at Cadiz. But she is a large vessel, Sir Thomas; and seeing that she has been cruising here, for I am sure now that I caught a glimpse of her last night, I am sure that she will have many men."

"Then their numbers shall confuse them. We will carry them by the board, and so escape their shot. Move the tiller over, master, so as to put their aim out."

Bang! crash! It was very certain that the Spaniard carried heavy metal, for one of her shots came aboard the brigantine at that moment, and ploughed through the deck, rending the timbers, and scattering splinters on either side. Then a second hulled the Englishman, stripping away a length of bulwark, and killing or disabling half a dozen men. Roger looked down at the scene of havoc for a little while, feeling dizzy and upset at the sight; for huge though he was, and a powerful fellow, he was a child in experience – a light-hearted, overgrown fellow, who had as yet seen little of the rough side of the world.

"An ugly sight, which makes the head swim," said the voice of Sir Thomas. "But use makes one hardened. When you have seen all that I have, you will pity those who are hurt, but will let your feelings go no further. Ah! we are likely to suffer heavily, unless we can soon come to close quarters."

For ten minutes and more the Spaniard hulled the brigantine, while the latter made fruitless efforts to come close to her adversary, and had, so far, not returned a shot. Meanwhile, her crew had suffered heavily, and many of the men-at-arms and the adventurers had been killed or severely wounded.

"She is playing with us!" shouted Sir Thomas, at length, seeing that the Spaniard did not approach closer. "She relies upon her superior sailing, and is trying to circle about us. Bring her about, master, and jamb us into this craft."

He stamped on the deck with vexation, for it was maddening to see his men thus cut down without being able to retaliate. However, a crafty move on the part of the master met a change of course of the Spaniard, and at once the ships began to run towards one another, the brigantine looking ridiculously small beside the Spaniard.

"Shall I keep an eye on their steersman?" asked Roger, seeing that a move on the latter's part might yet take the enemy away. "If he puts his helm over, we shall have their guns pouring their shot down our decks, while our own small cannon will hardly serve better than my crossbow. See, Sir Thomas, a shaft from my weapon would reach from here."

"'Tis a good thought. Hold the fellow in your eye, and if he makes a move to throw us apart, fire at him. Stay here while I go to the gunners."

By now the crew of the brigantine were overflowing with eagerness, for it had been hard work lying behind the rail to be fired at without hope of retaliation. Now the chance was coming, and the men could be seen moistening their hands ere they seized their pikes or cutlasses, while the gunners blew at their port-fires and squinted along the cannon. Not that they could take aim yet at the enemy, for the latter was on a course which would take her across the bows of the brigantine, and it was impossible to slew the guns round sufficiently.

"We must make the most of the opportunity when we are near," said Sir Thomas, as he returned. "But I fancy that they will run on this course till almost crossing our stem. Then they will come over and sail on our course, while their stern guns pour shot into us. You must see that the movement is not carried out."

Roger nodded, and drew back the bow of his weapon, fitting a shaft with care and accuracy. He had been accustomed to the weapon from his earliest days, since he had had the strength to use one, and he was a fine shot.

"He is about to move, sir," he suddenly exclaimed, bringing the crossbow to his shoulder. "Yes, he is pushing at the helm."

Thanks to the high stern of the enemy, it was easy to pick out the steersman and to observe his movements. By now the Spaniard was about to pass the bows of the brigantine, and as she came to that position, the steersman pushed at the helm, while men were seen running to the braces. Roger took a quick aim and fired.

"Hit!" shouted Sir Thomas. "A brave shot, and see what it brings us."

He pointed excitedly, for the tiller had fallen from the hands of the Spanish steersman, while the unhappy fellow, struck in the breast by Roger's shaft, staggered against the rail of the vessel. The failure to steer at that moment was fatal, for instead of coming up into her new course, the prow of the Spanish ship paid off at once, and she swung across the stem of the brigantine. Instantly the master aboard the latter put his helm over a little, and ere the enemy could recover from their astonishment, or send a relief to the helm, the English ship was forging along on an almost parallel course which, thanks to the fact that the other vessel had almost lost way, brought her quickly into range. Then, indeed, did the men-at-arms and the adventurers give back what they had received. Crossbow bolts and arquebus bullets flew at the Spaniards, while the little cannon shot forth their missiles. Then the

prow of the brigantine struck the enemy heavily on the beam, and, sheering off a few feet, came into contact again.

"Aboard her! To the rails!" shouted the English leader.

He seized his cutlass, and sprang on to the rail. A rope gave him an opportunity of clambering up the high sides of the enemy, while Roger's stalwart arm gave him a heave which sent him with a swing on to the higher deck. Then our hero followed, Philip hard on his heels, while the remainder of the ship's company swarmed up wherever and whenever they could, leaving a few to lash the vessels together. A moment later all were engaged in a fierce struggle with the Spaniards, at whose head fought a noble in complete armour.

CHAPTER III

Roger the Lieutenant

The men of England clambered aboard the huge Spaniard like so many monkeys, pikes and swords gripped in their hands. Roger, accompanied by his bosom friend Philip, followed close on the heels of the commander, the former carrying a pike, while Philip bore a short sword.

"Rally! Rally, men of England!" shouted Sir Thomas, as he ran forward to oppose the Spanish leader. "Throw yourselves upon them and sweep them from the decks!"

"We have them in our hands," called out the Spaniard. "We outnumber them by two to one. Now, one rush and they are gone back to their own cockleshell. Together! cut them down!"

There was no doubt that both sides were stubbornly determined to gain the day, the Spaniards perhaps because they hardly knew what it was at those times to meet with defeat, and the English because of their natural determination to win, and perhaps for the reason that defeat meant so much to them. It was therefore with furious courage that they attacked the enemy, their leader crossing swords with Sir Thomas. Roger found himself opposed to a man of medium height, who wielded a sword with wonderful dexterity.

"We have a giant to fight against," cried out this veteran, with a laugh. "Then see how I will cut him down. See me slay the English giant."

"And look to yourself that the giant does not run you through!"

In the excitement of the moment Roger forgot all caution, and wildly lunged at his enemy. But this Spanish man-at-arms was a well-trying warrior, and he stepped aside with an easy movement, and with a disdainful smile on his lips.

"For all your height, but a child, Englishman," he said. "I will kill you before five minutes have passed, and then will your side be without its interpreter."

He set to work at once in earnest, and Roger had as much as he could do to defend himself. Indeed, he was never able to take the offensive, for the merest attempt at a lunge was met so swiftly with such a rapid presentation of the point of the sword wielded by his opponent, that he narrowly escaped. And if he could not touch his enemy, the Spaniard could not do as he had sworn. Twice he had contrived to slightly wound Roger; but our hero merely smiled, for they were but pricks. And now the press of the conflict was separating them. On every side men fought like furies, the clash of weapons being heard amidst the shouts. Here and there a man fell heavily to the deck, or staggered to the rail, there to lean against it while his hands clasped the wound.

But the English were gaining the centre of the deck. At the voice of their leader they advanced together by means of rushes, slashing fiercely, and sweeping the enemy back. And it was in one of these that the Spaniard who had opposed Roger endeavoured to fulfil his promise. He gave way before the onslaught of the enemy, enticing Roger to follow. Then he turned like a tiger at bay, and fell upon the Englishman.

"A promise is a promise," he said. "Now I will kill you as I said."

He very nearly accomplished his purpose too, for his sword descended with tremendous force on Roger's steel cap, severing the handle of the pike on its way. Indeed, had he been a foot shorter the blow would certainly have killed him. But it merely dented the steel cap, and caused him to stagger forward, dropping the end of the pike. It was a fine opportunity, and the Spaniard seized upon it.

"He felt the blow," he shouted. "Now he shall not feel it so much. This to settle the matter between us."

But he had spoken too quickly, for though Roger had staggered forward on to hands and knees, and, in fact, was in a position where his adversary could easily despatch him, yet some fortunate chance caused our hero to act in a manner which saved his life. Had he snatched at the severed pike

and tried to rise he would certainly have been cut down. But finding himself sprawling forward at the feet of the enemy, he stretched to his full length on the deck, and with a rapid movement grasped the legs of the Spaniard and lifted them from the boards. Then he flung them upward so quickly that the man crashed back upon the deck, striking it a heavy blow with his head. A second later Roger had taken his sword and had rejoined his comrades.

"A narrow escape," gasped Philip. "You gave the fellow a fine toss, and one which will last him a lifetime. Look at him; he moves, and is crawling away. If looks could annihilate, then our giant would be gone. But what will be the next move? That toss you gave seems to have been the signal for a pause in the fighting."

This was, in fact, what had happened. By mutual and unspoken consent the combatants had drawn away from one another for the moment, and stood glaring across the narrow stretch of deck, while they leaned on their weapons and breathed heavily. But the respite was not to be long enjoyed, and presently, at a shout from Sir Thomas, the men from the brigantine threw themselves once more upon the Spaniards.

"We will drive them to the far end of the deck," he said, "and then do you, Roger de Luce, call upon them to surrender. Now, my men, let us see who likes fighting the best."

There was no lack of enthusiasm amongst the gallant crew which had so recently sailed from England, and though the enemy were stubborn, and fought with a fury and disregard of danger which had already won them fame, they were compelled to retire before the attackers. Struggling for every inch of the deck, they were slowly forced back till the tall poop stood as a barrier behind them. Then it was that Roger's knowledge of the language saved his countrymen.

"Beware, Sir Thomas!" he shouted, working his way to their leader. "I heard the Spanish captain calling upon his men to prepare to spring aside while the guns were fired. They are screened behind the men, and the gunners are ready now with the port fires."

"Then let every man fall flat upon the deck when Roger de Luce gives us the word," shouted Sir Thomas. "Now, on to them again!"

A minute later there was a loud call from the Spanish leader, and at once the enemy broke from the Englishmen, and fled to the rails of the ship, disclosing a couple of big guns in rear which till that moment had been practically hidden. But now they were ready to sweep the English into the sea, and were crammed to the muzzle with all kinds of bullets and scraps of iron and lead.

"Fall flat!" shouted Roger, setting the example by throwing himself prone upon the deck. "Down, every one of you!"

The warning had come none too soon, and undoubtedly, had it not been for his knowledge of the Spanish language, the English crew would have been annihilated. As it was, they were barely upon their faces before two loud explosions shook the galleon, and a mass of iron and lead shrieked over them, and, spreading widely, ploughed a huge hole in the bulwarks. It was a lucky escape, in fact, and Sir Thomas at once prepared to make the most of it. But he was to meet with still more trouble, for the Spaniards were not yet beaten, and still outnumbered his own men. And, worse than that, a shout from one of them, and a turning of the heads of all, called his attention elsewhere. Then he gave vent to a cry of consternation.

"Another ship, and larger than this, I fancy," he called out. "She is bearing down upon us from the island, and will be here in less than an hour. We are lost if we do not retire. Back to the ship, men. Cut the lashings and let us be gone."

"But then we shall be followed by this same ship, sir," shouted Roger. "Cut her masts down before we go. It will take only a few minutes, and the axes are here."

He waited to see whether his commander would approve, and then rushed to the rack which stood at the foot of one of the masts, and which held three big axes, placed there for the very purpose for which they were now to be used.

"Come, Philip," he shouted. "We will have the masts so weak in a minute that they will not carry canvas, while our comrades can hold the enemy. There. Take an axe, and cut to the leeward side."

They fell upon the axes with even greater fury than they had shown some minutes before, and at once attacked the larger of the two masts carried in the waist of the galleon. A third rose from the poop; but this could not be got at, and in any case was unimportant, for it could not carry sufficient canvas to matter. And as they hacked at the wood, Sir Thomas and his men held the enemy in check, beating back their frantic efforts to gain more of the deck and frustrate the efforts of the two who were cutting at the masts. Roger and his comrade took not the slightest notice of them, but instead ran to the second mast as soon as the first had been more than half cut through.

"It will fall the instant the ship is put into the wind," said the former. "If we were to cut deeper it might fall now, and then we ourselves and the men might be hurt, or even the spar might damage or imprison the brigantine. Now let us finish this one."

A minute later they shouted to Sir Thomas, and at the latter's orders the men began to retire slowly, keeping their faces to the enemy all the while. The latter did their utmost to hamper the retirement, and rushed down upon the English furiously. But they could make no impression. The same stubborn, unbroken front was presented, and at the last moment, when many of the men had already regained the brigantine, a final rush and a furious onslaught sent the enemy flying.

"Now over the rail and into our own ship," said Sir Thomas. "But first let us put their cannon out of action. Come, we have men here who have the strength, and those friendly discharges which should have swept us away have done us a service, for they have cleared the rails. Throw yourselves upon the weapons and topple them overboard."

It was an excellent step to take, and Roger and his comrades carried the work out in a manner which did them the utmost credit. A few cuts with sword or axe severed the ropes which held the guns to their rings. Then a dozen pushed at the ponderous weapons, and one by one four of them were thrown into the sea.

"Now retire," said Sir Thomas; "and do you, Roger de Luce, ask the name of the commander here."

Our hero at once stood forward, his axe over his shoulder, and his dented cap tipped to the back of his head. A fine, gallant young fellow he looked, too, with his fair hair and his open features. His head was held erect, and there was a look about him which told of infinite assurance in himself and his comrades.

"From my master, the commander of the brigantine," he called out. "He desires to learn the name of the brave commander of this Spanish galleon."

"Then answer thus." The leader of the Spaniards stepped to the centre of the deck, his helmet discarded, and showing a bearded, strong face. He was covered in every other part by beautifully made armour, and a sword was gripped in one hand. Resting the tip of it on the deck, he leaned upon the hilt and looked towards Sir Thomas. "I am Don Cabeza de Vaca," he said, "and I would ask for the name of my opponent."

"He is Sir Thomas Brice, commander of the brigantine."

"Then tell him that I honour him as a valiant foe, and that I counsel him to depart from these waters. If he escapes the ship which now bears down upon us he will meet with others, for we are on the watch. He will be wise to retire to England, for in these waters he will meet with opposition, and if captured will be executed. This is my friendly warning to a gallant foe."

Roger rapidly translated the words, and waited for his leader's answer.

"Tell the brave Don that I thank him for his advice, but cannot follow it, even if I would. Let him know that nothing shall keep me from sailing on."

A minute later the Spaniard retired to the centre of his men, and Roger clambered over the rail and down to the deck of the brigantine. Already the majority of the lashings had been cast loose, and a few cuts with a knife severed what remained. Then the vessels drifted apart, while the crews watched

one another. But there was a strong breeze blowing, and the sails catching this, the brigantine very soon left her opponent in the distance. As for the Spanish vessel, it turned out that things happened as Roger had prophesied; for the minute that she was thrown on to a course to follow the English, the pull of her sails caused the weakened masts to crack, and they came thundering down across her decks. She was left a complete wreck, disarmed and helpless.

"We will crack on every stitch of canvas which we possess," said Sir Thomas, as the brigantine increased her distance from the vessel with which she had just been in action. "What are our chances, master? Will yonder big galleon overhaul us easily?"

"Ay, Sir Thomas. She will sail five feet to our four, and will come up with us. But when, is the question which we have to settle. It is just past noon now, and she is some leagues away. I should say that her guns will speak to us as the dusk falls, and we shall disappear in the darkness as she gets to closer action. Then your honour must decide which course to take. You might attempt to take them by the board, as in this last case."

"And in that should lose more of my men. No; I think that I will take a shrewder action, for I cannot afford to lose more. Even now I do not know what our losses have been, though I fear that they are heavy. But at night the gravest accidents happen. We might run us aboard this galleon, and when we were on her deck some of the enemy might cut the lashings and send us adrift. Come hither, Roger de Luce, well called our giant, for you are strong in limb, and a power to us also in that you are our only interpreter. Glad am I to see you secure and safe, for at one time, as I looked in the midst of the *mêlée* I thought that that red-bearded Spaniard would give you the *coup de grace*. You flung him finely, and by a clever trick, quickly thought on, and still more rapidly adopted. That shows that you have a ready wit besides strength of arm, and reminds me that to you we owe the fact that yonder galleon is not now pounding us with her shot. For had the masts still stood, she would have covered them with canvas and come after us, with the hope of taking us before the arrival of her consort. Such efforts do men make to obtain the whole share of honour and warlike glory. Yes, 'twas a fine manœuvre, and it has placed them out of action. We owe you much, and, as a sign of my good favour, I herewith appoint you my lieutenant, for there are vacancies, I grieve to say. Now, you have given us a lead before; the master says that as the dusk falls yonder ship will have the range of us, and that as night comes her shot will be pounding into us. What shall be our action in these circumstances?"

He stood leaning on his sword, still breathing heavily, for he had fought with all his strength and energy, and had made an able and gallant leader. Nor was his appearance less dignified or grand than that of Don Cabeza de Vaca; for he also was dressed in the full armour of that period, armour beneath the weight of which many a man would have groaned, particularly in that hot climate. But Sir Thomas was in his own way a fine Englishman, sturdy and broad-shouldered, and hardened to much fatigue by long warring with France. The point of his weapon pierced the deck as he leaned upon it, while he pushed up the portion of his helmet which protected the face, and hooked it into position so that it would not fall again.

"Come, Sir Giant," he said with a gay laugh, the laugh of one who knows that he and his men have done well, and who feels relieved and gratified thereby, "tell us whither to go next, and how to hoodwink these crafty Spaniards."

"Will the master say what would happen were we to keep steadily on this course during the night?" demanded Roger, flushing at the honour done him, and at the thought of his promotion, a promotion quite unexpected.

"I can say that with ease," was the answer, as the master cast an eye aloft and shouted to the sailors to direct them as to the spreading of more sail. "We may put on sheet after sheet, and still that galleon will outsail us, for she has bigger masts and yards, and carries a bigger proportion of canvas. She will overhaul us of a surety, and were the night promising to be dark, might easily ride past us. But the sky is clear. Fine weather is before us, and the moon rises at an early hour."

"So that to continue as we go will mean another action, with an enemy who is fresh, while we are sore knocked about, and who, moreover, has a galleon to fight from, while we have only a brigantine, which looks more like a ship's boat beside these Spanish monsters."

"That is as I have said," admitted the master. "If we continue we are face to face with an enemy determined to sink us, and one which can sail round and round us in a ring, pounding us with her cannon. Then, too, the night is bound to be fine, and her marksmen will make fine use of the moonlight."

"If we remain," said Roger, with a cunning smile. "But the moon does not come up at the instant that the night falls. Last evening, when I was on the watch, it did not rise till some four hours were passed."

"Which is early, I take it," said the master. "To-night she will shine within some three hours of the dusk."

"Then we must make the most of those three hours, sir," exclaimed Roger, turning to the knight who commanded the brigantine. "Why should we not set this course, and keep it in full view of the Spaniard till the night comes? Then let us swing round, and, after sailing some leagues to left or right, make up for the island of Cuba again?"

"But, surely, that would be madness," exclaimed Sir Thomas, stepping back and looking at his young lieutenant in astonishment, while he secretly wondered whether he had not, after all, overrated Roger's acuteness, and promoted him somewhat hastily and rashly. "Surely, my lad, that would be placing our heads in the very mouth of this Spanish lion. This island of Cuba is the stronghold of the lieutenants who act for King Ferdinand of Spain, and we may be sure that they will protect it for his Catholic Majesty. Our coming to the island, our being near it, indeed, would lead to a descent upon us in far greater force. Likely enough we should be hemmed in and taken."

"If seen, sir," said Roger, quietly. "My opinion was given in view of the necessity which seems to exist for refitting. Look at the decks! Even our spars will require attention, while the carpenter tells you that two of the Spanish shot struck between wind and water. Those rents have been hastily repaired, and may withstand the strain of the water for a time. But if we were to meet with a storm as we proceed, our case would certainly be worse than were we on the coast of Cuba, with Spanish ships and enemies about us."

The argument was concise and clear, and Roger stood there, looking now at the knight and then at the master, watching their troubled faces, and wondering what action they would take. Would they spurn the advice thus sought from their newly promoted lieutenant, – from him who had come forward with his plan of cutting the masts of the galleon at such a critical moment? Would they decide to take some opposite course than that recommended them by the lad who but a few hours before had been a raw crossbow youth, unused to war, inexperienced in action, and whose sole recommendations were his height, his great strength, and his valuable knowledge of the Spanish language? To Roger it was a moment in his life. He had given thought to this question of escape from the enemy; he saw that the brigantine was sadly crippled, that her crew were badly hurt from the late action, and that refitting and rest were essential to future success. More than that, like Sir Thomas, he realized that a second action with an enemy who were fresh, and with a galleon of even greater power, could end in but one way. The English might beat off the Spaniards – might even, with superhuman gallantry, capture this following galleon; but their numbers would be again reduced, and probably very largely.

"Besides," he added, as if he had been speaking his thoughts aloud, "even if we do not make for the island, this vessel will follow during the following day, and she or other consorts will discover us. Were we in the best condition all would be well, but we are crippled. Our men are hurt, and, more than that, in the open sea the Spaniards can nearly certainly laugh at us."

"The lad is right. He has seen farther than we have, and gives us sound and good advice," said Sir Thomas, slowly, his brow all furrowed, as one could see through the opening in his helmet. "Then you advise that we make for this island of Cuba? Come, Sir Giant, set that brain to work and aid us."

We are not too proud to seek help and good counsel from even the youngest, providing he has proved his ability. Often have I seen the humblest soldier do service in this manner when at the wars. And, besides, you have travelled. You have seen strange lands and people, and there is nought like that to educate the mind. Some day, may be, you will command an expedition like this, and look back upon this day when your courage and good sense were put to the test."

Roger blushed red to the roots of his hair. He drew himself to the full of his height, looking proud and happy, for he had tried. While others merely looked to themselves, his was the mind which thought of the future, which tried to arrange for the welfare of the crew of the brigantine. And for that reason, when Sir Thomas first turned to him, he was ready with his answer. It was, indeed, an honour to be taken so seriously, to feel that the action of the commander of this vessel rested with him, and that his was the brain which had thought out the course which should be taken. He awoke to the fact that the two standing watching him were waiting for an answer, and thereat the colour again surged to his cheeks.

"What next?" demanded Sir Thomas. "We bear up for the island – "

"And endeavour to give these Spaniards the slip as we change course," said Roger. "Then we steer straight for Cuba, and, with the aid of the moon, come in touch with the land before those ashore can see us. Then again our course should be altered. Westward is our destination, and I advise that we sail along to the western extremity of the island. There, as the dawn comes, we will creep into some inlet, where we can refit, and where, from the hills about, we can set a watch on the country and the sea."

"A plan which will fall in well with the state of the island," exclaimed the knight, "for I have information that the western end has few, if any, Spaniards; that the natives who are left on the land have drifted thither, and there defy their enemies. 'Tis said that these Spanish have been vastly cruel to these unhappy negroes, and that death has been busy with them. No wonder, then, if they fly to the farthest point, there to live as easily as possible till the day when their masters come to hunt them down again, to take them to slave in the mines."

"And better still," added the master, "for this western end will be sheltered. We shall have the land to keep off the prevailing wind, and therefore shall be able to careen the brigantine without fear of any gale which may arise. I am with you, Sir Thomas, in thanking this tall youth for his service to us. He may be the means of helping us out of a trying dilemma."

"Then it is agreed. To-night, as the darkness becomes intense, we round on to the other course, to the west preferably. Then we steer for a league or two before coming up into the straight run for the island. All is plain. Get your preparations made accordingly, master. And now, master Roger, do you accompany me as my lieutenant. It shall be published to all how you have done service for us, and for what reason you have received promotion. Let us make a round and look to our damages."

They stepped to the ladder of the poop and clambered to the waist of the ship, where the chief damage had been sustained. And here they saw that the shot of the galleon had done mischief which warranted a complete refitting; for one of the shot had torn the deck up for several feet, disclosing the cross beams, and leaving a gap through which masses of water could flow. Then the rail was gone in many places, while sailors were even then busy at work with the carpenter endeavouring to stop the rents between wind and water. A tiny seat had been secured to a rope, and on this one of the men had been lowered over the side. Roger peeped over at him, and found that he dangled with his feet in the water, and that he was engaged in tarring the surface of a stout piece of canvas which he had just nailed over the opening left by the shot.

"The fellow is drenched to the skin, and no doubt has had to do a portion of the work by feeling under the water," said Sir Thomas. "But I deem that this rent on the deck is of even greater importance. For we can back those others from within, and that the carpenter is no doubt now seeing to. But this other is too large for our planks, and canvas would be useless, except in fine weather. Were it to blow we should have seas aboard us here, and one huge one might easily swamp us. More than

ever do I perceive that you have a shrewd and cunning mind; that you are one of the thinkers, who goes about the world and his business with his wits alert, and not, as many do, half asleep and wandering. To Cuba we will go, and there we will busy ourselves with refitting. Now let us count our losses."

A few questions ascertained the fact that ten adventurers and men-at-arms had been killed, and that some twenty others had been wounded more or less seriously. As Roger and the commander crossed the deck the sailors were at work cleansing them with water drawn by means of throwing a wooden bucket overboard, to the handle of which a rope was attached. Others had wet swabs in their hands, while, again, others were tossing the dead into the sea, a rough and ready, but the only, method of giving them burial.

A few hours later dusk began to fall, and those aboard the brigantine cast anxious eyes upon the galleon. The latter had closed in considerably. Indeed, the master had proved an excellent prophet, for just as the light began to fail a flash spurted from the bows of the Spaniard, the report and the ball itself following afterwards. The missile struck the sea once or twice, ricocheting beautifully; then it plumped into the water some three hundred yards astern of the brigantine.

"By nightfall they will be pounding us," repeated the master, coming to Roger's side. "But we shall outwit them, I think. If not, there is nothing to hope for save victory in an attempt to carry her by the board. Not again can we hope for that lucky shot which struck the steersman and allowed us to come aboard the other galleon."

"Ay! I had forgotten. 'Twas a fine shot indeed," exclaimed Sir Thomas. "And thereby this Roger de Luce showed that he could use his bow. Who knows. It may happen that in the near future the same may be called to greater use, and that this Roger may have to bless his prowess for the preservation of his life."

Who could say, indeed? Who can tell the future? But if the facts were looked at quietly and carefully it was more than probable that Roger would have to make good use of his crossbow. And not he alone; for would not every member of the crew of the brigantine have to fight for dear life once the Spaniards were really encountered? Could this audacious expedition hope to reach the city depicted upon the plaque, and wrest its riches from the Spaniards without bloodshed and fighting? And, besides, what of the owners of this city, the lawful possessors of the treasure?

Happily few, if any, gave a thought to the matter. The crew, from their leader downward, had a fine assurance in themselves and in their good fortune, and they put aside the danger, hoping for success in their venture.

An hour later night had fallen, and the last of the enemy's guns had thundered. Not a single shot had struck the brigantine, though a few had come dangerously near. There was a cheer from the men as the Spaniard sank out of sight, while all eyes followed the movements of the master.

"'Tis too light yet," he said quietly to Sir Thomas. "I can still see the forward deck and the men on it. When they are gone, then shall the word be given. But let us send to make sure that there is no light in any part of the vessel."

Roger was despatched on this errand, and as he came back with his report that all was right the master was satisfied that the time had come.

"The men are at the braces," said the latter. "I have only to whistle softly and they will pass the signal. Besides, they will feel the movement as I put the tiller over. Now, sir, God grant that we are successful."

He leaned his whole weight against the tiller, and caused the vessel to swerve. Steps, silent and almost unheard, passed across the deck as the brigantine swung into her new course. The sails flapped once or twice. Then the wind caught them again, and in less than a minute she was bowling along at right angles to her former course. It was a time of suspense. Men leaned against the bulwarks staring into the night, while the commander and the master tramped the poop, and hoped that the Spaniards would not see them. An hour passed in silence.

"Over with the helm and man the braces," whispered the master, and at his order the word was passed. Once again the vessel swayed, and swung to a new direction, and as the moon floated up into the clear sky the brigantine was sailing alone, it seemed, through a silvery waste, her look-out man watching for a sight of the island of Cuba.

"And you are a lieutenant, though you started merely as a crossbow man and as interpreter. Well, you deserve the honour and your good fortune. My father says that it was your action which threw us aboard that first galleon and saved us from further pounding from her guns, and your forethought which prevented her following. And now the ship knows that this new move is the work of the interpreter. Truly, I envy you your new position, but I give you the most hearty congratulations."

It was Philip who spoke, Philip, who had already made such a friend of our hero. And the pale rays of the moon shining upon his handsome face, showed that he meant every word that he had said. They gripped hands with enthusiasm, and gripped again as the look-out man sang loudly that Cuba was in sight – Cuba, the stronghold of the Spaniards, the island where the men of the brigantine were to meet with events of the utmost importance.

CHAPTER IV

The Island of Cuba

Thanks to the brilliant moon which floated in the sky, the master of the brigantine was able to sail her within easy distance of the coast of Cuba without fear of dashing her upon the land. Then he put his helm down again, and sent the good ship along towards the north-west, his look-outs being on the watch for Spanish vessels. No one ventured to sleep that night, though all were tired out after their engagement. Roger would have slumbered as he stood had not Sir Thomas detailed him to aid the apothecary whom the ship carried.

"Go and see what you can do to aid him," he said. "The work will interest you after a time, and you will be doing good for your comrades."

Roger took Philip with him, for the two had become inseparable, and they dived below in search of the surgeon, a wizened man of fifty years, who struggled to do all that was necessary by the aid of a feeble glimmer, all that could be allowed him.

"Right glad shall I be of help," he said, lifting his head from the task upon which he was engaged. "No lights can be permitted above this deck, and in consequence our wounded have to be on the level of the keel almost. Take no notice of the water. None leaks in now that the canvas has been nailed over the rents."

The wounded aboard the brigantine had, in fact, to put up with rough quarters for the time being, for Sir Thomas had given strict orders that no lights should be used, and had only permitted this feeble dip in the lower-deck space. Round the sides of it were gathered the wounded, some in serious condition, though the majority were able to sit up and talk. The place was hot and stuffy, and smelled strongly of boiling oil, some of which was even then heating over a brazier. But the men did not complain; instead, they discussed the battle cheerfully, for all realized that a stubborn fight had been made.

"We have given them a taste of what is to follow," said one of the men, beckoning to Roger. "But I warrant that but for our giant's help we should not be so comfortable to-night. 'Tis not the pleasantest feeling to know that cannon, and large cannon, too, comrades, are firing at one. One ducks the head perhaps when on deck; but here below, when a chance shot may find its way in all unexpected, and then the blow will be followed by a deluge of water, and perhaps by the sinking of the vessel, why then –"

"It is somewhat distasteful to feel that one must be drowned in a cage, that one must go to the bottom of this ocean as surely as a dog would with a stone about his neck; that is, if the ocean has a bottom, which I doubt."

They took for a moment or two to the discussion of this problem, mentioning many superstitions; for the men of that day were uneducated, and vastly superstitious. They even imagined that once they had crossed the horizon and sailed over the other side they would be unable to return; and it was this thought which had been almost the ruin of Columbus's voyage. However, at length they returned to Roger.

"We were saying that shot are not pleasant at any time, and particularly down here," said the first speaker; "and I was about to tell all who may not have known it that this giant of ours is to be thanked specially for that. Mayhap all know now that it was he who suggested that the masts of the galleon should be cut, and he and this young fellow here carried out the work. Truly, you deserve some recognition."

"Which he already has received," burst in Philip, "and right well he merits it, for it was his shaft which threw the steersman of the galleon out and enabled us to come alongside. He is a lieutenant now, and will command an expedition one of these days."

"Come, come! All this chatter is not help," burst in the surgeon. "Here are strips of coarse linen, and here a pot of hot oil. Now we will see to those who have as yet had no attention. I will examine their wounds, and then do you and your friend apply the dressings. Already I have seen that severe bleeding has been stopped, so that there will be no great difficulty."

He beckoned Roger and Philip to follow him, and led the way along the row of wounded men. Our hero then noticed that all had received some attention, those whose wounds were deep and severe having a tourniquet or a bandage tied tightly about the limb. The surgeon awoke the first they came to, for the poor fellow had fallen asleep, and quickly exposed the wound. It was in the shoulder, and was a clean cut, evidently the work of a sword, and had penetrated to the bone.

"A heavy blow," he reflected; "and it cut through the leather jerkin and the armour scales sewn to it. Truly a straight cut. The bone stopped the blade, and prevented further mischief. Now, sit so while my helpers dress the wound. Come, Roger de Luce, get that basin of water and bathe the place; then dry and apply the oil when burning hot."

It was trying work for those unaccustomed to such sights, and Roger felt the same feelings of giddiness which he had experienced as the cannon-shot struck the men down on deck. His head swam, and he felt sick. The surgeon noticed his condition at once, and spoke sharply.

"Do not give way to silly fancy," he said curtly. "Get the basin, and let me see you commence to work. Help is required."

The words came at a timely moment, and were spoken in a manner which made our hero writhe; not that the surgeon meant to be unkind, as he explained later.

"I could see that you were a strange mixture," he said, with a grim smile; "that you were brave in the fight, and fertile in resource when difficulty faced you; that you were better at giving wounds and at receiving them, if need be, than attending to the work of fighting men. You would have fainted at the sight, for men do that when their blood is cold and such matters are shown to them. Then I spoke, and you rallied. You glared at me as though I had given a mortal thrust, and then seized the basin."

"I was determined to be a help, and not a hindrance. I hate being a failure."

"And you strive to succeed in all that you take up," said the surgeon. "A proper desire, and one which will aid in giving you further promotion. There are men, and lads too – and always will be, I opine – who will go about the world drowsily and too lazy to care what happens so long as they can win drink and food. Be one of the opposite sort, I counsel you. But, no, there is no need to do that. You are one of those who would lead a strenuous life."

Roger would, in fact, far rather have suffered anything than have fainted or proved useless at such a moment. Just as he would have grieved had Sir Thomas elected to spurn the advice which he had given within a few minutes of his promotion, so would he have shown distress had he, on this occasion, carried out his orders indifferently. He seized the basin, therefore, reeled for a moment, and then, with an effort of will, composed himself for the strange task; and very soon he became accustomed to it. His hands gently bathed the wounds, while his sympathetic words comforted the men as the hot oil was applied; for it was the custom in those days to dress wounds with boiling fat or oil, and the pain of such a procedure can be imagined. However, the men bore it stoically, and when an hour had passed all were comfortably dressed.

"Your services have been invaluable," said the surgeon, "and I shall desire Sir Thomas to give me the loan of your help again. Now you had better retire. I shall administer a soporific to these men, and then shall extinguish the light. They will sleep till morning, I trust, and awake feeling refreshed and better."

He nodded to Philip and to Roger, who at once sprang up the ladder. They were almost sorry to be gone, for the task which had appeared so difficult at first now fascinated them. Indeed, for many a day after that they came every morning to help the surgeon, and thereby gained much useful information.

When they gained the deck above, and Roger scrambled to the poop with his report for the commander, the moon was falling, and the slanting light made it difficult to see the island.

"We are safe in any case," said Sir Thomas, "unless, of course, there should be rocks hereabouts. In an hour the dawn will come, and then we must search for a hiding-place. Stand beside me, Roger de Luce, and tell me if you perceive a spot which might prove suitable. It must be some harbour protected by the land and hidden by trees or something else which will prevent those on the shore from spying us."

"Trees would be the better, sir," said Roger, quickly.

"And why? Why better than an overhanging bluff, which would completely screen us?"

"Because we shall require wood. Because you have already said, Sir Thomas, that our planks are not long enough to fill the hole in our deck."

"A pest upon it! The lad thinks of everything!" laughed the commander. "I must have you as my close attendant. But, seriously, Sir Giant, 'tis well to cultivate this habit of seeking for the best, of planning a course which shall prove most helpful to success. He is not always most successful who leads his men boldly when the moment of danger arrives. Better make preparation beforehand, and ward off the danger altogether, if that be possible. Ah! the sky lightens a little, I think, and we may hope for the day soon. Come, now, tell me of those poor fellows below."

Roger strode up and down the deck with him, telling him of the wounds suffered by each man, and the surgeon's opinion as to their chances of recovery.

"I warrant that fresh air, water, and food will do for them as much even as the worthy apothecary's skill," Sir Thomas said thoughtfully. "Once we find a suitable spot, we will send a force ashore and investigate the country around. Then we will establish posts, and at one of these the sick and wounded shall be placed; for I have observed that men get well and strong when taken from the confinement of a ship, and from the salt provisions which we necessarily carry."

"There is a point yonder, I think!" cried Roger, suddenly interrupting him; "and, if my eyes and this half light do not deceive me, it is thickly wooded."

"They do not deceive you, lad. The point is forest grown," answered Sir Thomas, when he had stared in the direction of Roger's finger. "Mayhap there is a suitable nest for us there. We will see. Call to the master and tell him to put our head over in that direction."

Half an hour later the light was sufficiently strong to disclose the land clearly in that neighbourhood, and it was seen at once that the wooded point was but a portion of a huge forest extending along the coast. In places the trees seemed to come to the very edge of the cliffs, while at others, which perhaps were more exposed, the wood receded, leaving brown patches of rock. The stem of the brigantine was turned promptly towards the land, and she held on that course till the breakers could be seen. Then she swung west again, and sailed along the line of the shore, every one aboard searching for a sheltered cove. Suddenly the cliff was seen to be broken. A tiny bay presented itself, and on the far side the coast continued, lower than before, and consisting of shelving sand and rock. But trees made up for the absence of cliff, and seemed to hem the exit in and hide it from the outside world.

"Yonder point shall be our signal station and our hospital," said Sir Thomas, with decision. "There shall the wounded drink in all the breezes, while we labour at the ship below. Now, to you, Roger and Philip, I give the task of searching the land about. Others will follow, but they will not go far, for to them will be given the work of making temporary forts, and of sounding the depth of the inlet. When we have your report, we can arrange to careen the ship, but not before. Make your preparations, therefore, and leave as soon as we touch the land. Carry what arms you prefer, and, if necessary, be absent for two days. It is essential that I should know whether Spaniards are near, and if so, how far they are, and whether they are likely to attack us."

Roger and his friend were overjoyed at the prospect. They had been a whole month on the ship, and the confinement was beginning to tell upon them. Besides, the salted food carried in those days,

and the absence of vegetables, made existence on shipboard very different from what it is in these days. Scurvy was a very common ailment, even amongst crews sailing home waters, while amongst those going farther afield it frequently proved fatal, and ruined an expedition. Roger was conscious of a lack of energy, and both he and Philip prepared for the expedition with alacrity, feeling intuitively that a scamper ashore, fresh water to drink, and some wild fruits to eat, would do them a vast amount of good.

"Though we must be careful not to pluck and eat the first that we come to," said Philip, cautiously. "We are ignorant of foreign fruits, and no doubt shall see many that are strange."

"Then we must watch to see whether the birds pick them," answered Roger, eagerly. "In any case, we will carry some biscuit and cheese, and a junk of salted meat. For water we shall have to search, but there can be no doubt of its existence. The woods prove that it is here in abundance. And now for weapons and clothes."

"A sword is my choice for the former," said Philip.

"And mine a sword and a crossbow. We want something to eat, Philip, and a shaft strikes the mark silently, and brings down the quarry. I shall take my crossbow, therefore, and some two dozen shafts. An arquebus would be useless, and, besides, were one to be fired, the Spaniards might hear it, particularly if some are ashore. For clothing, I shall go as I am, with a light head-piece, and no other protection. A blanket carried across the shoulder will do for night covering."

"A very complete programme. Then we are ready, you think?" asked Philip.

"Not yet. We have to decide where we shall go first, for there is a big track of land about us. We should make for the highest peak, and from there endeavour to obtain a view far and wide. That will, perhaps, save us a long search, for if Spaniards are here they will have houses, and there will be clearings amongst the trees. We should see those easily, and could make our way to them."

"And then?"

"And then we should want to look into the matter; to see how many there were; whether inclined to be peaceful or warlike, and whether in sufficient numbers to prove troublesome. Also we should do well to arrange a signal with our leader. Now, what shall it be?"

"Why not hoist a blanket. There are trees in plenty, and one blanket hoisted will mean all is well; if two, look out for trouble. The matter is easily arranged."

They went at once to get their blankets and their weapons, both adding a dagger to the last. Then Roger clambered to the poop, and discussed the question of signals with the commander.

"I shall remember," was the answer. "One blanket will be a good sign for us, and I trust that you will be able to fly it. In an hour you should be gone, and soon afterwards I will post look-outs to search for your signal."

By now the brigantine was heading into the tiny bay, while all aboard crowded the decks, sniffing in the smell of the land. Then the sun came out, and the green of the trees flashed, the leaves shimmering in the light. But for the urgent need for silence a cheer would have broken from the men – a cheer of gratitude, for the long confinement had told upon them also. But they preserved silence, and watched eagerly as the vessel forged her way in. Presently, when within some sixty yards of the shore, the anchor was dropped, and preparations made to lower the only boat which the brigantine carried. Then a crew were placed aboard her, all armed to the teeth, while Roger and Philip dropped lightly amongst them.

"Remember that an early warning of danger is valuable," Sir Thomas cried down to them from the poop. "Send us news that Spaniards are here and threaten our safety, and we shall be prepared. On the other hand, if you tell us that none are to be found we shall be grateful. Now push off. May success follow you."

Ten minutes later Roger and his friend had gained the fringe of the trees, and turned ere they dived into the undergrowth.

"'Twould be a bad day for us if these enemies came from the seaward side and the brigantine were forced to sail away," said Philip, suddenly, taking a lingering look at the ship. "We should be in sorry case, Roger, and should have to decide whether to starve or to become Spaniards."

"In which case we should need to become Catholics and change our religion, or suffer the tortures given by their Inquisition. That was something of which I heard tales when in Spain. But never fear! Our commander would not desert us; and if he were so inclined your father would prevent the action. Now, there is the point above us, and we will make for it."

They plunged into the undergrowth, plucking the leaves from the trees and briars as they passed, for it was delicious to feel the soft material, still wet with the dew. Above their heads rose a network of branches, at first of moderate height, though as they progressed the height increased till it made them marvel.

"No need to stay here for more than a week, I should say," said Roger, suddenly. "If the ship were careened and the shot rents 'tween wind and water mended, we could put to sea again with one of these trees in tow. Then we could cut planks from it at our leisure, and mend the deck. But we shall see. Perhaps there will be no need to hasten."

By now they had begun to ascend towards the elevated part for which they aimed, and presently were on the summit. But trees surrounded them thickly on every side.

"We must climb, or search for some higher spot free of trees," said Philip. "Give me a leg up, Roger, and I will make an attempt to get to the top of one of these giants. Once I am up to the first branch there should be no difficulty."

He threw his sword to the ground, and his blanket also. Then he leaned against the tree, stiffening his frame. Roger stepped towards him easily, and, stooping, grasped his ankles.

"This to show my weakness," he laughed. "Keep rigid, and grasp the trunk as I lift you."

He put out all his power, and slowly and steadily lifted his friend, his grasp never relaxing from the ankles. Higher and higher went Philip, till Roger's arms were full above his head.

"Now stand on one of my hands as I release the ankle," he called out; "then do the same with the other foot."

Very carefully he released the right leg, and shifted his hand rapidly to the sole of the foot, while Philip transferred his weight to the left. Then the operation was repeated with the other leg, till the greatest amount of lift was obtained. By standing up on his toes as far as possible, Philip was just able to reach the lowest branch, and a quick jerk on Roger's part allowed him to grasp it. After that the ascent was easy, and he was soon at the very summit. Thence he stared in all directions, and finally fixed his attention to one particular spot.

"There is a side clearing, and beyond it a lot of rocky ground, free of vegetation," he said, as he came down to the lowest branch and dropped beside Roger. "I thought I saw men walking about, but I am not certain. However, there are houses, for I saw them, and the presence of houses argues men."

"And men argue the presence of Spaniards, and therefore of enemies," added Roger, with a grim smile. "How far was this clearing?"

"Perhaps seven leagues. But the expanse of trees made it difficult to judge."

"Then we will ascertain for ourselves. But, first, shall we fly the signal?"

They debated the matter for a little while; and then arguing that they would soon traverse the distance, they set off through the forest, being careful to take their bearings by means of the sun. Also Philip used his sword every few minutes, cutting a mark on the trees.

"Foresters do that in England," he said, "and we must not neglect to take the same precaution. A man could be easily lost in this forest."

An hour and a half's quick walking took them to the verge of the clearing, for after a little while Philip became more dexterous at the blazing of the trees, while Roger aided him, each making the cut alternately. Then they took the precaution to avoid the denser parts of the wood.

"We may want to retire at a run, and in that case the undergrowth would hamper us," said Roger. "And, besides, if the ground is moderately open we shall be able to see our blaze marks better, and pick them up as we run. I fancy that we have now taken them close enough, though I should like to have something here which would tell us at a glance where our track commenced, without giving the secret to the Spaniards, presuming always that they are here."

"A fact upon which I am ready to stake much. For do natives have houses?"

The question was one which neither could answer, for in those days Englishmen were absolutely ignorant of foreign matters. Negroes they had seen in England, but these were few, and in many cases were born out of their native haunts. Then, though the people of this island knew France and other adjacent countries well, for they had carried war there, they had but the vaguest ideas of the Indies. Vague rumour had come of huge riches – of gold which was to be obtained without the trouble of mining, of pearls ready at hand. The tales whetted their cupidity and their curiosity, but it led to no inquiry as to the condition of affairs in the Indies, the inhabitants there, and their ways of living. But Roger and his friend, as time passed, learned more, learned that the Caribs of Cuba, and the natives of Hispaniola and other adjacent islands, had been friendly and well disposed to the Spanish strangers; that they were peaceful people, tilling the soil, and living in contentment. Some little gold they had, simply because it was at hand. But they needed no wealth while their climate was so friendly and the land provided their wants. However, with the coming of the Spaniards came the greed for gold. Adventurers of every station and of every character came to these new-discovered lands, eager to make their fortunes. Labour was essential, for these adventurers discovered that gold was not to be so easily obtained once the resources of the natives had been drained. Therefore mines had to be worked, and the natives must work them. Then commenced a *régime* of brutality and tyranny so fierce and so unreasoning and inhuman that Hispaniola was soon depopulated, while in Cuba the natives hanged themselves sooner than endure further miseries. But the Spaniards were not dismayed. They deported natives from other lands, and set them to work as slaves, standing over them with their whips, and giving them in return for labour the right to exist, and sufficient food to attain that object. The history of the Spanish Conquest is, indeed, one long tale of cruelty, a tale which is made even worse by the narration of their treatment of the people on the Terra Firma, the country to which Roger and his friends were bound.

"Let us make use of some of the fallen boughs if there is need to leave the forest," said Philip. "There are sure to be plenty, and we will lay two in the form of a cross, so that none will suspect that they have not fallen in that manner, while we shall know that they are our mark. But we shall not require to do that yet. We have to spy out these houses."

The light in their immediate front had now increased, and the two young fellows therefore redoubled their precautions against surprise. They crept forward silently, cutting their blazes by piercing the bark with the points of their swords or with their daggers. Then a sudden break in the trees told them that they were at the clearing.

"We will go on our faces and creep to the very edge," said Roger. "Now, there is a bush there which will give us shelter, and from behind which we can watch the men who may be in the clearing."

They fell on their faces and wormed their way forward till the bush covered them. Then they parted the leaves in front, and stared eagerly into the clearing. A number of wooden houses stood there, and one or two had little gardens of flowering plants in front of them. Then a long dark track was seen crossing to the far side of the clearing, where it made its exit through a wide gap in the trees.

"A road constructed of logs," whispered Roger; "and see the huge mounds of earth."

"With a Spaniard standing above them with his whip in his hand. And there are natives. He drives them as one would a dog."

"Say, rather, as one would some wild beast whom one feared or loathed. That last blow was wholly undeserved. Poor folk! How they cringe beneath his lash. I would that some who have the

power to thus torture their fellow-beings could change places with their victims. Then, indeed, would there be groaning and anguish."

Roger spoke bitterly, for in those days the slave trade was almost unknown in England. In Portugal it had existed for many years, and Spain had adopted the custom. But England, in spite of her rising maritime power, and the increase of her sea-borne trade, had not as yet ventured to Africa or to the Indies, as had the Portuguese and the Spaniards, though there had been a few unauthorized expeditions. So that Englishmen were totally ignorant of the dark-skinned races, and held them in higher opinion, deeming them as fellow human beings, deserving of fair treatment. It made the blood boil, therefore, to see such cruelty.

"And here comes their guard," exclaimed Roger, in low tones, as a dozen men lounged from behind the mound of earth which cropped up into the centre of the clearing. "They are armed, and clad in light armour. I suppose the heat here is too great for much clothing. It looks as if it were the hour for a meal, and the slaves and their masters retiring."

Very soon they were certain that this was what was happening, for not a soul was to be seen, not even the big ruffian who had stood over the slaves.

"We will take advantage of their absence. They have gone into the houses, and are out of our way. Stay here, Philip, while I creep forward."

It was ridiculous of Roger to talk of creeping forward. But when he glided off his friend was bound to confess that, in spite of his size, this huge Roger de Luce, the crossbow-man, had a silent step and a way of getting across the ground swiftly, while showing very little of himself. He was gone round the end of the mound of earth almost before Philip had had time to grasp his meaning; while the latter, once he was out of sight, sat up with a start, and taking the crossbow, fitted a shaft and drew back the bow.

"He is venturesome to rashness," he said angrily. "He will be seen. Presently I shall hear a shout, and back he will come, and an arquebus bullet racing after him."

However, when Roger next appeared it was from the very opposite quarter, so stealthily that Philip was dumfounded. He would have questioned him, but Roger would not answer. He silenced him with a finger, and then led the way into the forest.

"Can you find your way to the ship alone?" he demanded. "Then do so, and with this report. There are fifteen Spaniards here, and I make out that they are engaged in mining for the Government. I heard them say as much, for I stood outside one of the houses and listened to the talk. They do not suspect our arrival, though they were speaking of the battle, the noise of the cannon having reached their ears. Also they know that an English ship may appear, a golden plaque of vast value, because of the plan it contains, having been taken by our countrymen. But there is more yet," he suddenly added, seeing that Philip was about to interrupt. "This mine gives a rich store of gold, which is kept partly in bars and partly as dust. I saw the bags, and the pure metal. Tell Sir Thomas this, and say that a guard posted here might watch to make sure that no one suspected our arrival, and against surprise; and that if the work of repair were hastened, it might be possible to make a raid upon the mine."

"And recoup ourselves for the injury these Spaniards have done us. I follow the reasoning, Roger, and I will return at once. Here is the bow. I promise to lead the way back here at the first opportunity."

He rose to his feet from the position which he had taken, and turned on his heel. There was no protest, no argument, no attempt to alter his friend's decision, or to shake his determination to stay. For Philip was beginning to find out that this huge friend of his, who played and laughed like a boy, was a clever fellow at times, skilled in stratagems, and fertile in resource.

"I suppose he has been thinking it over as he went round," he said to himself as he plunged into the trees. "Anyway, I fancy he is in the right."

He left Roger comfortably seated on the trunk of a tree within sight of the edge of the clearing, and in such a position that he could watch without danger of being seen.

CHAPTER V

A Valuable Capture

Three hours passed after Philip's departure before Roger saw anything of the Spaniards and their slaves. For the noonday heat was great, and all were indulging in a siesta, the slaves even being allowed this luxury, simply because without their masters to watch over them and to flog them no work was to be expected.

"Better dine and rest myself," thought Roger. "Then I shall be ready for anything. But I must not sleep, though I feel drowsy enough. It would be different were there no Spaniards about. But there are none, and I have nothing to look at save that big brown mound of earth, and the forest trees with a curling line of logs passing out amongst them. Let me see what I have with me; and I must look for water."

He remembered then that as he sat or lay full length in the bush he had heard the tinkle of a stream somewhere near at hand, and at once he was on his feet and in search of the fluid; for though the leaves above sheltered him from the glare of the sun, it must be remembered that for a month he had been unused to much exertion, and particularly had walked very little. On this day, however, he had scrambled through the underwood, putting aside brambles and creepers at every step. Then he found that in spite of the shade the heat was very great. It was close and sultry beneath the trees, and long ago he had been forced to open his doublet at the neck and sleeves, while the perspiration poured from his forehead. So that it was not to be wondered at that he desired a drink of water. A hundred yards to the right he found the stream, and falling full length, lowered his lips to the surface.

"A good place for an out-of-doors meal," he said to himself; "and as I can see the houses from here, I shall stay."

He took the biscuit and cheese from his pocket, and the junk of salt meat from the satchel carried over one shoulder. Then he cut the latter into two parts with his dagger, and one of the halves into thin slices. A little later a figure startled him, and he observed a tall native emerge into the clearing. He was almost naked, and his dark brown skin was stained with marks of the toil with which he had been engaged. In his hand he carried a bag made of woven grass, while his eyes sought for some shady nook in which he might rest. He saw the big bush which had sheltered Roger and Philip, and he sauntered to it, throwing himself down in the shade.

"Lucky I moved away from the edge of the clearing," said Roger, "and still more fortunate that I kept the clearing in sight. That fellow might see our marks. Sir Thomas tells me that he has heard that they can track any one with the intelligence and quickness of a dog, that a crushed leaf, or a broken twig has a story for them. I wonder what the result would be supposing he happened to discover that some one had been in the bush behind him? He would follow, and perhaps come as far as the ship. That must be prevented. If he moves I will meet him, and will speak to him. If he runs –"

He debated whether he ought to fire a shaft at the native under those circumstances.

"Why should I?" he said. "The poor beggar is obviously a slave, and must hate the Spaniards, for he was one of those who was lashed as we arrived. I wonder whether he speaks Spanish, or whether the Spaniards have learned the native language."

He was still debating the matter when a movement on the part of the native arrested his attention. He dived into his bag, and produced a long rod of wood. Had Roger been nearer he would have seen that this rod pierced the centre of a flat circular stone bored for the purpose, and that a cross piece provided with leather strings was attached. There was also a piece of hard wood, with a little hollow in it, while from one corner of the bag some brown powder was produced, consisting of dried wood. Roger, in fact, was about to observe the native method of obtaining fire, and marvelled as the man patiently twirled his weighted stick till smoke burst from the hollow in the hard wood.

Then he added some of the powder, and as it caught and smouldered, placed a piece of dried and rotten stick against the flame. But our hero opened his eyes still wider in utter amazement when the native rolled something between his brown hands, licked the object carefully and critically, and then placing one end to his lips, applied the other to the flame. Smoke burst from the mouth and nostrils of this strange man, while he leaned back easily and contentedly, slowly putting out the fire with his other hand, and replacing the stick and the whole paraphernalia in his bag.

"Marvellous!" thought Roger, sitting up in his amazement. "The fellow looks as if he were on fire. What can it all mean? And he seems so contented and happy, for he leans back with closed eyes, and puffs at that long brown stick. Now he is sitting up. Ah! He burned his hand against the end, and that made him start. He is rubbing the place with a leaf, and – "

His words were cut short, while he himself fell flat on the ground, for that accidental burn was like to be his undoing. The native, dissatisfied with the first leaf which came to his hand, turned and sought for some special kind in the grass and herbage growing in the bush, and gave vent to a cry of astonishment. He knelt upon his knees and searched the grass around the bush diligently, and in a manner which showed that his interest was aroused. Then, catching up his bag, he slung it over one arm and rose to his feet, still puffing at the long cigar which he had manufactured; for that, in fact, was the nature of the article which he had in his hand, and Roger was probably the very first Englishman to witness this native custom – a custom which has now become almost universal. But he had other matters to occupy his attention, for it was obvious that the native's curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"He is coming into the forest," exclaimed Roger, in alarm, "He is bending low, and following the tracks left by Philip and myself as if he were a dog, or as if they were as clearly outlined as any road. Ah, he has stopped! That must be the point at which I struck off for this stream."

Discovery seemed certain, but in the hope of escaping observation Roger threw himself into the long grass and undergrowth, and burrowed his way into the thickest part. Then he drew his sword, for even now it was not certain that the native would be friendly.

"He must take his chance," said Roger between clenched teeth. "We have too great a stake at issue to risk the ship and all our lives for the sake of one native. If he discovers me I shall speak in Spanish, and order him to be silent. If he refuses, and attempts to run – "

Could Roger cut him down in cold blood? Could he, taller even than this tall native, set upon him, knowing him to be a slave, for he had so recently seen him cringe beneath the lash of the Spaniards? No! Roger knew well that he could not do that, even for the sake of all his comrades, and for the safety of the expedition.

"Poor beggar!" he thought. "I will not harm him; but at the same time I will not allow him to betray us. I will sheathe the sword, and, if he runs, will jump upon his back and capture him."

By now the native had turned aside, and was creeping along the narrow track left by Roger. He halted every now and again, and picked up a piece of stick, or bent closer to inspect the ground. Once even his face showed traces of astonishment and fear, and it looked as if he would turn back to the clearing. But at heart, and when no whip dominated him, he was a courageous fellow, and presently he came on again till he was close to Roger. Instantly his frame became rigid with apprehension, and he was about to run, for his eyes had detected the figure lying in the undergrowth.

"Stand and be silent," said Roger, sternly. "Do not run, or harm will come to you. I am no Spaniard, but come from another part where the people do not love your masters."

He scrambled to his feet and stood up before the astonished native, who eyed him fearfully, and looked for a moment as if he would have bolted. But Roger's youth saved the situation. He looked no villain, no cruel taskmaster, but what he was – a jovial, overgrown young fellow, given to kindness to all.

"Not Spanish? There are no others, so we have been taught," exclaimed the native. "Our masters tell us that they rule the world, and they have made slaves of us here as if by natural right. We are

forced to work for them, even to learn their tongue that we may understand them. Not Spanish? Then what?"

"English!" exclaimed Roger, proudly lifting his head. "We are subjects of King Henry the Eighth, and we are as good, and better than these Spaniards. Why should you slave for them? Why not drive them from your island if they treat you so?"

"Because we are too weak to do so. Years ago it might have been possible, when first they appeared, and in small numbers. Now there are more than a thousand, and they are too strong with their guns and their horses. Yes, their horses carry them so swiftly after us, and run us down so easily. Then, too, the vengeance of our masters is so fierce. They punish us with barbarous tortures, and slay us and our wives and children. Life is one long hardship under them. But tell me where you come from? I marked your tracks, and followed. Then, as I turned in this direction, the track told me that a big man had gone this way. I feared it was a Spaniard, for there were prints of boots such as these tyrants wear. It might have been one of the soldiers come here for a quiet rest, and had I wakened him the lash would have followed. But I came on, and – hush, I hear voices! I must be going, for they have started to work at the mine again."

Roger would have kept him, would have asked him to come to this same spot again. But the native turned quickly and left, as if fearful of being late for his work, knowing well, without doubt, that the lash would be his reward. But he was not to reach the clearing without trouble, for it happened that as he entered the forest in search of the strangers who had left their tracks, one of the Spaniards had sauntered from the houses, and caught sight of the retreating figure. Desertions from amongst the slaves were very common, and the Spaniard at once came to the conclusion that the native was about to make an attempt to get away. He crept after him, therefore, and so quietly that neither Roger nor the man heard his approach. Suddenly, however, as the native ran back towards the clearing, he rose from the path and accosted him.

"What now!" he demanded violently. "A runaway! You will teach the others to give us the slip, and will give us the trouble of following, and setting on the dogs. A lesson is wanted, and you shall see that it is unwise to attempt to leave us so hurriedly. Work at the mine may not meet your fancy, but there are other matters which are less pleasant."

He eyed the trembling native till Roger thought that the poor fellow would have sunk to the ground in his terror, while he slowly extracted a knife from his belt. Then he searched for a suitable sapling, and having chosen one which was stout and whippy, he cut it off, and severed the smaller branches.

"A whip may sting for a while," he said, with a brutal laugh, "but for long memories, give me a cane after this sort. The pain of the bruise lasts, and every movement is a reminder. Now, come hither, slave, and receive what is your due. Hanging were too good for you."

He seized the poor fellow, and brought his stick down with all his strength, till the native shrieked. Roger's blood boiled. Up till now he remained unseen by the Spaniard. But he could not lie there, a big fellow such as he was, and see a human being treated with such cruelty.

"Why, one would not beat a savage dog so!" he said. "And, moreover, the poor native was not attempting to be gone, though none would blame him had he done so. I won't put up with such brutality."

He leapt to his feet impulsively, forgetting all about the safety of the expedition and his comrades – forgetful of everything save the unhappy native and the Spanish coward who thrashed him. With a bound he was on the path, and in a twinkling he was before the Spaniard, his face flushed with anger, and his pulses beating with excitement. There was a loud cry of amazement; the Spaniard let go his hold of the native, and stared at the stranger till, suddenly, Roger's fist flew out, and, crashing into the Spaniard's face, sent him rolling into the underwood.

"An enemy! The English! The English! Rally!"

The man picked himself up with the agility of a monkey, and gave vent to the warning at the top of his voice. Then his sword swished from the scabbard, and he stepped towards Roger.

"So that is what brought this sneaking cur over into the forest!" he said, with an oath. "He has been parleying with you – you men of England, of whom we have heard. And you and your comrades are here, hoping to snatch this island of Cuba from us. We shall see, and you shall learn that a man of less than six feet is more than a match for one of your height. Yield now, or wait till my comrades come. It makes no difference. You will be taken, and later on the Governor will roast you on the square at Santiago."

Roger did not wait to argue with the man, nor did he accept the invitation to surrender. He heard shouts from the clearing, and caught sight of a number of armed men running towards the forest. In two minutes they would be there, and his escape would be out of the question. Indeed, already he was almost cut off, and unless he moved now he would never get away. Doubtless he would then be burned on the square at Santiago, according to the barbarous custom of the Spaniards. In an instant, therefore, his plan of action was taken. While the Spaniard stood glaring at him, hesitating to attack him, our hero sprang forward so suddenly that his opponent was unable to raise the point of his sword. Roger clutched at his enemy, and, lifting him above his head, threw him against the trunk of a tree.

"Come with me," he said to the native. "If you remain you will be killed or tortured by these brutes. Come with us, and you will be kindly dealt with."

There was no time for further discussion, for by now the shouts were sensibly nearer. He darted forward, therefore, and, following the track through the grass, made for the spot where the long line of blazings commenced.

"Master, let me go before you," he heard the native exclaim. "I will come with you, for to remain is to be killed. Let me run in front, and I shall be able to find the track and follow it without loss of time."

"Then get ahead," said Roger, shortly. "You will find that we have marked the trees, so as to show us how to reach the ship again; and if you follow that line we shall be safe. Now hasten, for the Spaniards are near, and I fancy their comrade will be able to speak to them, and tell them what has happened. I missed my aim, for had he hit the tree as I meant he would have been silenced for many a day."

The Spaniard had, in fact, hit the trunk at which Roger had thrown him with the broad of his back, and though the concussion had momentarily stunned him, and knocked the breath out of his body, he was able to speak when his comrades ran to his side.

"Follow!" he gasped. "I came hither after one of the slaves, and found him parleying with a huge Englishman. Their ship – the one we heard of – must have touched on the coast somewhere near at hand, and they sent a scout in to see where we were. Follow, and cut the fellow to pieces."

The effort was almost too much for him, for he fell back at the foot of the tree and lapsed into unconsciousness. But he had been able to give valuable information, and his comrades acted upon it with alacrity. Fortunately for them, all were fully armed, and therefore they set off into the forest without hesitation and without the loss of a moment. One of their number happened to catch a sight of the fugitives, and this giving them the direction, they burst their way through the forest at a rapid rate. They had no need to follow any particular line, for the noise made by the two fugitives was sufficient indication of the course of their flight. The Spaniards therefore simply rushed through the underwood, careless of the brambles which grew here and there, their eyes seeking for Roger and the native, while their ears listened for sounds of their flight. As for the latter, thanks to the acuteness of the native – an acuteness which Roger marvelled at – they ran on into the depths of the forest almost without a halt. But their progress was hardly as rapid as that of the enemy, for the simple reason that Roger and Philip had made an occasional *détour* to avoid the thick underwood. Then, again, their progress through the forest had not been as direct as it might have been, because they

Were unused to travelling in such a place. So that, though they ran fast and did not delay, the enemy steadily approached them.

"They are striking to the right again, because of some thick bushes," called out one of the Spaniards who led the pursuit. "Come after me, and I will take you by a route which will cut into their course."

He was a man who had spent many years in the Indies, and was well accustomed to the forests. Indeed, his comrades said of him that he could track out a native as well even as the best of native trackers could have done, and that bloodhounds were hardly necessary if Sebastian were with the party. He plunged, therefore, into the thick of the underwood, thrusting the brambles and twigs aside savagely, and leaping over obstacles such as the fallen trunks of trees. Then he burst into a glade, and swinging to the left, led the party straight ahead, till his eye caught a mark on one of the trees.

"Halt!" he said, holding his pike in the air. "We are ahead of them, I think. Listen! There is the sound of broken sticks as they run, and it is behind us."

"Are you certain? I thought that I heard sounds ahead," exclaimed one of his comrades, standing beside him and breathing deeply, for the sudden call for exertion, their indolent lives, and the weight of their weapons and clothing had told upon them. "There! Listen you, Sebastian! Those sounds are ahead, I wager anything upon it!"

"And I swear that they are behind," burst in another, hotly. "Listen, there is the noise."

"Hush! You will give them the warning. There are men in advance, I think," admitted Sebastian, "but I am sure that these fugitives, this slave and the Englishman, are behind us. Perhaps there are others near at hand, and they will have had no warning. Silence, I say! Let us line the path which is here. You can see the blaze marks on the trees. Then, when we have cut down the fugitives, we will teach the others a lesson."

"A lesson to leave the Indies alone; to meddle with nothing which belongs to his Most Catholic Majesty, Ferdinand."

"Silence, fool!" Sebastian turned upon the man with a snarl which caused the offender to close his lips. Then he crept forward on to the track left by Roger and Philip, and disposed his men so as to catch them in a trap.

"Let there be no hesitation. If the man is armed cut him down, but do not give a mortal blow if it can be helped. We may get information from him. Now, to your places."

Meanwhile Roger and the native had been hurrying along through the forest, their eyes picking out the trees which were marked. So occupied were they with this that they hardly noted the progress made by the enemy, and they would undoubtedly have plunged into the trap set for them had not the acuteness of the native suddenly arrested their flight.

"Lie down," he said abruptly, catching Roger by the sleeve and drawing him to the ground. "There, you can hear their voices. We have been going in a circle, while they have cut straight through. They are on the path before us."

"Then we must cut our way through them. How many were there?"

The native counted the enemy off on the fingers of his two hands, giving the number in the broken Spanish which he spoke.

"Thirteen, I think, master," he said. "There are fifteen at the mine, and one you threw against the tree. One is with the slaves at the works, and that will leave thirteen to attack us. Surely it is impossible to cut a way through them?"

"It must be done!" answered Roger, with decision. "We will creep along till close to where they hide, and if possible we will pass them. If they spy us out we must run, and cut down whoever opposes us. Here is a dagger. Make use of it."

"Hush!" The native stopped Roger with a movement. "More sounds," he said. "Wait while I listen."

Creeping along the ground, he placed his ear against the trunk of a big tree, and stood there for more than a minute. Then he returned to Roger's side and whispered in his ear.

"I hear men moving," he said. "They seem to come towards us, and they are making much noise. I do not think that they are the Spaniards, for these sounds come from beyond the spot where I last heard them."

"Then they must be friends," exclaimed Roger, his heart beating faster at the thought. "I had sent for them, and expected them before this. Can we get round to them?"

For a moment the two looked into one another's eyes, Roger longing for the native's answer, while the latter debated whether it would be possible for this big, clumsy Englishman to creep through the forest without alarming the enemy.

"There will be great risk of discovery," he said, "and I advise that I creep through to your friends. Give me a token, and I will hasten to them with it. What message shall I take?"

"Tell them that I have been discovered; that the Spaniards lie between me and them, and that I am cut off. If we have heard their coming, then the enemy have very likely become aware of their presence in the forest. But they do not know their numbers. Therefore we shall still have some chance of surprising them. Tell my comrades to advance, while I will come towards them from this side. Bid them be sure that none of the Spaniards escape, and lest they should do so do you return in this direction and lie in wait. None of these enemies must return to the clearing. But – " He suddenly recollected that the native could not speak English. "Then you must sign to them and bring them along," he said quickly. "Take this whistle, and go."

He lay full length in the underwood, his eyes peering amongst the trees and brambles, while he listened intently. For who could say whether the Spaniards were already coming towards him? No doubt they were accustomed to warfare in these woods, for they had had many a brush with the natives. Then perhaps they were stalking him, and would come just as silently as his native comrade had gone.

Roger shivered at the thought. Then his courage returned, and with that his old assurance. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword, while he lay in such a posture that in a moment he could rise to his feet.

Click! A twig snapped near at hand, and his grip tightened. Was it friend or enemy? There it was again, and Roger became certain that some one was approaching.

"It must be a Spaniard," he thought, "and as I have been still and silent since I dropped in this place the chances are that he does not quite know my whereabouts. I have something which will stop him."

Very softly his hand sought for his crossbow and a shaft. Then he pulled back the bow and waited. Click! The very faintest sound reached his ear, followed by the rustle of dried leaves. He turned his head to the left, and his eye fell upon the tip of a pike. Then he saw the ridge of a steel cap, and behind it the legs of a Spaniard. It was Sebastian, who, conscious of his superiority, had left his comrades to discover the whereabouts of the fugitives, and with the intention of capturing them alone if possible. The sudden cessation of sounds had surprised him, and he had rapidly guessed that the fugitives had halted and were in hiding, or were endeavouring to creep silently away.

"Strange! I do not see them, and there is now not a sound," he suddenly said to himself, as he halted. "A little while ago there were noises from this direction, and we heard other men deeper in the forest. Now none are to be heard, and none to be seen."

He sat up cautiously and looked round him. But only leaves and forest trunks were in sight. Only leaves! No! His eye suddenly caught the glitter of a steel bow, while behind that bow was a steel cap much the same as he wore. Sebastian was startled. Then he leaped to his feet, and taking his pike in both hands, charged down upon Roger with a roar which startled the echoes.

"The Englishman!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Follow! Follow!"

Roger made no movement. He did not even flinch as he saw the point of the pike lowered and the man rushing upon him. Instead, his eye went to the bow, and he aimed steadily for his man. Very gently the tip of the bow went up till it was directed full upon the Spaniard's throat. Then our hero pressed the trigger, and in less than a second Sebastian was down amidst the moss and the ferns and bracken, his pike and his enmity forgotten, while his feeble hands clutched convulsively at a shaft which had passed right through his neck. He attempted to call for help, but failed. For a moment or two he rolled over and over, struggling dreadfully. Then a sigh escaped him, and he became silent; his head fell back, and he lay with arms spread out to their full extent, a victim of his own rashness. He had hardly fallen before a babel of shouts broke the silence of the forest, while the heavy trampling of feet and the snapping of twigs came to Roger's ears. He leaped to his feet, and drawing his sword, thrust the point into the ground. Then he fitted another shaft into his crossbow and waited. A few seconds later two of the Spaniards appeared, and, catching sight of him, ran forward. Then a third was seen, and he came to an abrupt halt, and levelling his arquebus, made ready to fire it.

"Better get behind a tree," thought Roger; "then the gun cannot do me harm, and I shall be ready for the others. Ah, there is a fourth! I trust that my comrades will be coming soon."

"He has slain Sebastian. Fall on him! Cut him down!" shouted the first of the enemy, catching sight of his dead comrade and halting for a moment. "Now, comrade, we will run him through together. Lower your pike and rush."

Sheltered behind a huge trunk, Roger watched them cautiously, and out of the tail of his eye saw the man with the arquebus blowing at his fuse, while he endeavoured to hold the ponderous weapon steadily at his shoulder. A second later the fuse was ready, and he fired, the bullet striking the tree with an ugly thud. But no damage was done to Roger, and at once his head and shoulders appeared, and his crossbow twanged, one of the charging Spaniards falling instantly. The other kept on without a pause, and, seeing that he was determined to come to close quarters, Roger dropped his crossbow and snatched at his sword.

"Yield!" cried the Spaniard. "You are surrounded, and your friends cannot help you. Throw down your sword and surrender."

"Never!" answered Roger, quietly. "Yield yourself, for it is you who are surrounded. Now, up with your hands, or I will cleave you to the chin."

The Spaniard gave vent to a hoarse laugh, for he was amused at the insolence of the Englishman. Then he lowered the point of his pike and lunged, striking Roger on the arm. But the hurt was only a slight one, and was returned instantly. Pike parried sword thrust, while the point of Roger's weapon prevented his adversary from approaching too close. He had just succeeded in wounding the man slightly for the second time, when the appearance of five more of the Spaniards made the affair wear a serious look. He cut savagely at his opponent, and was in the act of following the stroke up when an arquebus roared, and the unfortunate fellow who opposed him fell to the ground. Then shouts came to his ear – English shouts – and at the sound of his comrades voices he dashed forward, and fell upon the Spaniards furiously, his sword playing swiftly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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