



T. S. ARTHUR

***HAIR
BREATH
ESCAPES***



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**Perilous incidents in the lives of sailors and travelers
in Japan, Cuba, East Indies, etc., etc**

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Pirate Life.

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I served as assistant pilot on board the merchant vessel Dolphin, bound from Jamaica for London, which had already doubled the southern point of the Island of Cuba, favored by the wind, when one afternoon, I suddenly observed a very suspicious-looking schooner bearing down upon us from the coast. I climbed the mast, with my spy glass, and became convinced that it was a pirate. I directed the captain, who was taking his siesta, to be awaked instantly, showed him the craft, and advised him to alter our course, that we might avoid her. The captain, a man of unfortunate temper, whose principal traits of character were arrogance, avarice, and obstinacy, scorned my counsel, and insisted that we had nothing to fear, as we were perfectly well protected by the English flag.

We sailed on, while the schooner drew nearer, for about half a league, when we observed that the deck of the strange vessel swarmed with armed men, and her people were busy in getting out their boats. Upon seeing this, our captain was not a little frightened, and ordered a change in the course of the ship; but it was too late, for we were already within reach of the pirate, who soon hailed us, commanding our captain to come on board of his vessel, and as his commands were not obeyed, fired a broadside into us, which, however, did us no injury. At the same time a boat, containing nine men, pushed off towards us. They presented a most ferocious appearance, being armed with

guns, swords, and long knives. They boarded our brig, as we offered not the least resistance.

They then commanded the captain, the ship's carpenter, and myself, to enter their boat, and sent us with an armed escort of four men, who handled us most roughly, to the schooner, where the pirate captain received us with deep curses. He was a gigantic, powerful, well-formed man, of a pale, sallow complexion, large prominent eyes, a hooked nose, and a huge mouth, and glossy hair and beard. He might be about thirty years old, and spoke broken English with a Spanish accent.

"Have you specie on board?" he asked.

"None at all," answered our Captain, thoughtlessly enough, for we had only too much of it, and unfortunately the papers referring to it lay upon the cabin table.

"The devil," cried the robber, "do you take me for a child? All home-bound vessels have money on board; give up yours quietly, and depart in the devil's name whither you will."

The captain repeated his silly denial, and enraged the pirate still further.

"Well," he said with frightful calmness, "if you will not give up the money, I will throw your cargo overboard, and search for it myself. If I find it, I'll lock you in your cabin, and burn your vessel with every man on board."

After this threat he walked up and down the deck, and said more quietly, turning to me:

"You must remain with us, for there is no one among my men who thoroughly understands a helmsman's duty, and I must give myself more rest, I am not well."

One can imagine my sensations. In the meanwhile supper had been prepared, and the pirate officers, six or seven in number, invited us politely to partake of it; we accepted, as we did not wish to displease them. The meal consisted of onion soup with bread, tolerable fish, and a very good ham, with plenty of excellent Cogniac and Bordeaux wine. During supper the schooner approached the Dolphin, and lay alongside. It was now perfectly dark, and they showed us a place close by the cabin door, where we could sleep.

The following morning we were invited to breakfast, which consisted of coffee with goat's milk, broiled fish, smoked pork, very good biscuit, and sweet brandy. After breakfast we were sent back to the Dolphin, which, as the captain still persisted in his obstinate assertion that there was no money on board, was being emptied of her contents by the robber captain's commands. First of all I slipped into the cabin to look after my chest; it had been broken open and robbed of all articles of value, among which were two diamond rings. Some suits of clothes, and some shirts, were all that remained. In unloading the vessel they began first with the cow; then they threw over the poultry, and all the other provisions, and then the wine and brandy casks. They next came to the actual cargo of the brig, out of which only what was very valuable was preserved, for there was no room to stow any thing away in the pirate ship. Thus they worked until towards evening, when we were again invited to supper, and again shown to our sleeping place. The sailors had already become intoxicated, and were singing and rioting upon deck, without either officers or captain

daring to check them, for on board such ships discipline is not to be thought of.

The next day, right after breakfast, the pirate called the captain to the after deck.

"I speak now," said he, "in kindness to you, for the last time; give up your money, or tell where it is concealed. Do it, or, God d--n me, the Dolphin, yourself, and all on board are lost."

The captain answered as before, that there was no money on board.

"Well then," cried the captain in a rage, "you shall find out who you have to deal with. Ho there!" he cried to his men, "down with him into the hold, tie up the pumps, and bring fire!"

The command was instantly obeyed, and a quantity of dry wood was heaped up around the unfortunate man, which they were just about to kindle, when his agony wrung from him the confession that under a board in the cabin floor there was a box containing about five hundred doubloons. He was unbound, and the gold was found.

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"Well," said the pirate, "that is something. But you have more--I know it! Give it up, or by all the devils, you shall be burnt."

The captain now swore, with tears, that he had not a penny more, but the pirate would not believe him.

"I will refresh your memory," said he, "rely upon it. Bind up the pumps again, and kindle the fire quickly!"

The poor man was again bound fast, and the light wood around him was kindled; the flames licked his clothes and hands, and his eye-brows and hair were already singed, but

he renewed his protestations and commended himself to God's mercy. The pirate at last believing his assertion, let the pumps play and extinguished the fire.

"Well," he said in a milder tone, "I will set you at liberty, and you may sail whither you please, except to any Cuban port, for if I find you again in these waters I will scuttle your vessel and leave you to your fate."

He supplied the Dolphin with water and provisions for ten days and loosened it from the schooner. I was obliged to remain upon the pirate ship while the brig set sail, and had soon vanished from our sight. As a thick mist arose we anchored on the edge of a sand-bank, and remained there over night; at break of day we again set sail and ran into a small, concealed, but very safe harbor on the coast of Cuba.

II.

We had scarcely cast anchor when a whole fleet of large and small boats pushed off from the shore and sailed towards us. The pirate knew with whom he had to deal, 10 and made ready for them. Two officials and several other gentlemen and ladies now stepped on board, and were saluted with fifteen guns. After the guests had congratulated the robber upon his successful expedition, refreshments were brought, and the whole company commenced dancing on the deck, where some black musicians were playing. The merriment lasted far into the night, and all left the vessel, delighted with the rich presents of silks and jewels that they had received, while they promised to send purchasers to the sale of the pirate's booty, which was to take place on the following day. As soon as we were alone again, the pirate captain informed me

confidentially, that he maintained the friendliest relations with the government, and that he had no dread whatever of any hostile attempts against him.

“I can easily settle all that with these people,” said he, “with presents.”

On the following morning the deck was swept and preparations were made for the sale, and a crowd of ladies and gentlemen soon appeared; the captain and I received them on board, and conducted them under the blue canopy with silver fringe that had been erected for their accommodation. At a signal from the ship’s bell the sale began. As many articles were sold by weight, I presided over the scales, that were placed near the mainmast. The purchasers stood around me in a semi-circle, and as every one of them bought either a whole or half a hundred weight, it was immediately shoveled into the bags and baskets they had brought. Some attendants, in the meanwhile, handed round wine, cakes, and biscuit, and the wine had its effect; 11 the sale was very lively, and before three o’clock in the afternoon, our casks and barrels were almost empty.

The captain now invited the whole company to dinner, and the further sale of silks, linens, and ornaments, was postponed until afterwards. He then called me aside, and gave me a peculiar commission; he ordered me to concoct a drink which should be no less intoxicating than pleasant.

“After the guests shall have partaken of it,” said he, “they will bid high enough, and I shall have an excellent sale. Call it English punch and they will like it all the better.”

I had to promise him to do my best, and go to work at once; as we had a good store of all kinds of intoxicating

liquors on board, I could choose what I pleased. I mixed together, Bordeaux, Madeira, Rum, Arrac, Geneva, Cogniac, and Porter; dissolved in it half a hat-full of sugar and threw in about two dozen oranges, and as many sweet lemons. It certainly tasted most excellently, and even the smell of it affected my head. After dinner, when the dessert was about to be placed upon the table, I called six sailors, and providing each with a large bowl of my mixture, they marched into the cabin in procession and placed them on the table; then I informed the company that the mixture was a new kind of English punch, and filled their glasses for them.

The delicious drink was very popular and even the ladies sipped it with delight. The effect was immediate; after the first two glasses, all grew very loquacious; two more glasses and the gentlemen were thoroughly intoxicated without being stupified. At this moment the sale began, and all rushed on deck, and proceeded to purchase in such a wild, excited manner, that the worst article that we had, sold for twice its real value. When the business was nearly concluded, a frightful noise arose on the forward deck; the crew had received a double allowance of rum and brandy, and very naturally, a quarrel had arisen between two of the most excited, in which one of them was stabbed in the breast. As I understood something of surgery, I was called upon to dress and bandage the wound, and whilst I was thus engaged the company departed in the boats, the gentlemen in a high state of excitement and much pleased with their bargains.

When all was quiet on board, the captain called to him the man who had escaped from the combat unhurt, and inquired into the cause of the bloody fray. And now a fearful secret came to light. The man revealed a conspiracy against the captain, headed by one of the officers, which had been in progress for a month. The officer who commanded it had asked leave of absence, and was at that time on land, engaged in perfecting his plan, which was, to fall upon the captain and murder him with the greater part of the crew. The wounded sailor had belonged to this conspiracy, which was frightful enough, and so angered the captain that he was almost beside himself with rage. He forthwith called together the whole ship's company and made known to them the plot he had discovered. He had scarcely finished speaking when fierce cries for revenge arose among the crew; they rushed below, and in a few minutes dragged up the wounded sailor, hacked off his arms and legs, plunged 13 their knives into his body, and threw it overboard. They then dragged out his chest; destroyed and tore to rags every thing in it, and in a perfect frenzy of rage, threw it into the sea also. Then the watch was trebled and set; all sharpened their daggers and knives, and prepared for an attack. But the night passed and nothing occurred.

On the following afternoon, a sail appeared, which steered towards us; the captain took the spy glass, and instantly recognized the boat which had carried the treacherous officer and part of the crew on land the day before.

"Here come the conspirators," he cried, with a fearful curse, "we'll give them the welcome they deserve. Thirty of

you load your muskets and be ready.”

When the boat was within a short distance of us, it stopped and hoisted a white flag in token of peace; the captain did the same, and the boat then approached perfectly unsuspectingly. When they were within musket shot, the captain ordered his men to fire. Five men fell dead, a sixth sprang into the sea, and the rest turned and rowed away. The captain sent a boat out after the unhappy wretch who was in the water, and in less than five minutes they dragged him on board. He was wounded in the arm and was bleeding freely. But, notwithstanding, his clothes were, by the captain’s orders, torn off, and he was exposed naked to the burning rays of the sun. When he had suffered thus for an hour, the tyrant went to him and asked with suppressed rage:

“Now traitor, will you confess?”

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“I am innocent,” replied the half-dead wretch, “I know of nothing.”

“Here,” cried the captain to his savages, “take him and row him into the inlet; there leave him in the swamp; we’ll see whether the gad-flies will not help his memory. You,” continued the captain, “go with them, and give heed to this example.”

Five of the pirates, armed with pistols and swords, bound the wretched man, hand and foot, threw him into the boat and rowed into the inlet. Just at the mouth of it there was a morass filled with gad-flies and other poisonous insects. Into this dreadful ditch they threw their former comrade, and then withdrew to a short distance to jeer at and mock him. In about an hour they drew him out again; he was still living,

but his body was so covered with blisters that he looked like nothing human. In this condition he was taken to the ship again.

"Has he confessed?" shouted the captain to us as we were approaching.

We replied in the negative.

"Then shoot him down like a dog."

Two of the robbers seized him, one presented a pistol to his forehead, another to his breast; they were both discharged at the same moment, and the unhappy man was bathed in his own blood. As he gave no further sign of life, they hurled him overboard.

What a deed of horror! I passed a fearful night, for I could not close my eyes when I thought of the probable fate that awaited me among these miscreants.

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III.

The next morning I went sadly enough to my labor, which consisted in cutting and making a new sail, when at about ten o'clock, the watch at the mast-head, cried out:

"A sail! a sail!"

I went aloft, and saw that it was a large merchant vessel. The captain weighed anchor, sailed down upon her and when he supposed himself sure of his prey, fired off a cannon; the brig hoisted the English flag and lay to. This unexpected manoeuvre seemed very suspicious to the captain; he began to believe that he had to deal with a man-of-war; changed his plan, and determined upon boarding the strange vessel; he gave orders to have two boats manned with the bravest of his crew, which should attack the ship

upon both sides at once, and commanded me to head the expedition. Such an order terrified me not a little.

"What," I cried, "must I fight thus shamefully with my countrymen. If I am taken prisoner what can I expect but the most shameful death. No, Senor, I can never obey your orders."

"Who are you," he answered fiercely, "who think yourself so much better than me and my men? Do we not expose ourselves to death every hour of the day? My vessel shall never be taken, for when I can no longer defend it I will blow it up. Obey me instantly or I will have you shot in the twinkling of an eye."

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"Do it," I coolly rejoined, "I do not fear death, but I will never obey your orders."

"Well then," he cried furiously, "to death with him. Bandage his eyes. Five minutes respite only, and let three men aim at his head and three at his heart."

The pirates obeyed instantly, and I commended my soul to God. When the five minutes had gone, the captain asked:

"Are you ready, helmsman?"

"Yes, Senor."

"You persist then in your obstinacy."

"Yes, Senor."

"Attention! Make ready! Fire!"

The men fired, but I remained unhurt; a burning cork flew in my face, but made no wound. The captain had intended to frighten me, and his men had only loaded with blank cartridges.

"Well, helmsman," he cried, "are you mortally wounded? Have you had enough?"

"I am not wounded, Senor," I replied, "but I am not a boy to be trifled with; if you are going to kill me, do it quickly, for I will never disgrace myself by obeying your orders."

"So be it then," cried the pirate, foaming with rage; "bind him to the mainmast; unbandage his eyes; let us have plenty of tinder; lay a train of powder, and to the devil with him!"

His orders were obeyed; I closed my eyes and awaited death for the second time. In about ten seconds I heard a terrible explosion, which stunned me for some minutes. 17 When I recovered my consciousness, I felt a terrible pain in my lower limbs; my hands were bound, and my clothes on fire.

"Shoot me upon the spot; why do you torture me so?"

But the captain and his men only laughed; and when my stockings were entirely burnt, he gave orders to pour water over me and unbind me, saying composedly, as if nothing had happened:

"You provoked me or I should not have done it; now go below and get cured."

But the moment I was unbound, I fainted away, and when I came to myself I lay upon a matrass in the cabin, and felt the most intolerable pain in all my limbs, but particularly in my legs. On a chair beside me sat the cook; he told me that lemonade had been prepared for me; I took some of it, and asked him to support me, that I might look at my legs; they were frightfully burnt; in some places the bone was exposed. While I was examining them, the captain appeared, looked at my horrible wounds, and said, with a show of compassion:

“Helmsman, ask for whatsoever you want, and you, cook, see that he has it. Make haste and get better; by heaven, I hope you’ll get over it.”

With these words he left me. I called for a better bed, the medicine chest, lint, and bandages; every thing was instantly brought, and I did my best to soothe my sufferings. I inquired of my officious attendants where we were, and learnt, to my surprise, that we were again at anchor in the harbour. The captain had decided that the brig was an English man-of-war, and had made a hasty retreat to a place of safety.

After dinner, the cook made his appearance again, and as he had nothing else to do, remained with me. He informed me that the captain, a naturally quick-tempered, tyrannical man, was a perfect tiger when he was in a passion, that he had already shot and stabbed twenty of his men with his own hands, and begged me to be upon my guard, for I had not a man, but a monster, to deal with.

“Whatever you want,” he added, compassionately, “let me know, and be assured that I mean you well.”

With this comforting assurance he departed, while I prepared a cooling salve and bandaged my wounds neatly. I drank quantities of lemonade and broth, and felt that as the afternoon wore on, the heat in my limbs was subsiding. Towards sunset, the kind cook again appeared, to see how I was, and to inform me that the captain was raging like a maniac on deck, for a coasting vessel had brought him news that my former captain had sailed straight for Havana, and had there made all sorts of complaints with regard to the

robbery that he had sustained. While he was speaking the captain himself rushed into the cabin.

“See,” he cried, “what rogues your countrymen are. Spite of my commands, that traitor sailed directly for Havana and entered a complaint against me. But I know how to deal with him; I have sent four bold fellows after him; he is a dead man if he lingers two days longer, and to make all sure, I shall send a fifth this evening, who I understand understands his business well, and will despatch him without mercy.”

With these words he left the cabin. “What a monster, what cruelty!” I thought, but borne down by fatigue, I soon fell asleep.

I had been sleeping about two hours when I was roused by the captain.

“You must come on deck,” he said, rather anxiously, “we are in trouble.”

Four sailors seized me, and immediately carried me above, sick as I was. Here I learned that a boat was approaching in the darkness, and that preparations for defence were being made.

“Hail it in English,” said the captain.

I did so, but received no answer.

“Now let me try,” he continued; “we’ll see if they understand Spanish.”

They answered immediately as friends, and announced that they came with important news for the captain. The partisans of the officer, who had formed the before-mentioned conspiracy, maddened by the death of their comrades, had sworn to be revenged. They had tracked the fifth assassin, who had been sent off this evening to the