

THE CHAPEL BELL

A Tale of the Days when England was Harried by Pirates.

By HEADON HILL



IT is hard to believe that little more than two hundred years ago the towns on our coasts, more especially to the south and west, were not infrequently surprised and pillaged by Mahomedan pirates from the Mediterranean. Yet it is the fact, as, among other annals, those of the ancient town of Penzance will prove. In the year 1640 two galleys, crammed with Turkish and Algerine corsairs, swooped upon the town during the night and carried off sixty of the townspeople into slavery.

On the evening before they set themselves to the greater enterprise they paid a visit to the rocky fastness of St. Michael's Mount in the manner, and with the consequences, hereinafter detailed.

Towards the close of a brilliant autumn day, Leonora Basset, the only daughter of Hugh Basset, the proprietor, was taking leave of her lover, Gervase Boscawen, in one of the rooms of the castle. The window of the low-ceiled apartment looked down upon the causeway, which, two hundred feet below, joined the Mount to the mainland.

"I must e'en be going, dearest, if I am not to be cut off by the tide," said the young cavalier, pointing to the causeway, with the surface of which the waves were nearly lapping level. "Would that like your cousin Clarence I possessed the privilege of having no farewells to make. Happy man is he to dwell always within the rays of so glorious a sun."

It was an age of fine speeches—even among lovers—and the girl was quick to take the point. "Poor Clarence," she murmured, smiling up at her betrothed, "I trow he does not consider that there is much happiness in it, inasmuch as, though near the sun, it shineth not for him."

As she spoke, the door was gently opened and a swarthy-featured young man looked in, regarding the handsome pair with evil, unfriendly eyes. Perceiving that they had not noticed him he stole out again.

"And yet, methinks, your father favoured his suit at first," replied Gervase, drawing on his gauntlets.

"What matter, if my father's daughter favoured thine—and gained her way," laughed Leonora lightly. "And now fare thee well, sweetheart, if those gay riding boots are not to be wetted by the tide. I shall watch to see my Gervase cross the causeway and mount his steed in Marazion yonder, so quit thee well, my love, and come speedily again."

While Gervase Boscawen makes his way down the steep of the Mount to seek his horse at Marazion on the opposite mainland, and so ride home to his mansion at Gurlyn, we must follow the dark young man who retired so quickly from the leave-taking. Once clear of the door he abandoned his stealthy gait, and running along a series of stone-paved corridors, passed through the great hall into the chapel. Rapidly mounting the winding stair that led to the bell-turret he gained the wind-swept cupola and gazed downwards at the sea.

So near in under the precipitous rock as to be concealed from the windows of the castle, two strange craft were gliding leisurely round the Mount towards the hamlet that clustered at its foot by the causeway. As yet they were invisible from the threatened point, but in a few minutes they would turn the angle of the rock and shed consternation among the unprotected dwellings at the foot of the Mount. For the long, low hulls, with their lofty prows, single masts, and double banks of flashing oars, were the unmistakable marks of Algerine or Turkish rovers.

"They will come to land just as he sets foot on the causeway," muttered Clarence Tresidder, gauging the pace of the galleys with a critical eye. "Fortune favoured in granting me a sight of them while old Kenrick the watchman is boosing at the buttery-hatch. And now for the bell."

The place where he stood was a circular platform running round the inside of the cupola, used for adjusting or repairing the gear which was worked in the usual way from below by a rope running down the well of the turret. By leaning over the safety rail he managed to reach the bell with his hand, and by a smart upward jerk to detach the clapper from its hook. Having thus rendered the bell dumb he tossed the clapper through one of

the open slits in the cupola on to the rocks below, and, with the one more triumphant glance at the galleys, turned and ran down the winding stair.

A moment later he rushed into the room where his cousin Leonora was sitting at the window, waiting to wave a lost adieu to her lover when he should appear on the causeway.

"We must shut the gates, cousin, and sound the alarm," he exclaimed excitedly. "There are two galleys full of Levantine scoundrels making for the causeway. I saw them but now from the south terrace, where I was walking, and they may round into view any minute. Why, what is this," starting with affected surprise, "Is Gervase Boscawen departed?"

Pale and trembling, Leonora rose, but ignored his question. "What waste of time is this? Why come prating to me of your pirates?" she cried. "Have you not lived in St. Michael's Mount long enough to know that the first duty when danger threatens from the sea is to ring the chapel bell, so that the poor fisher-folk below may fly hither for safety? Run, if your words be true, and bid Kenrick pull his hardest. Stay, I will go myself, for Gervase is below, and I trust not you to save him from peril."

She hurried from the room, followed by Clarence, who had much ado to hide the ugly sneer that curled his lips as he thought of the fruitlessness of her errand. Her father being absent, Leonora took matters into her own hands, ordering the truant Kenrick to hasten to the bell, and instructing the male retainers to close the gates as soon as the fugitives from below should have found refuge. This was by no means the first alarm of which she had had experience, and in five minutes the citadel was rendered impregnable.

Having sent everyone to his post she returned to the window to watch for Gervase, wondering every moment why the bell did not ring out its timely warning. Clarence had sneaked back to the room at her heels, and having despatched him to hasten old Kenrick's lagging steps, she opened the casement and gazed anxiously to the foot of the steep. The few straggling huts lay in unconscious security, the upwreathing smoke telling of the evening meal; and the causeway, sloppy now with the rising tide, was guiltless of passengers; Gervase had not yet finished his descent of the Mount to enter upon that stage of his journey.

Still no peal of warning bell rang out, and the fair *châtelaine* fretted and fumed at the thought that any moment the prows of the corsairs might round the point, and those poor souls below unheeding of their danger. Even as she hesitated whether to leave her vigil to go and see what was amiss, old Kenrick burst into the room with the announcement that he had pulled his arms well-nigh from their sockets, but never a sound from the bell.

The words of amazed alarm that rose to Leonora's lips were never spoken, for at that instant she caught sight of her lover far below, turning to kiss his hand gaily from the causeway. And, away to the left, simultaneously, there was a gleam of oar-blades, as the two snake-like galleys rushed around the point, their small draught allowing them at this state of the tide to come right up to the rocks. Almost before Gervase realised the situation he was fighting with a score of red-girdled ruffians on the slippery pathway, while the rest swarmed among the huts and began scrambling up the steep to the castle.

Armed only with a light sword, the gallant youth made such good use of his weapon that three of the rovers went down before his deadly lunges, and Leonora began to breathe again on seeing that inch by inch he was fighting his way back to the rock. But her eyes were focussed upon the immediate combat and she made no allowance for the pirates who were pillaging the houses on the fringe of shore. As Gervase sprang clear of the causeway, and turned towards the upward path, a crowd of the sea-robbers closed in upon him from behind, and had him on his back in a twinkling.

From that great height what passed at the foot of the Mount seemed to be done in dumb pantomime; but Leonora, sinking to her knees in prayer, saw one gigantic pirate level a pistol at the prostrate figure, and another, who by his gestures appeared to be in authority, strike it upwards so that it exploded in the air. Then, before she could grasp the full significance of the proceeding, and only thank-

ful that her lover's life had been spared, she saw Gervase bound hand and foot with gaudy sashes, and tossed like a bale of goods into one of the galleys.

The rest of that evening, aye, and many an evening to come, passed like a dreadful dream to Leonora Basset, and though the serving-men swore to their dying day that she behaved like a heroine in the brief and successful defence of the Mount, she herself avowed that she remembered nothing of it. Only three of the fisher-folk managed to reach the summit before the gates had to be shut in face of the black-vised wretches who hurled themselves in vain against the fortifications, and then, recognising the fruitlessness of the attempt, went cursing down to the beach again.

To follow and attempt a rescue would have been madness, for there were but a dozen men in the Mount, and of the rovers at least two hundred, armed to the teeth. Yet it is on record that when they retired from the walls, Leonora ordered the gates to be opened, and a volley to be fired into the retreating mass, which tumbled three of their number down the slope headlong. And when all was over, she stole back to her apartment like a pale ghost, and strained her eyes through the gathering gloom after the galley which bore Gervase Boscawen to a fate worse than death.

After that dark days set in at St. Michael's Mount. The mystery of the damaged bell was never rightly cleared, though Leonora was moved to suspicion that Clarence Tresidder, having seen the approaching galleys, had removed the clapper so that Gervase might be taken unawares. But when she mooted this to her father on his return, he flew into a violent rage, and swore that it was only a bawled girl's fancy. Hugh Basset had ever favoured the suit of Clarence in preference to that of Gervase Boscawen, being influenced by the consideration of certain mortgages held by his nephew on the Mount.

In face of the terrible havoc wrought by the corsairs at Penzance on the night after their call at St. Michael's, and of the greater calamity of sixty young men and maidens carried into slavery, Leonora's trouble soon faded into insignificance, and she had no one to share it with her but Gervase's widowed mother at Gurlyn. But even sympathy was soon to be denied to her, for, throwing off all disguise, her father seized the opportunity to encourage Clarence to renew his suit, and he, nothing loth, warmly began to play the lover. On the girl refusing to show him anything but contempt, he put pressure on Hugh Basset to forbid further intercourse with the bereaved lady at Gurlyn, and a regular system of tyranny was inaugurated.

At the end of two dreary years, Leonora, staunch as ever to the memory of her lost love, and as firm in her resistance, was summoned one day to her father's chamber, and found him pacing to and fro in evident agitation. He had only returned from London on the previous night, and she had not seen him since his arrival. Heartless as he had shown himself towards her, she could not be shocked at his haggard looks and trembling hands.

"My daughter, you have withstood my commands for these two years past; it remains to be seen whether you will withstand my entreaties," he began. "I implore you—on my knees if you will—to wed your cousin Clarence, and so save me from ruin in my old age."

"You have been dicing again in London, father?" said Leonora sadly.

"Aye, and lost more than I could pay were St. Michael's ever so free from encumbrance," was the answer. "It comes to this—that Clarence alone can save me, but will only do so on his own terms. You know what they are."

"You have both taken care that I should not forget them, ever since Gervase was lost to me," replied Leonora bitterly. "Father," she went on in a softer tone, "I would do even this thing for you, if it were not that I am persuaded that Gervase will one day return. It is because I have felt so assured of this that I have not grieved as other women might, with tears and wailings, but have held myself for him, waiting for the glad day when I shall see his dear face again."

Any finer susceptibilities which Hugh Basset may once have had, had long since been blunted by prodigal living and consequent difficulties. The

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