

# **THE FIRST FIFTY-FOUR**

C.J. Cutcliffe Hyne

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"It looks to me," said Sergeant Colorado appreciatively, "as if they would end up by contriving a shipwreck out of it." He made a telescope of his hands, and peered hard through the spindrift. "And even if she breaks up and sinks in deep water which is probable, with our beastly luck the bodies should have clothes on them when they begin to come ashore. Name of Mahomet! But I have almost forgotten the feel of breeches! And as for a shirt, well, one wore shirts, I believe, once, when one was a French soldier, but here on this disgusting Cabrera I ask you even to figure to yourself the luxury of wearing a shirt!"

"It looks to me," said the small man, with the bandy legs, "as if they were trying to pile her up purposely. And, as I was a sailor during the ten years before I joined the army of the accursed Dupont, perhaps my opinion is better than that of laymen."

"My dear Monsieur Jean Baptiste Rousseau," the lanky sergeant bawled back at him through the gale, "conjure me that ship ashore on this infernal isle, and I'll quarrel with you on no matter of professional knowledge whatever. I want breeches. I starve for breeches. And I'd dearly love a shirt. But let them escape their shipwreck as every selfish brute of a sailor does when we start praying for him to be thrown here on Cabrera and I'll send my seconds to you, and see the colour of your insides before a dozen hours are over."

The dull thump of a heavy gun came to them down the wind.

"There's the Britisher loosing off a foredeck carronade again. Might as well try to shoot a horn off the moon as hit a ship in that sea with a little sawn-off, wide-mouthed dog of a four-pounder carronade like the bulldog's got. Face of a pig! What a shot! He's nicked the fellow's fore-topsailyard."

The sound of the gun carried sullenly over the isle, and of the 5500 French prisoners of war who were marooned there, just seven had sufficient energy and curiosity to join Sergeant Colorado and the bandy-legged Rousseau, and watch listlessly with them the manœuvres of the two brigs.

With one brig, the clumsy, leewardly Britisher, they were bitterly well acquainted, and that she still sailed the Mediterranean was a standing proof of the inefficacy of their daily prayers and vituperation. She had been set to patrol the seas round their prison by the brutal island sea-power in the north, and time after time had she caught boat-loads of men escaping, flogged them soundly for contravention of rule, and sent them contemptuously back upon the island again. She was captained by one Meadey, a small, dandified, proud, old, and disappointed man, who preserved an iron discipline amongst his own crew, handled his clumsy vessel with almost supernatural skill, and observed a ferocious contempt for all men and things which did not happen to be of British birth and origin. As Captain Meadey, with his ruffled shirt and his gold-buckled shoes, sailed across the vision of each of the 5500 prisoners at least once per diem, it may be plainly understood that his claim to be the best-cursed man in the Mediterranean rested on no slender foundation.

The other brig, the nimble-heeled polacre, had been sighted by the prisoners the day before, and had obviously tried to communicate with the island. Twice she had run in, and twice Meadey's ponderous Frolic had worried her off. She was a heavily-sparred little thing, with an astonishing turn of speed in a light breeze, and she played with

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His Britannic Majesty's 20-gun war brig in a way that rasped on Captain Meadey's nerves.

At the third attempt the pole-masted brig ran in close enough to the rocks for a man in her main rigging to attempt to bawl a message through a speaking-trumpet. He was a tall, sallow-faced man, with a black whisker. They had noted him before as smoking incessantly at a long clay pipe. And his French was fluent, inaccurate, and delivered with a fine nasal accent. The prisoners, who were clustered like limpets on the rocks, could pick up one sentence in ten.

"Take you right back ... French soldiers have no use for this brand of treatment ... Emperor Bonaparte had me come ... us two, Escape Agents ... You swim off ... Pick you up ... My Land! yes! ..."

And then the bellow of the voice was blown beyond earshot, though the pipe wagged at them, emphasising further sentences. All the afternoon it had been breezing up, and a heavy sea was beginning to run, that knocked the speed out of the polacre. On the other hand it was just the Frolic's weather, and under Meadey's magnificent handling she soon made things very warm indeed for the other brig. Even now the intruder might have run to sea, and, once driven off debatable waters, would probably have been spared further interference. But it seemed she was captained by someone as dogged as Meadey himself; and though it was plain she was very short-handed, she stuck to her plan of making short boards due north and south just a mile to eastward of the rocks.

"Face of a pig!" screamed the sailor Rousseau. "What did I tell you? Look, they are deliberating starting sheets and heading for inshore. They are deliberately intending to pile her up. There is that long fellow with the black whiskers at the wheel himself, and looking for a soft spot to beach her on."

"We want no more lodgers on this island," grumbled another of the prisoners. "The Spaniards will not increase the ration, and we're three parts starved as it is."

"Toad-brain!" said Sergeant Colorado, "and who was it that ever dreamed of getting those gentlemen ashore alive except your particularly ugly self? We invite them to join us as corpses. Afterwards we take their breeches and wear them. Time was when I should not have cared to wear a dead man's breeks. But here on this beastly Cabrera I am not so nice."

"She will strike on the outer reef if she sticks to her present course," said Rousseau, "and who was it that ever dreamed of getting here. With this wind the current will set due south. Those that want pickings must swim for them." He began to clamber down the cliffs. "I'd risk drowning for a cask of good salt horse. Face of a pig! But think of having one good square meal again!"

Nearer and nearer the polacre rushed into the rocks, rearing madly over the creaming seas. For a time she was plain to all their eyes, and then something of the suddenest she was blotted from sight. A white squall, that typical pest of the Mediterranean, swept down on her through the gale, and before that merciless impact of rain and spindrift and shouting wind, the prisoners on the edge of the island had to turn away their faces.

There they lay whilst the rain flogged them, and the wind blew their shaggy hair into fluttering flags, and yelped at them with an impish frenzy; and when at length the white squall blew through, the polacre brig was not, and out at sea, on Meadey's hateful Frolic, a couple of top-men were lashing a besom to her main royal truck. Captain John Benjamin Meadey, R.N., was pointing out in his agreeable fashion that he had swept the seas.

At the sight of that nautical insult the Frenchmen on the rocks danced and screamed in an ecstasy of rage; but the hunger-pinch in their bellies, and the bareness of their limbs, soon drove them back to business. They spread amongst the rocks, holding there against the surf, and peered with smarting eyes for any possible thing that would alleviate their condition.

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It was Sergeant Colorado himself that found the black-whiskered man who had bawled at them through the speaking-trumpet.

They had all seen the fellow swimming strongly shorewards through the surf, and there had been many fears that he would be thoughtless enough to reach the rocks alive. But some piece of floating wreckage stunned him, and he disappeared; and it was fully an hour later that the blue-faced Sergeant found him cast up limp and sprawling under a rick of seaweed.

"Wearer of breeches," said Sergeant Colorado, "I bid you welcome, and promise you decent burial in return for your clothes. Name of Mahomet! To think how I shall revel in wearing that shirt of yours."

He began with vigorous hands to pull away the seaweed, and presently got the body cleared.

"And now," said the Sergeant, "I'll trouble you first of all for your coat, as I feel sure you have no further use for it."

The grizzled old soldier proceeded with a deft thoroughness which proved that he was by no means unused to such post-mortem spoliation, and until he arrived at loosening the supports of the coveted breeches, there was no interruption. But as he was stooping down to disentangle the last reluctant button, a bunch of fingers reached up from below him, and the Sergeant sprang back with a yell, and began fumbling tenderly with both hands at his right eye.

The man with the black whisker drew himself shakily up, and spat sea water.

"You blue-faced cannibal," he gasped presently, when Sergeant Colorado showed further signs of returning to his task, "if you touch my suspenders again, I'll have your eye clean out next time, and bite it in two."

"Name of Mahomet! But here again is my usual luck! Here is monsieur sitting up and recovering his undesirable life. I imagined monsieur had no further use for clothes, and here on this beastly Cabrera we have been forced of late to go for the most part naked."

"'Monsieur' be hanged! I am Major Joseph Colt. Don't you know enough to salute your officer?"

Sergeant Colorado smacked his bare heels together and saluted. "I have spread your coat out to dry, Major. I thought it might be a little damp for you."

"Thanks," said Colt drily, "I like a thoughtful man." He turned to the coat and after a fumble, produced a bowl and stem of a pipe in sections, which he blew clear of water and screwed together. His tobacco was in a watertight box along with flint, steel, and tinder, and presently he was drawing smoke from the long tube with an air of great contentment.

"Well, Sergeant," he said at last, "it's a rough way of landing at a place, but I've got here in spite of all their teeth, and that's the main thing. One item for congratulation, though, "I'm glad I didn't bring Miss Clarice along."

"What, the late vivandière of the 82nd of the Line!" The old sinner grinned. "Well, we have women on the island certainly, but I shouldn't recommend it as quite the place for an officer to bring his ladylove to."

"My Land! but you'll get it in the neck before I'm done with you if you sing any more of that tune. Miss Clarice is no more my ladylove than she is yours. As a point of fact, I believe she's engaged to a Monsieur Legros, or Le Sage, 'way over in Paris. But, anyway, she's down in this section, same as I am, by Emperor Bonaparte's orders, to see you prisoners out of this Cabrera, and back to your work in the army again. In fact, the Emperor has created a

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new billet especially for Miss Clarice and me he's named us his Escape Agents."

"Live the Emperor!" Sergeant Colorado hit his chest. "I was with him in Italy and Egypt. I helped him sweep out Austria and the German States. The Emperor can do no wrong, and if he has appointed you, Major, to get the 5500 of us out of this hole, it is because you are the best man in the world for the job. But" the Sergeant rubbed his great hammer-headed nose "to brigade you with Mademoiselle Clarice is curious, even for the Emperor."

"She is far more fitted for the job than I. But I want you to know right here that we work entirely independent of one another. And to take the snigger further off your ugly chops, I am going to tell you once and for always that I'm engaged to be married to a Miss Patience Collier, of 207, Pilgrim Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, in my own country, and anyone I have to remind of that too often will need a doctor badly, and probably an undertaker. You understand that?"

Sergeant Colorado saluted stiffly. "I can take an order, Major, and carry it out exactly. And if my talk has more of freedom in it than you find to your taste, you must remember I'm an old soldier and have been admitted to intimacy with men who are now Marshals of the Empire. Moreover, we prisoners here have lived as savages so long that we have almost forgot what French discipline is like."

Major Colt pulled deeply at his pipe. "So you have known other men who have climbed to be marshals, eh?"

"Berthier, Marmont, Massena there's three for you, Major, anyway. Who knows but what there's a bâton carved with the name of Marshal Colt stored up somewhere?"

"I'm mighty tickled to think there is."

"Well, you bring the 5500 of us here back to the Emperor again, and he'll draw the bâton out of store quick enough. But perhaps that's what you're after."

"Well," drawled Colt, "I'm not here for the climate, I guess, and it would be too flattering to say I'd come for the society Land of Columbia! Here's Meadey sent for me already!"

Sergeant Colorado turned sharply round, and saw advancing fourteen sturdy sailormen, cutlass at hip, club-butted pistol in belt, unmistakable Britons. They all rolled to exactly the same angle in their walk, and had their pigtails served to a precise pattern. Beside them marched a contemptuous officer in a uniform that was spruce, stiff, and finely faded. And behind, and on either flank, hovered a rabble of ragged, naked prisoners spitting hate.

The Britishers marched on to near where Sergeant Colorado stood, halted to a cold and formal word of command, and scanned the coastline. Then the officer, in vilely accented grammatical French (after the pattern set by his Grace the Iron Duke), made pronouncement as follows:

"Order begins.

"Any salvage from polacre brig to be given up to authorities duly appointed to receive same at once. And prisoner concealing same to be flogged.

"Any body or bodies coming ashore from wreck to be pointed out to authorities before touched. Any prisoner stealing from or searching same to be flogged.

"Any survivor or survivors coming ashore alive from wreck to be reported at once to authorities. Any prisoner concealing or failing to report same to be flogged.

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"Order ends."

The chilly Englishman folded the paper and put it back into his pocket, and "here then," thought Sergeant Colorado, terminates the usefulness of this Yankee Major.

He turned his head to see how the Escape Agent, who a minute before had talked so feelingly of bâtons, would take the check, but to his amazement the man was gone. There was the imprint on the rick of seaweed to point out where he had sat; a splash of wet on the shingle showed where he had emptied the sea water from his shoes; and in the air was the scent of his tobacco.

The Sergeant lifted up his great bottle nose and sniffed appreciatively. Yes, although there was still a stiff breeze, the odour from that quaint long pipe lingered delicately. But of the man, look though one might over every rock within sight, there was not the dimmest trace.

"Name of Mahomet! –"

"If you have a report to make," rasped the Lieutenant Cabott, "make it, and don't stand there spluttering and swearing at nothing. Just like a Frenchman, wasting his wind swearing at nothing."

"My officer, the man was here – a man thrown up from that wreck – and saw you come up, and therefore unless you admit your eyes are worse than a French officer's, you must have seen him. Now he is gone. It was no business of mine to guard him; but as he was under your eyes all the time you must have seen him go."

"You blue-nosed son of Belial," snapped Cabott, "you'll be getting your back scratched if you don't take a pull on your jaw tackle" – and then to his men: "Spread out there, my lads, and hunt this fellow up."

Merrily frolicked the sailors amongst the rocks, and half a dozen times they thought they had their man, but it always turned out to be one of the bona fide French prisoners; and in the end they were called in by their chilly officer, who led them back again to the Frolic's cutter.

In the meanwhile, Major Joseph Colt was making himself at home elsewhere, and attending to his creature comforts with the ease of an old campaigner.

At the first sight of the English, he had clapped down to the ground behind the rick of seaweed. He was a man bred up to such quick alarms as these, and every rock and every fold of the ground had already mapped themselves in his eye by instinct. Moreover, his Indian training had taught him how to keep his body always in cover, whilst at the same time moving with the extreme of rapidity.

For a dozen yards he progressed snake-fashion below a ridge not more than a foot in height. Then behind a deeper fold of the ground he straddled along at a fine pace, crouching on all fours, and presently he was running on his two feet at a good round speed. Each footstep was studied. He did not think it likely that there was a tracker amongst those English sailors; but he never took superfluous chances; and so he left no footmarks. But he was by no means flurried. He unscrewed and stowed away the parts of his long pipe as he ran.

By the time Cabott began his proclamation, Major Colt was in the sea, first wading and then swimming; and by the time that chilly Islander has reached his last paragraph, the American had pulled out into the mouth of a cave which he had noted some hours before when coasting by in the polacre.

He had with him a small lobster and a handful of shellfish, which he had gathered en route, and felt ready to stay hidden for a week if necessary.

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The cave, as it turned out on inspection, ran upwards and inland, and at its upper end was (as caves go) tolerably dry. A great straggle of dry wood, the jetsam of the Mediterranean, filled the cave's middle part.

"Here," thought Colt, "are the materials for a boat, anyway;" and with characteristic promptitude he pulled out spars which would make keelpiece, stem and stern-post and ribs, and saw to it that enough timber remained over to dub into the requisite planking. But a sheath knife was the only cutting tool he then possessed; and, even for an American with a frontier training, that is short allowance with which to attack so large a piece of carpentry. An axe, or preferable of course an adze, was an early requisite, and so for the time he halted, screwed together, filled, and lit his pipe, and in contemplative clouds of tobacco smoke tried to evolve some scheme by which this weapon might be materialised.

From this mechanical reverie he was aroused, somewhat of the most abruptly, by a giggle—a giggle, too, of unmistakably female timbre.

Major Colt's pipe was quenched with a plug of sand, and Major Colt's person was clapped into a shadowed fret of the rock with the quickness of a thought; and then he had the mortification to hear a comment which made him rapidly emerge again with angular dignity.

Said the voice: "Why it's that Yankee officer that was with Dupont. The one old poker-back Meadey's sent ice-cream Cabott for. And now he's shut his eyes and thinks he can't be seen. My!" And then as he came out into sight "Good-day, Major."

"Good-day." Colt looked up and saw the faces of two comely damsels laughing down at him from the head of a hill of sand which he had thought before ran up in one unbroken sweep to the cavern's roof. "I didn't know there was a back door to my cave."

"Well, we call it our cave," said the darker lady, shaking her curls. "Permit me to present you to my friend Mademoiselle Kabak. I am Mademoiselle La Rueuse."

"I make my salutation. You followed the army, I believe?"

"When there was an army, my brave one. But we are Frenchwomen of the Empire, and adapt ourselves finely to circumstances. Behold us now as cave-dwellers."

"I am sure you act the part charmingly."

"Ah, monsieur! What discernment. Once I was on the stage in Paris, and I left it because they said I could neither act nor kick. You say I can act, Monsieur the Major; presently you shall see my high kick, and I will convince you there also."

"Yes," said Colt drily, "we'll get on to that later. But just now I want your kind assistance in another direction. I want a boat. To build a boat I must have an axe. Can you find one, or beg or steal an axe?"

"Is this boat for yourself?" inquired the dark-haired Mademoiselle La Rueuse, pushing away the sand, and coming into fuller view.

"Sure!"

"Because you talked to that blue-nosed old Sergeant of a partnership. You said the Emperor had appointed you as one of his Escape Agents, and that stuck-up chit, Clarice de la Plage, was the other."

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"Miss de la Plage is the other Escape Agent, and I want to tell you right here that she is neither stuck-up nor a chit whatever that may be. She is a very high-toned young lady, and, as far as an engaged man may, I admire her exceedingly."

"Ah, you're engaged to Clarice, are you?"

"I am not," snapped Colt. "I am engaged to a lady in Boston, America, who finds employment there as a schoolmarm, and is a very different sort of young person."

"And Boston must be so very far away for an ardent soldier's sweetheart. Well, we all must find our consolations."

"Madam," said Colt savagely, "I could swear right here, but I wouldn't like you to hear me. If I thought you actress enough to play another part, I'd ask you to talk about something else."

The other woman, a stout placid blond, here joined in. "Oh, stow it, you two, or, as sure as my name's Kabak, I'll begin using language myself next, and you know what that means. Now, Major, you want to pay your footing, don't you? Yes? Well, hand up that lobster."

"Catch!"

"Good. You are hereby enrolled as a Free Miserable of Cabrera, with authority to go starving as long as you can stand it, and full leave to forage at all times and get nothing for your pains. I don't suppose they'll give you a ration, and if they do, the rations are not worth the having."

"But if you please, mademoiselle."

"Don't call me mademoiselle. I am just Kabak."

"Right. What I want, Kabak is that axe."

"There is one axe on the island figure it: one axe to build the huts and cut the firewood for 5500 men and if you want it you must hire it. The tariff is six sous the day."

"That goes. I'll take it for a week, and as I guess there's a commission payable on this deal, if I give you a five-franc bill that will be O.K."

Now from the first, Major Colt had little hope of building his boat without disturbance. The women in the further cave there turned out to be four of them all told were merely camp-followers, and were constantly squabbling away the sand, and coming into fuller view.

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Now from the first, Major Colt had little hope of building his boat without disturbance. The women in the further cave — there turned out to be four of them all told — were merely camp-followers, and were constantly squabbling. It seemed quite too much to hope for that his presence there and his occupation should remain for long unreported. So he was constantly plotting and scheming to find some other means to deport the first batch of prisoners, but always without effect. Invariably, when he had a new plan formed, some item of it in re-testing proved faulty, and there he was left to begin again afresh. Still he was getting together admirable material to send to that fair historian, Miss Collier, of Boston, for her "Conduct of the Continental Wars."

At the same time he was not idle. He worked ten diligent hours a day at his boat. He was one of those men who always thought best and most clearly when strenuously employed. Between whiles, when he was not sleeping, he foraged. There was no ration served out to him by the Spanish authorities, who, indeed, were unaware of his existence there, and for foraging purposes the island and the smaller islets round it were very barren. The 5500 prisoners were all in a state of semi-starvation, and half of them were on the constant prowl for food.

But all the world over there is the one man who can grow fat where the thousand will starve, and Major Joseph Colt was one of these exceptions, though in actual girth fatness was not his to acquire. He was always lean and lanky in figure, and his blue-black cheekbones and jaw were always strongly outlined. But he needed food in plenty to keep his machinery going at its accustomed high pressure, and he saw to it that he had it. He charmed out rabbits that no one else could lure from their burrows, he caught fish which had refused every other hook, he found edible roots and salads at whose existence none of the prisoners had so much as guessed.

And still work on the boat progressed till at length she stood up on her rollers, completed. La Rueuse, Kabak, and the other two women had developed an unexpected fidelity. In return for the surplus meats of his forays, they vied with one another in doing him small kindnesses. And in return for a certain angular deference he paid them — a deference which they saw little enough elsewhere — they all of them gave "this dear Joe" an affection which was quite open and unrestrained; and, what was far more to his taste, added every possible assistance to his scheme which lay in their power.

Upon matters advanced then to this state, descended one day Mademoiselle Clarice de la Plage in fine millinery, and under official escort. She had arrived at Majorca, it appeared, a week ago, and on landing at Palma had brought with her, baggage labelled "Countess Czerny, Vienna." She spoke Spanish and English with fluent inaccuracy, and because there was no one in the city to examine her, they took it on trust that her native tongue was some Hungarian dialect with an unspellable name. Austria was the chronic enemy of Bonaparte, and any enemy of France was the friend of the Spaniards. Even Captain J.B. Meadey, who came ashore at Palma one morning to make things unpleasant for his beef contractor, was acidly civil to her.

The Countess, it appeared, wished to revel in the sight of enemies in misfortune, and, this being quite comprehensible to the Spanish mind, she was taken over to Cabrera by the next supply boat, assigned quarters, and given the run of the island. It was all ridiculously easy, as she assured Colt with sly malice, when he told his

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own hard struggle to get a footing.

But, in point of fact, she had moved always in a halo of danger, and knew it. As Mademoiselle Clarice, vivandière of the late 82nd Regiment of the Line, she had been for various reasons one of the best known figures in Dupont's army, and many of the tattered, shaggy prisoners stared at her in open recognition. So far she had met their looks with clever winks — with whole volleys of winks — and none of them named her as countrywoman. But she knew she was every moment in danger of being denounced as what she was, and once caught, she was quite certain the Spaniards would put her down as a spy. They had a perfect mania for discovering spies. And their treatment of them — a very final treatment — was too horrible to think about.

The British, she heard, only shot or hanged spies, and, although so far the bag had been all of the other sex, she wondered whether Captain Meadey would hang a female spy if he caught one.

It was Sergeant Colorado, who first put her in the way of finding Colt. That grizzled old warrior had one day met her on one of her promenades, had heard her addressed as Countess, and had promptly doubled up in a fit of silent laughter. Later she got him alone, and gave him her views of his indiscretion. "And to think that you, you of all fellows, should behave so to me. Why from my canteen alone came half the liquor which coloured that great bottle nose of thine. And there's a score of drinks owing for yet."

"Which shall be paid for honourably, mademoiselle, when my purse refills. Name of Mahomet, yes. But in the meantime one can serve. Will you accept service, mademoiselle? I know your business here. Major Colt told it to me."

"Ah," she said quickly, "now, there is how you can wipe off your score. Take me to Major Colt."

This, as it turned out, was no easy task. The Sergeant had not seen or heard of Colt since the day of his landing, and, indeed, being well occupied with his own hunger and miseries, had let him drop from memory without ten more thoughts. But to serve Mademoiselle Clarice — and possibly to acquire further benefits — he was ready to exert himself, and did so to such good purpose that at the end of a week he had the American's earth located.

With the four nymphs of the outer cave Clarice had a preliminary skirmish that left many ruffled tempers. They did not approve of her, and said so. She very openly did not approve of them. La Rueuse recommended her to leave the Escape-Agency business to people who understood it, and to go back to the army as a vivandière, or to the stage as an actress. Clarice regretted she could not suggest that La Rueuse should again become an actress, seeing that she had never been one at all. They all called each other "dear" very effusively, and any spiteful cut they omitted was one they did not think of.

As a consequence, when at last she did come face to face with Colt, she was flushed of cheek, and her temper beneath was ruffled; and when in his second sentence the tall American extolled the services of La Rueuse and her friends, Mademoiselle Clarice let him grasp the situation in rapid phrase.

"I can't understand any man letting such hussies wait upon him. Least of all, a man who so continually prated about his girl in Boston — Conyer, I think you said the name was."

"Collier, miss. I have noted before that you have a difficulty in remembering names. There was your own fiancé for instance — Monsieur Legrand — Lesage — Lequelquechose —"

The lady wagged a slim brown finger at him.

"Monsieur evades the point! Monsieur is aware of his guilt."

"I'm nothing of the kind. I'm down here on business, and I had to make use of such employees as came to hand. If you haven't forgot Emperor Bonaparte's commission, you're down on business, too, and I guess we'd better get back to that right now, and leave frills alone."

"If a further recitation of Monsieur the Major's tastes can be avoided, let us get to the 'business,' as you name it, at once."

"Sure. Well, miss, that's the boat I built, with — er — some help. With crowding she could carry fifteen men. Yes, I had reckoned on sending a first consignment of fifteen men back to Emperor Bonaparte's service. But there will be fourteen now, and the odd seat will be for you. Indeed, I just freeze to think of the risks you have run already."

"Pooh! I am not like your Boston schoolmarm. I have no nerves to stay a-twittering."

"No. But it is the Boston schoolmarm that I shall marry."

"Meaning that you wouldn't marry me if I were the last woman on earth? Dear Mary! Do you think I'd have

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you, even if I were not engaged already to Monsieur Le Brun? What a prospect for any woman who becomes your wife, to be dragged back to your savage America, there to be scalped by the Red Indians! No, Monsieur the Major, be faithful to your Miss Patience Collier, or you will die a bachelor. There is no woman in Europe who would go to the backwoods, as I daresay you have found even with La Rueuse and Kabak, and those creatures."

"Then," snapped Colt, "as I have no intention of breaking my word to Miss Collier, we will take it I am well suited, and drop the subject if you please. There will be no moon to-morrow night, and, if the sea is sufficiently smooth, the boat will take you off then. I will arrange to-night for the fourteen men who shall accompany you. There is a bandy-legged little sailorman, Jean Baptiste Rousseau, who shall be in command."

"And this boatful is the limit of your ambitions for the time?"

"For the time, yes. My brig was wrecked."

"But my ship was not. How do you suppose I got to Majorca? Flew there? No, monsieur, I came in an abominable little craft, named a felucca, manned by sailors who adore me. I earned money for her hire by singing and dancing, and acting in Marseilles. Oh, I know, monsieur, that the Emperor and others have said I am no actress, but still I can earn money on the stage, and good money, too. And my felucca waits now every night behind Formentera yonder."

"Good. I guess you've seen me, and gone ten better. How many men will she hold?"

"Say three loads of your boat."

Colt pulled at his square black whisker. "Well," he said with a sigh. "I guess the Emperor will have to enter up the first forty men delivered on this contract to your account, Miss Clarice."

"Not at all, monsieur. Without your boat, and without your ferriage across to Formentera, none could get away. So I am afraid the men will have to go down to the joint account for the pair of us, and I can only hope that Miss Collier will not disapprove of the partnership. Perhaps it would be one of the things best left out from the notes you send her for that history she is writing."

"Miss Collier," retorted Colt, "when I parted from her in Boston, gave me instructions to 'get on,' and secure a high position in the French Army. Well, I guess I'm doing it. She didn't mention any limitations about the methods. I have to use what help I can."

"There's one lot of help you'll not use again," snapped Clarice, "and that's those four creatures in the other cave there. They go off by the first boat, or nobody goes off at all. Mind that."

"But, my good girl, the Emperor wants men — soldiers — not women camp-followers."

"I know as well as you do what the Emperor wants, and I know better still what he will get, and that's La Rueuse, and Kabak, and the two others in the first batch. Come, monsieur, have you no gallantry. Surely it should be the poor weak women to be rescued first!"

Major Colt rubbed hard at his chin. "The Emperor's orders were for men," he persisted. "He said nothing about women."

"Bah, you incorrigible! You philanderer! You want to keep the creatures here to enjoy their pawings, and listen to their silly flatteries."

"They shall go by the first boat, miss, and be hanged to them. There shall be five of you in the boat, and I hope your tongues will keep you warm."

"Ah, but," said Clarice, sweetly, "I do not go in the boat. I stay here. I have my reputation to make as well as you have yourself. And it is only on Cabrera that I can make it."

The night following came away moonless and black, and, as the sea was smooth, Major Colt crammed no less than eighteen of the prisoners in his boat. A layer of them had to lie on the floorboards, it is true, but they had served too long an apprenticeship to discomfort on Cabrera to mind such small inconvenience as that.

They reached the felucca and were discharged on to her, and then Colt ordered the sailor Rousseau to help him row back to the boat.

"Face of a pig!" screamed the bandy-legged Jean Baptiste, "and here was I picturing myself with a full belly at last. And now you ask me to go back to that beastly island again and starve? Never will I budge from here." After which he seated himself sturdily on his thwart, and they rowed off.

On the next night and the next, cargoes of the gaunt, shaggy prisoners were taken off to the felucca, which then hove her anchors out of the Balearics, and in due time discharged her freight at Toulon. The hungry J.B. Rousseau was with them, very much to his satisfaction, and Colt rowed back the heavy boat alone.

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That night, so it happened, Captain Meadey had in mind to give certain of his crew a little boat-exercise, and whilst he sailed the Frolic round Cabrera one way, Lieutenant Cabott was set to circumnavigate the island on the opposite course.

It was Cabott who picked up the phosphorescence of Colt's oar-blades against the blackness, and very promptly turned his ten-man-power boat towards the glow, and ran him aboard. Colt had the sense not to resist, but gave instead such explanation as his wit suggested.

One hour later, an elderly, dandified Captain Meadey received this same contemptuous lieutenant on his quarter-deck in the light of a battle-lantern, and heard the curt report that he had captured an Englishman who was a born liar.

"Send him aft," said Meadey, and Colt came to him under escort. "My officer tells me you call yourself an Englishman."

"That is so," said Colt. The men around sniggered openly at the accent.

"You're a liar. Also an American. But I am short of hands, and will overlook both offences. You may consider yourself pressed."

"My Land! But I don't."

"If you do your duty," said the chilly Englishman, "you will get what you're entitled to. If you don't you will be flogged. Get forward."

Now Major Joseph Colt was cool and calculating, and the least impulsive man on earth but Captain Meadey was too much for him. Here was the type of man who had made the American Colonists revolt, and Colt was his father's son. His sheath knife was still inside his shirt, and he was within an ace of drawing it and making a rush on the Captain and holding him, knife at throat, a hostage for his own freedom, when of a sudden he halted and drew back with a cough and a gasp. Clarice de la Plage stepped out of the blackness into the circle of the battle-lantern's light.

"An addition to your crew, Captain Meadey? Oh, I am so glad you are going to be kind to 'im."

And then Colt saw the pity glow in her eyes, and her lips — her clever, stage-trained lips — deliberately frame the words, "Poor Joe!"

Major Colt marvelled at her impudence in addressing him by his Christian name.

But on consideration he rather liked it.

As he went forward between the rows of guns, he wondered rather curiously why he should like it. He wondered also how she had come on board the Frolic. But as she was there, he felt half reconciled to being there himself for the time being. He somehow seemed to himself responsible just now for the safety of this girl Clarice de la Plage.

But at the same time he wondered rather uneasily if Miss Collier, of Boston, Massachusetts, would altogether approve of his interest.