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# The Horror in the Hold

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

*A tale of the old adventurous days when Spain and England fought  
for the supremacy of the seas*

THE Scourge of the Caribbees accepted his ill-luck with grim fortitude. The roar of the surf was loud in his ears as he dozed in his cabin, and for a time, at least, his ships were safe. "Hogs, hens' eggs, fish, cocos and aqua vitæ," he enumerated between his teeth. "Howbeit our sails are badly

bruised we have victuals a-plenty. 'Tis well we came upon such a pleasant isle!"

The *Princess of Lubek* rose on a tremorless swell and the Scourge slept. But Pedro de Castro spoke to him in a sibilant whisper, albeit a stout deck and the length of the *Princess* separated the twain. "Bartholomew Mabbott," he murmured,

"there is nothing between you and the frying-pan but a little powder. Heretic, infidel—you will steam and sizzle in the Devil's furnace!"

The jewelled and painted head of the Spaniard swayed for a moment above the enormous quadrant by which the ship was steered and a lean, sun-browned arm waved in defiance. Then he lowered himself to the deck and crawled softly forward on his hands and knees. He crawled beneath the topmast and crouched in the shadows while the wind whistled eerily through the twisted rigging above his head. He waited for a luminous strip of moonlight to cross the lower section of the sterncastle. He waited patiently, for the night was young and time did not concern him. At length the cabin door stood out clear and sharp in the moonlight, and in a moment he was through it and descending a flight of crooked stairs in his naked feet.

He was a cumbersome figure of a man to look at, six feet three in height and broad of shoulder, yet he moved with the agility of a small lad. His swarthy face looked as if tropic suns had shone on it for centuries; his small eyes beneath enormous eyebrows suggested a savage and violent nature. He wore gold ear-rings and frayed breeches from which water dripped in a continuous stream. Wet clusters of thick black hair glittered weirdly on his nude torso.

Half-way in his descent he paused and glanced back over his shoulder. The silence had become almost too oppressive, but it gave him a curious pleasure to discover that no lurking shadows had blotted out the stars, which were still plainly visible from where he stood.

He chuckled and advanced less cautiously. Soon he was far down within the dim, shadowy hold, descending no longer by stairs but by rope ladders that swayed disastrously with every lurch of the ship.

As he clung to the heavy cords the veins on his forehead swelled and fierce exultation shone in his small evil eyes. "A little powder will put Bartholomew into the frying-pan!" he mumbled maliciously.

A moment later he came to the end of the last ladder and hazarded a drop of five yards. He alighted upon his feet and found himself standing ankle-deep in a pool of greasy, ill-smelling bilge-water. "Curse these English ships," he muttered angrily, "they're not made for gentlemen!"

"Not made for Spanish dogs," said a voice at his elbow. He gasped and wheeled abruptly. Facing him in the sickly yellow light stood the dim form of a huge Englishman. As he stared in amazement his anger melted away and beads of sweat came out on his dark forehead. "*Madre de Dios!*" he blurted out. "'Tis the Devil in person."

"Mayhap," said the Englishman after a pause. "But he is a loyal Devil who serves the Queen. If you advance another step he will rive you in twain. Faith, 'twould be an act of charity to kill you!"

Pedro lowered his eyes and studied the blade which rested above his heart. It was a sharp blade and the hand which held it did not tremble. "A brave fellow," thought Pedro, "but easily duped. Perhaps if I can addle his wits he will sizzle with Bartholomew."

A look of savage cunning came into the Spaniard's eyes. He swallowed hard and when he spoke again his voice was steady. "Will you fight me?" he asked.

A heavy silence fell, during which Pedro waited with a chilling spine for his enemy's reply. For moments that seemed interminable the latter stood stiff and alert, and it was obvious that he was torn by conflicting emotions. The air was choked with whirling dust and far back in the hold a small candle guttered and flared. At last the Englishman spoke:

"No, I will not fight you. You are a vile spy and Master Mabbott will cut off your ears!"

Pedro made a furious grimace. "Have it your own way," he snarled, "but I would have killed you." Almost immediately he regretted his bravado. A fearful burning in his shoulder warned him that his tall adversary was not to be trifled with. He raised his hand to the wound and groaned.

The Englishman's mocking laugh smote painfully on his ears. "The dog isn't as brave as I thought he was. 'Tis excessively foolish to whimper so over a little wound."

The taunt so infuriated Pedro that he threw caution to the winds. In the twinkling of an eye he ducked and butted his enemy squarely in the stomach with his head. It was a ludicrous, almost childish trick, but it took the latter by surprize. He fell back and had barely time to recover his balance when Pedro rushed violently upon him.

The two giants grappled and fell forward upon the wet planks. Pedro pummelled his enemy's face until his wrists ached and his knuckles were bruised and bleeding. Then he reached for his knife. The Englishman raised himself slightly, his fingers clutching at lacerated flesh, but Pedro's hand was nimble as a mouse to clutch the knife which rested beneath his breeches. In a moment he had it out and was using it with terrible effect.

The struggle lasted scarcely a minute. Pedro's arm rose and fell and he breathed hard. At the last the Englishman raised a horrible yell and his head fell forward. For several minutes Pedro crouched in silence above the dead man, and then, with an oath, he stood up.

He stood up and wiped his dripping weapon on the seat of his breeches. The blade glittered evilly in the yellow light. "The poor fool has preceded Bartholo-

mew into the frying-pan," he chuckled. "'Tis perhaps well that the good captain should have a comrade to listen to his groans."

PEDRO took his enemy's body upon his shoulder and carried it into the oblong shadows cast by huge barrels as heavy as stone. He threw it down with a grunt of execration. He lifted pious eyes to the slanting black boards above him. "May all heretics perish!" he cried and shook his fist in a mighty fury. "May Bartholomew Mabbott's life be cut short! May his body burn!" He sacrificed caution to anger and raised his voice in terrible imprecations.

Finally, however, his anger subsided and there began for him a hectic search. He clambered hysterically over barrels and prying off lids poked with his fingers into their smelly contents, led on by a curious sense of anticipation. The wound in his shoulder bled profusely and sweat streamed from his forehead, but he did not cease his efforts until his hand had sunk into something soft that ran like grains of sand through his fingers when he lifted them. Then he fell a-blubbering and cried out that Bartholomew Mabbott would assuredly fry. He had discovered it at last, the El Dorado of his vengeance: a cask full of fine, white powder.

He withdrew several paces and prepared his fuse. He worked now with all possible speed. He would make the fuse very long, since he did not want the explosion to occur until he had put a considerable distance between himself and the ship. An ugly thought crossed his mind. What if they caught him as he was about to slip into the water?

*Carramba!* but it is not pleasant to be discovered in such enterprises! He could hear footsteps passing rapidly back and forth above his head. What if they were even now waiting on deck to surprize

him? He must make the fuse so long that he would have time to explain what he had done and save the ship in the event of his capture. They would hang him, of course, but thoughts failed him when he tried to visualize the lively horror of what would happen if the cask should explode before he could escape or confess.

He passed a lean hand over his forehead and coughed uneasily. "Only a madman," he reflected, "would expose himself to such dangers for the sake of destroying a few English murderers."

But never mind, he would go through with it, and perhaps, in Spain, the King would speak high words to him and pinch his ear. Men had been made *grandees* for less. It was surely a splendid service to destroy such scoundrels and heretics as Bartholomew Mabbott and his thrice-acursed crew. Yes, he would certainly receive his reward. It was unfortunate that all the world could not be witnesses of his valor.

He had the fuse in place and was bending to light it when he heard steps on the wet planks. He was too astonished at first to move, but when the steps drew very near he raced forward, secured the slain man's sword and crawled into a crevice between two barrels. By dint of repeating to himself that he could never be captured he silenced the clamorous beating of his heart. As he crouched in the blackness his face had an evil look.

For a moment there was silence, and then drunken voices were raised in revelment:

"The Dragon of England is Lord of the Main;  
'Tis hard on the cowardly pirates of Spain!"

"Fools!" Pedro whispered fiercely. "Since the defeat of the great Soderia they have grown big with pride. If they but knew how near they are to the frying-pan——"

A shadow fell athwart the barrels between which Pedro crouched. Presently three men stood on the slippery planks and laughed crazily. They held goblets in their hands and their lean, scarred faces were flushed with wine. It was obvious that they did not suspect Pedro's presence. The wrinkles about the Spaniard's eyes grew in volume. He laughed silently to himself. "Drunken pigs," he thought. "I shall splice them upon a sword if they make trouble." His brain throbbed with intensity of hate. He was in the temper to destroy anyone who might discover him. The wound in his shoulder burned fearfully, but he ignored the pain.

For a long minute the men laughed and cursed and slapped one another upon the back. Apparently they feared nothing, but Pedro smiled as he thought of the grains of powder in the cask that would put the Scourge of the Caribbees into the frying-pan.

He was an astounding man, this Pedro. He crouched in the long shadows and smiled as the men before him cursed the ships of Spain and praised the Dragon of England. "'Tis the Dragon will defend us," they said, and their teeth knocked together with excitement. "Never yet has the Dragon forsaken his own. For a thousand years he will rule the sea!"

**P**RESENTLY, for they had drunk heavily, they tottered so that they could scarcely stand, and searched about for a place to repose their unsteady bodies. Then it was that Pedro tightened his grip upon the Englishman's sword and crept cautiously forward.

As he left the shadows he became aware that the leanest of his enemies had collapsed against a barrel and lay tittering idiotically. But one remained standing directly before the barrels, making childish play in the air with his sword, and when he sighted Pedro he gave a cry of

amazement and anger and flung himself forward.

Pedro stepped warily aside and laughed outright. The big man snorted with rage and throwing caution to the winds came at Pedro like a charging bull. Again Pedro sidestepped. Too late the Englishman endeavored to arrest himself in his headlong flight. Before he could recover his balance the point of his sword was buried in a stout wooden cask, and the Spaniard was at his back.

As Pedro hacked at the bewildered man he marvelled that English dogs were so easily vanquished. Twice he ran his enemy through the body, and when the latter fell upon his face with a horrible moan and lay still exultation grew rapidly upon him.

As he sprang at the second Englishman a tremor of hate went through his body. "I shall kill you!" he shouted, and delivered a lunge with lightning speed. The giant before him seemed suddenly to awaken from a dream. He flung his arm out to defend himself and Pedro's blade flashing in an arch cut off one of his fingers. The Englishman gave vent to a dreadful shriek and drew his sword.

Pedro's heart leaped with joy as he gazed into the eyes of fury before him, but he did not let an anticipation of victory affect his swordplay. He saw at once that this second man was a more formidable adversary and accordingly he fenced with all his skill.

There was the harsh ring of clashing blades as the two men circled about between the barrels. Hilt to hilt they fought and parried and their eyes emitted little sparks as they advanced and retreated.

For several moments the tall man held his own, meeting Pedro's thrusts with

adequate parries and occasionally a stiff counter-thrust; and then he began to give ground. Slowly he fell back under the ferocity of Pedro's attack. The Spaniard was quick to follow up his advantage and in a moment he had the Englishman completely at his mercy.

"Prepare to die," he shouted, and cut viciously beneath his opponent's guard. The tall seaman dropped his sword and groaned. Then, falling upon his knees he begged for mercy. He was a pitiful spectacle as he cringed and cowered in the ill-lighted hold, but Pedro's heart held no charity. With a sudden wide movement of his arm he sent the other sprawling, and a torrent of vile abuse poured from his lips. Then he struck, laying his enemy stark dead at his feet with the blood pouring from a great gash in his forehead.

Pedro laughed uproariously and stepped deftly aside. As he approached his last victim his eyes strayed over the man's swollen and bloated face, closed eyes and open mouth, from which issued the sounds of labored breathing. "I shall deepen his slumber," he murmured. Still laughing, he raised his sword and rained cuts upon the sleeper's head and shoulders. The limp form sprang into life with heart-breaking shrieks, and what followed was the foulest butchery.

At last Pedro's arm grew tired and a sudden weariness beset him. The wound in his shoulder pained prodigiously. He sat down on the nearest barrel and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. For a moment he sat and panted in the semi-darkness, while his eyes surveyed the horror he had wrought. Pedro was fastidious in all things and the sight of his victims appalled him.

The shadows about him seemed to

deepen. He shivered and regarded the fuse, which was clearly visible from where he sat. His eyes regarded it with fearful contemplation. He had only to ignite the end of it and the Scourge would go into the frying-pan.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and staggered forward. The wound in his shoulder caused him exquisite torture. He picked the end of the fuse up and held it for a moment clutched tightly in his sweaty palm. Then he struck his flint.

Suddenly, something moved in the gloom behind him. He strove to ignite the end of the fuse, but his fingers trembled so violently that he could not control them. While he remained thus, shivering with fright, two eyes rose above the barrel on his left and regarded him steadily.

It was unfortunate, perhaps, that Pedro should have turned his head at that moment, for pain and fear had robbed him of all caution. When he saw the eyes he shrieked and shrieked again, and then delirium fastened on his tired brain.

Clutching his left shoulder he crawled hysterically forward on his knees, hurling curses at the thing that crouched in the gloom above him. For a moment the eyes disappeared, and then a long, scaly body came into view supported by webbed limbs that raced forward with incredible rapidity.

"The Dragon of England!" yelled Pedro. "Heaven pity my poor soul!"

Great jaws yapped wide, revealing a row of conical teeth, and a piercing scream came from the shadows as they fastened voraciously upon soft human flesh. There followed a moment of silence, and then, from somewhere in the darkness behind huge barrels there arose the unmistakable sound of bones cracking, cracking beneath a horrible pressure.

THE Scourge of the Caribbees awoke from a dream of a pleasant isle and sat up. A tall negro stood before him, quaking in every limb. "Master," he groaned. "Four of our men have been foully murdered!"

Bartholomew swallowed hard and rubbed his eyes. "Murdered!" he gasped. "Who—who——"

The tall negro shuffled his feet. "We couldn't find the body, master. There were only a few odds and ends left. But we saved two ear-rings and some hair, and it looks as if he was a Spaniard."

"But who killed *him*?" asked Bartholomew and shivered slightly.

"The queer-looking monster we caught on the beach this morning," replied the negro. "The big scaly monster that you were bringing back to show Her Majesty. You forgot to feed him and mayhap he was hungry. I don't think he likes Spaniards."

The Scourge scratched his ear and a grin of satisfaction spread athwart his massive face. "See if there is a Spanish ship in the bay," he thundered. "We'll give them a dose of salt to season their vileness. And as for that monster—treat him with respect! Deny him nothing, and if he is hungry we have victuals a-plenty—hogs' eggs, fish, cocos and aqua vitæ. Depend upon it, we shall not permit him to starve!"

The negro laughed and disappeared through the cabin door. Bartholomew Mabbott dressed reflectively. "There was enough powder in the hold to blow us to atoms!" he murmured. "'Tis as if St. George had protected us!"

Far down within the ship a fat crocodile blinked contentedly and dozed over his victuals.