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Chapter 18 - The Lottery of Death

Jane Porter had been the first of those in the lifeboat to awaken the morning after the wreck of the LADY ALICE. The other members of the party were asleep upon the thwarts or huddled in cramped positions in the bottom of the boat.

When the girl realized that they had become separated from the other boats she was filled with alarm. The sense of utter loneliness and helplessness which the vast expanse of deserted ocean aroused in her was so depressing that, from the first, contemplation of the future held not the slightest ray of promise for her. She was confident that they were lost--lost beyond possibility of succor.

Presently Clayton awoke. It was several minutes before he could gather his senses sufficiently to realize where he was, or recall the disaster of the previous night. Finally his bewildered eyes fell upon the girl.

"Jane!" he cried. "Thank God that we are together!"

"Look," said the girl dully, indicating the horizon with an apathetic gesture. "We are all alone."

Clayton scanned the water in every direction.

"Where can they be?" he cried. "They cannot have gone down, for there has been no sea, and they were afloat after the yacht sank--I saw them all."

He awoke the other members of the party, and explained their plight.

"It is just as well that the boats are scattered, sir," said one of the sailors. "They are all provisioned, so that they do not need each other on that score, and should a storm blow up they could be of no service to one another even if they were together, but scattered about the ocean there is a much better chance that one at least will be picked up, and then a search will be at once started for the others. Were we together there would be but one chance of rescue, where now there may be four."

They saw the wisdom of his philosophy, and were cheered by it, but their joy was short-lived, for when it was decided that they should row steadily toward the east and the continent, it was discovered that the sailors who had been at the only two oars with which the boat had been provided had fallen asleep at their work, and allowed both to slip into the sea, nor were they in sight anywhere upon the water.

During the angry words and recriminations which followed the sailors nearly came to blows, but Clayton succeeded in quieting them; though a moment later Monsieur Thuran almost precipitated another row by making a nasty remark about the stupidity of all Englishmen, and especially English sailors.

"Come, come, mates," spoke up one of the men, Tompkins, who had taken no part in the altercation, "shootin' off our bloomin' mugs won't get us nothin'. As Spider 'ere said afore, we'll all bloody well be picked up, anyway, sez 'e, so wot's the use o' squabblin'? Let's eat, sez I."

"That's not a bad idea," said Monsieur Thuran, and then, turning to the third sailor, Wilson, he said: "Pass one of those tins aft, my good man."

"Fetch it yerself," retorted Wilson sullenly. "I ain't a-takin' no orders from no--furriner--you ain't captain o' this ship yet."

The result was that Clayton himself had to get the tin, and then another angry altercation ensued when one of the sailors accused Clayton and Monsieur Thuran of conspiring to control the provisions so that they could have the lion's share.

"Some one should take command of this boat," spoke up Jane Porter, thoroughly disgusted with the disgraceful wrangling that had marked the very opening of a forced companionship that might last for many days. "It is terrible enough to be alone in a frail boat on the Atlantic, without having the added misery and danger of constant bickering and brawling among the members of our party. You men should elect a leader, and then abide by his decisions in all matters. There is greater need for strict discipline here than there is upon a well-ordered ship."

She had hoped before she voiced her sentiments that it would not be necessary for her to enter into the transaction at all, for she believed that Clayton was amply able to cope with every emergency, but she had to admit that so far at least he had shown no greater promise of successfully handling the situation than any of the others, though he had at least refrained from adding in any way to the unpleasantness, even going so far as to give up the tin to the sailors when they objected to its being opened by him.

The girl's words temporarily quieted the men, and finally it was decided that the two kegs of water and the four tins of food should be divided into two parts, one-half going forward to the three sailors to do with as they saw best, and the balance aft to the three passengers.

Thus was the little company divided into two camps, and when the provisions had been apportioned each immediately set to work to open and distribute food and water. The sailors were the first to get one of the tins of "food" open, and their curses of rage and disappointment caused Clayton to ask what the trouble might be.

"Trouble!" shrieked Spider. "Trouble! It's worse than trouble--it's death! This --- tin is full of coal oil!"

Hastily now Clayton and Monsieur Thuran tore open one of theirs, only to learn the hideous truth that it also contained, not food, but coal oil. One after another the four tins on board were opened. And as the contents of each became known howls of anger announced the grim truth--there was not an ounce of food upon the boat.

"Well, thank Gawd it wasn't the water," cried Thompkins. "It's easier to get along without food than it is without water. We can eat our shoes if worse comes to worst, but we couldn't drink 'em."

As he spoke Wilson had been holding a hole in one of the water kegs, and as Spider held a tin cup he tilted the keg to pour a draft of the precious fluid. A thin stream of blackish, dry particles filtered slowly through the tiny aperture into the bottom of the cup. With a groan Wilson dropped the keg, and sat staring at the dry stuff in the cup, speechless with horror.

"The kegs are filled with gunpowder," said Spider, in a low tone, turning to those aft. And so it proved when the last had been opened.

"Coal oil and gunpowder!" cried Monsieur Thuran. "SAPRISTI! What a diet for shipwrecked mariners!"

With the full knowledge that there was neither food nor water on board, the pangs of hunger and thirst became immediately aggravated, and so on the first day of their tragic adventure real suffering commenced in grim earnest, and the full horrors of shipwreck were upon them.

As the days passed conditions became horrible. Aching eyes scanned the horizon day and night until the weak and weary watchers would sink exhausted to the bottom of the boat, and there wrest in dream-disturbed slumber a moment's respite from the horrors of the waking reality.

The sailors, goaded by the remorseless pangs of hunger, had eaten their leather belts, their shoes, the sweatbands from their caps, although both Clayton and Monsieur Thuran had done their best to convince them that these would only add to the suffering they were enduring.

Weak and hopeless, the entire party lay beneath the pitiless tropic sun, with parched lips and swollen tongues, waiting for the death they were beginning to crave. The intense suffering of the first few days had become deadened for the three passengers who had eaten nothing, but the agony of the sailors was pitiful, as their weak and impoverished stomachs attempted to cope with the bits of leather with which they had filled them. Tompkins was the first to succumb. Just a week from the day the LADY ALICE went down the sailor died horribly in frightful convulsions.

For hours his contorted and hideous features lay grinning back at those in the stern of the little boat, until Jane Porter could endure the sight no longer. "Can you not drop his body overboard, William?" she asked.

Clayton rose and staggered toward the corpse. The two remaining sailors eyed him with a strange, baleful light in their sunken orbs. Futilely the Englishman tried to lift the corpse over the side of the boat, but his strength was not equal to the task.

"Lend me a hand here, please," he said to Wilson, who lay nearest him.

"Wot do you want to throw 'im over for?" questioned the sailor, in a querulous voice.

"We've got to before we're too weak to do it," replied Clayton. "He'd be awful by tomorrow, after a day under that broiling sun."

"Better leave well enough alone," grumbled Wilson. "We may need him before tomorrow."

Slowly the meaning of the man's words percolated into Clayton's understanding. At last he realized the fellow's reason for objecting to the disposal of the dead man.

"God!" whispered Clayton, in a horrified tone. "You don't mean--"

"Wy not?" growled Wilson. "Ain't we gotta live? He's dead," he added, jerking his thumb in the direction of the corpse. "He won't care."

"Come here, Thuran," said Clayton, turning toward the Russian. "We'll have something worse than death aboard us if we don't get rid of this body before dark."

Wilson staggered up menacingly to prevent the contemplated act, but when his comrade, Spider, took sides with Clayton and Monsieur Thuran he gave up, and sat eying the corpse hungrily as the three men, by combining their efforts, succeeded in rolling it overboard.

All the balance of the day Wilson sat glaring at Clayton, in his eyes the gleam of insanity. Toward evening, as the sun was sinking into the sea, he commenced to chuckle and mumble to himself, but his eyes never left Clayton.

After it became quite dark Clayton could still feel those terrible eyes upon him. He dared not sleep, and yet so exhausted was he that it was a constant fight to retain consciousness. After what seemed an eternity of suffering his head dropped upon a thwart, and he slept. How long he was unconscious he did not know--he was awakened by a shuffling noise quite close to him. The moon had risen, and as he opened his startled eyes he saw Wilson creeping stealthily toward him, his mouth open and his swollen tongue hanging out.

The slight noise had awakened Jane Porter at the same time, and as she saw the hideous tableau she gave a shrill cry of alarm, and at the same instant the sailor lurched forward and fell upon Clayton. Like a wild beast his teeth sought the throat of his intended prey, but Clayton, weak though he was, still found sufficient strength to hold the maniac's mouth from him.

At Jane Porter's scream Monsieur Thuran and Spider awoke. On seeing the cause of her alarm, both men crawled to Clayton's rescue, and between the three of them were able to subdue Wilson and hurl him to the bottom of the boat. For a few minutes he lay there chattering and laughing, and then, with an awful scream, and before any of his companions could prevent, he staggered to his feet and leaped overboard.

The reaction from the terrific strain of excitement left the weak survivors trembling and prostrated. Spider broke down and wept; Jane Porter prayed; Clayton swore softly to himself; Monsieur Thuran sat with his head in his hands, thinking. The result of his cogitation developed the following morning in a proposition he made to Spider and Clayton.

"Gentlemen," said Monsieur Thuran, "you see the fate that awaits us all unless we are picked up within a day or two. That there is little hope of that is evidenced by the fact that during all the days we have drifted we have seen no sail, nor the faintest smudge of smoke upon the horizon.

"There might be a chance if we had food, but without food there is none. There remains for us, then, but one of two alternatives, and we must choose at once. Either we must all die together within a few days, or one must be sacrificed that the others may live. Do you quite clearly grasp my meaning?"

Jane Porter, who had overheard, was horrified. If the proposition had come from the poor, ignorant sailor, she might possibly have not been so surprised; but that it should come from one who posed as a man of culture and refinement, from a gentleman, she could scarcely credit.

"It is better that we die together, then," said Clayton.

"That is for the majority to decide," replied Monsieur Thuran. "As only one of us three will be the object of sacrifice, we shall decide. Miss Porter is not interested, since she will be in no danger."

"How shall we know who is to be first?" asked Spider.

"It may be fairly fixed by lot," replied Monsieur Thuran. "I have a number of franc pieces in my pocket. We can choose a certain date from among them--the one to draw this date first from beneath a piece of cloth will be the first."

"I shall have nothing to do with any such diabolical plan," muttered Clayton: "even yet land may be sighted or a ship appear--in time."

"You will do as the majority decide, or you will be `the first' without the formality of drawing lots," said Monsieur Thuran threateningly. "Come, let us vote on the plan; I for one am in favor of it. How about you, Spider?" "And I," replied the sailor.

"It is the will of the majority," announced Monsieur Thuran, "and now let us lose no time in drawing lots. It is as fair for one as for another. That three may live, one of us must die perhaps a few hours sooner than otherwise."

Then he began his preparation for the lottery of death, while Jane Porter sat wide-eyed and horrified at thought of the thing that she was about to witness. Monsieur Thuran spread his coat upon the bottom of the boat, and then from a handful of money he selected six franc pieces. The other two men bent close above him as he inspected them. Finally he handed them all to Clayton.

"Look at them carefully," he said. "The oldest date is eighteen-seventy-five, and there is only one of that year."

Clayton and the sailor inspected each coin. To them there seemed not the slightest difference that could be detected other than the dates. They were quite satisfied. Had they known that Monsieur Thuran's past experience as a card sharp had trained his sense of touch to so fine a point that he could almost differentiate between cards by the mere feel of them, they would scarcely have felt that the plan was so entirely fair. The 1875 piece was a hair thinner than the other coins, but neither Clayton nor Spider could have detected it without the aid of a micrometer.

"In what order shall we draw?" asked Monsieur Thuran, knowing from past experience that the majority of men always prefer last chance in a lottery where the single prize is some distasteful thing--there is always the chance and the hope that another will draw it first. Monsieur Thuran, for reasons of his own, preferred to draw first if the drawing should happen to require a second adventure beneath the coat.

And so when Spider elected to draw last he graciously offered to take the first chance himself. His hand was under the coat for but a moment, yet those quick, deft fingers had felt of each coin, and found and discarded the fatal piece. When he brought forth his hand it contained an 1888 franc piece. Then Clayton drew. Jane Porter leaned forward with a tense and horrified expression on her face as the hand of the man she was to marry groped about beneath the coat. Presently he withdrew it, a franc piece lying in the palm. For an instant he dared not look, but Monsieur Thuran, who had leaned nearer to see the date, exclaimed that he was safe.

Jane Porter sank weak and trembling against the side of the boat. She felt sick and dizzy. And now, if Spider should not draw the 1875 piece she must endure the whole horrid thing again.

The sailor already had his hand beneath the coat. Great beads of sweat were standing upon his brow. He trembled as though with a fit of ague. Aloud he cursed himself for having taken the last draw, for now his chances for escape were but three to one, whereas Monsieur Thuran's had been five to one, and Clayton's four to one.

The Russian was very patient, and did not hurry the man, for he knew that he himself was quite safe whether the 1875 piece came out this time or not. When the sailor withdrew his hand and looked at the piece of money within, he dropped fainting to the bottom of the boat. Both Clayton and Monsieur Thuran hastened weakly to examine the coin, which had rolled from the man's hand and lay beside him. It was not dated 1875. The reaction from the state of fear he had been in had overcome Spider quite as effectually as though he had drawn the fated piece.

But now the whole proceeding must be gone through again. Once more the Russian drew forth a harmless coin. Jane Porter closed her eyes as Clayton reached beneath the coat. Spider bent, wide-eyed, toward the hand that was to decide his fate, for whatever luck was Clayton's on this last draw, the opposite would be Spider's. Then William Cecil Clayton, Lord Greystoke, removed his hand from beneath the coat, and with a coin tight pressed within his palm where none might see it, he looked at Jane Porter. He did not dare open his hand.

"Quick!" hissed Spider. "My Gawd, let's see it."

Clayton opened his fingers. Spider was the first to see the date, and ere any knew what his intention was he raised himself to his feet, and lunged over the side of the boat, to disappear forever into the green depths beneath--the coin had not been the 1875 piece.

The strain had exhausted those who remained to such an extent that they lay half unconscious for the balance of the day, nor was the subject referred to again for several days. Horrible days of increasing weakness and hopelessness. At length Monsieur Thuran crawled to where Clayton lay.

"We must draw once more before we are too weak even to eat," he whispered.

Clayton was in such a state that he was scarcely master of his own will. Jane Porter had not spoken for three days. He knew that she was dying. Horrible as the thought was, he hoped that the sacrifice of either Thuran or himself might be the means of giving her renewed strength, and so he immediately agreed to the Russian's proposal.

They drew under the same plan as before, but there could be but one result--Clayton drew the 1875 piece.

"When shall it be?" he asked Thuran.

The Russian had already drawn a pocketknife from his trousers, and was weakly attempting to open it.

"Now," he muttered, and his greedy eyes gloated upon the Englishman.

"Can't you wait until dark?" asked Clayton. "Miss Porter must not see this thing done. We were to have been married, you know."

A look of disappointment came over Monsieur Thuran's face.

"Very well," he replied hesitatingly. "It will not be long until night. I have waited for many days--I can wait a few hours longer."

"Thank you, my friend," murmured Clayton. "Now I shall go to her side and remain with her until it is time. I would like to have an hour or two with her before I die."

When Clayton reached the girl's side she was unconscious --he knew that she was dying, and he was glad that she should not have to see or know the awful tragedy that was shortly to be enacted. He took her hand and raised it to his cracked and swollen lips. For a long time he lay caressing the emaciated, clawlike thing that had once been the beautiful, shapely white hand of the young Baltimore belle.

It was quite dark before he knew it, but he was recalled to himself by a voice out of the night. It was the Russian calling him to his doom.

"I am coming, Monsieur Thuran," he hastened to reply.

Thrice he attempted to turn himself upon his hands and knees, that he might crawl back to his death, but in the few hours that he had lain there he had become too weak to return to Thuran's side.

"You will have to come to me, monsieur," he called weakly. "I have not sufficient strength to gain my hands and knees."

"SAPRISTI!" muttered Monsieur Thuran. "You are attempting to cheat me out of my winnings."

Clayton heard the man shuffling about in the bottom of the boat. Finally there was a despairing groan. "I cannot crawl," he heard the Russian wail. "It is too late. You have tricked me, you dirty English dog."

"I have not tricked you, monsieur," replied Clayton. "I have done my best to rise, but I shall try again, and if you will try possibly each of us can crawl halfway, and then you shall have your `winnings.'"

Again Clayton exerted his remaining strength to the utmost, and he heard Thuran apparently doing the same. Nearly an hour later the Englishman succeeded in raising himself to his hands and knees, but at the first forward movement he pitched upon his face.

A moment later he heard an exclamation of relief from Monsieur Thuran.

"I am coming," whispered the Russian.

Again Clayton essayed to stagger on to meet his fate, but once more he pitched headlong to the boat's bottom, nor, try as he would, could he again rise. His last effort caused him to roll over on his back, and there he lay looking up at the stars, while behind him, coming ever nearer and nearer, he could hear the laborious shuffling, and the stertorous breathing of the Russian.

It seemed that he must have lain thus an hour waiting for the thing to crawl out of the dark and end his misery. It was quite close now, but there were longer and longer pauses between its efforts to advance, and each forward movement seemed to the waiting Englishman to be almost imperceptible.

Finally he knew that Thuran was quite close beside him. He heard a cackling laugh, something touched his face, and he lost consciousness.