

Mor Jokai

The Corsair King

 Publio

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Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

Chapter I Choosing a King

The storm had spent itself, the sea was calm again, and on its smooth surface tossed empty casks and shattered masts,—the monuments of shipwrecked vessels. The stormy petrels had vanished with the tempest, and the flying fish were now making their clumsy leaps from wave to wave,—a sign of fair weather. A brigantine which had outlived the gale was moving slowly over the almost unrippled surface of the water; all hands were engaged in repairing the damage occasioned by the storm; temporary masts were rigged, sails trimmed, the crew worked fairly hanging in the air; for the ship had heeled far over,—a proof that her ballast had shifted during the tempest.

With the exception of the blows of the carpenter's hammer, and the creaking of the pumps, nothing was heard save the voice of the captain, who stood leaning against the mainmast trying to ascertain on a chart the place to which he had been driven by the storm. The movements of the needle were scrutinized more and more carefully, while from time to time, the voice of an officer taking soundings, echoed on the air. At last the captain's finger stopped on a group of islands and he said quietly: "We are off the Ladrões." At the same moment a sailor on the mast-head shouted: "Land!" Without the slightest change of expression, the captain repeated: "The Ladrões."

Then, folding the chart, he took out a small silver whistle and, blowing a signal, ordered the mate to summon the crew to investigate the occurrences of the preceding night.

The Isles of Thieves were but a few miles distant, they had no cannon, their sails were tattered, yet the captain spoke as calmly in passing sentence upon his men as though he were sitting in the utmost security upon a jury bench.

"By whose directions were the sick thrown overboard?" he asked, turning his stern face toward the crew.

"The doctor ordered it," replied an old seaman.

"You, Scudamore?" inquired the captain, wheeling round to look a tall thin man in the face.

The latter's countenance was one of those which, at the first glance, appear smooth and gentle, whose features when smiling are even captivating, until some expression of mockery or greed of vengeance suddenly transforms the winning glance into an image of horror.

"You gave the order yourself, Captain Rolls," replied the surgeon, with a smiling face, and in a tone of marked gentleness, as if the subject under discussion were some very noble deed, which he

declined to acknowledge merely from exaggerated modesty. "When the ship sprung a leak, you commanded that all the superfluous ballast should be thrown overboard. The men first cast out the heavy ballast; then you ordered them to add whatever else could be spared. Then the cannon went, though it was a great pity, for we stand in need of them, especially when off the Ladrões, but even this did not lighten the ship sufficiently. You again issued orders that everything superfluous must be cast into the sea. There was nothing left which could be dispensed with except the bars of silver and the sick. The crew began to discuss which should be thrown overboard. I answered: 'We shall not be asked for the *men* when we reach London, but we shall be for the silver;' and, by my advice, the silver was saved and the ship weathered the storm."

"Dr. Scudamore," said the captain, with cool deliberation, "for this inhuman deed you will be cashiered, kept in irons until we reach London, and there delivered up to justice."

"Sail in sight!" shouted the man at the helm, and several of the crew whispered in terror; "Pirates!"

Scudamore fixed his green-gray eyes on the captain and, smiling contemptuously, said in tones which had suddenly grown hoarse.

"I think it might be advisable to defer my punishment a few hours; you or some one else might need my services during the interval."

"That is no affair of yours," returned the captain. "To die without a doctor or to be thrown into the sea by his orders is much the same thing."

"Ha! ha! ha! You see, it might have been better for you in the end, had you relieved the ship of the sick in the first place, instead of throwing your guns overboard. But that's *your* affair."

Captain Rolls silently nodded to the men to take the doctor below. Then he gave orders that the bars of silver should be concealed in the hold, and that every man should go to his post to be prepared for any attack. He himself, taking his weapons, went to his usual station and, without changing the vessel's course in the least, ordered all sail to be set.

Meanwhile the pirate craft was dashing toward the brigantine. The black flag was already visible, and a cannon ball, whistling close by the brigantine's rigging, was the first message from the sea-robber.

Captain Rolls had no cannon with which to answer. The silence was interpreted by the pirates as fear, and one of their number shouted in a tone of thunder through his speaking trumpet:

"Ship ahoy! A word with the captain."

Instantly a battle-flag fluttered from every mast-head on the brigantine.

A terrible uproar arose on the pirate ship; a tall man, with a gray vest, girdled by a scarlet sash, appeared on deck, issuing orders in loud, hoarse tones, upon which half the sails were furled, and with a swift turn the light craft came round before the wind close by the brigantine, without firing a shot, evidently considering her a sure prey, which must be spared from harm.

On the pirate's prow was carved a strange human figure, the symbol of the ship's name, The Sea Devil, and, which, the pirates humorously asserted, was the living image of their Captain Davis, whose face had been so disfigured by the bursting of a shell that it resembled a death's head.

The pirates dashed with Satanic recklessness toward the brigantine, whose defenders still awaited them in motionless silence. But just at the moment the grappling irons were thrown, Rolls made a sign, and the thunder of the report of the sailors' arms followed; when the smoke dispersed, the two vessels were already fast locked together, the fire had killed several of the pirates; the others, pushing their comrades' bodies aside, were trying to climb to the brigantine's deck. In an instant the two crews were fighting man to man with sabres and knives. One furiously attacked, the other coolly defended; neither feared wounds or weapons.

The sailors fought bravely. Captain Rolls remained in his place, with his eyes fixed on the pirate leader, who had already fired at him three times without making his foe even turn his head.

"I'll see whether you are the devil or I!" Davis at last shouted savagely. "Follow me, you scoundrels," and seizing his sabre between his teeth, while swinging a huge hammer above his head with his right hand, he sprang on the deck of the brigantine, felling two of her crew at the same instant. The pirates, with deafening yells, rushed into the breach thus made, and the terrified sailors began to yield, more alarmed by the hideous face of the pirate leader than by the weight of his blows.

Rolls quietly drew a pistol from his belt. "You won't hit me!" yelled Davis, gnashing his teeth and trying to startle the captain by rolling his eye-balls hideously. The latter fired, and whoever was looking at Davis at the moment saw a bloody star on his forehead where the bullet entered. The pirate suddenly grasped the handle of his hammer with both hands and sank lifeless.

Bewildered by the loss of their leader, the corsairs were on the point of yielding their vantage ground, when one of their number shouted triumphantly: "Hurrah, Barthelemy!" and at that moment a fierce yell arose from the center of the brigantine. While the fight had been raging on one side, six pirates in a boat had rowed around her and crept noiselessly to her deck, which they reached just as their captain fell. These men, too, turned to fly, but one of their number, a young, slender fellow, with a bronzed face, thick curling locks, and sparkling eyes, sprang behind Rolls, and, pinioning his arms, wrested his pistol from his hold and forced him to his knees.

"Let no one stir or you are all dead men!" shouted the young pirate in bold, ringing tones, and the sailors, disheartened by the capture of their commander, laid down their arms before the savage forms thronging on deck.

The victory was Barthelemy's; and his comrades' first act was to lift him on their shoulders, declare him their captain and, with terrible oaths, swear eternal fealty by death, hell, and the devil.

A Herculean fellow raised him aloft like a child, and, pointing to the figures lying weltering in their blood, shouted in a voice of thunder:

"Who deserves to be your leader better than Robert Barthelemy?"

"No one! No one!" was the unanimous answer.

"Will you have him for your leader, captain, king?"

"Hurrah!" responded the crew.

"Stop!" cried Barthelemy from the Hercules' shoulder. "I heard some one shout 'No.'"

"Who was it?" roared the athlete; "does any one want to jest with death?"

"Don't rage, Skyrme, don't rage, my brave giant. Speech is free. Come forward, Lord Simpson,

you oppose my election. Step forward, my valiant nobleman, and tell us your objection to me!"

The pirates, amid rude laughter, pushed before Barthelemy a tall, fair man, who, with his hands thrust into his pockets, eyed the new captain scornfully from head to foot.

"Speak fair, noble lord!" said Skyrme, raising his sinewy hand, threateningly above Simpson's head, "or you'll bite your own tongue."

"I should do that without your telling me," replied Simpson, nonchalantly, glancing at his comrades. "You know that my father was Lord Simpson?"

"Of course we do!" shouted the others.

"My father was the sworn foe of Jeffreys, who, after Monmouth's fall, brought the brave English Protestant nobles to the scaffold. My father suffered with them. Since that time I have hated the Papists, and do not want one even for a pirate chief. Not even you, Barthelemy, for you are a Papist."

Instead of breaking the speaker's head, Skyrme raised him on his arm and, amid the loud laughter of the pirates, drew him toward Barthelemy, with whom he drained the cup of friendship, after Barthelemy had assured him, on his honor as a pirate, that he had not entered a church since his christening, and had never been in a priest's presence during his entire life. The new captain was then formally given the leader's cap with its scarlet plume, and the whole band then proceeded to the work of distributing the booty.

Barthelemy sat on a cask turned upside down, holding on his knees a black book in which were written in red letters the names of the pirates, and read them one by one in a loud tone. Often nobody answered and, at the end of a long pause, some one growled: "Dead," and the name was instantly erased from the list.

Just then a pirate brought Captain Rolls, who had been bound hand and foot, to the mainmast, where he laid him flat on the deck. Barthelemy raised his hat with the utmost courtesy.

"Pardon me, captain, that my men have placed you in so uncomfortable a position. You are a brave soldier and fought well. Unbind this worthy man."

"His hands too?" asked a pirate, casting a doubtful glance at his leader from under his shaggy brows.

"Yes, Asphlant, especially if the captain will promise to do nothing against us."

"I'll promise nothing," replied Rolls.

"Well, no matter; I told you to unbind his hands at any rate, it will be our business to see that he doesn't break anybody's head. And now, captain, be kind enough to declare the contents of your vessel, which you have so bravely defended. No doubt you have a valuable cargo."

"You have captured the ship, and can search every corner of her, I shall guide you nowhere."

"Right again. Men, go below."

The pirates instantly leaped down the hatchways and, after spending an hour in rummaging through every part of the ship, they returned to Barthelemy with the sorrowful tidings that there was nothing in the whole vessel except a cask of biscuit and one of water.

Rolls could not help smiling at the fury of the disappointed men.

"You could see that I had no guns, and therefore might have inferred that, if I had been in such straits that I was forced to throw them overboard, there would be no other ballast in the ship."

"Devil take it!" roared Asphlant, throwing his cap on the deck, "have so many brave fellows eaten lead and drunk salt water for the sake of an empty box, full of rats? you are a cheat, captain. What had you to defend in this ship?"

"My honor," replied Rolls proudly.

"Which, when we have taken it from you, will be of no use to us," said the giant Skyrme, laughing. "What do you say to that, Moody?"