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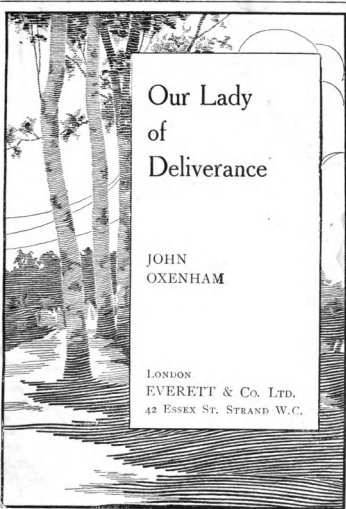
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OUR LADY OF DELIVERANCE



SHE LOOSED THE CLOAK.

page 68.



Our Lady
of
Deliverance

JOHN
OXENHAM

LONDON
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NOVELS BY JOHN OXENHAM.

GOD'S PRISONER
RISING FORTUNES
A PRINCESS OF VASCOVY
BONDMAN FREE
JOHN OF GERISAU
UNDER THE IRON FLAIL
BARBE OF GRAND BAYOU
HEARTS IN EXILE
JOSEPH SCORER
A WEAVER OF WEBS
WHITE FIRE
THE GATE OF THE DESERT
GIANT CIRCUMSTANCE
PROFIT AND LOSS
THE LONG ROAD
CARETTE OF SARK
PEARL OF PEARL ISLAND
THE SONG OF HYACINTH
MY LADY OF SHADOWS
GREAT-HEART GILLIAN
A MAID OF THE SILVER SEA
LAURISTONS
THE COIL OF CARNE
THEIR HIGH ADVENTURE
QUEEN OF THE GUARDED MOUNTS

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Our Lady of Deliverance

CHAPTER I

HOW I JUMPED INTO FORTUNE

IF I were a believer in stars and omens and such things I should certainly have the best of reasons for saying that I was born under the luckiest and brightest of both. For the two events in my life that have had most to do with guiding it into happy channels were matters of pure—chance?—good luck?—I prefer to thank something less impalpable and more thankable.

I spent many years on the sea, you see, and no man with brains in his head and a heart inside him can do that without coming to the knowledge that chance and luck are not the powers that be, hide it as he may under a mask of carelessness. Intimacy with the elements provokes no contempt, but a profound consciousness of personal insignificance which makes towards reliance on a higher power, and if we call it luck or chance, that is because we have British blood in our veins and don't talk much of those other things.

I was the youngest fourth officer of my year in the Cunard Service, and again the youngest third and the youngest second—possibly, if no one younger had turned up in the meantime, I might in due course have become the youngest captain, but that happened which changed all my life and turned it otherwise.

My mother died while I was still very young. My

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father, before he followed her, gave me a good education at Merchiston, near Edinburgh, and when I joined the service that soon told.

The first of my fortunate happenings occurred during my fourth voyage with Captain Hains on the *Servia*.

I was leaning over the stern railing one evening chatting with a friend and waiting for the dinner-bell to ring, when a shout from amidships startled us, and as I glanced over the rail I saw a white face slide past in the green-white seethe of the ship's wake. It was purely a matter of instinct to rip away the life-belt that hung at the rail, and with it on my arm to spring out as far as I could in the direction of the face. I was a good swimmer and came up with it with little difficulty. I slipped the belt over the head of the drowning man, as I found it to be on closer acquaintance, and waved my hand to the boat that was already making towards us.

In ten minutes from the time my foot kicked off the stern railing we were on board again, and the *Servia* was under full steam trying to make up for those lost ten minutes, which, by the way, cost the man overboard the pool on the run next day. However, if anyone could afford to lose the pool it was he.

His name was Ephraim Sandbacker, and he came from California. He was a very quiet, unpretentious old soul, and he was worth twenty million dollars, but that I only learned later. For some days I was almost afraid to show face on deck, so overpowering, to a naturally reserved and modest man, were the remarks of the passengers, especially the American girls, who, I believe, took a special and perverse delight in covering me with confusion.

However, they gradually calmed down and let me go about in peace and free from blushes.

Old Mr Sandbacker said very little, but he wrung my hand very gratefully while he held my eyes with

his, which were very bright and somewhat moist. All he did say was, 'You'll never be sorry to think you lengthened an old man's life, my boy.'

And I said, 'No, sir, but anyone else would have done the same.'

Practically nothing more passed on the subject. The old gentleman was always very friendly and pleasant, and would, I think, have been more so but that I always had a fear when he got me alone that he was going to offer me a reward for saving his life.

As I said, our little swim did not occupy ten minutes, but those ten minutes were the ten most fruitful minutes of my life. I doubt if any Rothschild ever coined money more rapidly. And that jump from the stern rail of the *Servia* was for me a jump into a new life, though at the time I did not know it.

Just twelve months later the bag which came out by the tender at Queenstown brought me a letter from a firm of solicitors in Liverpool. It was brief and to the point.

'DEAR SIR,—We are advised by Messrs Lock & Steele of Los Angeles, California, that under the will of their late client, the Hon. Ephraim Sandbacker, you are entitled to the sum of one million dollars, and they hold same to your orders. Your instructions will have our immediate and careful attention.—We remain, Dear Sir, yours faithfully, LAYTON & SON.

'HUGH LAMONT, Esq.,
'S.S. *Servia*.'

I got such a shock at the first reading of that letter that it took two more readings to get the sense of it into me. Then I took it along to the captain and put it into his hand. He read it through carefully, and then his dear old face lighted up with gladness and he wrung my hand lustily.

'I'm heartily glad, my boy,' he said. 'I knew the

old chap would never forget, and he hasn't, but it's not every man would have remembered to such an extent. Pity after all,' he said quietly, 'here's another good sailor spoiled. I suppose—?' and he looked at me with whimsical wistfulness.

'No,' I said; 'I think I'll have a stroll on dry land. My only regret will be leaving you, sir. I never want to sail under a better man.'

'We shall miss you,' he said.

I forgot to ask him to say nothing about it, and it was all over the ship inside an hour, and once more I was put to the blush at the congratulations which rained upon me.

And so, at the age of twenty-eight, endowed with the best of health and spirits, my fortune was made by no grace of my own, but by, let us say, a happy accident and the generous remembrance of a grateful old man.

CHAPTER II

MDLLE. X.—HER PORTRAIT

FOR two years I roamed to and fro over the wide world, visiting in that time nearly every country that had ever in any way appealed to my heart or my imagination.

Foreign lands had always had a fascination for me, and now that in this wonderful way I was able to indulge my fancy I did so with the keenest enjoyment. Time and money were alike no object. I had no ties to keep me at home, and I was free to go whithersoever the spirit led me, and the spirit led me far and wide and with a trend towards the unbeaten tracks of travel. First I crossed back to America, sailing as a passenger on my old ship the *Servia*, I think I may

say, without any conceit, to the great satisfaction of my good friend the captain. We had great times together, and we tramped the deck and the bridge for hours, with, in the case of one of us at all events, an enjoyment which had never been there before.

The very fact of travelling as a passenger where hitherto I had been a servant and an official was in itself an enjoyable novelty and had in it many elements of amusement. My old friends among the crew were constantly mixing up my new position with the old one and coming to me with reports and so on, and then backing off with a grin and a turn of the tongue in their cheeks which always started us both laughing.

After a run through Canada and the States I crossed to California and visited Los Angeles. The only representative of Mr. Ephraim Sandbacker was his widow, an old lady of seventy, who, when she knew who I was, could not find large enough expression for her good feelings towards me. She would have had me settle down 'right there,' and become a son to her old age, but the travel fever was hot in my veins, and after a delightful visit I only got away by promising to come back and see her again when I was ready to settle down for good and all, if that time ever came.

Then, through South America and the lovely islands of the Pacific, I wandered up to Japan, where I lingered long. Then to Australia, India, Egypt, Asia Minor, and so to Europe, and so at last to Paris and all that waited me there and afterwards.

Paris charmed me greatly, and the debt I owe to her will never be fully paid, for she proved the gateway to those very strange experiences through which I was to attain to all that I hold highest in my life.

One fateful day I rambled into the Salon. I was no judge of pictures, and my taste was no doubt

hopeless, but I knew when a picture pleased me, and out of such I was able to get much enjoyment.

It seemed to me a very clever show if slightly eccentric here and there, and I was passing somewhat inattentively through the last room, my eyes surfeited with the masses of colour on which they had already feasted, when I stopped short, with a catch of the breath and a thrill like an electric shock, at the glance of a pair of eyes that caught mine and held them captive.

I had seen many beautiful women in my time, but I had never seen anything within measurable distance of the lovely face that looked calmly into mine from that curiously-carved, dead-white frame on the wall.

It was the face of a girl, the most exquisitely-beautiful face I had ever seen, the incarnation—say rather an inspiration—of all that is sweet and pure and good, and altogether lovely. As I stood gazing at it a voice behind me said triumphantly in French,—
'Fair—one!'

And another voice cried argumentatively, 'Not at all! Dark—one!'

Then the dispute, whatever it was, was taken up by other voices, and a wordy *mêlée* ensued, to which I paid no attention, because, in the first place, it was as unintelligible to me as the chattering of many parrots, and because, in the second place, my thoughts were given entirely to that lovely face before me. Was it a portrait, or only the idealisation of a master hand and brain?

I turned to the catalogue.

'No. 1001—Portrait of Mdlle. X. . . . Louis Bidard.'

That left the point undecided. But the one thing certain was that never in my life had I seen anything so charming, and the very sight and thought of that sweet face sent new life spinning through my veins and altered the look of the world for me.

I went to the Comédie Française that night to see Bernhardt, but the face of Mdlle. X. danced between me and the divine Sara and diverted my thoughts from even her finest agonies.

In the nature of things the following afternoon found me once more at the Salon renewing my tête-à-tête with the beautiful unknown. I noticed that Mdlle. X. attracted very general attention, and scarcely a passer-by but stopped and lingered to admire. It struck me as very ludicrous to find myself actually beginning to feel jealous of these attentions.

'Fair—one!' I heard the same voice behind me.

And again that other voice: 'No—dark!' and again a wrangle, and when I turned I saw two young men assiduously taking note of the crowd, though why and wherefore I could not make out.

The desire suddenly possessed me to become the owner of that picture, and I made my way to the secretary's desk to inquire if it was for sale.

'No, monsieur,' the secretary was explaining with smiling courtesy to a man who had arrived just in front of me, 'that portrait would have been sold fifty—a hundred times, had it been for sale, but it is not offered.'

The other man turned away, and in my not over fluent French I asked the secretary if his remark applied to No. 1001, feeling fully assured in my own mind that it did so.

He smilingly confirmed my fears, and I too passed on. I had already looked for the address of M. Louis Bidard in the catalogue, but it was not there. I turned back to the desk and asked the secretary, who was just dismissing another applicant, if he could give it to me.

'I would, monsieur, with pleasure, but'—and he shook his head knowingly—'there is none.'

'But how—?' I began.

'There is no M. Louis Bidard. It is a *nom de*

crayon, and I am instructed not to divulge the artist's name.'

There was nothing more to be done, and I went back to take another look at Mdlle. X.

'Fair—one!' said the voice behind me.

'Dark—if you please!' said the other voice.

Tiens! it is the same gentleman again. That does not count.'

'Oh, yes, it does, *mon ami!*'

'Very well, then he is mine.'

'Not a bit of it! Not a very little bit of it, my child! He is distinctly and emphatically blonde.'

'*Phistrel!*' Your eye is losing its cunning, *mon gars*. Monsieur's complexion is brown—distinctly brown, with a tendency towards black. So that counts to me.'

I could not make out what they were quarrelling about, and I strolled away and left the building.

It became a regular part of my day's programme to pay my respects to Mdlle. X., and the calm gaze of the great violet eyes, with just a hint of shy wistfulness in them, remained with me all the day and brightened everything else I saw.

Several times I imagined myself the object of remark from the same half-dozen young fellows who seemed to have constituted themselves a guard of honour to Mdlle. X., and to take note of the many who stopped to admire her. I had by this time learned to distinguish them as art students, but what might be the meaning of their curious carry-on I could not at all make out.

One afternoon, however, as I strolled up to the portrait, one of these young gentlemen gave a cry of triumph, darted forward and, to my great astonishment, shook me heartily by the hand, gabbling as he did so at the rate of two hundred words a minute.

I was not quite sure if he was making fun of me or not, for he certainly was not of my acquaintance.

But it is my custom to grasp little nettles of this kind firmly and so destroy their sting. According, I gripped his hand and smiled pleasantly on him and murmured, 'So very pleased to make monsieur's acquaintance!' till he howled, and clasping his right arm with his left hand, as though he feared it would come off, he finally sank on to his knees, and his three friends danced round us in paroxysms of laughter, while I continued shaking him heartily by the hand.

'Ah, the poor Philippe! he is broken, he is mangled,' cried one, between his spasms of laughter. 'Have pity on him, monsieur! He is *bon garçon* and meant no harm.'

'Nor I, monsieur,' I said; 'I simply accepted the greeting of monsieur, whose acquaintance I am delighted to make,' and as I wrung his hand once more Master Philippe howled again.

However, I released him at last, and he got up and carefully pulled each separate finger into shape and smoothed it out and then impressively bandaged his hand in his handkerchief. He was a merry youth, however, and bore no ill-will.

'Allow me to introduce my friends, monsieur,' he said, waving the bandaged hand towards each one in turn. 'Monsieur Louis Duval, Monsieur Jean Lépine Monsieur Raoul Delavoye. Pray proffer them the hand of friendship also.'

But they one and all declined and contented themselves with bows.

'And now, messieurs, perhaps you will have the extreme kindness to explain why we are on such friendly terms.'

'Assuredly,' said Philippe of the bandaged hand, 'it is due to monsieur. It is thus, monsieur. Monsieur has unwittingly rendered me a service, and I desired to thank him for it.'

'I am very happy to have been of service to you. How did I manage it? What is it I have done?'

'You see that portrait, monsieur?'—pointing to Mdlle. X.

I nodded.

'Yes,' laughed Philippe, 'monsieur has seen it several times, and in that lies the service he has rendered me. You see, monsieur, we are divided. Louis and Jean there hold that like tends to like. Raoul and myself hold that the strongest affinity lies between opposites. That a fair man prefers a dark woman, and a dark man a fair woman. And you, monsieur—?'

'Opposites, I think, as a rule. But that portrait is so very beautiful that anyone would be attracted by it. Can you tell me who Mdlle. X. is, Monsieur Philippe?'

He shook his head.

'Perhaps you can tell me where to find M. Louis Bidard?'

A glance flashed between them, and I got an impression of something like a wink.

'But, yes, monsieur, that is easy. We can take monsieur there in the twinkling of an eye.'

'I shall be infinitely obliged to you.'

'*Allons!*' said Philippe promptly. 'We will go at once,' and he led the way. The others linked arms and followed, with scarce concealed expectation and enjoyment.

Master Philippe's merry eyes twinkled many times before we reached our destination, and I had begun to wonder where we were getting to when he halted suddenly and pointed across the street to a gaily-decorated restaurant, along the front of which ran a large gilt-lettered sign—'A la Palette d'Or, par Louis Bidard.'

I stared at it in surprise. It was an artist's studio I was expecting, not a restaurant.

'But—' I began.

'Stay, we will introduce you to him,' said Philippe, and led the way inside.