THE HOUSE UNDER THE SEA

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A Romance

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A ROMANCE

BY

MAX PEMBERTON

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ILLUSTRATED

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Shall we go, or stay?

"Shall we go, or stay?"

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A picturesque old figure standing there.

She looked at me with her big, questioning eyes.

We were all sitting at the supper table.

The drawing-room is a cave whose walls are of jewels.

"If there is a sound at the door, fire that gun."

Another man fell with a loud cry.

THE HOUSE UNDER THE SEA

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH JASPER BEGG MAKES KNOWN THE PURPOSE OF HIS VOYAGE TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN, AND HOW IT CAME ABOUT THAT HE COMMISSIONED THE STEAM-SHIP SOUTHERN CROSS THROUGH PHILIPS, WESTBURY, AND CO.

MANY gentlemen have asked me to write the story of Ken's Island, and in so far as my ability goes, that I will now do. A plain seaman by profession, one who has had no more education than a Kentish grammar school can give him, I, Jasper Begg, find it very hard to bring to other people's eyes the wonderful

things I have seen or to make all this great matter clear as it should be clear for a right understanding. But what I know of it, I will here set down; and I do not doubt that the newspapers and the writers will do the rest.

Now, it was upon the third day of May in the year 1899, at four bells in the first dog watch, that Harry Doe, our boatswain, first sighted land upon our port-bow, and so made known to me that our voyage was done. We were fifty-three days out from Southampton then; and for fifty-three days not a man among the crew of the Southern Cross had known our proper destination, or why his skipper, Jasper Begg, had shipped him to sail for the Pacific Ocean. A pleasure voyage, the papers said; and some remembered that I had been in and out of private yachts ever since I ran away from school and booked with Skipper Higg, who sailed Lord Kanton's schooner from the Solent; but others asked themselves what pleasure took a yacht's skipper beyond the Suez, and how it came about that a poor man like Jasper Begg found the money to commission a 500-ton tramp through Philips, Westbury, and Co., and to deal liberally with any shipmate who had a fancy for the trip. These questions I meant to answer in my own time. A hint here and there of a lady in whose interest the voyage was undertaken kept the crew quiet, if it did not please its curiosity. Mister Jacob, my first officer, and Peter Bligh (who came to me because he said I was the only man who kept him away from the drink) guessed something if they knew little. They had both served under me in Ruth Bellenden's yacht; neither had forgotten that Ruth Bellenden's husband sailed eastward for the wedding trip. If they put their heads together and said that Ruth Bellenden's affairs and the steam-ship Southern Cross were not to be far apart at the end of it, I don't blame them. It was my business to hold my tongue until the land was sighted, and so much I did for Ruth Bellenden's sake.

Well, it was the third day of May, at four bells in the first dog watch, when Harry Doe, the boatswain, sighted land on the port-bow, and came abaft with the other hands to hear what I had got to say to him. Mr. Jacob was in his bunk then, he being about to take the first watch, and Peter Bligh, who walked the bridge, had rung down for half-speed by the time I came out with my glass for the first view of the distant island. We were then, I must tell you at a rough reckoning, in longitude 150 east of Greenwich, by about 30 north; and my first thought was that we might have sighted the Ganges group, as many a ship sailing from 'Frisco to Japan; but when I had looked at the land a little while, and especially

at a low spur of rocks to the northward, I knew that this was truly the Ken Archipelago, and that our voyage was done.

"Lads," I said, "yonder is your port. Good weather and good luck, and we'll put about for home before three days have passed."

Now, they set up a great cheer at this; and Peter Bligh, whose years go to fat, wiped his brow like a man who has got rid of a great load and is very pleased to have done with it.

"Thank you for that," said he. "I hope I do my duty in all weathers, Mr. Begg, but this sunshine do wear a man sadly. Will you stop her, sir, or shall we go dead slow?"

"Dead slow, if you please, Mister Pugh," said I; "the chart gives two thousand fathoms about the reef. We should have water enough, and water is a good thing, as I believe you know."

"When there's nothing else, I can manage to make shift with it—and feel a better man, sir," he added, as an after-thought. But I was already busy with my glass and that was not the hour for light talk. Yonder upon the port-bow a group of islands shaped on our horizon as shadows upon a glassy sea. I could espy a considerable cliff-land rising to the southward, and north of that the rocky spur of which I have made mention. The sun was setting behind us in a sky of orange and crimson, and it was wonderful to see the playful lights now giving veins of gold to the dark mass of the higher rocks, or washing over the shadows as a running water of flame. I have seen many beautiful sights upon the sea, in storm or tempest, God's weather or the devil's; but I shall never forget that sunset which brought me to Ken's Island on as strange an errand as ever commissioned a ship. The deep blue of the sky, the vastness of the horizon, the setting sun, the island's shaping out of the deep: these, and the curiosity which kept the glass ever at my eye, made an hour which a man might fear to tell of. True, I have sighted many a strange land in my time and have put up my glass for many an unknown shore; but yonder lay the home of Ruth Bellenden, and to-morrow's sun would tell me how it fared with her. I had sailed from England to learn as much.

Now, Mr. Jacob, the first officer, had come up to the bridge while I was

searching the shore for an anchorage, and he, who always was a prudent man, spoke up at once for laying to and leaving our business, whatever it was, until the morning.

"You'll lose the light in ten minutes, and yon's a port I do not like the look of," said he. "Better go about, sir. Reefs don't get out of the way, even for a lady."

"Mister Jacob," said I, for, little man that he was, he had a big wit in his own way, "the lady would be very glad to get out of the way of the reef, I'm thinking. However, that's for the morning. Here's Peter Bligh as pleased as any school-boy at the sight of land. Tell him that he isn't going ashore to-night, and he'll thank you nicely. Eh, Peter, are you, too, of Jacob's mind? Is it sea or shore, a glass in my cabin or what the natives will sell you in the log-cabins over yonder?" Peter Bligh shut up his glass with a snap.

"I know the liquor, Mr. Begg," said he; "as the night is good to me, I'm of Mister Jacob's way of thinking. A sound bed and a clear head, and a fair wind for the morning—you'll see little of any woman, black or white, on yonder rock to-night."

Jacob—his little eyes twinkling, as they always did at his own jokes—muttered the old proverb about choosing a wife by candle-light; but before any one could hear him a beacon shone out across the sea from some reef behind the main island I had noticed, and all eyes were turned anxiously to that. It was a queer place, truly, to set up a light, and I don't wonder that the men remarked it.

"An odd kind of a lantern to help poor mariners," said Mister Jacob, sagely. "Being kind to it, sir, I should say that it's not more than a mile too much to the northward."

"Lay your course by that, and a miracle won't carry you by the reef," added Peter Bligh, sagaciously; "in my country, which is partly Ireland, sir, we put up notice-boards for the boys that ride bicycles: 'This Hill is Dangerous.' Faith, in ould Oireland, they put 'em up at the bottom of the hills, which is useful entirely."

Some of the crew, grouped about the ladder's foot, laughed at this; others began to mutter among themselves as though the beacon troubled them, and they did not like it. A seaman's the most superstitious creature that walks the earth or sails

on the sea, as all the world knows. I could see the curiosity, which had followed my men from Southampton, was coming to a head here about twelve thousand miles from home.

"Lads," cried I, quick to take the point up, "Mister Bligh says that an Irishman built yon light, and he knows, being a bit of a one himself. We're not going in by it, anyway, so you can ask questions to-morrow. There's a hundred pounds to be divided among you for your good behaviour outward, and there'll be another hundred when we make Calshot Light. To-night we'll find good sea-room, and leave their beacon to the lumber-heads that put it up. I thank you, lads, for honest work in an honest ship. Ask the purser for an extra tot of grog, and say the skipper told you to."

They gave a hearty "Aye, aye, sir," to this, and without more ado we put the ship about and went dead slow against a stiff tide setting east by north-east. For my part, I reckoned this the time to tell my officers what my intentions were, and when I had called them into the cabin, leaving our "fourth"—a mere lad, but a good one—upon the bridge, I ordered Joe, the steward, to set the decanters upon the table. Mister Jacob, as usual, put on his glasses (which he always did in room or cabin, just as though he would read a book), but Peter Bligh sat with his cap between his knees and as foolish an expression upon his face as I have ever seen.

"Now, gentlemen," I said, "no good talking in this world was ever done upon a dusty table, so we'll have a glass round and then to business. Mr. Bligh, I'm sure, will make no objection to that."

"Faith, and I know when to obey my superior officer, captain. A glass round, and after that———"

"Peter, Peter," said I, "'tis the 'after that' which sends many a good hulk to the bottom."

"Not meaning to apply the term to Peter Bligh, but by way of what the landsmen call 'silime,'" said Mister Jacob.

"'Simile' you mean, Mister Jacob. Well, it's all the same, and neither here nor there in the matter of a letter. The fact is, gentlemen, I wish you to know why I have sailed this ship to Ken's Archipelago, and under what circumstances I shall

sail her home again."

They pricked up their ears at this, Peter turning his cap nervously in his hands and Mister Jacob being busy with his glasses as he loves to be.

"Yes," I went on, "you have behaved like true shipmates and spoken never a word which a man might not fairly speak. And now it's my duty to be open with you. Well, to cut it short, my lads, I've sailed to the Pacific because my mistress, Ruth Bellenden, asked me."

They had known as much, I imagine, from the start; but while Mister Jacob pretended to be very much surprised, honest Peter raised his glass and drank to Mistress Ruth's good health.

"God bless her," he said, "and may the day come when I ship along o' such a one again. Aye, you would have come out for her sake, captain—no other, I'm sure!"

"She being Ruth Bellenden no longer, but the wife of a gentleman with a name none but a foreigner can spell," added Mister Jacob; and then he went on: "Well, you surprise me very much, captain—very much indeed. Matrimony is a choppy sea and queer things swim in it. But this—this I had not looked to hear."

I knew that this was only Mister Jacob's way, and continued my story.

"It was a promise to her upon her wedding day. Ten thousand pounds she left with her lawyers for this very purpose. 'My husband has strange ideas; I may not share them,' were her words to me. 'If his yacht should not be at the islands when I wish to visit Europe again, I should like you to find me a vessel in its place. I trust you, Jasper Begg,' she said; 'you will sail for Ken's Archipelago twelve months from today, and you will come to my house there, as you used to do in the old time, for orders. Perhaps I shall send you home again, perhaps I may like to have a yacht of my own once more. Who knows? I am quite alone in the world,' she said, laughing, 'though my brother is alive. And the Pacific Ocean is a long way from London—oh, such a long way,' she said, or something of that sort."

"Aye, and right, too. A derned long way she meant, I don't doubt, if what was in her mind came out," puts in Peter at this.

"Mr. Bligh," said I, "be pleased to hold your tongue until your opinion is asked. What I am telling you is a confidence which you two, and no others, share with me. To-morrow, as soon as daylight, I shall row ashore and ask to see Mme. Czerny, as I suppose I must call little Ruth now. If she says, 'Go home again,' very well, home we go with good wages in our pockets. If she says 'Stay,' there's not a man on board this ship that will not stay willingly—she being married to a foreigner, which all the world knows is not the same as being married to an Englishman———"

"To say nothing of an Irishman," said Peter Bligh, whose mother was from Dublin and whose father was named sometimes for a man of Rotherhithe and at other times put down to any country which it suited Peter to boast about.

"Edmond Czerny was a Hungarian," said I, "and he played the fiddle wonderful. What mad idea took him for a honeymoon to Ken's Island, the Lord only knows. They say he was many years in America. I know nothing about him, save that he had a civil tongue and manners to catch a young girl's fancy. She was only twenty-two when she married him, Mister Jacob."

"Old enough to know better—quite old enough to know better. Not that I would say anything against Ruth Bellenden, not a word. It's the woman's part to play the capers, sir, and we poor mortal men to be took by them. Howsomever, since there was a fiddle in it, I've nothing more to say."

We laughed at Mister Jacob's notion, and Peter Bligh said what it was in my heart to say:

"Saving that if Ruth Bellenden needs a friend, she'll find twenty-six aboard this ship, to say nothing of the cook's boy and the dog. You've a nice mind, Mister Jacob, but you've a deal to larn when it comes to women. My poor old father, who hailed from Shoreham———"

"It was Newport yesterday, Peter."

"Aye, so it were—so it were. But, Newport or Shoreham, he'd a precious good notion of the sex, and what he said I'll stand by. 'Get 'em on their feet to the music,' says he, 'and you can lead 'em anywheres.' 'Tis Gospel truth that, Mister Jacob."

"But a man had better mind his steps," said I. "For my part, I shouldn't be surprised if Ruth Bellenden's husband gave us the cold shoulder to-morrow and sent us about our business. However, the sea's free to all men, lads, and the morn will show. By your leave we'll have a bit of supper and after that turn in. We shall want all our wits about us when daylight comes." They agreed to this, and without further parley we went on deck and heard what the lad "Dolly" Venn had to tell us. It was full dark now and the islands were hidden from our view. The beacon shone with a steady white glare which, under the circumstances, was almost uncanny. I asked the lad if he had sighted any ships in towards the land or if signals had been made. He answered me that no ship had passed in or out nor any rocket been fired. "And I do believe, sir," he said, "that we shall find the harbour on the far sight of yonder height."

"The morning will show us, lad," said I; "go down to your supper, for I mean to take this watch myself." They left me on the bridge. The wind had fallen until it was scarce above a moan in the shrouds. I stood watching the beacon as a man who watches the window light of one who has been dear to him.

CHAPTER II

WE GO ASHORE AND LEARN STRANGE THINGS

I HAVE told how it came about that I sailed for Ken's Island, and now I shall tell what happened when I went ashore to find Ruth Bellenden.

We put off from the ship at six bells in the morning watch. Dolly Venn, who was rated as fourth officer, was with me in the launch, and Harry Doe, the boatswain, at the tiller. I left Mister Jacob on the bridge, and gave him my orders to stand in-shore as near as might be, and to look for my coming at sunset—no later. "Whatever passes," said I, "the night will find me on board again. I trust to bring you good news, Mister Jacob—the best news."

"Which would be that we were to 'bout ship and home again," says he; and that I did not contradict.

Now, we were to the westward of the island when we put off, and neither my glass nor the others showed any good landing there. As the launch drew in towards the cliffs I began to get the lie of the place more clearly; and especially of what I call the mainland, which was wonderfully fresh and green in the sunlight and seemed to have some of the tropic luxuriance of more southern islands. About four miles long, I judged it to be, from the high black rock to which it rose at the southward point, to the low dog's-nosed reef which defended it to the north. Trees I could see, palms and that kind, and ripe green grasses on a stretch of real down-like land; but the cliffs themselves were steep and unpromising, and the closer we drew the less I liked the look of it.

"Dolly, my lad," I said at last, "you were the wise one, after all. Yon's no shore for an honest man; he being made like a man and not like an eagle. Let's try the starboard tack and see what luck will send us."

We headed the launch almost due south, and began to round the headland. The men were elated, they didn't know at what; Dolly Venn had a boy's delight in the difficulty.

"An ugly shore, sir," he said, pleased at my compliment. "A very ugly shore. It would be a bad night which found a ship in these parts and no better light than the fool's beacon we saw yesterday."

"As true as the parson's word," said I, "but, ugly or beautiful, I'll be up on those heights before twelve o'clock if I have to swim ashore. And speaking of that," said I, "there are men up yonder, or I'm a Dutchman!" Well, he clapped his glass to his eye and searched the green grass land as I had done; but the light was overstrong and the cliff quickly shut the view from us, so that we found ourselves presently in the loom of vast black rocks, with the tide running like a whirlpool, and a great sword-fish reef a mile from the shore, perhaps, to catch any fool that didn't want sea room. I took the tiller myself from this point, and standing well out I brought the launch round gingerly enough, but the water was deep and good once we were on the lee side; and no sooner did we head north again than I espied the cove and knew where Ruth Bellenden had gone ashore.

"It's there, lad," said I, "yonder, where the sand sparkles. There'll be a way up the cliff and good anchorage. No one but an Irishman would buy an island without a harbour; you tell Mr. Bligh that when we go aboard again."

"Mr. Bligh says he's only Irish on the mother's side, sir; that's what makes him bighearted towards the women. He'll be dying to come ashore if there are any petticoats hereabouts."

"They haven't much use for that same garment on the Pacific Islands," said I. "Peter can marry cheap here, if it's the milliners' bills he's minding—but I doubt, lad, from the look of it, whether we'll find a jewel in this port. It's a wild-looking place, to be sure it is."

Indeed, and it was. Viewed from the eastward sea, I call Ken's Island the most fearsome place I have come across in all my fifteen years afloat. Vast cliffs, black and green and crystal, rose up sheer from the water in precipices for all the world like mighty steps. By here and there, as the ground sloped away to the northward, there were forests of teak (at least, I judged them to be that), pretty woods with every kind of palm, green valleys and grassy pastures. The sands of the cove were white as snow, and shone like so many precious stones pounded up to make a sea beach. On the north side only was there barrenness—for that seemed but a tongue of low land and black rock thrust straight out into the sea. But elsewhere it was a spectacle to impress a man; and I began, perhaps, to admit that Edmond Czerny had more than a crank's whim in his mind when he took little Ruth Bellenden to such a shore for her honeymoon. He had a fancy for wild places, said I, and this was the very spot for him. But Miss Ruth, who had always been one for the towns and cities and the bright things of life—what did she think of it? I should learn that, if she were ashore yonder.

Now, we put straight in to the cove where the silver sand was, and no sooner was I ashore than I espied a rickety wooden ladder rising almost straight up to the cliff's head, which hereabouts was no more than sixty feet high. Neither man nor beast was on the beach, nor did I make out any sign of human habitation whatever. It was just a little sandy bay, lone and desolate; but directly I slipped out of the launch I discovered footprints leading to the ladder's foot, and I knew that men had gone up before me, that very morning it must be, seeing that the tide had ebbed and the sand was still wet. At another time I might have asked myself why nobody came out to meet us, and why there was no lookout for the

island to hail a strange ship in the offing; but I was too eager to go ashore, and, for that matter, had my feet on the sand almost before the launch grounded.

"Do you, Dolly, come up with me," said I; "the others will stand by to anchor until we come down again. If it's not in an hour, lads, go back and get your dinners; but look for me at sunset anyway, for I've no mind to sleep ashore, and that you may be sure of."

They took the orders and pushed the launch off. Dolly and I ran up the crazy ladder and found ourselves at the cliff's head, but no better off in the matter of seeing than we had been before. True, the launch looked far down, like a toy ship in a big basin of blue water; we could distinguish the sword-fish reef, as the lad called it, and other reefs to the east and north, but the place we stood on was shut in by a black wood of teak and blue ebony, and, save for the rustling of the great leaves, we couldn't hear a sound. As for the path through the plantation, that was covered with long, rank grass, and some pit or other—I don't know what it was—gave a pungent, heavy odour which didn't suit a seaman's lungs. I was set against the place from the first—didn't like it, and told the lad as much.

"Dolly," said I, "the sooner we have a ship's planking under our feet again the better for our constitutions. If there's a house in this locality, the ladder is the road to it, unless one of Peter Bligh's countrymen built it. Put your best foot foremost, my lad. We'll dine early if we don't lunch late."

With this I struck the path through the wood and went straight on, not listening to the lad's chatter nor making any myself. The shade was welcome enough; there were pretty places for those that had eyes to see them—waterfalls splashing down from the moss-grown rocks above; little pools, dark and wonderfully blue; here and there a bit of green, which might have been the lawn of a country house. But of dwelling or of people I saw nothing, and to what the boy fancied that he saw I paid no heed.

"You're dreaming it, young gentleman," said I, "for look now, who should be afraid of two unarmed seamen, and why should any honest man be ashamed to show his face? If there are men peeping behind the trees, well, let them peep, and good luck go with them. It doesn't trouble me, and I don't suppose it will take your appetite away. You aren't afraid of them, surely?"

It was an unkind thing to have said, and the lad rightly turned upon me.

"Why, sir," cried he, "I would never be afraid while I was with you."

"Proudly put, my boy, and a compliment I won't forget. What sort of men did you say that they were?"

"One was old, with a goat's beard. He wore ragged breeches and a seaman's blouse. I saw him directly we entered the wood. The others were up in the hills above the waterfall. They carried rifles."

"Come, come, Dolly," exclaimed I. "Put them in Prussian blue at once, and fly the German ensign. Rifles in a place like this—and two unarmed strangers against them! Why should the rogues hide their beautiful faces? If they would know all about us, what's to prevent them? Do we look like highwaymen or honest fellows? Be sure, my lad, that the young lady I am going to see wouldn't have any blacklegs about her house. Ruth Bellenden's too clever for that. She'd send them about their business quick enough, as she's sent many a one when I was the skipper of her yacht. Did they tell you that, Dolly—that your skipper used to sail the smartest schooner-yacht that ever flew the ensign———"

The boy looked up at me and admitted frankly that he knew something.

"They said the young lady owned the Manhattan, sir. I never asked much about it. The men were fond of her, I believe."

"Adored her, lad. She was the daughter of Rupert Bellenden, who made a mint of money by building the Western American Railroad, and afterwards in the steel way. He was drowned at sea when the Elbe went down. His son got the business, but the daughter took the house and fortune—at least, the best part of it. She was always a rare one for the sea, and owned a biggish boat in her father's time. When he died she bought the Manhattan, more's the pity, for it carried her to Mediterranean ports, and there she took up with the fiddler. He was a Chevalier or something, and could look a woman through and through. What money he had was made, the Lord knows where, not out of fiddling, I'll be bound, for his was no music to set the tongue lilting. He'd been in the Pacific a while, they say, and was a Jack-of-all-trades in America. That's how he came across these islands, you may imagine—slap in the sea-way to Yokohama as they are. There's

been many a good ship ashore on Ken's Island, lad, believe me, and there'll be many another. 'Tis no likely place to bring a young wife to, and none but a madman would have done it."

I told him all this just in a natural way, as one man speaking to another of something which troubled his mind. Not that he made much of it—how should he?—for there were a hundred things to look at, and his eyes were here and there and everywhere; now up at the great black rocks above us; now peering into a deep gorge, over which a little wooden bridge carried us, just for all the world like a scaffold thrown from tree to tree of the wood. It was a rare picture, I admit, and when we came out of the thicket at last and saw the lower island spread before us like a chart, with its fields of crimson flowers, its waterfalls, its bits of pasture, and its blue seas beyond, a man might well have stood to tell himself that Nature never made a fairer place. For my part, I began to believe again that Edmond Czerny knew what he was about when he built a house for Miss Ruth on such a spot; and I was just about to tell the lad as much when a man came running up the path and, hailing us in a loud voice, asked us where the devil we were going to—or something not more civil. And, at this, I brought to and looked him up and down and answered him as a seaman should.

"To the devil yourself," said I; "what's that to do with you, and what may your name happen to be?"

He was a big man, dressed in blue serge, with a peak cap and a seaman's blouse. He had a long brown beard and a pock-marked face, and he carried a spy-glass under his arm. He had come up from the grassy valley below—and there I first saw the roof of a low bungalow, and the gardens about it. That was Ruth's home, I said, and this fellow was one of Czerny's yacht hands.

"Not so fast, not so fast," cried he; "do you know that this is private land, and you've no business ashore here?"

"Why," says I, "haven't we come ashore to see you, my beauty, and doesn't the spectacle reward us? 'Bout ship," says I, "and have done with it. My business is with your mistress, whom I knew before your brother was hanged at 'Frisco."

He swore a big oath at this, and, I do believe, was half of the mind to try which was the better man; but when he had looked down at the gardens of the

bungalow, and a white figure was plainly to be seen there, he seemed to think better of it, and changed his tone entirely.

"Avast," cries he, with a bit of a laugh, "you're one of the right sort, and no mistaking that! And where would you be from, and what would you be wanting here?" he asks, grown civil as a bagman with a bit of ribbon to sell.

"Shipmate," says I, "if I'm one of the right sort, my port's Southampton and my flag's the ensign. Take me down to Mme. Czerny, whom I see among the flower-beds yonder, and you shall know enough about me in five minutes to bring the tears to your beautiful eyes. And come," says I, chaffing him, "are there any girls in this bit of a paradise? If so," says I, "I should call 'em lucky when I look at you."

Well, he took it sourly enough, but I could see he was mighty curious to hear more about me, and as we went down a winding path to the bungalow in the valley he put many questions to me, and I tried to answer them civilly. Like all seamen he had no silent wits of his own, and every word he thought, that he must speak.

"The guv'nor's not here," he said; "gone to 'Frisco. Lucky for you, for he don't like strangers. Aye," he goes on, "he's a wonderful man for his own way; to be sure he is. You'll be aboard and away before sunset, or you might see him. Take my advice and put about. The shore's unwholesome," says he.

"By the looks of you," says I, "you've nothing more than jaundice, and that I can put up with. As for your guv'nor, I remember him well when he and I did the light fandango together in European ports. He was always a wonder with the fiddle. My mistress could lead him like a pug-dog. I don't doubt she's a bit of a hand at it still."

Now, this set him thinking, and he put two and two together, I suppose, and knew pretty well who I was.

"You'll be Jasper Begg that sailed the lady's yacht Manhattan?" says he. "Well, I've heard of you often, and from her own lips. She'll be pleased to see you, right enough—though what the guv'nor might say is another matter. You see," he went on, "this same island is a paradise, sure as thunder; but it's lonely for women-

kind, and your mistress, she don't take to it kindly. Not that she's complaining, or anything of that sort. A lady who has rings for her fingers and bells for her toes, and all real precious, same as any duchess might wear, she don't complain long. Why, my guv'nor could make his very teeth out of diamonds and not miss 'em, come to that! But his missus is always plaguing him to take her to Europe, and that game. As if he don't want a wife in his own home, and not in another man's, which is sense, Mister Begg, though it is spoke by a plain seaman."

I said, "Aye, aye," and held my tongue, knowing that he would go on with it. We were almost down at the house now, and the cliffs stood like a great cloud of solid rock, above which a loom of smoke was floating. Dolly walked at my heels like a patient dog. My own feelings are not for me to tell. I was going to see Ruth Bellenden again. Why, she was there in yonder garden, and nothing between us but this great hulking yellow boy, who took to buttonholing me as a parson buttonholes his churchwarden when he wants a new grate in his drawing-room.

"Now," says he, standing before me as one who had half a mind to block the road, "you be advised by me, Mister Begg, and cut this job short. Don't you be listening to a woman's parley, for it's all nonsense. I've done wrong to let you ashore, perhaps—perhaps I haven't; but, ashore or afloat, it's my business to see that the guv'nor's orders is carried out, and carried out they will be, one man or twenty agen 'em. Do you take a plain word or do you not, Mister Begg?"

"I take whatever's going, and don't trouble about the sugar," says I; and then, putting him aside, I lifted the latch of the garden gate, and went in and saw Miss Ruth.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH JASPER BEGG MAKES UP HIS MIND WHAT TO DO

NOW, she was sitting in the garden, in a kind of arbour built of leaves, and near by her was her relative, the rats'-tailed old lady we used to call Aunt Rachel. The pair didn't see me as I passed in, but a Chinese servant gave "Good-day" to the yellow man we'd picked up coming down; and, at that, Miss Ruth—for so I call her, not being able to get Mme. Czerny into my head—Miss Ruth, I say, stood up, and, the colour tumbling into her cheeks like the tide into an empty pool, she stood for all the world as though she were struck dumb and unable to say a word to any man. I, meanwhile, fingered my hat and looked foolish; for it was an odd kind of job to have come twelve thousand miles upon, and what to say to her with the hulking seaman at my elbow, the Lord forgive me if I knew.

"Miss Ruth," says I at last, "I'm here according to orders, and the ship's here, and we're waiting for you to go aboard———"

Well, she seemed to hear me like one who did not catch the meaning of it. I saw her put her hand to her throat as though something were choking her, and the old lady, the one we called Aunt Rachel, cried, "God bless me," two or three times together. But the yellow man was the next to speak, and he crossed right over to our Miss Ruth's side, and talked in her ear in a voice you could have heard up at the hills.

"You'll not be going aboard to-day, lady. Why, what would the master have to say, he coming home from foreign parts and you not ashore to meet him? You didn't say nothing about any ship, not as I can remember, and mighty pleased the guv'nor will be when he knows about it. Shall I tell this party he'd better be getting aboard again, eh, ma'am? Don't you think as he'd better be getting aboard again?"

He shouted this out for all the world like a man hailing from one ship to another. I don't know what put it into my head, but I knew from that moment that my mistress was afraid, aye, deadly afraid, as it is given few to fear in this life. Not that she spoke of it, or showed it by any sign a stranger might have understood; but there was a look in her eyes which was clear to me; "and by my last word," said I to myself, "I'll know the truth this day, though there be one or a hundred yellow boys!" None the less, I held my tongue as a wise man should, and what I said was spoken to the party with the beard.

"You've a nice soft voice for a nightingale, that you have," says I; "if you'd let

yourself out for a fog-horn to the Scilly Isles, you'd go near to make your fortune! Is the young lady deaf that you want to bawl like a harbour-master? Easy, my man," says I, "you'll hurt your beautiful throat."

Well, he turned round savage enough, but my mistress, who had stood all the while like a statue, spoke now for the first time, and holding out both her hands to me, she cried:

"Oh, Captain Begg, Captain Begg, is it you at last, to walk right here like this? I can't believe it," she said; "I really can't believe it!"

"Why, that's so," said I, catching her American accent, which was the prettiest thing you ever heard; "I'm on the way to 'Frisco, and I put in here according to my promise. My ship's out yonder, Miss Ruth, and there's some aboard that knows you—Peter Bligh and Mister Jacob; and this one, this is little Dolly Venn," said I, presenting him, "though he'll grow bigger by-and-bye."

With this I pushed the boy forward, and he, all silly and blushing as sailors will be when they see a pretty woman above their station—he took her hand and heaved it like a pump-handle; while old Aunt Rachel, the funny old woman in the glasses, she began to talk a lot of nonsense about seamen, as she always did, and for a minute or two we might have been a party of friends met at a street corner.

"I'm glad to find you well, Captain Begg," said she. "Such a dangerous life, too, the mariner's. I always pity you poor fellows when you climb the rattlesnakes on winter's nights."

"Ratlins, you mean, ma'am," said I, "though for that matter, a syllable or two don't count either way. And I hope you're not poorly, ma'am, on this queer shore."

"I like the island," says she, solemn and stiff-like; "my dear nephew is an eccentric, but we must take our bread as we find it on this earth, Mister Begg, and thankful for it too. Poor Ruth, now, she is dreadfully distressed and unhappy; but I tell her it will all come right in the end. Let her be patient a little while and she will have her own way. She wants for nothing here—she has every comfort. If her husband chooses such a home for her, she must submit. It is our duty to

submit to our husbands, captain, as the catechism teaches us."

"Aye, when you've got 'em," thought I, but I nodded my head to the old lady, and turned to my mistress, who was now speaking to me.

"You'll lunch here; why, yes, captain—you mustn't find us inhospitable, even if you leave us at once. Mr. Denton, will you please to tell them that Captain Begg lunches with me—as soon as possible?"

She turned to the yellow man to give him the order; but there was no mistaking the look which passed between them, saying on her side: "Allow me to do this," on his, "You will suffer for it afterwards." But he went up to the veranda of the house right enough, and while he was bawling to the cook, I spoke the first plain word to Mme. Czerny.

"Mistress," I said, "the ship's there—shall we go or stay?"

I had meant it to be the plain truth between us; on her part the confession whether she needed me or did not; on mine the will to serve her whatever might happen to me. To my dying day, I shall never forget her answer.

"Go," she said, so low that it was little more than a whisper, "but, oh, for God's sake, Jasper Begg, come back to me again."

I nodded my head and turned the talk. The man Denton, the one with the yellow beard (rated as Kess Denton on the island), was back at my side almost before she had finished. The old lady began to talk about "curling-spikes" and "blue Saint Peters," and how much the anchor weighed, and all that sort of blarney which she thought ship-shape and suited to a poor sailor-man's understanding. I told her a story of a shark that swallowed a missionary and his hymn-book, and always swam round our ship at service times afterwards—and that kept her thinking a bit. As for little Dolly Venn, he couldn't keep his eyes off Miss Ruth—and I didn't wonder, for mine went that way pretty often. Aye, she had changed, too, in those twelve months that had passed since last I saw her, the prettiest bride that ever held out a finger for a ring in the big church at Nice. Her cheeks were all fallen away and flushed with a colour which was cruelly unhealthy to see. The big blue eyes, which I used to see full of laughter and a young girl's life, were ringed round with black, and pitiful when they looked at

you. The hair parted above the forehead, as it always was, and brought down in curls above her little ears, didn't seem to me so full of golden threads as it used to be. But it was good to hear her plucky talk, there at the dinner-table, when she chattered away like some sweet-singing bird, and Dolly couldn't turn away his eyes, and the yellow boy stood, sour and savage, behind her chair, and threw out hints for me to sheer off which might have moved the Bass Rock. Not that he need have troubled himself, for I had made up my mind already what to do; and no sooner was the food stowed away than I up and spoke about the need of getting on again, and such like. And with that I said "Good-bye" to Mistress Ruth and "Good-bye" to the old woman, and had a shot left in my locker for the yellow boy, which I don't doubt pleased him mightily.

"Good luck to you," says I; "if you'd a wisp of your hair, I'd put it in my locket and think of you sometimes. When you want anything from London you just shout across the sea and we'll be hearing you. Deadman's Horn is nothing to you," said I; "you'd scare a ship out of the sea, if you wasn't gentle to her."

Mind you, I said all this as much to put him off as anything else, for I'd been careful enough to blab no word about the Southern Cross being Miss Ruth's very own ship, nor about her orders that we should call at Ken's Island; and I knew that when a man's angry at what you say to him he doesn't think much of two and two making four, but as often as not makes them eight or ten. May-be, said I, he'll make it out that I'm on a tramp bound for 'Frisco and have touched here on the way—and certainly he won't look for my coming back again once he sees our smoke on the sky-line. Nor was I wrong. My mistress was to tell me that much before twelve hours had passed.

And so it was that I said "Good-bye" to her, she standing at the garden-gate with a brave smile upon her pretty face, and the yellow man behind her like a savage dog that is afraid to bite, but has all the mind to. At the valley's head I turned about, and she was still there, looking up wistfully to the hills we trod. Thrice I waved my hand to her, and thrice she answered, and then together, the lad and I, we entered the dark wood and saw her no more.

"Your best leg forward, lad," said I to him, "and mum's the word. There's work to do on the ship, and work ashore for a woman's sake. Are you game for that, Dolly—are you game, my boy?"

Well, he didn't answer me. Some one up in the black gorge above fired a rifle just as I spoke; and the bullet came singing down like a bird on the wing. Not a soul could I see, not a sound could I hear when the rolling echoes had passed away. It was just the silence of the thicket and of the great precipices which headed it—a silence which might freeze a man's heart because the danger which threatened him was hidden.

"Crouch low to the rocks, lad, and go easy," cried I, when my wits came back again; "that's a tongue it doesn't do to quarrel with. The dirty skunks—to fire on unarmed men! But we'll return it, Dolly; as I live I'll fire a dozen for every one they send us."

"Return it, sir," says he; "but aren't you going aboard?"

"Aye," says I, "and coming back again like drift on an open sea. Now let me see you skip across that bridge, and no mistake about it."

He darted across the chasm's bridge like a chamois. I followed him quick and clumsy. If my heart was in my mouth—well, let that pass. Not for my own sake did I fear mortal man that day, but for the sake of a woman whose very life I believed to be in danger.

CHAPTER IV

WE GO ABOARD, BUT RETURN AGAIN

WE made the ship safely when twenty minutes were passed, and ten minutes later, Mister Jacob and Peter Bligh were in my cabin with me.

"Lads," I said, for it was not a day when a man picked his talk; "lads," said I, "this ship goes full steam ahead for 'Frisco, and you'll be wanting to know the reason why. Well, that's right and proper. Let me tell you that she's steaming to 'Frisco because it's the shortest way to Ken's Island."

They looked queer at this, but my manner kept them silent. Every man aboard the Southern Cross had heard the gun fired up in the hills, and every one knew that Dolly Venn and the skipper had raced for their lives to the water's edge. "What next?" they asked; and I meant to tell them.

"Yes," said I, "the shortest way to Ken's Island, and no mistake about it. For what does a man do when he sees some one in a house and the front door's slammed in his face? Why, he goes to the back door certainly, and for choice when the night's dark and the blinds are down. That's what I'm going to do this night, lads, for the sake of a bit of a girl you and I would sail far to serve."

They said, "Aye, aye," and drew their chairs closer. The men had been piped down to dinner, but Peter Bligh forgot his, and that was extraordinary peculiar in him. Mister Jacob took snuff as though it were chocolate powder, and the whole of a man spoke from his little eyes.

"Listen," said I, beginning to tell them what you know already, "here have we sailed twelve thousand miles at Ruth Bellenden's order, and how does she receive us? Why, with a nod she might give a neighbour going by in the street———"

"They not being on speaking terms except in church," put in Peter Bligh.

"Or she wishing him to get on with his business," said Mister Jacob, "and not to gossip when there was work to do."

"Be that as it may," I ran on, "the facts are as plain to me as eight bells for noon. Ruth Bellenden's married to a foreigner who's next door to a madman. Why, look at it—what was the only word she had the time or the chance to say? 'For God's sake, come back, Jasper Begg,' says she. And what am I going to do upon that, gentlemen? Why, I'm going back, so help me heaven, this very night to learn her trouble."

"And to bring her aboard where she could tell it on a fair course, so to speak. You'll do that, sir?"

"The night will show what I shall do, Mister Jacob. Was there ever such a story? A man to marry the best creature that ever put on a pretty bonnet, and to carry her to a god-forsaken shore like this! And to ill-treat her there! Aye, that's it. If ever a woman's eyes spoke to me of hard treatment, it was Ruth Bellenden's this morning. She's some trouble, lads, some dreadful trouble. She doesn't even speak of it to me. The yellow boy I've made mention of stood by her all the time. We talked like two that pass by on the ocean. Who'll gainsay that it was an unnatural thing? No mortal man can, with reason!"

"Aye, there's precious little reason in it, by what I make out, captain. You'll know more when the young lady's aboard here———"

"And the yellow boy's head has a bump on the top of it, like the knob what used to hang down from my mother's chandelay—but that's idle talking. What time do you put her about to go ashore, sir?"

I was glad to see them coming to it like this, and I fell to the plan without further parley.

"A fair question and a fair answer," said I; "this ship goes about at eight bells, Peter. To Mister Jacob here I trust the safety of the good fellows who go ashore with me. If we can bring the mistress aboard to-night, well and good, we've done the best day's work we ever set our hands to. If not, that work must rest until

tomorrow night, or the night after or the night after that. Eight days from now if it happens that nothing is heard from the land and no news of us, well, the course is plain. In that case it will be full steam ahead to 'Frisco, and from there a cable to Kenrick Bellenden, and the plain intimation that his sister has pretty bad need of him on Ken's Island."

"And of an American warship, if one is forthcoming."

"It may be, Mister Jacob; it may be that, though the devils ashore there are the only ones that could tell you that. But you're a man of understanding, and your part will be done. I rely upon you as between shipmates."

He took a pinch of snuff, and flapping his coat-tails (for he was always rigged out in the naval officer way) he answered what I wished.

"As between shipmates, I will do my duty," said he.

"I knew it; I've known it from the beginning," said I. "What's left when you've done is the shore part, and that's not so easy. Peter Bligh's coming, and I couldn't well leave Dolly on board. Give me our hulking carpenter, Seth Barker, and I'll lighten the ship no more. We're short-handed as it is. And, besides, if four won't serve, then forty would be no better. What we can do yonder, wits, and not revolvers, must bring about. But I'll not go with sugar-sticks, you take my word for it, and any man that points a gun at me will wish he'd gone shooting sheep."

"Aye, aye, to that," cried Peter, who was ever a man for a fight; "the shooting first and the civil words after. That's sense and no blarney. When my poor father was tried at Swansea, his native place, for hitting an Excise man with a ham———"

"Mr. Bligh," cried I, "'tis not with hams you'll be hitting folks yonder, take my word for it. This job may find us on a child's errand or it may find us doing men's work. Eight bells on the first watch will tell the whole of the story. Until that time I shall hold my tongue about it, but I don't go ashore as I go to a picnic, and I don't make a boast about what I may presently cry out about."

Well, they were both of my way of thinking, and when we'd talked a little more about it, and I'd opened the arm-chest and looked over the few guns and pistols

we'd got there, and we'd called the lad Dolly down and promised him that he should come with us, and the men had been given to understand that the skipper was to go ashore by-and-bye on an important business, Peter and the others went to their dinner and I took my turn on the bridge. The swell was running strongly then, and the wind blew fresh from the north-east. We'd lost all sight of the island, and spoke but one ship, a small mail steamer from Santa Cruz bound for the Yellow Sea, which signalled us "All well" at six bells in the afternoon watch. From that time I went dead slow and began to bring the Southern Cross about. The work was begun that very hour, I always say.

Now, I've told all this, short and brief, and with no talk of my own about it. The thing had come so sudden, I knew so little of Ruth Bellenden's trouble or of what had befallen her on the island, that I was like a man in the dark groping blindly, yet set on hearing the truth. As for the crew, well, you may be sure that Dolly Venn had put his side of the story about, and when they knew that my mistress was ashore there and in some danger, I believe they'd have put me in irons if I'd so much as spoken of going back.

Risky it was, so much I won't deny; but who wouldn't risk more than his own paltry skin to save a woman in trouble, and she, so to speak, a shipmate? There was not a man aboard, stake my life, who wouldn't have gone to the land willingly for Ruth Bellenden's sake though he'd been told, sure and certain, that Ken's Island must be his grave. And we'd always the ship, mind you, and the knowledge that she would go to 'Frisco to get us help. A fool's hope, I say now. For how could we know that the Southern Cross would be at the bottom of the sea, a thousand fathoms down, before the week was run? We couldn't know it; yet that was what happened, and that is why no help came to us.

We had put the ship about at six bells in the afternoon watch, but it was eight bells in the second dog (the night being too clear for my liking and a full moon showing bright in the sky) that we sighted Ken's Island for the second time, and for the second time prepared to go ashore. The longboat was ready by this time, her barrels full of water and her lockers full of biscuit. Such arms as we were to carry were partly stowed in water-proof sheeting—the rifles, and the cartridges for them; but the revolvers we carried, and a good Sheffield knife a man, which we weren't going to cut potatoes with. For the rest, I made them put in a few stout blankets, and more rations than might have served for such a trip. "Good beginnings make good endings," said I; "what we haven't need of, lads, we can

carry aboard again. The longboat's back won't ache, be sure of it."

All this, I say, was done when the moon showed us the island like a great barren rock rising up sheer from the sea. And when it was done, Mister Jacob called my attention to something which in the hurry of shore-going I might never have seen at all or thought about. It was nothing less than this—that their fool's beacon was out to-night, and all the sea about it as black as ink. Whoever set up the light, then, did not use it for a seaman's benefit, but for his own whim. I reckoned up the situation at a glance, and even at that early stage I began to know the terrible meaning of it.

"Mister Jacob," said I, "those that keep that beacon are either fools or knaves."

"Or both, sir," said he.

"Which one is the own brother to the other. Aye, captain, 'tis lucky ye've the parish lantern, as my poor father used to say when———"

But Peter Bligh never finished it that night. The words were still in his mouth when a rocket shot up over the sea and bursting in a cloud of gold-blue sparks, cast a weird, cold light upon rock and reef and all that troubled sea. And as the rocket fell our big carpenter, Seth Barker, standing aft by the hatch, cries out,

"Ship ashore! Ship ashore, by———!"

CHAPTER V

STRANGE SIGHTS ASHORE, AND WHAT WE SAW OF THEM

NOW, when Seth Barker cried out that a ship was ashore on the dangerous reefs to the northward of the main island, it is not necessary to tell you what we, a crew of British seamen, were called upon to do. The words were scarcely spoken

before I had given the order, "Stand by the boats," and sent every man to his station. Excited the hands were, that I will not deny; excited and willing enough to tell you about it if you'd asked them; but no man among them opened his lips, and while they stood there, anxious and ready, I had my glass to my eye and tried to make out the steamer and what had befallen her. Nor was Mister Jacob behind me, but he and Peter Bligh at my side, we soon knew the truth and made up our minds about it.

"There's a ship on the reef, sure enough, and by the cut of her she's the Santa Cruz we spoke this afternoon," said Mr. Jacob, and added, "a dangerous shore, sir, a dangerous shore."

"But full of kind-hearted people that fire their guns at poor shipwrecked mariners," put in Peter Bligh. I wouldn't believe him at first, but there was no denying it, awful truth that it was, when a few minutes had passed.

"Good God," cried I, "it can't be so, Peter, and yet that's a rifle's tongue, or I've lost my hearing."

Well, we all stood together and listened as men listen for some poor creature's death-cry, or the sounds which come in the stillness of the night to affright and unnerve us. Sure enough, you couldn't have counted ten before the report of guns was heard distinctly above the distant roar of breakers; while flashes of crimson light, playing about the reef, seemed to tell the whole story without another word from me.

"Those devils ashore are shooting the crew," cried I; "did man ever hear such bloody work? I'll have a reckoning for this, if it takes me twenty years. Lower away the boats, lads; I'm going to dance to that music."

They swung the two longboats out on the davits, and the port crew were in their seats, when Mister Jacob touched my arm and questioned my order—a thing I haven't known him to do twice in ten years.

"Beg pardon, sir," said he, "but there's no boat that will help the Santa Cruz to-night."

"And why, Mister Jacob—why do you say that?"

"Because she's gone where neither you nor I wish to go yet awhile, Mister Begg."

I stood as though he had shot me, and clapping my glass to my eye I took another look towards the northern reef and the ship that was stranded there. But no ship was to be seen. She had disappeared in a twinkling; the sea had swallowed her up. And over the water, as an eerie wail, lasting and doleful, came the death-cries of those who perished with her.

"God rest their poor souls and punish them that sent them there," said Peter Bligh fervently; but Mister Jacob was still full of his prudent talk.

"We're four miles out, and the moon will be gone in ten minutes, sir. You couldn't make the reef if you tried, and if you could, you'd find none living. This sea would best the biggest boat that ever a ship carried—it will blow harder in an hour, and what then? We've friends of our own to serve, and the door that Providence opens we've no right to shut. I say nothing against humanity, Captain Begg, but I wouldn't hunt the dead in the water when I could help the living ashore."

I saw his point in a moment, and had nothing to say against it. No small boat could have lived in the reefs about the northern end of the island with the sea that was running that night. If the devils who fired down upon the poor fellows of the Santa Cruz were still watching like vultures for human meat, fair argument said, the main island would be free of them for us to go ashore as we pleased. A better opportunity might not be found for a score of months. I never blame myself, least of all now, when I know Ruth Bellenden's story, that I listened that night to the clearheaded wisdom of Anthony Jacob.

"You're right, as always, Mister Jacob. I've no call to take these good fellows on a fool's errand. And it's going to blow hard, as you say. We'll take in one of the boats, and those that are for the shore will make haste to get aboard the other."

This I said to him, but to the men I put it in a few seaman's words.

"Lads," I said, "no boat that Southampton ever built could swim in yonder tide where it makes between the reefs. We'd like to help shipmates, but the chance is not ours. There's another little shipmate ashore there that needs our help pretty

badly. I'm going in for her sake, and there's not a man of you that will not do his duty by the ship when I'm gone. Aye, you'll stand by Mister Jacob, lads, I may tell him that?"

They gave me a rousing cheer, which was a pretty foolish thing to have done, and it took all my voice to silence them. Lucky for us, there was a cloud over the moon now, and darkness like a black vapour upon the sea. Not a lamp burned on the Southern Cross; not a cabin window but had its curtain. What glow came from her funnel was not more than a hazy red light over the waters; and when five of us (for we took Harry Doe to stand by ashore) stepped into the longboat, and set her head due west for the land, we lost the steamer in five minutes—and, God knows, we were never to see her again on the high seas or off.

Now, I have said that the wind had begun to blow fresh since sunset, and at two bells in the first watch, the time we left the ship, the sea ran high, and it was not oversafe even in the longboat to be cruising for a shore we knew so little about. I have always accounted it more good luck than good seamanship which brought us to the cove at last, and set us all, wet but cheerful, on the dry, white sand about the ladder's foot. There was shelter in the bay both for man and ship, and when we'd dragged the longboat up on the beach we gave Harry Doe his orders and left him to his duty.

"If there's danger fire your gun," said I—"once, if you wish to call us; twice, if you think we should stand off. But you won't do that unless things are at the worst, and I'm hoping for the best, when you won't do it at all."

He answered, "Aye, aye," in a whisper which was like a bear's growl; and we four, Peter Bligh, Seth Barker, and the lad Dolly, besides myself, climbed the ladder like cats and stood at the cliff's head. To say that our hearts were in our mouths would not be strict truth, for I never feared any man, beast, or devil yet; and I wasn't going to begin that night—nor were the others more ready, that I will answer for them. But remembering the things we had seen on the reef, the words which Ruth Bellenden had spoken to me, and that which happened to the lad and myself last time we came ashore; remembering this, it's not to be wondered at that our hearts beat a bit quicker, and that our hands went now and again to the pistols we carried. For, just think of it—there we were at nine o'clock of a dark night, in a thick wood, with the trees making ghosts about us, and the path as narrow as a ship's plank, and no knowledge who walked the

woods with us, nor any true reckoning of our circumstance. What man wouldn't have held his tongue at such a time, or argued with himself that it might end badly, and he never see the sun again? Not Jasper Begg, as I bear witness.

Now, I put myself at the head of our fellows and, the better to find the track, I went down on my hands and my knees like a four-footed thing, and signalling to those behind with a bosun's whistle, I led them well enough through the wood to the wicker-basket bridge; and would have gone on from there straight down to the house but for something which happened at the clearing of the thicket, just as I stood up to bid the men go over. Startling it was, to be sure, and enough to give any man a turn; nor did I wonder that Peter Bligh should have cried out as he did when first he clapped eyes upon it.

"Holy Mother of Music," says he, "'tis the angels singing, or I'm a dirty nigger!"

"Hold your tongue," says I, in a whisper; "are you afraid of two young women, then?"

"Of three," says he, "which being odd is lucky. When my poor father———"

"To hell with your father," says I; "hold your tongue and wait."

He lay low at this, and the rest of us gaped, open-mouthed, as though we were staring at a fairy-book. There, before us, coming down from the black rocks above, leaping from step to step of the stone, were three young girls; but, aye, the queerest sort that ever tantalized a man with their prettiness. You may well ask, the night being inky dark, how we managed to see them at all; but let me tell you that they carried good rosin torches in their hands, and the wild light, all gold and crimson against the rocks, shone as bright as a ship's flare and as far. Never have I seen such a thing, I say, and never shall. There were the three of them, like young deer on a bleak hillside, singing and laughing and leaping down, and, what's more, speaking to each other in an odd lingo, with here a word of French and there a word of German, and after that something that was beyond me and foreign to my understanding.

"God be good to me—saw man ever such a sight? And the dress of 'em, the dress of 'em," whispers Peter Bligh. But I clapped my hand upon his mouth and stopped him that time.

"The dress is all right," said I; "what I'm wondering is how three of that sort came in such a place as this. And well born too, well born, or I don't know the meaning of the term!"

They were pretty creatures and their dress was like the rest of them. Short skirts all looped and filled with flowers, toggery above cut out of some white skin, with caps to match and their hair falling in big ramping curls about it—they were for all the world like the dancers you see at a stage play and just as active. And to hear their voices, sweet and musical, floating from ravine to ravine like a choir singing in a place of echoes, aye that was something you might not soon forget. But what they were doing in such a place, or how they came there, the Lord above alone knew, and not a plain seaman like Jasper Begg.

Like dancers at a stage play

Like dancers at a stage play.

"What are they saying, Peter—what do you make of it?" I asked him, under my breath.

""Tis the French lingo," says he, foolish-like, "and if it's not that, 'tis the German—leastwise no Christian man that I know of could distinguish between 'em."

"Peter," says I, "that's what you learn in the asylum. 'Tis no more the French lingo than your own. Why, hearken to it."

Well, he listened, and soon we heard a pretty echo from the valley, for they'd gone down towards the gardens now; and one word repeated often had as nice a touch of music as I remember hearing. It was just this: "Rosamunda—munda—munda," and you can't think how fresh the young voice sounded in that lonely place, or what a chill it gave a man when he remembered the devils over at the reef and what they'd done to the crew of the Santa Cruz. I do believe to this day that our fellows imagined they'd seen nothing more nor less than an apparition out of the black rocks above them; and it wasn't until I'd spoken to them in good honest English that I got them to go on again.

"Flesh or spirit, that's not a lot to whiten a man's gills," cried I; "why, thunder, Peter Bligh, you're big enough to put 'em all in your pocket, and soft enough they'd lie when they got there. Do you mean to tell me," I asked him, "that four hale and strong men are to be frightened out of their wits by three pretty girls?—and you a religious man, too, Peter! Why, I'm ashamed of you, that I am, lads, right down ashamed of you!"

They plucked up at this, and Peter he made haste to excuse himself.

"If they was Christian men with knives in their hands," says he, "I'd put up a bit of a prayer, and trust to the Lord to shoot 'em; but them three's agen all reason, at this time of night in such a lone place."

"Go on with you, Peter," chimes in Dolly Venn; "three ripping little girls, and don't I wish they'd ask me in to tea! Why, look, they're down by the house now, and somebody with them, though whether it's a man or a woman I really don't pretend to say."

"I'm derned if I don't think it's a lion," says Seth Barker, asking my pardon for the liberty.

We all stood still at this, for we were on the hillside just above the house now; and down on the fair grass-way below us we espied the three little girls with their torches still burning, and they as deep in talk with a stranger as a man might have been with his own mother. A more remarkable human being than the one these little ladies had happened upon I don't look to see again the world around. Man or lion—God forgive me if I know what to call him. He'd hair enough, shaggy hair curling about his shoulders, to have stuffed a feather bed. His dress was half man's, half woman's. He'd a tattered petticoat about his legs, a seaman's blouse for his body, and a lady's shawl above that upon his shoulders—his legs were bare as a barked tree, and what boots he had should have been in the rag-shop. More wonderful still was it to see the manner of the young ladies towards him—for I shall always call them that—they petted him and fondled him, and one put a mock crown of roses on his head. Then, with that pretty song of theirs, "Rosamunda—munda—munda," they all ran off together towards the northern shore and left us in the darkness, as surprised a party of men as you'll readily meet with.

"Well," says Peter Bligh, and he was the first among us to speak, "yon's a nice shipmate to speak on a quiet road. So help me thunder, but I wouldn't pass round the tin for him in a beauty show, no, not much! Did ye see the hair of him, captain—did ye see the hair?"

"And the girls kissing him as though he were Apollo," cries Dolly Venn, who, I don't doubt, would have done the kissing willingly himself. But I hushed their talk, and without more ado I went straight down to Ruth Bellenden's house. All the strange things we'd seen and heard, the uncanny sights, the firing on the reef, the wild man ashore, the little girls from the hills—all these, I say, began to tell me my mistress's story as a written book might never have done. "She's need of me," I said, "sore need; and by God's help I'll bring her out of this place before to-morrow's sun."

For how should I know what long days must pass before I was to leave Ken's Island again?

CHAPTER VI

JASPER BEGG MEETS HIS OLD MISTRESS, AND IS WATCHED

I HAD made up my mind to take every proper precaution before going up to the house where my mistress lived; and with caution in my head I left Seth Barker, the carpenter, up on the hill path, while I set Peter Bligh at the gate of the garden, and posted Dolly Venn round at the northern side, where the men who had looted the Santa Cruz might be looked for with any others that I had no knowledge of. When this was done, and they understood that they were to fire a gun if the need arose, I opened the wicket-gate and crept up the grass path for all the world like an ill-visaged fellow who had no true business there. Not a sound could I hear in all that place; not a dog barked, nor a human voice spoke. Even the wind came fitful and gusty about the sheltered house; and so quiet was it between the

squalls that my own footfall almost could scare me. For, you see, a whisper spoken at the wrong time might have undone all—a clumsy step have cost us more than a man cared to count. We were but four, and, for all I know, there might have been four hundred on Ken's Island. You don't wonder therefore, if I asked myself at times whether to-morrow's sun would find us living or what our misfortune might spell for one I had come so far to serve.

It was very dark in the garden, as I have told you, but two of the windows in the house were lighted up and two golden rings of light thrown out upon the soft grass I trod. I stood a long time debating which window to knock open—for it was a fearful lottery, I must say—and when I'd turned it over and over in my head, and now made out that it was this window and now plumped for the other, I took up a pebble at last and cast it upon the pane nearest to the door—for that seemed to me the more likely room, and I'd nothing else but common sense to guide me. You may judge of my feelings when no notice was taken of my signal except by a dog, which began to yap like a pup and to make such a scare that I thought every window and every door must be opened that very instant and as many men out on top of me. I said, surely, that it was all up with Jasper Begg that journey; but odd to tell it, the dog gave over at last, and no one showed himself, neither was there any whistle from my company; and I was just making ready to throw another stone when the second light was turned out all of a sudden and, the long window being opened, Ruth Bellenden—or, to be more correct, Mme. Czerny—herself came out into the garden, and stood looking round about as though she knew that I was there and had been waiting for me. When at last she saw me she didn't speak or make any sign, but going about to the house again she held the window open for me, and I passed into the dark room with her, and there held her hand in mine, I do believe as though I would never let it go again.

"Jasper," says she, in a whisper that was pretty as the south wind in springtime; "Jasper Begg, how could it be any one else! Oh, we must light a candle, Jasper Begg," says she, "or we shall lose ourselves in the dark."

"Miss Ruth," said I, "light or dark, I'm here according to my orders, and the ship's here, and as I said to you before the yellow boy to-day, we're waiting for our mistress to go aboard."

She had her back to me when I said this, and was busy enough drawing the

curtains and lighting the lamp again. The light showed me that she wore a rich black gown with fluffy stuff over it, and a bit of a sparkle in the way of diamonds like a band across her parted hair. The face was deceiving, now lighted up by one of the old smiles, now hard set as one who had suffered much for her years. But there was nothing over-womanish in her talk, and we two thrashed it out there, just the same as if Ken's Island wasn't full of devils, and the lives of me and my men worth what a spin of the coin might buy them at.

"You mustn't call me Miss Ruth," says she, when she turned from the lamp and tidied up her writing on the table; "of course you know that, Jasper Begg. And you at my wedding, too—is it really not more than twelve long months ago?"

A sigh passed her lips, such a sigh as tells a woman's story better than all the books; and in that moment the new look came upon her face, the look I had seen when the yellow man changed words with her in the morning.

"It's thirteen months three weeks since you went up with Mr. Czerny to the cathedral at Nice," was my next word; "the days go slow on this out-of-the-way shore, I'll be bound—until our friends come, Miss Ruth, until we're sure they haven't forgotten us."

I had a meaning in this, and be sure she took it. Not that she answered me out and away as I wished; for she put on the pretty air of wife and mistress who wouldn't tell any of her husband's secrets.

"Why, yes," she said, very slowly, "the days are long and the nights longer, and, of course, my husband is much away from here."

I nodded my head and drew the chair she'd offered me close to the table. On her part she was looking at the clock as though she wished that the hands of it might stand still. I read it that we hadn't much time to lose, and what we had was no time for fair words.

"Miss Ruth," says I, without more parley, "from what I've seen to-night I don't doubt that any honest man would be glad to get as far as he could from Ken's Island and its people at the first opportunity. You'll pardon what a plain seaman is going to say, and count him none the less a friend for saying it. When you left money in the banker's hands to commission a ship and bring her to this port,

your words to me were, 'I may have need of you.' Miss Ruth, you have need of me—I should be no more than a fool if I couldn't see that. You have sore need of me, and if you won't say so for yourself, I take leave to say it for you."

She raised a hand as though she would not hear me—but I was on a clear course now, and I held to it in spite of her.

"Yes," I said, "you've need of your friends to-night, and it's a lucky wind that brought them to this shore. What has passed, Miss Ruth, in these months you speak of, it's not for me to ask or inquire. I have eyes in my head, and they show me what I would give my fortune not to see. You're unhappy here, Miss Ruth—you're not treated well."

I waited for her to speak; but not a word would she say. White she was, as a flower from her own garden, and once or twice she shivered as though the cold had struck her. I was just going on to speak again, when what should happen but that her little head went down on the table and she began to sob as though her heart would break.

"Oh, Jasper Begg, how I have suffered, how I have suffered!" said she, between her sobs; and what could I do, what could any man do who would kiss the ground a woman walks upon but has no right or title to? Why, hold his tongue, of course, though it hurt him cruelly to do any such thing.

"Miss Ruth," said I, very foolish, "please don't think of that now. I'm here to help you, the ship's here, we're waiting for you to go aboard."

She dried her tears and tried to look up at me with a smile.

"Oh, I'm just a child, just a child again, Jasper," cries she; "a year ago I thought myself a woman, but that's all passed. And I shall never go away on your ship, Jasper Begg—never, never. I shall die on Ken's Island as so many have died."

I stood up at this and pointed to the clock.

"Little friend," I said, "if you'll put a cloak about your shoulders and leave this house with me I'll have you safe aboard the Southern Cross in twenty minutes by that clock, as God is my witness."

It was no boast—for that I could have done as any seaman knows; and you may well imagine that I stood as a man struck dumb when I had her answer.

"Why, yes," she said, "you could put me on board your boat, Captain Jasper, if every step I took was not watched; if every crag had not its sentinel; if there were not a hundred to say 'Go back—go back to your home.' Oh, how can you know, how can you guess the things I fear and dread in this awful place? You, perhaps, because the ship is waiting will be allowed to return to it again. But I, never, never again to my life's end."

A terrible look crossed her face as she said this, and with one swift movement she opened a drawer in the locker where she did her writing, and took from it a little book which she thrust, like a packet, into my hands.

"Read," she said, with startling earnestness, "read that when you are at sea again. I never thought that any other eyes but mine would see it; but you, Jasper, you shall read it. It will tell you what I myself could never tell. Read it as you sail away from here, and then say how you will come back to help the woman who needs your help so sorely."

I thrust the book into my pocket, but was not to be put off like that.

"Read it I will, every line," said I; "but you don't suppose that Jasper Begg is about to sail away and leave you in this plight, Miss Ruth! He'd be a pretty sort of Englishman to do that, and it's not in his constitution, I do assure you!"

She laughed at my earnestness, but recollecting how we stood and what had befallen since sunset, she would hear no more of it.

"You don't understand; oh, you don't understand!" she cried, very earnestly; "there's danger here, danger even now while you and I are talking. Those who have gone out to the wreck will be coming home again; they must not find you in this house, Jasper Begg, must not, must not! For my sake, go as you came. Tell all that thought of me how I thank them. Some day, perhaps, you will learn how to help me. I am grateful to you, Jasper—you know that I am grateful."

She held out both her hands to me, and they lay in mine, and I was trying to speak a real word from my heart to her when there came a low, shrill whistle

from the garden-gate, and I knew that Peter Bligh had seen something and was calling me.

"Miss Ruth," says I, "that's old Peter Bligh and his danger signal. There'll be some one about, little friend, or he wouldn't do it."

Well, she never said a word. I saw a shadow cross her face, and believed she was about to faint. Nor will any one be surprised at that when I say that the door behind us had been opened while we talked, and there stood Kess Denton, the yellow man, watching us like a hound that would bite presently.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH HELP COMES FROM THE LAST QUARTER WE HAD EXPECTED IT

NOW, no sooner did I see the yellow man than my mind was fully made up, and I determined what harbour to make for. "If you're there, my lad," said I to myself, "the others are not far behind you. You've seen me come in, and it's your intention to prevent me going out again. To be caught like a rat in a trap won't serve Ruth Bellenden, and it won't serve me. I'm for the open, Kess Denton," said I, "and no long while about it, either."

This I said, but I didn't mean to play the startled kitten, and without any token of surprise or such-like I turned round to Miss Ruth and gave her "good-evening."

"I'm sorry you're not coming aboard, Mme. Czerny," says I; "we weigh in an hour, and it will be a month or more before I call in again. But you sha'n't wait long for the news if I can help it; and as for your brother, Mr. Kenrick, I'll trust to hear from him at 'Frisco and to tell you what he thinks on my return. Good-night, madame," said I, "and the best of health and prosperity."

I held out my hand, and she shook it like one who didn't know what she was doing. The yellow man came a step nearer and said, "Halloa, my hearty." I nodded my head to him and he put his hand on my shoulder. Poor fool, he thought I was a child, perhaps, and to be treated as one; but I have learnt a thing or two about taking care of myself in Japan, and you couldn't have counted two before I had his arm twisted under mine, and he gave a yell that must have been heard up in the hills.

"If you cry out like that, you'll ruin your beautiful voice," said I; "hasn't any one ever asked you to sing hymns in a choir? Well, I'm surprised. Good-night, my boy; I shall be coming back for your picture before many days have passed."

Upon this, I stepped towards the door, and thought that I had done with him; but no sooner was I out in the garden than something went singing by my ear, and upon that a second dose with two reports which echoed in the hills like rolling thunder. No written music vas necessary to tell me the kind of tune it was, and I swung round on my heel and gripped the man by the throat almost before the echoes of the shot had died away.

"Kess Denton," said I, "if you will have it, you shall!" and with that I wrenched the pistol from his grasp and struck him a blow over the head that sent him down without a word.

"One," said I, to myself, "one that helped to make little Ruth Bellenden suffer;" and with that I set off running and never looked to the right of me nor to the left until I saw Peter Bligh at the gate and heard his honest voice.

"Is it you—is it you yourself, Mr. Begg? Thank God for that!" cries he, and it was no longer in a whisper; "there's men in the hills, and Seth Barker whistling fit to crack his lips. Is the young lady coming aboard, sir? No?—well, I'm not surprised, neither, though this shore do seem a queerish sort of place———"

I cut him short, and Dolly Venn running round from his place in the garden I asked him for his news. The thing now was to find a road to the sea. What could be done for Ruth Bellenden that night was over and passed. Our chance lay on the deck of the Southern Cross, and after that at 'Frisco.

"What have you seen, Dolly Venn—be quick, lad, for we can't linger?" was my

question to him so soon as he was within hail. He answered me by pointing to the trees which border the garden on the eastward side.

"The wood is full of armed men, sir. Two of them nearly trod upon me while I was lying there. They carry rifles, and seem to be Germans—I couldn't be sure of that, sir."

"Germans or chimpanzees, we're going by them this night. Where's Seth Barker—why doesn't he come down? Does he think we can pass by the hill-road?—the wooden block! Call him, one of you."

They were about to do this when Seth Barker himself came panting down the hillpath, and, what was more remarkable, he carried an uncouth sort of bludgeon in his hand. I could see that there had been a bit of a rough and tumble on the way, but it wasn't the time for particulars.

"Come aboard, sir," says he, breathing heavy; "the gangway's blocked, but I give one of 'em a bit of a knock with his own shillelagh, and that's all right."

"Is there any more up there?" I asked quickly.

"May be a dozen, may be more. They're up on the heights looking for you to go up, captain."

"Aye," said I, "pleasant company, no doubt. Well, we must strike eastward somehow, lads, and the sooner the better. We'll hold to the valley a bit and see where that leads us. Do you, Seth Barker, keep that bit of a shillelagh ready, and, if any one asks you a question, don't you wait to answer it."

Now, I had resolved to try and get down to the sea by the valley road and, once upon the shore, to signal Harry Doe, if possible, and, if not him, then the ship herself as a last resource. Any road seemed to me better than this trap of a house with armed men all about it and a pistol bullet ready for any stranger that lingered. "Aboard the ship," said I, "we'll show them a clean pair of heels to 'Frisco and, after that, ask the American Government what it can do for Ruth Bellenden and for her husband." We were four against a hundred, perhaps, and desperate men against us. If we got out of the scrape with our skins, we should be as lucky a lot as ever sailed the Northern Pacific Ocean. But should we—

could we? Why, it was a thousand to one against it!

I said this when we plunged into the wood; and yet I will bear witness that I got more excitement than anything else out of that venture, and I don't believe the others got less. There we were, the four of us, trampling through the brushwood, crushing down the bushes, now lying low, now up a-running—and not a man that wouldn't have gone through it twice for Ruth Bellenden's sake. If so be that the night was to cost us our lives, well, crying wouldn't help it—and those that were against us were flesh and blood, all said and done, and no spirits to scare a man. To that I set it down that we went on headlong and desperate. As for the thicket itself, it was full of men—I could see their figures between the trees. We must have passed twenty of them in the darkness before one came out, plump on our path and cried out to us to halt.

"Hold, hold," shouts he; "is it you, Bob Williams?"

"It's Bob Williams, right enough," says I, and with that I gave him one between the eyes, and down he went like a felled ox. The man who was with him, stumbling up against Seth Barker, had a touch of the shillelagh which was like a rock falling upon a fly. He just gave one shuddering groan and fell backwards, clutching the branches. Little Dolly Venn laughed aloud in his excitement, elbowed Peter Bligh who gave a real Irish "hurrugh"; but the darkness had swallowed it all up in a minute, and we were on again, heading for the shore like those that run a race for their very lives.

"Do you see any road, Peter Bligh?" asked I, for my breath was coming short now; "do you see any road, man?"

"The devil a one, sir, and me weighing fourteen stone!"

"You'll weigh less when we get down, Peter."

"And drink more, the saints be praised!"

"Was that a rifle-shot or a stone from the hills?" I asked them a moment later. Dolly Venn answered me this time.

"A rifle-shot, captain. They'll be shooting one another, then—it's ripping, ripping!"

"Look out, lad, or it'll be dripping!" cried I; "don't you see there's water ahead?"

I cried the warning to him and stood stock-still upon the borders of as black a pool as I remember to have seen in any country. The road had carried us to the foot of the hills, almost to the chasm which the wicker-bridge spanned; and we could make out that same bridge far above us like a black rope in the twilight. The water itself was covered with some clinging plants, and full of winding, ugly snakes which caused the whole pool to shine with a kind of uncanny light; while an overpowering odour, deadly and stifling, steamed up from it, and threatened to choke a man. What was worse than this was a close thicket bordering the pond on three sides, so that we must either swim for it or turn back the way we came. The latter course was not to be thought of. Already I could hear footsteps, and boughs snapping and breaking not many yards from where we stood. To cross the pond might have struck the bravest man alive with terror. I'd have sooner forfeited my life time over than have touched one of those slimy snakes I could see wriggling over the leaves to the bottom of the still water. What else to do I had no more notion than the dead. "It's the end, Jasper Begg," said I to myself, "the end of you and your venture." But of Ruth Bellenden I wouldn't think. How could I, when I knew the folks that were abroad on Ken's Island?

I will just ask any traveller to stand with me where I stood that night and to say if these words are overmuch for the plight, or if I have spoken of it with moderation. A night as black as ink, mind you; my company in the heart of a wood with big teak trees all round us, and cliffs on our right hand towering up to the sky like mountains. Before us a pool of inky water, all worming with odd lights and lines of blue fire, like flakes of phosphorus on a bath, and alive with the hissing of hundreds of snakes. Upon our left hand a scrubby thicket and a marsh beneath it, I make sure; Czerny's devils, who had shot the poor folks on the Santa Cruz, at our heels, and we but four against the lot of them. Would any man, I ask, have believed that he could walk into such a trap and get out of it unharmed? If so, it wasn't Jasper Begg, nor Peter Bligh, nor little Dolly Venn, nor Seth Barker with the bludgeon in his hand. They'd as good as given it up when we came to the pool and stood there like hunting men that have lost all hope.

"Done, by all that's holy!" says Peter Bligh, drawing back from the pond as from

some horrid pit. "Snakes I have seen, nateral and unnateral, but them yonder give me the creeps———"

"Creeps or no creeps, the others will be up here in five minutes, and what are you going to do then, Peter Bligh, what then?" asks I, for as I'm a living man I didn't know which way to turn from it.

Seth Barker was the one that answered me.

"I'm going to knock some nails in, by your leave," says he, and with that he stood very still and bade us listen. The whole wood was full of the sound of "halloaing" now. Far and wide I heard question and answer, and a lingering yodle such as the Swiss boys make on the mountains. It couldn't be many minutes, I said, before the first man was out on our trail; and there I was right, for one of them came leaping out of the wood straight into Peter Bligh's arms before I'd spoken another word. Poor devil—it was the last good-night for him in this world—for Peter passes him on, so to speak, and he went headlong into the pond without any one knowing how he got there. A more awful end I hope I may never hear of, and yet, God knows, he brought it on himself. As for Peter Bligh, the shock set him sobbing like a woman. It was all my work to get him on again.

"No fault of ours," said I; "we're here for a woman's sake, and if there's man's work to do, we'll do it, lads. Take my advice and you'll turn straight back and run for it. Better a tap on the head than a cry in yonder pool."

They replied fearsomely—the strain was telling upon them badly. That much I learnt from their husky voices and the way they kept close to me, as though I could protect them. Seth Barker, especially, big man that he was, began to mutter to himself in the wildest manner possible; while little Dolly burst into whistling from time to time in a way that made me crazy.

"That's right, lad," cried I, "tell them you're here, and ask after the health of their womenfolk. You've done with this world, I see, and made it straight for the next. If you've a match in your pocket, strike it to keep up their spirits."

Well, he stopped short, and I was ashamed of myself a minute after for speaking so to a mere lad whose life was before him and who'd every right to be afraid.

"Come," said I, more kindly, "keep close to me, Dolly, and if you don't know where I am, why, put out your hand and touch me. I've been in worse scrapes than this, my boy, and I'll lead you out of it somehow. After all, we've ship over yonder and Mister Jacob isn't done with yet. Keep up your heart, then, and put your best leg forward."

Now, this was spoken to put courage into him—not that I believed what I said, but because he and the others counted upon me, and my own feelings had to go under somehow. For the matter of that, it looked all Lombard Street to a China orange against us when we took the woodland path again; and so I believe it would have been but for something which came upon us like a thunder-flash, and changed all our despair to a desperate hope. And to this something Peter Bligh was the first to call our attention.

"Is it fireflies or lanterns?" cries he all at once, bringing out the words like a pump might have done; "yonder on the hillside, shipmates— is it fireflies or lanterns?"

I stood to look, and while I stood Seth Barker named the thing.

"It's lanterns," cries he; "lanterns, sure and certain, captain."

"And the three ripping little girls carrying them," puts in Dolly Venn.

'"Tis no woman ever born that would hunt down four poor sailor-men," cries Peter Bligh.

"To say nothing of the he-lion they was a-fondling of"—from Seth Barker.

"Lads," said I, in my turn, "this is the unlooked for, and I, for one, don't mean to pass it by. I'm going to ask those young ladies for a short road to the hills—and not lose any time about it either."

They all said "Aye, aye," and we ran forward together. The halloaing in the wood was closing in about us now; you could hear voices wherever you turned an ear. As for the lanterns, they darted from bush to bush like glow-worms on a summer's night, so that I made certain they would dodge us after all. My heart was low down enough, be sure of it, when I lost view of those guiding stars altogether, and found myself face to face with the last figure I might have asked

for if you'd given me the choice of a hundred.

For what should happen but that the weird being, whom Seth Barker had called the "he-lion," the old fellow in petticoats, whom the little girls made such a fuss of, he, I say, appeared of a sudden right in the path before us, and, holding up a lantern warningly, he hailed us with a word which told us that he was our friend —the very last I would have named for that in all the island.

"Jasper Begg," cried he, in a voice that I'd have known for a Frenchman's anywhere, "follow Clair-de-Lune—follow—follow!"

He turned to the bushes behind him, and, seeming to dive between them, we found him, when we followed, flat on his stomach, the lantern out, and he running like a dog up a winding path before him. He was leading us to the heights, I said; and when I remembered the great bare peaks and steeple-like rocks, upstanding black and gloomy under the starry sky, I began to believe that this wild man was right and that in the hills our safety lay.

But of that we had yet to learn, and for all we knew to the contrary it might have been a trap.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BIRD'S NEST IN THE HILLS

THERE had been a great sound of "halloaing" and firing in the woods when we raced through them for our lives; but it was all still and cold on the mountain-side, and you could hear even a stone falling or the drip of water as it oozed from the black rocks to the silent pools below. What light there was came down through the craggy gorge; and it was not until we had climbed up and up for a good half-hour or more that we began to hear the sea-breeze whistling among the higher peaks like wild music which the spirits might have made. As for the path itself, it was oftentimes but a ledge against the wall of some sheer height; and none, I think, but seamen could have followed it, surely. Even I remembered where I was, and feared to look down sometimes; but danger bridges many a perilous road, and what with the silence and the fresh breezes and the thought that we might live through the night, after all, I believe I could have hugged the wild old man who led us upward so unflinchingly.

I say that he went on unflinchingly, and surely no goat could have climbed quicker than he did. Now standing over an abyss which made you silly to look down into; now pulling himself up by bush or branch; at other times scrambling over loose shale as though he had neither hands nor knees to cut, he might well have scared the coolest who had met him without warning on such a road. As for the four men he had saved from the devils in the thickets below, I don't believe there was one of them who didn't trust him from the first. The sea is a sure school for knowing men and their humours. If this old Frenchman chose to put a petticoat about his legs, and to wear a lion's mane down his back, we liked him all the better for that. What we had seen of the young girls' behaviour towards him made up for that which we did not know about him. He must have had a tender place somewhere in his heart, or three young women wouldn't fondle him like a dog. Like a ship out of the night had he crossed our path; and his port must

be our port, since we knew no other. That's why, I say, we followed him over the dangerous road like children follow a master. He was leading us to some good haven—I had no doubt of it. The thing that remained to tell was, had we the strength and the breath to reach it?

You may imagine that it was no light thing to run such a race as we had run, and to be asked to climb a mountain on the top of it. For my part, I was so dead tired that every step up the hillside was like a knife in my side; and as for Peter Bligh, I wonder he didn't go rolling down to the rocks, so hard did he breathe and so heavy he was. But men will do wonders to save their necks, and that is how it is that we went up and still up, through the black ravine, to the blue peaks above. Aye, a fearsome place we had come to now, with terrible gorges, and wild shapes of rocks, like dead men's faces leering out of the darkness. The wind howled with a human voice, the desolation of all the earth seemed here. And yet the old man must push on—up, up, as though he would touch the very sky.

"The Lord be good to me," cried Peter Bligh, at last; "I can go no farther if it's a million a mile! Oh, Mister Begg, for the love of God, clap a rope about the wild man's legs."

I pushed him on over a sloping peak of shale, and told him to hold his tongue.

"Will you lie in the pool, then? Where's your courage, man? Another hundred yards and you shall stop to breathe. There's the old lion himself waiting for us, and a big bill of thanks he has against us, to be sure."

I said no more, but climbed the steep to the Frenchman's side, and found him waiting on the bank of that which seemed to be a great cup-like hole, black and bottomless and the last place you'd have picked for a camp on all the hillside. Dolly Venn was already there, and Seth Barker, lying on the stones and panting like a great dog. Old Clair-de-Lune alone was fresh and ready, and able in his broken English to tell us what he wished.

"Messieurs," he said, "speak not long but go down. I myself am shipmate too. Ah, messieurs, you do wise to follow me. Down there no dog bark. I show you the ladder, and all be well. To-morrow you speak your ship—go home. For me, never again—I die here with the children, messieurs; none shall come for old Clair-de-Lune, none, never at no time—but you, you I save for the shipmates'

sake———"

It was odd talk, but no time to argue about it. I saw a ladder thrust up out of the pit, and when the old man went down I followed without hesitation. A lantern lighted in the darkness showed me a hollow nest 20 feet deep, perhaps, and carpeted over with big brown leaves and rugs spread out; and in one corner that which was not unlike a bed. Moreover, there was a little stove in the place and upon one side an awning stretched against the rain; while cooking pots and pans and other little things made it plain at a glance that this was the man's own refuge in the mountains, and that here, at least, some part of his life was spent. No further witness to his honesty could be asked for. He had brought us to his own home. It was time to speak of thanks.

"What you've done for us neither me nor mine will ever forget," said I, warmly. "Here's a seaman's hand and a seaman's thanks. Should the day come when we can do a like turn to you, be sure I'll be glad to hear of it; and if it came that you had the mind to go aboard with us—aye, and the young ladies, too—why, you'll find no one more willing than Jasper Begg."

We shook hands, and he set the lantern down upon the floor. Peter Bligh was lying on his back now, crying to a calendar of saints to help him; Seth Barker breathed like a winded horse; little Dolly Venn stood against the wall of the pit with his head upon his arm, like a runner after a race; the old Frenchman drew the ladder down and made all snug as a ship is made for the night.

"No one come here," he said, "no one find the way. You sleep, and to-morrow you signal ship to go down where I show. For me and mine, not so. This is my home; I am stranger in my own country. No one remember Clair-de-Lune. Twelve years I live here—five times I sleep the dreadful sleep which the island make—five times I live where others die. Why go home, messieurs, if you not have any? I not go; but you, you hasten because of the sleep."

We all pricked up our ears at this curious saying, and Dolly Venn, he whipped out a question before I could—indeed, he spoke the French tongue very prettily; and for about five minutes the two of them went at it hammer and tongs like two old women at charring.

"What does he mean by sleep-time, lad?" I asked in between their argument.

"Why shouldn't a man sleep on Ken's Island? What nonsense will he talk next?"

I'd forgotten that the old man spoke English too, but he turned upon me quickly to remind me of the fact.

"No nonsense, monsieur, as many a one has found—no nonsense at all, but very dreadful thing. Three, four time by the year it come; three, four time it go. All men sleep if they not go away—you sleep if you not go away. Ah, the good God send you to the ship before that day."

He did his best to put it clearly, but he might as well have talked Chinese. Dolly, who understood his lingo, made a brave attempt, but did not get much farther.

"He says that this island is called by the Japanese the Island of Sleep. Two or three times every year there comes up from the marshes a poisonous fog which sends you into a trance from which you don't recover, sometimes for months. It can't be true, sir, and yet that's what he says."

"True or untrue, Dolly," said I, in a low voice, "we'll not give it the chance. It's a fairy tale, of course, though it doesn't sound very pretty when you hear it."

"Nor is that music any more to my liking," exclaimed Peter Bligh, at this point, meaning that we should listen to a couple of gunshots fired, not in the woods far down below us, but somewhere, as it seemed, on the sea-beach we had failed to make.

"That would be Harry Doe warning us," cried I.

"And meaning that it was dangerous for us to go down."

"He'll have put off and saved the longboat, anyway. We'll hail him at dawn, and see where the ship is."

They heard me in silence. The tempest roaring in the peaks above that weird, wild place; our knowledge of the men on the island below; the old Frenchman's strange talk—no wonder that our eyes were wide open and sleep far from them.

Dawn, indeed, we waited for as those who are passing through the terrible night. I think sometimes that, if we had known what was in store for us, we should

have prayed to God that we might not see the day.

CHAPTER IX

WE LOOK OUT FOR THE SOUTHERN CROSS

THE wind blew a hurricane all that night, and was still a full gale when dawn broke. To say that no man among us slept is to put down a very obvious thing. The roaring of the breakers on the reefs below us, the showers of stones which the heights rained down, the dreadful noises like wild human voices in the hills, drove sleep far from any man's eyes. And more than that, there was the ship to think of. What had become of the ship? Where did she lie? When should we see her again? Aye, how often we asked each other that question when the blast thundered and the lightning seemed to open the very heavens, and the spindrift was blown clean over the heights to fall like a salt spray upon our faces. Was it well with the ship or ill? Mister Jacob we knew to be a good seaman, none better. With him the decision lay to run for the open water or to risk everything for our sakes. If he made up his mind that the safety of the Southern Cross demanded sea-room he would take it, and let to-morrow look after itself. But I was anxious, none the less; for, if the ship were gone, "God help us on Ken's Island," I said.

Now, the old Frenchman was the first to be moving when the day came, and no sooner did all the higher peaks show us a glimmer of the dawn-light—very beautiful and awesome to look upon—than he set up the ladder and began to show us the way to the mountain-top.

"You make signal; you fetch ship. Sailormen go down where landman afraid. Little boat come in; shipmate go out. Old Clair-de-Lune he know. Ah, messieurs, the wind is very dreadful to-day—what you call harriken. Other day, all quite easy plan—but this day not so, great water, all white—no go, no man."

It was queer talk, and we might have laughed at him if we'd have forgotten that he saved our lives last night and was waiting to save them again this morning. But you don't laugh at a friend, talk as he may, and for that matter we were all too excited to think of any such thing, and we made haste to scramble up out of the pit and to follow him to the heights where the truth should be known—the best of it or the worst. For the path or its dangerous places we cared nothing now. The rocks, upstanding all about us, shut in the view as some great basin cut in the mountain's heart. You could see the black sky above and the bottomless chasms below—but of the water nothing. Imagine, then, how we raced for the summit: now up on our feet, now on all-fours like dogs; now calling, man to man, to hasten; now saying that haste wouldn't help us. And no wonder—no wonder our hearts beat high and our hands were unsteady, for beyond the basin we should find the sea, and the view might show us life or death.

Old Clair-de-Lune was the first to be up, but I was close upon his heels, and Dolly Venn not far behind me. Who spoke the first word I don't rightly recollect; but I hadn't been on the heights more than ten seconds when I knew why it was spoken, and what the true meaning of it might be.

The ship was gone!

All the eyes in the wide world could not have found her on that angry sea below us, or anywhere on the black and looming horizon beyond. The night had taken her. The ship was gone. Hope as we might, speak up as we might, tell each other this story or tell each other that—the one sure fact remained that the Southern Cross had steamed away from Ken's Island and left us to our fates.

"He'll be running for sea-room, and come in when the gale falls," said Peter Bligh, when we had stood all together a little while, as crestfallen a lot as the Pacific Ocean could show that day; "trust Mister Jacob to be cautious—he's a Scotchman, and would think first of the ship. A precious lot of good his wages would do him if the ship were down in sixty fathoms and he inside her!"

"That's true," cried Dolly Venn, "though your poor old father didn't say it, Mister Bligh. The ship's gone, but she'll come back again." And then to me he said, very earnestly, "Oh, she must come back, captain."

"Aye, lad," said I, "let her ride out the gale, and she'll put back right enough.

Mister Jacob isn't the one to desert friends. He'll have learned from Harry Doe how it stands with us, and he'll just say, "Bout ship'; that's what Mr. Jacob will say. I've no fear of it at all. I'm only wondering what sort of shore-play is to keep us amused until we sight the ship again."

Well, they looked doleful enough; but not a man among them complained. 'Tis that way with seamen all the world over. Put them face to face with death and some will laugh, and some will curse, and some talk nonsense; but never a man wears his heart upon his sleeve or tells you that he's afraid. And so it was that morning. They understood, I do believe, as well as I did, what the consequences of the gale might be. They were no fools, to imagine that a man could get from Ken's Island to San Francisco in any cockleshell the beach might show him. But none of them talked about it; none charged me with it; they just put their hands in their pockets like brave fellows who had made up their minds already to a very bad job; and be sure I was not the one to give a different turn to it. The ship had gone; the Lord only knew when she would come back again. It was not for me to be crying like a child for that which neither I nor any man could make good.

"Well," said I, "the ship's gone, sure enough, and hard words won't bring her back again. What Mister Jacob can do for his friends, that, I know, will be done. We must leave it to him and look after ourselves far as this place is concerned. You won't forget that the crew downstairs will be ready enough to ask after our health and spirits if we give them a look in, and my word is for lying-to here until night comes or the ship is sighted. It must be a matter of hours, anyway. The gale's abating; a landsman would know as much as that."

They said, "Aye, aye," to it, and Peter Bligh put in a word of his humour.

"The ship's gone, sure enough," said he; "but that's more than you can say for my appetite! Bear or dog, I'm not particular, captain; but a good steak of something would come handy, and the sooner the better. 'Twere enough to bring tears to a man's eyes to think of all the good grub that's gone aboard with Harry Doe. Aye, 'tis a wonderful thing is hunger, and the gift of the Lord along with good roast beef and pork sausages. May-be you find yourself a bit peckish, captain?"

I answered "Yes," though that was far from the truth, for what with watching through the night and thinking about the ship and little Ruth Bellenden's

loneliness in this place of mystery, and far worse than mystery, I'd forgotten all about meal-times, and never once had asked myself where breakfast was to come from. But now the long faces of my shipmates brought me to a remembrance of it, and when little Dolly Venn cried, "Oh, captain, I am so hungry!" I began to realize what a parlous plight we were in and what a roundabout road we must tread to get out of it. Lucky for us, the old Frenchman, who had stood all this time like a statue gazing out over the desolate sea, now bobbed up again, good Samaritan that he was, and catching Master Dolly's complaint, he spoke of breakfast on his own account.

"Ah! you hungry, you thirst, messieurs; sailor-man always like that. Your ship gone? Never mind, he shall come back again, to-day, to-morrow, one, two, three day—pray God it be not longer, shipmate, pray God!"

A picturesque old figure standing there

A picturesque old figure standing there.

I thought him a fine, picturesque old figure, standing there on the headland with his long hair streaming in the wind like a woman's, and his brawny arms outstretched as though he would call the ship back to us from the lonely ocean. Truth to tell, the place was one to fill any man with awe. Far as the eye could see, the great waste was white with the foam of its breaking seas; the headland itself stood up a thousand feet like some mighty fortress commanding all the deep. Far below us were the green valleys of the island, the woods we had raced through last night; pastures with little white houses dotted about on them; the bungalow itself wherein Ruth Bellenden lived. No picture from the gallery of a high tower could have been more beautiful than that strange land with the wild reefs lying about it and the rollers cascading over them, and the black glens above which we stood, and the great circle of the water like some measureless basin which the whole earth bounded. I did not wonder that old Clair-de-Lune was silent when he looked down upon a scene so grand. It seemed a crime to speak of food and drink in such a place; and yet it was of these that Peter Bligh must go on talking.

"We'll do the prayin', shipmate, if you'll do the cookin'," cried he, hopefully; "as for that—you speak like a wise man. 'Tis wonderful easy to pray on a full stomach! There isn't a hunger or a thirst this side of 'Frisco which I would not pray out of this same island if you'll be pleased to bring 'em along. Weigh anchor, my man," says he, "and we'll pipe down to dinner."

Well, the old man laughed at his manner of putting it, and, without further ado, we all went down to the bird's nest in the hollow, and there we lighted a fire in the shelter of the pit, and old Clair-de-Lune going away in search of rations, he returned presently with victuals enough to feed a missionary, and more than that, as pretty a trio to serve them as any seaman could hope for. For what should happen but that the three young girls we'd seen yesterday in the woods came romping up the hill together; and one bringing a great can for the coffee, and another a basket of luscious fruit, and a third some new-made bread and biscuit—they ran down the ladder to us and began to talk in their pretty language, and now and then in English which did not need much understanding.

"I am Rosamunda," says one.

And the second, she says:

"I am Sylvia—Sylvia—Sylvia."

And the third, she chimes in with:

"I am Celestine, and I have brought you bread."

And they all stood together, shy and natural, looking now at one, now at another of us; but most often, I thought, at little Dolly Venn, who had a way of making them understand which an older man might have envied.

"And wonderful pretty names, too, young ladies, though a seaman doesn't often hear the likes of 'em," cries Peter Bligh, gallant enough, as all Irishmen are. "They're all Pollies in our parts, and it do come easier to the tongue and more convenient if you know many of 'em. Whereby did you hitch up names like those?" asks he; "which, askin' your pardon, seem to me to be took out of a picture-book."

They giggled at this; but old Clair-de-Lune, who was mighty proud of them, and

justly, answered Peter Bligh as though the question were serious.

"Monsieur, in my own country I am artiste; I play the drama, the comedy, the tragedy. Clair-de-Lune they call me at the theatre. To the daughters of my master I give the artiste's name—why not? Better the good name than the bad name! It was long year ago, shipmate; the Belle Ile was wrecked on these reef; the maitre is drowned, but I and the young ladies are save. We come, we go, none interfere. The Governor is angry, we hide in the hill; the Governor laugh, we go down to the valley. When the sleep-time comes, we go to the house under the sea: you shall find him a dangerous time, but we hide far down. None frighten Clair-de-Lune; they frighten of him. He become the father according to his best."

It was touching, I must say, to hear this old man's broken story; and prettier still to see the affectionate eyes with which these little girls watched every movement of one to whom, I am sure, they were beholden for all that they got out of Ken's Island. For the rest, the tale was plain enough. The father had been wrecked and drowned on the sword-fish reef; the servant had saved the children and himself from the ship, and his own natural cleverness had done the rest. No one interfered with him, he said; and this was true. I verily believe that the devils in the valley below believed that he and the children with him were nothing more or less than spirits.

I say his story was plain, and yet there was something in it which was Greek to me. He had named a house under the sea, and what that meant, or how any man could build such a house, lay beyond my understanding. I should have asked a question about it there and then, and have sought light on the matter if it hadn't been that the food was already cooked, and, the others being mighty anxious, we sat down to steaming coffee and broiled kid's flesh and good bread and sweet fruit, and I was very willing to keep my curiosity. Once, it is true, the young girl who called herself "Rosamunda" came and sat by my side and wished to talk to me; but, prettily as she spoke our tongue, her measure of it was limited, and we did not get very far, in spite of good intentions.

"Do you like the island, do you like living here?" I asked her.

She answered me with a doubting shake of her pretty head.

"In the sun-months, yes, I like it; but not in the sleep-time. You will go away

before the sleep-time, monsieur?"

"Really, young lady," said I, "it seems to me that it depends upon Mister Jacob and the ship. But, supposing I cannot go away—what then? How does the sleep-time concern me?"

"You must not stay," she said, quickly; "for us it is different; we—we live in the house under the sea, but no stranger may live there—the Governor would not permit it. On the island all things sleep. If you do not go to the house under the sea—ah, monsieur, but you will sail away, you will sail in your ship."

She put it very childishly, the same cock-and-bull story that the old Frenchman had been at last night. What to make of it, I knew no more than the dead. Here we seemed to be on as fair an island as the whole Pacific might show you; and yet these odd folk could talk of sun-months and sleep-time, and other stuff which might have been written in a fairy-book. Do you wonder that I laughed at them and treated it as any sane man, not given to fables, would have done?

"Sleep-time or sun-time, I'll be away before then, please God, mademoiselle," said I; "do not fear for Jasper Begg, who was always fond of his bed and won't grumble overmuch, be it sleep or waking. For the rest, we'll take our chance, as others must do here, I fancy. Mme. Czerny, for instance—do you know Mme. Czerny, young lady?"

She nodded her head and said that she did.

"Yes, yes, we know Mme. Czerny; she is the Governor's wife. I think she is unhappy, Monsieur Captain. In the sun-months I see her, but in the sleep-time she lives in the house under the sea, and no one knows. You are her friend, perhaps; you would know that she is unhappy?"

I knew it well enough; but I wished to lead this little talker on, and so I said I did not.

"Unhappy, young lady! Why should she be unhappy?"

I asked it naturally, as though I was very surprised; but you could not deceive Mlle. Rosamunda. A more artful little witch never played at fairies in a wood.

"If she is not unhappy, why have you come here, Monsieur Captain? You come to help her—oh, I know! And you say that you do not."

"Perhaps so, young lady; perhaps I do—that I will tell you by-and-bye. But I am curious about the Governor. What sort of a man is he, and where does he happen to be at this particular moment? I'm sure you could say something nice about him if you tried."

She looked at me with her big, questioning eyes

She looked at me with her big, questioning eyes.

She looked at me with her big, questioning eyes, as though the question were but half understood. Presently she said:

"You laugh at me. M. Czerny has gone away to the world. Of course he would go. He has gone in the ship. What shall I tell you about him? That he is kind, cruel; that we love him, hate him? Every one knows that; every one has told you. He is the Governor and we are his people who must obey: When he comes back he will ask you to obey him too, and you must say 'yes.' That will be at the sleep-time: eight, nine, ten days. But why do you ask, Monsieur Captain? Has not Mme. Czerny said it because you are her friend? I know that you tease me. Sailors love to tease little girls, and you are no better than the other ones."

She cast down her eyes at this, and looked for all the world the taking little coquette that she was. Her odd speech told me something, enough at least to put a hundred questions into my head and as many useless answers. The Governor was away. The island alternately hated and feared him. The sleep-time, whatever it was, might be looked for in ten days' time. We must be away and on board the ship by then or something dreadful would happen to us. Ruth Bellenden's unhappiness was known even to these little girls, and they surmised, as the others had surmised, that we were on shore to help her. For the rest, the men on Ken's Island, I imagined, would hunt us night and day until we were taken. Nor was I mistaken in that. We'd scarcely finished our meal when there was the sound of a gunshot far down in the valley, and, old Clair-de-Lune jumping up at

the report, we were all on our feet in an instant to speak of the danger.

"Halloa, popguns," cries Peter Bligh, in his Irish way; "what for now would any man be firing popguns at this time of the morning?"

"It's to ask after your health, Peter," said I, when we'd listened awhile, "what else should a man be firing after, unless he takes you for a rabbit? Will you run down and thank him kindly?"

He hitched up his breeches and pulled out his briar-pipe.

"If this is track-running, take down my number. I'm through with it, gentlemen, being not so young as I was."

A gunshot, fired out at sea, cut short his talk. Old Clair-de-Lune, nipping up the ladder, bade us follow him, while to the girls he cried, "*Allez-vous en!*" All our quiet talk and content were gone in an instant. I never answered little Dolly Venn when he asked me, "Do you think there's danger, sir?" but, running up the hill after the Frenchman, I helped him to carry the ladder we'd dragged out of the pit, for I knew he'd need of it.

"What is it, Clair-de-Lune? Why are they firing?" I asked him, as he ran.

"Governor home," was his answer—"Governor home. Great danger, *capitaine*."

CHAPTER X

WE ARE SURELY CAGED ON KEN'S ISLAND

We ran up the hill, I say, as men who raced for their lives. The little girls, snatching up their bags and baskets, exchanged a quick word with Clair-de-Lune and then hurried off towards the bungalow. Our own path lay over difficult rocks

and steep slopes and chasms fearful to see. Of these our leader made nothing, and we went on, up and up, until at last the road carried us right round the highest peak, on whose very walls we walked like chamois on a mountain crag. It was here, on a narrow ledge high above the sea, that the Frenchman stopped for the first time.

"Shipmates," said he, when he had got his breath, "journey done, all finish, you safe here, you rest. I go down to see Governor; but come back again, come back again, messieurs, with bread and meat."

Well, I don't think one of us had the voice to answer him. The place itself—the ledge above the sea and the little low, cramped cave behind it—occupied all our thoughts. Here, in truth, a man might lie safely enough—yet in what a situation. The very door of the house opened upon an abyss a thousand feet above the rocks below. We had the sea before our eyes, the sea beneath us, the sea for our distant horizon. Day and night the breakers thundered on the sword-fish reef; the wind moaned in the mighty eaves of those tremendous crags. We were like men placed suddenly on a steeple's side and left there to live or fall, as fortune went.

I tell you this, plain and straightforwardly, because five days passed on that awful ledge, and, except for one day, there is nothing but a seaman's talk of question and answer and idle hope to set down on these pages. If every hour of the day found one of us with eyes which yearned for our lost ship, with hearts grown heavy in waiting and disappointment—that was his affair, and of no concern to others. Be sure we didn't confess, one to the other, the thought in our heads or the future we must live through. We had come to Ken's Island to help little Ruth Bellenden, and this fearful plight was the result of it—ship gone, the island full of devils that would have cut our throats for nothing and thought themselves well paid—no knowledge, not the smallest, of any way of escape—food short and likely to be shorter. Friends we had, true friends. Night and morning Clair-de-Lune and the little girls found their way up to us with bread and meat and the news that was passing. It was on the fifth day that they came no more, and I, at least, knew that they would never come again.

"Lads," I said, "one of two things has happened. Either they've been watched and followed, or the time of which they made mention has come. I trust the old Frenchman as I would trust my own brother. He knows how it will fare with five men left on a lonely rock without food or drink. If he doesn't come up here

today, it's because he daren't come or because he's ordered elsewhere."

They turned it over in their minds, and Dolly Venn spoke next.

"Last night in my watch I heard a bell ringing, sir. At first I thought it was fancy—the sea beating on the rocks or the wind moaning in the hills; but I got the ladder and went down the hill, and then I heard it distinctly, and saw lights burning brightly on the reef far out to the north. There were boats passing, I'm sure, and what was so wonderful that I didn't like to speak about it, the whole of the sea about the reef shone yellow as though a great lantern were burning far down below its heart. I could make out the figures of men walking on the rocks, and when the moon shone the figures disappeared as though they went straight down into the solid rock. You may not believe it, captain, but I'm quite sure of what I say, and if Clair-de-Lune does not come to-night, I ask you to go down the hillside with me and to see for yourself."

Now, the lad spoke in a kind of wonder-dream, and knowing how far from his true nature such a thing was, it did not surprise me that the others listened to him with that ready ear which seamen are quick to lend to any fairy tale. Superstitious they were, or sailors they never would have been; and here was the very stuff to set them all ears, like children about a bogey. Nor will I deny that Dolly Venn's tale was marvellous enough to make a fable. Had it been told to me under any other circumstances, my reply would have been: "Dolly, my lad, since when have you taken to sleep-walking?" But I said nothing of the kind, for I had that in my pocket which told me it was true; and what I knew I deemed it right that the others should know also.

"When a man sees something which strikes him as extraordinary," said I, "he must first ask himself if it is Nature or otherwise. There are lots of things in this world beyond our experience, but true for all that. Ken's Island may be rated as one of them. The old Frenchman speaks of a sleep-time and a sun-time. Lads, I do believe he tells the truth. If you ask me why—well, the why is here, in these papers Ruth Bellenden gave me five days ago."

I took the packet from my pocket, and turned the pages of them again as I had turned them—aye, fifty times—in the days which had passed. Thumbed and dirty as they were (for a seaman's pocket isn't lined with silk); thumbed and dirty, I say, and crumpled out of shape, they were the first bit of Ruth Bellenden's

writing that ever I called my own, and precious to me beyond any book.

"Yes," I went on, "this is the story of Ken's Island, and Ruth Bellenden wrote it. Ten months almost from this day she landed here. What has passed between Edmond Czerny and her in that time God alone knows! She isn't one to make complaint, be sure of it. She has suffered much, as a good woman always must suffer when she is linked to a bad man. If these papers do not say so plainly, they say it by implication. And, concerning that, I'll ask you a question. What is Edmond Czerny here for? The answer's in a word. He is here for the money he gets out of the wreckage of ships!"

It was no great surprise to them, I venture, though surprise I meant it to be. They had guessed something the night we came ashore, and seamen aren't as stupid as some take them for. Nevertheless, they picked up their ears at my words, and Peter Bligh, filling his pipe, slowly, said, after a bit:

"Yes, it wouldn't be for parlour games, captain!"

The others were too curious to put in their word, and so I went on:

"He's here for wreckage and the money it brings him. I'll leave it to you to say what's done to those that sailed the ships. There are words in this paper which make a man's blood run cold. If they are to be repeated, they shall be spoken where Edmond Czerny can hear them, and those that judge him. What we are concerned about at this moment is Ken's Island and its story. You've heard the old Frenchman, Clair-de-Lune, speak of sleep-time and sun-time. As God is in heaven, he spoke the truth!"

They none of them answered me. Down below us the sea shimmered in the morning light. We sat on a ledge a thousand feet above it, and, save for the lapping waves on the reef, not a sound of life, not even a bird on the wing, came nigh us. You could have heard a pin drop when I went on.

"Sleep-time and sun-time, is it fable or truth? Ruth Bellenden says its truth. I'll read you her words———"

Peter Bligh said, "Ah," and struck a match. Seth Barker, the carpenter, sat for all the world like a child, with his great mouth wide open and his eyes full of

wonder. Dolly Venn was curled up at my feet like a dog. I opened the papers and began to read to them:

"On the 14th of August, three weeks after the ship brought us to Ken's Island, I was awakened at four o'clock in the morning by an alarm-bell ringing somewhere in the island. The old servant, she whom they called 'Mother Meg,' came into my room in great haste to tell me to get up. When I was dressed my husband entered and laughingly said that we must go on board the yacht at once. I was perplexed and a little cross about it; but when we were rowed out to the ship, I found that all the white people were leaving the island in boats and being rowed to those rocks which lie upon the northward side. Edmond tells me that there are dangerous seasons in this beautiful place, when the whole island is unfit for human habitation and all must leave it, sometimes for a week, sometimes for a month."

I put the paper down and turned another page of it.

"That, you see," said I, "is written on the 14th of August, before she knew the true story or what the dangerous time might mean. Passing on, I find another entry on September 21st, and that makes it clearer:

"There is here a wonderful place they call 'The House Under the Sea.' It is built for those who cannot escape the sleep-time otherwise. I am to go there when my husband sails for Europe. I have asked to accompany him and am refused. There are less delicate ways of reminding a woman that she has lost her liberty.

"November 13th.—I have again asked Edmond to permit me to accompany him to London. He answers that he has his reasons. There is a way of speaking to a woman she can never forget. My husband spoke in that way this morning.

"December 12th.—I know Edmond's secret, and he knows that I know it! Shall I tell it to the winds and the waves? Who else will listen? Let me ask of myself courage. I can neither think nor act to-night.

"December 25th.—Christmas Day! I am alone. A year ago—but what shall it profit to remember a year ago? I am in a prison-house beneath the sea, and the waves beat against my windows with their moaning cry, 'Never, never again—never again!' At night, when the tide has fallen, I open my window and send a

message to the sea. Will any hear it? I dare not hope.

"January 1st.—My husband has returned from his cruise. He is to go to Europe to see after my affairs. Will he tell them, I wonder, that Ruth Bellenden is dead?

"January 8th.—The sleep-time has now lasted for nine weeks. They tell me that vapours rise up from the land and lie above it like a cloud. Some think they come from the great poppies which grow in the marshy fields of the lowlands; others say from the dark pools in the gorges of the hills. However it may be, those that remain on the island fall into a trance while the vapour is there. A strange thing! Some never wake from it; some lose their senses; the negroes alone seem able to live through it. The vapours arise quite suddenly; we ring the alarm-bell to send the people to the ships.

"January 15th.—We returned to the island to-day. How blind and selfish some people are! I do believe that Aunt Rachel is content to live on this dreadful place. She is infatuated with Edmond. 'I am anchored securely in a home: she says. 'The house under the sea is a young man's romantic fancy.' The rest is meaningless to her—a man's whim. 'I cannot dissipate my fortune on Ken's Island.' Aunt Rachel was always a miser.

"February 2d.—This morning Edmond came to me for that which he calls 'an understanding.' His affection distresses me. Oh, it might all be so different if I would but say 'yes.' And what prevents me—the voices I have heard on the reef; or is it because I know—I know?

"February 9th.—I am on the island again and the sun is shining. What I have suffered none shall ever know. I prefer Edmond Czerny's anger to his love. We understand each other now.

"February 21st.—My message to the sea remains unanswered. Will it be forever?

"March 3d.—If Jasper Begg should come to me, how would they receive him? How could he help me? I do not know—and yet my woman's heart says 'Come!'

"April 4th.—There has been a short recurrence of the sleep-time. A ship struck upon the reef, and the crew rowed ashore to the island. I saw them last night in the moonlight, from my windows. They fell one by one at the border of the

wood and slept. You could count their bodies in the clear white light. I tried to shut the sight from my eyes, but it followed me to my bed-room!

"May 3d.—I whispered my message to the sea again, but am alone—God knows how much alone!"

I folded up the paper and looked at the others. Peter Bligh's pipe had gone out and lay idle in his hand. Dolly Venn was still curled at my feet. Seth Barker I do not believe had budged an inch the whole time I was reading. The story gripped them like a vice—and who shall wonder at that? For, mark you, it might yet be our story.

"Peter," said I, "you have heard what Mme. Czerny says, and you know now as much as I do. I am waiting for your notion."

He picked up his pipe and began to fill it again.

"Captain," says he, "what notions can I have which wouldn't be in any sane head? This island's a death-trap, and the sooner we're off it the better for our healths. What's happened to the ship, the Lord only knows! At a guess I would say that an accident's overtook her. Why should a man leave his shipmates if it isn't by an accident? Mister Jacob is not the one to go psalm-singing when he knows we're short of victuals and cooped up here like rats in a trap! Not he, as I'm a living man! Then an accident's overtook him; he doesn't come, because he can't come, which, as my old father used to say, was the best of reasons. Putting two and two together, I should speak for sailing away without him, which is plain reason anyway."

"We walking on the sea, the likes of which the parson talks about?" chimed in Seth Barker.

"If you haven't got a boat," says Dolly Venn, "I don't see how you are to make one out of seaweed! Perhaps Mister Jacob will come back tomorrow."

"And perhaps we sha'n't be hungry before that same time!" added Peter Bligh; "aye, that's it, captain, where's the dinner to come from?"

I thought upon it a minute, and then I said to them:

"If Dolly Venn heard a bell ringing last night that's the danger-bell of which Miss Ruth speaks. We cannot go down to the island, for doesn't she say it's death to be caught there? We cannot stop up here or we shall die of hunger. If there's a man among you that can point to a middle course, I shall be glad to hear him. We have got to do something, lads, that's sure!"

They stared at me wonderingly; none of them could answer it. We were between the devil and the deep sea, and in our hearts I think we began to say that if the ship did not come before many hours had passed, four of her crew, at least, would cease to care whether she came or stopped.

CHAPTER XI

LIGHTS UNDER THE SEA

THE day fell powerfully hot, with scarce a breath of wind and a Pacific sun beating fiercely on the barren rocks. What shelter was to be had we got in the low cave behind the platform; but our eyes were rarely turned away from the sea, and many a time we asked each other what kept Clair-de-Lune or why the ship was missing. That the old man had some good reason I made certain from the beginning; but the ship was a greater matter. Either she was powerless to help us or Mister Jacob had mistaken his orders. I knew not what to think. It was enough to be trapped there on that bit of a rock and to tell each other that, sleep-time or sun-time, we should be dead men if no help came to us.

"Belike the Frenchman's took with the fog and is doing a bit of a doze on his own account," said Peter Bligh, gloomily, towards three bells in the afternoon watch—and little enough that wasn't gloomy he'd spoken that day. "Well, sleep won't fill my canteen anyway! I could manage a rump-steak, thank you, captain, and not particular about the onions!"

They laughed at his notion of it, and Seth Barker sympathetically pegged his belt

up one. I was more sorry for little Dolly Venn than any of them, though his pluck was wonderful to see.

"Are you hungry, Dolly, lad?" I asked him, by-and-bye. Foolish question that it was, he answered me with a boy's bright laugh and something which could make light of it:

"It's good for the constitution to fast, sir," he said, bravely; "our curate used to tell us so when I went to church. We shall all be saints—and Mr. Peter will have a halo if this goes on long enough!"

Now, Peter Bligh didn't take to that notion at all, and he called out, savagely:

"To blazes with your halos! Is it Christianity to rob an honest man of his victuals? Give me a round of top-side and leave me out of the stained-glass window! I'm not taking any, lad—my features isn't regular, as my poor———"

"Peter, Peter," said I, bringing him to, "so it's top-side to-day? It was duck and green peas yesterday, Peter; but it won't be that to-night, not by a long way!"

"If we sit on this rock long enough," chimed in Seth Barker, who was over-patient for his size, "some on us will be done like a rasher. I wouldn't make any complaint, captain; but I take leave to say it isn't wisdom."

I had meant to say as much myself, but Peter Bligh was in before me, and so I let him speak.

"Fog or no fog," cries he, "I'm for the shore presently, and that's sure and certain. It ain't no handsome vulture that I'm going to feed anyway! I don't doubt that you'll come with me, captain. Why, you could play 'God save the King' on me and hear every note! I'm a toonful drum, that's what I am———"

"Be what you like, but don't ask us to dance to your music," said I, perhaps a little nettled; "as for going down, of course we shall, Peter. Do you suppose I'm the one to die up here like a rat in a trap? Not so, I do assure you. Give me twilight and a clear road, and I'll show you the way quick enough!"

I could see that they were pleased, and Dolly Venn spoke up for them.

"You won't go alone, sir?" asked he.

"Indeed, and I shall, Dolly, and come back the same way. Don't you fear for me, my lad," said I; "I've been in a fog before in my life, and out of it, too, though I never loved them overmuch. If there's danger down below, one man has eyes enough to see it. It would be a mortal waste and pity that four should pay what one can give. But I won't forget that you are hungry, and if there's roast duck about, Peter Bligh shall have a wing, I promise him."

Well, they all sat up at this; and Peter Bligh, very solemnly crossing his fingers after the Italian fashion, swore, as seamen will, that we'd all go together, good luck or bad, the devil or the deep sea. Seth Barker was no less determined upon it; and as for Dolly Venn, I believe he'd have cried like a child if he'd been left behind. In the end I gave way to them, and it was agreed that we should all set out together, for better or worse, when the right time came.

"Your way, lads, not mine," said I; and pleased, too, at their affection. "As you wish it, so shall it be; and that being agreed upon I'll trouble Peter Bligh for his tobacco, for mine's low. We'll dine this night, fog or no fog. 'Twould want to be something sulphurous, I'm thinking, to put Peter off his grub. Aye, Peter, isn't that so? What would you say now to an Irish stew with a bit of bacon in it, and a glass of whisky to wash it down? Would fogs turn you back?"

"No, nor Saint Patrick himself, with a shillelagh in his hand. I'm mortal empty, captain; and no man's more willing to leave this same bird's nest though he had all the sulphur out of Vesuvius on his diagram! We'll go down at sunset, by your leave, and God send us safely back again!"

The others echoed my "Amen," and for an hour or more we all sat dozing in the heat of the angry day. Once, I think towards seven bells of the watch, Dolly Venn pointed out the funnels of a steamer on the northern horizon; but the loom of the smoke was soon lost, and from that time until six o'clock of the afternoon I do not think twenty words were to be heard on the rock. We were just waiting, waiting, like weary men who have a big work to do and are anxious to do it; and no sooner had the sun gone down and a fresh breeze of night begun to blow, than we jumped to our feet and told each other that the time had come.

"Do you, Peter, take the ladder and let Seth Barker steady the end of it," said I.

"The road's tricky enough, and precious little dinner you'll get at the bottom of a thousand-foot chasm! If there's men on the island, we shall know that soon enough. They cannot do more than murder us, and murder has merits when starvation's set against it. Come on, my lads," said I, "and keep a weather-eye open."

This I said, and willingly they heard me; no gladder party ever went down a hillside than we four, whom hunger drove on and thirst made brave. Dangerous places, which we should have crossed with wary feet at any other time, now found us reckless and hasty.

We bridged the chasms with the ladder, and slid down it as though it had been a rope. The bird's nest, where five days ago we'd first found shelter from the islanders, detained us now no longer than would suffice for thirsty men to bathe their faces and their hands in the brook which gushed out from the hillside, and to drink a draught which they remembered to their dying day. Aye, refreshing it was, more than words can tell, and such strength it gave us that, if there had been a hundred men on the mountain path; I do believe our steps would still have been set for the bungalow. For we were about to learn the truth. Curiosity is a good wind, even when you're hungry.

Now, there was a place on the headland, three hundred feet above the valley, perhaps, whereat the hill path turned and, for the first time, the island was plainly to be seen. Here at this place we stopped all together and began to spy out the woods through which we had raced for our lives six days ago. The sun had but just set then, and, short as the twilight is in these parts, there was enough of it for us to make a good observation and to be sure of many things. What I think struck us all at the first was the absence of any fog such as we had heard about both from the Frenchman and Ruth Bellenden's diary. A bluish vapour, it is true, appeared to steam up from the woods and to loom in hazy clouds above the lower marshland. But of fog in the proper sense there was not a trace; and although I began to find the air a little heavy to breathe, and a curious stupidness, for which I could not altogether account, troubled my head, nevertheless I made sure that the story of sleep-time was, in the main, a piece of nonsense and that we should soon prove it to be so. Nor were the others behind me in this.

"It is no fog I see which would slow me down a knot!" said Peter Bligh, when

the island came into view; "to think that a man should go without his dinner for yon peat smoke! Surely, captain, they are simple in these parts and easy at the bogeys. 'Twill be roast duck, after all— and, may-be, the sage thrown in!"

This was all well said, but Dolly Venn, quicker with his eyes, remarked a stranger fact.

"There's no one about, sir, that I can see," said he, wisely, "and no lights in the houses either. I wonder where all the people are? It's curious that we shouldn't see some one."

He put it as a kind of question; but before I could answer him Seth Barker chimed in with his deep voice, and pointed towards the distant reef:

"They've lit up the sea, that's what they've done," said he.

"By thunder, they have!" cries Peter Bligh, in his astonishment; "and generous about it, too. Saw any one such a thing as that?"

He indicated the distant reef, which seemed, as I bear witness, ablaze with lights. And not only the reef, mark you, but the sea about it, a cable's length, it may be, to the north and the south, shone like a pool of fire, yellow and golden, and sometimes with a rare and beautiful green light when the darkness deepened. Such a spectacle I shall never see again if I sail a thousand ships! That luscious green of the rolling seas, the spindrift tossed in crystals of light, foam running on the rocks, but foam like the water of jewels, a dazzling radiance—aye, a very carpet of quivering gold. Of this had they made the northern channel. How it was done, what cleverness worked it, it needed greater brains than mine to say. I was for all the world like a man struck dumb with the beauty of something which pleases and awes him in the same breath.

"Lights under the sea, and people living there! It's enough to make a man doubt his senses," said I. "And yet the thing's true, lads: we're sane men and waking; it isn't a story-book. You can prove it for yourselves."

"Aye, and men going in and out like landsmen to their houses," cried Peter, almost breathless; "it's a fearsome sight, captain, a fearsome sight, upon my word."

The rest of us said nothing. We were just a little frightened group that stared open-mouthed upon a seeming miracle. If we regarded the things we saw with a seaman's reverence, let no one make complaint of that. The spectacle was one to awe any man; nor might we forget that those who appeared to live below the sea lived there, as Ruth Bellenden had told us, because the island was a death-trap. We were in the trap and none to show us the road out.

"Peter," said I, suddenly, for I wished to turn their thoughts away from it, "are you forgetting it's dinner-time?"

"I clean forgot, captain, by all that's holy," said he.

"And not feeling very hungry, either," exclaims Dolly Venn, who had begun to cough in the steaming vapour, which we laughed at. I was anxious about the lad already, and it didn't comfort me to hear Seth Barker breathing like an ox and telling me that it should be clearer in the valley.

I said, "Yes, it might be," and all together we began to march again. A sharp walk carried us from the hill path through the tangle of bushes into the woods wherefrom danger first had come to us. The night had set in by this time and a clear moon was showing in the sky. Rare and beautiful, I must say, that moonlight was, shimmering through the hazy blue vapour and coming down almost as a carpet of violet between the broad green leaves. No scene that I have witnessed upon the stage of a theatre was more pleasing to my eyes than that silent forest with its lawns of grass and its patches of wonderful, fantastic light, and its strange silence, and the loneliness of which it seemed to speak. So awesome was it that I do not wonder we went a considerable way in silence. We were afraid, perhaps, to tell each other what we thought. When Peter Bligh cried out at last, we started at the sound of his voice as though a stranger hailed us.

"Yonder," cried he, in a voice grown deep and husky; "yonder, captain, what do you make of that? Is it living men or dead, or do my eyes deceive me?"

I stopped short at his words and the others halted with me. We were in a deep glen by this time; and all the surrounding woodland was shut from our sight. Great trees spread their branches like a canopy above us; the grass was soft and downy to the feet; the bewitching violet light gave unnatural yet wonderful colours to the flowery bushes about us. No fairy glen could have showed a heart

more wonderful; and yet, I say, we four stood on the borders of it, with white faces and blinking eyes, and thoughts which none would change even with his own brother.

Why did he do it, you ask? Ah, I'll tell you why.

There were three men sleeping in the glen, and the face of one was plainly to be seen. He lay upon his back, his hands clenched, his limbs stiff, his eyes wide open as though some fearsome apparition had come to him and was not to be passed by. Of the others, one had dropped face downward and lay huddled up at the tree's foot; but the third was in a natural attitude and I do believe that he was dead. For a long time we stood there watching them—for he whose eyes were to be seen uttered every now and then a dismal cry in his sleep, and the second began to talk like a man in a delirium. Spanish he spoke, and that is a tongue I do not understand. But the words told of agony if ever words did, and I turned away from the scene at last as a man who couldn't bear to hear them.

"They're sleeping," said I, "and little good to wake them, if Miss Ruth speaks true. Come on, lads—the shore's our road and short's the time to get there."

Peter Bligh reeled dizzily in his walk and began to talk incoherently—a thing I had never heard him do before in all his life.

"They're sleeping, aye, and what's the waking to be? Is it the madhouse or the ground? She spoke of the madhouse, and who'll deny, with reason? There was air for a man in the heights and no parlour plants. I walked forty miles to Cardiff Fair and didn't dance like this. Take bread when you've no meat, and, by thunder, I'll fill your glasses."

Well, he gabbled on so, and not one of us gave him a hearing. I had my arm linked in Dolly Venn's, for he was weak and hysterical, and I feared he'd go under. Seth Barker, a strong man always, crashed through the underwood like an elephant stampeding. The woods, I said, could show us no more awesome sight than we had happed upon in the hollow; but there I was wrong, for we hadn't tracked a quarter of a mile when we stumbled suddenly upon the gardens of the bungalow, and there, lying all together, were five young girls I judged to be natives, for they had the shape of Pacific Islanders, and, seen in that strange light, were as handsome and taking as European women. Asleep they were, you

couldn't doubt it; but, unlike the white men, they lay so still that they might have been dead, while nothing but their smiling faces told of life and breathing. They, at least, did not appear to suffer, and that was something for our consolation.

"Look yonder, Dolly lad, and 'tell me what you see," said I, though, truth to tell, every word spoken was like a knife through my chest; "three young women sleeping as though they were in their own beds. Isn't that a sight to keep a man up? If they can go through with it, why not we—great men that have the sea's good health in them? Bear up, my boy, well find a haven presently."

I didn't believe it, that goes without saying, nor, for that matter, did he. But wild horses wouldn't have dragged the truth from him. He was always a rare plucky one, was little Dolly Venn, and he behaved as such that night.

"Better leave me? sir," he said; "I'm dead weight in the boat. Do you go to the beach, and perhaps the ship will come back. You've been very kind to me, Mister Begg, so kind, and now it's 'good-bye,' just 'good-bye' and a long good-night."

"Aye," said I, "and a sharp appetite for breakfast in the morning. Did you ever hear that I was a bit of a strong man, Dolly? Well, you see, I can pick you up as though you were a feather, and now that I have got you into my arms I'm going to carry you—why, where do you think?—into Ruth Bellenden's house, of course."

He said nothing, but lay in my arms like a child. Peter Bligh had fallen headlong by the gate of the bungalow, and Seth Barker was about raving. I had trouble to make him understand my words; but he took them at last and did as I told him.

"Open that door—with the bludgeon if you can't do it otherwise. But open it, man, open it!"

He drew himself up erect and dealt a blow upon the door which might have brought down a factory chimney. I ran into the house with Dolly Venn in my arms, and as I ran I called to Barker, for God's sake, to help Mister Bligh. There would be no one in the house, I said, and nothing to be got by whispers. We ran a race with death, and for the moment had turned the corner before him.

"Get Mister Bligh to the house and bar up the door after you. The fog will fill it

in five minutes, and what then? Do you hear me, Seth Barker—do you hear me?"

I asked the question plainly enough; but it was not Seth Barker who replied to it. You shall judge of my feelings when a bright light flashed suddenly in my face and a pleasant voice, coming out of nowhere, said, quite civilly:

"The door, by all means, if you have any; regard for your lives or mine!"

CHAPTER XII

THE DANCING MADNESS

IT was a great surprise to me that here should have been one of Edmond Czerny's men left in the bungalow; and when I heard his voice I stood for a full minute, uncertain whether to go on or to draw back. The light of the lamp was very bright; I had Dolly Venn in my arms, remember, and it was all Seth Barker's work to bring in Mister Bligh, so that no one will wonder at my hesitation, or the questions I put to myself as to how many men were in the house with the stranger, or what business kept him there when the island was a death-trap. These questions, however, the man answered for himself before many minutes had passed; and, moreover, a seaman's instinct seemed to tell me that he was a friend.

"Walk right in here," he cried, opening a door behind him and showing me a room I had not entered when I visited Mme. Czerny. "Walk right in and don't gather daisies on the way. You've been on a pleasure cruise in the fog, I suppose —well, that's a sailor all the time—just all the time."

He opened the door, I say, upon this, and when we had followed him into the room he shut it as quickly. It was not a very large apartment, but I noticed at once that the windows were blocked and curtained, and that half the space was lumbered up with great machines which seemed made up of glass bowls and jars; while a flame of gas was roaring out of an iron tube, and a current of delicious fresh air blowing upon our faces. Whatever we were in for, whether friendship or the other thing, a man could breathe here, and that was something to be thankful for.

"We were caught in the woods and ran for it," said I, thinking in time to make my explanations; "it may have been a fool's errand, but it has brought us to a

wise man's door. You know what the lad's trouble is, or you wouldn't be in this house, sir. I'll thank you for any kindness to him."

He turned a pleasant face towards me and bade me lay Dolly on the sofa near the flaming burner. Peter Bligh was sitting on a chair, swearing, I fear, as much as he was coughing. Seth Barker, who had the lungs of a bull, looked as though he had found good grass. The fog wasn't made, I do believe, which would harm him. As for the doctor himself, he seemed like a perplexed man who has time for one smile and no more.

"The lad will be all right in five minutes," said he, seriously; "there is air enough here, we being five men, for," he appeared to pause, and then he added, "for just three days. After that—why, yes, we'll begin to think after that."

I did not know what to say to him, nor, I am sure, did the others. Dolly Venn had already opened his eyes and lay back, white and bloodless, on the sofa. A hissing sound of escaping gas was in the room. I breathed so freely that a sense of excitement, almost of intoxication, came upon me. The doctor moved about quietly and methodically, now looking to his burners, now at the machines. Five minutes came and went before he put another question.

"What kept you from the shelter?" he asked, at last. I knew then that he believed us to be Edmond Czerny's men; and I made up my mind instantly what to do.

"Prudence kept us, doctor," said I (for doctor plainly he was); "prudence, the same sense that turns a fly from a spider's web. It is fair that you should know the story. We haven't come to Ken's Island because we are Edmond Czerny's friends; nor will he call us that. Ask Mme. Czerny the next time you meet her, and she'll tell you what brought us here. You are acting well towards us and confidence is your due, so I say that the day when Edmond Czerny finds us on this shore will be a bad one for him or a bad one for us, as the case may be. Let it begin with that, and afterwards we shall sail in open water."

I said all this just naturally, not wishing him to think that I feared Edmond Czerny nor was willing to hoist false colours. Enemy or friend, I meant to be honest with him. It was some surprise to me, I must say, when he went on quietly with his work, moving from place to place, now at the gas-burner, now at his machine, just for all the world as though this visitation had not disturbed him.

When he spoke it was to ask a question about Miss Ruth.

"Mme. Czerny," said he, quietly; "there is a Mme. Czerny, then?"

Now, if he had struck me with his hand I could not have been more surprised at his ignorance. Just think of it—here was a man left behind on Ken's Island when all the riffraff there had fled to some shelter on the sea; a man working quietly, I was sure, to discover what he could of the gases which poisoned us; a man in Mistress Ruth's own house who did not even know her name. Nothing more wonderful had I heard that night. And the way he put the question, raising his eyebrows a little, and looking up over his long, white apron!

"Not heard of Mme. Czerny!" cried I, in astonishment, "not heard of her—why, what shore do you hail from, then? Don't you know that she's his wife, doctor—his wife?"

He turned to his bottles and went on arranging them. He was speaking and acting now at the same time.

"I came ashore with Prince Czerny when he landed here three days ago. He did not speak of his wife. There are others in America who would be interested in the news—young ladies, I think."

He paused for a little while, and then he said quietly:

"You would be friends of the Princess's, no doubt?"

"Princess be jiggered," said I; "that is to say, God forgive me, for I love Miss Ruth better than my own sister. He's no more a prince than you are, though that's a liberty, seeing that I don't know your name, doctor. He's just Edmond Czerny, a Hungarian musician, who caught a young girl's fancy in the South, and is making her suffer for it here in the Pacific. Why, just think of it. A young American girl———"

He stopped me abruptly, swinging round on his heel and showing the first spark of animation he had as yet been guilty of.

"An American girl?" cried he.

"As true as the Gospels, an American girl. She was the daughter of Rupert Bellenden, who made his money on the Western American Railroad. If you remember the Elbe going down, you won't ask what became of him. His son, Kenrick Bellenden, is in America now. I'd give my fortune, doctor, to let him know how it fares with his sister on this cursed shore. That's why my own ship sails for 'Frisco this day—at least, I hope and believe so, for otherwise she's at the bottom of the sea."

I told the story with some heat, for amazement is the enemy of a slow tongue; but my excitement was not shared by him, and for some minutes afterwards he stood like a man in a reverie.

"You came in your own ship!" he exclaimed next. "Why, yes, you would not have walked. Did Mme. Czerny ask you here?"

"It was a promise to her," said I. "She left the money with her lawyers for me to bring a ship to Ken's Island twelve months after her marriage. That promise I kept, doctor, and here I am and here are my shipmates, and God knows what is to be the end of it and the end of us!"

He agreed to that with one of those expressive nods which spared him a deal of talk. By-and-bye, without referring to the matter any more, he turned suddenly to Peter Bligh and exclaimed:

"Halloa, my man, and what's the matter with you?"

Now, Peter Bligh sat up as stiff as a board and answered directly.

"Hunger, doctor, that's the matter with me! If you'll add thirst to it, you've about named my complaint."

"Fog out of your lungs, eh?"

"Be sure and it is. I could dance at a fair and not be particular about the women. Put me alongside a beef-steak and you shall see some love-making. Aye, doctor, I'll never get my bread as a living skeleton, the saints be good to me, my hold's too big for that!"

It was like Mister Bligh, and amused the stranger very much. Just as if to answer

Peter, the doctor crossed the room and opened a big cupboard by the window, which I saw to be full of victuals.

"I forget to eat, myself, when the instruments hustle me," said he, thoughtfully; "that's a bad habit, anyway. Suppose you display your energy by setting supper. There are tinned things here and eggs, I believe. You'll find firewood and fresh meat in the kitchen yonder. Here's something to keep the fog out of your lungs while you get it."

We were all sitting at the supper table

We were all sitting at the supper-table.

He tossed a respirator across the table, and Peter Bligh was away to the kitchen before you could count two. It was a relief to have something to do, and right quickly our fellows did it. We were all (except little Dolly Venn, who wanted his strength yet) sitting at the supper table when half an hour had passed and eating like men who had fasted for a month. To-morrow troubled the seamen but little. It did not trouble Peter Bligh or Seth Barker that night, I witness.

A strange scene, you will admit, and one not readily banished from the memory. For my part, I see that room, I see that picture many a time in the night watches on my ship or in the dreaming moments of a seaman's day. The great machines of glass and brass rise up again about me as they rose that night. I watch the face of the American doctor, sharp and clear-cut and boyish, with the one black curl across the forehead. I see Peter Bligh bent double over the table, little Dolly Venn's eyes looking up bravely at me as he tries to tell us that all is well with him. The same curious sensations of doubt and uncertainty come again to plague me. What escape was there from that place? What escape from the island? Who was to help us in our plight? Who was to befriend little Ruth Bellenden now? Would the ship ever come back? Was she above or below the sea? Would the sleep-time endure long, and should we live through it? Ah! that was the thing to ask them. More especially to ask this clever man, whose work I made sure it was to answer the question.

"We thank you, doctor," I said to him, at one time; "we owe our lives to you this night. We sha'n't forget that, be sure of it."

"I'll never eat a full meal again but I'll remember the name of Doctor—Doctor—which reminds me that I don't know your name, sir," added Peter Bligh, clumsily. The doctor smiled at his humour.

"Dr. Duncan Gray, if it's anything to remember. Ask for Duncan Gray, of Chicago, and one man in a thousand will tell you that he makes it his business to write about poisons, not knowing anything of them. Why, yes, poison brought me here and poison will move me on again; at least I begin to imagine it. Poison, you see, holds the aces."

"It's a fearsome place, truly," said I, "and wonderful that Europe knows so little about it. I've seen Ken's Island on the charts any time these fifteen years, but never a whisper have I heard of sleep-time or sun-time or any other death-talk such as I've heard these last three days. You'll be here, doctor, no doubt, to ascertain the truth of it? If my common sense did not tell me as much, the machinery would. It's a great thing to be a man of your kind, and I'd give much if my education had led me that way. But I was only at a country grammar school, and what I couldn't get in at one end the master never could at the other. Aye, I'd give much to know what you know this night!"

He smiled a little queerly at the compliment, I thought, and turned it off with a word.

"I begin to know how little I know, and that's a good start," said he. "Possibly Ken's Island will make that little less. The master of Ken's Island is generously sending me to Nature's university. I think that I understand why he permitted me to come here. Why, yes, it was smart, and the man who first set curiosity going about Prince Czerny in Chicago is well out of Prince Czerny's way. I must reckon all this up, Captain—Captain———"

"Jasper Begg," said I, "at one time master of Ruth Bellenden's yacht, the Manhattan."

"And Peter Bligh, his mate, who is a Christian man when the victuals are right."

Seth Barker said nothing, but I named him and spoke about Dolly Venn. We five, I think, began to know each other better from that time, and to fall together as comrades in a common misfortune. Parlous as our plight was, we had food and drink and tobacco for our pipes afterwards; and a seaman needs little more than that to make him happy. Indeed, we should have passed the night well enough, forgetting all that had gone before and must come after, but for a weird reminder at the hour of midnight, which compelled us to recollect our strange situation and all that it betided.

Comfortable we were, I say, for Dr. Gray had found fine berths for us all: Dolly on the sofa, his skipper in an arm-chair, Peter Bligh and Seth Barker on rugs by the window, and he himself in a hammock slung across the kitchen door. We had said "good-night" to one another and were settling off to sleep, when there came a weird, wild calf from the grounds without; and so dismal was it and so like the cries of men in agony that we all sprang to our feet and stood, with every faculty waking, to listen to the horrible outcry. For a moment no man moved, so full of terror were those sounds; but the doctor, coming first to his senses, strode towards the window and pulled the heavy curtain back from it. Then, in the dazzling light, that wonderful gold-blue light which hovered in mist-clouds about the gardens of the bungalow, I saw a spectacle which froze my very blood. Twenty men and women, perhaps, some of them Europeans, some natives, some dressed in seamen's dress, some in rags, some quite naked, were dancing a wild, fantastic, maddening dance which no foaming Dervish could have surpassed, aye, or imitated, in his cruellest moments. Whirling round and round, extending their arms to the sky, sometimes casting themselves headlong on the ground, biting the earth with savage lips, tearing their flesh with knives, one or two falling stone-dead before our very eyes, these poor people in their delirium cried like animals, and filled the whole woods with their melancholic wailing. For ten minutes, it may be, the fit endured; then one by one they sank to the earth in the most fearful contortions of limb and face and body, and, a great silence coming upon the house, we saw them there in that cold, clear light, outposts of the death which Ken's Island harboured.

We saw the thing, we knew its dreadful truth, yet many minutes passed before one among us opened his lip. The spell was still on us—a spell of dread and fear I pray that few men may know.

"The laughing fever," exclaimed the doctor, at last, letting the curtain fall back

with trembling hand. "Yes, I have heard of that somewhere."

And then he said, pointing to the lamp upon the table:

"Three days, my friends, three days between us and that!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE STORM

YOU have been informed that Dr. Gray promised us three days' security in the bungalow, and I will now tell you how it came about that we quitted the house next morning, and set out anew upon the strangest errand of them all.

There's an old saying among seamen that the higher the storm the deeper the sleep, and this, may-be, is true, if you speak of a ship and of an English crew upon her. It takes something more than a capful of wind to blow sleep from a sailor's eyes; and though you were to tell him that the Judgment was for to-morrow, I do believe he would take his four hours off all the same. But at Ken's Island things went differently; and two, at least, of our party knew little sleep that night. Again and again I turned on my bed to see Dr. Gray busy before his furnace and to hear Peter Bligh snoring as though he'd crack the window-glass. Nevertheless, sleep came to me slowly, and when I slept I dreamed of the island and all the strange things which had happened there since first we set foot upon it. Many sounds and shapes were present in my dream, and the sweet figure of Ruth Bellenden with them all. I saw her brave and patient in the gardens of the bungalow; the words which she had spoken, "For God's sake come back to me!" troubled my ears like the music of the sea. Sometimes, as dreams will, the picture was but a vague shadow, and would send me hither and thither, now to the high seas and an English port, again to the island and the bay wherein I first landed. I remember, more than all, a dream which carried me to the water's edge, with my hand in hers, and showed me a great storm and inky clouds looming

above the reef and the lightning playing vividly, and a tide rising so swiftly that it threatened to engulf us and flood the very land on which we stood. And then I awoke, and the dawn-light was in the room and Dr. Gray himself stood watching by the window.

"Yes," he said, as though answering some remark of mine, "we shall have a storm—and soon."

"You do not say so!" cried I; "why, that's my dream! I must have heard the thunder in my sleep."

He drew the curtain back to show me the angry sky, which gave promise of thunder and of a hurricane to follow; the air of the room seemed heavy as that of a prison-house. In the gardens outside a shimmer of yellow light reminded me of a London fog as once I breathed it by Temple Bar. No longer could you distinguish the trees or the bushes or even the mass of the woods beyond the gate. From time to time the loom of the cloud would lift, and a beam of sunlight strike through it, revealing a golden path and a bewitching vision of grass and roses all drooping in the heat. Then the ray was lost again, and the yellow vapour steamed up anew.

"A storm undoubtedly," said the doctor, at last, "and a bad one, too. We should learn something from this, captain. Why, yes, it looks easy—after the storm the wind."

"And the wind will clear Ken's Island of fog," cried I. "Ah, of course, it will. We shall breathe just now and go about like sane men. I am younger for hearing it, doctor."

He said, "Yes, it was good news," and then put some sticks into the grate and began to make a fire. The others still slept heavily. Little Dolly Venn muttered in his sleep a name I thought I had heard before, and, truth to tell, it was something like "Rosamunda." The doctor himself was as busy as a housemaid.

"Yes," he continued, presently, "we should be pretty well through with the sleep-time, and after that, waking. Does anything occur to you?"

I sat up in the chair and looked at him closely. His own manner of speech was

catching.

"Why, yes," said I, "something does occur. For one thing, we may have company."

He lit a match and watched the wood blazing up the chimney. A bit of fire is always a cheerful thing, and it did me good to see it that morning.

"Czerny has more than a hundred men," said he, after some reflection. "We are four and one, which makes five; five exactly."

Now, this was the first time he had confessed to anything which might let a man know where his sympathies lay. Friend or enemy, yesterday taught me nothing about him. I learnt afterwards that he had once known Kenrick Bellenden in Philadelphia. I think he was glad to have four comrades with him on Ken's Island.

"If you mean thereby, doctor, that you'd join us," was my reply, "you couldn't tell me better news. You know why I came here and you know why I stay. It may mean much to Mme. Czerny to have such a friend as you. What can be done by five men on this cursed shore shall be done, I swear; but I am glad that you are with us—very glad."

I really meant it, and spoke from my heart: but he was not a demonstrative man, and he rarely answered one directly as one might have wished. On this occasion, I remember, he went about his work for a little while before he spoke again; and it was not until the coffee was boiling on the hob that he came across to me and, seating himself on the arm of my chair, asked, abruptly:

"Do you know what fool's errand brought me to this place?"

"I have imagined it," said I. "You wanted to know the truth about the sleep-time."

He laughed that queer little laugh which expressed so much when you heard it.

"No," said he, "I do not care a dime either way! I just came along to advertise myself. Ken's Island and its secrets are my newspaper. When I go back to New York people will say, 'That's the specialist, Duncan Gray, who wrote about

narcotics and their uses.' They'll come and see me because the newspapers tell them to. We advertise or die, nowadays, captain, and the man who gets a foothold up above must take some risks. I took them when I shipped with Edmond Czerny."

It was an honest story, and I liked the man the better for it. No word of mine intervened before he went on with it.

"Luck put me in the way of the thing," he continued, the mood being on him now and my silence helping him; "I met Czerny's skipper in 'Frisco, and he was a talker. There's nothing more dangerous than a loose tongue. The man said that his master was the second human being to set foot on Ken's Archipelago. I knew that it was not true. A hundred years ago Jacob Hoyt, a Dutchman, was marooned on this place and lived to tell the story of it. The record lies in the library at Washington; I've read it."

He said this with a low chuckle, like a man in possession of a secret which might be of great value to him. I did not see the point of it at the time, but I saw it later, as you shall hear.

"Yes," he rattled on, "Edmond Czerny holds a full hand, but I may yet draw fours. He's a clever man, too, and a deep one. We'll see who's the deeper, and we will begin soon, Captain Begg—very soon. The sleep-time's through, I guess, and this means waking."

Now, this was spoken of the storm without, and a heavy clap of thunder, breaking at that moment, pointed his words as nothing else could have done. I had many questions yet to ask him, such as how it was that he persuaded Czerny to take him aboard (though a man who knew so much would have been a dangerous customer to leave behind), but the rolling sounds awoke the others, and Peter Bligh, jumping up half asleep, asked if any one knocked.

"I thought it was the devil with the hot water—and bedad it is!" cries he. "Is the house struck, or am I dreaming it, doctor? It's a fearsome sound, truly."

Peter meant it as a bit of his humour, I do believe; but little he knew how near the truth his guess was. The storm, which had threatened us since dawn, now burst with a splendour I have never seen surpassed. A very sheet of raging fire

opened up the livid sky. The crashing thunder shook the timbers of the house until you might have thought that the very roof was coming in. In the gardens themselves, leaping into your view and passing out of it again as a picture shuttered by light, great trees were split and broken, the woods fired, the gravel driven up in a shower of pelting hail. I have seen storms in my life a-many, but never one so loud and so angry as the storm of that ebbing sleep-time. There were moments when a whirlwind of terrible sounds seemed to envelop us, and the very heavens might have been rolling asunder. We said that the bungalow could not stand, and we were right.

Now, this was a bad prophecy; but the fulfilment came more swiftly and more surely than any of us had looked for. Indeed, Dolly Venn was scarce upon his feet, and the sleep hardly out of Seth Barker's eyes, when the room in which we stood was all filled by a scathing flame of crimson light, and, a whirlwind of fire sweeping about us, it seemed to wither and burn everything in its path and to scorch our very limbs as it passed them by. To this there succeeded an overpowering stench of sulphur, and ripping sounds as of wood bursting in splinters, and beams falling, and the crackling of timber burning. Not a man among us, I make sure, but knew full well the meaning of those signals or what they called him to do. The bungalow was struck; life lay in the fog without, in the death-fog we had twice escaped.

"She's burning—she's burning, by———!" cried Seth Barker, running wildly for the door; and to his voice was added that of Duncan Gray, who roared:

"My lead, my lead—stand back, for your lives!"

He threw a muffler round his neck and ran out from the stricken bungalow. The whole westward wing of the house was now alight. Great clouds of crimson flame wrestled with the looming fog above us; they illumined all the garden about as with the light of ten thousand fiery lamps. Suffocating smoke, burning breezes, floating sparks, leaping tongues of flame drove us on. Cries you heard, one naming the heights for a haven, another clamouring for the beach, one answering with an oath, another, it may be, with a prayer; but no man keeping his wits or shaping a true course. What would have happened but for the holding fog and the sulphurous air we breathed, I make no pretence to say; but Nature stopped us at last, and, panting and exhausted, we came to a halt in the woods, and asked each other in the name of reason what we should do next.

"The sea!" cries Peter Bligh, forgetting his courage (a rare thing for him to do); "show me the sea or I'm a dead man!"

To whom Seth Barker answers:

"If there's breath, it's on the hills; we'll surely die here."

And little Dolly, he said:

"I cannot run another step, sir; I'm beat—dead beat!"

For my part I had no word for them; it remained for Doctor Gray to lead again.

"I will show you the road," cried he, "if you will take it."

"And why not?" I asked him. "Why not, doctor?"

"Because," he answered, very slowly, "it's the road to Edmond Czerny's house."

CHAPTER XIV

A WHITE POOL—AND AFTERWARDS

We must have been a third of a mile from the shore when the doctor spoke, and three hundred yards, perhaps, from the pool in the glens. It is true that the storm seemed to clear the air; but not as we had expected, nor as fair argument led us to hope. Wind there was, hot and burning on the face; but it brought no cool breath in its path, and did but roll up the fog in banks of grey and dirty cloud. While at one minute you would see the wood, green and grassy, as in the evening light, at another you could scarce distinguish your neighbour or mark his steps. To me, it appeared that the island dealt out life and death on either hand; first making a man leap with joy because he could breathe again; then

sending him gasping to the earth with all his senses reeling and his brain on fire. Any shelter, I said, would be paradise to men in the bond of that death-grip. Sleep itself, the island's sleep, could have been no worse than the agony we suffered.

"Doctor," I cried, as I ran panting up to him, "Edmond Czerny's house or another —show us the way, here and now! We cannot fare worse; you know that. Lead on and we follow, wherever it is."

The others said, "Aye, aye, lead on and we follow." Desperation was their lot now; the madman's haste, the driven man's hope. There, in that fearful hollow, lives were ebbing away like the sea on a shallow beach. They fought for air, for breath, for light, for life. I can see Peter Bligh to this day as he staggers to his feet and cries, wildly:

"The mouth of blazes would be a Sunday parlour to this! Lead on, doctor, I am dying here!"

So he spoke; and, the others lurching up again, we began to race through the wood to a place where the fog lay lighter and the mists had left. Wonderful sights met our eyes—aye, more wonderful than any words of mine could picture for you. In the air above flocks of birds wheeled dizzily as though the very sky was on fire. Round and round, round and round, they darkened the heaven like some great wheel revolving; while, ever and anon, a beautiful creature would close its wings and swoop to death upon the dewy grass. Other animals, terrified cattle, wild dogs, creatures from the heights and creatures from the valleys, all huddled together in their fear, raised doleful cries which no ear could shut out. The trees themselves were burnt and blackened by the storm, the glens as dark as night, the heaven above one canopy of fiery cloud and stagnant vapour.

Now, I knew no more than the dead what Duncan Gray meant when he said that he would lead us to Czerny's house. A boat I felt sure he did not possess, or he would have spoken of it; nor did he mean that we should swim, for no man could have lived in the surf about the reefs. His steps, moreover, were not carrying him towards the beach, but to that vile pool in the ravine wherein a man had died on the night we came to Ken's Island. This pool I saw again as we ran on towards the headland; and so still and quiet it seemed, such a pretty lake among the hills, that no man would have guessed the terror below its waters or named the secret

of it. Nevertheless, it recalled to me our first night's work, and how little we could hope from any man in Czerny's house; and this I had in my mind when the doctor halted at last before the mouth of an open pit at the very foot of the giant headland. He was blown with running, and the sweat dropped from his forehead like water. The place itself was the most awesome I have ever entered. On either hand, so close to us that the arms outstretched could have touched them, were two mighty walls, which towered up as though to the very sky beyond the vapour. A black pit lay before us; the fog and the burning wind in the woods we had left. Silence was here—the awful silence of night and solitude. No eye could fathom the depths or search the heights. What lay beyond, I might not say. The doctor had led us to this wilderness, and he must speak.

"See here," he cried, mopping the sweat from his face and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, like a man who has good work to do, "the road's down yonder, and we need a light to strike it. Give me your hand, one of you, while I fetch up the lantern. A Dutchman didn't write of Ken's Island for nothing. I guess he knew we were coming his way."

He stretched out a hand to me with the words, and I held it surely while he bent over the pit and groped for the lantern he spoke of.

"Three days ago," said he, "I ran a picnic here all to myself. It is as well to find new lodgings if the old don't suit. I left my lantern behind me, and this it is, I reckon."

He pulled up from the depths a gauze lantern such as miners use, and, lighting it, he showed us the heart of the pit. It was a deep hole, 30 feet down, perhaps, and strewn with rubbish and fragments of the iron rocks. But what was worth more to us, aye, than a barrel of gold, was the sweet, fresh air which came to us through a tunnel's mouth as by a siphon from the open sea herself; and, blowing freshly on our faces, sent us quickly down towards it with glad cries and the spirits of men who have broken a prison gate.

"The sea, the sea, by all that's holy!" cries Peter Bligh. "Oh, doctor, I breathe, I breathe, as I am a Christian man, I breathe!"

We tumbled down into the pit headlong and sat there for many minutes wondering if, indeed, the death were passed or if we must face it again in the

minutes to come. There before us, once we had passed the tunnel's mouth, stood a vast, domed hall which, I declare, men might have cut and not Nature in the depths of that strange cavern.

Open to the day through great apertures high up in the face of the cliff, a soft glow like the light which comes through the windows of a church streamed upon the rocky floor and showed us the wonders of that awesome place. Room upon room, we saw, cave upon cave; some round like the mosques a Turk can build, others lofty and grand as any cathedral; some pretty as women's dens, all decked with jewels and ornament of jasper and walls of the blackest jet. These things I saw; these rooms I passed through. A magician might have conjured them up; and yet he was no magician, but only Duncan Gray, the man I knew for the first time yesterday, but already called a comrade.

"Doctor," I said, "it is a house of miracles, truly! But where to now—aye, that's the question; where to?"

He sat upon a stone, and we grouped ourselves about him. Peter Bligh took out a pipe from his pocket and was not forbidden to light it. There was a distant sound in the cave like that of water rushing, and once another sound to which I could give no meaning. The doctor himself was still thinking deeply, as though hazarding a guess as to our position.

"Boys," he said, "I'll tell you the whole story. This place was discovered by Hoyt, a Dutchman. If Czerny had read his book, he would know of it; but he hasn't. I took the trouble to walk in because I thought it might be useful when he turned nasty. It is going to be that, as you can see. Follow through to the end of it, and you are in Czerny's house. Will you go there or hold back? It's for you to say."

I filled my pipe, as Peter had done, and, breathing free for the first time for some hours, I tried to speak up for the others.

"A sailor's head tells me that there is a road from here to the reef; is that true?" asked I at last; "is it true, doctor?"

He put on his glasses and looked at me with those queer, clever eyes of his. I believe to this day that our dilemma almost pleased him.

"A sailor's head guesses right first time," was his answer. "There is a road under the sea from here to Czerny's doorstep. I'm waiting to know if it's on or back. You know the risks and are not children. Say that you turn it up and we'll all go back together, or stay here as wisdom dictates. But it's for you to speak———"

We answered him all together, though Peter Bligh was the first he heard.

"The lodgings here being free and no charge for extras," said Peter, sagely.

And Dolly Venn, he said:

"We are five, at any rate. I don't suppose they would murder us. After all, Edmond Czerny is a gentleman."

"Who shoots the poor sailormen that's wrecked on his shore;" put in Seth Barker, doggedly.

"He'd be of the upper classes, no doubt;" added Peter Bligh; "he'll see that we don't sleep in damp sheets! Aye, 'tis the devil of a man, surely!"

Doctor Gray heard them patiently—more patiently than I did—and then went on again:

"If you stop here, you starve; if you go on—well, you take your luck. Should the fog lift up yonder, you'll be having Czerny back again. It's a rule-of-three sum, gentlemen. For my part, I say 'go on and take your luck,' but I won't speak for you unless you are willing."

"None more willing," cried I, coming to a resolution on the spot. "Forward let it be, and luck go with us. We'd be fools to die like rats in a trap when there's light and food not a mile away. And cowards, too, boys—cowards!" I added.

The others said: "Aye, aye, we're no cowards!" And all being of one mind we set out together through that home of wonders. Edmond Czerny's house we sought, and thither this iron road would carry us. A path more beautiful no man has trodden. From this time the great, church-like grottos gave place to lower roofs and often black-dark openings. By here and there we dived into tunnels wondrously cut by some forgotten river of fire in the ages long ago, and, emerging again, we entered a wilderness of ravines wherefrom even the sky was

to be seen and the cliffs towering majestically above us. Then, at last, we left the daylight altogether, and going downward as to the heart of the earth I knew that the land lay behind us and that the sea flowed above our heads.

Reader of a plain seaman's story, can you come with me on such a journey as I and four stout hearts made on that unforgotten day? Can you picture, as I picture now, that dark and lonesome cavern, with the sea beating upon its roof and the air coming salt and humid to the tongue, and the echo of distant breakers in your ears, and always the night and the doubt of it? Can you follow me from grotto to grotto and labyrinth to labyrinth, stumbling often by the way, catching at the lantern's dancing rays, calling one to the other, "All's well—lead on"? Aye, I doubt that you can. These things must be seen with a man's own eyes, heard with his own ears, to be understood and made real to him. To me that scene lives as though yesterday had brought it. I see the doctor with his impatient step. I see Peter Bligh stumbling after him. I hear little Dolly Venn's manly voice; I help Seth Barker over the rocks. And these four stand side by side with me on the white pool's edge. The danger comes again. The fear, the loathing, are unforgotten.

I speak of fear and loathing and of dread white pool, and you will ask me why and how we came thereto. And so I say that the water lay, may-be, a third of a mile from the land, in a clear, transparent basin of some quartz or mica, or other shining mineral, so that it gave out crystal lights even to the darkness, and the arched grotto which held it was all aglow, as though with hidden fires. A silent pool it was, we said, and our path seemed to end upon its brink; but even as we stood asking for a road, all the still water began to heave and foam, and, a great creature rising up from the depths, the lantern showed us a monster devil-fish, and we fell back one upon the other with affrighted cries. Nor let any man charge us with that. A situation more perilous I have never been in, and never shall. The fish's terrible suckers searching all the rocks, the frightful eye of the brute, the rushing water, the half-light worse than darkness, might well have driven back a stronger man than I. And upon the top of that was the thought that by such lay the road to safety. We must pass the grotto, or perish of starvation.

Now, the first fright of this encounter was done with in a minute or two, and when it was plain to us that the devil-fish was stuck in the pool which some tide of the sea fed, perhaps, and that his suckers could not reach the higher part of the rock, we began to speak of it rationally, and to plan a way of going over. I was

for emptying our revolvers into the fish straight away; but the doctor would have none of it, fearing the report, and, remembering what he had read in the Dutchman's book, he came out with another notion.

"Hoyt went over the rocks," said he, calmly, while we still drew back from the pool affrighted, our hearts in our boots I make sure, and not one of us that did not begin to think of the fog again when he saw the devil-fish struggling to be free. "It's not a sweet road, but better than none at all. Keep behind me, boys, and mind you don't slip or you'll find something worse than sharks. Now for it, and luck go with us."

With this he began to clamber round the edge of the pool, but so high up that it did not seem possible for the fish to touch him. There was good foothold on the jagged hunks of rock, and a man might have gone across safely enough but for the thought of that which was below him. For my part, I say that my eyes followed him as you may follow a walker on a tight-wire. One false step would send him flying down to a death I would not name, and that false step he appeared to make. My God! I see it all so clearly now. The slip, the frantic clutch at the rocks, the great tentacle which shot out and gripped his leg, and then the flash of my own revolver fired five times at the terrible eyes below me.

There were loud cries in the cave, the wild shouts of terrified men, the smoke of pistols, the foaming and splashing of water, all the signs of panic which may follow a fellow-creature about to die. That the devil-fish had caught the doctor with one of his tentacles you could not doubt; that he would drag him down into that horrid stomach, I myself surely believed. Never was a fight for life a more awful thing to see. On the one hand a brave man gripping the rocks with hands and foot until the crags cut his very flesh; on the other that ghoul-like horror seeking to wind other claws about its prey and to drag it towards its gaping mouth. What miracle could save him, God alone knew; and yet he was saved. A swift act of his own, brave and wonderful, struck the sucker from the limb and set him free. Aye, what a mind to think of it! What other man, I ask, would have let go his hold of the rocks when hold meant so much to him and that fish swam below? Nevertheless, the doctor did so. I see it now—the quick turn—the knife drawn from its sheath—the severed tentacle cut clean as a cork, the devil-fish itself drawing back to the depths of the crimson pool. And then once more I am asking the doctor if he is hurt; and he is answering me, cheerily, "Not much, captain, not much," and we four are following after him as white as women, I do

believe, our nerves unstrung, our hearts quaking as we crossed the dreadful pit.

Well, we went over well enough, shirk it as we might. The bullets which sent the devil-fish to the bottom sent him there to die, for all I knew. The pool itself was red with blood by this time, and the waters settling down again. I could see nothing of the fish as I crossed over; and Seth Barker, who came last and, like a true seaman, had forgotten his fear already, swung the lantern down to the water's edge, but discovered nothing. The doctor himself, excited as you might expect, and limping with his hurt, simply said, "Well over, lads, well over"; and then, taking the lantern from Seth Barker's hands, he would not wait to answer our curiosity, but pushed on through the tunnel.

"It's not every man who has a back-door with a watch-dog like that," said he, as he went; "Edmond Czerny, may-be, does not know his luck; I'll tell him of it when we're through. It won't be a long while now, boys, and I'm glad of it. My foot informs me it's there, and I shall have to leave a card on it just now."

"Then the sooner you let us look at it the better, doctor," said I. "Aye, but you were nearly gone. My heart was in my throat all the time you stood there."

"Which is no place for a man's heart to be," said he, brightly; "especially at the door of Edmond Czerny's house."

He stood a moment and bade me listen. We were in an open place of the tunnel then, and a ray of light striking down from some lamp above us revealed an iron ladder and a wooden trap above it. The sea I could hear beating loudly upon the reef; but with the sea's voice came others, and they were human.

"Yes," said the doctor, quietly, "we are in the house all right, and God knows when we shall get out of it again!"

And then, with a cry of pain, he fell fainting at my feet.

CHAPTER XV

AN INTERLUDE, DURING WHICH WE READ IN RUTH BELLENDEN'S DIARY AGAIN *

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* The editor has thought it well to give at this point the above extract from Ruth Bellenden's diary, as permitting some insight into the events which transpired on Ken's Island after Jasper Begg's discovery and Edmond Czerny's return.

MAY 5TH.—My message to the sea has been heard. Jasper Begg is on Ken's Island. All that this means to me, all that it may mean, I dare not think. A great burden seems lifted from my shoulders. I have found a friend and he is near me.

May 6th.—I have seen Jasper to-night, and he has gone away again. He is not changed, I think. It is the same honest, English face, the same cheery English voice. I have always said that Jasper is one of the handsomest Englishmen I have ever seen. And just as on my own yacht, so here on Ken's Island, the true English gentleman speaks to me. For Jasper is that above all things, one of Nature's gentlemen, whom the rough world will never disguise nor the sea life change. He would be thirty-five years of age now, I remember, but he has not lost his boyish face, and there is the same shy reticence which he never could conquer. He has come here according to his promise. A ship lies in the offing, and he would have me go to it. How little he knows of my true condition in this dreadful place. How may a woman go when a hundred watch her every hour?

May 7th.—Clair-de-Lune, the Frenchman, came to the bungalow very early this morning to tell me of certain things which happened on the island last night. It seems that Jasper is still here, and that the storm has driven away his ship. I do not know whether to be sorry or glad. He cannot help me—he cannot!—and yet a friend is here. I take new courage at that. If a woman can aid a brave man to win her liberty, I am that woman and Jasper is the man. Yesterday I was alone; but to-day I am alone no longer, and a friend is at my side, and he has heard me. His ship will come back, I say. It is an ecstasy to dream like this!

May 10th.—I have spent four anxious days—more anxious, I think, than any in my life. The ship has not returned, and Jasper Begg is still a fugitive in the hills. There are three of his companions with him, and we send them food every day.

What will be the end of it all? I am more closely watched than ever since this was known. I fear the worst for my friends, and yet I am powerless to help them.

May 10th (later).—My husband, who has now returned from San Francisco, knows that Jasper is here and speaks of it. I fear these moods of confidence and kindness. "Your friend has come," Edmond says; "but why am I not to know of it? Why is he frightened of me? Why does he skulk like a thief? Let him show himself at this house and state his business; I shall not eat him!" Edmond, I believe, has moments when he tries to persuade himself that he is a good man. They are dangerous moments, if all a man's better instincts are dead and forgotten.

May 11th.—Clair-de-Lune, Edmond tells me, has been sent to the lower reef. I do not ask him why. It was he who helped my friends in the hills. Is it all real or did I dream it? Jasper Begg, the one man who befriended me, left to die as so many have been left on this unpitying shore! It cannot be—it cannot be! All that I had hoped and planned must be forgotten now. And yet there were those who remembered Ruth Bellenden and came here for love of her, as she will remember them, for love's sake.

The drawing-room is a cave whose walls are of jewels

The drawing-room is a cave whose walls are of jewels.

May 13th.—The alarm bell rang on the island last night and we left in great haste for the shelter. The dreadful mists were already rising fast when I went down through the woods to the beach. The people fled wildly to the lower reef. It is not three months since the sleep-time, and its renewal was unlooked for. To-night I do not think of my own safety, but of those we are leaving on the heights. What is to become of Jasper, my friend—who will help him? I think of Jasper before any other now. Does he, I wonder, so think of me?

May 13th (later).—The House Under the Sea is built inside the reef which ties about a mile away on the northern side of the island. There can be nothing like it in the world. Hundreds of years ago, perhaps, this lonely rock, rising out of the

water, was the mouth of some great volcano. To-day it is the door of our house, and when you enter it you find that the rocks below have been hollowed out by Nature in a manner so wonderful that a great house lies there with stone-cold rooms and immense corridors and pits seeming to go to the heart of the world. None but a man with my husband's romantic craving would have discovered such a place, or built himself therein a house so wonderful. For imagine a suite of rooms above which the tides surge—rooms lighted by tunnels in the solid rock and covered over with strongest glasses which the sea cannot break. Imagine countless electric lamps lighting this labyrinth until it seems sometimes like a fairy palace. Say that your drawing-room is a cave, whose walls are of jewels and whose floor is of jasper. Night and day you hear the sea, the moaning winds, the breaking billows. It is another world here, like to nothing that any man has seen or ever will see. The people of a city could live in this place and yet leave room for others. My own rooms are the first you come to; lofty as a church, dim as one, yet furnished with all that a woman could desire. Yes, indeed, all I can desire. In my dressing-room are gowns from Dousé's and hats from Alphonsine's, jewels from the Rue de la Paix, furs from Canada—all there to call back my life of two short years ago, that laughing life of Paris and the cities when I was free, and all the world my own, and only my girlhood to regret! Now I remember it all as one bright day in years of gathering night. Everything that I want, my husband says, shall be mine. I ask for liberty, but that is denied to me. It is too late to speak of promises or to believe. If I would condone it all; if I would but say to Edmond, "Yes, your life shall be my life, your secrets shall be mine; go, get riches, I will never ask you how." If I would say to him, "I will shut out from my memory all that I have seen on this island; I will forget the agony of those who have died here; I will never hear again the cries of drowning people, will never see hands outstretched above the waves, or the dead that come in on the dreadful tides; I will forget all this, and say, 'I love you, I believe in you'"—ah, how soon would liberty be won! But I am dumb; I cannot answer. I shall die on Ken's Island, saying, "God help those who perish here!"

May 14th.—Three days have passed in the shelter, and Clair-de-Lune, who comes to me every day, brings no good news of Jasper. "He is on the heights," he says; "if food were there he might live through the sleep-time." My husband knows that he is there, but does not speak of it. Yesterday, about sunset, I went up to the gallery on the reef, where the island is visible, and I saw the fog lying

about it like a pall. It is an agony to know that those dear to you are suffering, perhaps dying, there! I cannot hide my eyes from others; they read my story truly. "Your friends will be clever if they come to Ken's Island again," my husband says. I do not answer him. I shall never answer him again.

May 15th.—There was a terrible storm on the island last night, and we all went up to the gallery to see the lightning play about the heights and run in rivulets of fire through the dark clouds above the woods. A weird spectacle, but one I shall never forget. The very sky seemed to burn at times. We could distinguish the heart of the thicket clearly, and poor people running madly to and fro there as though vainly seeking a shelter from the fire. They tell me to-day that the bungalow is burnt; I do not know whether to be sorry or glad. I am thinking of my friends. I am thinking of Jasper, thinking of him always.

May 16th.—I learn that there was a stranger left behind in the bungalow, a Doctor Gray, of San Francisco. He landed with Edmond last week, and is here for scientific reasons. My husband says that he does not like him; but allowed him, nevertheless, to come. He was in the bungalow making experiments when the lightning struck the house and destroyed it. It is feared that he must have perished in the fire. My husband tells me this to-night and is pleased to say it. But what of Jasper, my friend; what of him?

May 16th.—I was passing through the great hall of the house to-night, going to my bed-room, when something happened which made my very heart stand still. I thought that I heard a sound in the shadows, and imagining it to be one of the servants, I asked, "Who is there?" No one answered me; and, becoming frightened, I was about to run on, when a hand touched my own, and, turning round quickly, I found myself face to face with Jasper himself, and knew that he had come to save me!

CHAPTER XVI

ROSAMUNDA AND THE IRON DOORS

WE had no notion that the doctor had come by any serious hurt, and when he fell in a dead faint we stood as men struck by an unseen hand. Light we still had, for the rolling lantern continued to burn; but the wits of us, save the wits of one, were completely gone, and three sillier fellows never gaped about an ailing man. Dolly Venn alone—trained ashore to aid the wounded—kept his head through the trouble and made use of his learning. The half of a minute was not to be counted before he had bared an ugly wound and showed us, not only a sucker still adhering to the crimson flesh, but a great, gaping cut which the doctor's own knife had made when he severed the fish's tentacle.

"You, Seth Barker, hold up that lantern," says he to the carpenter, as bold as brass and as ready as a crack physician at a guinea a peep; "give me some linen, one of you—and please be quick about it. I'll trouble you for a knife, Mister Peter, and a slice of your shirt, if you don't mind!"

Now, he had only to say this and I do believe that all four of us began to tear up our linen and to make ourselves as naked as Adam when they discharged him from Eden; but Peter Bligh, he was first with it, and he had out his clasp-knife and cut a length of his Belfast shift before you could say "Jack Robinson."

"'Tis unlikely that I'll match it in these parts, and I've worn it to my mother's memory," says he while he did it; "but 'tis yours, Dolly, lad, and welcome. And what now?" asks he.

"Be quiet, Mister Peter," says Dolly, sharply; "that's what next. Be quiet and nurse the doctor's leg, and do please keep that lantern steady."

Well, big men as we were, we kept quiet for the asking, as ignorance always will

when skill is at the helm. Very prettily, I must say, and very neatly did Dolly begin to bind the wound, and to cut the suckers from their hold. The rest of us stood about and looked on and made believe we were very useful. It was an odd thing to tell ourselves that a man, who had been hale and hearty five minutes before, might now be going out on the floor of that hovel. I knew little of Duncan Gray, but what little I did know I liked beyond the ordinary; and every time that Dolly took a twist on his bandage or fingered the wound with the tenderness of a woman, I said, "Well done, lad, well done; we'll save him yet." And this the boy himself believed.

"It's only a cut," said he, "and if there's no poison, he'll be well enough in a week. But he won't be able to stand, that's certain. I'd give ten pounds for an antiseptic, I really would!"

I knew what he meant all right; but the others didn't, and Peter Bligh, he must come in with his foolishness.

"They're mortal rare in these parts," said he; "I've come across many things in the Pacific, but anyskeptics isn't one of 'em. May-be he'll not need 'em, Dolly. We was twenty-four men down on the Ohio with yellow-jack, and not an ounce of anyskeptics did I swallow! And here I am, hale and hearty, as you'll admit."

"And talking loud," said Seth Barker, "talking very loud, gentlemen!"

It was wisdom, upon my word, for not one of us, I swear (until Seth Barker spoke), had remembered where we were or what was like to come afterwards. Voices we had heard, human voices above us, when first we entered the cellar; and now, when the warning was uttered, we stood dumb for some minutes and heard them again.

"Douse the glim—douse it," cries Peter, in a big whisper; "they're coming down, or I'm a Dutchman!"

He turned the lantern and blew it out as he spoke. The rest of us crouched down and held our breath. For ten seconds, perhaps, we heard the deep, rough voices of men in the rooms above us. Then the trap-door opened suddenly, and a beam of light fell upon the pavement not five yards from where we stood. At the same moment a shaggy head peered through the aperture, and a man cast a quick

glance downward to the cellar.

"No," said the man, as though speaking to some one behind him, "it's been took, as I told you."

To which the other voice answered:

"Well more blarmed fool you for not corking good rum when you see it!"

They closed the trap upon the words, and we breathed once more. The lesson they had taught us could not be forgotten. We were sobered men when we lighted the lantern with one of Seth Barker's matches, and turned it again on the doctor's face.

"In whispers, if you please," said I, "as few as you like. We are in a tight place, my lads, and talk won't get us out of it. It's the doctor first and ourselves afterwards, remember."

Dr. Gray, truly, was a little better by this time, and sitting up like a dazed man, he looked first at Dolly Venn and then at his foot, and last of all at the strange place in which he lay.

"Why, yes," he exclaimed at last, "I remember; a cut and a fool who walked on it. It serves me right, and the end is better than the beginning."

"The lad did it," said I; "he was always a wonder with linen and the scissors, was Dolly Venn."

"To say nothing of a square foot of my shirt," put in Peter Bligh, obstinately. "'Tis worth while getting a bit of a cut, doctor, just to see Dolly Venn sew it up again."

The doctor laughed with us, for he knew a seaman's manner and the light talk which follows even the gravest mishap aboard a ship. That our men meant well towards him he could not doubt; and his next duty was to tell us as much.

"You are good fellows," said he, "and I'm much obliged to you, Master Dolly. If you will put your hand inside my coat, you will find a brandy-flask there, and I'll drink your health. Don't worry your heads about me, but think of yourselves.

One of you, remember, must go and see Czerny now; I think it had better be you, captain."

I said yes, I would go willingly; and added, "when the right time comes." The time was not yet, I knew—when men walked above our heads and were waking. But when it came I would not hold back for my shipmates' sake.

We had a few biscuits among us, which prudent men had put in their pockets after last night's meal; and, my own flask being full of water, we sat down in the darkness of the cellar and made such a meal as we could. Minute by minute now it became more plain to me that I must do as Duncan Gray said, and go up to find Czerny himself. Food we had none, save the few biscuits in our hands; salt was the water in the crimson pool behind us. Beyond that were the caverns and the fog. It was just all or nothing; the plain challenge to the master of this place, "Give us shelter and food" or the sleep which knows no waking. Do you wonder that I made up my mind to risk all on a journey which, were it for life or death, would carry us, at last, beyond the doubt and uncertainty?

We passed the afternoon sleeping and dozing, as tired men might. Voices we heard from time to time; the moan of the sea was always with us—a strange, wild song, long-drawn and rolling, as though the water played above our very heads in the gentle sport of a Pacific calm. At a dwelling more remarkable than the one we were about to enter no man has knocked or will knock in all the years to come. We were like human animals which burrow in a rocky bank a mile from any land. There were mysteries and wonders above, I made sure; and there was always the doubt, such doubt as comes to men who go to a merciless enemy and say, "Give us bread."

Now, I left my comrades at ten o'clock that night, when all sounds had died away above and the voice of the sea growing angrier told me that my steps would not be heard.

"I shall go to Czerny, lads," said I, at the moment of leaving them, "and he will hear the story. I'll do my best for good shipmates, trust me; and if I do not come back—well, you'll know that I cannot. Good night, old comrades. We've sailed many a sea together and we'll sail many another yet, God willing."

They all cried "Aye, aye, sir!" and pressed my hand with that affection I knew

they bore me. Little Dolly Venn, indeed, pleaded hard to accompany me; but it seemed plain that, if life were to be risked, one alone should risk it; and, putting him off kindly, I mounted the ladder and raised the trap.

I was in Edmond Czerny's house, and I was alone.

* * *

Now, I had opened the trap, half believing I might find myself in some room, perhaps in the kitchen of the house. Men would be there, I said, and Czerny's watch-dogs ready with their questions. But this was not a true picture; and while there were arc lamps everywhere, the place was not a room at all, but a circular cavern, with rude apertures in the wall and curtains hung across in lieu of doors. This was not a little perplexing, as you will see; and my path was not made more straight when I heard voices in some room near by, but could not locate them nor tell which of the doors to avoid.

For a long time I stood, uncertain how to act. In the end I put my head round the first curtain at a venture, and drew it back as quickly. There were men in that place, half-naked men, grouped about the door of a furnace whose red light flashed dazzlingly upon walls and ceiling and gave its tenants the aspect of crimson devils. What the furnace meant or why it was built, I was soon to learn; for presently one of the men gave an order, and upon this an engine started, and a whirr of fans and the sucking of a distant pump answered to the signal. "Air," said I to myself; "they are pumping air from above."

The men had not seen me, so quick was I, and so soft with the leather curtain; and going tiptoe across the cave I stumbled at hazard upon a door I had not observed before. It was nothing more than a big and jagged opening in the rock, but it showed me a flight of stairs beyond it, and twinkling lamps beyond that again. This, I said, must surely be the road to the sea, for the stairs led upward, and Czerny, as common sense put it, would occupy the higher rooms. So I did not hesitate any more about it, but treading the stairway with a cat's foot I went straight on, and presently struck so fine a corridor that at any other time I might well have spent an hour in wonder. Lamps were here—scores of them, in wrought-iron chandeliers. Doors you saw with almost every step you took—aye, and more than doors—for there were figures in the light and shadow; men passing to and fro; glimpses of open rooms and tables spread for cards, and

bottles by them; and wild men of all countries, some sleeping, some quarrelling, some singing, some busy in kitchen and workshop. By here and there, these men met me in the corridor, and I drew back into the dark places and let them go by. They did not remark my presence, or if they did, made nothing of it. After all, I was a seaman, dressed as other seamen were. Why should they notice me when there were a hundred such in Czerny's house? I began to see that a man might go with less risk because of their numbers than if they had been but a handful.

"I shall find Czerny, after all," said I to myself, "and have it out with him. When he has spoken it will be time enough to ask, What next?"

It was a little consoling to say this, and I went on with more confidence. Passing down the whole length of the corridor, I reached a pair of iron doors at last, and found them fast shut and bolted against me. There was no branch road that I could make out, nor any indication of the way in which I must open the doors. A man cannot walk through sheer iron for the asking, nor blow it open with a wish; and there I stood in the passage like a messenger who has struck upon an empty house, but is not willing to leave it. See Czerny that night I must, even if it came to declaring myself to the rogues who occupied the rooms near by, and whose voices I could still hear. I had no mind to knock at the door; and, truth to tell, such a thing never came into my head, so full it was of other schemes. Indeed, I was just telling myself that it was neck or nothing, when what should happen but that the great iron door swung open, and the little French girl, Rosamunda, herself stepped out. Staggered at the sight of me, as well she might be (for the electric lamp will hide no face), she just piped one pretty little cry and then fell to saying:

"Oh, Captain Begg, Captain Begg, what do you want in this house?"

"My dear," says I, speaking to her with a seaman's liberty, "I want a good many things, as most sailors do in this world. What's behind that door, now, and where may you have come from? Tell me as much, and you'll be doing me a bigger kindness than you think."

She didn't reply to this at once, but asked a question, as little girls will when they are thinking of somebody.

"Where are the others?" cried she; "why do you come alone? Where is the little

one, Mister—Mister———"

"Dolly Venn," said I; "ah, that's the boy! Well, he's all right, my dear, and if he'd known that we were meeting, he'd have sent his love. You'll find him down yonder, in the cellar beyond the engine-house. Show me the way to Mister Czerny's door, and we'll soon have him out of there. He's come a long way, and it's all for the pleasure of seeing you—of course it is." The talk pleased her, but giving her no time to think about it, I went on:

"Mister Czerny, now, he would be living by here, I suppose?"

She said, "Yes, yes." His rooms were through the great hall which lay beyond the doors; but she looked so startled at the idea of my going there, and she listened so plainly for the sound of any voices, that I read up her apprehensions at a glance and saw that she did not wish me to go on because she was afraid.

"Where is your old friend, the Frenchman?" I asked her on an impulse; "what part of this queer house does he sling his hammock in?"

She changed colour at this, and plainly showed her trouble.

"Oh, Mister Begg," says she, "Clair-de-Lune has been punished for helping you on Ken's Island. He is not allowed to leave his room now. Mister Czerny is very angry, and will not see him. How can you think of coming here—oh, how can you do it?"

"It's easy enough," said I, lightly, "if you don't miss the turning and go straight on. Never fear for me, young lady; I shall pull through all right; and when I do your friend goes with me, be sure of it. I won't forget old Clair-de-Lune, not I! Now, just show me the road to the governor's door, and then run away and tell Dolly Venn. He'll be precious glad to see you, as true as Scripture."

Well, she stood for a little while, hesitating about it, and then she said, as though she had just remembered it:

"Benno Regnarte is the guard, but he has gone away to have his supper. I borrowed the key and came through. If you go in, he will not question you. The governor may be on his yacht, or he may be in his room. I do not know. How foolish it all is—how foolish, Captain Begg! They may never let you go away

again!"

"Being so fond of my company," cried I, gaily. "Well, we'll see about it, my dear. Just you run off to Dolly Venn and leave me to do the rest. Sailors get out where other people stick, you know. We'll have a try, for the luck's sake."

I held her little hand in mine for a minute and gave it a hearty squeeze. She was the picture of prettiness in a print gown and a big Spanish shawl wrapped about her baby face. That she was truly alarmed, and rightly so, I knew well; but what could I do? It was Czerny or the pit. I chose Czerny.

Now, she had opened the iron door for me to pass by, and without another word to her I crossed the threshold and stood in Czerny's very dwelling-house. Thereafter, I was in a vast hall, in a beautiful place for all the world like a temple; with a gallery running round about it, and lamps swinging from the gallery, and an organ built high up in a niche above the far end, and doors of teak giving off all round, and a great oak fire-place such as you see in English houses; and all round the dome of this wonderful room great brass-bound windows, upon which the sea thundered and the foam sprayed. Softly lighted, carpeted with mats of rare straw, furnished as any mansion of the rich, it seemed to me, I do confess, a very wonder of the earth that such a place should lie beneath the breakers of the Pacific Ocean. And yet there it was before my eyes, and I could hear the sea-song high above me, and the lamps shone upon my face; and, as though to tell me truly that here my journey ended, whom should I espy at the door of one of the rooms but little Ruth Bellenden herself, the woman I had crossed the world to serve.

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH JASPER BEGG ENTERS THE HOUSE UNDER THE SEA

I DREW back into a patch of shadow and waited for her to come up to me. Others

might be with her and the moment inopportune for our encounter. She walked with slow steps. Care had written its story upon her sweet face. I saw that she was alone, and I put out my hand and touched her upon the arm.

"Miss Ruth," said I, so soft that I wonder she heard me—"Miss Ruth, it's Jasper Begg. Don't you know me?"

She turned swiftly, but did not cry out. One wild look she cast about the half, with one swift glance she made sure of every door, and then, and only then, she answered me.

"Jasper, Jasper! Is it really Jasper Begg?" she cried, with a look of joy and gratitude I never shall forget.

Now, she had asked a woman's natural question; but I shall always say that there never were wits quicker than Ruth Bellenden's; and hardly were the useless words out of her mouth than she drew back to the room she had left; and when I had entered it after her she closed the door and listened a little while for any sounds. When none came to trouble her she advanced a step, and so we two stood face to face at last, in as pretty a place as all London, or all Europe for that matter, could show you.

Let me try to picture that scene for you as it comes to me when I write of it and seek to bring it back to my memory. A trim, well-kept cabin, such I call her room —a boudoir the French would name it—all hung round with pale rose silk, and above that again an artist's pictures upon a wall of cream. Little tables stood everywhere and women's knick-knacks upon them; there were deep chairs which invited you to sit, covered in silks and satins, and cushioned so that a big man might be afraid of them.

Upon the mantel-shelf a clock from Paris swung a jewelled pendulum, and candlesticks matched it on either side. A secretaire, littered over with papers and bright with silver ornaments, had its back to the seaward wall; a round window, cut in the rock above it, stood hidden by curtains of the richest brocade. The carpet, I said, was from Turkey; the mats from Persia. In the grate the wood-fire glowed warmingly. Ruth Bellenden herself, the mistress of the room, capped the whole, and she was gowned in white, with rubies and diamonds strung about her stately neck, and all that air of proud command I had admired so much in the

days bygone. Aye, such a scene, believe me, as a grand London drawing-room might show you any night of London's months you care to name, and yet so different from that. And I, a plain sailor, found myself thrust forward there to my confusion, yet feeling, despite it all, that the woman I spoke to was woman at heart, as I was man. A few days ago I had come to her to say, "You have need of me." To-night it was her lot to answer me with my own words.

"Jasper," she said, her hand still on the switch of the lamp, "what miracle brings you to this place?"

"No miracle, Miss Ruth," said I, "but a plain road, and five men's necessity. We were dying on Ken's Island and we found a path under the sea. It was starvation one way, surrender the other; I am here to tell Mr. Czerny everything and to trust my life to him."

Now, she heard me almost with angry surprise; and coming forward into the light she stood before me with clasped hands and heated face.

"No," she said, and her "No" was a thing for a man to hear. "No, no; you shall never tell my husband that. And, oh, Jasper!" she cried upon it, "how ill you look —how changed!"

"My looks don't tell the truth," said I, not wishing to speak of myself; "I am up and down like a barometer in the tropics. The plain fact is, Miss Ruth, that the ship's gone, clean gone! I gave Mister Jacob the sure order to stand by us for three days, and that he didn't do. It means, then, that he couldn't. I greatly fear some accident has overtaken him; but he'll come back yet as I'm a living man!"

She heard me like one dazed: her eyes were everywhere about the room, as though seeking something she could not find. Presently she opened the door with great caution, and was gone a minute or more. When she returned she had a flask of spirits and some biscuits in her hand, and this time, I noticed, she locked the door after her.

"Edmond is sleeping; they have sent Aunt Rachel to Tokio," she almost whispered; "Benno, our servant, is to be trusted. I heard that you were starving in the hills; but how could I help—how could I, Jasper? It was madness for you to come here, and yet I am glad—so glad! And oh," she says, "we'll find a way;

we'll find a way yet, Jasper!"

I poured some brandy from the flask, for I had need of it, and gulped it down at a draught. Her vivacity was always a thing to charm a man; as a girl she had the laughter and the spirits of ten.

"What shall we do, Jasper?" she kept on saying, "what shall we do next? Oh, to think that it's you, to think that it is Jasper Begg in this strange house!" she kept crying; "and no way out of it, no safety anywhere! Jasper, what shall we do—what shall we do next?"

"We shall tell your husband, Miss Ruth," said I, "and leave the last word with him. Why, think of it, five men cast adrift on his shore, and they to starve. Is he devil or man that he refuses them food and drink? I'll not believe it until I hear it. The lowest in humanity would never do such a thing! Aye, you are judging him beyond ordinary when you believe it. So much I make bold to say!"

I turned to the fire, and began to warm my fingers at it, while she, for her part, drew up one of the silk-covered chairs, and sat with her pretty head resting in a tired way between her little hands. All our talk up to this time had been broken fragments; but this I judged the time for a just explanation, and she was not less willing.

"Jasper," says she of a sudden, "have you read what I wrote in the book?"

"To the last line," said I.

"And, reading it, you will ask Edmond to help you?"

"Miss Ruth," said I, "how shall one man judge another? Ships come to this shore, and are wrecked on it. Now and then, perchance, there is foul play among the hands. Are you sure that your husband has any part in it—are you sure he's as bad as you think him?"

Well, instead of answering me, she stood up suddenly and let her dress fall by the shoulder-knots. I saw the white flesh beneath bruised and wealed, as though a whip had cut it, and I knew that this was her witness to her story. What was in my heart at such a sight I would have no man know; but my fingers closed about the pistol I carried, and my tongue would speak no word.

"Why do you compel me to speak?" she went on, meanwhile. "Am I to tell of all the things I have seen and suffered on this dreadful place in the year—can it be only that?—the long, weary year I have lived here? Do you believe, Jasper, that a man can fill his house with gold as this is filled—this wild house so far from the world—and fill it honestly? Shall I say, 'Yes, I have misjudged him,' the man who has shot my servant here in this room and left me with the dead? Shall I say that he is a good man because sometimes, when he has ceased to kill and torture those who serve him, he acts as other men? Oh, I could win much if I could say that; I could win, perhaps, all that a woman desires. But I shall never speak—never; I shall live as I am living until I am old, when nothing matters!"

It was a very bitter and a very surprising thing for me to hear her speak in this way. Trouble I knew she must have suffered on Ken's Island; but this was a story beyond all imagination. And what could I say to her, what comfort give her—I, a rough-hearted sailor, who, nevertheless, would have cut off my own right hand if that could have served her? Indeed, to be truthful, I had nothing to say, and there we were for many minutes, she upon one side of the fire and I upon the other, as two that gazed into the reddening embers and would have found some old page of our life therein recorded.

"Miss Ruth," said I at last, and I think she knew what I meant, "I would have given much not to have heard this thing to-night; but as it is spoken—if it were twenty times as bad for me and those with me—I am glad we came to Ken's Island. The rest you will anticipate and there is no need for me to talk about it. The day that sees me sail away will find a cabin-passenger aboard my ship. Her name I will not mention, for it is known to you. Aye, by all a man's promise she shall sail with me or I will never tread a ship's deck again."

It was earnestly meant, and that, I am sure, Miss Ruth knew, for she put her hand upon mine, and, though she made no mention of what I had said, there was a look in her eyes which I was glad to see there. Her next question surprised me altogether.

"Jasper," she asked, with something of a smile, "do you remember when I was married?"

"Remember it!" cried I; and I am sure she must have seen the blood rush up to

my face. "Why, of course, I remember it! How should a man forget a thing like that?"

"Yes," she went on, and neither looked at the other now, "I was a girl then, and all the world was my playground. Every day was a flower to pick; the night was music and laughter. How I used to people the world my hopes created—such romantic figures they were, such nonsense! When Edmond Czerny met me at Nice, I think he understood me. Oh, the castles we built in the air, the romantic heights we scaled, the passionate folly with which we deceived ourselves! 'The world is for you and I,' he said, 'in each other's hearts'; and I, Jasper, believed him, just because I had not learnt to be a woman. His own story fascinated me; I cannot tell how much. He had been in all countries; he knew many cities; he could talk as no man I had ever met. Perhaps, if he had not been so clever, it would have been different. All the other men I knew, all except one, perhaps ———!"

"There was one, then," said I, and my meaning she could not mistake.

But she turned her face from me and would not name the man.

"Yes," she went on, without noticing it, "there was one; but I was a child and did not understand. The others did not interest me. Their king was a cook; their temple the Casino. And then Edmond spoke of his island home; I was to be the mistress of it, and we were to be apart from all the world there. I did not ask him, as others might have asked him, 'What has your life been? Why do you love me?' I was glad to escape from it all, that little world of chatter and unreality, and I said, 'I will be your wife.' We left Europe together and went first to San Francisco. Life was still in a garden of roses. If I would awake sometimes to ask myself a question, I could not answer it. I was the child of romance, but my world was empty. Then one day we came to Ken's Island, and I saw all its wonders, and I said, 'Yes, we will visit here every year and dream that it is our kingdom.' I did not know the truth; what woman would have guessed it?"

"You learnt it, Miss Ruth, nevertheless," said I, for her story was just what I myself had imagined it to be. "You were not long on Ken's Island before you knew the truth."

"A month," she said, quietly. "I was a month here, and then a ship was wrecked.

My husband went out with the others; and from the terrace before my windows I saw—ah, God! what did I not see? Then Edmond returned and was angry with the servant who had permitted me to see. He shot him in this room before my face. He knew that his secret was mine, he knew that I would not share it. The leaves of the rose had fallen. Ah! Jasper, what weeks of terror, of greed, of tears—and now you—you in this house to end it all!"

I sat for a long while preoccupied with my own thoughts and quite unable to speak to her. All that she had told me was no surprise, no new thing; but I believe it brought home to me for the first time the danger of my presence in that house, and all that discovery meant to the four shipmates who waited for me down below in the cavern.

For if this man Czerny—a madman, as I always say—had shot down a servant before this gentle girl, what would he do to me and the others, sworn enemies of his, who could hang him in any city where they might find him; who could, with one word, give his dastardly secret to the world; who could, with a cry, destroy this treasure-house, rock-built though it might be? What hope of mercy had we from such a man? And I was sitting there, it might be, within twenty paces of the room in which he slept; Miss Ruth's hand lay in my own. What hope for her or for me, I ask again? Will you wonder that I said, "None; just none! A thousand times none"! The island itself might well be a mercy beside such a hell as this.

"Miss Ruth," said I, coming to myself at last, "how little I thought when you went up to the great cathedral in Nice a short year ago that such a sunny day would end so badly! It is one of the world's lotteries; just that and nothing more. Edmond Czerny is no sane man, as his acts prove. Some day you will blot it all out of your life as a page torn and forgotten. That your husband loved you in Nice, I do believe; and so much being true, he may come to reason again, and reason would give you liberty. If not, there are others who will try—while they live. He must be a rich man, a very rich man, must Edmond Czerny. God alone knows why he should sink to such an employment as this."

"He has sunk to it," she said, quickly, "because gold is fed by the love of gold. Oh, yes, he is a rich man, richer than you and I can understand. And yet even my own little fortune must be cast upon the pile. A month ago he compelled me to sign a paper which gives up to him everything I have in the world. He has no more use for me, Jasper; none at all! He has sent my only living relative away

from me. When you go back to England they will tell you that I am dead. And it will be true—true; oh, I know that it will be true."

She had come to a very low state, I make sure, to utter such a word as this, and it was a sorry thing for me to hear. To console her when I myself was in a parlous plight was just as though one drowning man should hold out his hand to another. To-morrow I myself might be flung into that very ocean whose breakers I could hear rolling over the glass of the curtained windows. And what of little Ruth then?

That question I did not answer. Words were on my lips—such words as a driven man may speak—when there came to us from the sea without the boom of a distant gun, and, Miss Ruth springing to her feet, I heard a great bell clang in the house and the rush of men and the pattering of steps; and together, the woman I loved and I, we stood with beating hearts and white faces, and told each other that a ship was on the rocks and that Edmond Czerny's devils were loose.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHANCE OPENS A GATE FOR JASPER BEGG, AND HE PASSES THROUGH

THE devils were out; never once did I doubt it. The alarm bell ringing loudly in the corridor, the tramp of feet as of an army marching, the cry of man to man proclaimed the fact beyond any cavil. If the clang of arms and the loud word of command had found me unwilling to believe that sailors must die that night on the reef to the southward side, the voice of Edmond Czerny himself, crying by the very door behind which I stood, would have answered the question for good and all. For Czerny I heard, I would have staked my life on it—Czerny, whom last I had seen at Nice on the morning of his marriage.

"To the work, to the work!" I heard him shouting; "let Steinvertz come to me.

There is a ship on the Caskets—a ship, do you hear?"

His voice was hoarse and high-pitched, like the voice of a man half mad with delirium. Those that answered him spoke in terms not less measured. Had a pack of wild hounds been slipped suddenly to its prey, no howls more terrifying could have been heard than those which echoed in that house of mystery. And then, upon the top of the clamour, as though to mark the meaning of it, came silence, a silence so awesome that I could hear myself breathing.

"They've left the house, then," I said to Miss Ruth in a whisper; "that's something to be glad about!"

She passed the remark by and, seating herself in a chair, she buried her face in her hands. I could hear her muttering "God help them—God help them!" and I knew that she spoke of those dying out on the dangerous reef. For the time being she seemed to have forgotten my presence; but, after a spell, she looked up suddenly and answered the question.

"Yes," she said; "my husband will be on the yacht. He has not the courage to be anywhere else. You and I are quite alone now, Jasper."

My fingers closed tight about my seaman's cap, and I went to the door and unlocked it. Strong and clear in my head, and not to be denied, was something which seemed to set my brain on fire. "My God," I said, "what does it mean?" Was it chance or madness that I should pass it by?

"There would be men below at the furnaces and others standing to guard," I put it to her; "how many in all do you make out that a man might chance to meet if he went below just now, Miss Ruth?"

She became very calm at the words, I thought, and stood up that she might take my words more readily.

"Jasper!" she exclaimed, "what are you going to do, Jasper?"

"God knows," said I. "Tell me how many men there are in this house."

She stood and thought about it. The flushed face told the story of her hopes. Neither of us would speak all that came leaping to our tongues.

"There would be five, I think, in the engine-house and six for the guards," she said, and I could almost see her counting them; "the lower gate is the second in the corridor. There is a ladder there, and—oh, Jasper, what do you mean?" she asked again.

"Mean?" said I; "why this: that it is time my shipmates shared your hospitality. Aye, we'll bring them along," says I, "Seth Barker and the others. And then," says I, coming quite close to her, "the luck being with us, we'll shut the doors. Do you say there are two of them?"

She said that there were two; one for the men, a small gate on the reef; the other for Czerny—they called it the great gate. "And, oh," she cried, while her very gladness seemed to thrill me through—"oh, if you could, if you could, Jasper —!"

"Whether I can or no the night will prove," said I, more quietly than before. "One thing is sure, Miss Ruth, that I am going to try. It's worth the trying, indeed it is. Do you find your own room and know nothing at all about it. The work below is men's work, and there are men, thank God, to do it."

You say that it was a boast; aye, perhaps it was that, yet what a boast! For think of it. Here at the very moment when it appeared that our lives were at Czerny's mercy, at this very moment when we must look to his cruel hand for succour or sleep in the death-pit of the island, there comes this message from the sea and the devils go out. There is not a sound in the house, and I know that my comrades are waiting for my word. I have three brave men behind me; the peril fires my blood so that, man or devil against me, I care nothing for either. Was it a boast for a man to stake all on a throw at such an hour? Not so, truly, but just what any English seaman would have done, saying, "All or nothing, the day or the night," as chance should decide for him.

Now, my hand was upon the key when I told little Ruth that it was men's work, and without waiting to hear her wise displeasure I opened the door and stepped out into the silent hall. One man alone kept watch there, and he was in the shadows, so that I could not see his face or tell if he were armed. I knew that this man was the first between me and my liberty, and without a moment's hesitation I crossed the hall; and aware of all the risks I took, understanding that a word of mine might bring the guard down from the sea, I clapped a pistol to the sentry's

head and let him know my pleasure.

"Open that gate, Benno Regnarte!" said I.

He was a short man, burly, with curly hair, and not an unpleasant face. So quick had I come upon him, so strange, perhaps, he thought it that I named him at hazard, that he fell back against the iron and stood there gaping like one who had seen a bogey in the dark. Never, I believe, in all this world was a seaman so frightened. He could not speak or utter a sound, or even raise his hand. He just stood there like a shivering fool.

"Benno Regnarte, open that gate!" I repeated, seeing that I had the name all right; "I'll give you half a minute."

The threat brought him to his senses. Without a word, a sign, a sound, he opened the iron doors and waited for me to go through.

"Now," said I, "give me those keys and march on. And by the heaven above me, if you open your lips far enough for a fly to go in, I'll shoot you dead where you stand!"

He gave me the keys with a hand that trembled so that he nearly dropped them. In spite of my injunction he mumbled something, and I was not unwilling to hear it.

"I am the friend of Mme. Czerny," said he, cringingly; "trust me, signor, for God's sake trust me!"

"When you earn the trust," said I, grimly; "now march, and remember!"

I let him go through, and then locked the iron doors behind me. Miss Ruth, at least, must be protected from the rogues below. The lamps in the corridor were still burning, and, by here and there, I thought that I saw figures in the shadows. But no man hailed me, and when I came to the great dormitory which, at first passing, was full of seamen, I found the door of it open and no more than six or seven men still about its tables. If they heard me come up they suspected nothing. I shall always say that the brightest idea of that night was the one which came to me while I stood by the open door and counted the devils that Czerny had left to guard his house. For what should I do, upon the oddest impulse, but

put my hand round the door very quietly and, closing it without noise, turn the key first in the lock and then in my pocket.

"Six," said I to the man before me; "and you make seven. How many more in this place now, Benno Regnarte?"

He held up his hands and began to count.

"In the engine-room one, two, three," he said; "upon the ladder hereby two; at the great door two more. Seven men altogether, signor. Your party will be more than that?"

I laughed at his notion, and, seeing that the man still shivered with fear and was not to be counted, I went straight ahead to the greater work I had to do. Already the alarm was raised in the room behind me, and men were beating with their fists upon the iron door. It was ten to one that their cries must be heard and one of the sentinels called from the sea; but, miracle if you will, or greed of plunder if that is the better term, none came; none answered that heavy knocking. And I —why, I was at the cavern's head by that time, and, opening the trap, I had spoken to my shipmates.

"Up you come, every one of you—up for your lives!" cried I. "Do you, Seth Barker, lift the doctor, and let Peter Bligh follow after. There's no time to lose, lads—no time at all."

I took them by surprise, be sure of it. That opening trap, the light flashing down upon them, the message when they had begun to despair of any message, the call to action—aye, how they leaped up to answer me with ready words!

"To God be the glory!" cries Peter Bligh, and I can hear him now. "To God be the glory! 'It was the captain's voice,' says I, before ever you spake a word."

"And oh, aren't we sick of it—just sick of it!" chimes in Dolly Venn as he climbs the ladder like a cat and stands willingly at my side.

I pressed his hand, and showed him the revolver I carried.

"Whip it out, lad, whip it out," said I; "we've work to do to-night for ourselves and another. Oh, I count on you all, Dolly, as I never counted before!"

He would have said something to this, I make sure, but the others came through the trap while I spoke, and four more astonished men never stood in a cavern to ask, "What next?"

"The ladder to the reef side," said I, putting their surprise by and turning to the Italian in whose hands our lives might lie; "can men hold the top of it, or is it best taken by the sea?"

He answered me with a dramatic gesture and a face which spoke his warning.

"At the rockside it is straight; they shoot you from the top, captain. No man go up there from this place. They fire guns, make noise."

"And the report will call the others," said I. "So be it; but we'll close that door, anyway."

It was Greek to the others, and they gaped at the words. From the room which I had locked loud shouts were to be heard and heavy blows upon the iron panels. That such cries would call men from the sea presently, I knew well. We had but a few minutes in which to act, and they were precious beyond all words. The gate must be shut though a hundred lay concealed in the rooms of mystery about us. On our part we staked all on chance; we threw the glove blindly to fortune. And, remember, I alone knew anything of that house in which we stood; that house, above which the sea ever rolled her crested breakers and lifted her eerie chantry. My shipmates were but astonished strangers, not willing to go back, yet half afraid of that which lay before them. The bright lights in the caverns, the dark doors opening into darkness, and upon these the great corridor, so vast, so gloomy, so mysterious, were to them new pictures in a wonderland the like to which they had never seen before and will never see again.

"What place is this, and where is the best parlour?" asks Peter Bligh, his clumsy head blundering to a question even at such a time. '"Tis laid out for a small and early, and crowns to be broken," says he. "Have you took it furnished, or are there neighbours, sir? 'Tis a queer house entirely."

I cut him short and turned to the doctor.

"What news of the foot, sir?" I asked him; "how are you feeling now?"

He replied light-heartedly enough, wishful, I could see, to make light of it.

"Like a man who has bought a wooden leg and prefers the old one," said he; asking at the same time, "What's the course, captain, and why do we follow it?"

"The course," said I, "is to Mme. Czerny's boudoir, and a good couch to lie upon. Do you two get on as fast as you can and leave us to the parley. It's coming, sure enough, and lame men won't help the argument. We'll need your help by-and-bye, doctor, when the heads are broken."

I made the guess at hazard, little knowing how near the truth it was to prove. We were almost at the head of the first stairway by this time, and the uproar in the corridor might have awakened the seven sleepers. Impossible, I said, that such a warning should not bring in men from the sea, sentinels who would ask by whose hand the key had been turned; but the danger lay behind us in the shadows where we had not looked for it. Aye, the three in the engine-house, how came I to forget them? They were atop of us before the doctor was out of hearing, and a great hulking German, his face smeared with soot and a bar of iron in his hands, caught me by the shoulder and swung me round almost before I had done speaking.

"Who, in thunder, are you?" asks he. It was a question which had to be answered.

Now, I had picked up a wrinkle or two about "rough-and-tumbles" in the years I traded to Yokohama, and though my heart was in my mouth and it was plain to me that this was the crisis of the night, when a single unlucky stroke or misspoken word might undo all that chance had done for us, I nevertheless kept my wits about me, and letting the man turn me round as he willed I presently caught his arm between both of mine and almost broke the bone of it. Upon which he lifted up a cry you might have heard at the sword-fish reef, and writhing down I struck him with all my force and he fell insensible.

"Seven and one makes eight," said I, and a man might forgive himself for boasting at such a time; for, mark you, but two were left to deal with, and while one was making for little Dolly Venn, Peter Bligh had the throat of the other in such a grip that his friends might well have said, "God help him!"

"Hold him, Peter, hold him!" cried I, my blood fired and my tongue set loose; but there was no need to be anxious for Mister Bligh, I do assure you.

"He'll need new teeth to-morrow, and plenty of 'em!" says he, shaking the man as a dog shakes a rat. "Aye, go on, captain, the fun's beginning here."

I waited to hear no more, but ran at the man who closed with little Dolly Venn. "Dolly's is the need," said I; though in that I was mistaken, as you shall see presently. And I do declare it was a picture to watch that bit of a lad dancing round a hulking Dutchman, and hitting the wind out of him as though he had been a cushion. Grunt? The lubber grunted like a pig, and every time he stopped for want of breath in come Master Dolly again with a lightning one which shook him like a thunder-bolt. No "set-to" that I have seen in all my life ever pleased me half as much; and what with crying and laughing by turns, and singing out "Bravo, Dolly!" and dancing round the pair of them, the sweat ran off me like rain, and I, and not little Dolly Venn, might have been doing for the Dutchman in the shadows of that corridor.

In the end, believe me, this foreign bully turned tail and ran like a whipped cur. It was all I could do to keep the lad from his heels.

"Next time, Dolly," cried I, holding him back roughly, "next time, lad; we have better work to do, much better work to do. Here's Peter needing a box for his goods—and a pretty big one, too. Is it over, Peter? Will he be talking any more?" I asked Mister Bligh.

He answered me by pointing to a figure on the floor beside him, stark and motionless and very still. Peter had played his part, indeed; I knew that the gate of Czerny's house was open.

"All together, lads," said I, leading them on now with a light heart; "all together and out of the shadows, if you please. We've another gate to close, and then—as God's above me, I do believe we have bested Edmond Czerny this night!"

It was something to say, a thought to thrill a man, and yet I would not dwell upon it, remembering all that lay between us and Miss Ruth's freedom—all that must be done in the doubtful hours before us.

"The iron ladder by which the men come in," I asked of the Italian, suddenly, "where is that, Regnarte?"

Now, this man had been very frightened during the brawl at the stairs-head; but, seeing the stuff we were made of, and being willing all along to join with us (for I learned afterwards that he nursed a private spite against Czerny), he replied to me very readily:

"The ladder is the second door, captain; yet why, since no man can go up? I tell you that two hold it, and they have guns. You cannot go, captain! What good the key when men have guns?"

"We'll see about that," said I. And cocking my pistol I strode to the door he indicated.

It was an iron door, opening inward to a small apartment cut out of the solid rock. For a while I could see nothing when I entered the little cavern—it laid bare; but, becoming used to the dim light presently, I took a few steps forward, and looking up I saw a rocky chimney and an orifice far up and the stars glimmering in the grey-blue sky above me. This, then, was the second gate to Czerny's house, I said; the seagate by which his men passed in. Here, as yonder where Miss Ruth's apartment lay, the reef lifted itself above the highest tides; here was the gate we must shut if the night were to be won. And who would dare it with armed men on the threshold, and a ladder for foothold, and the knowledge on our part that one word of the truth would dig a grave for recompense? And yet it had to be dared; a man must go up that night for a woman's sake.

Well, I took off my boots at the ladder's foot, and thrusting my pistol into my waist-belt I spoke a warning word to Peter Bligh.

"This," said I, taking from Regnarte the key I needed, "this opens the iron doors you will meet down yonder. If misfortune happens to me, go straight through and take my place. Hold the rooms as long as you can and let your judgment do the rest. Belike Mister Jacob will come back with the ship. I wish to God I could think so!" I added.

He nodded his head, and but half understanding what I was about he watched me anxiously when I put my naked foot with wary step on the ladder and began to

go up. I saw him for a moment, a comrade's figure in the dim light of the cavern, and then thinking only of my purpose, and of what it would mean to one who waited for me, I clenched my teeth and began my journey. Below me were the little cave and the glimmer of a distant lamp, shipmates crying "God speed!" the hidden house, the mystery; above me that dark funnel of the rock and the sky, which seemed to beckon me upward to freedom and the sea.

If danger lay there I could not espy it nor detect its presence. Not a sound came from the open trap, no figures were to be seen, no spoken voice to be heard. The moaning waves upon the iron reef, the echo of gunshots in the silence of the night, alone spoke of life and being and the open sea without. And I went up like a cat, rung by rung, my hand hot upon the iron, the thought in my head that madness sent me and that I might never see another day.

No man appeared at the orifice, I say; the gate might have been unguarded for any sentinel I could espy. Nevertheless, I knew that the Italian spoke the truth, and that his reckoning was good. Edmond Czerny was no fool to leave a sea-gate open to all the world. Somewhere on the foothold of the rocks men were lurking, I made sure. That they heard nothing of their friends' outcry in the corridor below, that they did not answer it, was a thing I had not, at the first, understood; but it became plain when the chimney I climbed shut out every sound but that of the breaking seas, and gave intervals of silence so great that a man might have heard a ticking watch. No, truly, it was no wonder that they had not gone down nor heard that loud alarm, for they hungered for the wreck; for pillage and plunder, and all the gruesome sights Ken's Island that night could show them; and this hunger kept them at the water's edge, hounds kennelled when others were free, unwilling idlers on a harvest day. God knows, they paid a price for that when the good time came.

Now, at the ladder's head, everything was as I had seen it in the mind's picture; and even before I made the top fresh spray would shower upon my face, while the sea sounded as though its waves were breaking almost at my very ears. Unchallenged and, for all I could make out, unwatched, I grew bolder step by step, until at last I touched the topmost rung; and, looking over, I saw the white crests of the breakers and the pinnacles of the reef and the distant island under its loom of gold-blue fog. Halted there, with one hand swung free and my good pistol ready, I peered intently into the night—a sentinel watching sentinels, a spy upon those that should have spied. And standing so I saw the men, and they saw

me; and quickened to the act by the sudden danger, I swung over the first half of the trap which shut the chimney in, and made ready to close the second with all the deftness I could command.

There were two men at the sea's edge, and they did not hear me, I believe, until the first door of that trap was down. Perchance, even then, they thought that a comrade played a jest upon them, and that this was all in the night's work, for one of them coming up leisurely peered into the hole and put a question to me in the German tongue. This man, my heart beating like a piston, and my nerves all strung up, I struck down with the butt-end of my pistol, and, as God is my witness, I swung over the trap and shot the bolts and locked the great padlock before the other could move hand or foot. For the foreigner fell, without a cry, headlong into the sea which played at his very feet.

"Shut—shut, by thunder!" cried I to those below, and gladder words a seaman never spoke to comrades waiting for him. "One gate more and the night is ours, lads!"

They heard me in astonishment. Remember how new this place of mystery was to them; how little I had told them of that which I do. If they followed me like the brave men that they were, set it down to the affection they bore me, and the belief that I led them on no child's errand. So much must have occurred to them as we gained the upper house and shut the iron doors behind us. The way lay to the sea again, the road most dear to the heart of every sailor. Let the main gate of Czerny's house be closed and all was won, indeed.

Aye, and you shall stand with me as, mounting a broad stairway beyond Miss Ruth's own door, I found myself out upon a great plateau of rock, and beheld the silent ocean spread out like a silver carpet before my grateful eyes, and knew that the house was ours—that house the like to which no man has built or will build during the ages.

CHAPTER XIX

WHICH SHOWS THAT A MAN WHO THINKS OF BIG THINGS SOMETIMES FORGETS THE LITTLE ONES

I WAS the first to be out on the rock, but Peter Bligh was close upon my heels, and, wonderful to tell, the Italian almost as quick as any of us. To what gate of the sea the staircase was carrying me I knew no more than the others. The time was gone by when anything in Czerny's house could surprise me; and when at the stairs' head we found that which looked for all the world like a great port-hole with a swing door of steel to shut it, I climbed through it without hesitation, and so stood in God's fresh air for the first time for nearly three days.

That this was the main gate to the sea I had all along surmised, and now proved surely. No sooner was I through the door than all the world seemed to spread out again before my eyes—the distant island, the shimmering sea, the blue sky shut to us through such long hours. The rock itself, where we gained foothold, lifted itself clear and dry above the breakers at my feet. There were steps leading down to the water's edge, a still pool wherein boats were warped, other crags of the reef defying the tides; these and the silence of the night everywhere; but of men I saw nothing. The bloody fight we had anticipated, blow for blow, and ringing alarm, the struggle for foothold on the rock, the challenge to Czerny's men—such things did not befall. We stood unchallenged on the plateau, and we stood alone.

I said that it was a miracle, and yet the Lord knows it was no miracle at all.

Let me try and describe this place for you that you may understand our situation more clearly, and how it befell that such a simple circumstance brought about such a strange turn of fortune. We had come up from the heart of the reef, as you know, and the staircase led out to a gate of steel opening in the face of a rocky

crag, which stood well above the level even of the storm-seas. A lower plateau (unwashed by the sea) stood below the gate, and other crags jutted out of the sea and showed windows to the western sun. I made a bit of a map of the land and water thereby to keep it in my memory: and such as it is it will enable any one easily to get the position truly. If one places himself at the main gate of this house of wonders and puts Czerny's crew by the sword-fish reef, all will be plain to him.

The island lay perhaps a mile to the southward; and nearer to us, at a cable's length as I reckoned it, a group of rocky pinnacles in the open sea marked the door we had shut and the ladder by which Czerny's men went in to shelter. But the oddest thing of all was this, that the main gate to this house of wonders should be left unguarded at an hour so critical. Dark as it was, with only the soft grey light of a summer's night shimmering on sea and land, nevertheless the mere fact that we had passed unchallenged told me that we were alone. For why should two men let three pass up and raise no alarm when alarm might mean so much?

Could they not have struck us down as we came out, one by one, firing their guns to call comrades from the sea, and bringing a hundred more atop of us to end our chances there and then? Of course they could; and yet it was not done. No man hailed us; we had the breaking seas at our feet, the fresh air in our lungs, the spindrift wet upon our faces. And who was the more surprised, I at finding the gate unguarded or my comrades to discover that there was such a gate at all, the Lord only knows. Like three who stumbled upon a precipice we halted there at the sea's edge, and looked at one another to ask if such great good fortune could, indeed, be ours.

I have told you before that the Italian was at our heels when we gained the rock, and it was to him now that I addressed my question.

"You said there were two at the gate, Regnarte. Where are they, then, and what keeps them?"

He cracked his bony fingers many times, and began to gabble away vociferously in his own language—a tongue I like the sound of, but which no right-minded man should talk. When he came to some calmness and to a sane man's speech, he pointed to the pinnacles of the lesser gate and began to make the truth clear to

me.

"You come lucky, sir, you come lucky, true! Hafmitz gone yonder; he and mate, too; he go to see why other men cry out!"

I saw it like a flash. The alarm had been given at the other end of the reef, and the two that should have guarded this, had put out in their boat to see what the matter was. If a man had wished to believe that Providence guided him that night, he could not have found a circumstance to help him farther on the road. I make no pretence to be what folks call a religious man, doing my duty without the hymn-books; but I believe, and always shall believe, that there was something more than mere chance on our way in all that venture, and so I set it down here once and for all. The fingers of the white man's God pointed the road for us; and we took it, fair or crooked let it prove to be.

"Luck! Luck's no word for it, my lads," said I. "If a man told such a thing ashore, who'd believe him? And yet it's true—true, as your own eyes tell you."

They had not found their tongues yet and none of them uttered a syllable. The wonders they had seen: that house of mystery lying like a palace of the story-books far down below the rolling Pacific; the surprise of it all; the picture of lights and rooms and of a woman's face; and now this plateau of rock with breakers at their feet and the island mists for their horizon; and, in the far distance, away upon the sword-fish reef, sights and sounds which quickened every pulse—who shall blame them if they could answer me never a word? They simply halted there and gazed spellbound across the shimmering water. I alone knew how far we stood from the end where safety lay.

Now, Peter Bligh was the first to give up his star-gazing; and, shaking himself like a great dog, he turned to me with a word of that common sense which he can speak sometimes.

"'Tis a miracle, truly, and a couple of doors to it," cried he, like one thinking keenly. "Nevertheless, I make bold to say that if they have a key to yonder hatch we are undone entirely, captain."

I sat upon a crag of the rock and tried to think of it all. Czerny's men would return in an hour, or two at the most, and the truth would be out. They would

come—the seamen to the lesser gate, the others to this door of steel by which we sat—and, finding that knocking did not open, they would take such measures as they thought fit to blast the doors. A gun well fired might do as much if gun could be trained upon the reef. Once let them inside and it needed no clever tongue to say how it would fare with us or with those we sought to protect. No man, I said, would live to tell that story, or to carry the history of Edmond Czerny's life to a distant city. All that lay between us and life was this door of steel shutting like a port-hole in the solid rock. And could we hold it against, it might be one, it might be three hundred men? That was a question the night must answer.

"Regnarte," I said, upon an impulse, "you have guns in this house?"

He held up his fingers and opened them many times to express a great number.

"One, two, three hundred guns," said he. "Excellency has them all; but here one gun much bigger than that. You seamen, you shall know how to fire him, captain. Excellency say that no man take the gate while that gun there. Ah! the leg on the other boot now!"

Now he cracked his fingers all the time he said this, and shook his keys and danced about the plateau like a madman. For a while I could make neither head nor tail of what he meant; but presently he turned as though he would go down to the cabins again, and, standing upon the very threshold of the staircase, he showed me what I had never seen or should have looked for in twenty years—the barrel of a quick-firing gun and the steel turret which defended it.

"'Tis a pom-pom, or I'm a heathen nigger!" cries Peter Bligh, half mad at the sight of it. "A pom-pom, and a shield about it. The glory to Saint Patrick that shows me the wonder!"

And Dolly Venn, catching hold of my hand in like excitement, he says:

"Oh, Mr. Begg, oh, what luck, what luck at last!"

I crossed the plateau and saw the thing with my own eyes. It was a modern Krupp quick-firing gun, well kept, well fitted, well placed behind a shield of steel which might defend those who worked it against a hundred. Those who set

it upon the rock so set it that not only the near sea but the second gate could be covered by its fire. It would sweep the water with a hail of lead, and leave unseen those that did the work. And the irony of it was chiefly this, that Edmond Czerny, seeking to defend the door of his house against all the world, now shut it upon himself.

"Yes," said I, at last, and I spoke almost like a man drunk with excitement; "give me shell for that, and we'll hold the gate against five hundred!"

The hope of it set every nerve in my body twitching; sweat, I say, began to roll down my face like rain.

"You have a magazine in this place," I continued, turning upon the Italian in a way that surprised him; "you have arms in this house and shot for that gun. Where are they, man, where are they?"

He stood stock-still with fright, and stammered out a broken reply.

"Excellency has the key, captain—I show you! Don't be angry, captain!"

He turned to enter the house again, and I followed him, as eager a man as ever hunted for that which might take a fellow-creature's life.

"Do you, Peter and Dolly, keep a watch here," said I, indicating the place, "while I go below with this man. We must hold the gate, lads, hold it with our lives! If the two yonder come back, be sure you close their mouths. You understand, Peter—close their mouths!"

"Aye, I understand, captain!" said he, very quietly. "They'll not sing hymns when I've done with them!"

I followed the Italian down the stairs, and we made for the great hall again. Many lights were burning there, and the figures of women passed in and out of the splendid rooms. At the far corner, opposite Miss Ruth's own apartment, the Italian came to a halt and began to gabble again.

"Excellency live here, sir," said he; "the gun-room—you go right through to him; but Excellency, he have the key. Me only doorman. I speak true, sir!"

I opened the door of the room he indicated, and feeling upon the wall switched on a lamp. It was the palace of a place, with great book-racks all round it, and arm-chairs as long as beds in every corner, and instruments and tables and pretty ornaments enough to furnish a mansion; but for none of these things had I eyes that night. Yonder, at the end of the room, a curtain opened above a door of iron; and through that door I saw at a glance the way to the gun-room lay. Ah, how my head tried to grapple with the trouble! The keys—where lay the keys? What chance or miracle would show me those? Was the key on Czerny's person or here in one of the drawers about? How much would I have paid to have been told that truly! But how to open it!

Now the Italian watched me with curious eyes as I went up to the door and drew the curtain back from it. A quick glance round the room did not show me what common sense was seeking—an iron safe in which Czerny's keys might lie. That he would keep the key of the armoury in the room, unless it were on his person, I had no doubt; and argument began to tell me that, after all, a safe might not be necessary. If alarm came it would come from the sea; or from the lower doors, which were locked against his devil's crew. I began to say that the keys would be in a drawer or bureau, and I was going to ransack every piece of furniture, when —and this seemed beyond all reason—I saw something shining bright upon a little table in the corner, and crossing the room I picked up the very thing for which a man might have offered the half of his fortune.

"Heaven above!" said I, "if this is it—if this is it———"

And why should it not have been? News of the wreck had come to the house like a sudden alarm leaping up in the night; the keys, which I held with greedy fingers, might they not have been in Czerny's hands when the bell clanged loudly through the startled corridors? I saw him, forgetful in his very greed, serving out rifles to his willing men, running up at hazard to be sure of the truth, leaving behind him that which might open his house to the world forever. And in my hand the fruit of his alarm was lying.

Ah, Heaven! it was the truth, and the door opened at my touch, and arms for a hundred men glittered in the dim light about me.

CHAPTER XX

THE FIRST ATTACK IS MADE BY CZERNY'S MEN

We carried the shot to the stairs' head, each man working as though his own life were the price of willing labour. If Miss Ruth had tidings of the great good fortune the night had sent to us, she would neither stay our hands with questions nor wait for idle answers. For a moment I saw her, a figure to haunt a man, looking out from the door of her own room; but a long hour passed before I changed a word with her or knew if that which we had done would win her consent. Now, indeed, was Ruth Bellenden at the parting of the ways, and of all in Czerny's house her lot must have been the hardest to bear. She had blotted the page of her old life that night and it never would be rewritten. None the less, a woman's courage could show me a bright face and all that girlish gentleness which was her truest charm. Never once would she speak of her own trouble, but always lightly of ours; so that we three—little Ruth, Dr. Gray, and Jasper Begg—might have been friends met upon any common adventure, and not at the crisis of that desperate endeavour. And so I think it will befall in all the perilous days, that what is written in the story-books about loud exclamations and pale faces and all the rest of it is the property of the story-teller, and that in plain truth you find none of these things, but just silent actors and simple talk, and no more noise of the difficulty than the common day will bring. This, at least, is my memory of that never-to-be-forgotten night. To-morrow might give us life or death—a grave beneath the seas or mastership of that house of mystery; though of this no word passed between us, but briefly we gave each other the news and asked it in return.

"Captain," says the doctor, he being the first to speak, "they tell me you've struck a gun-store. Is it true or false?"

I told him that it was true, and making light of it—for I did not wish Miss Ruth to be upset before there was good reason—I named another thing.

"Yes," said I, "we shall defend ourselves if there's need, and give a good account, I hope. For the rest, we'll take it as we find it. I am trusting that Mister Czerny

will listen to common sense and not risk bloodshed. If he does, the blame be on his own head, for I shall do my best to make it easy for him."

"I know you will—I know you will, Jasper," says little Ruth, closing her hand upon mine, and not caring much what the doctor thought of it, I'll be bound; "we can do no more than our duty, each of us. Mine is very hard, but I shall not turn from it—never, while I know that duty says, 'Go on!'"

"That I'm sure you won't, Miss Ruth," was my answer to her; "if ever duty justified man or woman it justifies you and I this night. Let us begin with that and all the rest is easy. What we are doing is done as much for the sake of our fellow-men as for ourselves. We work for a good end—to let the world know what Ken's Island harbours and to keep our fellow-men from such a place. Accomplish that much, and right and humanity owe us something, though it's not for me to speak of it, nor is this the time. My business is to hold this house against the devils who are pillaging the ship yonder. The sea-gate I can take care of, Miss Ruth. It's what's below in the pit that I fear."

She listened with a curiosity which drank in every word and yet was not satiated. Nevertheless, I believe but half of my story was plain to her. And who blames her for that? Was not it enough for such a bit of a girl to say, "My friends are with me. I trust them. They will win my liberty." The arguments were for the men—for Mister Gray and me, who sought a road in the darkness, but could not find one.

"Two doors to this house, captain," says the doctor, after a little while, "and one of them shut. So much I understand. Are you sure that the cavern below is empty, or do you still count men in it?"

""Tis just neither way," said I, "and that's the worst of it, doctor. The sea's to be held while the shell lasts and perhaps afterwards; but if there are men down below, why, then it's another matter. I'm staking all on a throw. What more can I do?"

He leaned back upon the sofa and appeared to think of it. Presently he said:

"Captain, a man doesn't shoot with his foot, does he?"

And then, not waiting for me to answer, he goes on:

"Why, no; he shoots with his hand. Just you plant me in the passage and give me a gun. I'll keep the door for you—by Jove, I will!"

Now, I saw that this promise frightened Miss Ruth more than she would say, for it was the first time that it occurred to her that men might come out of the pit. But she was just the one to turn it with a laugh, and crying, "What folly! what folly!" she called out at the same time for little Rosamunda, and began to think of that which I had clean forgotten.

"Jasper," says she, "you will never make a general—never, never! Why, where's your commissariat? Would you starve your crew and think nothing of it? Oh, we shall feed Mister Bligh, and then it will be easy," says she, prettily.

I made no objection to this, for it was evident that she wished to conceal her fears from us; but I knew that the doctor was wise, and before I left him there was a rifle at his side and twenty rounds to go with it.

If there is any sound at the door, fire that gun

"If there is any sound at the door, fire that gun."

"If there's any sound at the door of the corridor—as much as a scratch," said I, "fire that gun. I shall be with you before the smoke's lifted, and you will need me, doctor—indeed, you will!"

I left him upon this and went up, more anxious than I would have confessed, to my shipmates at the gate. I found them standing together in the moonlight, which shone clear and golden upon a gentle sea, and gave points of fire to the rocky headlands of Ken's Island. So still it was, such a scene of wonder and of beauty, that but for the words which greeted me, and the dark figures peering across the water, and something very terrible on the distant reef, I might have believed myself keeping a lonely watch in the glory of a summer's night. That delusion the East denied. I knew the truth even before Mister Bligh named it.

"They've fired the ship, captain—fired the ship!" says he, with just anger. "Aye, Heaven do to them as they've done to those poor creatures! Did man ever hear of such a villainy—to fire a good ship in her misfortune? It would be a sin against an honest rope to hang such a crew as that!"

I stepped forward to the water's edge that I might see the thing more clearly. Looming up upon that fair horizon were wreathing clouds of smoke and crimson flames, and in the heart of it all the outline of the ship these fiends had doomed. No picture ever painted could present that woful scene or describe its magnificence as we saw it from the watch-tower of the reef. It was, indeed, as though the very heavens were on fire, while the sea all about the burning hull shone like a pool of molten gold in which strange shapes moved and the shadows of living things were to be seen. Now licking the quivering masts, now blown aside in tongue-shaped jets, the lambent flame spurted from every crack and crevice, leaped up from every port-hole of that splendid steamer. I saw that her minutes were numbered, and I said that before the dawn broke she would sink, a mass of embers, into the hissing breakers.

"Good Lord, Mister Bligh!" cried I, the seaman's habit coming to me at the dreadful spectacle, "was ever such a thing heard of? And the poor people aboard —what of them now? What haven may they look for?"

"They've put the men ashore, sir," said Dolly Venn, hardly able to speak for his anxiety. "I saw two boat-loads go across to the bay while Mister Bligh was piling the ammunition. They've sent them to die on the island. And we so helpless that we must just look on like schoolgirls. Oh! I'd give all I've got to be over yonder with a hundred bluejackets at my elbow. Think of it, sir! Just a hundred, and cutlasses in their hands."

"Aye," said I, "and a tree for every rogue that rows a boat yonder. Well, my lad, thinking's no good this night, nor can you get the bluejackets by whistling. We haven't all served our time in a Queen's ship, Dolly, and we're just plain seamen; but we'll try and speak a word to Edmond Czerny by-and-bye, or I'll never speak another. Now, help me with your young eyes, will you, and tell me if that's a ship's gig yonder, or if it isn't———"

He said that it was a ship's gig, and he pointed out that which I had not seen before—a steam yacht lying off to the east of us and waiting for some of her

crew to go aboard. Edmond Czerny would be on deck there, I thought, watching the hounds he had sent to the work; and if that spectacle of death and destruction did not gratify him, then nothing would in all the world. And surely such a sight even he had not beheld in all his years. That shimmering molten sea, the island catching the reflected lights and making its own pictures of them; the distant forests, whose trees lifted fiery branches and leaves of flame; the mist-clouds raining blood and gold, the burning steamer, the great arena of fire-flecked sea and the small-boats swimming upon it—what more of delight or devilry could Ken's Island give this vulture of the deep?

So much the night would show us as Providence willed and good hearts might determine.

Now, I have told you that little Dolly Venn had served in the Naval Reserve and knew more of gunnery than the most of us. To this, I bear witness, we owed much that night.

"You've got a skipper's part, Dolly, lad," said I, "and yon gig begins the trouble, if my eyes don't deceive me. Why, she's coming in here, lad, straight to this very door, just as fast as oars can bring her. And there's more to follow—a fleet of them, as any lubber could tell you."

'"Tis like a fête and gala on the old stinking Liffey," says Peter Bligh, peering with me across the busy sea. "A dozen boats, and every one of them full. I'd give something to see Mister Jacob to-night; indeed, and I would, captain. We are over few for such an 'out and home' as this."

It was rare to see Peter Bligh serious, but he had the right to be that night, and I was the last to blame him. Consider our situation and ask what others would have felt, placed as we were—four willing men upon a bit of craggy rock rising sheer out of a thousand fathom sea, and commanded to hold the gate for our lives and for another life more precious against all the riff-raff that Ken's Island could send against us. Out on the shimmering sea I counted twelve boats with my own eyes, and knew that every one of them was full of cut-throats. In the half of an hour or sooner that devil's crew would knock at our gate and demand to come in. Whatever way we answered them, however clever we might be, was it reason to suppose that we could hold the rock against such odds, hold it until help came when help was so distant? I say that it was not. By all the chances, by

every right reason, we should have been cut down where we stood, and our bodies swimming in the sea before the sun shone again on Ken's Island and its mysteries. And if this truth was present in my mind, how should it be absent from the minds of the others? Brave faces they showed me, bright words they spoke; but I knew what these concealed. We stood together for a woman's sake; we knew what the price might be and made no complaint of it.

"We are over few, Peter," said I, "but over few is better than many when the heart is right. Just you drink up that grog and put yourself where there is not so much of your precious body in the moonlight. It will be Dolly's place at the gun, and mine to help him. There is this in my mind, Peter, that we've no right to shoot fellow-creatures unless they call upon us so to do. When the gig comes up I'll give them a fair challenge before the volley's fired. After that it's up and at them, for Miss Ruth's sake. You will not forget, Peter, that if we can hold this place until help comes, belike we'll carry Miss Ruth to Europe and shut down this devil's den forever. If that's not work good enough to put heart into a man, I don't know what is. Aye, my lads," said I to them all, "tell yourselves that you are here and acting for the sake of one who did you many a kindness in the old time; and mind you shoot straight," says I, "and don't go wasting honest lead when there's carrion waiting for it."

They answered "Aye, aye!" and Dolly, leaping up to the gun, began to give his orders just for all the world as though he skippered the ship and I was but a passenger.

"We'll put Regnarte in front," says he, "so that we can keep an eye on him. Let Peter hail them from where he's standing now; the rock covers him, captain, and the shield will take care of you and me. And oh?" says he, "I do wish it would begin—for my fingers are just itching!"

"Let them itch, lad, let them itch," was my answer; "here's the gig by the point, and they won't trouble you with that complaint long. Do you, Peter, give them a hail when I cry, 'Now!' If they stop, well and good; if they come on—why, you won't be asking them to walk right in!" says I.

He took my meaning and set to work like the brave man that he was. Very deliberately and carefully I saw him slip out of his coat and fold it up neatly at his feet. He had a rifle in his hand and a pile of ammunition on the floor, and

now he opened his Remington and began to fill it. For my part, I stood by the gun's shield, and from that place, covered by a ring of steel, I looked out across the awaking sea. Impatience, doubt, hope, fear—these I forgot in the minutes which passed while the gig crept slowly across that silver pool. The silence was so great that a man might almost breathe it. Slow, to be sure, she was; and every man who has waited at a post of danger knows what it means to see a strange sail creeping up to you foot by foot, and to be asking yourself a dozen times over whether she be friend or enemy, a welcome consort or a rogue disguised. But there is an end to all things, even to the minutes of such suspense; and I bear witness that I never heard sweeter music than the ringing hail which Mister Bligh sent across the still sea to the eight men in the gig, and to any other his message might concern.

"Ahoy!" cries he, "and what may you be wanting, my hearties, and what flag do you sail under?"

Now, if ever a hail out of the night surprised eight men, this was the occasion and this the scene of it. They had come back from the pillaged ship believing that the sea-gate of the house stood open to them and that friends held it in all security. And here upon the threshold a strange voice hails them; they are asked a question which turns every ear towards the rock, sends every man's hand to the gun beside him. Instantly, their own vile deeds accusing them, they cry, "Discovery!" They tell each other, I make sure, that Czerny's house is in the possession of strangers. They are stark mad with curiosity, and unable for a spell to say a word to us.

They would not speak a word, I say; their oars were still, their boat drifted lazily to the drowsy tide. If they peered with all their eyes a the rock from which the voice came, but little consolation had they of the spectacle. The shadows spoke no truth, the gate hid the unknown; they could read no message there. Neither willing to go back nor to advance, they sat gaping in the boat. How could they know what anxious ears and itching hands waited for their reply?

A voice at last, crying harshly across the ripple of the water, broke the spell and set every tongue free again. Aye, it was good to hear them speak.

"Bob Williams," cries the voice. "What ho! my ancient! I guess that's you, Bob Williams."

"And I guess it isn't," roars Peter Bligh, half mad, like a true Irishman, at the thought of a fight. "It isn't Bob Williams, and be derned to you! Are you going ashore to Ken's Island or will you swim awhile? It's good water for bathing," says he, "and no charge for the machine. Aye," says he, "by the look of you cold water would not hurt your skins."

Well, they had nothing to say to this; but we could hear them parleying among themselves. And presently; another longboat pulling up to them, the two together drifted in the open and then, without a word, began to row away to the lesser reef, whose gate I had shut not an hour ago. This I saw with very great alarm; for it came to me in an instant that if they could force the trap—and there were enough of them to do that, seeing that they had rifles in their hands—the whole of the lower rooms would swarm with their fellows presently, and I did not doubt that the house would be taken.

"Dolly," cried I, appealing to the lad, when, the Lord knows, my own head should have been the one to lead, "Dolly," cried I, "they'll force the gate—and what then, Dolly———?"

He had leapt up when the ship moved off, and now, drawing me back, with nervous fingers he began to show me what a man-of-war had taught him.

"No, sir, no," says he, wildly, "no, it's not that. Help me and I'll tell you—and oh, Mister Begg, don't you see that this gun was put here to cover that very place?" says he.

Well, I had seen it, though in the stress of recent events it had slipped my memory; and yet it would have been as plain as the nose on the face to any gunner, even to the youngest. For if Czerny must hold his house against the world, how should he hold it with one door of two open to the sea? That devilish gun, swung there on a peak of the rock, could sweep the waters, turn where you might. It was going to sweep the lesser gate to-night.

"Round with her and quick about it," cries Dolly Venn, and never a gladder cry have I heard him utter. "They're coming ashore, captain. They are on the rock already."

I stood up to make sure of it, and saw four men leap from the gig to the rock

which it was life or death for us to hold. And to Dolly I said:

"Let go, lad; let go, in Heaven's name!"

He stood to the gun; and clear above all other sounds of the night the sharp reports rang out. That peaceful, sleeping sea awoke to an hour the like to which Ken's Island will never know again. We cast the glove to Edmond Czerny and powder spake our message. Henceforth it was his day or ours, life or death, the gallows or the sea.

There were four men upon the rock when the gun began to spurt its vomit of shot across the sea, and two of them fell almost with the first report. I saw a third dragging himself across the crags and pressing a hand madly against every stone as though to quench some burning flame; a fourth crouched down and began to cry to his fellows in the boats for mercy's sake to put in for him; but before they could lift a hand or ship an oar the fire was among them; and skimming the waves for a moment, then carrying beyond them, it caught them as a hail of burning steel at last and shut their lips forever. Aye, how shall I tell you of it truly—the worming, tortured men, the gaping wounds they showed, the madness which sent them headlong into the sea, the sagging boat dipping beneath them, the despair, the terror, when death came like a whirlwind? These things I shut from my eyes; I would not see them. The sharp reports, the words of agony, the oaths, the ferocious threats—they came and went as a storm upon the wind. And afterwards when silence fell, and I beheld the silver sea, the island wreathed in mists, ships' boats in the distance like dots upon the water, the ebbing flames where the steamer burned, the woods wherein honest seamen suffered in the death-trance from which but few would waken, I turned to my comrades and, hand linked in hand, I said, "Well done!"

CHAPTER XXI

WHICH BRINGS IN THE DAY AND WHAT BEFELL THEREIN

It was just after dawn that Miss Ruth came up from her room below and found me at my lonely post on the plateau of the watch-tower rock. Dolly Venn was fast asleep by that time, and Peter Bligh and the carpenter no less willing for a spell of rest. I had sent them to their beds when it was plain to me that, whatever might come after, the night had nothing more in store for us; and though heavy with sleep myself I put it by for duty's sake.

Now, I was watching all alone, my rifle between my knees and my eyes upon the breaking skies, when I heard a quick step behind me, and, turning round, I saw Miss Ruth herself, and felt her gentle hand upon my shoulder.

"I couldn't sleep, Jasper," said she, a little sadly I thought. "You are not angry with me for being here, Jasper?"

It blew cold with the dawn, and I was glad to see that she had wrapped her head in a warm white woollen shawl—for these little things stick in a man's memory—and that her dress was such as a woman might wear in that bleak place. She had dark rings about her eyes—which I have always said could look at you as the eyes of no other woman in all the world; and I began to think how odd it was that we two, whom fortune had cast out to this lonely rock together, should have said so little to each other, spoken such rare words since the ship put me ashore at the gate of her island home.

"Miss Ruth," said I, "it's small wonder what you tell me. This night is never to be forgotten by you and I, surely. Sometimes, even now, I think that I am dreaming it all. Why, look at it. Not two months ago I was in London hiring a ship from Philips, Westbury, and Co. You, I believed, were away in the Pacific, where all things beautiful should be. I saw you, Miss Ruth, in an island home, happy and contented, as it was the wish of us all that you should be. There were never lighter hearts on a quarterdeck than those which set out to do your bidding. 'It's Miss Ruth's fancy,' we told ourselves, 'that her friends should bring a message from the West, and be ready to serve her if she has the mind to employ them.' What other need could we think of? Be sure no whisper of this devil's house or of yonder island where honest men will die to-day was heard by any man among us. We came to do your bidding as you had asked us. It was for you to say 'go' or 'stay.' We never thought what the truth would be—even now it seems to me a horrid nightmare which a man remembers when he is waking."

She drew a little closer to me, and stood gazing wistfully across the westward seas, beyond which lay home and liberty. Perchance her thoughts were away to the pretty town of Nice, where she had given her love to the man who had betrayed her, and had dreamed, as young girls will, of all that marriage and afterwards might mean to her.

"If it were only that, Jasper," she said, slowly, "just a dream and nothing more! But we know that it is not. Ah, think, if these things mean so much to you, what they have meant to me. I came away from Europe believing that heaven would open at my feet. I said that a good man loved me, and I gave myself heart and soul to him. Just a silly little girl I was, who never asked questions, and trusted—yes, trusted all who said they loved her. And then the truth, and a weary woman to hear it! From little things which I would not see, it came speaking to me in greater things which I dare not pass by, until I knew—knew the best and the worst of it! And all my castles came tumbling down, and the picture was shut out, and I thought it was forever. The message I spoke to the sea would never be answered, or would be answered when I no longer lived to hear it spoken. Do you blame a woman's weakness? Was I wrong to believe that you would forget the promise?"

"I never forgot it, Miss Ruth," was my answer, "never for a moment. 'May-be,' said I to Peter Bligh, 'she'll laugh when I go ashore; may-be—but it is a thousand to one against that—she'll have need of me.' When I saw Ken's Island looming off my port-bow, why I said, 'It's just such a picture of a place as a rich man would pitch upon for an island home. It's a garden land,' said I, 'a sunny haven in this good Pacific sea.' Judge how far I was from the truth, Miss Ruth, how little I knew of this prison-house that, God helping me, shall stand open to the world before many days have come and gone."

She was silent for a spell, for her eyes were searching the distant island, and she seemed to be scanning its fog-bound heights and misty valleys as though to read that secret of the night of which I hoped no man had told her.

"The ship that came ashore last night, Jasper?" she asked, of a sudden. "What have they done to the ship?"

I put my hand upon her arm and led her forward to the sea's edge, whence we could espy both the sword-fish reef and the ashes of her bungalow at the island's

heart. The day had broken by this time, quick and beautiful as ever in the Pacific Ocean. Sunny waves rolled up to our very feet. There were glittering caps of rock gleaming above the island of death. Czerny's yacht lay, the picture of a ship, eastward in the offing. The longboats, twelve of them, and each loaded with its devil's crew, drifted round and round the master's ship; but never a man that went aboard from them.

"The ship," said I, "is where many a good ship has gone before: a thousand fathoms down by yonder cruel reef. As for those that sailed her, they live or die on Ken's Island, mistress. Last night in my watch I heard them crying like wild beasts that hunger drives. Those who do not sleep to-day herd together on yonder beach. I counted nine of them not half an hour since."

She tried to see with me, looking across the water; and presently she said:

"There are men there and women, too—oh, Jasper, think of it, women!"

"Ah!" said I, "I have been thinking of it for an hour or more, ever since I first made a signal to them. So much comes of being a seaman, who can speak to folks when others are dumb. If they read my message aright, they'll not stay on Ken's Island to sleep, be sure of it; but I doubt that they'll dare it, Miss Ruth. Poor souls; their need is sore, indeed!"

"And our own, Jasper," says she, "is our own less? You are brave men, and you have all a woman's trust and gratitude; but, Jasper, when my husband comes, what will you say to him? They are a hundred and we are but five, shut up in this prison of the sea! We may live here forever and no help come to us. We may even die here, Jasper. There are things I will not either name or think of. But, oh, Jasper," says she, "if we could save those poor people!"

It was always thus with her—nine thoughts for others and not the half of one for herself. What she meant by the things she would not name or speak of, I could hardly guess; but it was in my head that she meant to indicate the corridors below and that unknown danger which iron doors shut down. I had been a clearer-headed man that morning if I could have put away from me my doubt of what the depths were hiding from us. But I hid it from her always. A truce of self-deception shut out the question as one we neither cared to hear nor answer.

"Miss Ruth," said I, speaking very slowly, "those people have a boat, for you can see it on yon sands. Let them find the courage to float it, and it is even possible that Dolly Venn and I can do the rest. We should be thirteen men then, and glad of the number. I won't hide it from you that we are a pitiful handful to face such a horde as lingers yonder. Why, think of it. Your husband keeps them off the yacht, that's clear to a child's eye. What harbour, then, is open to them? The island—yes, there's that! They can go and sleep the death-sleep on the island, as many an honest man before them. But they will have something to say to Czerny first if I know anything of their quality! Our plight is bad enough; but I wouldn't be in your husband's shoes to-day for all the money in London City. We may pull through—there would be rasher promises than that; but Edmond Czerny will never see a white man's town again—no, not if he lives a hundred years!"

"It would be justice, God's justice," said she, very slowly; "there is that in the world always, Jasper. Whatever may be in store for me, I should like to think that I had done my duty as you are doing yours."

"We won't talk of that;" said I; "the day is dark, but the sunshine follows after. Some day, in some home across the sea, we'll tell each other how we held Ken's Island against a hundred. It may be that, dear friend; God knows, it may be that!"

* * *

It was five o'clock in the morning by my watch when I signalled for the second time to the people on the beach, and half-past five when first they answered me. Until that time I had not wished to awake Dolly Venn or Mister Bligh; but now when it began to come to me that I might, indeed, save these poor driven folks and add to the garrison which held the house, sleep was banished from my eyes and I had the strength and heart of ten. No longer could I doubt that my signals were seen and read by some sailor on that distant shore. Driven out, as they must have been, by the awful fogs which loomed over Ken's Island, gasping for their lives at the water's edge, who shall blame their hesitation or exclaim upon that delay? Over the sea they beheld a white flag waving. Was it the flag which friend or foe had raised? There, from that craggy rock, help was offered them. Could they believe such good fortune, those who seemed to have but minutes to live?

Well, Dolly Venn came up to me, and Peter Bligh, half awake from sleep; and all

standing together (Seth Barker keeping watch below) I told them how we stood and pointed out that which might follow after.

"There'll be no attack from Czerny's men with the light," said I; "for so much is plain reason. If there's murder done out yonder, look for it on Czerny's yacht when his friends would go aboard. Why, see, lads, there are a hundred and twenty men, at the lowest reckoning, drifting yonder in open boats. Who's to feed them, who's to house them? They can go ashore on Ken's Island and dance to the sleep-music; but they are not the sort to do that, from what we've seen of them! No, they'll have it out with Edmond Czerny; they'll want to know the reason why! And let the wind blow more than a capful," said I, "and by the Lord above me not a man among them will see to-morrow's sun! Does that put heart into you, Peter, or does it not? There are folks to save over there, Peter Bligh," says I, "and we'll save them yet!" His reply was an earnest "God grant it!" and from that moment the sleep left his eyes, and standing by my side, as he had stood many a day on the bridge of the Southern Cross, he began to read the signals and to interpret them aloud as the old-time duty prompted him.

"Eight men and a woman, and one long-boat," says he; "sickness among them and no arms. 'Tis to know if they shall put off now or wait for the dark. You'll be answering that, captain."

"Let them come, let them come," said I; "how's the dark to help them? Will they live a day in the fogs we know of? And what sort of a port is Ken's Island in the sleep-time for any Christian man? If Czerny murders them on the high seas, so much the more against him when his day comes. Let them come, Peter, and the Lord help them, poor wretches!"

I was using my arms with every word, and trying to make my meaning clear to the poor folks on the beach. So far they had been content to answer me with questions; but now, all at once, they ceased to signal, and a black object riding above the surf told me that they had risked all and were afloat, be the danger what it might. At the same moment a sharp cry from Dolly Venn turned my eyes to Czerny's yacht; and I saw his devils rowing their boats for the open water of the bay, and I knew that murder was in their minds, and that the hour had come when every veil was to be cast aside and their purpose declared against all humanity.

"Clear the gun and stand by," was my order to the others; "we'll give them something to take home with them, and it sha'n't be pippins! Can you range them, Dolly, or must you wait? There's no time to lose, my lad, if honest lives are to be saved this day."

He went to work without a word, charging his magazine and training the gun eastwards towards the advancing boats. If he did not fire at once, it was because he doubted his range; and here was his difficulty, that by sweeping round to the east and coming at the refugees upon a new course, Czerny's lot might yet cheat us and do the infernal work they intended. Indeed, the poor people in the longboat were just racing for their lives; and whether we could help them or whether they must perish time alone would show. Yard by yard, painfully, laboriously, they pushed towards the rock; yard by yard the devil's crew were bearing down upon them. And still Dolly kept his shot; the gun had nothing to say to them. No crueller sight you could plan or imagine. It was as though we were permitting poor driven people to be slaughtered before our very eyes.

"Fire, Dolly, lad!" cried I, at last—"fire, for pity's sake! Will you see them die before our very eyes?"

His fingers trembled upon the gun. He had all the heart to do it; but still he would not fire.

"I can't," says he, half mad at his confession; "the gun won't do it—it's cruel, captain—cruel to see it—they're half a mile out of range. And the others dropping their oars. Look at that. A man's down, and another is trying to take his place———"

It was true as I live. From some cause or other, I could only surmise, the longboat lay drifting with the tide and one of Czerny's boats, far ahead of its fellows, was almost atop of her.

"They're done!" cries Peter Bligh, with an oath, "done entirely. God rest their souls. They'll never make the rock———"

We believed it surely. The refugees were done; the pirates had unsheathed their knives for the butcher's work. I saw no human help could save them; and saying it a voice from the open door behind me gave the lie to Peter Bligh, and named a

miracle.

"'Tis the others that need your prayers, Mister Bligh—Czerny's lot are sinking sure———"

I looked round and found Seth Barker at my elbow. His orders had been to watch the gate of the corridor below. I asked him what brought him there, and he told me something which sent my heart into my mouth.

"There's knocking down below and strange voices, sir. No danger, says Mister Gray, but a fact you should know of. Belike they'll pass on, sir, and please God they'll leave the engine for their own sakes."

"Does Mister Gray say that?" asked I. "Does he fear for the engine?"

"If it stops, we're all dead men for want of breath, the doctor says."

"Then it sha'n't stop," said I, "for here's a man that will open the trap if two or twenty stand below."

He had quickened my pulse with his tale, for the truth of it I could not deny; and it seemed to me that danger began to close in upon us, turn where we might, and that the outcome must be the worst, the very worst a man could picture. If I had any satisfaction, any consolation of that wearing hour, it was the sight I beheld out there upon the hither sea, where Czerny's boat drifted upon its prey—yet so drifted that a child might have said, "She's done with; she's sinking."

"Flushed, by all that's wonderful," cries Peter Bligh, with a tremendous oath; "aye, down to oblivion, and an honest man's curse go with you. The rogue's done, my lads; she's done for, certain."

We stood close together and watched the scene with burning eyes. Dolly Venn chattered away about a shot that must have struck the boat last night and burst her seams. I cared nothing for the reasons, but took the facts as the sea showed them to me. Be the cause what it might, those who would have dealt out death to the refugees were going down to eternity now, their arms in their hands, their mad desire still to be read in every gesture. When the truth came swift upon them, when the seas began to break right in across their beam, then, I say, they leaped up mad with fear, and then only forgot their prey. For think what that

must have meant to them, the very boat sinking beneath them; their comrades far away; the waves lapping their feet; the sure knowledge that they must die, every man of them within hail of those very woods wherein so many had perished for their pleasure. Aye, it came upon them swiftly enough, and the good boat, making a brave effort to battle with the swell, went down headlong anon, and the cries of twelve drowning men echoed even in the distant island's hills. That which had been a placid sea with two ships' boats was still a placid sea though but one boat swam there. I beheld horrible faces looking upward through the blinding spindrift; I saw arms thrust out above the foam-flecked waters; I witnessed all that fearful struggle for life and air and the sun's bright light; and then, aye, then the scene changed awfully, and silence came upon all, and the sun was still shining, and the untroubled deep lapped gently at our feet.

* * *

The twelve had perished; but the nine were saved. Stand awe-struck as we might, seeing the hand of God in this deliverance, the truth of it remained to put new heart into us and to hide that scene from our eyes. There, pursued no longer, was the island boat. Glad voices hailed us, wan figures stood up to clasp our hands; we lifted a woman to the rocks; we ran hither, thither, for help and comfort for them. But nine in all, they were our human salvage, our prize, our treasure of honest lives. And we had snatched them from the brigand crew, and henceforth they would stand with us, shoulder to shoulder, until the day were won or lost and Ken's Island gave up its mysteries, or gathered us for that last great sleep-time from which there is no waking.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BEGINNING OF THE SIXTY HOURS

IT was near about midday on a Saturday that we saved the poor folks from the island, and not long after midnight on the Monday that our troubles came to a head. I like to call these the "sixty hours"; and as what I have to write of them is written, as it were, from watch to watch, so swiftly did things happen, I will try to make a diary of it that you may follow me more closely.

Saturday, May 27th. At midday.

There are nine people rescued from the ship, and one of these a girl, Isabel, the daughter of Captain Nepeen, of the American navy. Her father is with her, a tall, stately man, very quiet and orderly, and quite ready to take a man's duty in the house. Of the others, the most part are American seamen, for this was an ocean-going steamer, Silver Bell, trading from American ports to Yokohama. All are very astonished at the things they have seen and heard both in this house and upon Ken's Island; but they are too ill to take much part in them, and the young lady lies still in a dead trance. Doctor Gray says that he will save her; but another man, knowing less, might think that she was dead.

The same day. At four o'clock.

They waked me from sleep at this hour to tell me that the men in the caverns below were beating upon the iron doors of the corridor, and appeared likely to force their way up to our part of the house. Captain Nepeen brought the news himself, and had a long talk with me. I found him a cultured man, and one who got a grip of things sooner than I had expected.

"Mr. Begg," he said, "it is plain that we have fallen into the hands of a very great scoundrel. I cannot imagine what kind of intellect has made use of this

extraordinary place, but I can very plainly divine the purpose. It is for you and me to answer to civilization and justice. We must begin at once, Captain Begg, without any loss of time," says he.

I answered him a little sharply, perhaps, being not over-pleased that he should make so light of my own part in the matter.

"Sir," said I, "what a seaman can do I have done already, or you would not be here to speak of it. Let that go by. The news that you bring won't wait for civilities. It must be plain to you that if we are to stand a siege in this house, we must hold every gate of it. There are men in the galleries below; Heaven knows how many of them. I would name that first and let the rest come after."

He was put about at this, and made haste to express a gratitude I had not looked for. His naval training prompted him to habits of authority. I could see that he was itching to be up and acting, and I knew that he needn't wait long for that.

"Indeed," says he, warmly, "we owe our lives to you, as many a good seaman will owe it in the days to come. I should have spoken of that first. The wonders of this place drive other thoughts from a man's head. We were half dead when we saw your signal, captain. What has become of my fellow-passengers and the rest of the crew, God alone knows. They put us ashore on the island after the ship was taken last night, and nine of us, as you see, are here to tell the story. I have heard the tradition of Ken's Island from the Japanese, but I never believed a word of it before yesterday. Now I know that it is true. My fellow-passengers are there, dead or dying, and at sundown I am certainly going ashore to do what I can for them."

"You are a brave man, Captain Nepeen," said I, "a very brave man. Where you go I follow. We cannot leave poor seamen to perish, cost us what it may. Yet I would not hide it from you that it is a big business, and that the man who goes to Ken's Island to-night may never return. We are now fourteen in this house, and our first duty is to leave it safe for those who trust us. With your help, Captain Nepeen, we'll answer the scum down below," said I.

He assented very heartily and began to speak of the arms that we had and of the manner of employing them. His fellows, I learned, were bivouacked in the great hall, and these he waked first while I was getting the sleep out of my eyes and

asking myself, "What next?" The room in which I lay was Czerny's own room; and now in the daylight the sea played cool and green upon the arched windows and showed to me such sights on the rocks without as I had never dreamed of in the darker hours. What genius had pitched upon such a house under the waves? I asked. What spirit of evil breathed upon this dreadful place? What craving for solitude sent this master-mind here to the bed of the Pacific Ocean, where it could spy upon these uncanny secrets, watching the still green water, face to face with devilish shapes butting upon the glass, the friend of the horrid creatures which slimed upon the windows and crawled to their rocky haunts, or fought claw to claw in the sight of their enemy, man? Desperate as the plight was, I must stand a minute before the crystal panes and watch that changing spectacle of the sea's own wonders. The very water was so near that I thought I had but to stretch out a hand to touch it. The weird, wild things that crept over the rocks, surely they would enter this room presently! And Czerny could live here, cheek by jowl with these fearsome mysteries! Again I say that man knows little of his fellow-man, of his better nature or his worse.

The same day. At five o'clock.

We open the lower doors and go down into the galleries. Seven men are with me and each carries a musket. The quest is not so much for those shut down in the pit as for the life which they may send up to us. Doctor Gray has put it in a word, and it is true. The great engine, which draws the air from the sea's brink and drives it out in life-giving currents through the corridors of Czerny's house, that engine alone stands between us and eternity this day. If those below have kept that engine going until this time, it is for their own safety's sake. Rob them of food and drink, and what security have we that they will continue at the task? And yet, the deed be my witness, it was a perilous journey. No man in our company could say surely how many of Czerny's crew he would find in the black labyrinth we must face. No man could speak of the hidden mysteries lurking in passage or cavern, far from the sea-gate and the sun's light. We were going into the unknown; and we went with timorous steps, each asking himself, "Shall I live to see the day again?" each saying to the other, "Stand close!"

Now, the knocking had ceased when we opened the gates, and we stood for a little while peering down into that corridor, which I have named already as the backbone of the lower house. Lighted it was, the lamps still burning, its barred doors shut, its branching passages suggesting a hive of rocky nests which might

harbour an army of desperadoes. No sound came up to us from below save the sound of the engine throbbing, throbbing, as it fanned a breath of life and drove it upwards to us fresh and sweet upon our faces. Whoever lurked in that abyss feared to show himself or to cry a truce. We were hedged about by black mystery, and, rifle in hand, we set out to learn the truth.

There were lamps in the corridor, but in the passages branching from it no light save that which streamed down, green and silvery, from the windows which shut the still sea out. Oftentimes the seven with me would draw all close together, awed by the fantastic spectacle these glimpses of the sea's heart showed to them. At other times the nearer alarm would set them quaking, and crying "Hist!" they would listen for steps in the silence or other sounds than that of the engine's pulse and the whirring fans. The very stillness, I think, made them afraid. The horrors of the windows—above all, that horror of the nameless fish—could frighten a man as no spectre of God's earth above. If I had accustomed myself in part to these new sensations, if Czerny's house seemed to me rather a refuge than a terror, none the less there were moments when my step halted and my eyes were glued upon the sights I saw. For here it would be a monstrous shark lying still in a glassy pool; or there a very army of ferocious crabs, their eyes outstanding, their claws crushing prey, their great shells shaped like fungi of the deep; or going on a little way again I stopped before a giant porthole and discovered a devil-fish and his nest in the deep and said that nothing like to it had been heard or told of. Here lies a great basin scooped out of the coral rock, and the green water is focused in it until it looks like a prism, and everywhere, in nook and crevice, the deadly tentacles, the frightful eyes of these unnameable creatures seem to twist and stare, and threaten us. Such fish we counted, hundreds of them, at the windows of the second cavern we entered; and, drawing back from it affrighted, we went on like men who fear to speak of that which they have seen.

"A madman's house; it could not be anything else," says Captain Nepeen, as pale as any ghost; "unless I had seen it with my own eyes, Mr. Begg, no story that ever was written would make me believe it. And yet it is true, as Heaven is above us, it is true."

"No doubt of that," said I, "a madman's house, captain, and madmen to people it. But of that we'll speak by-and-bye; for the shadows may listen. Keep your gun ready; there will be others about besides ourselves. Here's the first of them—

stone-dead, by the Lord!"

They all came to a stand at my words, and saw that which my eyes discovered for them—the figure of a dead man, lying full and plain to be seen in the lamp's glare, and so fallen that no one might ask you how he had died.

"One," said I, "and that which killed him left behind! He's been struck down as he ran. There's the knife that did it, lads!"

A young seaman among us shuddered when he saw the knife still sticking in the dead man's side. The rest of us drew the body out of the light and went on again with wary steps. We were near the great dormitory at this time, the door of which I myself had locked; but it was open now and the lock broken. Lamps still burned in that vast room; food lay still upon its tables; but the story of it was to be read at every step. Chests overturned, chairs smashed, a litter of clothes upon the floor, broken bottles, an empty pistol, great marks upon the door where iron had indented it, bore witness to the struggle for light and freedom. The prisoners had fled, but life was the price of liberty. I took one swift glance round this broken prison, and then led my comrades out of it.

"The birds have flown and one of them is winged," said I. "There are five more to take, and the shadows hide them! Come on, my lads, or they'll say that eight were scared by five, and that's no tale to tell of honest seamen!"

I spoke up to encourage them, for, truth to tell, the dark and the mystery were playing strange tricks with my nerves. As we penetrated deeper into that labyrinth I could start at every shadow and see a figure in every cranny. The men that the dark patches harboured, where were they? Their eyes might be watching every step we took, their pistols covering our bodies as we hurried on to the depths. And yet no sound was heard, the great engine throbbed always; the cool, sweet air blew fresh upon our faces.

Now, the first voice spoke at the head of the engine-room stairs, from an open cavern which no lamp illumined. I had just called out to Captain Nepeen to follow me to the engine-room, and was bidding the others wait at the stairs-head, when a shot came flashing out of the darkness, and in the flame of the gun's light I saw a great hulking figure, and recognised it instantly. It was that of Kess Denton, the yellow man, whom I had left senseless at the door of Ruth

Bellenden's bungalow more than twenty days ago. A giant figure, the head bandaged, the arms and chest naked, a rifle gripped in both hands, this phantom of the darkness showed itself for an instant and then vanished with an echoing laugh which mocked and angered us. At the same moment the young seaman who had shuddered before the dead, fell headlong in the passage, and with one loud cry gave up his life.

And this was the first man who died for little Ruth Bellenden's sake.

We swung about on our heels as the report rang out and fired a blazing volley into the darkness of the cavern. What other men lingered there, how many of the driven ghouls who haunted the labyrinth received that hail of lead, I shall never know nor care to ask. Groans answered our shots; there were cries of pain, the curses of the wounded, the derisive laughter of those that escaped. But little by little the sounds died away, echoing in other and distant galleries, or coming to us as whispered voices, speaking from places remote, and leaving to us at last a silence utter and profound.

We were masters of the bout and the engine was ours.

"Captain Nepeen," said I, "do you and three others go back to the stairs-head and hold it until I come. If they are afraid to face us here, they'll never face us at all. Why, look at it. Seven men out in the light, as fair a target as a woman might ask for, and they show us their heels. Go back and hold the gate, and I and those with me will answer for the engine. Time afterwards to hunt the vermin out."

He took my order unwillingly, I could see. A greater devil for a fight than that smooth-faced American sailor I shall never meet in all my days. Keen as a hound after quarry, he would have hunted out the vermin, I do believe, if the path had led down to the mouth of Hades itself.

"You will not go alone, captain," cried he, "that's plain madness."

"I take two to my call," said I, "and leave you the rest."

"But what—aren't you afraid, man?"

"Afraid! Of whom?" said I. "Of an old man—but that's too far ahead. I'll speak of it when I come up, captain. Perhaps it's only my own idea. But it's good

enough to go on with."

He had still something to say, and, looking first into the black cavern, which we had filled with shot, and then down the stairs towards the engine-room, he went on presently:

"You take a big risk and I hope you'll get out of it. How many do you expect to find below?

"One," said I, quickly, "and he a friend. It's a strange story, captain, and wonderful, too. But it will wait."

I was at the door of the engine-room before he could answer me, and pulling back the leather curtain I put my own idea to the proof. Just as forty hours ago, so now that gloomy cavern shimmered with the crimson light which the giant furnaces cast upon its rocky roof. Now, as then, leather-clad figures moved before its molten fires. There were the mighty boilers, the pumping engine, the throbbing cylinders, the shining cranks; but the man who staggered towards me in the white light, the man who uttered a glad cry of recognition, the man who fell at last at my feet, imploring me for the love of mercy to bring him food and drink, that man was no enemy.

He was Clair-de-Lune, the old Frenchman, and I had but to look at him twice to see that he was the neighbour of death.

"Clair-de-Lune, old comrade!" I cried, "you! We owe our lives to *you*, then! By thunder, you shame us all!"

He was pale as death; the sweat ran in streams down upon his naked breast; his words came like a torrent when he tried to tell me all.

"Three days in prison, and no man come to me," he said, pathetically; "then I hear your voice. I say it is Captain Begg. I am glad, monsieur, because it is a friend. I break the door of my prison and would come up to you; but no, there is no one in the house; all gone. I say that my friends die if I do not serve them. There are lads with me; but they are honest. Ah, Captain Begg, food and drink, for the love of Christ!"

He fainted in thy arms, and I carried him from the place. Again, in all

providence, I and those dear to me had been saved by the fidelity of one of the oddest of God's creatures.

The same day. At eight o'clock.

I have begun to believe that the Italian is right, and that Czerny left no more than eight men in the lower house. No attack has been made upon the Americans we put in charge of the engine, nor is there any news of those mutineers who fled from us this morning, save that which comes from two of them, very pitiful creatures, broken-down and starving, who have surrendered their arms and begged for food. The others, they say, will come in presently, when the big man, whom they call Kess Denton, will let them. They protest that their comrades are but four, and two of them wounded grievously. I no longer feel any anxiety about that which is below, and I have told Miss Ruth as much. She has now been two hours with Captain Nepeen. Her way of life draws her sympathetically towards that brave and gentle man. It must be so. The world has put a great gulf between the simple seaman and those whom fortune shelters at her heart. A plain sailor has his duty to do; the world would laugh at him if he forgot it because the years have taught him to worship a woman's step and to seek that goal of life to which her hand may lead him.

An hour later.

We are to go ashore with the dark to see if we can save any of the refugees marooned on the island. It is a desperate chance and may cost good men's lives. I do not forbid it, for I have lived and suffered on Ken's Island myself. If there are living men there now—it may be women, too—held in that trance of death from which they must awake to madness or never wake again, the commonest instinct of pity says to me, "Go." I have consulted Doctor Gray, and he is doubtful of the venture. "Mind what you are doing, I beg of you," he says. "Are there not women to save in this house?" Miss Ruth overhears him and draws me aside, and, putting her hand upon my arm winningly, she lifts her pretty face to mine and says, "Jasper, you will save them!"

I am going ashore, and Captain Nepeen goes with me.

At ten o'clock.

We put off a boat at ten o'clock and rowed straight for the open beach. It was a gloriously clear night, with a heaven of blazing stars and a sea like flowing silver. The ship's boats made so many black shapes, like ocean drift in the pools of light; and Czerny's yacht, speaking of that dread Presence, lay as an evil omen in the anchorage to the northward. Ken's Island itself was uplifted like some mountain of the sea, snowcapped in its dazzling peaks, harbouring its wayward forests and lovely glens and fresh meadows which the moon's light frosted. And over all was that thin veil of the fog, a steaming blue vapour flecked with the richest hues; now drifting in clouds of changing tints, now spreading into fantastic creations and phantom cities, pillars of translucent yellow flame, banks of darker cloud as though a storm were gathering. Sounds of the night came to us from that dismal island; we heard the lowing of the kine, the sea-bird's hoot, ever and anon the terrible human cry which spoke of a soul in agony. And with these were mingled grimmer sounds, like very music of the storm: the echo of distant gunshots fired by Czerny's men at the anchored yacht which refused them harbourage.

There were four with me in the boat, and Captain Nepeen was one of them. I had set Peter Bligh at the tiller, and Seth Barker and an American seaman to pull the oars. We spoke rare words, for even a whisper would carry across that night-bound sea. There were rifles in our hands; good hope at our hearts. Perchance, even yet, we should awake some fellow-creature from the nameless sleep in the woods whose beauty veiled the living death.

Now, I say that Czerny's men were firing rifle-shots at the anchored schooner, and that sound was a true chantey for our ears. What eyes would they have for us when their salvation lay aboard the yacht? We were nothing to them; the ship was all. And, be sure, we did not go unwatched or helpless. Behind us, at the gate we had left, our gun showed its barrel like the fang of a slipped hound. Cunning hands were there, brave fellows who followed us in their hearts, while we crossed the basin swiftly and drew near the terrible shore. If we had seen the sun for the last time, then so be it, we said. It is not a seaman's way to cry at danger. His word is "must," and in a sure purpose lies his salvation.

We made the island at the westward end that we might have a clear sheet of water between Czerny's boats and our own; and we so set our course that our gun could sweep the intervening seas if any eye detected us. The land was low-lying towards the west and marshy; yet, strange to be told, the fog lay light upon

it. It had been planned between us that Captain Nepeen and I should go ashore while the others held the boat. We carried revolvers in our hands, but no other arms. The death-fog was our true defence; and against that each man wore the respirator that Duncan Gray had made for him. Sleep might be our lot, but it would come upon us slowly.

"It will be straight for the woods, captain," said I, "and all our heart go with us. Your friends, who were put ashore last night, will never stray far from the beach, believe me. We'll search the foreshore and leave the rest to chance. As for going under, we sha'n't think of that. It would never do to begin by being afraid of it."

He answered readily enough that he had never thought of such a thing.

"Where you lead, there I follow, Captain Begg," said he. "I shall not be far behind you, rely upon it."

"And me not far from the shore when it's 'bout ship and home again," chimes in Peter Bligh. "God go with you, captain, for you are a brave man entirely!"

I laughed at their notion of it, and went a little way up the beach. The respirator about my mouth, charged with some chemical substance I did not know the use of, permitted me to breathe at first with some ease. And what was more extraordinary was this, that while in the woods the fog had seemed to suffocate me, here it was exhilarating; bracing a man's steps so that he seemed to walk on air; exalting him so that his mind was on fire and his head full of the wildest notions. No coward that ever lived would have known a moment's fear under the stimulation of that clear blue vapour. I bear witness, and there are others to bear witness with me, that a whole world of strange figures and wonderful places opened up to our eyes when we began to push ashore and to leave the sandy beach behind us. And that was but the beginning of it, for more fearful things were to follow after.

I will try to describe for you both the place and the scene, that you may realize my sensation, and follow me truly in this, my third journey to Ken's Island. Imagine, if you can, an undulating stretch of lush grass and pasture-land, a glorious meadow flooded with the clear, cold light; arched over with a heaven of stars; bordered about by heavy woods; dipping to the sea on two sides and extending shimmering sands to the breaking swell on the third. Say that a hot

blue fog quivers in the air above this meadow-land, and is breathed in at every breath you take. Conceive a mind so played upon by this vapour that the meadows and the woods beyond the meadows are gradually lost to view, and a wonder-world quickly takes their place. Do this, and you may follow me more surely to a phantom city of majestic temples hewn out of a golden rock and lifting upward until they seem to touch the very skies; you may peer with me into abysses so profound that no eye can fathom their jewelled depths; you may pass up before walls built wholly of gems most precious; you may sleep in woods beneath trees silvered over with light; search countless valleys rich in unknown flowers. And the city is peopled with an unnumbered multitude of moving figures, the sensuous figures of young girls all glittering in gold and jewels; the shapes of an army of giants in blackest armour; and there are animals that no eye has seen before, and beasts more terrible than the brain can conceive.

Say, too, that this deadly vapour of the island so stimulates the faculties that earth no longer binds a man nor heaven imprisons him. Say that he can rise above the spheres to unknown worlds, can, span the seas, and bridge the mountains. Depict him, as it were, throwing off his human shape and seeing the abodes of men so far below him, so puny, so infinitely small that he begins to realize eternity. Cast him down from these visions suddenly and in their place set up black woods and the utter darkness of nature impenetrable. Let the exaltation leave him, the sights fade utterly, the dismal abyss of the nether world close him in. Awake him from these again and let him reel up and stagger on and believe that he is sinking down to the eternal sleep. Such sensations Ken's Island will give him until at last he shall fall; and lying trance-bound for the rain to beat upon his face, or the sun to scorch him, or the moon to look down upon his dreams, he shall lie and know that the world is there, and that nevermore may he have part or lot in it.

I have set down this account of my own experiences on the island that you may compare it with the books of others who have since visited this wonderful place; but I would not have you think that I, and the brave man who stood at my side, forgot that human errand which put us ashore in those dismal swamps; or hung back to speak of our own sensations while others might need us so sorely. If we passed from delirium to sanity, from the height of hysterical imagination to the depths of despair and gloom, none the less the faculty of action remained, the impulse which cried, "Straight on," and left us willing still to dare the worst if

thereby a fellow-creature might be saved. Burning as our brains were, heavy the limbs, we could still push on across the meadows, search with our eyes for those poor people we had come out to save. How long this power of action would remain to us, what supreme misfortune would end our journey at last, throwing us, it might be, to the grass, there to sleep and end it all, we would not so much as consider. Good men were perishing on Ken's Island, and every instinct said, "You, Jasper Begg, and you, James Nepeen, hold out a hand to them."

"Do you see anything, captain?" I asked my companion again and again; "we should be near them now. Do you hear any sound?"

He answered me, gasping for his breath:

"Not a whisper."

"Yonder," I would go on, "yonder by the little wood; they landed there. Can you get as far, captain?"

"I'll try, by Heaven!" said he, between his teeth.

"They'll not be far from the wood," said I, "that's common sense. Shut your eyes to all the things you see and don't think about it. It's an awful place, captain. No living man can picture its fellow."

I waited for him to come up to me, and so placed myself that his eyes, I hoped, might turn seaward and not up towards the woods where such weird sights were to be seen. For this place, the angle of the great pasture-land where it met the forest, was occupied by sleeping cattle, white, and still, and frigid, so that all the scene, glimmering in the moonlight, might have been cut out of some great block of marble; and cows and sheep, and trees and hills, all chiselled by the hand of Death. That a living thing should be speaking and moving there seemed almost an outrage upon the marvellous beauty of that field of sleep. The imagination reeled before this all-conquering trance, this glory of nature spellbound. It were as though a man must throw himself to the earth, do what he would, and surrender to the spell of it. And that, perchance, we had done, and the end had been there and then, but for a woman's cry, rising so dolefully in the woods that every impulse was awakened by it and all our resolutions retaken.

"Did you hear that?" I cried to him, wildly; "a woman's voice, and near by, too! You'll not turn back now, Captain Nepeen!"

"Not for a fortune!" said he, bravely; "it would be Gertrude Dolling, the purser's sister; we cannot leave her!"

The desire was like a draught of wine to him. He had been near falling, I make sure, but now, steadying himself for an instant upon my arm, he set off running at all his speed, and I at his heels, we crossed the intervening grass and were in the wood. There we found the purser's sister, stumbling blindly to and fro, like a woman robbed of sight, while children were clinging to her dress and crying pitifully because she did not heed them.

It was an odd scene, and many must come and go before I forget it. Dark as the wood might be by day, the moonlight seemed to fill every glade of it, showing us the gnarled trunks and the flowering bushes, the silent pools and the grassy dells. And in the midst of this sylvan rest, remote from men, a lonely thicket of the great Pacific Ocean, was this figure of civilization, a young girl decked out in white, with a pretty hat that Paris might have sent her, and little children, in their sailors' clothes, clinging trustingly, as children will in confidence to a woman's protecting hand. No surprise was it to me then, nor is it a surprise now, that the girl neither saw nor heard us. The trance had gripped her surely; the first delirium of exaltation had robbed her of sight and sense and even knowledge of the children. That doleful wailing song of hers was the first chant of madness. Her steps were undirected, now carrying her to the wood's heart, now away from it a little way towards the sea's beach. My order, twice given, that she should stand and wait for us was never answered; I do not even think that she felt my hand upon her shoulder. But she fell at last, limp and shuddering, into my arms, and I picked her up and turned towards the sea.

"The children to you, and straight ahead," said I to the captain; "run for your life, and for the lives of these little ones. It will be something to save them, captain."

He answered me with a word that was almost a groan; but stooped to his task, nevertheless. He knew that it was a race for their lives and ours.

I had the burden in my arms, I say, and no feather's weight was less to me in the hope of my salvation and of those we strove for. The way lay straight down,

through a ravine of the low cliffs to the beach we had left and the good boat awaiting us there. Nothing, it seemed, but a craven will could stand henceforth between us and God's fresh air that night. And yet how wrong that reckoning was! There were a dozen of Czerny's men halloaing wildly on the cliff-side when we came out of the wood; and almost before we had marked them, they were after us headlong like devils mad in wine.

Now these men, as we learned afterwards, driven by hunger and thirst to the point of raving, had come ashore that very evening; it may be to rifle the stores on the island; it may be in that spirit of sheer madness which sometimes drives a seaman on. Twenty in all when they landed, there were eight asleep already when we encountered them; and lying on the cliff's side, some with arms and heads overhanging, some shuddering in the fearful sleep, one at least bolt upright against the rock with his arms outstretched as though he were crucified, they dotted that dell like figures upon a battle-field. The rest of them, a sturdy twelve, fired by the dancing madness, brandishing their knives, uttering the most awful imprecations, ran on the cliff's head above us, and seemed to be making straight for the cove where our boat lay. And that is why we said that the race was for life or death.

There are moments in his life when a man must decide "aye" or "nay" without checking his step to do so. As things stood, the outlook could not have been blacker while we ran through the ravine to the water's edge. Behind, in the wood, lay the dancing death; before us these madmen with their gleaming knives, their unearthly yells, their reeling gait and fearful gesticulations. We had to choose between them, the sleep in the lonely glen, or the race downward to the shore; and we chose the latter, believing, I think, that the end must be the same, turn where we would.

"Keep your course, keep your course!" I cried to the captain as we ran on. "Hold to it, for your life—it's our only chance!"

He set one of the children on the sand, and, bidding the little one run on ahead, he drew his revolver and stood shoulder to shoulder with me.

"A straight barrel and mark your men," cried he, very quietly; "it's a cool head that wins this game. We have ten shots and the butts will do for two. You will make that twelve if you add it up, captain."

His coolness surprised me, but it was not to be wondered at. Never from the first had I heard this man utter one word which complained of our situation or of its difficulty. To Captain James Nepeen a tight corner was a pleasure-ground; and now with these yelling devils all round him, and the vapour steaming in the woods behind, and the sea shimmering like a haven that would beckon us to salvation, he could yet wear that cynical smile of his, and go with lighter step, and bear himself like the true seaman that he was. Of all that I have ever sailed with I would name him first as a true comrade in peril or adversity. To his skill I owed my life that night.

"One," said he, suddenly, when a great head showed itself on the cliff above us and was instantly drawn back. So quick had he been, so wild did the aim appear, that when a body rolled presently down the grassy bank and lay stark before us I could not believe that a bullet had done its work.

"One," cried he again, triumphantly—"and one from twelve leaves eleven. Ha, that's your bird, captain, and a big one!"

Another man fell with a loud cry

Another man fell with a loud cry.

I had pulled my trigger, prompted by his example, and another man from the cliff above lifted his arms and fell with a loud cry. And this was the astonishing thing, that though we two were caged in a ravine like rats in a trap, and had shot two of the devils stone-dead, no answering shot was fired from above, no rifle levelled at us.

"No arms," cries the captain, presently; "and most of them half drunk. We're going through this, Mister Begg, right through, I assure you!"

Well, I began to believe it; nevertheless, there were men on the shore before us, halloaing madmen, with clasp-knives in their hands and murder in their faces. Clear in the moonlight you could see them; the still air sent up their horrid imprecations. Those men we must pass, I said, if we would reach the boat. And

we passed them. It seems a miracle even when I write of it.

Now, we had halted at the foot of the ravine and were just prepared to go headlong for the six, believing, it may be, that one at least of us must fall, when they fired a shot, not from the gun at the watch-tower gate, but from Czerny's own yacht away in the offing; and coming plump down upon the sand, not a cable's length from our own boat, a shell burst with a thunderous explosion, and scattering in fragments of steel, it scared the mutineers as no rifle could have done. Roaring out like stricken bulls, cursing their master in all tongues, they began to storm the cliff-side nimbly and to run for the shelter of the woods; but some fell and rolled backward to the sand, some turned on their own knives and lay dead at the gully's foot; while those who gained the summit stood all together, and wailing their doleful song they yelled defiance at Czerny's ship.

But we—we made the boat; and falling half-dead in it, we thrust it from the beach and heard our comrades' voices again.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF THE SIXTY HOURS

The same night. Off Ken's Island. Half-past twelve o'clock.

We have not returned to the watch-tower rock, nor can we bring ourselves to that while there is any hope left to us of helping those whom Czerny marooned on the dangerous shore. Our gig drifts lazily in a pool of the whitest moonlight. We can still make out the ship's boats lying about Czerny's yacht, and the angry crews which man them. From the beach itself rises up the mutineers' wail of agony, like a wild beast's cry, at one time loud and ferocious, then dying away in a long-drawn cry, which haunts the ear. Ever and anon, as the mood takes them, the gunners on Czerny's yacht let fly at us with their erring shells; but they smite the air or hurt the water, or drop the bounding fire on the shimmering spread of

sand beyond us. Perhaps it is that this employment occupies the minds of the longboats' crews and keeps them from reckoning with the master who has befooled them. They, at least, are at the crisis of their peril. Afloat there on a gentle swell they must know that any hour may bring a changing wind and a breaking sea, and a shore rockbound and unattainable. They are playing with chance, and chance will turn upon them presently. Let them make for the island where the laughing woods say "Come!" and the heralds of sleep will touch them upon the foreheads, and raving, dreaming, they will fall at last, just victims of the island visions. Say that their brute intelligences do not yet understand this; but hunger and thirst will teach them ere the dawn, and then reckoning must come!

All this I foresaw as we let the boat drift by the sandy bays, and spake, one to another, of to-morrow and that which it must bring. Whatever our own misfortune might be, that of Czerny's men was worse a hundredfold. For the moment it amused them to see the shells plunging and hissing in the sea about us; for the moment the desire to be quit of us made them forget how it stood with them and what must come after. But the reckoning would be sure. Let a capful of wind come scudding across that glassy sea, and all the riches in the world would not buy Edmond Czerny's life of these sea-wolves who sought it.

"They'll stand by until they know the worst, and then nothing will hold them," I said to my comrades. "If they think they can get aboard the yacht, they'll do so and make for some safe port. If not, they'll try to rush the house. Assume that they are driven hard enough and no gun will keep them off. Let ten or twenty go down, the rest will come in. I am thinking that we should get back to the house, lads, and not leave it to younger heads. We've done what we could here, and it's plainly useless to go on with it!"

They were all with me in this, none more so than Captain Nepeen, who, up to this time, had been for the shore and the friends who might be found there.

"At least we have made every prudent effort; and there are others to think of," said he. "If they had a gunner worth a groat, we should not be where we are, captain. You must allow something to chance and a lucky shot. They may get home even yet. I will not ask you what that would mean, for you are a seaman and you know."

His words, I think, recalled us to the danger. No hope of rescue rewarded our eyes when we scanned the black woods and the lonely fore-shore of the forbidden land. Dark and terrible in the moonlight, like some mighty beacon of evil rising up above that sleeping sea, it seemed to say to us, "Go, turn back; remember those who count upon you." And we pulled from it reluctantly out into the broad sea, and breathed a full breath as we left its vapours and its fetid shores.

Three shots were fired at us while we crossed the open channel, and one fell so close that we could see the cleavage of the water and feel the silver spray upon our heated faces. This quickened our oars, you may be sure, and set our course true and straight for the house, whose iron gate stood up like a fortress of the deep and opened its rocky shelter to us. Clair-de-Lune was there, too, halted and motionless by the sea's brink; Dolly Venn stood at his side; and once I thought that I saw Miss Ruth herself peering across the lapping wavelets and watching us with a woman's anxious eyes.

Nor did we go unobserved by those who had so much to gain if mischance should befall us in that last endeavour. Like pirates' junks, slipping from a sheltered creek, the devils in the longboats espied us in the moonlight and began to row towards us and to hail us with those wild shouts which yesterday we had heard even in the House Under the Sea. Yet, I witness, they did not affright us. We knew that sure eyes watched them from the reef; no lads' playing at the length of a watchdog's chain, kept more surely from the dog's teeth than those night-birds from the gun's range. Shots they fired—wild, reckless shots, skimming the water, peppering the sky, whistling in the clear air above us. But the boats drew no nearer, and it seemed that we must touch our haven unharmed, when the American seaman, stretching out his arms in a gesture fearful to think of, and ceasing to row with horrid suddenness, fell backward without any word and lay, a dying man, before us.

They had shot him through the heart; and he was the second who fell for Ruth Bellenden's sake.

Sunday morning. Five o'clock.

I have known little sleep for the last thirty hours, nor can I sleep at the crisis of our misfortunes. It is a still grey morning, with heavy cloud in the East, and

lapping rhythmical waves beating upon the windows of the house as though anon a gale must blow and all this torrid silence be swept away.

I cannot conceal it from myself what a gale would mean to us; how it must scatter the open boats, drifting there at the mercy of a Pacific sea; how, perchance, it might even lift the fog from Ken's Island and show us sunny fields and sylvan woods, a harbourage of delight to which all might flock with leaping hearts. And yet, says reason, if it so befall that you yourselves may go ashore to yonder island, what logic shall keep Czerny's men from the same good anchorage? They are as twenty to one against you. If there are houses there, and stores for the sun-time, who will shut them to this horde of desperadoes? Aye, the head reels to think of it; the hours pass slowly; to-morrow we shall know.

Now, I have thought of all this, and yet there are other things in my mind, and they jostle one with the other, the sweet and the bitter, the good and the bad, until it seems to me that I no longer get at the heart of it, but am as a man drifting without a chart, set free on some unknown sea whose very channels I may not fathom. Three hours ago when I came ashore and lifted the dead man out, and sent the sleeping girl to shelter, Ruth Bellenden's hand was the first to touch my own, her word the first my ear would catch. So clear it was, such music to a man to hear that girlish voice asking of his welfare as a thing most dear to her, that all the night vanished at the words, and Ken's Island was lost to my sight, and only the memory of the olden time and of my life's great hope remained to me.

"Jasper!" she said, "it was not you—oh, Jasper, it was not you, then!"

I stepped from the boat, and, taking her hand in mine, I drew her a little nearer to me; then, fearful of myself, I let go her hand again and told her the simple truth.

"Miss Ruth," said I, "it is yon poor fellow. I will not say 'Thank God!' for what right have I to serve you before him? He did his duty; help me to do mine."

She turned away and gazed out over the sea to the yacht still thundering its cannon and ploughing with its wasted shot the unoffending sea. Deep thoughts were in her mind, I make sure, a torture of doubt, and hope, and trepidation. And I—I watched her as though all my will was in her keeping, and there, on the lonely rock, was the heart of the world I would have lived and died in.

"You cannot forbid me to be glad, Jasper," she said, presently; "you have given me the right. I saw you on the shore. Oh! my heart went with you, and I think that I counted the minutes, and I said, 'He will never come; he is sleeping.' And then I said, 'It is Jasper's voice.' I saw you stand up in the boat and afterwards there were the shadows. Jasper, there cannot be shadows always; the sun must shine sometimes."

She held my hand again and touched it with her cheek. I think that I forgot all the place about, the sea and the men, the distant shore and the island's shape, the still night and the dawn to come; and knowing nothing save that Ruth, little Ruth, was by my side, I went into dreamland and said, "It shall be forever."

Monday. At six o'clock.

I cannot sleep and I have come to keep watch on the rock. Old Clair-de-Lune is with me, but silence is in the house below, where some sleep and some are seeking sleep. Of all who can discuss our future bravely, none speaks better sense than this simple old man; and if he rebukes my own confidence he rebukes it justly. I ask him when the sleep-time will pass and the sun-time come. He shakes his head, he will not prophesy.

"God forbid that it should pass," says he. "They will go ashore to the island, and we—we perish," says he. "Pray that it shall not be, captain. We have food for three week—month; but what come after? You pick up by ship, you say. But not so. When your ship come here the devils set trap, and all is wreck and burn and steal! They take your ship and you perish, you starve. Ah, monsieur, pray that the sun-time do not come."

I lay back upon the rock and thought of it. This old man, surety, was right. Let the fog drift from Ken's Island, the woods awake, life stir again, and how stood we—where was our benefit?

"It is a fearful position," said I, "and Heaven alone knows what the end of it will be. That something has happened to Mister Jacob and my ship I can no longer doubt, Clair-de-Lune. The Southern Cross is on the rocks, be sure of it, and good men with her. Take it that they are picked up and set on the American coast. What then? Who finds the money for another steamer? It is not to be thought of: we must dismiss it from our minds. You say that we have food for three weeks,

and the condensers down below will give us water. But it won't be three weeks before we are in or out of it, my friend. If we are starving, others are starving—those out yonder by Czerny's yacht. He'll give them food to-day; but how long will they drift like cattle for the rain to beat on? Your sense will tell you that they won't drift long, but will be asking questions and wanting their answers. Aye, Clair-de-Lune, we'll listen with all our ears when that begins!"

He had a glass with him and he began to scan the yacht very closely and the ship's boats about it. I had not noticed that there was an unusual stir in the anchorage, but he remarked it now and drew his own conclusions.

"They give rogue man arms and cutlass, captain; he go overboard too. I see them pass from boat to boat. Ah, there he is, the bread and the biscuit. They get breakfast and then come here, captain. What else you look for? They not lie there all the days. They too much devil for that. We few and little; they big and strong. Why shall they not take the house? Some die, but other mans remain. Czerny he say to them, 'Great much price if you kill the English captain.' He know that all his money is locked up down here. Why shall he not come, captain?"

I could not tell him why. My own glasses showed me the things he made mention of and others beside. Arms, I saw, were being passed down from the yacht to the small boats clustered about it. There was no sunlight to glisten upon the bright barrels of the rifles, but I could distinguish them nevertheless; and cutlasses were handed from boat to boat—a good fifty of them I counted, and there were more to come. What the meaning of it was a child might have told you. Truce prevailed between master and man in their common desire of possession. The last great attack was to be made upon us—the rock to be rushed. Even a woman would have divined as much.

"Clair-de-Lune," said I, "the end is coming at last; and it won't be very long. We're dealing with a remarkable man, and it is not to be supposed that he'll sail away and leave us here without one good blow for it. Aye, it's a great mind altogether, and there's the plain truth. Who else but the cleverest would have thought of this place, and come here like a human vulture to feed upon ships and men? There have been many Edmond Czernys in the world; but this man I name chief among them, and others will name him also. We set ourselves against a hand in a million; stiff backs we need to wrestle with that; but we'll do it, old

comrade, we'll see it through yet!"

It was a wild boast, yet, God knows, a well meant one. Perhaps, if he had pushed me to the confession, I would have told him that I was far from believing my own prophecies, and that, in truth, I realized, as he did, the perilous hazard of our position and all that defeat might mean to us. Just as he knew, so did I know that before the night came down dead men might lie on the rocks about me and be engulfed in that sea which beat so gently upon the lonely shore; that living men from the boats yonder would swarm in the galleries below, and women's cries be heard, and something follow which even I dare not contemplate. The dreadful truth, perhaps, kept our tongues away from it; we talked of other things, of Czerny and his house, and of what we would do if the best should befall.

"He wonderful man," old Clair-de-Lune went on, standing, like some old Neptune of the sea, bolt upright on the pinnacle of rock; "wonderful man, and none like him! Thirteen year ago he first find this place, and thirteen year he wreck the ships. I know, for there was a day when he tell me much and I listen. He say, 'Make great fortune and no trouble to earn him. If sailor man drown, more fool he.' All the years back, hundreds of years, ships perish on Ken's Island. Czerny he hear the story in Japan, and he come to see the place for himself. They say he once sleep through the fog and mad afterwards. He no longer have right or wrong or care about the world. He come to Ken's Island and grow rich. Then his engineers find this rock. Once, long time ago, it have been part of the island, captain. The—what you say?—volocano, he shoot fire into the sea; but that was before the peoples. Czerny, he go down into the rock and he discover great cavern and little cavern, and he say, 'I live here in the sleep-time.' Plenty of money make fine house. He shut out the sea wherever he would come in; he build great windows in the rock; his *mécanicien*, he put up engine and draw air from the skies. Long year Czerny live here alone. Then one day come madame—ah, captain, I was sorry when I saw madame come! 'She will suffer here,' I said; she have suffered much already. Czerny is not as other men. If madame say to him, 'You good man; you and I live here always,' then she have everything, she go where she will, she become the master. But I say when I see her, 'No, never she will not say that. She good woman.' And then I fear for her, captain; I fear greatly. I did not know she have the English friend who will save her."

He turned to me wistfully, and I read in his eyes of that deep affection which

little Ruth Bellenden has never failed to win from all who know and learn to love her.

Monday. At three o'clock.

We held a council of war in the great hall at this hour, and came upon a plan to meet the supreme attack which must be made upon us tonight. We are all of one mind, that Czerny will seek to rush the house under cover of the darkness, and in this the sunless day must help him. We cannot look for any moon or brightness of the stars which shall aid our eyes when the sun has set. It will be a dark night, cloudy and, perhaps, tempestuous. If the storm should break and nature be our ally, then the worst is done with already and the end is sure. But we have no right to hope for that. We must face the situation like thinking men, prepared for any eventuality.

Now, I had slept a little at the height of the day, and the first news that they brought to me when I waked was of the surrender of the two that remained in the caverns below, and of the fidelity of the other four of Czerny's men who already had joined us. So far as I can make out there may be but one living man in the lower story of the house, and for him and his goodwill we care nothing.

The rest of the crowd we fought, seeing, perhaps, that fortune goes with us so far, will themselves stand on fortune's side and serve us faithfully. That much, at least, I put to my fellows as we sat round the table in the hall and made those plans which reason dictated.

"They'll serve," said I, "as long as we are on the winning side. We'll put them in the engine room, where they'll keep the fires going for their own sakes. If they so much as look false, then shoot them down. It is in my mind, Captain Nepeen," said I, "that we'll have need of such a man as you, and three good fellows with you, at the lesser gate. You should find cover on the rocks while we hold the near sea for you. If Czerny gets a foothold there and beats that door in, I need not tell you how it will go with us. For the rest, I leave two men at the stairs-head and two in this hall to be at Miss Ruth's call. Peter Bligh and Dolly Venn go up with me to work the gun. If they rush it—well, twenty there won't keep them back with rifles. But I count upon the coward's part, and I say that a man will think twice about dying for such as Czerny and his ambitions. Let that be in all your minds, and remember—for God's sake remember—what you are fighting for."

"For women's honour and good men's lives," said Captain Nepeen, quietly. "Yes; that's the stake, gentlemen. I don't think we need say any more to nerve our arms and clear our eyes. We fight for all that is most dear to honest men. If we fail, let us at least fail like true seamen who answer 'Here' when duty has called."

At six o'clock.

We all dined together at this time in the large dining-room near by Miss Ruth's boudoir. An odder contrast than that between this fine room below and the still, desolate sea above, no mind could imagine. For, on the one hand, were the insignia of civilization—luxury, display, the splendid apartment, the well-dressed women, the table decked out with fine linen and silver, the windows showing the sea-depths and all their wondrous quivering life; on the other hand, the black shapes of night and death, the menace of the boats, the anchored yacht, the darkening skies, the looming island. We sat down fourteen souls, that might have met in some great country house, and there have gathered in friendship and frivolity. Never in all my life had I seen Miss Ruth so full of vivacity or girlish charm. Her laughter was like the music of bells; the jest, the kindly word was for every man; and yet sometimes I, at her side, could look deep into those grey-blue eyes to read a truer story there. And in the babble of the talk she would whisper some treasured word to me, or touch my hand with her own, or say, "Jasper, it must be well, it must be well with us!" Of that which lay above in the darkening East, no man spoke or appeared to think. There was ruby wine in our glasses; the little French girls capered about us like nymphs from the sea; we spoke of the old time, of sunny days in the blue Mediterranean, of wilder days off the English shores, of our homes so distant and our hopes so high; but never once of the night or that which must befall.

Monday. At eleven o'clock.

We have now been at our stations for two hours and nothing has transpired. I have Clair-de-Lune with me at the great sea-gate, and Dolly Venn and Seth Barker are at the gun. The night is so dark that the best trained eye can distinguish little either on sea or land. Ken's Island itself is now but a blur of black on a cloud-veiled horizon. We have shut off every light in the house itself; the reef runs no longer beneath the sea like a vein of golden light, nor do the windows cast aureoles upon the sleeping water. What breeze there is comes in hot gusts like breath from heated waters. We cannot see Czerny's yacht nor espy

any of his boats near or afar; but we crouch together in the shelter of the rocks, and there is water near to our hand, and food if we seek it, and the ammunition piled, and the barrels of the rifles outstanding, and the figures with their unspoken thoughts, their hopes, their fears of the dreadful dawn that must be. Whence out of the night shall the danger come? Shall it come leaping and brandishing knives, a veiled army springing up from the shadows, or shall it come by stealth, boat by boat, now upon this quarter, now upon that, outposts seeking to flank us, deadly shots fired we know not where? I cannot tell you. The comrades at my side ask again and again, "Do you see anything, captain?" I answer, "Nothing!" It is the truth.

Monday. At midnight.

We are still upon the rock and the shadows engulf us. The lad at my side, sick with waiting, has curled himself up upon a bed of stone and is half asleep; Seth Barker leans against a crag like some figure hewn out of granite; old Clair-de-Lune is all hunched up as a bundle. Nevertheless, masterly eyes scan the lapping waters. Will the night never speak to us? Will the day bring waiting? Ah, no! not that! A shot rings out clear on the still night air; a flash of fire leaps across the sea. We spring to our feet; we cry, "Ready!" The sixty hours are over and the end is near!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SECOND ATTACK ON CZERNY'S HOUSE

THE shot was fired and answered at the lower gate. We had looked for that; for that we had been waiting during the watching hours. They would attack the lesser reef, we said, and our own good men, standing sentinels, would flash the news of it to us, and the gun would do the rest. Dark as it was, the blackest hour the island had given us, nevertheless by daylight we had trained our barrels upon the reef, and now took aim in all confidence. Twice we whistled shrilly to warn our men; twice we heard their answering voices. Then the gun belched forth its hail of shot and the challenge was thrown down.

"Give it to them, Dolly!" I cried, my brain afire at the call of action; "for every honest seaman's sake, give it to them, lad! We'll tell of this to-morrow—aye, Dolly, we'll tell a great story yet!"

He answered me with a boy's glad cry; I do believe it was like a game to him.

"Pass here, pass here!" he kept crying; "we have them every time! In with the shot, Seth—in with it! Don't keep them waiting! Oh, captain, what a night!"

The others said nothing; even Peter Bligh's tongue was still in that surpassing moment. The doubt of it defied words. We knew nothing, nor could we do aught but leave our fortune to the darkness of the night. The rogues who fell, the rogues who stood, the boats that came on, the boats that withdrew, of these we were ignorant. All was hidden from our eyes; the veil of the night cloaked from us the work we had done. If men cried in agony, if groans mocked angry boasts, if we heard the splashing of the oars, the hoarse command, the vile blasphemy, the rest was in imagination's keeping. The outposts of Czerny's crew, we said, had tried to rush the gate where our own men watched; but our own were behind the steel doors now and the gun's hail swept the barren rock. The dawn would

show us the harvest we had reaped.

Now, the volleys rolled their thunder right away to the hills of Ken's Island, and the whistling of the bullets was like the singing of unseen birds above our heads; there were oases of red flame in the waste of blackness; we heard oaths and cries, commands roared hoarsely across the water, voices triumphant and voices that were stilled; and then came the first great silence. Whatever had befallen on the rock, those who sought to force the lesser gate were, for the moment, driven back. Even little Dolly, mad at the gun like one whom no reason could restrain, heard me at last and obeyed my command.

"Cease firing, lad!" roared I, "cease firing! Would you shoot the sea? Yonder's the captain's whistle. It means that the danger's nearer. Aye, stand by, lads," I said, "and look out for it."

We swung the gun round so that it faced the basin before us, and, rifles ready, we peered again in the lowering darkness. About me now I could hear the deep breathing of my comrades and see their crouching figures and say that every nerve was tautened, every faculty awakened. Shielded by the night, those hidden boats were creeping up to us foot by foot. Whatever had been done at the lesser gate had been done as a ruse, I did not doubt. Czerny's goal was the greater door we held so desperately, his desire the full possession, the mastery of the house wherein lay life and treasure and lasting security.

I counted twenty, no man speaking, and then I raised my voice. Dimly, in the shadows, I made out the shape of a longboat drifting to the brink; and to Dolly I said:

"Let go—in God's name, let go, lad!"

He stood to the gun with a cry of defiance and blazed into the darkness. The drifting boat lurched and sagged and turned her beam to the seas. I could distinguish the faces of men, ferocious and threatening, as they peered upward to the rock; I saw other boats looming over the dark water; I heard the ringing command, "In at them! To hell with them!" and then, I think, for many minutes together I fired wildly at the figures before me, swung round now to this side, now to that; was unconscious of the bullets splintering the rock or of the lead shower pouring on us. The battle raged; we were at the heart of it. What should a

man remember then but those who counted upon him?

Now, you have imagined this picture, and you seem to stand with me upon that split of rock, that defiant crag in the great Pacific Ocean, with the darkness of heaven above and the darkness of the sea below, with the belching guns and the spitting rifles, the yells of agony and the crouching figures, the hearts beating high and the sweating faces; and just as the outcome was hidden from me and I knew not from minute to minute whether it were life or death to us, so will you share the meaning of that suspense and all the terror of it. From every side now the rain of shot was poured in upon us, the unceasing torrent came; above, below, ringing upon the iron shield, scattering deadly fragments, ploughing the waters, it fell like a wave impotent, a broken sea whose spindrift even could not harm us. For a good ring of steel fenced us about; we held the turret, and we laughed at the madness below.

"Round with the gun!" I would cry, again and again; "round with her, Dolly. Let them have it everywhere. No favours this night, my lad; full measure and overflowing—let them have it, for Miss Ruth's sake!"

His joyous "Aye, aye, sir!" was a thing to hear. No sailor of the old time, black with powder, mad on a slippery deck, fought, I swear, as we four in that shelter of the turret. Clear as in the sun's day were the waves about us while the crimson flame leaped out. Crouched all together, the sweat upon our foreheads, smoke in our eyes, the wild delight of it quickening us, we blazed at the enemy unseen; we said that right was with us.

There were, as far as I could make out, six boats set to the attack upon the great gate, and seventy or eighty men manning them. Acting together on such a plan as a master-mind had laid down for them, they tried to rush the rock from four points of the compass, trusting, it may be, that one boat, at least, would land its crew upon the plateau. And in this they were successful. Pour shot upon them as we might, search every quarter with the flying shells, nevertheless one boat touched the rock in spite of us, one crew leaped up in frenzy towards the turret. So sudden it was, so unlooked for, that great demoniacal figures seemed upon us even while we said that the seas were clear. Whirling their knives, yelling one to the other, some slipping on the slimy weed, others, more sure in foothold, making for the turret's height, the mutineers fell upon us like a hurricane and so beat us down that my heart sank away from me, and I said that the house was

lost and little Ruth Bellenden their prey at last.

"Stand by the gun—by the gun to the last, if you love your life!" I cried to Dolly Venn. "Do you, Peter, old comrade, follow me; I am going to clear the rock. You will help me to do that, Peter?"

"Help you, captain! Aye," roared he, "if it was the ould divil himself in a travelling caravan, I'd help you!"

He swung his rifle by the barrel as he spoke the words and, bringing it down crash, he cleaved the skull of a great ruffian whose face was already glowering down from the turret's rim. Nothing, I swear, in all that night was more wonderful than the *sang-froid* of this great Irishman (as he would call himself in fighting moods) or the merry words which he could find for us even then in the very crisis of it, when hope seemed gone and the worst upon us. For Peter knew well what I was about when I leapt from the turret and charged down upon the mutineers. A dozen men, perchance, had gained foothold on the rock. We must drive them back, he said, stand face to face with them, let the odds be what they might.

"God strengthen my arm this hour and show me the bald places!" cries he, leaping to the ground and whirling his musket like a demon. Seth Barker, do not doubt, was on his heels—trust the carpenter to be where danger was! I could hear him grunting even above that awful din. He fought like ten, and wherever he swung his musket there he left death behind him.

So follow us as we leap from the turret, and hurl ourselves upon that astonished crew. Black as the place was, tremulous the light, nevertheless the cabined space, the open plateau, was our salvation. I saw figures before me; faces seemed to look into my own; and as a battle-axe of old time, so my rifle's butt would fall upon them. Heaven knows I had the strength of three and I used it with three's agility, now shooting them down, now hitting wildly, thrust here, thrust there, bullets singing about my ears, haunting cries everywhere. Aye, how they went under! What music it was, those crashing blows upon head and breast, the loud report, the gurgling death-rattle, the body thrown into the sea, the pitiful screams for mercy! And yet the greater wonder, perhaps, that we lived to tell of it. Twelve against three; yet a craven twelve, remember, who feared to die and yet must fight to live! And to nerve our arms a woman's honour, and to guide us

aright, the watchword: "Home!"

I fought my way to the water's edge, and then turned round to see what the others were doing. There were two upon Peter Bligh at that moment, but one fell headlong as I took a step towards them; and the other's driving-knife fell on empty air, and the man himself, struck full between the eyes, rolled dead into the lapping sea.

"Well done, Peter, well done!" I cried, wildly; and then, as though it were an answer to my boasts, something fell upon my shoulder like a great weight dropped from above, and I went down headlong upon the rock. Turning as I fell, I clutched a human throat, and, closing my fingers upon it, he and I, the man out of the darkness and the fool who had forgotten his eyes, went reeling over and over like wild beasts that seek a hold and would tear and bite when the moment comes. Aye, how I held him, how near his eyes seemed to mine, what gasping sounds he uttered, how his feet fought for foothold on the rock, how his hand felt for the knife at his girdle! And I had him always, had him surely; and seeking to force himself upward, the slippery rock gave him no foothold, and he slipped at last from my very fingers, and some great fish, hidden from me, drew him down to the water and I saw the waves close above his mouth. Henceforth there were but three men left at the gate of Czerny's house. They were three who, even at that time, could thank God because the peril was turned.

* * *

We beat the twelve off, as I have told you, and for an hour at least no fresh attack was made on the rock. The sharpest eye now could not detect boats in the darkness; the sharpest ear could not distinguish the muffled splash of oars. We lay all together in the turret, and very methodically, as seamen will, we stanched our wounds and asked, "What next?" That we had some hurt of such an affray goes without saying. My own shoulder was bruised and aching; the blood still trickled down Peter Bligh's honest face from the knife-wound that had gashed his forehead; Seth Barker pressed his hand to a jagged side and said that it was nothing. But for these scratches we cared little, and when our comrades hailed us from the lesser gate, their "All's well!" made us glad men indeed. In spite of it all, one of us, at least, I witness, could tell himself, "It is possible—by Heaven, it is possible—that we shall see the day!" That we had beaten off the first attack was not to be doubted. Wherever the mutineers had gone to, they no longer

rowed in the loom of the gate. And yet I knew that the time must be short; day would not serve them nor the morning light. The dark must decide it.

"They will come again, Peter, and it will be before the dawn," said I, when one thing and another had been mentioned and no word of their misfortune. "It's beyond expectation to suppose anything else. If this house is to be taken, they must take it in the dark. And more than that, lads," said I, "it was a foolish thing for us to go among them as we did and to fight it out down yonder. We are safer in the turret— safer, by a long way!"

"I thought so all the time, sir," answered Dolly Venn, wisely. "They can never get below if you cover the door; and I can keep the sea. It's lucky Czerny loopholed this place, anyway. If ever I meet him I shall quote poetry: 'He nursed the pinion which impelled the steel.' It would about make him mad, captain!"

"Aye," says Peter Bligh, "poetry is well enough, as my poor old father used to say; but poetry never reefed a to'gallon sail in a hurricane and isn't going to begin this night. It's thick heads you need, lad, and good, sound sense inside of 'em! As for what the captain says, I do hold it, truly. But, Lord! I'm like a boy at a fair when the crowns are cracking, and angels themselves wouldn't keep me back!"

"You'd affright them, Mister Bligh," puts in, Seth Barker, "you'd affright them—asking your pardon—with your landgwich!"

"What!" cries Peter, as though in amazement; "did I say things that oughtn't to be said? Well, you surprise me, Barker, you do surprise me!"

Well, I was glad to hear them talk like this, for jest is better than the coward's "if"; and men who can face death with a laugh will win life before your craven any day. But for the prone figures on the rock, looking up with their sightless eyes, or huddled in cleft and cranny—but for them, I say, and distant voices on the sea, and the black shape of Ken's Island, we four might have been merry comrades in a ship's cabin, smoking a pipe in the morning watch and looking gladly for dawn and a welcome shore. That this content could long endure was, beyond all question, impossible. Nevertheless, when next we started up and gripped our rifles and cried "Stand by!" it was not any alarm from the sea that brought us to our feet, but a sudden shout from the house below, a rifle-shot

echoing in the depths, a woman's voice, and then a man's rejoinder, a figure appearing without any warning at the stairs-head, the figure of a huge man, vast and hulking, with long yellow hair, and fists clenched and arms outstretched—a man who took one scared look round him and then leaped wildly into the sea. Now this, you may imagine, was the most surprising event of all that eventful night. So quickly did it come upon us, so little did we look for it, that when Kess Denton, the yellow man, stood at the open gate and uttered a loud and piercing yell of defiance, not one among us could lift a rifle, not one thought of plan or action. There the fellow was, laughing like a maniac. Why he came, whence he came, no man could tell. But he leaped into the seas and the night engulfed him, and only his mocking laugh told us that he lived.

"Kess Denton!" cried I, my head dazed and my words coming in a torrent; "Kess Denton. Then there's mischief below, lads—mischief, I swear!"

Clair-de-Lune answered me—old Clair-de-Lune, standing in a blaze of light; for they had switched on the lamps below, and the vein of the reef stood out suddenly like some silver monster breathing on the surface of the sea. Clair-de-Lune answered me, I say, and his words were the most terrible I had heard since first I came to Ken's Island.

"The water is in!" he cried, "the water is in the house!"

I saw it as in a flash. This man we had neglected to hunt from the caverns below, striking at us in the supreme moment, had opened trap or window and let the sea pour in the labyrinth below. The water was flooding Czerny's house.

"Now!" I cried, "you don't mean that Clair-de-Lune? Then what of the engine-room? How will it fare with Captain Nepeen?"

Doctor Gray stood behind the old Frenchman, and, limping up to my side, he leaned against the rock and began to speak of it very coolly.

"The water is in," he said, "but it will not flood the higher rooms, for they are above sea-level. We are saving what provisions we can, and the men below are all right. As for Nepeen, we must get him off in a boat somehow. It is the water I am thinking of, captain; what are we going to do for water?"

I sat upon the rock at his side and buried my face in my hands. All that terrible day seemed to culminate in this overwhelming misfortune. Driven on the one hand by the sea, on the other by these devils of the darkness, doomed, it might be, to hunger and thirst on that desolate rock, four good comrades cut off from us by the sea's intervening, the very shadows full of dangers, what hope had we, what hope of that brave promise spoken to little Ruth but three short hours ago?

"Doctor," I said at last, "if we are not at the bottom of it now, we never shall be. But we are men, and we will act as men should. Let the women stand together in the great hall until the sea drives them out. If water is our need, I am ashore to Ken's Island to-morrow to get it. As for Nepeen, we have a boat and we have hands to man it; we'll fetch Captain Nepeen, doctor," said I.

He nodded his head and appeared to be thinking deeply. Old Clair-de-Lune was the next to utter a sensible thing.

"The man flood the house," said he, "but no sure he get to ship. If he drown, Czerny know nothing. I say turn out the lamp—wait!"

"As true a word as the night has spoken," said I; "if Kess Denton does not reach the boats, they won't hear the story. We'll keep it close enough, lads, and Captain Nepeen will learn it soon enough. Do you whistle, Dolly, and get an answer. I hope to God it is all well with them still."

He whistled across the sea, and after a long minute of waiting a distant voice cried, "All's well!" For the hour at least our comrades were safe. Should we say the same of them when daylight came?

* * *

The dark fell with greater intensity as the dawn drew near. I thought that it typified our own black hour, when it seemed that fate had nothing left for us but a grave beneath the seas, or the eternal sleep on the island shore.

* * *

Another hour passed, and the dawn was nearer. I did not know then (though I know now) what kept Czerny's crew in the shadows, or why we heard nothing of them. Once, indeed, in the far distance where the yacht lay anchored, gunshots

were fired, and were answered from some boat lying southward by the island; but no other message of the night was vouchsafed to us, no other omen to be heard. In the gloom of the darkened house women watched, men kept the vigil and prayed for the day. Would the light never come; would that breaking East never speed its joyous day? Ah! who could tell? Who, in the agony of waiting, ever thinks aright or draws the truthful picture?

There was no new attack, I say, nor any sure news from the caverns below. From time to time men went to the stairs-head and watched the seas washing green and slimy in the corridors, or spoke of them beating upon the very steps of the great hall and threatening to rise up and up until they engulfed us all and conquered even the citadel we held. Nevertheless, iron gates held them back. Not vainly had Czerny's master-mind foreseen such a misfortune as this. Those tremendous doors which divided the upper house from its fellow were stronger than any sluice-gates, more sure against the water's advance. We held the upper house; it was ours while we could breathe in it or find life's sustenance there.

Now, I saw little Ruth in the hour of dawn and she stood with us for a little while at the open gate and there spoke so brightly of to-morrow, so lightly of this hour, that she helped us to forget, and made men of us once more.

"They will not come again to-night, Jasper," she said; "I feel, I know it! Why should they wait? Something has happened, and something spells 'Good luck.' Oh, yes, I have felt that for the last hour. Things must be worse before they mend, and they are mending now. The gale will come at dawn and we shall all go ashore, you and I together, Jasper!"

"Miss Ruth," said I, "that would be the happiest day in all my life. You bring the dawn always, wherever you go, the good sunlight and God's blue sky! It has been day for me while I heard your voice and said that I might serve you!"

She would not answer me; but, as though to give my words their meaning, we had watched but a little while longer on the rock when suddenly out of the East the grey light winged over to us, and, spreading its wonder-rays upon the seas, it rolled the black veil back and showed us height and valley, sea and land, the white-capped breakers and the dim heaven beyond them. Many a dawn have I watched and waited for on the heart of the desolate sea, but never one which carried to me such a message as then it spake, the joy of action and release, the

tight of life and hope, the clarion call, uplifting, awakening! For I knew that in day our salvation lay, and that the terrible night was forever passed; and every faculty being quickened, the mind alert, the eyes no longer veiled, I stretched out my arms to the sun and said, "Thank God!"

* * *

It was day, and the fresh sea answered its appeal. Coming quickly as day will in the great Pacific, we had scarce seen that great rim of the East lift itself above the sparkling water when all the scene was opened to us, the picture of ships and water and wave-washed reef made clear as in some scene of stageland. As with one tongue, realizing a mighty truth, we cried, "The ship is gone; the ship has sailed!"

It was true, all true. Where at sundown there had been a yacht anchored in the offing, now at daybreak no yacht was to be seen. Darkness, which had been the ally of Czerny's men, had helped the man himself to flee from them to an unknown haven where their vengeance should not reach him. By night had he fled, and by day would he mock his creatures. Drifting there in the open boats, the rising seas beginning to wash in upon them, hunger and thirst their portion, the rebels were at no pains to hide their secret from us. We knew that they had been called back by these overwhelming tidings of the master-trick, and we asked what heart the rogues would have now to sell their lives for the man who betrayed them? Would they not look to us for the satisfaction the chief rogue denied to them? We, as they, were left helpless in that woful place. Before us, as before them, lay the peril of hunger and of thirst, the death-sleep or the greater mercy. And who should ask them to accept it without a last supreme attempt, a final assault, which should mend all or end all? Driven to the last point, to the last point would they go to grasp that foothold of the seas and to drive us from the rock whereon life might yet be had.

"Lads," I said, "the story is there as the man has written it. We have no quarrel with yon poor devils nor they with us; but they will find one. We cannot help them; they cannot help us. We'll wait for the end—just wait for it."

I spoke with a confidence which time did not justify. Just as the dawn had put new life into us, so it had steeled the hearts of this derelict crew and nerved it for any desperate act. For long we watched the rogues rowing hither, thither; now in

the island's shadows, now coming towards us, but never once raising a rifle or uttering a threat. In the end they came all together, waving a sail upon a pole; and while they appeared to row for the lesser gate they accompanied the act with soft words and a protest of their honesty.

'"Tis after a truce they are," says Peter Bligh, presently, "and that's a poor thing, any-way. My poor father used to say, 'Knock 'em on the head first and sign the papers afterwards.' He was a kind-hearted gentleman, and did a lot of good in the world!"

"He must have done, Peter," said I; "he must have done a power of good, hearing the little you say about him. 'Tis a pity the old gentleman isn't here this day to preach his kindness to yonder rogues. They look in need of a friendly hand; indeed, they do."

Well, the laugh was turned on Peter; but, as a matter of fact, he spoke sense, and I understood as well as he did the risk of parley with the wreckers, even though they did not seem to have any fight left in them—a fact which old Clair-de-Lune was the first to observe.

"They not fire gun this morning," says the old man. "All starve hungry. Czerny gone. What for they fight? They no stomach left."

"Meaning they've no heart in them," puts in Doctor Gray, at his side. "Aye, that's true, and a bit of human nature, too. You cannot fight every day any more than you can make love every day. It comes and goes like a fever. They had their square meal last night, and they are not taking any this morning. I should not be afraid of them if I were you, captain."

"I never was," said I, bluntly; "I never was, doctor. There's not enough on my conscience for that. But I do believe you speak truly. Making love is more in their line this watch. Ask Dolly Venn there. From what I saw between him and little Rosamunda down below, lie's an authority on that point. Eh, Dolly, lad," said I to him, "you could make love every day, couldn't you?"

The lad flushed all over his face at the charge, and Peter Bligh, he said something about "Love one another" being in the Bible, "which must mean many of 'em, and not one in particular," says he. And what with the laugh and

the jest, and the new confidence which the sight of those poor driven devils put into us, we came all together to the sea's edge, and, scarcely cocking a rifle at them, we hailed the longboats and got their story.

"Ahoy, there! And what port d'you think you're making for?" cries Peter Bligh, in a voice that might have split the waters.

They replied to him, standing up in the boat and stretching out their sunburnt, hairy arms to us:

"Water!—water, mate, for the love of God!"

"And how do you know," cries Peter back to them, "how do you know that we've water for ourselves?"

"Why, Barebones saw to that," says one of them, no doubt meaning Czerny thereby; "Barebones saw to that, though precious little of it the lubber drank!"

"He's off, is Barebones," says another; "oh, trust Barebones! Bones-and-Biscuits puts to sea last night, 'cause he's a duty to perform in 'Frisco, he 'as. Trust Bones-and-Biscuits to turn up righteous when the trumpet blows!"

And another, said he:

"I wish I had his black head under my boot this minute! My mouth's all sand and my throat is stuck! Aye, mates," says he, "you'll moisten my poor tongue—same as is wrote in the Scriptures!"

There were other entreaties; some of them spoke to us in French, the most part in German. Of the boats that were left, two had rowed away for the lesser gate, but five drifted about our rock and drew so close that we could have tossed a biscuit to them. Never have I seen a crowd of faces more repulsive or jowls so repellent. Iron-limbed men, fat Germans, sleek Frenchmen, Greeks, niggers, some armed with rifles, some with fearsome knives, they squatted all together in the open boats and roared together for pity and release. Then, for the first time, I was able to see how cruelly Czerny's gun had dealt with them in the darkness of the night. It was horrible to see the bloody limbs, the open wounds, the matted hair, the gaping faces of these creatures of a desperado's mad ambition. The boats themselves were splintered and hacked as though heavy hatches had beaten

them. I could wonder no longer that they called the truce; and yet, knowing why they called it, what was I to do? Let them set foot on the plateau, and we, but a handful at the best, might be swept into the sea like flies from a wall. I say that I was at my wits' end. Every merciful instinct urged me to give them water; every prudent voice cried, "Beat them off."

"If there's fight in that lot, I'm as black as yonder nigger!" said Peter Bligh, when he looked at them a little while, very contemptuously. "Not a kick to-day among the lot of them, by Jericho! But you cannot give them water, captain," he goes on, "for you've little to give."

Clair-de-Lune, thinking deeper, was, nevertheless, for a stem refusal.

"Keep them off, captain, that's my advice," says he. "They very desperate, dangerous men. They drink water, then cut throat. Make ear deaf and say cistern all empty. They think you die, and they wait, but come aboard—no, by thunder!"

Now, I knew that this was reason, and when Doctor Gray and Captain Nepeen added their words to the Frenchman's I stepped down to the water's edge and made my answer.

"I'll give you water willingly, men, if you'll show me where it is to be found," said I; "but we cannot give what we haven't got, and that's common sense! We're dry here, and if it's bad luck for one it's bad luck for all. The glass says rain," I went on; "we'll wait for it together and have done with all this nonsense."

They heard me to the end; but ignorant, perhaps, of my meaning they continued to whine, "Water, water," and when I must repeat that we had no water, one of them, leaping up in the boat, fired his rifle point-blank at Captain Nepeen, who fell without a word stone-dead at my side.

"Great God!" said I, "they've shot the captain dead."

The suddenness of it was awful; just a gun flashing, a gasping cry, an honest man leaping up and falling lifeless. And then something that would never move or speak again. The crews themselves, I do believe, were as dazed by it as we were. They could have shot us, I witness, where we stood, every man of us, but, in God's mercy, they never thought of that; and turning on their own man, they

tore the rifle from his hand and, striking him down with a musket, they sent him headlong into the sea.

"Witness we've no part in it!" they roared. "Jake Bilbow did it, and he was always a bad 'un! You won't charge fifty with one man's deed! To hell with the arms, mate—we've no need of 'em!"

Well, we heard them in amazement. Not a man had moved among us; the body was untouched at our feet. From the boats themselves ruffians were casting their rifles pell-mell into the sea. Never at the wildest hazard would I have named this for the end of it. They cast their rifles into the sea and rowed unarmed about us. To the end of it, I think, they feared the gun with a fear that was nameless and lasting, nor did they know that the turret was empty—how should they?

It was a swift change; to me it seemed as though the day had conjured up this wonder. None the less, the perplexity of it remained, nor could I choose a course even under these new circumstances. Of water I had none to give; our own circumstances, indeed, were little better than that of these unhappy creatures in the boats about me. The sea flooded the house below us; the great engine no longer throbbed; our women were huddled together at the stairs-head, seeking air and light; the fogs loom heavy on Ken's Island; no ship's sail brought hope to our horizon. What should I say, then, to the mutineers, how answer them? I could but protest: "We are as you; we must face it together."

* * *

Now, I have told you that both the greater and the lesser gates of Czerny's house were hewn in the pinnacles of rock rising up above the highest tides, and offering there a foothold and an anchorage; but you must not think that these were the only caps of the reef which thrust themselves out to the sea. For there were others, rounded domes of tide-washed rock, treacherous ledges, little craggy steeples, sloping shelves, which low water gave up to the sun and where a man might walk dry-shod. To such strange places the longboats turned when we would have none of them. Convinced, may-be, that our own case was no better than theirs, the men, in desperation, and cramped with long confinement in the boats, now pushed their bows into the swirling waters; and following each other, as sheep will follow a leader, they climbed out upon the barren rocks and lay there in a state of dejection defying words. Nor had we any heart to turn

upon them and drive them off. Little did the new day we desired so ardently bring to us. The sky, gloomy above the blackening, angry seas, was like a mock upon our bravest hopes. Let a few hours pass and the night would come again. This was but an interlude in which man could ask of man, "What next?" We feared to speak to the women lest they should know the truth.

The men crawled upon the sea-washed rocks, I say, and there the judgment of God came upon them. So awful was the scene my eyes were soon to behold that I take up my pen with hesitation even now to write of it; and as I write some figure of the shadows comes before me and seems to say, "You cannot speak of it! It is of the past, forgotten!" And, certainly, if I could make it clear to you how Czerny's men were forever driven off from the gate of the house that Czerny built, if I could make it clear to you and leave the thing untold, that would I do right gladly. But the end was not of my seeking; in all honesty I can say that if it had been in my power I would have helped those wretched creatures, have dealt out pity to them and carried them to the shore; but it was written otherwise; a higher Power decreed it; we could but stand, trembling and helpless, before that enthralling justice.

They climbed on the rocks, forty or fifty of them, may-be, and lying in all attitudes, some stretched out full length, some with their arms in the flowing tide, some huddled close as though for warmth, they appeared to surrender themselves to the inevitable and to accept the worst; when, rising up out of the near sea, the first octopus showed himself, and a great tentacle, sliding over the rock, drew one of the mutineers screaming to the depths. Thereafter, in an instant, the whole terror was upon them. Leaping up together, they uttered piercing cries, turned upon each other in their agony, hurled themselves into the sea, to reach the boats again. God! how few of them touched the befriending prows! The whole water about the reef was now alive with the devilish creatures; a hundred arms, crushing, sucking, swept the unsheltered rocks and drew the victims down. So near were they, some of them, that I could see their staring eyes and distorted limbs as, in the fishes' embracing grip, they were drawn under to the gaping mouths or pressed close to that jellied mass which must devour them. The sea itself heaved and splashed as though to be the moving witness of that horrible attack; foam rushed up to our feet; a blinding spray was in the air; eyes protruded even in the green water; great shapes wormed and twisted, rending one another, covering the whole reef with their

filthy slime, sending blinding fountains to the highest pinnacles, or sinking down when their prey was taken to the depths where no eye could follow them. What sounds of pain, what resounding screams, rent the air in those fearful minutes! I draw the veil upon it. For all the gold that the sea washes to-day in Czerny's house, I could not look upon such a picture again. For death can be a gentle thing; but there is a death no man may speak of.

* * *

At twelve o'clock the clouds broke and the rain began to fall upon a rising sea. The vapours still lay thick upon Ken's Island, but the wind was driving them, and they rolled away in misty clouds westward to the dark horizon.

I went below to little Ruth, and in broken words I told her all my story.

"Little Ruth, the night is passed, the day is breaking! Ah, little Ruth!"

She fell into my arms, sobbing. The sleep-time was past, indeed; the hour of our deliverance at hand.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH THE SUN-TIME COMES AGAIN

I HAVE told you the story of Ken's Island, but there are some things you will need to know, and of these I will now make mention. Let me speak of them in order as they befell.

And first I should record that we found the body of Edmond Czerny, cold and dead, by that pool in the woods where so many have slept the dreadful sleep. Clair-de-Lune stumbled upon it as we went joyously through the sunny thickets and, halting abruptly, his startled cry drew me to the place. And then I saw the

thing, and knew that between him and me the secret lay, and that here was God's justice written in words no man might mistake.

For a long time we rested there, looking down upon that grim figure in its bed of leaves, and watching the open eyes seeking that bright heaven whose warmth they never would feel again. As in life, so in death, the handsome face carried the brand of the evil done, and spoke of the ungoverned passions which had wrecked so wonderful a genius. There have been few such men as Edmond Czerny since the world began; there will be few while the world endures. Greatly daring, a man of boundless ambitions, the moral nature obliterated, the greed of money becoming, in the end, like some burning disease, this man, I said, might have achieved much if the will had bent to humanity's laws. And now he had reaped as he sowed. The cloak that covered him was the cloak of the Hungarian regiment whose code of honour drove him out of Europe. The diamond ring upon the finger was the very ring that little Ruth had given him on their wedding-day. The agony he had suffered was such as many a good seaman had endured since the wreckers came to Ken's Island. And now the story was told: the man was dead.

"It must have been last night," I said, at length, to Clair-de-Lune. "His own men put him ashore and seized the ship. Fortune has strange chances, but who would have named such a chance as this? The rogues turned upon him at last, you can't doubt it. And he died in his sleep—a merciful death."

The old man shook his head very solemnly.

"I know not," said he, slowly; "remember how rare that the island give mercy! We will not ask how he died, captain. I see some-thing, but I forget it. Let us leave him to the night."

He began to cover the body with branches and boughs; and anon, marking the place, that we might return to it to-morrow, we went on again through the woods, as men in a reverie. Our schemes and plans, our hopes and fears, the terrible hours, the unforgotten days, aye, if we could have seen that the end of them would have been this!—the gift of a verdurous island, and the ripe green pastures, and the woods awakening and all the glory of the sun-time reborn! For so the shadow was lifted from us that for a little while our eyes could not see the light; and, unbelieving, we asked, "Is this the truth?"

* * *

I did not tell little Ruth the story of the woods; but there were whispered words and looks aside, and she was clever enough to understand them. Before the day was out I think she knew; but she would not speak of it, nor would I. For why should we call false sorrow upon that bright hour? Was not the world before us, the awakening glory of Ken's Island at our feet? Just as in the dark days all Nature had withered and bent before the death-giving vapours, so now did Nature answer the sun's appeal; and every freshet bubbling over, every wood alive with the music of the birds, the meadows green and golden, the hills all capped with their summer glory, she proclaimed the reign of Nature's God. No sight more splendid ever greeted the eyes of shipwrecked men or welcomed them to a generous shore. Hand-in-hand with little Ruth I passed from thicket to thicket of the woods, and seemed to stand in Paradise itself! And she—ah, who shall read a woman's thoughts at such an hour as that! Let me be content to see her as she was; her face grown girlish in that great release, her eyes sparkling in a new joy of being, her step so light that no blade of grass could have been bruised thereby. Let me hear her voice again while she lifts her face to mine and asks me that question which even now I hear sometimes:

"Jasper, Jasper! is it real? How can I believe it, Jasper? Shall we see our home again—you and I? Oh, tell me that it is true, Jasper—say it often, often, or I shall forget!"

We were in a high place of the woods just then, and we stood to look down upon the lower valley where the rocks showed their rare green mosses, and every crag lifted strange flowers to the sun, and little rivulets ran down with bubbling sounds. Away on the open veldt the doll-like houses were to be seen, and the ashes of her bungalow. And there, I say, all the scene enchanting me, and the memory of the bygone days blotted from my mind, and no future to be thought of but that which should give me forever the right to befriend this little figure of my dreams, I said:

"It is true, little Ruth—God knows how true—that a man loves you with all his heart, and he has loved you all through these weary months. Just a simple fellow he is, with no fine ways and small knowledge of the world; but he waits for you to tell him that you will lift him up and make him worthy———"

She silenced me with a quick, glad cry, and, winding both her arms about my neck, she hid her face from me.

"My friend! Jasper, dear Jasper, you shall not say that! Ah, were you so blind that you have not known it from the first?"

Her words were like the echo of some sweet music in my ears. Little Ruth, my beloved, had called me "friend." To my life's end would I claim that name most precious.

* * *

We were picked up by the American war-ship Hatteras ten days after the sleep-time passed. I left the island as I found it—its secrets hidden, its mysteries unfathomed. What vapour rises up there—whether it be, as Doctor Gray would have it, from the bog of decaying vegetation, which breathes fever to the south; whether it be this marsh fog steaming up when the plants die down; or whether it be a subtler cloud given out by the very earth itself—this question, I say, let the learned dispute. I have done with it forever; and never, to my life's end, shall I see its heights and its valleys again. The world calls me; I go to my home. Ruth, little Ruth, whom I have loved, is at my side. For us it shall be sun-time always; the night and the dreadful sleep are no more.

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